

In Search of

Amelia



Murrysville's **Mike Silvert** on the quest to find clues about Amelia Earhart's 1937 disappearance. BY JENNIFER BROZAK

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fter Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Electra disappeared during its attempted 29,000-mile flight around in the world in the summer of 1937, several wildly conflicting theories arose. One presumed her plane had simply run out of gas and crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Another speculated that Earhart had managed to land her plane, but had been captured by the Japanese and died while in Japanese custody.

There is, of course, a third theory—one that suggests that Earhart, experiencing a mechanical error or a navigational mishap, landed her plane on a remote island in the Pacific and lived alone as a castaway for some time before succumbing to the elements.

This is the theory that Murrysville resident Mike Silvert believes, and the one he has spent the past several years determined to prove.

Silvert's fascination with Amelia Earhart began when he was a child growing up in the growing up in the 1950s. His mother regaled him with stories about Earhart, who was still very much in the public consciousness.

"She was quite the groundbreaking person of her time," says Silvert, 71, referring to the fact that Earhart had been the first woman and only the second person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

After high school, Silvert joined the U.S. Navy, where he specialized in navigation. He learned how to navigate using the same pre-GPS methods, like celestial navigation, that Amelia Earhart used to pilot her plane across the Pacific, further stoking his interest in the Earhart mystery.

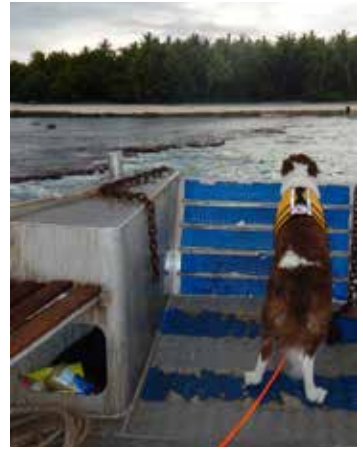
Berkley canine forensic dog at channel entrance to Niku.

A native of Baltimore, Silvert came to Murrysville in 1982 after he landed a sales job at the former Channel 22, which was based in Monroeville. About a year and a half later, Silvert left Channel 22 to work for WPXI-TV, where he stayed for 24 years before retiring in 2008.

It was sometime in the early 1990s when Silvert's curiosity about Earhart was piqued once again, when he read about The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR), a nonprofit foundation dedicated to promoting responsible aviation archaeology and historic preservation. The group had taken several expeditions to a deserted island in the Pacific to investigate Earhart's disappearance.

Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro Island) was located approximately 356 nautical miles away from Earhart's intended target, Howland Island, which was a one-square-mile island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Based on the number and location of Amelia's final radio messages, TIGHAR believes that Gardner Island is where Earhart actually landed her plane—and also where its members have found numerous artifacts that support their theory.

In 1991, for example, the group found an aluminum patch that likely had been used to replace the broken navigation window on the Electra's starboard fuselage. Since then, other evidence has been found that points to Earhart having spent time on the island, including shoe parts and glass bottle fragments that point to habitation by Westerners.



Aerial photo of Nikumaroro.

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Nikumaroro reef where Amelia Earhart is believed to have landed.



Haircomb found in 2015 made from aircraft aluminum.



Canine forensic dog Piper and her trainer.

“The last leg of the trip was more than 20 hours across the Pacific Ocean,” explains Silvert. “In 1 hour, if you’re off just by 1 degree due to wind or a minor miscalculation, you’re 60 miles away from where you’re [planning] to be. In a period of 20 hours, you could be 120 miles or more off course and you’ll never find your destination.”

Earhart’s navigator was Fred Noonan, who had worked for Pan-American Airways and was widely considered one of the top aviation experts of his time. This is one of the reasons Silvert doesn’t abide by the theory that Earhart’s plane simply veered off course and

crashed into the ocean. According to him, an experienced team like Earhart and Noonan would have had a “Plan B” if they couldn’t reach their intended target.

“In navigation, you always have a Plan B. If you can’t figure out where you are supposed to be, you have to ask yourself where do you think you are, and where is the closest place you can head to,” says Silvert.

Silvert continued to follow TIGHAR’s research on the island throughout the rest of his career. When he retired, he decided that he wanted to do more than just monitor TIGHAR’s progress from afar. He officially joined the organization around 2012.

Then, in 2014, he learned that TIGHAR was planning a 2015 trip to Nikumaroro via a partnership with the California-based Betchart Expeditions. Inspired by Earhart’s famous quote, “There’s more to life than being a passenger,” Silvert signed up for the voyage.

“I had retired in 2008. All of a sudden, it was one of these things like you’ve always told yourself—that you’ve got to do something exciting,” Silvert recalls. “I love history, I love a good

mystery, and Amelia Earhart was a role model for me as a kid. So, I figured if she could do it, I could do it.”

With TIGHAR’s chief archaeologist Tom King on board, Betchart navigated a small cruise ship from Fiji to Nikumaroro—a five-day trip that was fraught with rough seas and horrible storms. By the time they arrived, TIGHAR’s research ship was already anchored off of the small island.

On the first day there, one of the members of the Betchart group, a botanist, discovered the first of two hair combs that had been fabricated from airplane aluminum.

“That gave us, the civilians, some bona fides,” Silvert says, laughing.

Following that successful expedition, Silvert and his fellow TIGHAR members (in partnership with the National Geographic Society) returned to the island in 2017, this time bringing along four cadaver dogs to the location known as the “Seven Site,” which takes its name from a seven-shaped natural clearing on the island. This is also the location where the bones of a castaway were found by the British in 1940. The bones were recently reanalyzed by a forensic anthropologist who says that the evidence “strongly supports the conclusion that the Nikumaroro bones belonged to Amelia Earhart.”

Still, the TIGHAR team was hoping to unearth a tooth or even a tooth fragment—widely considered the “holy grail” of artifacts because of DNA properties.

“I spent one day there, for six and a half hours, sitting cross-legged on the ground with a little trowel and rubber gloves—it was ‘CSI Nikumaroro,’” Silvert says. “But after 80 years of serious weather conditions, nothing actually definitive was able to be recovered.”

He remains hopeful that one day the mystery of what happened to Amelia Earhart will be solved.

“She was such a remarkable woman and so much of an inspiration to young women of the 1930s and 1940s—needless to say, we have to remember how things were for women back then,” Silvert adds. “I think she deserves to be an inspiration for this generation of young people and the next. I think she deserves to be brought home.”

For more information about TIGHAR’s research, including extensive reports of the group’s trips to Nikumaroro, visit tighar.org. ■