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Howland Island Lighthouse:
A Light for Amelia Earhart

By Elinor DeWire

The vast Pacific Ocean is home to numerous groups of islands, some so tiny, far-flung, and isolated that many of us have never heard of them. Howland Island, a mere sandbank adrift in cerulean seas and distant from civilization, might fit that description, except for the fact that it gained fame 75 summers ago when it played a significant role in the disappearance of America's most famous aviatrix.

Amelia Earhart, the daring young flyer who attempted to circumnavigate the equator in 1937, vanished along with her co-pilot, Fred Noonan, near Howland Island on the trans-Pacific leg of her historic final flight. Investigators of the incident believe "Lady Lindy," as she was affectionately nicknamed, lost her way and crashed into the ocean not far from Howland Island. Her last radio transmission, received by the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca*, anchored off the island, noted:

WE ARE ON THE LINE OF POSITION 157 – 337. WILL REPEAT THIS MESSAGE. WE WILL REPEAT THIS MESSAGE ON 6210 KC. WAIT…LISTENING ON 6210.

A garbled message, "we are running north and south" followed. Then Amelia Earhart vanished into history. Today, she is remembered in many ways, lending her name to scholarships, streets, parks, festivals, wildlife sanctuaries, bridges, and ships, but also to a lighthouse on Howland Island. The Amelia Earhart Lighthouse, a 74-year-old sentinel known as Amelia Earhart Light, is modest in size and has been tested by war and weather.

It ceased operation in 1996 and was downgraded to a daybeacon. Yet, the story of how it came to be and how it shines as a memorial to feminine determination and pluck surely would make Amelia Earhart proud.

Shaped like a pickle and only two miles long and a half-mile wide, Howland Island is a pile of pulverized, sunburned coral fringed by extensive reefs. It is situated near the equator at 0°48′07″ North and 176°38′3″ West about 1,900 miles south-southwest of Honolulu and is part of a scattering of coral atolls called the Phoenix Islands. The island was named in 1842 for a crewman aboard the whaler *Isabella*, who spotted it from the ship's crow's nest while watching for humpback whales. He spied a clump of pisonia trees growing near the island's center, along with some grasses and low shrubs. The apron of reefs around the island was festooned with the ribs of an old shipwreck that had occurred there years before. Whether the ship's crew survived or perished is unknown, but the vessel gave the island its only mammal population—a horde of hearty castaway rats.

In 1857 Howland Island was acquired by the United States under the Guano Islands Act passed the previous year. Fertilizer ships rushed to the site and harvested the brick-hard guano deposits, created by seabirds, within two decades. Stripped of its only bounty, Howland Island then grew quiet for almost 80 years.

In the early 1930s, the island became part of the United States Minor Outlying Islands. Besides Howland Island, this designation also included the islands known as Baker, Jarvis, Wake, the Midways, and Johnston Atoll and Kingman Reef. Interestingly, these small isles, along with the Marshall Islands, Gilbert Islands, Christmas Island, and the Hawaiian Islands, form a huge 2,500-mile-diameter circle around the Central Pacific Basin which navigators have



Amelia Earhart posed in 1928 with the plane in which she made her famous "Flight Across America." Library of Congress photo.

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long known as a waypoint on trans-Pacific sea voyages and flights. The Polynesians, who were perhaps the best seat-of-the-pants navigators of all time, knew these islands like the backs of their hands.

The United States failed to see them as useful, however. What would they do with these small, flat, nearly lifeless atolls? They were unfit for habitation, with no fresh water and little natural resource value. Some seemed strategically located for military purposes, but there was no war in the Pacific in the 1930s. In fact, there was little evidence anyone had ever lived on any of the Phoenix Islands.

In 1935 an experiment of sorts began with the establishment of a small settlement on Howland Island called Itascatown. Boys from the prestigious Kamehameha School in Honolulu were brought to the island on the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* to live for short stints and work as weather observers and marine science investigators. A lesser known goal for the project was to see how well the group of young men survived on a lonely, desolate island—a test of the human spirit. Similar colonies were set up on nearby Baker Island and Jarvis Island as well. It was a project that easily could have inspired William Golding's 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*.

Not until 1937 was a more publicized and perhaps practical use found for Howland Island. Someone had her eye on it, and she was famous. The island lay almost directly on the 2,556-mile air route Amelia Earhart planned to fly from Papua, New Guinea, to the coast of South America where she would be celebrated as the first woman to fly around the world. Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, decided Howland Island would be a good place to land, rest, and refuel. This prompted the United States to build Kamakaiwi Airfield on the island as a Great Depression era WPA project. Officials noted that it would serve not just Amelia Earhart's flight but other trans-Pacific flights as well. The airfield was named for James Kamakaiwi, one of the first boys from the Kamehameha School to live on Howland Island. It consisted of three unpaved runways, any of which could accommodate Earhart's twin-engine Lockheed L10-E Electra, her plane of choice for the historic flight.

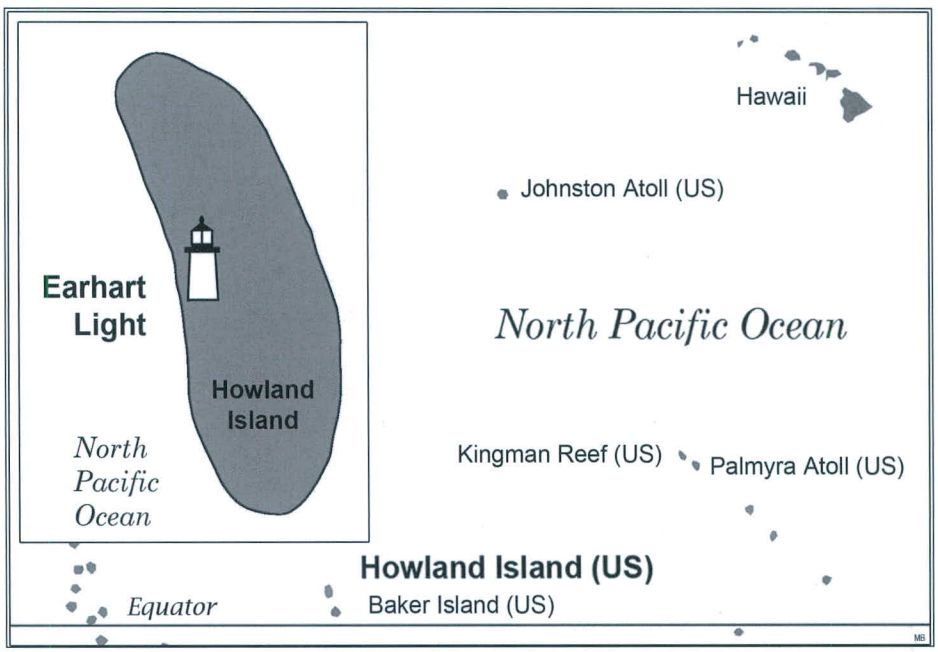
Almost all airfields had airway beacons at the time, and the U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses was responsible for many of these beacons through its Airways Division. The plans for Kamakaiwi Airfield included a tower of sorts that would double as an airway beacon and a sentry for shipping. Howland Island had no natural harbor and making a landing by ship was difficult, given the extensive reef system. With an airfield added, the beacon would do double duty.



The Howland Island lighthouse circa 1939 exhibited a flashing 190-candlepower beacon. Lighthouses on Baker and Jarvis islands were of similar design. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Enormous publicity for the Earhart flight gripped the American public and the aviation industry that year. Press releases, public appearances, photo ops, and radio talks boasted Earhart's aviation acumen and her desire to do something no other woman had done. The 39-year-old aviatrix had earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and had successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean flying solo. Everyone was sure her Pacific flight also would end in success.

No one knows what really happened after Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan left Lae, New Guinea. Though *The Boston Globe* listed Earhart as "one of the best women pilots in the United States," others said her skills were ordinary and noted she took unnecessary risks. Her trans-Atlantic flight from Newfoundland to Wales in June 1928, only a year after Charles Lindbergh's flight from New York to Paris, propelled her to stardom. But even she knew she had not really flown across the ocean. Two other occupants of the plane



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The lighthouse at Howland Island in 1941 after being used for bombing practice by the Japanese. U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office photo.

had done the work and she had gone along for the ride.

Even so, Earhart wrote a book, went on a lecture tour, and hyped ads for cigarettes and women's fashions. Her popularity soared as she became the shy but accomplished female idol of her day. To prove she could fly on her own, she made a solo flight across the continental United States later in 1928. In 1931 she set an altitude record, began racing in planes, and was described as an expert "stunt flyer." That same year she married her book publisher, George P. Putnam, and surprised the public by keeping her last name and announcing that she and her husband were equals with "dual control." Amelia Earhart had developed a penchant for setting records in the air and in social circles.

In May 1932 Earhart finally proved her mettle by flying solo from Newfoundland to Ireland in 14 hours 56 minutes. (The pasture in Ireland where she landed is now occupied by a museum.) Congress awarded her the Distinguished Flying Cross and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt climbed in a plane with Earhart to demonstrate the strength and will of women. In 1935 Amelia Earhart flew solo from Honolulu to Oakland, then from Los Angeles to Mexico City and on to New York City. She set several distance and speed records and then announced she would undertake the greatest flight yet—a round-the-world flight over the equator.

A first attempt in March 1937 resulted in mechanical problems with Earhart's plane and issues with the navigation system. She reconnoitered and planned a new route. Three months later she was in the air, on her way into the history books. Earhart and co-pilot Fred Noonan left Miami on June 1, 1937, stopped in Puerto Rico, then crossed the Atlantic Ocean to Africa and passed over the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Next they flew to Karachi, India, and then to Rangoon, Bangkok, Singapore, and Bandoeng. They landed at Darwin, Australia, where they rested and then flew on to Lae, New Guinea, on June 29, 1937. By this time Earhart had logged about 22,000 air miles and had only about 7,000 miles to go. The remainder of the round-the-world flight would take her over the vast Pacific Ocean, to Howland Island with its special runways and beacon, and then on to South America.

The two intrepid aviators left New Guinea at midnight July 2. Throughout the night they were in contact with the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca*, anchored just off Howland Island. Radio-direction-finding (RDF) for air travel was new and, according to Noonan, lacked reliability. The two tried to back up their radio navigation with old fashioned calculations of sunlines. Some historians say Earhart lacked skill at operating the RDF system, and possibly the antenna for the radio mounted underneath the fuselage was somehow torn away, perhaps during takeoff. There was conjecture about the effect of a headwind on Earhart's travel time estimates too. No matter the cause of the problem, it appears Earhart could not hear radio transmissions from the *Itasca* and this crippled her sense of position.

At 7:42 in the morning she radioed "We must be on you but cannot see you," and reported flying at an altitude of 1,000 feet and her plane running low on gas. About 15 minutes later, another message indicated she wanted voice transmissions from the *Itasca* instead of radio, but the ship's communications console was unable to send them and opted for Morse Code instead. Earhart heard the coded messages but could not determine the *Itasca*'s position from them. Around 8:45 the *Itasca* received Earhart's last transmission, a broken message that could barely be heard. They tried in desperation to push smoke in the air from the ship's oil-fired boilers in hopes she would see it. The airway beacon was of little use in the daylight. Then, the radio was eerily silent. Amelia Earhart disappeared, never to be heard from again.

A search began within the hour, with the *Itasca* making north-south sweeps of the ocean around Howland Island. Pan American Airways claimed they received signals from Earhart over the next few hours and estimated the signals originated near uninhabited Gardner Island. This meant the plane may have run out of fuel and crash-landed on the island, since a water landing would have shorted out the plane's electrical system and prevented radio transmissions.

The *Itasca* was quickly joined by at least three other ships and several planes to make a thorough search of a broad expanse of sea in the Phoenix Islands. Other planes and ships joined the search, to the tune of $4 million. Later in the month, when the government had abandoned its effort, Earhart's husband launched his own extensive search but nothing was found. The best guess was that Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan crashed into the sea about 120 miles northwest of Howland Island. Amelia Earhart was declared dead in January 1939.

The public was shocked. Earhart had a strong cult following by this time and her astute media mogul husband had promoted her round-the-world flight with press releases to newspapers throughout the planning phase and with short articles and quotes from his wife as each leg of the journey was completed. The media blitz during the search effort only whetted the public appetite for more Earhart news and probably influenced the U.S. Lighthouse Service's decision to build a lighthouse in her memory.

The sentinel would be a memorial for Amelia Earhart but also a safety measure for



The lighthouse in 1963 with its daymark stripes. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

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all seamen and aviators traveling over the central Pacific. And not just Howland Island would be lighted. The U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses decided to build genuine lighthouses on several of the Phoenix Islands.

A notice in the *Seattle Times* in December 1937 detailed the proposed lighthouses:

> Oh, for the life of a lighthouse keeper on Howland Island or Baker or Jarvis Islands!
>
> These three overgrown reefs in the mid-Pacific, far south of Hawaii, soon will have lighthouses for the first time and keepers to keep them dark except when they get radioed instructions to light the lights from faraway Honolulu.
>
> It would appear to the novice that keeping the lights on those tiny equatorial islands would be about the most restful jobs in the world.
>
> Lighthouses with 190-candlepower flashing lights are reported nearing completion on each of the islets, but because of their extreme isolation the lights will be lighted only on specific requests of shipmasters or pilots of transpacific [*sic*] airplanes cruising in the vicinity.
>
> The request system will work as follows: When a vessel or plane approaches the islands and desires the beacon be lighted the master will radio his request to the superintendent of lighthouses at Honolulu, who will, in turn, radio the keepers of the lights 2,000 miles away with instructions to turn on the lights.
>
> More definite instructions it is said will be contained in a near-future notice to mariners published by the lighthouse service and Navy hydrographic office.

Life Magazine's January 3, 1938, issue showed a group photo of men on Howland Island laying the cornerstone of the Earhart Lighthouse. The new structure, a 20-foot tall conical stone tower with an exposed small beacon on top, was being built under the direction of Ernest Gruening, former governor of Alaska and by this time the director of the Division of Territories and Insular Possessions for the Department of the Interior. The ship *Roger B. Taney* set sail from Honolulu in November 1937 with a construction crew and materials, plus Gruening, who carried a set of blueprints. The cornerstone was laid November 17, 1937, five months and fifteen days after Amelia Earhart's disappearance.



Amelia Earhart Lighthouse is dark today and serves as a daybeacon. A simple stone block top replaced the upper portion of the tower destroyed in World War II. Wikipedia photo.

The sentinel was completed by the end of the year on the island's highest spot 25-feet above sea. The light's focal point was 46 feet, an acetylene gas light that flashed once every four seconds. The keeper could access the beacon using an exterior ladder or from the inside. It was to serve as both an active aid to navigation and a memorial to the lost aviatrix, Amelia Earhart.

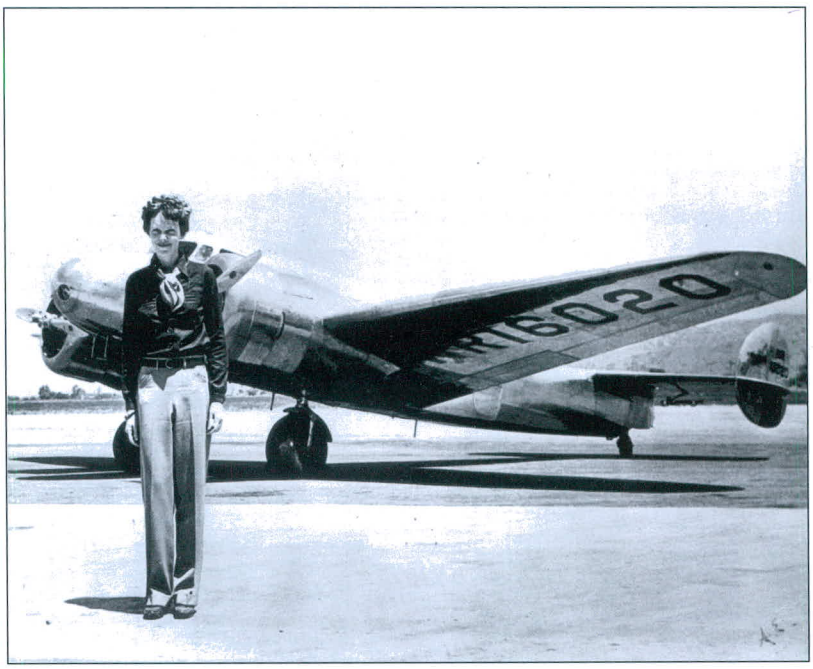
The whitewash was barely dry on the new Amelia Earhart Lighthouse when World War II began. The few inhabitants of the island were quickly evacuated and Japanese bombers enjoyed practice runs over the island, destroying the runways that only a few years before had waited in vain for Earhart's plane to touch down, and damaging the pretty white lighthouse dedicated to her bravery.

By 1945 the lighthouse was a shambles, with the light out and most of its upper portion gone. The top of the tower was amateurishly rebuilt after the war and the beacon was reinstated, but it was a shadow of its former self. Amelia Earhart Lighthouse never again looked as lovely as in 1937 when it was first completed. In 1996 the Coast Guard discontinued the light. Today, Amelia Earhart Lighthouse is a crumbling daybeacon and an oddity for the few visitors to the island.

Howland Island National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1974, surrounds the old tower and comprises the 455-acre island and 34,074 acres of reefs around it. It is part of the greater Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. Access is by permission of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. While park rangers visit the island once every two years, it truly is a memorial now, quiet and undisturbed.

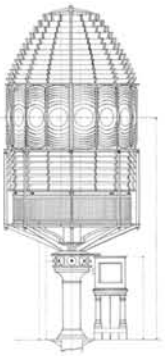
Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail their failure must be but a challenge to others.

Amelia Earhart, *Last Flight*



Earhart posed in 1937 with her Lockheed L-10E Electra, the plane she flew into history. The Museum of Flight Photo.

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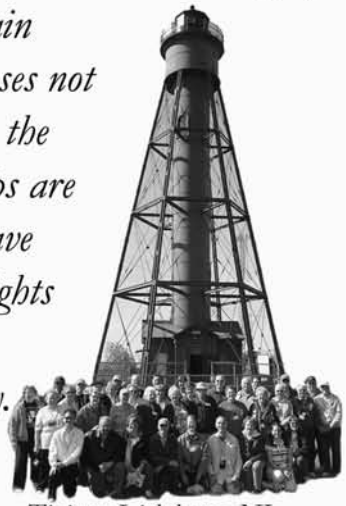
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