Searching for Amelia Earhart

The date was July 2, 1937. The battleship U.S.S. Colorado (NECR) was docked at a pier by Aloha Tower in Honolulu. I was a radioman aboard this vessel. I had learned the international Morse code from a Boy Scout handbook as a youngster in school. Another kid and I wrote notes in the code to each other. But this is not the way to learn the code -- I had to go through twice as many brain operations to copy by sound. So I was slow and it took a long time for me to gain any speed. But it was considerably better than being a deck hand from whence I was recruited. But after a while things started looking up for me. I was put on some of the slower circuits - two of these were the NPL sked (really slow) and the watch on 500KC trying to make a log of those salty, swinging signals of the merchant fleet.

I met a Ham in the transmitter room and among some 40 radiomen aboard the ship, I had more brotherly feeling for Michael Dutchak (W7DSN) than any of the others. Ours became a very "fast" friendship as he began teaching me how to become a Ham. His help was not in ~~vein~~ vain and in early 1936 I was awarded the call letters I have today (W7FVM). We built up a Ham station "on the beach" and really enjoyed our time ashore. It seems we were always building up or modifying our rigs, sometimes getting back on the air barely in time for the sked with W7DRJ in Great Falls. I outgrew my home-made TRF receiver and bought a Bretting 12. Those were enjoyable days in my life.

One time during a fleet exercise I was put on a special circuit with a PBY. I had no typewriter - just a receiver, a clipboard and pencil and a brass hand key. But I kept a very respectable log. The Navy operators all used those Underwood mills with Western Union type - all caps.

They couldn't copy with a stick, their conditioned reflexes required the typewriter. With my clipboard I got some quizzical looks from them. I was doing something they would have to struggle with.

The 4th. of July lay just ahead as Mike and I made plans with a couple of other ops to pool our money and make a grand tour of Oahu as we would have liberty that day. On July 2nd. after supper I was in radio central when priority messages were heard over the radio circuits. The Commandant of the 14th. Naval District was telling Washington Navy C.N.O. about Amelia Earhart being over due at Howland Island and requesting the U.S.S. Colorado with it's three observation seaplanes go to the aid of the Coast Guard Cutter Itasca (NRUI) and mount an air-sea search. Of course the answer was affirmative.

Well, there went our 4th of July holiday ashore. At dawn the next day (July 3rd.) I awoke to find my ship was in Pearl Harbor taking on fuel. In addition a news reporter (Associated Press) came aboard and was billeted in the officers quarters aft. Our "gunner", C.W.O. Lee J. Delworth (N6AG - SK) got permission to represent United Press. With two boilers down for repair we put to sea on six and the next day the other two were brought on-line. The old Columbo plowed through the briney as never before, leaving behind a large contingent of the crew unable to make it back to the ship in time.

We set up radio watch with the Itasca for coordinating our search soon to begin. We set up monitors on 3105KCS and 6210KCS, the aircraft frequencies used by the Earhart plane (KHAQQ). This was a Lockheed Electra, model 10E. It had been a 10 passenger craft but the seats had been removed and gas tanks installed to give it a range of some 4500 miles.

The communications officer came to our living compartment to meet with a number of us -- we "fell in" to receive his instruction. He told us about the aerial search that would soon take place and came to find volunteer radiomen to man the planes as observers and radio ops.

I didn't need to be asked twice -- I was really turned on about it and eager to take those two paces forward. I was a little surprised, though, at how few and how reluctant the others were. Was I making a mistake? Should I have remained in line? I remembered that old adage: "Never volunteer for anything." I shrugged it off and was soon pitched into the middle of the historical search.

I can remember only one other volunteer: LeRoy Flatt (W6TOX - SK). I believe Lee was the hottest CW op I have ever seen. He would copy WCX press (35 WPM) cutting a stencil as he went, indenting for the paragraphs, underlining the headings, and get this: telling jokes and drinking coffee and smoking all at the same time. He missed nothing and was copying at least one line behind, sometimes two.

Mike Dutchak (SK) and I compared notes that evening. He was an expert with the direction finder so they had picked him to communicate with the planes and keep a log of their bearings.

The observation seaplanes were the SOC-1 type - a biplane (fabric covered wings and tail) with a single pontoon amd small ones under each tip of the lower wing. The engine was a Pratt & Whitney 550 H.P.

When we arrived in the search area on July 7, the USCG cutter Itasca came along side for refueling. We sent over a lot of food stores and she sent over several drums of aviation gasoline intended for the Earhart plane as fuel for the remainder of her flight to Honolulu, which would have completed the circumnavigation of the globe by air. It was sad to see those blue 55 gallon drums sitting there on the quarterdeck, unused.

At this point we were about 150 miles east of Howland Island, the place where Amelia was supposed to land and where the Itasca had been standing by to refuel her plane.

After refueling, Itasca cast off the lines and proceeded to search an area below the equator just south of Baker Island around 177° W Long. The Colorado catapulted its planes over a calm sea to search out a reef one degree S. of the equator at about 175° W. Long. The reef was not found and the planes recovered at 1700.

During this first flight the U.S.S. Colorado crossed the equator at 174° 34' 48" West Longitude at 1629 on July 7. The usual initiation into the Realm of the Deep by Neptunus Rex was canceled, However, I had previously survived one of these frightful affairs and was now, safely, a Shellback.

On July 8 the planes were catapulted at 0700 to search out a wide area of open sea. This early flight had an accident -- a hole was punctured in the pontoon of the lead plane during recovery. So the midday flight would only have two planes. This would be my first time up and mine was the lead plane.

Mike was on the quarterdeck with me as the planes were refueled and prepared for take-off. Mike said,

"Beck, dont worry about a thing, I'll be on the DF and if anything should happen, just put the key down for a long dash and I'll get a fix on you." He continued,

"Every few minutes send me a couple of dits and I'll dit back then give me a dash so I can get the loop on you".

Somebody said it was time ~~to go~~ To get aboard and I was soon on the #3 turret housing two 16 inch naval cannon and supporting the catapult. As I climbed into the rear cockpit an airman petty officer was right behind me.

"Here is how we buckle up - - " and he proceeded to fasten those heavily spring-loaded snap hooks. One across the waist and one across each thigh near the crotch. The helmet was too large and I had to stuff a couple of hankerchiefs in it to make it fit tighter. The earphones were part of the helmet and they had to really fit close to smother out the roar of the engine. I noticed that if I opened my mouth real wide the chin strap ~~strap~~ would tighten the helmet just enough. What a deal! (open cockpit planes will never be a success.)

My pilot was Lt. L. O. Fox - a real top-notch pilot. He instructed me about the flight:

"Do a lot of rubbernecking and lay off the radio except when necessary." He told me about the tactical signals to other aircraft and how to hand him a written message or how to receive a written MSG to keep the wind from blowing it away, since the intercockpit phone was snafu. He instructed me on the landing procedure: he would fly out ahead of the ship and at his signal, I would jettison a smoke flare. Then the ship would turn at the flare in the water and go directly up-wind. This would leave a nice large slick-water astern on which we would land.

After landing, it would be my duty to climb upon steps inside the cockpit, reach my arm over the top of the notched upper wing and with pointing finger conn the pilot onto the trailing water sled because the engine obstructed his view. Behind the sled, being towed by the ship, was a rope netting, and under the bow of the pontoon was a hook. The idea was to taxi up to the sled, get the hook caught in the netting, kill the engine and a hook would be lowered by a crane to hoist us aboard. At this point I was to remove a large ring and 4 short cables attached to it from beneath a bungee cord on top of the upper wing and snap it into the big pelican hook above me. This was called the CAST method of recovery. It all seemed simple but I nearly fell overboard when I forgot to unplug the phones (helmet).

An airman was cranking up the inertial starter at the engine, the whining pitch increasing on each laborious turn of the crank. Soon the pilot engaged the starter and the engine sputtered into a steady roar.

The plane sat on a kind of sled affair which was snapped from one end of the catapult track to the other, being propelled by an arrangement of pulleys, cables and an expansion chamber like a large piston and cylinder. The force behind the piston was 17 pounds of gun powder. (WHEW !)
At full throttle the plane shook and trembled (part may have been from me) as the flight controller waved his little green flag around in a circle over his head. The Pratt & Whitney engine howled at top pitch. I felt small and helpless and had second thoughts about those two paces forward. I grabbed two handles above the instrument panel and hung on for dear life.

I cant remember the words of that short prayer.

The flight controller brought the flag down, The gunner yanked a lanyard and we were off! We reached 65 MPH (stalling ~~speed~~) at the end of a 65 foot catapult -- right on the edge of Eternity!

Somehow we made it. Lt. Fox gave me a signal and I knew we were high enough to reel out the trailing wire antenna. I unlocked the reel and hanging onto the crank firmly, lest the thing get away from me, let out 65 turns. With the power switch on I pushed that big, clumsy navy key and proceeded to tune and load the transmitter on 1025KCS. Still shaking and all tuned up, I called "B45", a tactical call for the ship, and Mike came right back. It was most reassuring to hear his signal: "R FB" (The navy was real strict about private communication, but no one jumped us about this.)

We systematically covered a wide area of open sea passing over where Winslow Reef should have been, but not seen. We returned to the ship after nearly four hours in the air. The plane carried 4 hrs fuel in the main tank and 20 minutes in the reserve. I had been anxiously watching the elapsed time clock and looking around the whole horizon I could see no ship. How could I miss anything as big as a battleship? Suddenly I discovered it was directly below us. I got the signal from Lt. Fox and sent a quick "ZZT" to Mike before reeling the antenna.

Landing on the sea was like riding a bronco -- we would bounce, the pilot would catch it with the throttle and we would bounce again, picking up a lot of sea water with the propellor throwing heavy spray over us -- the engine sounding like it was going to quit. We finally landed and got hoisted aboard.

Now back safely on the ship I headed for the DF shack. I looked back in wonderment at the bundle of rags and aluminum called an observation sea-plane -- sitting on its catapult cradle being groomed for its next flight. I thought: "What an operation!"

Mike only had a few minutes between flights -- he was at it from dawn until dusk. He only smiled and asked me about the flight.

As an inducement for my two steps forward I was told I would be relieved of all other duties - which was gladly received - I hated those mid watches. That evening I was headed back aft to the transmitter room to chew the fat with Mike and possibly Lee when I got side-tracked into radio central. My duty was to contact KYG, a commercial station in Honolulu, and send to him press releases (AP & UP) --- News to the world.

The radio crew was run by Charles McVey, a First Class PO, a strict boss and sometimes an old grandma. He didn't want me to use a speed key on Navy circuits - he didn't think I was good enough with it. I had recently acquired a Vibroplex from an op who had been paid off. I had practiced a lot with it and now I felt I was ready to get it on the air. Mac didn't say anything this time - he was pretty busy with a short-handed crew. It was refreshing and fun to send those two long dispatches with a speed key. When done I turned off the gear, picked up my bug, dropped the serviced MSGs at the supervisors desk and started to walk out. Mac asked me where I was going. I replied:

"I'm gonna hit the sack, my flight catapults at dawn."

A slight look of dismay crossed his face. He said nothing more. As I left I had the superb feeling that I had "arrived."

On July 9 the planes were catapulted at 0700 from 4° S. Lat. and 175° W. Long. searching out McKean Island which was found to be 15 miles N.W. of its charted position.

We need to pause here for a comment. Most of these islands were discovered by the British in the mid 1800s. Their navigational instruments and methods in those days were not nearly as accurate as those we had in the mid 1930s. As a result, in several cases, islands and reefs were not found in the charted location as in the case of McKean. Some islands had been re-charted and positions corrected. I'm sure this was true in the case of the Phoenix Group since we had no problem locating them. If Earhart and Noonan were using an uncorrected British chart they could have easily missed Howland. Also, the track of the Earhart plane was from the N.N.W. and the search was based on this track. However, a course from Lae New Guinea is about

20° south of west - a difference of about 90°. This thing raised a lot of questions in our minds, but the Navy officials said nothing about it. It was said the Earhart plane carried photographic equipment - however, this may have just been a rumor.

The military was concerned during these times that the Japanese might be fortifying some of the Trust Territory Islands which had been mandated to them after WW1. If so it would be a violation of the trust. These Trust Territory Islands lay in a northwesterly direction from Howland. Ariel photographs of some of these islands would be of high value to the military and Washington. History confirms some of these islands were indeed fortified. After the war, I had an opportunity to visit Truk in the Eastern Caroline Islands. It had been a fortified hub for Japanese operations during WW2.

From McKean Island we altered course to Gardner I. to the south, covering a wide area enroute. It was covered with tropical vegitation and an old ship wreck was seen on the N.W. side, but we found no sign of life. The planes proceeded S.E. to Carondelet Reef which was submerged with an occasional breaker. At 0930 the planes were recovered and again catapulted at 1400 flying Eastward to Hull I. Here the planes landed in the quiet waters of the lagoon and an outrigger canoe came away from the beach. ~~A white~~ The man in the canoe was asked if he had seen anything of Amelia Earhart. He said,

"No, who is she?" The pilot explained the situation and asked if he had a radio to keep up with the news. He responded with a British accent,

"Yes, but the bloody battery has been dead for two years."

There were 200 natives, most likely Gilbertese, and this one ~~white~~ English man on Hull. The planes were recovered at 1655.

The sea was beginning to build up a chop and we had been flying through occasional rain squalls.

On July 10 the planes were catapulted at 0700 near 4° S. Lat. and 172° W. Long. We proceeded to Sidney I. in the Phoenix Group. Zooming low over the palm covered island we spotted three shacks but no sign of life or wreckage. From there we turned N. Eastward to Phoenix I., saw nothing of

Fox gave me a MSG to this effect as we returned to 1000 ft MSL and I reeled out the antenna and sent the MSG to Mike.

intrest and proceeded N. Westerly to Enderbury I., found nothing and changed course to the S.W. to Birnie I. then back to the battleship to recover at 1020 with nearly empty tanks.

There were a few things working against the success of the flight. Amelia was a frail person and had only been getting no more than five hours sleep per night up to the take-off at Lae. She had attached little importance to radio communication and learned little about DF work and, in fact, had left the Morse key and trailing antenna behind along with the life raft. On top of this she was subject to occasional air sickness and ate little when flying. In addition, Howland Island was small: a little less than 1½ miles long by a scant ½ mile wide rising to hardly more than 25 feet in a place or two above the sea and was found 5½ miles from it's charted location. Fred Noonan was, primarily, a celestial navigator and they had been plagued with a lot of cloudiness, so most of the flight was by dead reckoning. The last radio contact with the Earhart plane was made by the C.G. Cutter Itasca on July 2 at 0843 when she reported being on a line-of-position "157 - 337 running North and South - - - ". She seemed to be approaching the island from the N.N.W. and reported very low on fuel. From Lae to Howland is 2500 miles. What happened to the other 2000 miles she had gas for? Had she indeed flown from Lae to Truk and then to Howland? Then miss the island and ditch in the sea and sink? It seems possible. However I noted a seaplane ramp at Truk which means they would have had military planes with which to challenge the Earhart plane and most likely shot it down. Whether-or-not this ramp existed in 1937 - 4 years before Pearl Harbor - one can only guess.

On July 10 we made rendezvous with the C.G. Cutter Swan (NIJP) to refuel and reprovision her. After Swan left the planes were catapulted for the last time, flying to Canton Island where shacks, left by observers of a solar eclipse a month earlier, were sighted but no other signs of life or wreckage. The planes were recovered at 1630 thus ending the U.S.S. Colorado's part in the historic search. The U.S.S. Lexington (NIKM) had come to continue the search and we headed north to rendezvous with U.S. destroyers Lamson, Drayton and Cushing for refueling, and then back to Pearl.

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