

Researcher to review evidence of Amelia Earhart theory

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Amelia Earhart, circa 1936. Credit: Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress

Legendary American pilot Amelia Earhart may not have perished in a plane crash as many have long assumed.

A group of researchers believe she died as a castaway on a remote island, and one UT professor is helping to provide the [scientific evidence](#) to back up that claim.

Richard Jantz—professor emeritus of anthropology and director emeritus of UT's Forensic Anthropology Center—is working with the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) on research papers that will document their conclusions. They plan to submit the papers for journal publication soon.

"Nothing we can do will prove it's her," Jantz said. "But we hope to produce a preponderance of the evidence."

Earhart was the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. She mysteriously disappeared in 1937 while flying over the Pacific Ocean. Many assumed that her plane crashed into the waters, and she and her navigator, Fred Noonan, were never to be seen again.

In 1940, bones were found on Nikumaroro, a remote island in the South Pacific. Some suspected they belonged to Earhart, so the remains were shipped to a physician and founder of a medical school in Fiji for confirmation. The physician analyzed the bones and concluded they were the bones of a man.

"After he excluded Amelia Earhart, people lost interest," Jantz said. "It wasn't until the 1990s when interest resurfaced because the physician's written report was found in archives in London."

The notes contained four measurements of the skull and three measurements from long bones—the tibia, humerus, and radius. There

was one problem: the bones themselves had disappeared and were believed to have been purged from the [medical school](#)'s collection. TIGHAR reached out to Jantz for assistance through a colleague with whom they had previously partnered.

"My role is to make what can be made of the biological relationship of the bones found on this island to Amelia Earhart," Jantz said.

"Everybody thinks when you say bones were found, it's easy to find out by DNA. Unfortunately, the bones have gone missing. All we have are data written by a physician in 1940."

In 1998, Jantz along with other anthropologists reviewed the measurements and published a paper indicating that the morphology of the bones appeared consistent with a female of Earhart's height and ethnic origin.

Jantz is taking a closer look again at the measurements "and trying to figure out if what the physician had before him could have deceived him."

"We're not arguing that he was incompetent or unprofessional. He was asked to do something he was not experienced to do," said Jantz, noting that the [physician](#) recommended in his report that the bones be sent to Sydney, Australia, for further analysis.

"Forensic anthropology at the time was an infant science," he said.

Jantz and the TIGHAR team are also considering other evidence, including information about Earhart's height and feedback from a forensic photographer who has reviewed photos of Earhart in which her bare limbs are visible.

TIGHAR has conducted archeological trips to Nikumaroro and found

several artifacts including a size nine shoe—the same size Earhart wore—and a sextant, a navigating tool like the one Earhart's co-pilot used. The organization also has evidence that from the time Earhart's plane vanished off radar on July 2 until July 6, Earhart made more than 100 radio transmissions calling for help.

Skeptics have questioned the new information. In response to their doubts, Jantz said, "We think there is pretty strong evidence that somebody of European origin was on the island and these artifacts have to be explained. If it wasn't Amelia Earhart, who was it?"

"The theory that Earhart crashed into the ocean needs to be confronted with evidence found on the island," Jantz said. "I think we can say it's more likely than not that the bones are hers."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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