

# TIGHAR TRACKS

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP FOR HISTORIC AIRCRAFT RECOVERY

## A PROMISE OF CERTAINTY

We're going to know. We don't know yet, but we now know that we're going to know whether or not Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan landed their Lockheed at Nikumaroro. TIGHAR's most recent expedition to that far away island has returned with airplane wreckage – bits and pieces of aluminum and other materials which were, without question, once part of an airplane. The artifacts recovered are of sufficient variety and complexity to permit a conclusive identification of the aircraft from which they came. Is it the Electra? Are these shards of debris the long-sought answer to the Earhart enigma, or can Nikumaroro be eliminated from the puzzle? This expedition, organized and executed at such cost in dollars and sweat, has taken the problem out of the realm of theory and speculation and made it an issue of conclusive material analysis. The significance of that accomplishment can hardly be overstated. We're going to know.

### SURPRISES

In historical investigation it is wise to remind ourselves that we really don't know one tenth of one percent about anything. History hands us tiny scraps of certainty around which we try to assemble a picture using theory, probability and conjecture to fill in the huge blank spaces. If we're careful, disciplined and rational, the picture we concoct will bear some resemblance to what really happened, but it will never, ever be exactly right. It may, however, lead us to the discovery of more of those precious scraps of certainty with which we can correct our picture, and begin the process anew. Surprises, therefore, in an investigation like The Earhart Project should not be – well – surprising. And indeed, Nikumaroro handed us a number of surprises during the ten days the expedition spent at the island.



### DISAPPOINTMENTS

The grave which we suspected might contain the bones reportedly found by the island's early settlers turned out to contain the remains of a tiny, possibly stillborn, infant. The excavation was undertaken only after we had re-examined the whole situation with the aid of our representative from the government of Kiribati and obtained his concurrence that the grave was very suspicious. The dig was meticulously executed over several days under very difficult conditions and, in the end, we were rewarded with the knowledge that all we had done was disturb the grave of a baby. As badly as we felt, as we carefully restored the grave we also knew that we had had no choice if we were to carry out the investigation we had come there to do. Speculation had been replaced with another scrap of certainty. The contents of the grave are now known, although the reason for its odd location and the origin of other objects found nearby are still a mystery.

Less conclusive was the search for the possible remains of a campsite seen by World War II Coast Guardsmen on the island's eastern shore. Day after blistering day of metal detector sweeps along the carefully surveyed and gridded beachfront yielded nothing unusual or unexplainable. Whatever the Coasties saw in 1944 is now either gone or hidden deep in the impenetrable underbrush. The TIGHAR team carried out an excellent search under truly brutal conditions and all we know for sure is that there was nothing where we were able to look.

### HOPE AND FRUSTRATION

There is, however, no underbrush in the ocean and the sonar search of the waters surrounding the atoll was more conclusive. The 1989 expedition had determined that there was no intact airplane parked on Nikumaroro.

*cont. p. 2*

The 1991 expedition proved that there is no intact airplane resting on the ocean bottom anywhere near the island. In fact, Oceaneering International found the sea floor adjacent to the atoll remarkably free of any debris except for one spot along the section of beachfront photographed by the U.S. Navy search planes in 1937 and directly off shore of where World War II Coast Guardsmen reported seeing an unexplained campsite. There are anomalous sonar contacts in that area that are too small to be an intact airplane and might simply be unusual coral outcroppings. Then again, they could be chunks of airplane. Maddeningly, the targets were too deep for inspection by divers without special support equipment, and too close to the reef-edge to permit visual inspection with our ROV (Remote Operated Vehicle), so any further information about these targets will have to come from analysis of the sonar read-outs. At the very least, Oceaneering's sonar search has allowed us to make a fundamental correction to our historical picture. If the Earhart aircraft landed at Nikumaroro it has not survived intact.

## REVELATION

Along with the confirmation that there is no intact airplane, wet or dry, at Nikumaroro came the discovery of components from a very much un-intact airplane scattered throughout the long-abandoned Gilbertese village. The most obvious parts were not visible in 1989 but had appeared, or re-appeared, as the result of severe beach erosion caused by very large waves which hit the west end of the island sometime between our two visits. Other pieces were, in 1989, undoubtedly right where we found them in 1991. In our failure to recognize them on the first expedition is a valuable lesson in historical investigation. We have always been, and must necessarily be, our own worst skeptics. In our abhorrence of the wild speculation and unfounded leaping to conclusions which have typified Earhart research for more than fifty years, we have gone to great lengths to avoid such errors in TIGHAR's work. And yet healthy skepticism, if taken too far, can become blindness. In 1989 we were quick (too quick it turns out) to ascribe aluminum debris seen among the ruins of the village to non-aviation sources. After all, there had been a Coast Guard Loran station on the island during World War II. Surely they had left behind objects made of aluminum, and weren't scraps of the metal found in the village more likely to be from that source than from an airplane? It was only when confronted with a box-like structure stamped with what looked suspiciously like an airplane part number that we were willing to concede that it was worth checking out. And even that artifact, which turned out to be the navigator's bookcase, took two

years to thoroughly analyse. A handful of other pieces of aluminum were also collected, almost grudgingly, but they didn't have numbers and never received much analytical attention. Then, on this expedition, the island handed us more aluminum artifacts which are quite obviously airplane parts. We're pretty dense, but eventually we catch on. A harder look at that 1989 junk reveals that several pieces are undoubtedly from an aircraft. So focused had we been on the notion that there had to be an intact airplane somewhere that we hadn't seen the evidence under our noses. The airplane at Nikumaroro, whatever airplane that might turn out to be, ended up in little pieces. With that realization it's hardly surprising that our searches for a complete aircraft, on land and underwater, came up negative. Of course, we would have much preferred an intact airplane – better visuals for the media (who would go to see *Raiders of Debris From The Lost Ark?*) – but when we set out to learn history's story it's best to remember that it's not Hollywood writing the script.

## GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

So what's next? The press and the public are clamoring for answers. TIGHAR's critics (primarily Earhart authors who see their royalties threatened) are predicting that we'll announce results that are just unfounded speculation. Some are so frightened that they're shouting "fraud" before we've even made an announcement. The TIGHAR membership, on the other hand, has been understanding and supportive of our decision not to say anything until we know for certain what we have. Meanwhile, NBC News Productions is working on its two-hour documentary to be syndicated nationally in early April. LIFE magazine is waiting to see how the analysis comes out before deciding whether to run the story. And all the while we're measuring, testing, comparing, squinting at reel after reel of poorly microfilmed aircraft plans, consulting dozens of experts, doing everything we can think of to make positive identification of the materials and structures discovered.

## FINISHING THE JOB

But artifact analysis is expensive in dollars and in time. The major sponsors whose loans made the expedition possible are 100% behind the project, and fund-raising on TIGHAR's behalf by The Pacific Society in Japan has exceeded all expectations. Nevertheless, our ability to finish the job quickly and thoroughly is directly dependent upon membership support. The expedition's full story has yet to be told (and quite a story it is too), but first we have work to do and, as always, we need your help to do it.



# THE CRASH AT SYDNEY ISLAND



A crucial piece of information needed to evaluate the wreckage found on Nikumaroro is the identity of an aircraft reported to have crashed on another island some 200 miles away. The logic goes like this:

- TIGHAR has established that the Gilbertese settlers on Nikumaroro used a variety of aircraft components as a source of lightweight metal. The abandoned village was fairly littered with little, and not so little, pieces of aluminum which were once part of an airplane and had been subsequently torn, hacked, and sawn apart for any number of local uses.
- Since December of 1938 when the first settlers arrived, there has been no recorded instance of any aircraft ever being damaged or abandoned at Nikumaroro. Therefore, either an airplane came to grief at the island prior to its settlement, or wreckage was brought there from a crash that occurred somewhere else.
- There have been no civilian aviation losses in the region (except a rather famous one in 1937). During World War II, only one military wreck is believed to have occurred in the Phoenix Islands which might have provided a source of airplane parts which could have, subsequently, ended up on Nikumaroro. The problem is, we don't know what kind of airplane it was.

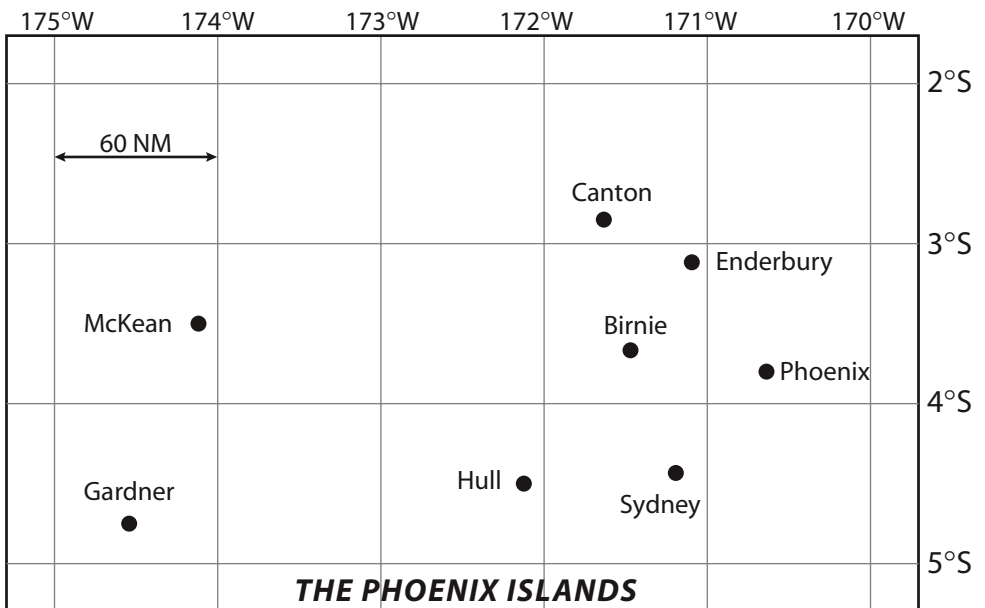
As early as May of 1989 we started hearing rumors concerning a large aircraft that supposedly crashed on Sydney Island during the war and was picked apart by the settlers there. Then, about a year ago, Dr. Tom King (TIGHAR #0391CE) came across this passage in an anthropological work entitled *Titiana* written by Kenneth Knudson:

“During the late war years, a large four-engine aircraft from Canton Island crashed on Sydney. ...[I]t circled the island once before attempting to ditch in the lagoon. The approach was made too low, however, and the airplane ... crashed just inland from the village. It burned on coming to rest, but the islanders hastened to pull the crew members from the wreckage. One man lived for a short time, but succumbed after an hour or so as he was badly burned. ... The next day a ship arrived from Canton and the bodies were removed and taken aboard. ... After the ship left for Canton, the wreck became the chief source of aluminum for the islanders, who had learned on Canton to make combs and other ornaments from this material. Eventually almost nothing remained of the aircraft.”

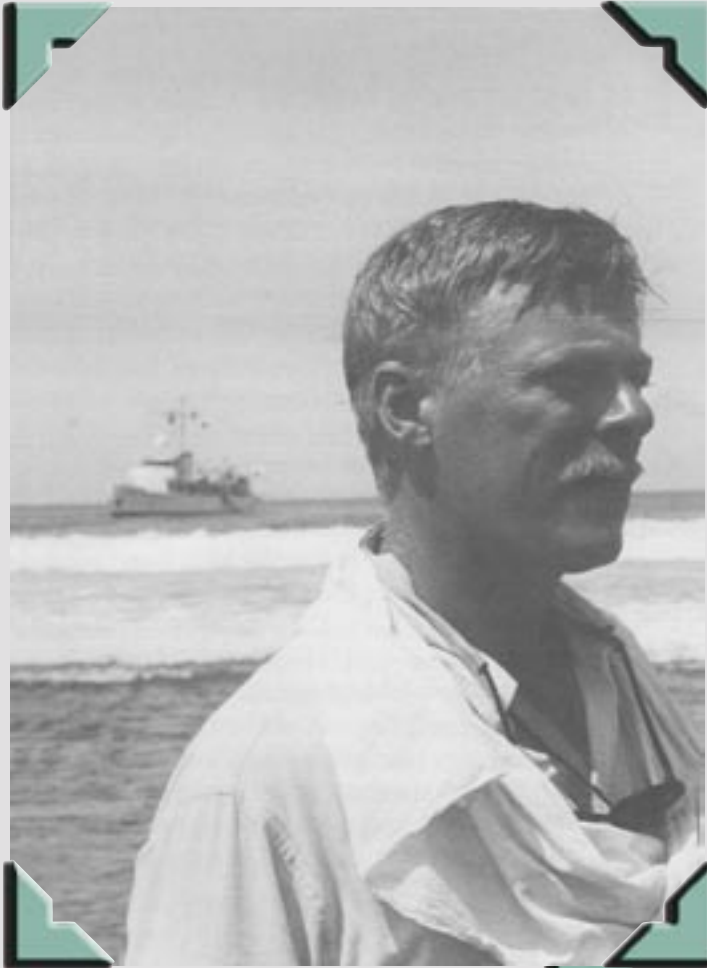
After the war, traffic between Sydney (later renamed Manra) and Nikumaroro was not uncommon and there is certainly a possibility that pieces of the Sydney wreck might have

left that island. We can't eliminate that airplane as the source of the wreckage we found on Nikumaroro until we know for sure what kind of airplane it was. Here's our reasoning so far:

- U.S. Navy operations out of Canton were flown by elements of Fleet Air Wing Two. A check of the records shows that they had only two losses out of Canton for the whole war: a PB4Y-1 lost at sea on October 18, 1943, and a PBM-3D lost at sea on September 5, 1944. It would appear that the Sydney crash was not a Navy airplane.
- Army Air Force combat operations out of Canton were associated with the Gilberts and Marshalls campaigns in late '43/early '44. The 7th Air Force was flying B-24s, the most common “large four-engine” aircraft of the Pacific Theatre, so it could have been a battle-damaged or lost Lib trying to get back into Canton.
- Later in the war, Canton became a major waypoint for cargo and personnel flights enroute between the States and the Southwestern Pacific. However, the lack of mention of any cargo or unusually high loss of life seems to argue against it being one of these aircraft.
- Perhaps the most promising lead is a mention by Knudson, in another part of his book, that the Gilbertese on Sydney were receiving repeated airdrops of supplies from aircraft operating out of Canton. Sydney is not really on the way to anywhere so it's easier to explain a crash by an airplane that has a reason for being there. But what unit was doing the airdrops and what kind of airplanes were they using? Let's get the TIGHAR network cranking on this one.

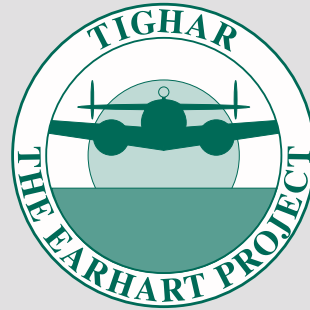


# PICTURES FROM AN EXPEDITION



TIGHAR photo by R. Matthews

## A glimpse of TIGHAR's Return To Nikumaroro.



Executive Director Richard Gillespie searches for the expedition ship.

*Photo courtesy R. Matthews*

Expedition Media  
Liaison Russ Matthews  
at work.



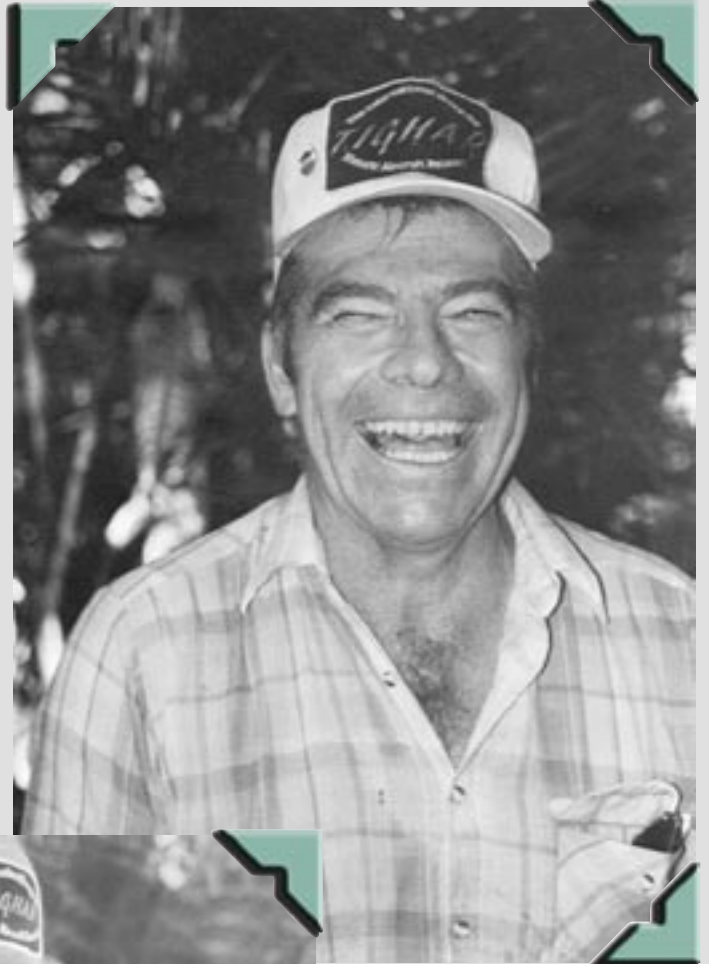




Team Leader Kristin Tague searches for Amelia Earhart.

*Photo courtesy R. Mattheus*

*TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher*



Expedition Quartermaster Veryl Fenlason realizes that he actually volunteered for this - twice.

*TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher*



Kiribati Customs Officer Manikaa Teuatabo wonders what he did to deserve this assignment.

# BOOKS BY TIGHARS

***WINGS From Burma to the Himalayas* by John W. Gordon (TIGHAR #1223). Published by Global Press, Memphis, Tennessee, 1987. 265 pp. 10 pp. of photographs. \$17.95 (hard cover). Available directly from the author, R.D. 2, Middleburgh, NY 12122.**

Global Press specializes in historical memoirs, whether fact or fictionalized. *Wings* is a fictionalized account of flying the Hump in C-47s. The author served as a navigator in the 27th Troop Carrier Squadron in 1944 and 1945, and has written this book as a way of capturing both his experiences and the experiences of others: “Based on facts, some names disguised, others true, in some cases composite experiences of different individuals, some fictionalized incidents, this is the way it was” (from the introduction). Told mostly in dialogue, slangy and profane, this is war stories in their purest form, including bailout, injuries, bandits, rescue by missionaries, capture by Japanese troops, final rescue by Americans – all the John Wayne action one can hope for. Not a tool for the serious historical researcher, it does succeed at capturing some



TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

of the emotional impact of the war, the flying, the climate, and the foreign-ness on inexperienced young men from the States. This is also not a book for those easily offended by racial, ethnic, or nationalistic slurs; the tales are told using the authentic slang of wartime, the language reflecting the assumptions and indoctrinations the men shared.

An annoying fault this book shares with many aviation books is sloppy typesetting and proof-reading. Misspellings, mis-usages and a number of apostrophe and comma problems on the first several pages make it difficult to concentrate on the text if one is sensitive to such things. Considering the many very good spell-checkers and excellent typesetting programs currently available, there is no excuse for this. Get with it, aviation books!

***Ladybirds, The Untold Story of Women Pilots in America* by Henry M. Holden (TIGHAR #1118) with Captain Lori Griffith. Published by Black Hawk Publishing, Mt. Freedom, New Jersey, 1991. 203 pp. \$19.95 (paper). Available directly from the publisher, P.O. Box 24, Mt. Freedom, NJ 07970-0024. \$2.00 shipping & handling charge.**

*Ladybirds* begins with six separate introductory pieces (all short) describing how the book came to be written, and why the various people feel it was important to write on the subject – all of which more or less subverts the ultimate goal of an historical work, the purpose of which is (or should be) self-evident. Once that part is done, however (and one can always simply not read it), we are introduced to Blanche Stuart Scott, the first woman to pilot an airplane – if, in fact, the whole thing wasn’t an accident! Beginning with that day in 1910, women have participated in aviation to the greatest extent that personality, determination, talent, and downright stubbornness have made possible, and this book begins the process of telling the story beyond the ready-made romance of Earhart, Cochran, and Lindbergh (Anne Lindbergh, that is).

*Ladybirds* is divided into nine chapters, the headings of which are: The Early Years; Barnstorming; The Golden Age of Aviation; Women & Warbirds; Whirly-Girls; Military Aviation (with a subtitle for each service); Astronauts; Commercial Aviation; and Aviation Entrepreneurs. The reader will note from this that a great deal of attention is paid to modern, even current aviation. This is a book more about women in aviation today than yesterday, in jets and helicopters rather than biplanes and long white scarves. From ladies in Edwardian dresses and parasols to airline pilots in captain’s stripes, *Ladybirds* traces the connections and shows the progress over eight decades of flying for women. Each chapter features a number of individuals and a generous splash of photographs. While it is clearly beyond the scope of a 200 page book to go into any depth on any one person, this volume makes for an excellent overview. It is clearly written, footnoted, and indexed; it contains a reasonably extensive bibliography, and an appendix listing addresses and contacts for those interested in learning more about careers in aviation. This is a must-have book for any girl or woman who contemplates learning to fly or continuing to fly, if only to know that she is not alone.

Apostrophe, quotation mark, and comma problems continuing throughout make it clear that Mr. Holden should invest in a good book on typesetting and page layout, and in better software. See last paragraph of the review above ...

***Aircraft Wrecks in the Mountains and Deserts of California, 1908 – 1990* by Gary Patric Macha (TIGHAR #0411). Published by Aircraft Archeological Press, Huntington Beach, California, 1991. 149 pp. incl. 15 pp. of photographs. Not priced. Paper. Available directly from the publisher, 17111 Camelot Circle, Huntington Beach, CA 92649.**

This book is a simple listing, in chronological order by date of crash, of various wrecks in various regions of California. It includes both military and civilian wreck sites, and where known the primary cause of the crash, the casualties if any, and the current status of the wreckage. Mr. Macha has visited a good many of the wreck sites; some of his photographs are reproduced in a section in the back of the book. One page is devoted to guidelines for wreck-hunting and visiting; his suggestions are sensible and responsible. This book is an excellent resource, especially for anyone who flies a good deal over this territory and wonders if anyone else knows about that airplane down there.

Proofreading and punctuation problems are distracting. See final paragraphs of two reviews above.



# MIDNIGHT GHOST STORY



It has happened again. Everytime TIGHAR's marathon search for the lost French transatlantic flight, described by Lindbergh as having "vanished like a midnight ghost," reaches what seems to be a dead end (see "Drawing a L'Oiseau Blanc," *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 7, No. 4), the ghost materializes to beckon us on. This time the apparition appeared in the form of yet another witness to a television documentary which supposedly detailed the discovery and removal of the plane's 450 H.P. Lorraine-Dietrich engine from the Maine woods.

The spectre first spoke through one Robert Gunou who, in 1987, said he had seen the show at his home near Detroit, Michigan "sometime in the early seventies." We turned the broadcast industry upside down and shook it, but nothing fell out. Faulty memory, a hoax, a fluke, dead end. Then, in 1990, we were working on The Earhart Project with Dirk Ballendorf, Professor of Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam. It was over pizza at a little Italian place not far from the National Archives that the phantom next appeared.

"Yeah, I saw that show."

"Sure, Dirk."

"No, I'm serious. It was when I was still living here in D.C. Had to be sometime before '77 when I moved to Guam. I remember sitting right there in the apartment watching a show about how these guys had found an airplane wreck in the Maine woods and it turned out to be The White Bird of Nungesser and Coli. The point of the show was that it proved that they had crossed the Atlantic before Lindbergh, but that's about all I remember."

More research. Bill Alexander (TIGHAR #0403E) and Don Ward (TIGHAR #1134CE) tried every source they could think of and came up with zilch. Well, even a professional historian can have a distorted recollection. There's just no record of any such show. Wild goose chase. Forget it.

Time for another appearance by you-know-who. It's November 16, 1991 and World War One aviation devotees are in Washington for the opening of a new gallery at the National Air & Space Museum. At a dinner that evening Bill Nungesser (TIGHAR #0759CE) is holding forth, as he has been known to do from time to time, about TIGHAR's search for his illustrious ancestor's airplane. Sitting beside him is a man who, at the appropriate point in the narrative, chimes in with, "Yup, I remember that show. Must have been – oh – 1972." But in the heat of the moment,

Bill forgets to get the man's name. Who was that guy? (Cue theme music from *The Twilight Zone*.) Under threat of bodily harm from several TIGHAR researchers, Bill is now tracking down the identity of this latest witness.

## AND THE SEARCH GOES ON

Jay Veith (TIGHAR #0767CE) has undertaken to assemble all the known printed articles and documents on the Nungesser/Coli disappearance into a bibliography of sources. It's a daunting task but Jay has become as much at home among the research resources of Washington, D.C. as he is among the wild woodlands of Washington County, Maine. He could use a hand, though, especially from anyone who has access to computerized magazine index services (CompuServ, Dialog, BRS, etc.). If you'd like to help, he's in the TIGHAR Directory or just call TIGHAR headquarters.

And in yet another branch of Project Midnight Ghost, Oscar Blue (TIGHAR #0820) of Hancock, Maine is looking for anyone who served at the Army Air Field in Bangor, Maine during August of 1942. Oscar is running down a lead concerning an unidentified airplane wreck allegedly seen during an aerial search at that time. If you were there then he'd like to hear from you.

Project Midnight Ghost is TIGHAR's oldest, and in many ways most challenging investigation. Over the past seven years there have been 20 expeditions supported by countless hours of archival research in the U.S. and in France, and yet we still don't know what became of The White Bird. At times we've backed away from the project, frustrated and convinced that it's a dead end street, that whatever became of the two brave fliers is not only unknown but unknowable after all these years. But whenever our resolve has weakened, or circumstances have dictated that our attention turn to other projects or issues, TIGHAR members have taken up the torch and moved the investigation forward (helped by an occasional nudge from the ghost). Like Ahab and the white whale, TIGHAR seems destined to hunt the White Bird, and who are we to argue with destiny?



Charles Eugene  
Jules Marie  
Nungesser, pilot of  
*l'Oiseau Blanc*.

Photo courtesy Musée de l'Air



# STRICTLY BUSINESS

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

A mailing will be sent to all TIGHAR members soon containing details of the TIGHAR calendar for 1992 and (surprise, surprise) your opportunity to correct your listing for the 1992 TIGHAR Membership Directory. We're going to try something a little bit different this year. We get a lot of calls here in Delaware to the tune of, "Do you know of any TIGHAR members out my way who are a.) Certified Flight Instructors? b.) underwater search specialists? c.) plumbers? d.)" — well, you get the picture. And sometimes we can help, but sometimes we don't know if the CFI, search specialist, or plumber would just as soon be left alone. So — beginning with the 1992 Directory, if you would like to have your business card in a special section of the Directory as an ad, we will be accepting cards until January 20, 1992 for that purpose. Please! cards only! No art copy or unusual sizes (standard size is roughly 3 1/2 x 2 inches). The charge will be \$25.00, and will include a copy of the Directory. If you have sent us your card in the past, please don't assume we can find it — send a new one. This is intended to be a convenience for those of our members who would like to keep it all in the family. We'll try it for a year and see how it works out. Watch for the mailing of the calendar and Directory listing preference sheet.



**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 co-operation 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, nor does it engage in the restoration or buying and selling of artifacts. The foundation devotes its resources to the saving of endangered historic aircraft wherever they may be found, and to the education of the international public in the need to preserve the relics of the history of flight.

**TIGHAR Tracks**, published six 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, Fax (302) 994-7945.

## MEMBERSHIP FORM

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

\$35 for a one year membership

\$60 for a two year membership

\$125 for a five year membership

\$1,000 for a life membership

Please send me —

*TIGHAR Tracks six times a year, and a membership patch and decals  
Invitations to participate in expeditions, courses, seminars, and Gatherings  
Opportunities to subscribe to special internal TIGHAR project publications  
Opportunities to do research, interviews, and reports for aviation historical projects*

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Please return this form with your membership dues in U.S. funds only, 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.

