



EARHART Dr street sign located on Saipan

# Amelia Earhart's Plane is Not on The Ocean Floor

Written By  
Don Peppers



DaminNivu Content

Cover Photo, Content Photos, Google Earth Pro and Wikimedia Commons

October 2023

## Introduction

The loss of Amelia Earhart is one of the most permanent mysteries of history. On July 2, 1937, Amelia, her navigator Fred Noonan, and Lockheed Electra 10E vanished. Almost a century later, theories, conjectures, South Pacific expeditions, and documentaries remain vivid reminders of how the human psyche can't let go of this event.

During my study of the subject, it's apparent that a select few know what happened to them. For whatever reasons, they choose to hide the truth. If I'm right, this mystery will never have a resolution. If for nothing but self-satisfaction, circumstantial evidence may be the only solution to finding a plausible explanation.

Amelia and Fred were experienced aviators with histories of one success after the other. I write about their challenges from that perspective. Without contingency planning, I don't think they would have left Lae, New Guinea. The traveled path was close to 2600 miles with 20 hours of flying time, and Howland Island is less than two miles long and a mile wide, located in a vast area of the Pacific Ocean with few landmarks.

The story I write here focuses on the 10E crew's Plan B, why it had to be initiated, and the ramifications of relying on it. For me, the Electra 10E did not run out of fuel and crash land mere miles from Howland Island. The crew was too smart to let something like that happen. But by 2013 GMT on July 2, the crew of the Electra had run out of luck. Lousy weather and fatigue are what must have doomed their fate.

Call it fate or bad luck, the crew ended up in Saipan but not by flying there in the Lockheed Electra 10E.

## A Legendary Flight

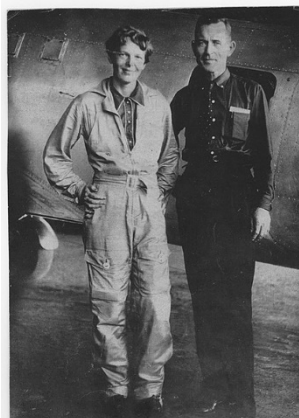
Lockheed Model 10E Electra's taxi to the runway must have been routine. Amelia received it on her 39<sup>th</sup> birthday, July 24, 1936.<sup>1</sup> Now it's June 1, 1937, at 5:56 am in Miami.<sup>2</sup> Time for throttles to full power on the two Pratt & Whitney R-1340 Wasp S3H1 engines.<sup>3</sup> A solid, deafening dual harmonic hum as Amelia and Fred sink into their seats from an unmistakable acceleration rush. Finally, smooth as glass, watching a runway descend below the NR16020 prominently displayed underside of the port side wing. A loud couple of thunks and the landing gear is up — one more destination fading away among the clouds, haze, and altitude. On to Puerto Rico as Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan continue their round-the-world trip destined for the ages.

Amelia's 10E, with its added fuel tanks, could carry 1,151 gallons of fuel. Three 149-gallon tanks and one 70-gallon tank installed inside the plane's fuselage in November 1936 helped to increase capacity.<sup>4</sup> If Fred wanted to get to the cockpit, he must have crawled over the tanks from his navigator location toward the tail. So, the crew talked with pulleys and messages attached to a fishing line.<sup>5</sup> Primitive yet modern technology would carry them through. Absent computers and GPS to calculate distance or celestial fix. It took seasoned wit and every effort to reach Lae, New Guinea, 30 days later.

Fred was a well-respected professional with 22 years as a merchant sailor and officer. He later moved into aviation, receiving a pilot's license for transport planes. In 1930, Fred started working for what would become Pan American Airways. He navigated routes between San Francisco and Honolulu and other paths across the Pacific. Those flights included Wake Island, Guam, and Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

Among her endless accomplishments, Amelia began flying in January 1921 and bought her first plane in July. By May 1932, she had broken the women's altitude record, published a book, and became aviation editor for *Cosmopolitan*. Amelia set at least two airspeed records and completed a solo flight across the Atlantic. She flew solo across the Pacific between Honolulu and Oakland in January 1935. Her civilian plane for that flight was the first to carry a two-way radio.<sup>7</sup>

The Electra from Port Darwin, Australia, arrived in Lae on June 29 at 3 p.m. local time.<sup>8</sup> The tattered crew showed fatigue in photos taken that day. Amelia looked worse than Fred, tired with puffy eyes and hollow cheeks echoing her cockpit management skills. But both were reaching their limits.<sup>9</sup> Luckily, for their sake, radio problems and weather delayed takeoff to Howland Island and allowed for short-lived rest. Their last flight began on July 2 at 0000 GMT, 10 am local time.<sup>10</sup>



## Failure at Howland Island

The last flight failed because Fred probably lost his ability to get a fix on Howland when overcast skies set in. The Electra 10E had radio voice and guidance issues throughout the trip, which could not be corrected. Radio failure issues resulted from the misconfiguration of onboard equipment. And a breakdown in planning between the persons on the ground and in the air.<sup>11</sup>

In 1937, no one got on a ZOOM call to sort out the variables. Everyone relied on telegrams, taking hours to cross the globe and expensive long-distance phone calls. On June 27, Amelia sent a telegram to the Itasca Coast Guard Cutter anchored at Howland about her radio settings to make sure they could talk to each other. She didn't wait for a response, probably because getting one might take an entire day or longer. If Amelia had received a reply, there's a high chance she would have known to use a different frequency for finding Itasca.<sup>12</sup>

She had a related frequency setting problem on July 1 at Lae. On a test flight before leaving Lae, the 10E couldn't get a bearing (could not get a minimum) on the station. The station at Lae used a frequency the 10E direction finder couldn't use. Amelia thought that the test failed because the station signal was too strong.<sup>13</sup> A mistake that plagued efforts searching for Itasca the next day.

By 1415 GMT, Fred probably could no longer get a location fix. Itasca could not talk to Amelia, but they could hear her transmissions.

### *Electra Transmissions*<sup>14</sup>

1415	<i>overcast</i>
1515	<i>overcast</i>
1623	<i>partly cloudy</i>
1744	<i>take a bearing on us 200 miles out</i>
1815	<i>take a bearing on us and report in/on half hour will whistle in mic, about 100 miles out</i>
1912	<i>must be on you flying at 1000 feet, "cannot see you but gas running low"</i> <i>"she's running low out of gas only ½ hour left"</i>
1927	<i>circling go ahead now or on /in half hour</i>
1930	<i>got your signal can't get minimum</i>
2013	<i>on the line 157 – 337 will repeat on 6210 [last transmission]</i>

## Plan B

Electra's radio equipment continued to have the same problem as on the Lae test flight. At 1930 GMT, "*got your signal can't get minimum.*" Amelia used a Bendix MN-20 circular antenna mounted outside above the cockpit to home in on a radio signal. While changing the direction of the antenna, she would try to get a bearing and then turn the plane toward that path.<sup>15</sup> She couldn't pick up a minimum signal strength (bearing) while turning the antenna at Lae or Howland. Without the minimum, there was no signal to use for navigating.

The Electra had about 1,100 gallons of fuel onboard, leaving Lae. An earlier flight showed that the average Electra 10E fuel burn rate could be 42 gallons per hour. That average suggested fuel used on the Howland flight was 850.5 gallons at 2015 GMT. With 249.5 gallons left, Amelia and Fred had six hours of fuel just after the last message at 2013 GMT. If the variables are off from this estimate, like stronger headwinds, slower ground speed, or fuel leakage, other fuel amounts could be about 4.5 to 5 hours left.<sup>16</sup> Looking at the timeline above, the transmission at 1912 GMT does not make sense. Her message at 1912 GMT could have meant it was almost time to go to Plan B. "*she's running low out of gas only ½ hour left,*" probably meant: The fuel is low, Fred and I are spending 30 more minutes looking for Howland. After that, we turn west.

At 1912 hours, the flight had reached a critical point, and the crew must have been in a state of panic when Amelia announced that they only had 30 minutes left to search for Howland. The visibility was low, with clouds all around, and the only thing they could see was water. By the last transmission at 2013 GMT, it was evident that the 30-minute reference made at 1912 GMT did not mean they were running out of fuel. It was also clear that they continued to search for Howland after Amelia's announced deadline.

If the crew had not left New Guinea with a contingency plan for failing to reach Howland, they likely formulated one at or around 2013 GMT. According to Mike Campbell's book, *Amelia Earhart: The Truth At Last*, Second Edition, the 10E crew could have picked up a strong signal from a Japanese radio station at Jabor on Jaluit Atoll. It makes sense that the crew weighed their odds and followed the northwest signal to Jabor. Drawing a line from the Howland Island area to Jabor on Google Earth shows a plausible outcome for landing on Mili Atoll about 40 miles north of their flight path to the radio station. Mili Atoll is located approximately 148 miles East of Jabor. If they were flying around 3000 feet, they could have easily spotted Mili Atoll. In addition, eyewitnesses put Amelia and Fred on Jabor after July 2.

How far could the 10E fly with four to five hours of fuel? The Electra's average ground speed on the trip by 1912 GMT was 133 mph.<sup>17</sup> Plan B would have the plane flying west to find a place to land. A tailwind would have been the advantage in that direction. So, at a minimum of 133 mph, they would be approaching the Gilbert or Marshall Islands in five hours. Adding a tailwind variable of 15 mph is a speed of about 148 mph. The Plan B flight distance might have been 590 to 740 miles.<sup>18</sup>

Amelia flew at 1000 feet to find Howland because of the clouds. At 1912 GMT, "*flying at 1000 feet,*" "*cannot see you but gas running low,*" and Itasca reported seeing clouds north and west of Howland. It's safe to say Amelia and Fred were flying more than 20 miles north of Howland because Itasca saw clear skies to the south and east.<sup>19</sup> At 1000

feet, their sight distance would have been about 39 miles.<sup>20</sup> It would be safe to assume the 10E was outside a 39-mile radius from Howland. If Amelia had gotten a bearing on Jabor, her path would have been well north of the Gilbert Islands. By then, fatigue and panic would have probably affected Fred's judgment, and they both needed to cling to a sure thing. Instead of heading south to the Gilbert Islands, it looks like they chose to fly toward a definite radio signal in Japanese-held territory.<sup>21</sup>

Three important eyewitness accounts show Amelia and Fred met their fates on Saipan before the war started. Bilimon Amaron was a medical corpsman working at a hospital in Jabor. He went to a Japanese Navy ship where he saw two Americans — one white woman dressed in trousers and an injured white man with blue eyes. He treated the man's injuries. Bilimon said the Japanese took them to Saipan and put them on trial for spying. Bilimon also saw a silver plane with one broken wing on the ship. This account stands out because Fred had blue eyes.<sup>22</sup> Bilimon probably had not seen many people with blue eyes in the South Pacific, so this feature would have stood out in his recollection of events.

Another credible account is from two teenage fishermen, Jororo Alibar and Anibar Eine. They saw an airplane land on a reef near Barre Island at the Mili Atoll, about 200 feet offshore. They said two men and a yellow boat (that grew) came out of the plane. Later, they realized one person was a woman after she screamed. The Japanese Navy took them away.<sup>23</sup>

It is easy to assume Electra's crew ended up on Saipan, and they died on the island. Too many eyewitnesses say the same thing. The Japanese thought they were spies. Here is one more credible account supporting the Japanese thought in 1937.

Before the war, a Japanese policeman told two sisters in Saipan, Florence Kirby and Olympio Borja, about killing an American man and woman. His drunk coworkers had bragged about it at dinner one night. Their grandfather also told them the American woman pilot was in Garapan Prison.<sup>24</sup> It's now identified as "Old Japanese Jail" on Google Earth.

## Conclusion

Amelia Earhart inspires aviation enthusiasts around the world, and her disappearance continues to intrigue people almost a century later. In 2019, a small piece of aluminum was found on Nikumaroro, a tiny island in the Phoenix Islands. The discovery led to widespread speculation that it might be a fragment of her Lockheed 10E airplane. Although the mystery of what happened to Earhart and her navigator remains unsolved, the search for answers continues. New discoveries could one day provide insight into their fate, but the legend remains.

One exciting piece of evidence that some people might overlook is a street named Earhart Drive on the island of Saipan, over 2,000 miles away from Earhart's flight path in 1937. The tarnished Earhart Drive sign is even visible on Google Earth Street View. This unusual landmark raises the question of why a street would be named after Earhart on an island far from her intended route.



Earhart Dr sign

Google Earth



## Sources

1. Mike Campbell, Amelia Earhart: The Truth At Last, Propaganda Versus Fact in the Disappearance of America's First Lady of Flight, Sunbury Press, Second Edition, 2016, 15.
2. Ibid., 24.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. TIGHAR, The Earhart Project, Earhart Project Research Bulletin, The Fuel System of NR16020, November 1, 2011  
[https://tighar.org/Projects/Earhart/Archives/Research/Bulletins/61\\_FuelSystem/61\\_FuelSystem.htm](https://tighar.org/Projects/Earhart/Archives/Research/Bulletins/61_FuelSystem/61_FuelSystem.htm)
5. Campbell, 24.
6. Ibid., 22.
7. Amelia Earhart, The Family of Amelia Earhart 2021, Achievements,  
<https://ameliaearhart.com/achievements/>
8. Campbell, 26.
9. Ibid., 27.
10. Ibid., 27-28.
11. Almon Gray's "Amelia Earhart and Radio," Part I, Earhart Truth, April 12, 2016  
<https://earharttruth.wordpress.com/2016/04/12/pan-am-radio-pioneer-capt-almon-gray-amelia-didnt-know-radio/>
12. Campbell, 26.
13. Ric Gillespie, Finding Amelia: The True Story of The Earhart Disappearance, TIGHAR, 2006, 74.
14. Sites Google, Fredienoonan, Explanation for why they missed Howland  
<https://sites.google.com/site/fredienoonan/discussions/explanation-for-why-they-missed-howland>
15. Almon Gray,  
<https://earharttruth.wordpress.com/2016/04/12/pan-am-radio-pioneer-capt-almon-gray-amelia-didnt-know-radio/>
16. Campbell, 126-127.
17. Campbell, 127.
18. vCalc, Ground Speed  
<https://www.vcalc.com/wiki/KurtHeckman/Ground+Speed>
19. Gillespie, 221.
20. Horizontal Distance Calculator  
<https://calculator.academy/horizon-distance-calculator/>
21. Japanese settlements in the Marshall Islands, Wikipedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese\\_settlement\\_in\\_the\\_Marshall\\_Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_settlement_in_the_Marshall_Islands)
22. Campbell, 144-146.
23. Ibid., 136.
24. Ibid., 114-115.