

Lost And Found

One of the great areas of contention among Earhart researchers has always been what went on in Lae, New Guinea between Earhart and Noonan's arrival there on June 29 and their departure for Howland Island on July 2. Why the delay? What preparations were made for the hazardous Howland leg? How much fuel was aboard when they left? The only reliable report has always been an all-too-brief letter written August 28, 1937 by James A. Collopy, District Superintendent for Civil Aviation at Lae. The closing sentence in that letter states, "Mr. Chater advised me that he forwarded a comprehensive report dealing with the aircraft's stay at Lae, work carried-out, radio messages received, etc., to Mr. Putnam."

Eric H. Chater was the General Manager for Guinea Airways at Lae. The airline operated Lockheed Electras similar to Earhart's and their maintenance people assisted Amelia and Fred with preparations for the flight. Chater's "comprehensive report" would settle the questions once and for all, except the report disappeared. It didn't go to the Purdue archives with Putnam's papers and it has never turned up in U.S. government records nor among the various other collections of Ameliana (new word) in private hands. Eric Chater was killed when he walked into a propeller four months after he wrote the report. The Chater Report was lost.

Now it has been found. Soon after TIGHAR's return from the Pacific, Hugh Leggatt, Manager of Corporate Communications for Placer Dome, Inc. in Vancouver,



British Columbia called to say that he had come across an interesting document relating to Amelia Earhart in the company's old files. His description of the document made it clear that what he had was the lost Chater Report and he offered to send TIGHAR one of the two "flimsies" which accompanied the original report, and photocopies of the various telegrams and letters which document its transmittal.

The odyssey of the report goes like this: Following the failed search for Earhart, W.T. Miller of the U.S. Bureau of Air Commerce wanted to find out what had happened in Lae. He knew that his friend Frank Griffin of the Canadian gold mining firm Placer Development had connections in New Guinea where the company had a large operation so he asked Griffin to help him get information. Griffin was an old friend of Eric Chater of Guinea Airways so he asked Chater to prepare a report for the U. S. government. Chater sent his eight page report, quite naturally, to his friend Griffin who forwarded a copy to Miller at the Bureau of Air Commerce in Washington. What became of Miller's copy is still a mystery, but the original and two flimsies remained in the Placer company's files until recently found by Mr. Leggatt. Following TIGHAR's announcement that the Chater letter had been discovered, author Fred Goerner told an Associated Press reporter that "he has had a copy of the report for 30 years" and was quoted as saying, "The Chater report has been around forever. Somebody finally sent [TIGHAR] a copy of it after all these years." Yet the Chater letter does not appear as a source or as information, in any Earhart book or article TIGHAR has seen, including Goerner's own book *The Search For Amelia Earhart* published in 1966.

The report itself confirms that the delay in Lae was caused entirely by difficulties in getting an accurate time check for Noonan's chronometers. It describes a test flight AE made on July 1 in which she could not get the Radio Direction Finder to work and assumed the problem was her proximity to the ground station. And the report settles forever the question about fuel. There were 1100 U.S. gallons of fuel aboard the aircraft when it departed for Howland. Also, Earhart left without waiting for the current weather report. Although it was sent to her by radio later, there is no confirmation that she received it. All in all, the report describes a series of events and decisions which suggest that Amelia Earhart died of "get-home-itis" – a malady that has always killed impatient pilots.