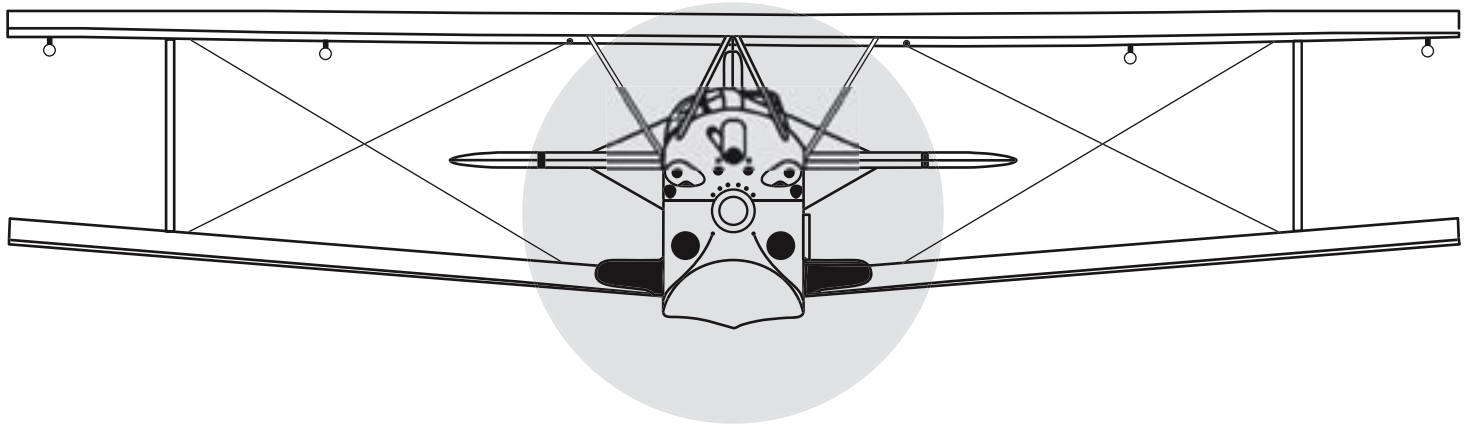


TIGHAR TRACKS

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP FOR HISTORIC AIRCRAFT RECOVERY

XVIII



PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST

EXPEDITION XVIII: April 16 — May 16, 1990

Spring comes late to Washington County, Maine. When most of us are enjoying the blooming of dogwood and azaleas, Downeasters are watching the ice finally leave the lakes and the last of the winter snows shrink in the shadow of the wooded hills. In late April the loons return — not just the feathered variety but, for the past five years, another kind known locally as “those people from away looking for that French airplane.”

Seventeen TIGHAR expeditions have made the search for l’Oiseau Blanc so much a fixture of the local scene that the thrill of nearing the long sought resolution of

the mystery is tempered by a paradoxical sadness that soon it may all be over. But before Project Midnight Ghost becomes a matter of monuments and reunions, there must be more hard logic and hard work, more cold searchers swinging cold steel, and more cold, hard cash to fund the effort.

TIGHAR members are encouraged to participate in Expedition XVIII as volunteer searchers (see box on page three). This special double issue of TIGHAR Tracks will review the new developments and discoveries which make this spring’s expedition one we’re looking forward to with great excitement.



Reviewing the evidence, Paris, Jan. 1990. L to R: Clément-Pascal Meunier, author of the French government report; Jean Taquet, Director, TIGHAREurope; Richard Gillespie, Executive Director, TIGHAR. *TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher*

Over the Coals

France takes her heroes seriously. Imagine, if you will, the United States government using federal funds to conduct a two year, in-depth study of the disappearance of, say, Amelia Earhart, more than fifty years after the fact. And yet that is precisely what the government of France did in 1981. Prompted by allegations that the flight of the White Bird ended in an ignominious crash in the English Channel soon after takeoff, the Bureau of Civil Aviation of the Ministry of Transportation (equivalent to the U.S. FAA or British CAA) launched a full investigation headed by General Engineer Clément-Pascal Meunier. In 1984 an exhaustive 96 page report concluded that the aircraft was last seen departing the west coast of Ireland, on course and in good weather, and that subsequent research into its fate should focus on North America.

It was M. Meunier, author of the French government report, who met with TIGHAR representatives in Paris, January 16, 1990, to evaluate the evidence Project Midnight Ghost has gathered over the last five years. On his recommendation the Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli has now officially endorsed TIGHAR's work, pledged to conduct fund-raising in France on TIGHAR's behalf, and plans to send its two senior officers, Fernand Andreani (Legion of Honor holder, retired Concorde captain, holder of the Paris-New York speed record for scheduled commercial flights) and Roland Nungesser (nephew to Charles, prominent French politician), to Maine during Expedition XVIII. 🐾

TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher.



"Votre modèle est sûrement un article de fabrication Français."

The Strange Case of the Strange Case

It was during Expedition XI (April-May 1987) that Thomas Lynch of Wakefield, Massachusetts read of TIGHAR's work in the Boston papers. He called to say that he had a cigarette case allegedly found in the late 1920's "in the woods near the lakes north of Machias, Maine." What prompted his call was the opinion of an antique dealer who had told him that the case was probably either French or German, manufactured during the early years of this century, and of a style popular with aviators during World War I. Mr. Lynch generously donated the case to TIGHAR's investigation.

Upon examination it was apparent that this was, indeed, a very strange item to come out of the Maine woods. Attempts to confirm its origins only added to the mystery. The birds on the cover are storks, commonly associated with World War I aviation in France through the famous Stork Squadrons (Escadrilles Cigognes); however, the motif is distinctly Oriental with tiny, crudely rendered markings on the inside of the case, corresponding to Japanese phonetic characters of no discernible meaning. As for the case's probable place of manufacture, the Smithsonian and a number of other art conservation laboratories came up dry. So we sent the case to France to see if any help could be had there.

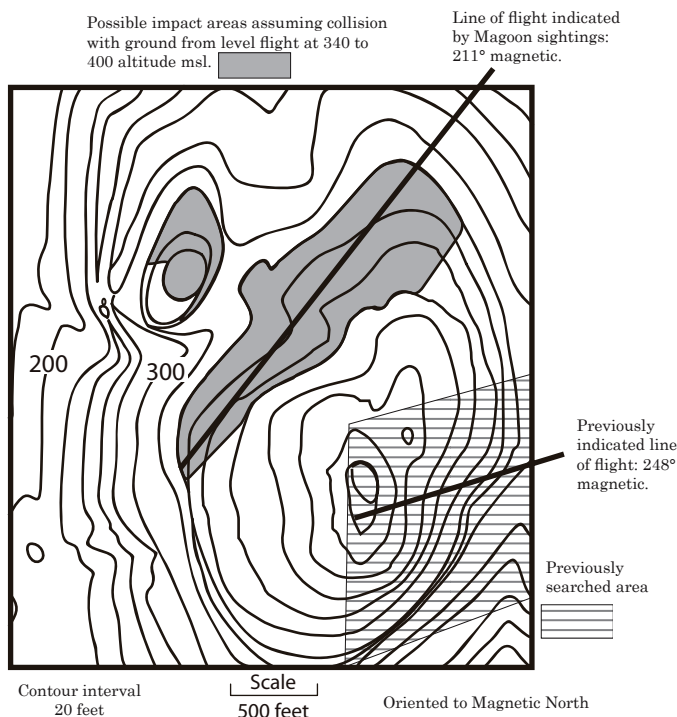
Through the efforts of the Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli of the prestigious Aéroclub de France, the cigarette case was recently identified by M. Maurice Gruson (whose credentials fill up half of his stationery) as being "surement un article de fabrication français" made between 1900 and 1920. Because the chain of possession of this artifact is not documented, it can never be diagnostic; that is, proof in itself that l'Oiseau Blanc crashed in Maine. Confirmation that it is, indeed, French and of the correct period was, however, enough to prompt the Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli to commission a thorough review of TIGHAR's work to date. 🐾

The Significance of the Magoon Sightings

Sometimes all it takes is one piece of a jigsaw puzzle to make a confused and contradictory picture suddenly make sense. The sighting of a “strange looking white airplane” by Evelyn and Robert Magoon as it circled their parents’ farm in 1927 (see TIGHAR Tracks Vol. 5 Nos. 3 & 5) has had that effect on TIGHAR’s search for the crash site of l’Oiseau Blanc.

Prior to the Magoon’s testimony, the line of witnesses seemed to correspond with Coli’s planned route and indicated an impact on one of the eastern sides of the three Round Lake Hills. However, a thorough search of those areas revealed no airplane wreckage. Woodsman Anson Berry who heard the plane crash in 1927 is reported to have initially thought that the impact occurred “some-where between the second and third hills.” That area was searched with no result.

But the Magoon sightings revealed a course change dictated by terrain and weather which would bring the airplane into the fog shrouded hills on a significantly different line. This more northerly approach opens up large areas of the western or “back” side of the third and largest of the Round Lake Hills as forest likely to contain the impact point. Previously considered illogical as a search area, this region of dense spruce and hemlock growth is unexplored country to Project Midnight Ghost. Adding to the anticipation of this spring’s search of the area is a 1984 recording of an interview with Anson Berry’s youngest brother Clarence in which he says, “Anson always said that airplane come down up in back of Third Round Lake Hill somewhere.”



HOW TO PARTICIPATE

APRIL 16 — MAY 16



EXPEDITION XVIII

Participation in Expedition XVIII is open to all TIGHAR members.

Completion of the Introductory Course in Aviation Archeology is recommended but not required.

This is a Category II TIGHAR Expedition: Moderate difficulty; participants should be in good physical condition with good stamina.

The expedition base is Machias, Maine. By car: about an hour and a half north of Bar Harbor on U.S. 1. By airline: major carriers serve Bangor; from there Machias is about 2 hours by rental car. By general aviation: Machias has an excellent 3,500' paved and lighted airstrip with avgas (no JetA) available.

Searchers stay at a modern, comfortable motel and eat breakfast and supper at a local restaurant. Lunch is a sandwich in the field.

TIGHAR will provide daily transportation to and from the search area.

Participants are responsible for their own transportation to and from Machias, Maine, and for their accommodation and meal expenses during their stays.

Each participant also makes a \$100 contribution toward the general cost of the expedition.

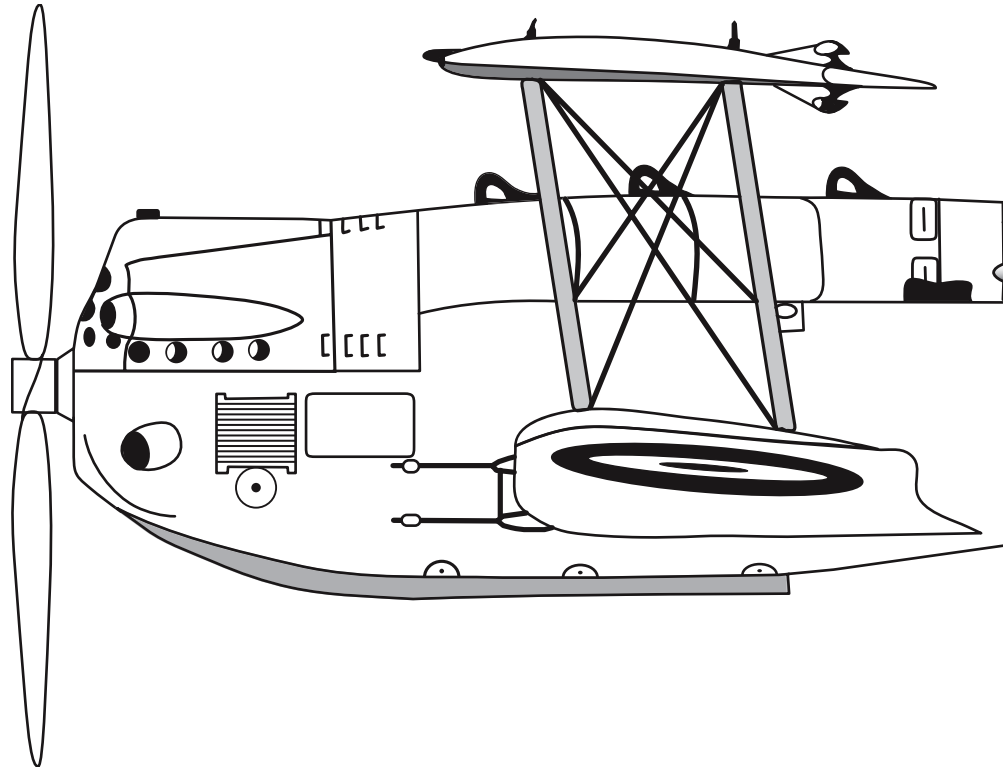
Experience has shown that four days is a practical minimum for participation, while one week is about as much as the average volunteer can take before his or her body (or mind) gives out.

The search effort can efficiently use only about six volunteers at any one time, so early coordination with TIGHAR headquarters is essential to schedule your participation.

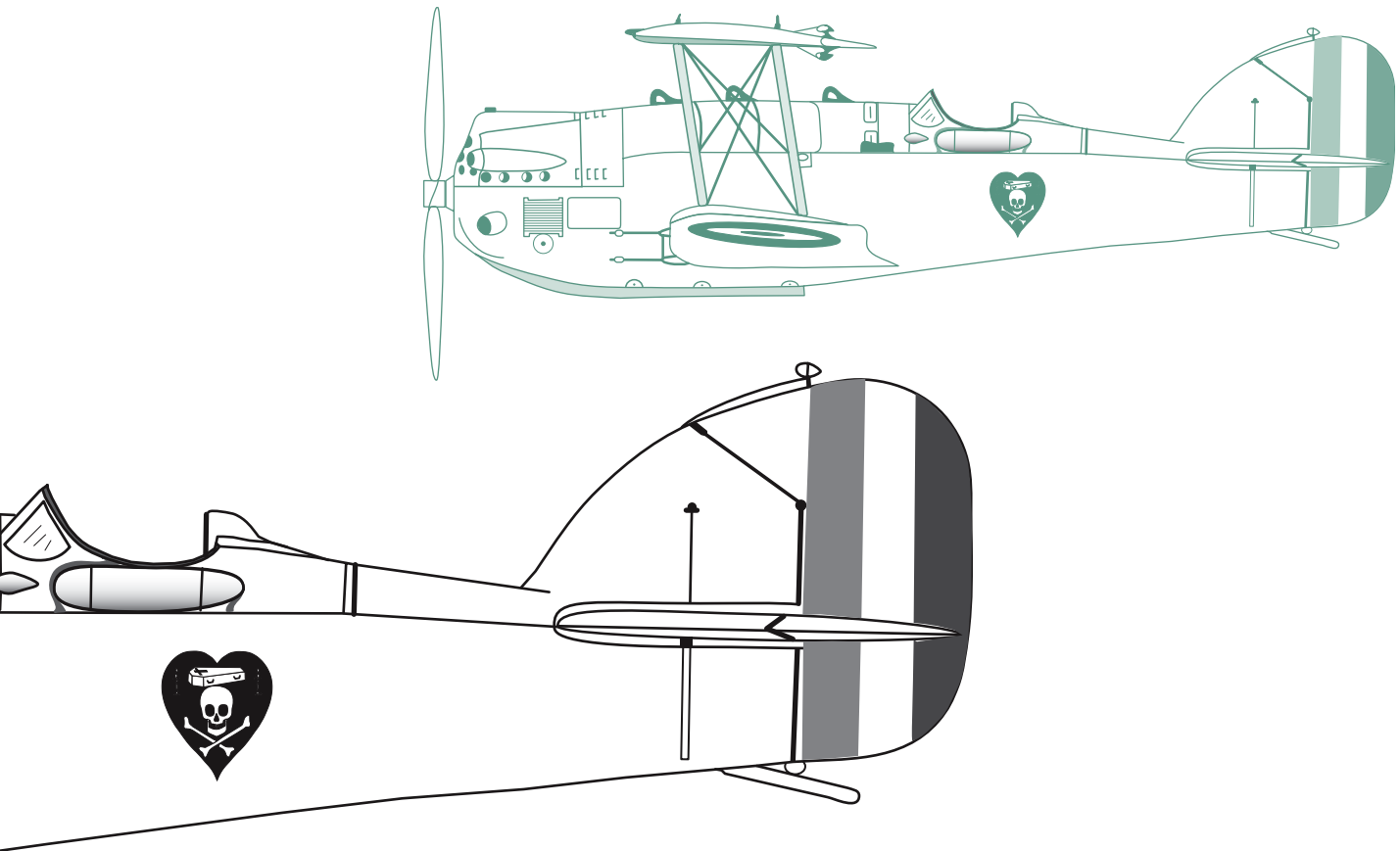
TIGHAR members wishing to participate in Expedition XVIII should call Project Director Richard Gillespie during normal business hours at 302/994-4410.

L'Oiseau Blanc

See end of this issue for an uninterrupted view of this graphic.



L'Oiseau Blanc during early tests (no nav lights yet). Coli stands in the cockpit. The hatch in the nose provides access to the manual primer for starting. Photo courtesy Musée de l'Air.



One of the most fascinating aspects of the Nungesser/Coli transatlantic attempt and disappearance is the airplane itself. Like the Spirit of St. Louis, it was a special one-off modification of an existing design; and like Lindbergh's Ryan it was hand-built in a very short time (February 15 to April 15, 1927). But unlike the NYP, good information about its construction is very difficult to obtain. If detailed technical drawings ever existed they were apparently lost when the manufacturer, Levasseur, went out of business before WWII. The aircraft itself, of course, vanished in 1927.

For TIGHAR, the compiling of reliable technical data on the machine has been a process of constant research, verification and revision. For the past two and a half years we've used a profile (small drawing above) based on Herb Kelley's three view appearing in Skyways magazine (No. 3, July 1987). In January of this year access to the Musée de l'Air's archives at Le Bourget enabled us to refine shapes and features resulting in a new profile as shown above. Some details worth noting are:

- Nose and hull lines are sleeker. Once the gear was jettisoned after take-off, l'Oiseau Blanc had admirably clean lines for a biplane.
- There were navigation lights on the leading edge of the upper wing and on the vertical fin (not the rudder).
- The lumpy features on the fuselage top are not gas caps, but fuel hoses which come vertically out of the three tanks to run aft along the exterior to the cockpit. We don't know why.

Not shown in this drawing is the large Navy anchor which was painted on the tail along with the words P. Levasseur, Type 8. Although totally a civilian venture the aircraft wore the red, white and blue French military markings and, of course, Nungesser's black heart — *son fétiche*.



BONES

*“Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here;
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.”
— epitaph of William Shakespeare*

In the family of Man, strictures against the disturbing of human bones are nearly universal. The culture of Micronesia is no exception. Recent TIGHAR research in London has helped bring into focus events surrounding the discovery of bones by the early settlers of the Phoenix Islands — bones which may be those of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan — and increased the probability that Gilbertese observance of this age-old taboo means that those bones today repose somewhere in the sands of Nikumaroro.

The bones’ discovery first became public on July 21, 1960 when retired Coast Guardsman Floyd Kilts told a reporter at the San Diego Tribune of a story he heard from a Gilbertese colonist on the island in March of 1946:

A native tried to tell me about it, but I couldn’t understand all of it so I got an interpreter. It seems that in the latter part of 1938 there were 23 island people, all men, and an Irish magistrate planting coconut trees on Gardner for the government of New Zealand.

They were about through and the native was walking along one end of the island. There in the brush about five feet from the shoreline he saw a skeleton.

What attracted him to it was the shoes. Women’s shoes, American kind. No native wears shoes. Couldn’t if they wanted to — feet too spread out and flat. The shoes were size nine narrow. Beside the skeleton was a cognac bottle with fresh water in it for drinking.

The island doctor said the skeleton was that of a woman. And there were no native women on the island then. Farther down the beach he found a man’s skull but nothing else.

The magistrate was a young Irishman who got excited when he saw the bones. He thought of Amelia Earhart right away. He put the bones in a gunnysack and with the native doctor, and three other natives in a 22-foot, four-oared boat started for Suva, Fiji, 887 nautical miles away.

The magistrate was anxious to get the news to the world. But on the way the Irishman came

down with pneumonia. When only 24 hours out of Suva he died.

The natives are superstitious as the devil and the next night after the young fellow died they threw the gunnysack full of bones overboard, scared of the spirits. And that was that.

An abbreviated version of the story appeared as an Associated Press release in 1961. Noted by KCBS reporter Fred Goerner, he included a brief mention of it in his 1966 book *The Search for Amelia Earhart*. Goerner dismissed the story as “weird” because he felt the alleged journey to Fiji was incredible. Subsequent research into Earhart’s fate caused Goerner to look further into the bone story. In a letter to TIGHAR member Rob Gerth, dated April 9, 1989, he wrote:

... I did considerable additional research on the Floyd Kilts story. ...

The human remains on Gardner were of a man, not a woman. There were only the remains of one person, and that person was a Polynesian man. There was no attempt to take the remains to Suva. The “white planter” in the story was a New Zealander who died on the island of peritonitis. He is buried in a marked grave on Gardner. Floyd Kilts was a part of the U.S. Coast Guard personnel constructing the Loran station on Gardner during WWII. He had been taken to Gardner Island aboard the Coast Guard vessel U.S.S. PLANETREE.

Both Kilts’ original telling of the story and Goerner’s supposed resolution of it are interesting for the mix of fact and fancy they contain. Both are under the mistaken impression that the island was under New Zealand administration. Nikumaroro was, in fact, part of the Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony of the West Pacific High Commission headquartered in Suva, Fiji, answering directly to London. This error also appears in U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence reports about the island, leading us to speculate that Goerner’s information may have come from such a source (he has not responded to our requests for him to cite his sources). Kilts’ “Irish Magistrate” and Goerner’s “New Zealander” is Gerald B. Gallagher, the Irish-born, Cambridge-edu-

Gerald B. Gallagher

cated Officer-in-Charge of the Phoenix Island Settlement Scheme. The most intriguing aspect of both versions is that each ends in such a way as to preclude the exhumation of bones on the island. The people of Micronesia believe that the ghosts of the dead, sometimes malevolent, roam abroad among the living so long as their earthly remains are unburied. A careful chronicling of activity on Nikumaroro, made possible by records on file in London, reveals a sequence of events which tracks closely with the bone story.

Kilts' "latter part of 1938" is when the first settlers came ashore (20 December 1938) to "plant coconut trees" and, just as he says, the first work party was all male. The bones were supposedly found when "[t]hey were about through." Completion of the coconut plantings was not accomplished until the summer of 1941. Gallagher, who had established a colonial headquarters on the island in September 1940, had left on leave in May of '41. Returning in September, he developed appendicitis while enroute aboard the S.S. Viti. Although the High Commission's Chief Pathologist, Dr. D. C. M. MacPherson, was along for a medical inspection of the colony, a shipboard operation was deemed too risky. They arrived at Nikumaroro on September 24 and three days later Gallagher died of peritonitis after an unsuccessful operation. From these facts it is possible to construct a scenario which explains both the Kilts and Goerner versions of the bone story.



The bones are discovered sometime during the summer of 1941 and are left undisturbed. They are shown to Gallagher and MacPherson upon their arrival at the island September 21 (this is the *only* time that both the "Irish Magistrate" and the "Island Doctor" are present on Nikumaroro). Gallagher's appendix has burst shortly before their arrival and, symptomatic of such occurrences, his discomfort abates for a couple of days until the resulting peritonitis takes hold. During this time MacPherson identifies the bones as being those of a woman and Gallagher speculates that they might be Earhart's. Then Gallagher rapidly sickens and MacPherson operates, but the 29 year-old colonial officer dies. The tragedy overshadows any speculation about the bones — except for the Gilbertese, who have seen the man who has led them for two and a half years suddenly sicken and die after handling the bones. The deadly relics are immediately buried.

Five years later an American Coast Guardsman asks about Amelia Earhart and the bones are mentioned. When he shows great interest the story is given an ending which guarantees the bones will not be disturbed. Later, Kilts tells his story to Naval Intelligence and inquiries are made. The story is not denied but is changed, again to insure that the lethal spirits are not set loose on the island. The new explanation is recorded in Naval Intelligence files where Goerner later finds it. 🐾

"Bones" is excerpted from *The Earhart Project*, Fifth Edition.

RETURN TO NIKUMARORO



Analysis of artifacts and information gathered during TIGHAR's 1989 expedition to Nikumaroro has been so encouraging that the decision has been made to return to the island. Slated for the summer of 1991, this expedition will include technology capable of searching the deep water immediately adjacent to the island's reef. If, as TIGHAR's research has indicated, the aircraft was landed on the dry reef flat at low tide and then, within days, washed over the reef's edge into several thousand feet of water, the Lockheed should survive relatively intact. As with last year's expedition, this effort will be carried out by highly qualified TIGHAR volunteers. **No selection of team members has yet been made.** This will be a Category III expedition. Members interested in applying for a slot on the team should write to Expedition Director Patricia Thrasher for information.

Meanwhile, the need for funding to continue the research and plan the expedition is critical. All TIGHAR members are urged to do what they can to support the work. In appreciation for your tax-deductible contribution, TIGHAR is pleased to offer:

Earhart Project Patch & T-Shirt	\$25.00
Earhart Project Certificate of Appreciation and Lapel Pin	\$50.00
The Earhart Project, Fifth Edition	\$100.00

Those who receive the Project Book will be eligible to receive subsequent editions for a contribution of \$25.00. 🐾


STRICTLY BUSINESS

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And the winner is --

L'Oiseau Blanc – the White Bird of the 1927 Nungesser/Coli transatlantic flight was chosen by TIGHAR's members as the aircraft to be featured on the new membership decal. The Flying Tiger P-40 which graced the original sticker was runner-up and, for old times' sake, we've decided to produce both versions. Each member will receive one of each with the next renewal (or anniversary in the case of multiple year memberships).

There was an abundance of nominations - great airplanes and great ideas – but the majority of TIGHAR members saw in l'Oiseau Blanc a symbol of the dedication and sacrifice that is aviation history. There was also a strong feeling that, because TIGHAR itself was born and grew out of the effort to find l'Oiseau Blanc, this unique aircraft has come to stand for the dedication and sacrifice it has taken, and still takes, to champion the cause of aviation historic preservation. We are flattered and humbled by the analogy and we'll put the White Bird on your membership sticker because you, the members of TIGHAR, have made this symbol your own. 

TIGHAR (pronounced "tiger") is the acronym for The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, a non-profit foundation dedicated to promoting responsible aviation archeology and historic preservation. TIGHAR's activities include:

- Compiling and verifying reports of rare and historic aircraft surviving in remote areas.
- Conducting investigations and recovery expeditions in cooperation with museums and collections worldwide.
- Serving as a voice for integrity, responsibility, and professionalism in the field of aviation historic preservation.

TIGHAR maintains no collection of its own; neither does it engage in the restoration or buying and selling of artifacts. Instead, the foundation devotes its energies to the saving of endangered historic aircraft wherever they may be found, and to the education of the international public in the need to responsibly preserve the relics of the history of flight.

TIGHAR Tracks, published nine times each year, is the official publication of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery. A subscription to *TIGHAR Tracks* is included as part of membership in the foundation (minimum donation \$35.00 per year). The editors welcome contributions of written material and artwork. Materials should be addressed to: Editors, *TIGHAR Tracks*, 1121 Arundel Drive, Wilmington, DE 19808 USA. Telephone 302/994-4410. Photographs and artwork will be returned on request.

Editors: Patricia R. Thrasher and Richard E. Gillespie

MEMBERSHIP FORM

I would like to join TIGHAR. Enclosed is my donation of —

\$35.00 for a one year membership

\$60.00 for a two year membership

\$125.00 for a five year membership

\$1,000 for a life membership

As a member of TIGHAR, I will receive the following benefits:

- Annual subscription to TIGHAR Tracks
- Membership patch, directory and catalog
- Expedition and educational opportunities

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____

Please return this form with your membership dues to TIGHAR, 1121 Arundel Drive, Wilmington, DE 19808 USA; Telephone 302/994-4410, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. EST/EDT, M-F. ALL DONATIONS TAX-DEDUCTIBLE WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE LAW.



