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Posted April 16, 2012

Local Earhart researcher continues to search for famed pilot

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The unsolved disappearance of famed pilot Amelia Earhart has remained a mystery for 75 years.



Retired Rockwell Collins Engineer and Amelia Earhart researcher Rod Blocksome, of Robins, stands in front of a plane exactly like Earhart's at the Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson, Ariz. Blocksome and another former Rockwell Collins employee have gone on expeditions with Nauticos LLC to search for Earhart's wreckage. (Contributed by Rod Blocksome)

And although one group of researchers sparked recent media furor over what they call a major breakthrough in the search for Earhart's wreckage, a different group of researchers with Eastern Iowa ties says they don't believe the hype.

In fact, Robins resident and former Rockwell Collins engineer Rod Blocksome said The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) is about 350 miles off course in their search for Earhart.

"[TIGHAR researchers] are pretty much the masters of the media and they're very good at coming up with newsworthy things that garner some publicity," Blocksome said. "...I don't think they're going to find anything, though."

Blocksome retired from Rockwell Collins in Cedar Rapids in May 2010 after 42 years as an engineer. The retired communications systems engineer has worked with Dave Jourdan, president of [Nauticos LLC](#), in searching for Earhart's wreckage over the past several years.

Nauticos LLC, a deep sea exploration company, searched the ocean floor in 2002 and 2006 around Howland Island, the island Earhart was trying to fly to when she began running out of fuel. Blocksome and another retired Rockwell Collins engineer, Tom Vinson, aided the search.

After analyzing her final radio transmissions and using Blocksome's help in estimating where her plane would have landed in the ocean, Jourdan said they're "quite sure" Earhart couldn't have strayed very far from Howland Island.

However, TIGHAR researchers have a completely different theory, one that gained Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's public support. They think Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan made it to a reef and survived for some time as castaways on the remote island now called Nikumaroro in the Pacific nation of Kiribati.

That's more than 300 miles from Howland Island, where Jourdan, Blocksome, and Nauticos researchers are focusing their search.

"I think we're kind of barking up different trees in a way," Jourdan said. "I don't object or discourage anyone from looking anywhere they want because anything could happen I suppose, but I don't think there's any serious chance [they'll find the plane]."

TIGHAR is preparing to search around the island of Nikumaroro again this summer in hopes of finding the wreckage. The researchers are touting the discovery of a recently found photo from 1937 that shows what some experts think is a strut and wheel of Earhart's Lockheed Electra landing gear in the water.

TIGHAR researchers also said they've found evidence – such as broken glass jars and

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Rod Blocksome

But Blocksome said circumstantial evidence and castaway theories are not what he, Jourdan, and Nauticos researchers are looking for around Howland Island. For them, indisputable, scientific evidence is necessary.

"[We're looking for] some very hard evidence that's not controversial when we find the plane," Blocksome said. "[TIGHAR] comes up with little bits and pieces ... Before we get everybody all excited, we want to make sure we got something that's very solid and holds up to scientific scrutiny."

And according to Blocksome, they're making progress. He and Jourdan said the next Nauticos expedition around Howland Island will probably happen sometime next year, but it takes time to plan such deep sea exploration.

"There's the matter of getting equipment and a ship together in the same place," Jourdan said. "It's not like renting a car from Avis or something. It's a question of waiting for the right timing for everything. I'm 99 percent sure we're going to be going next year sometime."

It also takes money. When Jourdan [visited Cedar Rapids in 2010](#) to discuss his book, *The Deep Sea Quest for Amelia Earhart*, he said it cost about \$1 for every second a ship was at sea.

Despite the vast differences between their search and TIGHAR's approach, both Jourdan and Blocksome said they support the other group's efforts.

The media attention keeps the mystery of Earhart in the public mind, Blocksome said, something the long-lost pilot deserves. If they find the wreckage, Jourdan said they would want to take it from city to city, eventually donating it to a museum.

"Her story, not only her disappearance, but what she did and the things she pioneered not only in aviation, but in women's careers still makes her relevant today," Blocksome said. "As it's the 75th anniversary, it really would be neat if somebody could solve that mystery."

Blocksome said one aspect that draws him to the search for Earhart is her educational importance. He speaks to classrooms in the Cedar Rapids school district about his experiences, emphasizing Earhart's scientific, mathmatic, historical, and geographical importance.

"The fact that students still find Amelia Earhart and the mystery surrounding her disappearance fascinating is part of Amelia's enduring legacy today," he said.

- *The Associated press contributed to this report.*

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