This picture illustrates the size of Amelia Earhart’s aircraft. As seen in the photograph it is 10 feet 1 inch at its highest point. If the landing gear were collapsed it still would stand over 4 feet high. What are the chances it was still on the reef when airplanes from the *USS Colorado* searched the island?

Exploring the Details in a New Light

Amelia Earhart was a very strong willed, intelligent and resourceful person. Everyone who knew or worked with her was impressed with her knowledge of everything mechanical. She was cool-headed and a very good aviator -- not at all like some characterizations of her as “A publicity-seeking woman stunt pilot.”

Amelia believed that if a man was capable of something, so was a woman. George Palmer Putnam Jr, her step-
son, stated in a recent interview with us, “She was very mechanically inclined. She had taken courses in auto repair and could have gotten a job with any GM dealership in the U.S. because of her schooling and experience. On several occasions when the car would sputter and start to run rough she would pull over to the side of the road, grab her tool kit, fix the problem and we would drive away.”

The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) has done some very impressive research on Ms. Earhart’s disappearance. Their website has more than 14,000 pages of research and many suppositions which point to an ill-fated flight landing on the reef at Gardner Island. The reef is smooth enough to afford a somewhat “bumpy,” but safe landing at low tide.

**The Evidence Speaks for Itself!**

Frederick J. Hooven wrote a report in June of 1982 that drew the same conclusion. This was three years before TIGHAR was founded and he stated, “The evidence strongly supports the hypothesis that the flyers landed in the Phoenix area, probably on McKeen or Gardner, (and) that they transmitted signals from there during the next three days.”

Hooven’s conclusion was based on the fact that Pan American Airways and the Navy used direction-finding equipment to home in on the signals believed to be transmitted by Amelia. In Hooven's words, “Statistical analysis of the direction-finding bearings, even allowing for a very modest estimate of their probable accuracy, indicate the probability of three Pan-American bearings (out of four) and one bearing taken from Howland should all coincide, along with the 337-157 position line, is so remote as to be dismissed from consideration.” In other words the lines all intersected in the vicinity of McKeen and Gardner Islands.

Our research contradicts Mr. Hooven’s conclusion. The lines, if extended past the Gardner/McKeen Island area converge on Samoa or American Samoa. In 1937 the U.S. Navy operated a base at Tutulia on American Samoa which had the capabilities to send, either accidently or purposely, the signals that were picked up by the Pan American Airways Direction Finding Stations. Only one bearing is the least bit ambiguous. The 201 bearing taken by Pan American at Midway Island could point to American Samoa or Mili Atoll (at the time in the Japanese controlled Marshall Islands).

The Lockheed Electra took off from Lae, New Guinea at midnight Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and was last heard from at 2055 GMT. The aircraft had 1100 gallons of fuel on board when it left Lae. There was between 3 hours and 05 minutes and 4 hours and 53 minutes of fuel remaining when her last radio transmission was received. Either of these figures makes it more than possible for her to have made the flight to Mili Atoll or Gardner Island with fuel to spare. These estimates depend on her actual position when she decided to turn towards her alternate destination.

The official government finding was that she was fatally injured in a crash in the Pacific Ocean near Howland Island. They closed the case on May 5, 1938. There was no real evidence at the time to support that conclusion. There has been no evidence since then to lend credence to that theory. There is, however, a great deal of evidence to support the conclusion that they landed **on land or in very shallow water.** We believe we can safely say that Amelia Earhart landed her aircraft on a nearly dry reef on Gardner Island or **Mili Atoll** between 10:30 and 11:00 AM local time on July 2, 1937. We also can conclude that the thought processes of the people who were supposed to rescue her were fatally flawed. The Department of Commerce made an unsupported finding when they closed the case in May of 1938. We also can dispel any notions that she simply lost control of her aircraft and crashed into the sea or flew in circles until she ran out of fuel.
There are other questions about this theory though. We are very impressed (although not always favorably) with the work of Mr. Gillespie and TIGHAR and applaud their research. However, we differ with them on their conclusion: that Amelia and Fred perished on the island and their plane was washed off the reef into deep water. Sorry, Mr. Gillespie, nothing personal.

The reasons we disagree with TIGHAR's conclusion comes from their own research and some fundamental logic. We know from TIGHAR's research that Fred and Amelia transmitted on their radio from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} to the 6\textsuperscript{th} of July. They could only transmit if the right engine was running, which meant she had to have landed with minimal damage to the plane. After the July 6\textsuperscript{th} there are transmissions that COULD have been made by them, but the evidence is not as conclusive as it is for the transmissions before the 6\textsuperscript{th}. We can be fairly sure that if they were on the Gardner Island, they were there until the night of the 6\textsuperscript{th} and possibly the early morning of the 7\textsuperscript{th}.

In fact there is a report from the navy radio operators at Wailupe, Hawaii that they heard a woman calling NRU1 (the call letters for the Itasca) from KHAQQ (Amelia Earhart's call letters). This meant that she may still have been on Gardner on the evening of the 7\textsuperscript{th}. Her transmission was “EARHART CALLING NRU1-NRUI-CALLING FROM KHAQQ, ON CORAL SOUTHWEST OF UNKNOWN ISLAND DO NOT KNOW HOW LONG...(the carrier wave faded but a few seconds later came). . . . KHAQQ CALLING, KHAQQ WE ARE CUT A LITTLE....(carrier wave faded not to be heard again).” These three navy radio operators may have been the last Americans to hear Amelia Earhart's voice.

So it is possible she was still calling on the nights of July 6\textsuperscript{th} and the 7\textsuperscript{th}. The search planes for the USS Colorado arrived over the island between 8:30 and 9:30 A.M. on the 9\textsuperscript{th} of July. TIGHAR states that according to the report of the senior aviator from the Colorado, J.O. Lambrecht: “Most of this island is covered with tropical vegetation with, here and there, a grove of coconut palms. Here recent signs of habitation were clearly visible but repeated circling and zooming failed to elicit any answering wave from possible inhabitants and it was finally taken for granted that none were there.”

Can an Aircraft Simply Disappear?

It appears that Lt. Lambrecht and his two fellow pilots gave anyone on the island a good opportunity to make themselves known. The USS Colorado was less than twelve miles off the coast of the island from 10:00 to 10:20 A.M. If we were to assume, as TIGHAR has done, that both Amelia and Fred were too weak to respond or already dead, then what happened to the aircraft? The ship's log mentions the SS Norwich City (a shipwrecked freighter on the reef) and according to TIGHAR the Electra should have been very close by.

TIGHAR contends that the tide was high and covered the aircraft which kept the pilots from spotting it. The tide, according to TIGHAR's “tide tables,” was never more than 50 inches above the reef. They state (on the web page titled “Post Loss Signal Statistics with Tide Information”) that at 9:30 A.M. on the 9\textsuperscript{th} of July the tide was from nine to five inches high (the tide was going out). It is hard for us to believe that an aircraft that was over ten feet high was completely covered by water five to nine inches high. Even if the landing gear had collapsed, the body of the aircraft is over four and a half feet high.
The aviators from the Colorado would have had to be blind (scary thought) not to have seen the wreckage under nine inches of water. TIGHAR contends the aircraft was stuck securely on the reef for five days – and then suddenly washed away! There were no storms recorded by any of the deck logs of the ships in the area and we find it difficult to believe that a rain squall could dislodge an aircraft weighing more than 7,300 pounds and wash it into deep water.

Putting the Pieces Together

But, let’s entertain the possibility that the Electra WAS washed off the reef. What would have happened? The empty fuel tanks would have supported the plane’s weight up to 9600 pounds. If the aircraft weighed more than 9600 pounds it would have meant that there was at least 366 gallons of fuel on board (9 hours and 30 minutes of flying time). If Amelia had 9 hours and 30 minutes of fuel remaining, why did she land on a reef at Gardner Island instead of going to American Samoa 3 hours and 42 minutes away?

Weighing less than 9600 pounds, the Electra would have floated like a cork and the wave action would have caused it to go further towards the shore, not out to sea. The Colorado should have seen the aircraft floating if it had been washed off the reef. We think it is a safe assumption that neither the Electra, nor parts of it, were on the reef when the planes dispatched from the Colorado searched the island. The landing gear, which has created so much news lately, would have been readily seen in five to nine inches of water if it had been there in July of 1937.

The Maude/Bevington expedition that arrived on the island on Wednesday, October 13, 1937 towards the end of the dry season were able to dig shallow wells to find water. Water would probably have been available in pools at the end of the wet season when the pair landed in July. Bevington stated that on the first day he walked from the wreck of the SS Norwich City to the shore in very shallow water at about 9:00 in the morning. It seems strange that he wouldn’t have seen something as prominent as a landing gear from an Electra in ankle deep water.

Even stranger, is the fact that he wouldn’t have gone to investigate what it was. It is even more unlikely the Electra was washed off the reef and sunk in the space of 36 to 48 hours. If it was washed off the reef it would have floated near the island for much longer than that. The tides and wave action would have washed it into the lagoon. The pilots from the USS Colorado, flying at 400 feet, found signs of recent habitation, but no bodies or an aircraft. Everyone rightfully assumed that neither Amelia nor Fred were on the island.

The Only Logical Conclusion!

It appears that the Navy arrived too late to help them if they were ever there. They were gone and their aircraft was taken with them. They were taken off the island and the Electra was deliberately sunk in deep water or they were never on the island. It is difficult to logically imagine any other answer. Only in the movies do things disappear with no reality-based explanation. They couldn’t possibly have left the island without some assistance.

Another possibility is that they were in the aircraft when it was washed off the reef. That would mean her last radio call was made from a floating aircraft, hence, “We are southwest of an unknown island and don' know how long...” Amelia could have made that brief call on battery power alone. If one looks at that scenario you have to ask, “What would possess anyone to climb aboard an aircraft that was being washed off a reef away from dry land?” If they did get aboard the Electra to float out to sea then they must have already been close to dying and unable to think rationally. It might have worked for Tom Hanks in the movie Castaway, but we doubt that would happen in real life.
About the authors

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Harold “Fred” Nicely is a retired Military and Civilian Helicopter and Airplane Pilot as well as a Helicopter Instructor. He has had a 37-year military career with an 18-month combat tour in Vietnam. Since then he has studied the early aviation greats Rickenbacker, Lindbergh, Earhart and Post and developed an extensive research ability and knowledge of celestial navigation. This first time novelist was born in Rhodell, WV