

THE WAGHENA ISLAND CONNECTION

Report of a Trip to Nikumaroro Village on Waghena Island in the
Solomons for the Purpose of Interviewing Former Residents of
Gardner Island in the Phoenix Group in Connection with the
Investigation of the Disappearance of Amelia Earhart and Fred
Noonan in 1937 Being Conducted by the International Group
for Historic Aircraft Recovery

by

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and

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Also, Mr. Jul Hoehl, who served as artist and photographer on the research trip, came along entirely at his own expense, and provided not only important material assistance, but also was steadfast comrade, especially during some of the more physically difficult parts of the expedition.

Mr. Tony Hughes of UN/ESCAP in Vanuatu, and a longtime resident of the Solomons, together with Mr. John Kaitu, Deputy Governor of the Solomon Islands Development Bank, provided invaluable planning assistance in the Solomons; without their help and courtesy the trip would not have gone

as smoothly as it did. Finally, the Solomon islanders themselves, and the Gilbertese Solomon islanders, enabled the entire undertaking from the start.

Dirk Anthony Ballendorf

Principal Investigator

SUMMARY POINTS:

1. All the original colonists of Gardner Island are now dead. The last two died at Nikumaroro Village, Waghena Island, Solomons, in February 1995, but were feeble and incoherent at the time of their deaths.
2. No really new information about the Earhart/Noonan mystery in connection with Gardner Island was discovered as a result of the trip.
3. The most interesting story was told by the people who were the children of the original colonists who had lived on the island and had attended school there in the 1940s and 1950s. They said that the early colonists found the skeletons of a white woman and a man on the island. When asked how they knew the skeletons were those of white people, they replied: "because they were wearing shoes and had the remnants of clothing on."
4. None of the surviving Gardner Island inhabitants could recall ever hearing about a plane wreck anywhere on Gardner Island itself, although they had heard about a plane wreck on Manru (Sydney) Island.

Preparation

On preparing for the trip from Guam, the greatest assistance was provided by Mr. Tony Hughes, the United Nations ESCAP Representative, a Britisher, who is married to a Solomon Island woman. Their home is in Honiara, although his office is in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Tony Hughes put us in touch with Mr. John Kaitu, a Solomon Islander of Gilbertese parents, who is the deputy governor of the Solomon Islands Development Bank. Together, these people helped us immeasurably by sending the word that we were coming to Waghena Island for a visit to talk with the people. They also set us up with informants and contacts along the way to guide us.

We were well supplied with cameras and film, with a tape recorder and tapes, and with gear and equipment to enable us to stay in the village with the islanders.

Purpose

The main purpose of the trip was to visit the village of Nikumaroro on the island of Waghena (sometimes Vaghena, Vagena, Wagen) in Choiseul Province where there live the former residents of Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro Island) in the Phoenix Group. We wanted to interview these people to find out if they knew anything about an old plane wreck on

Gardner, any stories about human habitation on Gardner prior to the arrival of the colonists in 1938, and stories which may help to further shed light on the Earhart/Noonan investigation. We also wanted to find and photograph any artifacts or implements, or any items of material culture, which the islanders may have brought with them from Gardner when they left there in the mid-1960s.

Getting There

We went from Guam to Brisbane, Australia, by Continental Airlines, and then from Brisbane to Honiara by Qantas Airlines. This travel took two days. From Honiara we went to the town of Ghizo (sometimes Gizo) in the Western Province by small plane, Solomon Islands Air. From Ghizo we hired a canoe and boatmen who took us from Ghizo to the village of Nikumaroro on Waghena Island, which is just below Choiseul. We crossed the New Georgia Sound, also known by its WWII name, "The Slot," in the canoe which was fitted with twin Yamaha 40 outboard motors. This was an arduous trip which took most of one day. We were quite exhausted and wondered what lay ahead as we landed on the beach.

In the Village

We got to the village and were warmly welcomed by the headman, Aberaam (also Abraham) who is also the pastor of the Protestant church. We learned that there were only a handful of people who now lived there who had come from Gardner, but also that none of the original colonists who had gone from Tarawa to Gardner in 1938, were still alive. The people who were immigrants had been children on Gardner, and in some cases infants, who remembered nothing of practical value.

We began interviewing almost immediately. Not as much photographing took place as we were actually prepared to do because of the small number of people involved. Listening to them and making notes was more appropriate and less obtrusive. Also, there was a great deal of commotion and interest caused by our mere presence, which resulted in being inundated with people, especially children, who were constantly present, bantering and swarming around us. Teewa, daughter of pastor Aberaam, and wife of Nicol, spoke English very well having been educated at Honiara, and served as our initial interpreter.

Teewa appeared rather suspicious at first, and questioned us about why we came, what kind of stories we were looking for, and were we interested the time during WWII or after WWII. We assured her that we were not with

the government, but were writers interested in stories about Gardner Island and the memories of the people who had been there. This explanation satisfied her that we had no other agendas, and she proceeded to explain our purpose to the others.

Teewa apologized for the children swarming about and staring at us: “you’ll have to forgive them, we don’t often see Europeans here.” Everyone soon became comfortable with one another and the children especially liked the candies which we occasionally passed to them. We took still photos, especially of the principal interviewees, and some video, but on the whole this was not necessary.

The people were cooperative and friendly; they made us comfortable and provided food and accommodations. We shared tobacco with them, and gave them some items we had such as eyeglasses, mosquito nets, clothing, and donations of money for their dispensary and church. Their collective articulation of past events was given, for the most part by Teinamati Mereki, the most educated man in the village. He is a medical officer trained at the Fiji School of Medicine at Suva. Their method was to talk in their native dialect together after hearing a question from us, and then Dr. Mereki would testify for everyone. They did the same with the photos we showed them. Everyone

was very interested in these and they studied them carefully. The photos helped them to recall their memories of Gardner.

Characteristics of Nikumaroro Village and the People

The village is comprised of three or four hundred people, mostly very young; under the age of twenty. The adults leave to go to Honiara or elsewhere in the Solomons to find work. Some go to Australia and even New Zealand for work. The young ones go to elementary school right there in the village, and then to secondary school elsewhere in provincial centers or in Honiara where the finest secondary school, King George, is located. Graduates of this school become teachers or go on to higher education programs out of the country.

After completing school, many leave the village on a permanent basis. Women marry outside of the village and visit only occasionally at holidays and other times. One fellow, Nicol, husband of Teewa our first interpreter, had lived six years in Australia, doing some sort of manufacturing (factory) work. Now he has a government job in Honiara, is married to Teewa the daughter of the village headman, and comes regularly to visit. He was also a helpful informant for us.

As is typical in Micronesian island communities, there is a headman, or chief, and a number of elders or leaders. All others in the village recognize and follow these people. We were introduced to and talked with all of these elders. The others who were present were either infants at Gardner with no real recollection of the place, or else they were adults with no particular standing in the village, and had nothing to add to the testimonies given by the leaders.

There may be a few people from the village who are living elsewhere in the Solomons, but no one seems to know any specifically. This is a way of their saying: yes, there could be some Gardner Island people living outside the village here, but we don't know them and have no touch with them. The fact is that there are a very few left now—less than twenty—who are Gardner Island veterans. We met all of these in the village, but only a few were spokesmen, and of these, all were men. The women who had been on Gardner, had to be specifically sought out. Then one only was the spokesman for the rest. Those who were not spokesmen had nothing further to add to the testimonies which we obtained and which are reported here.

Dr. Teinamati Mereki

I was born on Tarawa in 1934, and I am now 61 years old. My parents were some of the original colonists who went to Gardner from Tarawa in 1938. I attended elementary school on Gardner Island. I left in 1945 after World War II to attend school at Tarawa, and later I went to medical school at Suva, Fiji.

The few people here who remember Gardner all know the story of the skeletons that were found there. These skeletons were found, some say, laying side by side. They were of white people because they were wearing shoes. Some say they were not laying side by side. They said that one was a woman because it was smaller than the other. They were found, they say, in about this spot (indicates on the map where the skeletons were supposedly found.) The whereabouts of these skeletons now are not known. Nobody knows what happened to them (he queries all those in the group about the whereabouts of the skeletons, and no one knows.) Some of the early people (the original colonists) thought the skeletons were from the shipwreck (*SS Norwich City*, 1929.)

You have asked about the channel. This channel was made by the British engineers who came from Fiji, I think. This was in 1960, and I served

as medical officer for them while they were on Gardner then. They blasted it through and it took about two weeks to do all this. Then they left.

As far as radio operators are concerned, I don't recall anyone by the name of Mike. I remember two radio operators who were there when I was there. One was named Robin and he was from Fiji. Another was named Frank and he was from Ocean Island. I don't know where these people are now and doubt that they would still be alive. We had our own radio operators for the colony and they kept the islanders of Gardner in touch with their island in the Gilberts. The American Coast Guard people had their own radio operator, and I don't know him or his name.

There was no fraternization between the islanders and the Navy people. We stayed separate. They used to invite us to come to the camp to watch movies. The first movies I ever saw were from those Navy men. They used to come to the village and pick us up in their pick-up truck, and then take us back to the village after the movies were over. Those movies were fun.

I do not know of any plane wreck on Gardner, and no one here in the village today recalls any. There was a planewreck on Manru (Sydney) Island, but not on Gardner.

The Coast Guard people had their own generator, and they also had a desalinization plant to make their own fresh water. They never needed to ask us for water. But, they shared water with us if we were short. In the early 1960s there was a two year drought, and this led to the closing of the colony. When it came time to leave, many of the people did not want to leave, but the authorities said that they had to. They were extremely persistent. All were taken off by 1964. It was the second time for many of us to be moved from our homes. We could not go back to Tarawa because there was no room there. That is why we all came here to the Solomons; the British arranged for it.

I stay here now in the village to take care of the people. I have many patients who depend on me.

The child's grave that you mentioned had been found on Gardner, I know nothing about, but I am not surprised to hear about it.

No, we have never heard the name of Amelia Earhart, who is she? We never heard about tiger (TIGHAR) people either, who are they?

REVEREND ABERAAM ABERA

I was born on Gardner Island in 1940, and we stayed there until after WWII when I went to school at Fiji. I came back to Gardner after attending school. We had a wrecked ship which was on the reef at Gardner, but no plane wrecks. There was a plane wreck at Sydney (Manru Island), but I never heard of one at Gardner. We had some Americans on the island during WWII, but these were Coast Guard people. They had radios. We also had a radio with a generator. Sometimes the Americans would come to the village to invite us to come to the movies. They used to take us to their camp in a truck which they had. We liked the movies.

The older people of the island told a story about finding bones of white people—two white people—on Gardner. I never saw these bones, I just heard people talk about them. They said they were white people because they had shoes on; also some parts of clothing which were not like the islanders wore. Some people said these bones were from people who had been on the wrecked ship.

Some of us here remember Gardner as a good place, and we were sorry that we had to leave there. If we had the chance to go back there, we would like to do it.

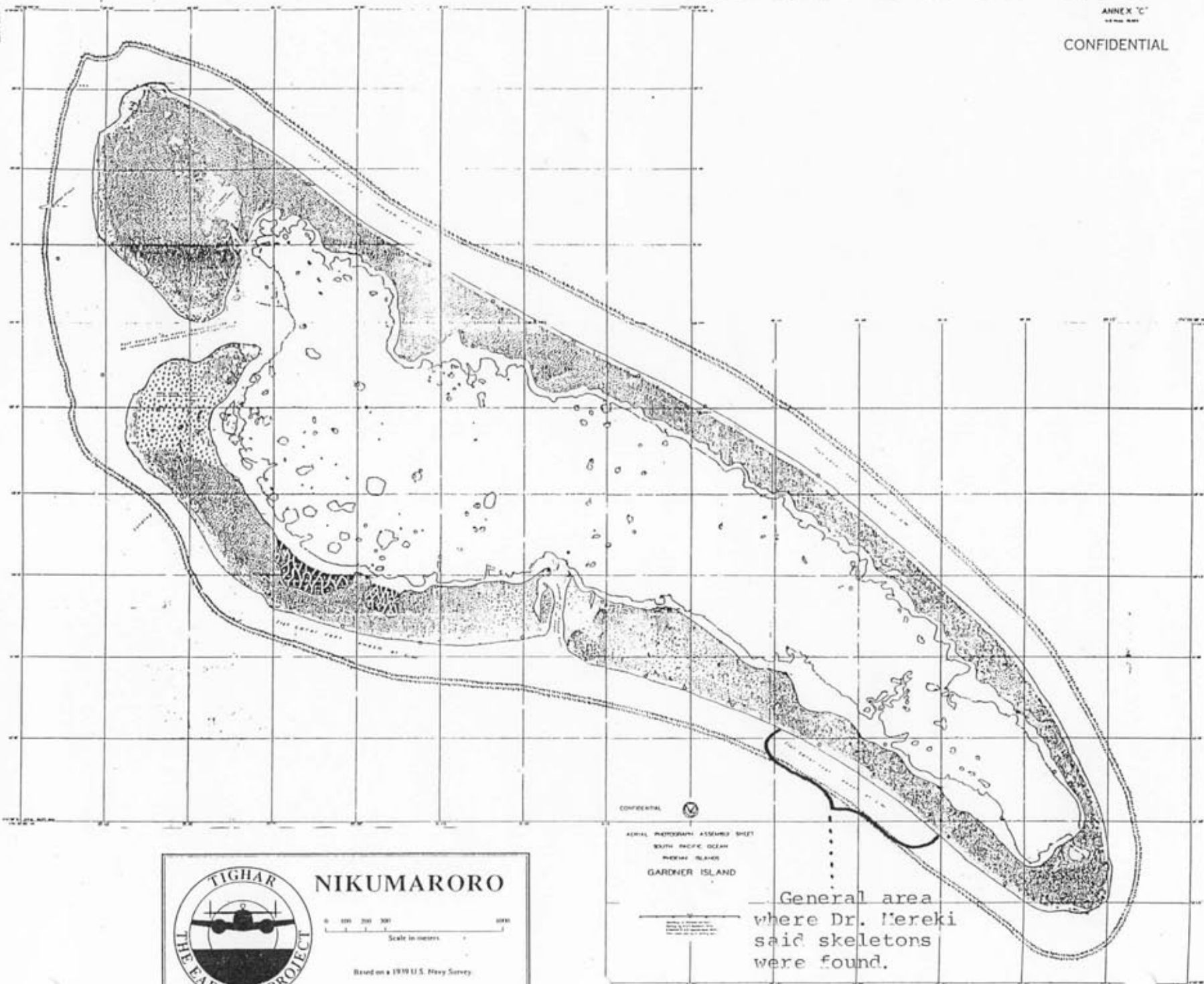
ERENITE KIRON

I am more than sixty years old, but I don't know exactly how old I am. I was born of Gardner Island and went to elementary school there. I stayed there after school and didn't go to Fiji like some of the others did.

I have heard the others talk about the bones that were found on the island, but I don't know anything about them. I never saw them. But I did see a ghost once on the beach near the lagoon. The ghost was that of a woman without a face. She came right up to me and I saw here. I told my mother about it, and other people. I saw this ghost only once.

11C

ANNEX 'C'
CONFIDENTIAL



TIGER
THE EARHART PROJECT

NIKUMARORO

0 100 200 300 400
Scale in meters

Based on a 1939 U.S. Navy Survey

CONFIDENTIAL

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY ASSUMED SHEET
SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN
PHOENIX ISLANDS
GARDNER ISLAND

General area
where Dr. Mearns
said skeletons
were found.

COMMENTARY BY INVESTIGATORS

1. On the matter of the skeletons found on Gardner Island: This is undoubtedly the most exciting, and at the same time neglected story, coming from the Gardner Island people. That this was known as far back as the early 1960s, when, reportedly, a newspaperman took down reference to it when the colonists were being moved to the Solomons—and no one followed-up on it—is remarkable! At that time there might have been some eye-witnesses who might have provided more details of the story. It is not inconceivable that the skeletons themselves, or parts of them, might have even been recovered. But, working with what we know now, there are some “whistles and bells” here. This story is reported sometimes with the words that the skeletons were lying “side by side.” This suggests that they died around the same time: lying down knowing that the end was near, and eventually expired. If the people were injured, this might be feasible. However, it seems unlikely that, if one person died and the other lived for awhile longer; say, for some days, that they wouldn't lie down next to a decaying corpse to expire themselves, but rather would find some other place.

2. The skeletons could have been from the *SS Norwich City*. It is strange how human bones can lie right on the ground and not turn to dust over a long period of time as one would expect. Here on Guam, for example, a WWII Japanese stragglers den was found in the jungle in the northern part of the island in the spring of 1980. This den was examined by Professor Ballendorf and the territorial pathologist, Dr. Hung Yee Park, shortly after the discovery was made. Several human skeletons were found lying randomly on the ground, the bodies having stayed exactly where they had fallen. The bones were a bit soft, but intact after more than 35 years. They had been lying on the ground, exposed to the elements, for all that time. This may suggest that people who survived the shipwreck of the *SS Norwich City* in 1929, might have had their skeletons intact after ten or twelve years.
3. If Earhart and Noonan were in fact on Gardner, why didn't they survive longer than a few months? I would have expected that they would. They were intelligent enough to find water from coconuts, or from catchments they could fashion. A person not trained, or used to opening coconuts, would have some trouble with this, but still they would have figured out

that with a sharpened stick in the ground they could husk one easily enough after a few tries. Too, there would have been mollusks and other small sea life in the lagoon which they could have chewed and survived on. Soon, they might even have been raising small sealife and fishes in the lagoon. Of course, if they had been injured, it would have been a different story.

4. On the matter of a plane wreck: Just because no one from Gardner ever heard of a plane wreck on the island doesn't mean that there isn't one there. It means only that those people interviewed had never heard of one.

January 12, 1996

Partial transcript of videotape received from Dirk A. Ballendorf

Tape appears to have been shot in a house made of local materials. Large open windows. Three men, all appearing to be between 50 and 65 years of age (hard to tell), sit cross-legged on the floor. Dirk is just off-camera to the right. Camera is steady and is either on a tripod or a fixed surface. Occasionally pans right. Dirk asks the questions and the closest of the three men answers in rather good English. He is apparently the only one of the three who speaks English. Other younger people hover around the edges of the group and there seems to be a great number of young and very boisterous children playing nearby. Sound quality on the tape is poor due to ambient noise (mostly the kids) and the distance of the mic from the speaker. Dirk's questions are often almost unintelligible.

G = Gilbertese man on tape

D = Dirk Ballendorf

- G: (in response to question asked before tape begins) "...but they don't find anything."
D: "never heard about (unintel)"
G: "But, this aluminium, they make a comb (gestures toward photo on floor) they said from plane crashed on Sydney."
D: "Sydney Island"
G: "During the war."
D: "So they never heard of any crash on Gardner."
G: "No. They tried to look for anything to ... from which these bones could come... place, but didn't find a trace of it."
D: (Explains that some "Coast Guards" say that some local boys told them of a plane wreck away from the village.)
G: "Maybe these two people who died knew the story but these one generation (nods to his friends), no." (smiling)
G: (Looking at photo of Coast Guard Unit 92 taken Christmas of '44.)
D: "You must remember some of these Coast Guards yourself."
G: "Cannot recognize them now. Memory is—you know."
D: "Did they have parties?"
G: "Oh yes."
D: "What were their parties like?"
G: (consults with his friends) "They do good parties but what I remember is they take people who are in movies."
D: "Ah—movies." Black and white, not color. Betty Grable, Clark Gable..."
G: "I don't remember names. We interested in story." (gestures upward as if toward a screen)
D: "Did they drink beer?"
G: (frowns and shakes his head) "Never see them take, drink beer when people there. Probably them under strict discipline. Never see them drink or act (unintel)."
D: "Always well behaved."
G: "Yes. What they normally drink was Coca Cola."
D: "Did they have a generator? Electricity?" G: "Yes. They make their own water from sea-water."
D: "That station was established in 1944 and stayed only two years. 1946 it closed, after the war."
G: "After I left."

Dirk then asks about the child's grave but gives the impression that there was a cement coffin and does not mention that it was not in the village. G asks how old the grave was. Dirk says we have no idea. G consults with his friends but nobody knows anything about the grave. This subject was very poorly addressed. All we can say is that there was no prominent island story about a baby being buried anywhere.

G: (Looking at photo of Gallagher's house.) "When was this picture taken?"

D: "1939 or '40"

G: "When the blasting team came to Gardner this house was still there. (unintel.) stayed in this house."

D: "How many blasters came?"

G: "Two teams. But about 16 or 20 people."

D: "How long did it take to make the channel?"

G: "About two weeks."

D: "There was a radio operator, a local boy, named Mike at Gardner. Did you know him?"

G: "Wireless operator in my time was man from Okin (?) Island named Frank Tyhoo (phonetic). Before him was Robin, after Robin was Frank. There's another one after."

D: "No one named Mike. Maybe that was a name the Coast Guards gave him."

G: "Yes."

There follows a discussion (untranslated) among the three Gilbertese about the photo showing the colonists in 1944. There appears to be a lot of recognition and speculation about individuals and perhaps relatives just as with anybody looking at an old photo of a family reunion.

Dirk says he knows that he has asked this question before but asks again whether anybody has any souvenirs from Gardner. The answer is "no."

Dirk also interviewed an old woman who did not speak English. Everything she said was summarized by an off-camera translator. She had two stories. One was about a place on the island where there was a ghost. This seems to be virtually identical to the story Laxton relates about the wife of the head man meeting Manganibuka. Dirk was under the impression that this old woman knew the bone story, but she didn't. Her other story was about a place on the island, apparently near on or near the reef-flat, where there are the footprints of an adult and a child in the "rock."

D: "Does she know any other stories about Gardner?"

Old Woman: "No."

D: "Does she have any souvenirs from Gardner?"

Old Woman: "No."

D: "How did the men on Gardner fish?" "Where did they get their fish hooks and lures?"

Old Woman: (makes an amused face as if to say "What a dumb question.") "The feathers for the lures came from roosters and the fish hooks came from the store."

D: "Did she ever hear of an airplane wreck on Gardner?"

Old Woman: "No."