Earhart's Final Resting Place Believed Found

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Legendary aviatrix Amelia Earhart most likely died on an uninhabited tropical island in the southwestern Pacific republic of Kiribati, according to researchers at The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR).

Tall, slender, blonde and brave, Earhart disappeared while flying over the Pacific Ocean on July 2, 1937 in a record attempt to fly around the world at the equator. Her final resting place has long been a mystery.

For years, Richard Gillespie, TIGHAR's executive director and author of the book "Finding Amelia," and his crew have been searching the Nikumaroro island for evidence of Earhart. A tiny coral atoll, Nikumaroro was some 300 miles southeast of Earhart's target destination, Howland Island.

A number of artifacts recovered by TIGHAR would suggest that Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, made a forced landing on the island's smooth, flat coral reef.

According to Gillespie, who is set to embark on a new $500,000 Nikumaroro expedition next summer, the two became castaways and eventually died there.

"We know that in 1940 British Colonial Service officer Gerald Gallagher recovered a partial skeleton of a castaway on Nikumaroro. Unfortunately, those bones have now been lost," Gillespie said.

The archival record by Gallagher suggests that the bones were found in a remote area of the island, in a place that was unlikely to have been seen during an aerial search.

A woman's shoe, an empty bottle and a sextant box whose serial numbers are consistent with a type known to have been carried by Noonan were all found near the site where the bones were discovered.

"The reason why they found a partial skeleton is that many of the bones had been carried off by giant coconut crabs. There is a remote chance that some of the bones might still survive deep in crab burrows," Gillespie said.

Although she did not succeed in her around-the-world expedition, Earhart flew off into the legend just after her final radio transmission.

Books, movies and television specials about her disappearance abound as well as speculation about her fate. Theories proliferated that she was a spy, that she was captured by the Japanese, that she died in a prisoner-of-war camp, and that she survived and returned to live her life as a New Jersey housewife.

A new biopic about Earhart's life, starring Hilary Swank and Richard Gere, opens this weekend.
The general consensus has been that the plane had run out of fuel and crashed in the Pacific Ocean, somewhere near Howland Island.

But according to Gillespie, the "volume of evidence" TIGHAR has gathered suggests an alternative scenario.

"Propagation analysis of nearly 200 radio signals heard for several days after the disappearance make it virtually indisputable that the airplane was on land," Gillespie said.

Eventually, Earhart’s twin-engine plane, the Electra, was ripped apart by Nikumaroro’s strong waves and swept out into deep water, leaving no visible trace.

"The evidence is plentiful -- but not conclusive yet -- to support the hypothesis that Amelia landed and died on the island of Nikumaroro," forensic anthropologist Karen Ramey Burns told Discovery News.

The author of a book on Earhart, Burns believes that the strongest of the amassed evidence comes from the report related to the partial skeleton found by Gallagher.

"The skeleton was found to be consistent in appearance with females of European descent in the United States today, and the stature was consistent with that of Amelia Earhart," said Burns.

According to Burns, another piece of documentary evidence comes from the accounts of Lt. John O. Lambrecht, a U.S. Naval aviator participating in the search for Earhart’s plane. Lambrecht reported "signs of recent habitation" on what was an officially uninhabited atoll.

Lambrecht’s report begs the question: Why did no one follow up?

"I have stood in plain sight on Nikumaroro in a white shirt waving wildly as a helicopter flew over me and was not noticed until the video tape of the flight was examined," Burns said.

"I find it very easy to believe that Amelia and Fred would not have been seen by the pilot. If the Electra was not visible at the time, their last chance of rescue was lost in Lambrecht’s notes," she added.

Abandoned on a desert island where temperatures often exceed 100 degrees, even in the shade, Earhart and Noonan likely eventually succumbed to any number of causes, including injury and infection, food poisoning from toxic fish, or simply dehydration.

The coconut crabs’ great pincers would have done the rest, likely removing some of the last physical traces of this pioneering aviatrix.