

... NOR ANY DROP TO DRINK



There has been an important new development in TIGHAR's investigation of the Earhart disappearance. On August 25, 1990 the following letter was received:

Dear Patricia Thrasher:

If you are reading this I am half way home, as I am seeking the Patricia Thrasher mentioned in the Associated Press article about the search for Amelia Earhart's plane. The article says the organization is based in Wilmington and yours is the only Thrasher name listed in the telephone book ... so I hope I got this right.

The article says your group has found a navigator's box picked up on Nickumaroro [sic] and also mentions the Coast Guard base located there during WWII. I was stationed on that base for a good part of the time it was in operation. ... Of course, we were not stationed on Nickumaroro, it was still Gardner in those days.

Among other things, the article indicates you are inclined to discount the idea that the box came from a PBY used to service the base. Your idea is very sound. 99% of our supplies, mostly diesel fuel, came by boat. The PBYs brought our mail about once a month. They arrived from Canton about 10 AM, always landing in the lagoon. They were back in the air by about 2 PM - since there wasn't a damn thing for them to do while they were there. There was never an occasion when one stayed overnight and never, while I was there, did any of them have anything other than a routine landing and takeoff. ... I think you are safe in assuming with absolute certainty that the mysterious box did not come from a PBY connected with the Loran base.

I would also be interested in learning the general location on the island where you found the box. ... The base was built on the

tip of the tear drop ...[t]he native village was North, beyond the inlet, near the shipwreck. ... So if you found things on the East side of the island, you can be pretty sure it had nothing to do with the base. To my knowledge there were only three times when anyone went over there. With one exception we found nothing but turtles.

The exception was a small structure we found designed to collect rain water. We assumed the natives had built it and we ignored it. But when we mentioned it to them a few months later they didn't know anything about it. We suggested that a previous group of natives had built it but they said there were never any people living on the island (prior to their arrival). All we were sure of is that we didn't build it and neither did the natives.

I hope these tidbits of information might be of help to you and, naturally, would be happy to supply you with anything else I might know that would be helpful.

If you are not the Patricia Thrasher who is President of TIGHAR and therefore never received this letter, please ignore it. In any event, Good Luck.

Richard K. Evans, PhD

Knowing Nikumaroro's history and topography as we do, we were intrigued by this report of a structure on the island's eastern shore, so we immediately telephoned and found Dick Evans to be as affable and helpful as his letter implied. Now 64 and recently retired from the Labor Relations department of the Pennsylvania state government, he was an 18 year old Coast Guardsman in 1944 and the youngest man at the Gardner Loran station. The "small structure ... designed to collect rain water" was found during a casual exploratory hike about a month or six weeks after he arrived at the island with the original construction detachment. Others who were with him that day included "Mac" McDonald from Nebraska, Herb Moffett from

Hemmett, California, and Charlie Race, a Pharmacist's Mate from Ft. Worth, Texas. Our subsequent attempts to find them have not been successful.

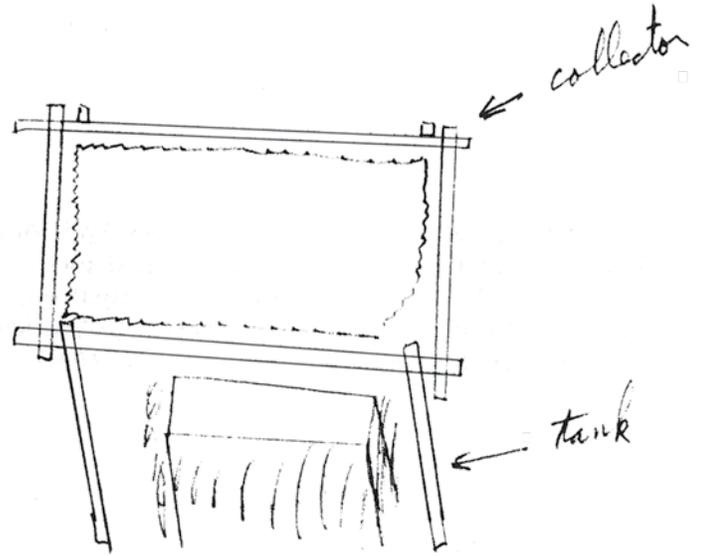
Dick was able to provide further details concerning the structure's make-up and location as well as a rough sketch of what he remembers seeing. After studying his testimony and comparing it with what we know of events in 1937, we were struck by a number of interesting apparent correlations.

The presence of such a structure on the island's eastern shore is indeed unusual. Dick says it was "less than halfway up the beach." That puts it somewhere along about a mile of some of the most unpleasant beachfront on Nikumaroro. The eastern side is the windward side of the island, and those TIGHAR members who participated in the brief survey that was done in that area on September 25, 1989, will remember the constant 15 to 20 knot wind, the soft, steeply sloping beach, and the ceaseless, deafening pound of the surf along the reef. To attempt a boat landing here would be suicidal, and no work party ever tried to clear the dense beachfront scaevola brush to plant coconuts on this part of the island. Neither is there any apparent reason for anyone to camp on the ocean beach rather than on the sheltered lagoon shore just a few hundred yards inland unless they needed to watch the ocean horizon. What Evans saw seems explainable only as a wreck survivor's attempt to get drinking water and shade while awaiting rescue. We can certainly understand the motivation. TIGHAR teams were consuming upwards of a quart of water an hour in the island's 120°F heat, and in the entire three weeks we were there only two brief rain showers passed over Nikumaroro.

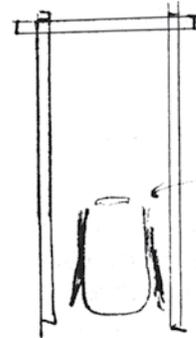
The structure itself, as Evans remembers it, seems odd. He says the upright supports were made of tree branches and stood about six feet tall. They supported (he doesn't remember just how) a piece of heavy cloth or canvas which he estimates was about eight feet long by about three feet wide. He describes the material as being light tan in color and similar in weight to a sailor's hammock. The tank which caught the rain was, he estimates, about five feet by two feet by two feet. Although he doesn't know what it was made of, it had coral piled around it and was full of water when he saw it.

There is nothing occurring naturally on Nikumaroro (larger than a coconut) from which to make a watertight container. The Gilbertese colony used concrete cisterns and corrugated iron sheeting to catch rainwater. So what was the tank Evans saw made of? It had to be metal of some kind, but the only metal tanks on the island in pre-colony days were massive steel structures from the wreck of S.S. *Norwich City* at the northwest end. A steel tank of those dimensions would be so heavy as to be difficult to move to the other end of the island, and would not require coral piled around it to keep it upright. We're left with the probability that it was an aluminum tank. But where could it come from? Faced with an anomalous artifact unexplainable in the context of the island's known history, we must consider the possibility that it is connected to the only known alternative explanation, that of the Earhart disappearance.

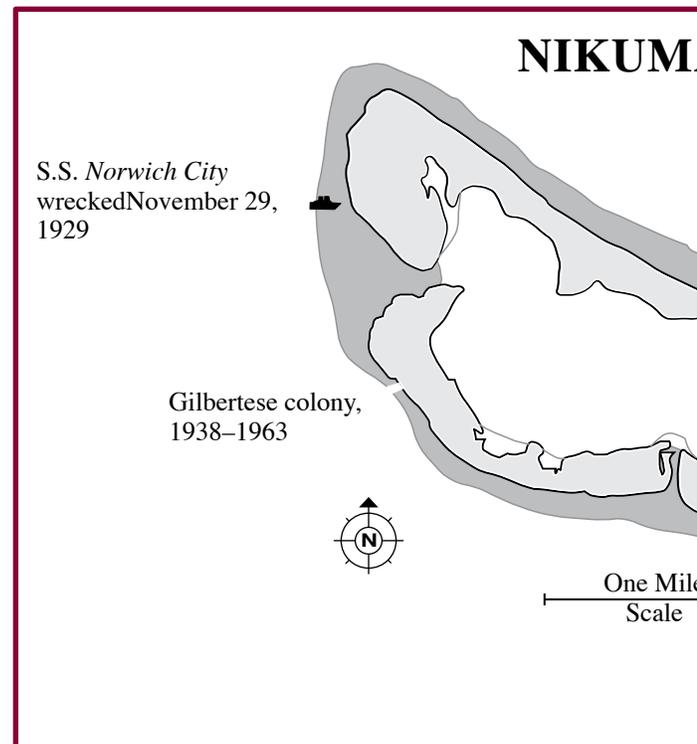
The 149 gallon main fuel tanks in the fuselage of NR16020 were very similar in dimension to the tank described by Evans. They were, of course, aluminum, and weighed 64.3 pounds each (according to original CAA records). Readily removable from the aircraft

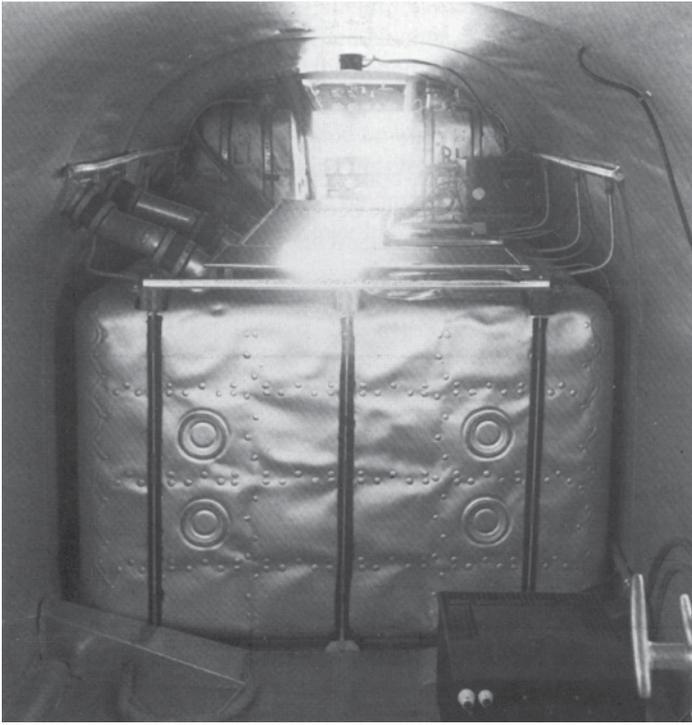


adrian



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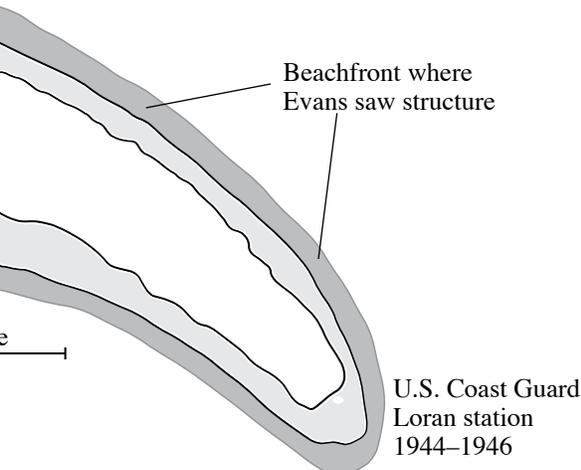




Main fuel tanks as installed in Earhart's Electra.
Photo courtesy Lockheed Corp.

... was covered with something firm
on. It did not seal the
reach into the water. The
up to the edge.
... piled around it.

NIKUMARORO



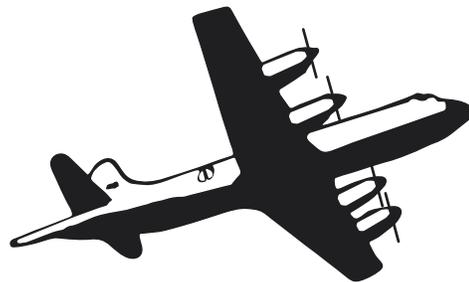
(they were just strapped down and would fit through the door), an empty tank used as a cistern would need to be stabilized with coral slabs as Evans describes. One cannot help but notice the similarity between Evan's sketch of the tank with "something to lean or sit on" partially covering it, and the Lockheed photo (which Evans had never seen) of the fuel tanks as installed in the Electra.

The "piece of heavy cloth or canvas" described by Evans is also interesting. A March 7, 1937 article in the *New York Herald-Tribune* includes an interview with Amelia in which she describes "specially made covers of Grenfell cloth for the propellers and engines." How big would a piece of Grenfell cloth have to be to cover the nacelles and face of the Electra's R1340s? About eight feet by three feet would do it. And what, by the way, is Grenfell cloth? TIGHAR researcher Bob Kujawa (TIGHAR #962) came up with the answer from Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles: "A closely woven twilled fabric of ply yarns of Egyptian cotton. Water repellent, windproof, and reversible." Wherever the cloth came from, it could not have been more than about 10 years old when Evans saw it in 1944, for the intensity of the equatorial sun is devastating to organic fibers.

But perhaps Dick Evans' testimony is not the first report we've had of such a structure seen on the beach at Nikumaroro. We have long wondered what Lt. John O. Lambrecht, Senior Aviator, U.S.S. *Colorado*, saw that caused him to include the following passage in his official report of his flight over Gardner Island on July 9, 1937, one week after Earhart disappeared:



"Here signs of recent human habitation were clearly visible, but repeated circling and zooming failed to elicit any answering wave from possible inhabitants, and it was finally taken for granted that none were there." (*Aircraft Search for Earhart Plane*, Lt. John O. Lambrecht USN, to Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, 16 July 1937.)



On September 20, 1989, a Royal New Zealand Air Force P-3 Orion flew over Nikumaroro and engaged in "repeated circling and zooming" over the island and over TIGHAR's expedition ship Pacific Nomad. The crew of the P-3 failed to see more than a dozen people on the island, in the open, dressed in colorful clothing, jumping up and down and waving. But we had a way home . . .

