

Discoverer of Titanic aims to find Earhart wreckage in Pacific stretch

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Amelia Earhart smiles as she sits clad in a leather aviator's jacket in the cockpit of a small airplane. One of the world's most famous aviators, Earhart was the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1932. While attempting to fly around the world in 1937 Earhart and her co-pilot and navigator Frederick Noonan crashed in the Pacific Ocean and neither their bodies nor their plane were ever found. Photo by: Brettmann/Getty Images

Robert Ballard is an explorer who finds sunken ships. He has been on 160 deep-sea explorations. His most famous discovery is probably the Titanic, the passenger ship that was sunk by a North Atlantic iceberg about 100 years ago.

Now, Ballard will set course on August 7 for Nikumaroro, an uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean. He is searching for answers about pilot Amelia Earhart's disappearance.

Earhart vanished over 80 years ago in 1937, alongside navigator Fred Noonan. She was trying to become the first female pilot to fly around the world. Since then, people have wondered about Earhart's disappearance.

The Business Of Finding Things

The mystery has attracted Ballard's interest — and warded him off for the same reason. "I'm in the business of finding things. I don't want to not find things," he said.

However, research opportunities pulled him to the small 1.3-mile-long Nikumaroro. The island is roughly halfway between Hawaii and Australia. The area is one of the most distant and uninhabited places on the planet.

Ballard will work with two teams. One will work on land and the other will crawl along the nearby seafloor. Their search is based on the popular theory that Earhart landed her plane on coral ringing the northwest side of Nikumaroro. People have wondered if bones found on Nikumaroro belong to Earhart.

Challenging The Navy's Explanation

The U.S. Navy's official conclusion is that Earhart and Noonan crashed directly into the ocean. Ballard does not agree with the navy's explanation. A picture of the island from the time period shows possible landing equipment in the coral reef. Recorded distress calls, believed to be of Earhart, also describe rising water.

One team will search Nikumaroro with bone-sniffing dogs. Meanwhile, Ballard and his co-leader, Allison Fundis, will search the ocean depths around the island. Underwater robots will first make maps distinguishing between hard and soft objects.

Regular sonar will not work in the area. Sonar is a method for detecting and locating objects, especially underwater, with sound. Volcanic mountains rising from the Earth's crust created Nikumaroro. The whole area is a thicket of canyons and valleys.

Once the area is mapped, a camera-equipped robot will travel the seabed. Humans will look through the camera for man-made objects.

Peering For Plane Parts

Nikumaroro is the top of a flat mountain with a tall underwater slope. The search vehicle will work off of the theory that the plane tumbled down the slope. The team will be looking for scattered plane parts. If found, the plane parts will help the team map out a search path.

"Push a plane off the cliff and it will leave stuff all along the way," Ballard said. "And all you need is one piece."

Ballard will also use information gathered by another group, the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery. The group was founded by Rick Gillespie. He hopes that Ballard will find physical proof of Earhart on the island.

Gillespie thinks finding the entire plane is unlikely. The reef includes boulder-sized coral that probably broke up the aircraft.

Ballard's trip is paid for by explorer groups National Geographic Partners and the National Geographic Society. National Geographic will also air a special about Ballard's mission and Earhart's history in October. A spokeswoman said that National Geographic will tell the world if Earhart's remains or plane are found before the airing.

A Pioneering Lady

Earhart was the first woman to fly alone across the Atlantic Ocean in 1932. Women won the right to vote only 12 years before her flight.

Her fame as a pioneer is not lost on his crew, Ballard said. More than half of the team are women, including many as key leaders. He will trade 12-hour watches with Fundis, his co-leader.

"This is important to women. That's why I'm so thrilled to have Allison as co-leader," Ballard said. "I hope we find it on her watch."

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article supports the main idea of the article?
- (A) He has been on 160 deep-sea explorations.
 - (B) He is searching for answers about pilot Amelia Earhart's disappearance.
 - (C) Once the area is mapped, a camera-equipped robot will travel the seabed.
 - (D) Ballard's trip is paid for by explorer groups National Geographic Partners and the National Geographic Society.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the article.

Earhart vanished over 80 years ago in 1937, alongside navigator Fred Noonan. She was trying to become the first female pilot to fly around the world. Since then, people have wondered about Earhart's disappearance.

Which statement summarizes the paragraph?

- (A) Amelia Earhart's disappearance is both mysterious and famous.
 - (B) Amelia Earhart was the first female pilot to fly around the world.
 - (C) Many people have tried to find out why Amelia Earhart disappeared.
 - (D) It is likely that Amelia Earhart disappeared near Nikumaroro.
- 3 Why was Robert Ballard not sure if he wanted to search for Amelia Earhart?
- (A) because he wanted Allison Fundis to be in charge of the search
 - (B) because he didn't believe that Earhart's plane actually crashed
 - (C) because he was busy with other deep-sea explorations
 - (D) because he didn't want to search without finding an answer
- 4 According to the section "Peering For Plane Parts," how will the team start searching for Earhart's plane?
- (A) by using sonar technology to locate objects underwater
 - (B) by partnering with Rick Gillespie to search the nearby coral reef
 - (C) by looking for scattered plane parts on and near the island of Nikumaroro
 - (D) by collecting information from National Geographic Partners