

Enhanced photo could solve Earhart disappearance mystery

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Amelia Earhart in a 1937 file photo. Researchers hope images of her departure from Miami Municipal Airport may hold clues to her disappearance during an attempted around-the-world flight. Photo: Miami Herald/MCT

MIAMI — For the most part, the photo taken on June 1, 1937, is unremarkable. It shows an airplane on a Miami runway in the shadows just before dawn.

The picture was probably a test shot taken moments before aviator Amelia Earhart lifted off on her doomed flight around the world.

But the picture contains an odd detail visible on none of the other thousands of photos of her plane.

On the fuselage is a shiny silver patch where a window should be. Could it be a clue — the clue — to what happened when Earhart vanished over the Pacific Ocean three months later?

Longtime Earhart investigator Ric Gillespie thinks so. He believes that the silvery patch reveals an unrecorded repair performed on Earhart's plane in Miami. He hopes that computer enhancements of that part of the photo will link it to a piece

of possible airplane wreckage discovered a quarter century ago. The wreckage was found on a tiny Pacific island in the area where Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan disappeared.

“If we can match a rivet pattern from the repair in the photograph to a rivet pattern on the wreckage, I think it would be beyond dispute that Noonan and Earhart weren’t lost at sea, but made it to the island,” Gillespie said. He is the executive director of the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR). The organization investigates missing plane cases and recovers old aircraft.

More Mysterious Or Mystery Solved?

If he is right, that would solve one of the greatest mysteries in aviation history. It would also mean, possibly, that the tale of Amelia Earhart had an even more tragic end — that she didn't die when her plane crashed into the sea, but from starvation, thirst and disease on a deserted island.

Earhart was one of the world’s most famous and admired women when she and Noonan attempted to be the first to fly around the globe. She was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic. And she was a feminist before the word was invented, advocating for women to be allowed to pursue anything they wanted.

Their trip didn't go well from the start. They landed at the wrong airport in Miami, the starting point of their journey. The landing was rough and the plane underwent repairs.

One of the repairs involved the removal of a window in the rear of the airplane. The window is clearly visible in earlier photos of Earhart’s plane taken at the start of her trip.

But in the photo shot on June 1, 1937, the window is gone, replaced by that odd silvery plate.

“I think the window must have been broken or (weakened) by the hard landing in Miami,” Gillespie said. “So they just took it out and patched the fuselage instead.”

The Potential Troubles Mounted

About a month into flight, on July 2, 1937, a radio antenna on the bottom of her plane tore away. That may be why she couldn't hear Coast Guard crewmen trying to make contact with her near Howland Island 19 hours later. “We are circling but cannot see island, cannot hear you,” she radioed. A series of increasingly frantic messages continued for another hour and a quarter before Earhart gave her location: “We are on the line of position 157 dash 337. ... We are now running north and south.”

The rest was silence.

Rescue ships began looking for Earhart right away. Eventually, search planes passed over Gardner Island, about 400 miles away from Howland, and spotted signs of recent habitation. But tribes of Pacific Islanders had been believed to be living there, and so the planes moved on.

In 1988, members of TIGHAR began wondering: What if Earhart didn't crash into the sea? What if she reached an uninhabited island?

TIGHAR discovered that Micronesian tribesmen living on Gardner found a partial human skeleton and a woman's shoe. Islanders did not wear shoes. The remnants of a fire pit nearby contained burned bones of small birds and fish.

The bones themselves have since disappeared.

Matching The Rivet Patterns

In 1991, TIGHAR investigators found a scrap of aluminum with rows of rivet holes. It looks like it came from the torn outer skin of an airplane.

Tests have shown the scrap is made from material used in all American planes manufactured in the 1930s — including Earhart's.

But the rivet patterns were very different from those on Lockheed's Electra.

TIGHAR began reviewing photos of Earhart's plane to see if the scrap could have come from the patch. Only one shot offered a good view of the patch — the 1937 photo.

"If we can match that rivet pattern in the photo," Gillespie said, "I don't see how anybody can argue against this anymore."

"If They Could Hear Me"

Gillespie thinks Earhart landed her plane on a coral reef just off Gardner Island and used the plane's radio to send out distress signals.

After she disappeared, more than 100 shortwave radio listeners reported hearing distress calls from a woman identifying herself as Earhart. At the time, they were dismissed as fakes or mistaken identities. But Gillespie believes some of them may have been genuine.

Among the most haunting of the reports came from a St. Petersburg, Florida, teenager named Betty Klenck. She died recently at the age of 92.

Three days after the plane went down, Betty was listening to her shortwave radio when she stumbled onto a call from someone who identified herself as Earhart. For three hours, the teenager listened, jotting down notes, as the woman pleaded for help, comforted an apparently injured Fred Noonan, and cried. "Oh, if they could hear me."

Later Betty's father showed her notebook to Coast Guard authorities. They weren't interested, thinking it the fantasy of a bored teenager. Yet the notebook contains hints of things Betty couldn't possibly have known, supporting the idea that the woman was really Earhart, calling from Gardner Island.

Quiz

- 1 Select the sentence that shows that the photo taken on June 1, 1937, was remarkable.
- (A) The picture was probably a test shot taken moments before aviator Amelia Earhart lifted off on her doomed flight around the world.
 - (B) He hopes that computer enhancements of that part of the photo will link it to a piece of possible airplane wreckage discovered a quarter century ago.
 - (C) The window is clearly visible in earlier photos of Earhart's plane taken at the start of her trip.
 - (D) But the rivet patterns were very different than those on Lockheed's Electra.
- 2 All of the following are possible theories related to the disappearance of Amelia EXCEPT:
- (A) Amelia's aircraft crashed and submerged in the sea.
 - (B) Amelia and Noonan somehow managed to reach a deserted island.
 - (C) Amelia and Noonan starved after landing in the Pacific Islands.
 - (D) A window in the rear of her plane was removed and replaced by a silvery plate.
- 3 Select the sentence that contains a word that is an antonym for "conceal."
- (A) For the most part, the photo taken on June 1, 1937, is unremarkable.
 - (B) He believes that the silvery patch reveals an unrecorded repair performed on Earhart's plane in Miami.
 - (C) Earhart was one of the world's most famous and admired women when she and Noonan attempted to be the first to fly around the globe.
 - (D) Eventually search planes passed over Gardner Island, about 400 miles away from Howland, and spotted signs of recent habitation.

4 Select the sentence that contains a word that means "to associate with someone or something."

- (A) The organization investigates missing plane cases and recovers old aircraft.
- (B) He hopes that computer enhancements of that part of the photo will link it to a piece of possible airplane wreckage discovered a quarter century ago.
- (C) TIGHAR discovered that Micronesian tribesmen living on Gardner found a partial human skeleton and a woman's shoe.
- (D) Gillespie thinks Earhart landed her plane on a coral reef just off Gardner Island and used the plane's radio to send out distress signals.