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Intermediate Student’s Book

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Where is Amelia Earhart?

**Three Theories**

By Ker Than for *National Geographic* News

Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, was attempting a round-the-world flight in 1937. She planned to land on the tiny Pacific Ocean island of Howland just north of the equator. She never arrived. Her fate, and that of her navigator Fred Noonan, remains one of aviation’s greatest unsolved mysteries. Researchers have spent millions of dollars investigating the case and several books have been published that examine the differing theories.

The official US position is that Earhart ran out of fuel and crashed in the Pacific Ocean. The radio log from a US Coast Guard ship indicates that she must have been near Howland when contact was lost.

Another theory says that Earhart could have landed on a different island, called Nikumaroro, and subsequently died since the island is uninhabited.

Yet another theory claims she was captured while on a secret mission to the Japanese-controlled Marshall Islands in the North Pacific and eventually returned to the USA with a new identity.

**Lost and found? The missing pilot**

18 February 2011

Amelia Earhart’s dried saliva could help solve the longstanding mystery of the aviator’s 1937 disappearance, according to scientists who plan to take samples of her DNA from her correspondence. A new project aims to create a genetic profile that could be used to test recent claims that a bone found on the South Pacific island of Nikumaroro is Earhart’s.

Justin Long, a Canadian whose family is partially funding the DNA project, points out that at the moment, anyone who finds fragments of bones can claim that they are Amelia Earhart’s remains. Long, an internet-marketing executive, is the grandson of 1970s aviator Elgen Long, who with his wife wrote the 1999 book *Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved*. According to Justin Long, Earhart’s letters are the only items that are both verifiably hers and that might contain her DNA. Hair samples are one of the best sources of a person’s DNA, but no hair samples from Earhart are known. There was, in theory, a sample of Earhart’s hair in the International Women’s Air and Space Museum in Cleveland, USA. However, a 2009 study revealed that the sample was actually thread.

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The remains of Earhart, her navigator Noonan, and their twin-engine plane were never recovered. But in 2009, researchers with the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery found a bone fragment on Nikumaroro, which they believed might have been from one of Earhart’s fingers. However, some scientists have suggested the Nikumaroro bone fragment isn’t human at all but may instead belong to a sea turtle which was found nearby.

The new Earhart DNA project will be headed by Dongya Yang, a genetic archaeologist at Simon Fraser University in Canada. Yang will work on four letters Earhart wrote to her family, out of more than 400 letters in the Earhart archive. Much of Earhart’s correspondence was dealt with by her secretary. However, with the four personal letters, the assumption is that Earhart must have sealed the envelopes herself.

Meanwhile, geneticist Brenna Henn of Stanford University, USA said she knows of no other case where DNA has been collected from decades-old letters. But she said Yang’s methodology ‘sounds reasonable’. The problem is that about 99 per cent of the genome is identical among all humans. If the team obtains little material, they have almost no power to discriminate between Earhart’s DNA and that of other living people. To ensure that the DNA from the letters indeed belonged to Earhart, the team will compare it to DNA from Earhart’s still-living relatives and also DNA extracted from another letter, written by Earhart’s sister.

genome /ˈdʒiːnəʊm/ the genetic information of each living thing

saliva /səˈlaɪvə/ the liquid normally in your mouth