

THE EARHART PROJECT



NEW EVIDENCE

On the eve of the expedition's departure, new evidence continues to come in. Late developments include:

- **Testimony obtained by Lou Schoonbrood (TIGHAR #1198) of The Netherlands who interviewed Gerson Van Messel, formerly a pilot with KNILM (Dutch East Indies Airlines).**

Captain Van Messel was at Andir Airport, Bandoeng, Java when Earhart and Noonan were there in late June 1937. AE and Fred visited him at his home there and he discussed the Electra's navigation station with Noonan. He remembers that Fred told him that he had recently moved the storage facility for his maps and books because "the original storeplace was in his way." TIGHAR had already determined that the navigator's bookcase found on Nikumaroro in 1989 shows signs of having been removed from its original mounting and reinstalled in a temporary fashion.

- **Corroboration of accounts that bones were found by the first settlers on Nikumaroro in 1938.**

Bauro Tikana, formerly clerk and interpreter to the British magistrate on the island in 1940, reports that he was told by laborers that they had found bones on the southeast end of the atoll when they first arrived in 1938. TIGHAR had long known of a similar tale related by a now deceased Coast Guardsman who was on the island in 1946 (see "Bones" in *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 6 No. 1), but that story contained many inaccuracies and had to be considered suspect. This recent corroboration by a living witness, however, lends the basic account much more credibility and indicates, in a general sense, where on the island the discovery was made.

- **Recognition of the possible significance of a grave found by the 1989 TIGHAR expedition.**

Tikana's account of bones being found at the southeast end of the atoll prompted a review of the various island features cataloged by the 1989 expedition. It happens that a small and

isolated grave was found and photographed on that end of the island on October 6, 1989 but was presumed, at the time, to be that of a Gilbertese child. In the light of Tikana's information, the grave seemed oddly distant from the village two miles away. Anthropologists familiar with Gilbertese burial practices agree that it appears unlikely that the grave is that of an island resident and is probably that of an *I-Matang* (EE-matahng), a white outsider. The grave's small size (about 1 m by .5 m) could, of course, be due to the burial of bones rather than a body. The 1991 expedition will examine the grave more closely and take appropriate measures based upon the results.

- **Corroborating documentation from U.S. Naval Intelligence files which indicates an unexplained human presence on Nikumaroro's eastern beachfront immediately following the Earhart disappearance.**

A photograph taken during the U.S. Navy's aerial search of the island on July 9, 1937 (one week after Earhart's disappearance) was found at the National Archives on July 15, 1991.



U.S. Navy photo, National Archives

Recently discovered photograph of Gardner Island taken on July 9, 1937 during the U.S. Navy's search for Amelia Earhart.

It confirms several suspicions TIGHAR has had about that operation: that the tide was high at the time of the search flight thereby masking the fact that the reef-flat provided an inviting landing area when dry at low tide; that the search was conducted from a relatively high altitude (the photo appears to have been taken from about 1,000 feet) due to concern over possible bird strikes; and that the section of the island considered most interesting by the searchers, and possibly the place where they saw the "signs of recent habitation" described in the official report, is precisely the section of beach where U.S. Coast Guardsmen saw an abandoned campsite in 1944.

- **Confirmation that a November 1939 U.S. Navy survey of Gardner Island by a team from the U.S.S. *Bushnell* did not survey the ocean beachfront on the southeast end.**

Critics of TIGHAR's hypothesis have cited the *Bushnell* survey as proof that there was no sign of Earhart or Noonan on the island a scant two years after their disappearance. However, the map generated by that survey was recently found by TIGHAR researchers at the

National Archives. The surveyors' notations show very clearly, if ironically, that the one neglected section of beachfront, the one place where no one bothered to go, is the very area where other evidence places the Earhart/ Noonan campsite. That evidence was not available to TIGHAR at the time of the 1989 expedition and, as in 1939, that particular beachfront received little or no attention. Needless to say, that will not be the case on this expedition.

