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**BECOMING GRANDMA**

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**ADAM HILLS**
THE HAPPIEST COMEDIAN

**ALAN JONES**
HIS COUNTRY GARDEN

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OUR INVISIBLE PM

# SEARCHING FOR AMELIA

***COULD A CHANCE DISCOVERY BY AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS HOLD THE KEY TO ONE OF AVIATION'S GREATEST MYSTERIES?***

**By Sam Buckingham-Jones**

# contents AUGUST 4 - 5, 2018

It is a tantalising though inconvenient theory that puts Amelia Earhart's lost aircraft in an unlikely location, far from where many think she went down 81 years go. And it's fascinating: a small group of Australian soldiers stumble across the wreckage of a plane on the island of New Britain in 1945. Details are taken from an identification tag on the engine mount and those details just happen to match a unique number from Earhart's plane. From his home in Queensland, former aircraft engineer David Billings has devoted years to trying to find this plane and to working out how it could have crashed in this location about 3000km from where accepted theory says it should be. Many say Billings' theory is not possible, but he has what other Earhart hunters don't – the soldiers' videotaped testimony and supporting documentation.

Christine Middap
EDITOR

## Front



## Features



## Life



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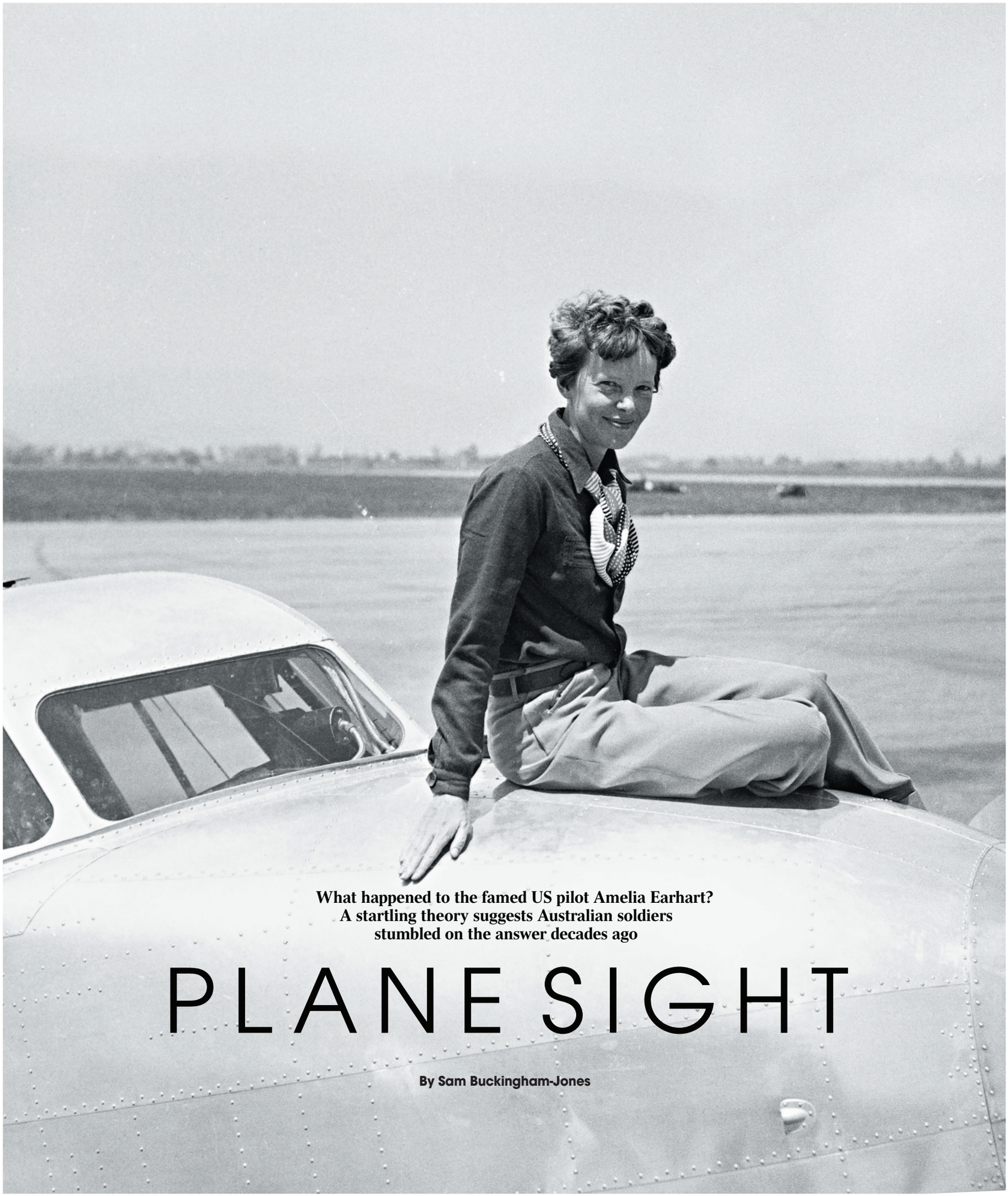


**What happened to the famed US pilot Amelia Earhart? A startling theory suggests Australian soldiers stumbled on the answer decades ago**

# PLANE SIGHT

**By Sam Buckingham-Jones**

In the autumn of 1945, a troop of young Australian soldiers was trudging through the muddy rainforests of New Britain, an island in the east of what is now Papua New Guinea. In that part of the world autumn is much like winter, spring and summer – it rains a lot and it's hot and humid.

The Australians of D Company, 11th Battalion, were doing reconnaissance in the mountains not far from the town of Rabaul on April 17. They knew Japanese soldiers were nearby, and at least one man was often told to hang back and watch for following enemies. Around 1pm, a group of 20 men from D Company who'd taken a shortcut along a ridge saw something unusual. Sunlight was pouring through the jungle canopy into a cavernous clearing, illuminating a metallic object wedged into the mud. Fearing an ambush, the men at the front of the patrol dropped to the ground. Cautiously approaching, they discovered to their surprise that it was an enormous plane engine. Corporal Don Angwin, one of the first in line, called back for the patrol's leader, Lieutenant Ken Backhouse, who came up to investigate.

To find crash debris on the ground was not unusual at that time; warplanes often went down and were sometimes not found for weeks, if ever. But this one was different. It didn't seem to be a military plane and the men later said it appeared to be very old. Looking for identifying marks, someone grabbed a metal tag hanging off the engine by a wire. Crucially, the information on it was copied onto the margins of a map of the patrol area. Decades later, it would emerge that those numbers and letters matched one plane – an aircraft that had, at the time, been missing for eight years. The fate of this plane and its two occupants remains one of the biggest aviation mysteries in history. The numbers and letters corresponded with the Lockheed Electra 10E flown by famed US pilot Amelia Earhart.

**In a large tin shed next to David Billings'** modest weatherboard home in Nambour, 100km north of Brisbane, there are three gliders in various states of disrepair. One, an old British Slingsby Skylark, has a wingspan of 18m; the wings have to be stored in three pieces just to fit inside the building. Gliding is a passion for Billings, a 78-year-old retired aircraft engineer who speaks with the engaging idiolect of an old Englishman. "I'm hard of hearing," he says. "Years of jet engines." Billings is also the main proponent of what has come to be known as the "New Britain Theory" of Earhart's disappearance. Many ideas have been put forward about her fate, ranging from the well-founded to the wildly conspiratorial – but unlike all the other theories about where she crashed, Billings has evidence and videotaped testimony from a group of men who saw the aircraft in the jungle and who have all long since passed away.

Billings closes his eyes as he recalls a newspaper story he read in 1993 about the possibility of Earhart's plane wreck being in New Britain. The article was light on detail but it led him to Angwin, who was the source of the story, and then to other members of D Company. "I met the boys – Don Angwin, Ken Backhouse, Roy Walsh and Keith Nurse – and they recounted to me what they remembered," Billings says. Angwin told how many years after the war he'd been watching a documentary in which Earhart's engines – Pratt & Whitney Wasps – were mentioned in passing. The name triggered the memory of the half-buried engine in the jungle; that was the make and model they were told they'd found in 1945.

Angwin then told how another member of the patrol, Len Willoughby, had sent him a map of the patrol area that he'd taken as a souvenir from a pile of discarded equipment in 1945. Willoughby had kept the map untouched until he mailed it to Angwin in 1993. When Angwin unfolded it to make a copy, he saw a series of letters and numbers written in the margins. There are few people in the world who would be able to recognise the significance of those letters and numbers – "600H/P S3H/1 C/N1055" – but Billings, who had spent years working in Papua New Guinea, is one. "600HP is obviously horsepower," he says. "S3H1 is the model of Earhart's aeroplane engines – S3H1 Wasps, made by Pratt and Whitney." But the most compelling of the numbers is CN1055. This was the unique construction number assigned to Earhart's airframe.

The series of circumstances that led Billings to the soldiers, their memories and the map was so incredible that Billings' wife Mary says it was like a "tapestry of chance". "It was so unlikely, it must have been destined to be," she says.

**Earhart's story is enduring because it remains** such a mystery. The American was the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, in 1932, and three years later became the first person to fly solo from Honolulu to Oakland, California. She was a national icon and an international

**Gutsy:** Earhart in 1936

celebrity. On May 21, 1937, aged 39, she set out to become the first woman to fly around the world. By July, she and her navigator, Fred Noonan, had flown more than 35,400km via, among other places, Miami, South America and India. They intended to make three final but long and perilous over-water flights across the Pacific to complete the voyage – from Lae, New Guinea, north-east to Howland Island in the central Pacific; from Howland to Hawaii; and finally from Hawaii to Oakland.

At 10am on July 2, according to James A. Collopy, the district superintendent of the local Civil Aviation Board in New Guinea, Earhart and Noonan left Lae with 1100 US gallons (4164 litres) of fuel and 64 gallons (242 litres) of oil (another official reported her tanks were full – a capacity of 1151 gallons, or 4357 litres). The takeoff was "hair-raising", Collopy wrote, as the plane did not lift off until the final 50m of the 1000m runway. When it did get airborne, he wrote, "it was obvious the aircraft was well handled".

Howland Island is just 3km wide and 1.6km long; finding it after flying more than 4000km over many hours, with no GPS and patchy radio communication, would be a huge navigational challenge. Noonan had confided to Collopy that he was "a bit anxious" about this leg of the journey.

About 19 hours after they left, Earhart and Noonan contacted the US Coast Guard vessel *Itasca*, which was near Howland Island. "We must be on you but cannot see you," she said. "But gas is running low. Been unable to reach you by radio." An hour later, she relayed her coordinates to *Itasca* – "on line 157 [degrees] 337 [degrees]" – and added: "We are running on line north and south." It was an unclear reference and, hours later, the plane was presumed to have come down. A fleet of 10 ships and 60 aircraft searched for more than two weeks and found nothing.

**There are three main theories that have** endured over the past 80 years. The most commonly held view is that Earhart and Noonan came down in the ocean within several hundred kilometres of Howland Island, and the plane promptly sank and likely took them with it. The major drawback to this theory is that no one saw the plane near Howland and no debris has been found and identified, despite many searches. Nevertheless, Dorothy Cochrane, a curator at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC, is one proponent. "I have no reason to believe otherwise," she says. Earhart was close enough to Howland Island that her radio calls were regarded as "very high strength" by those on *Itasca,* waiting on the ocean near Howland. "She could not possibly have had enough fuel to return to New Britain, practically her starting point," Cochrane adds.

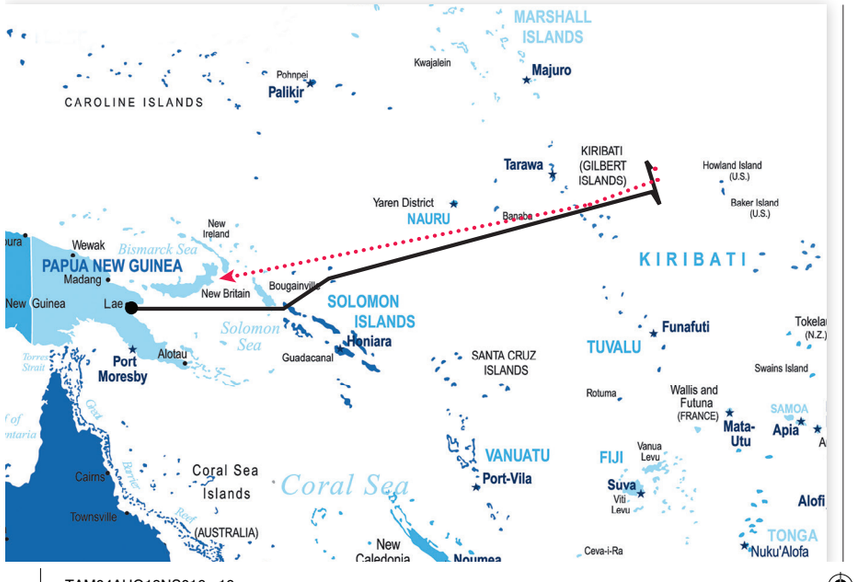
Earhart's sister, Muriel Earhart Morrissey, said in 1982: "I believe she just ran out of gas and went down off Howland Island." Retired Rear Admiral Richard Black, who handled much of the Pacific Island logistics for Earhart's last flight and heard her final radio transmissions, agreed, though he noted that if she'd made a wheels-up landing the Lockheed Electra "would float as the gas tanks were empty and the sea was not rough". Still, nothing was found. In 2002, Nauticos, a US company, used deep-sea sonar to search 1630sq km of the ocean bed and found nothing. More recently, US Earhart researcher Tim Mellon funded a $USI million search that came back empty-handed.

The second is the "Marshall Islands-Saipan Theory", which postulates that Earhart and Noonan, having fruitlessly searched for several hours for Howland, turned northwest and flew to the Marshall Islands, about 1500km away. There they crash-landed and were promptly taken captive by the Japanese, who were at that time gearing up for war with China.

There are several documented witnesses in the Marshall Islands who, years later, said they'd seen a large silver plane crash. A man and a woman emerged, they said, and were taken prisoner by the crew of a Japanese cargo ship. One proponent of this theory, author Mike Campbell, wrote that there were "literally hundreds" of Pacific Islanders who backed up evidence that Earhart and Noonan were forced to land around the islands and either died from disease or were executed.

The third is the "Nikumaroro/Gardner Island Theory", in which Earhart (Noonan's fate being, presumably, unknown) died a castaway on a tiny atoll roughly 600km southeast of Howland. In the spring of 1940, bones were unearthed on the claw-shaped coral island. The bones were subsequently lost, but not before precise measurements had been taken by Dr David W. Hoodless from the Central Medical School in Fiji. US forensic anthropologist Richard L. Jantz recently entered the measurements into a modern forensic program and concluded that his analysis "reveals that Earhart is more similar to the Nikumaroro bones than 99 per cent of individuals in a large reference sample". He added that "this strongly supports the conclusion that the Nikumaroro bones belonged to Amelia Earhart".

**Billings' alternative theory rests on several key** factors. One: that Earhart was hundreds of kilometres away from Howland – further than she, and everyone in contact with her, believed. It is possible, as radio waves can bounce off layers in the atmosphere under certain conditions, resulting in a signal remaining strong over much greater distances. Two: that an unclear radio message in




**Doomed:** Earhart and Noonan; their likely final flight path and (in red) return journey to New Britain, according to Billings' theory

which someone said "land in sight" – reported as having been picked up by a Nauru Radio operator at 10.30am Nauru time, two hours after Earhart's last reported transmission and on the frequency she'd previously said she was switching to – came from Earhart or Noonan. Finally, that Earhart had a contingency plan to turn west towards the Gilbert Islands – part of Kiribati – if she could not find Howland. The Gilberts are about 720km west of Howland and within four hours' fuel range, according to Billings.

"There's a factual side – the find in the jungle," he says, "but also a hypothesis side – how she could manage to do it." He has extensive calculations, based on the aircraft manufacturer's figures, showing how it would have been possible. According to his hypothesis, Earhart implemented her contingency plan to head towards the Gilberts and then, thinking she had sufficient fuel, continued west towards New Britain, which would have been the nearest safe place to land. He calculates that with a tail wind, high altitude and low engine power at a steady rate for maximum efficiency, she could have made it to New Britain – just.

There are issues with Billings' theory, however. While the engine identifying marks, noted by the Australian soldiers on their map, say "600 H/P", it was recorded that Earhart had 550HP (horsepower) Pratt & Whitney engines on her aircraft – although a report by Lockheed engineers in 1936 rates the engine at 600HP for takeoff. Billings believes the tags could have said either. And while the construction number, CN1055, is unique, the most visible identifier of Earhart's plane was the registration "NR16020", which appeared in enormous print on the wings. Unfortunately, only Lieutenant Backhouse appears to have examined the rest of the half-buried aircraft wreck in the New Britain jungle and he didn't notice a registration number.

Critics of the Billings theory have noted that a B-17E Flying Fortress bomber had crashed in the same area in August 1942; that plane blew up at altitude, scattering parts over several kilometres. But the Australian soldiers described an unpainted engine cover and two-bladed propellers, matching Earhart's plane, while the B-17E was military green and had three-bladed propellers. "It's a totally different type of arrangement," Billings says. The B-17E also had 1100HP Wright Cyclone engines, and it is more likely soldiers would recognise a well-known military plane like a Flying Fortress.

Billings is confident about his theory. "The factual evidence is there," he insists. "How did those numbers get on a wartime map?" He says


**Clues:** the patrol map, with the engine tag details in the margin; Billings

the provenance of the map is good and that the map edition, time, notation and textual structure are genuine in every respect, including the misspellings. There are also corresponding short reports sent by the patrol to headquarters.

Mike Campbell, author of *Amelia Earhart: The Truth At Last*, says he does not believe it would have been possible for Earhart to fly back to New Britain but he maintains a strong respect for Billings. "The idea that Earhart turned around and landed in the jungle of Papua New Guinea after nearly reaching Howland Island is unacceptable to me," he writes. "[But] Billings' New Britain theory is the only hypothesis among all the various possible explanations... that presents us information and poses questions that cannot be explained or answered. Unless and until the twin-engine wreck that an Australian army team found in the East New Britain jungle in 1945 is rediscovered, this loose end will forever irritate and annoy researchers who take such findings seriously."

**Billings was 16 when, as a young, inquisitive** British teen, he started an intensive apprenticeship at the Royal Air Force base Halton, outside London. The Halton apprentices have been described as the nucleus around which the air force expanded after World War I. They were elite mechanics. Billings' father, a carpenter, had built the cockpits for Airspeed Horsa troop-carrying gliders and made model aeroplanes in his spare time. "That got me interested from a young age," he says. During his 15 years working for the RAF, Billings travelled the world. In 1967 he was on board a helicopter that crash-landed in dense jungle in Borneo. He survived, as did the pilot, but he says the thick trees metres from where they came down would have hidden the wreck for decades, if not forever. He resolved then, he says, that "if ever I was in a position to locate downed aircrew, I would".

In 1988, he had his first chance. While in Papua New Guinea, a helicopter pilot reported hearing about a wreck in the remote, mountainous Madang Province. "I talked another pilot into doing a training flight in the area," he says. "We found it at about 10,500 feet." All 10 personnel on the B-24D Liberator bomber had been killed when it came down in 1944. Thanks in part to Billings, their bodies were recovered in 1990. He was contacted by relatives years later to thank him.

Some time later, another pilot told Billings about rumours of a wrecked plane on a mountain near Lae in Papua New Guinea. "The locals said a strange thing. They said they wanted the Americans to come and take the wreck away," Billings recalled. "They said it hurt the mountain." He drove and hiked up the mountain and found the wreckage of an enormous aircraft that had crashed decades before. "It was another Liberator, that was obvious," Billings says. "All the engines had come off and gone rolling through the jungle. They were about 100 yards away."

Sitting in his Nambour living room, I mention that while hiking the Kokoda Track decades ago, my father had visited a village where the wreck of a small plane had just been found. "What model was it? What was its serial number?" Billings says, his eyes lighting up. I show him the photos my father had taken. "It looks like an Airacobra P-39. Single, inline engine. Yep, an Airacobra, I'd say. Let me know if you find out the serial number."

**Pamela Collins is Don Angwin's daughter. She** remembers that when her father was in his 60s he made some enquiries about the plane wreckage his patrol had found during the war. "He rang Lockheed in America," she says. "They said, this aeroplane number, there were not many of that design and the only one that hadn't been located was the one flown by Amelia Earhart. His number matched up to her plane number." Angwin was already unwell by the time Billings took up the search in the early 1990s, and died in 2001.

Greg Dawson, Angwin's nephew, asks: "If it isn't Earhart's plane, how did the writing get on the bottom of that map? It raises a whole pile more questions." Dawson, a filmmaker based in Perth, went with Billings on his first trips to search for the aircraft in 1994 – and, when he returned, recorded interviews with four members of the patrol. The men are looking towards the camera but their eyes are distracted, as if they are watching their memories being played back on the wall behind. It's compelling viewing. "The mantle of the jungle spread completely over the top," Angwin recalled. "It was black, nearly dark. There was huge amounts of grey-green rotting moss hanging off the trees, there was vines, water, slime, mud. All of a sudden, there was a break in the mantle of the jungle over our head. A shaft of light hit down on something to my left... I realised it was a large aircraft engine."

"I could see it was just a plane," Ken Backhouse said. "There wasn't much of it – all we could see on our side was a bit of wing ... I just jumped up on the wing, had a glance inside what I thought was the cockpit, which proved afterwards to be more or less a navigational bubble that they had there, and couldn't see any bones or anything." He said there was "no sign of any guns".

Warrant Officer Keith Nurse described an engine cover that had broken open "like an eggshell", and bent propellers. "I decided then that I'd better have a look for some numbers on this engine, because I considered the engine was very old," he said. "It certainly wasn't a wartime military aircraft engine. And I think that's the thing that alerted me to the fact that this would be an important discovery. It could have been a civilian aircraft which had come down prior to the war."

**Meticulous:** Billings in PNG

Crucially, Backhouse said they took the engine tag, which he described as a "numberplate" hanging by wire, and pocketed it for the remainder of the journey back. The patrol filed paperwork when it returned to base and sent the metal tag with it. One short message, publicly accessible through the Australian War Memorial, states: "report [from the patrol] attached with A/C plates". The letters A/C was common shorthand for aircraft and the final words, Billings is sure, refer to the tag removed from the wreck. Several weeks later, Backhouse and Angwin recalled, they were approached by a senior officer who told them the tag had identified the engine as a Pratt & Whitney Wasp unit from a Lockheed.

It's unclear who wrote the tag details onto the margins of the map, but it mentions the patrol, the details of the plane, and the date May 24, 1945 – several weeks after the patrol and around the time the men recalled receiving some details about their find from the officer. It was believed to be an American aircraft, so the information – and the tag – were relayed to a US army division that was stationed nearby. The tag hasn't been seen since.

Billings has a letter from the late Bill Prymak, former president of the Amelia Earhart Society. In it, Prymak told Billings that he'd tracked down David Kenyon, one of the Lockheed engineers who repaired Earhart's plane when it landed hard in Hawaii in early 1937, four months before her ill-fated journey. "He stated to me that all engine mounts were fabricated by a foundry in LA, shipped to Lockheed and stored with crated engines outside the assembly building," Prymak wrote. "Each mount had a metal tag attached by wire, showing CN and HP rating." Kenyon's description of the tag, Billings says, matches that of the soldiers almost word for word, including the numbers written in 1945 on the map.

**Billings sits at his computer and sighs. Around** him are maps, books, notes, envelopes and scans of manuscripts. Many have scrawled calculations on them. Since 1994 he has travelled to PNG 16 times in search of the missing aircraft, and he plans to keep going back for as long as his health holds. For around $100,000, he believes, he could get a detailed Lidar (laser mapping) scan of the area. He already has quotes from two companies. "It's a couple of square kilometres at most," he says. "It's hard to search on foot." Logging means much of the area is now impenetrable secondary jungle. And, according to locals he has spoken to, the plane is likely to be nearly or totally buried; he said one local has confessed to burying a plane wreck in the area while using a bulldozer to clear sites for logging. The Lidar scan would show, among other things, bulldozer tracks.

Billings knows where to look next. There's a ridge that matches the description given to him by the veterans that he is yet to search. He went near there last trip. "We stopped for a break and I got my metal detector out," he says. "It went nuts. We were travelling so I didn't dig. We've found cans and ironstones in the past, but what if that was it?"

Billings, a man of meticulous research, has trawled through the fuel calculations released by Lockheed in the 1930s. With his calculations, and the wind and weather reports from July 1937, he says it is possible Earhart believed she had enough fuel to fly back to Rabaul, New Britain, but crashed into the jungle just as she was about to reach it. He has lined up the calculations with radio messages received, and they match his timeline. He believes the engine tag, a key piece of physical evidence, is likely buried away in US archives at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, or the National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Billings knows he cannot search forever. Already, he has promised his wife to stop gliding by the time he turns 80. He has osteoporosis in one hip, and a fall in the wrong place – remote PNG, for example – could be disastrous.

"That will be a sad day, though, won't it?" he says of the moment when he'll have to give up. "I don't know whether the interest will still be there. I will gladly part with the information I have for anybody who will go up there, genuinely, and search. I can still go at the moment, but in a few years..." Billings trails off. He says he still has one or two more searches in him. "I'd be happy with a part of the plane," he sighs. "Just a part." ●

**◖ For video of Billings and the filmed interviews with patrol members, go to theaustralian.com.au ◗**

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; JUSTINE WALPOLE; ARI ESPAY