



EVIDENCE, CONCLUSIONS, AND EXPECTATIONS



The following is a summary excerpted
from *The Earhart Project, Sixth Edition*.

A realistic assessment of the known facts shows that the loss of Lockheed NR16020 conforms to a general pattern established in countless other (and no less tragic) aviation losses before and since and is, in that regard, unremarkable. Nonetheless, the disappearance of the Earhart World Flight has, through endless sensationalization, entered the realm of folklore and any attempt to establish what really occurred must confront barriers of credibility thrown up by more than half a century of speculation. The only weapon against that formidable obstruction is a rigid adherence to accepted academic standards. Using those criteria TIGHAR has established as unwarranted the supposition that the flight ended with fuel exhaustion and a crash at sea. Likewise, abundant documentary evidence leaves little doubt that the allegations of clandestine government involvement or Japanese culpability are groundless.

To sort out what really did happen requires that we accept as fact only that information which meets the most rigorous criteria for credibility. We must disregard all anecdotal and circumstantial evidence (even, or indeed especially, that which appears to support our own hypothesis) and restrict our assessment to the scant data that meet the test. From the panoply of purported evidence assembled over the years, only four sources of fact qualify for this distinction.

1. USCG *Itasca* Radio Log #2 entry for 08:44 on 2 July 1937. Record of Earhart's last inflight transmission heard by the Coast Guard.
Significance: Establishes Earhart's final course of action to be one which would logically bring her to Nikumaroro.
2. Pan American Airways System Memorandum dated July 10, 1937. Record of post-loss signals received and bearings taken by stations at Oahu, Midway and Wake.
Significance: Establishes the presence of an active transmitter in the vicinity of Nikumaroro from July 2 to July 5, 1937.
3. Weekly Newsletter – Aircraft Search for Earhart Plane, dated 16 July 1937. Description of aerial search of Nikumaroro by aircraft from U.S.S. *Colorado* on July 9, 1937.
Significance: Establishes the presence of unexplained human activity on Nikumaroro one week after the Earhart disappearance.
4. TIGHAR Artifact 2-1 recovered from Nikumaroro on October 6, 1989. Part of a Navigator's Bookcase, Consolidated Aircraft Corp. Part Number 28F 4023.
Significance: Establishes the presence on Nikumaroro of an airplane component consistent with the Earhart aircraft.

This is not a great deal of information but it does, as one would expect of legitimate evidence, provide a clear, if still incomplete, picture of what transpired in the central Pacific in July of 1937. The sequence of events that is indicated by the evidence conforms to aeronautical navigational procedures conventional within the context of the times and is specifically preceded in Earhart's own experience. The

navigational emergency which precipitated the landing at a destination other than that intended was caused by a failure in Earhart's and Noonan's weakest area of expertise – radio. Faced with that failure, and that emergency, the crew appears to have responded rationally and prudently with a course of action that brought the flight to a safe conclusion. In the final analysis, what went wrong was that nobody found them. And yet, the fact that the U.S. Navy's search for the lost flight was ineffectual cannot be laid to any lack of commitment or desire on the part of the searchers. The official records make clear that a best effort was put forward by all involved and if, with the luxury of unrestricted time and access to worldwide resources, we can see in those records vital clues that were invisible to those who wrote them, we must remember that while we are engaged in an historical investigation, they were racing the clock to carry out a rescue.

The overall picture of what was intended, and of what went wrong, is now clear and the issue of where and how the flight ended would appear, in an academic sense, to be adequately resolved. It would, however, be folly to suppose that fact will replace folklore in the public consciousness without dramatic, intuitive proof that Earhart and Noonan landed and perished at Nikumaroro. Fortunately, there is every reason to believe that such proof is extant and discoverable at the site. The anticipated physical proof can be divided into three categories.

THE AIRCRAFT

The Lockheed can be expected to lie in the deep water immediately adjacent to the atoll. Its distance from the fringing reef, and therefore its depth, will depend entirely upon how long it floated and drifted before sinking. From the standpoint of preservation it is to be hoped that it is below 500 feet. There the effects of corrosion and coral encrustation should be minimal and the aircraft structure can be expected to be much as it was when it arrived there in 1937. A realistic picture might be that of an airplane with a somewhat crumpled nose

*Grave on
Niku-
maroro
discovered
by 1989
TIGHAR
expedition.*



*TIGHAR
Photo by
John Clauss.*

(from impact with the bottom) and considerable skin damage to its under-surfaces, wings and empennage from being washed off the reef. Damage to the interior could be severe due to the breaking free of fuel tanks which would pile up in the aft fuselage, then crush from water pressure as the airplane sank. Any organic material (cloth headliner, leather seats, etc.) will almost certainly be long since devoured by various marine organisms but the aluminum airframe, the cockpit glass and cabin windows (if not shattered earlier), instruments and radios, the rubber tires, the engines and propellers should be essentially intact. All of the metal will, however, be impregnated with chlorides from the seawater and highly unstable if disturbed without proper preservation materials and procedures being applied immediately upon recovery. It is important to remember that the recovery of any artifacts from Nikumaroro or its surrounding waters is conditional upon the approval of the government of the Republic of Kiribati which exercises ownership control over them.

ARTIFACTS ONSHORE

Anecdotal accounts of an unexplained “old campsite” on the eastern beachfront and documentary evidence of an unexplained human presence in the same area immediately following the Earhart disappearance indicate a high probability for the discovery on the island of further artifacts associated with the Earhart flight. The navigator’s bookcase found in the abandoned village in 1989 exhibits surprisingly little corrosion (as did aluminum objects in the debris of the island’s 1944 USCG Loran station) giving reason to expect that other aluminum artifacts associated with Earhart and Noonan still survive in relatively good condition. Ferrous objects fare much worse in the island environment and can be expected to be heavily rusted and in poor condition. Possible opportunities for positive identification of Earhart/Noonan artifacts include specifically identifiable items catalogued in the inventory of the aircraft done following the March 20, 1937 crash at Luke Field., such as:

- Bausch & Lomb field glasses, 6X30, serial no. 221939
- One quart fire extinguisher, Pyrene, serial no. Q-990198
- One and one half quart fire extinguisher, Pyrene, serial no. 116610
- Kodak Duo 6-20 camera, lens no. 865715, shutter housing no. 5116031
- Bone handle, double blade jackknife, no. 22309
- High pressure hand pump, serial no. 799

Also known to be aboard the aircraft in March of '37 was a Pioneer bubble octant borrowed from the U.S. Navy, serial no. 12-36. Other unique objects, such as the 149 gallon fuel tank possibly used as a water collection device, may be positively identifiable by comparison with photographs.

HUMAN REMAINS

Anecdotal accounts indicate that the skeletal remains of Earhart, Noonan, or both may have been discovered by Gilbertese laborers in the early days of the island’s colonial period. From what is known of Gilbertese tradition it is virtually certain that if that happened, the bones were buried and the grave marked in the customary fashion (an outline of coral slabs – see photo at left). Such a site was found by TIGHAR in 1989 in a location that does not seem consistent with the burial of a colonist. During the 1991 Expedition, the grave will be examined. Identification of Earhart’s or Noonan’s remains should not be difficult given the state of the art of forensic pathology. If identification is made disposition will, of course, be at the discretion of next of kin.

