

Amelia Earhart search revives her local connections

By [Joseph P. Kahn](#) | GLOBE STAFF JULY 09, 2012



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Amelia Earhart relocated from California to the Boston area in 1925 and often flew from what was then Dennison Airport in Quincy.



Growing up in Lynn, Jim Morrissey dreamed of two events happening in his lifetime: He wanted to see the Red Sox win a World Series, and he wanted someone to solve the disappearance of his great-aunt, Amelia Earhart.

The Sox took care of business in 2004. This month, on the 75th anniversary of Earhart's

doomed attempt to fly around the globe, Morrissey just might see his second wish granted. Last week an expedition left Hawaii for Nikumaroro, a tiny, uninhabited South Pacific atoll where some researchers think there is a good chance of locating the remains of Earhart's airplane.

Morrissey knows that atoll well. Ten years ago he joined a search expedition — led by the organization conducting the current one, The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, known as TIGHAR — seeking evidence that Earhart had landed and briefly lived on Nikumaroro.

Apart from signs of a primitive campsite, little was found to support that theory. However, new technologies, supported by \$2.2 million in private funding, hold the promise of different results this time, or so hope TIGHAR team members and a Discovery Channel crew documenting the mission.

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“I'm curious to see what happens. It would be great if they did find something,” said Morrissey, 52, a paramedic who lives in Oakland, Calif. “But I'm not holding my breath.”

When Earhart's plane was lost, on July 2, 1937, her only sibling, Muriel Earhart Morrissey — Jim Morrissey's grandmother — was living in Medford. She died in 1998, leaving behind two children raised in Massachusetts and seven grandchildren. (Amelia Earhart had no children.) Morrissey and other family members are among many New Englanders closely watching the Earhart saga, past and present.

Particular interest is focused on an autonomous underwater vehicle, or AUV, that could play a vital role in the mission. Designed and built by Bluefin Robotics, a Quincy company, the 16-foot-long, torpedo-shaped AUV is capable of diving to depths approaching 15,000 feet and will take sonar scannings of the atoll's coral reef. These scannings could yield evidence of plane fragments.

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By one scenario, Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, ditched their Lockheed Electra on Nikumororo, after which the aircraft was swept offshore. The pair presumably perished soon thereafter. A decades-old photo taken on the atoll shows what could be a portion of the plane's landing gear, bolstering the theory that it went down on the atoll.

Should any remnants be located, another, larger submersible will take high-definition pictures of whatever lies below. Two Bluefin technicians are also on board to provide technical assistance. The vessel is expected to reach Nikumororo this week.

The AUV was manufactured not far from the Quincy airstrip where Earhart often flew in the mid-1920s — Dennison Airport, later renamed Squantum Naval Air Station — while working and living in the Boston area, before she became internationally famous for her flying exploits.

“We're definitely excited to be involved in this,” said David Kelly, president and CEO of Bluefin Robotics. Beyond the Quincy connection, Earhart and his company share similar philosophies, Kelly noted. “She liked to push boundaries, to take calculated risks in the aviation field,” much as his firm does in underwater exploration, he said.

Meanwhile, the Ninety-Nines, an international organization of female pilots, will hold its annual conference in Providence beginning Wednesday. Earhart was the group's first president. With nearly 5,000 members in 35 countries, and 145 members in its three New England chapters, the Ninety-Nines are a living memorial to Earhart's pioneering achievements as an aviator, adventurer, public figure, and staunch advocate for women's rights.

“We all feel a connection to Amelia Earhart,” said conference co-chair Glenna Blackwood, who lives in (and flies out of) Great Barrington. “We keep up with today's happening, too, like the release of the ‘Amelia’ movie three years ago. But mostly we reflect on the past and what she did for all of us.”

Some Ninety-Niners prefer Earhart's fate to remain a mystery, feeling that it only enhances the mystique that has surrounded Earhart since her death. But Blackwood is not among them. “Personally, I'd like to have closure,” she said. “So I'm excited about this latest expedition. And I do feel they'll find something.”

Earhart's past — revered by Blackwood and countless others — is celebrated in biographies, films, museum exhibits, and other media. It includes the years Earhart spent largely in Massachusetts, not long before she became a global figure and pop culture icon.

Earhart had already set aviation records when she relocated from California to the Boston area in 1925. At the time, her career path was teaching English to immigrants and later nursing and social work. For two years she worked, and eventually lived, at Denison House, a settlement house on Tyler Street, in Boston's burgeoning Chinatown neighborhood.

Earhart was also promoting flying — and women's role in it — through newspaper columns and serving as a sales representative for Kinner airplanes. Joining the Boston chapter of the American Aeronautical Society, she helped lay the foundation for the Ninety-Nines as well.

In 1928, Earhart was invited to join a male pilot and copilot on a trans-Atlantic flight that would make her the first woman to accomplish such a feat. Upon its completion, the media likened her to flying hero Charles Lindbergh, nicknaming her "Lady Lindy." Four years later — not long after her marriage to publisher George Putnam — Earhart flew across the Atlantic solo, the first woman to do that, too.

"Boston was a turning point in her life," says Earhart biographer Susan Butler, for it was here that Earhart gained both the flying experience and media presence that carried her into the history books.

Like Jim Morrissey, Butler was invited along on an earlier search mission. It focused on Howland Island, Earhart and Noonan's intended destination when radio contact with their plane was lost. As was the case with numerous other land and deep-sea search efforts, it yielded no definitive answers to the pair's fate, either.

Will this attempt be different? Butler is skeptical if hopeful. She believes Earhart crash-landed at sea, her plane resting at a depth that makes finding it unlikely.

Still, said Butler, when and if the mystery is solved, "I'd hope the emphasis would be placed on her extraordinary life and not on her death."

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