

S. Pacific island yields bones that may solve mystery

By James Harney
USA TODAY

A small grave on a South Pacific island may contain the remains of famed aviator Amelia Earhart, whose disappearance 54 years ago has never been solved.

"It's speculation, but it's certainly a possibility" that bones in the grave are Earhart's, says Richard Gillespie of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery.

Earhart, navigator Fred Noonan and their twin-propeller Lockheed 10E Electra vanished on July 2, 1937, while on a flight around the world.

Gillespie's group, based in Wilmington, Del., has been probing the disappearance for three years, concentrating its search on Nikumaroro, a Pacific atoll. A public announcement on the grave discovery is expected today.

"We believe Nikumaroro is the place from which they radioed for help for three days before tidal forces washed their plane off the island," Gil-

lespie says. "We believe (they) were marooned ... awaiting a rescue that never came."

Gillespie plans to lead an expedition to Nikumaroro in December to investigate the grave site, discovered — and dismissed as unimportant — during the group's first expedition in 1989. "Because it wasn't part of an airplane ... it wasn't thought to have any possible connection to the Earhart disappearance," he said.

But recently, Gillespie said, his investigators spoke with a man who said he was present in 1938 when the first settlers came to Nikumaroro from the Gilbert Islands — and uncovered human bones as they cleared the jungle for planting.

"It is Gilbertese custom to bury whatever bones might be found, and because they were the bones of a stranger, they would have buried them on that side of the island, not ... near their village," he said.

The Gilbertese occupied Nikumaroro from 1938 to 1963, when a drought forced them to migrate, leaving the atoll unin-

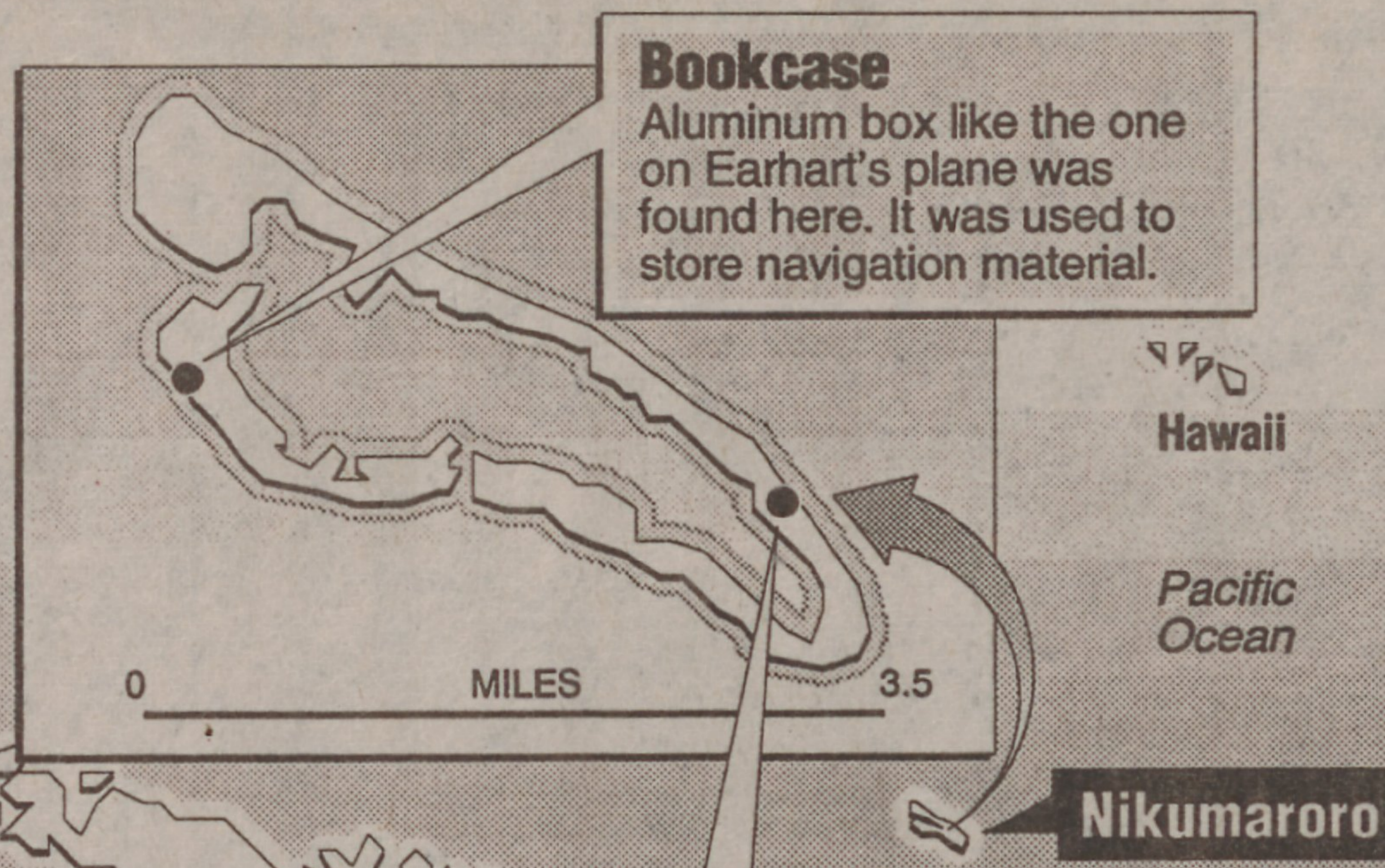
In search of Earhart's grave

The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery is expected to announce today it has located a grave on the South Pacific Nikumaroro atoll that may hold the remains of aviator Amelia Earhart. Earhart and Navigator Fred Noonan disappeared in 1937 on an attempted around-the-world flight.



EARHART: Last heard from July 2, 1937.

UPI



Indian Ocean

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GRAVE: Archeologists will examine it to see if it contains Earhart's remains.

Source: International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery

By Marty Baumann, USA TODAY

habitated since, Gillespie says.

The unexplained fate of Earhart and Noonan has spawned more than 30 books, several movies and numerous theories.

Some believe they ditched

the plane and drowned in the ocean; others contend they were shot down and executed for spying on the Japanese-held Marshall Islands.

Gillespie believes they land-

ed at low tide on the reef at Nikumaroro, which was never ground-searched after Earhart vanished. He feels the plane then was swept off the reef and sank in 2,000-foot-deep waters.

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