



LOOKING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

The water slapping the short, sharp Gardner shoreline is as warm as your bath and as blue as your baby's eyes. At low tide the smoothest coral in the world is exposed for 200 yards. From the air it looks as if you could dry your nets there ... or, alas, land your plane. And in the warm, blue water slapping the Gardner shore ... Amelia Earhart's airplane ... lies in a crust of shells. ... Miss Earhart crashed on the coral trap of the Gardner beach and crawled into the bush and died.

A familiar theory, to say the least. What's surprising is that this description of Earhart's fate comes from a *San Diego Tribune* article published July 21, 1960 and is based upon different information than the documentation which led TIGHAR to develop the same hypothesis. That summer of 1960, the California news media were buzzing with "new evidence" that Amelia Earhart had died on Saipan, a prisoner of the Japanese. A retired Coast Guardsman in San Diego was sure they were wrong. Floyd Kilts told a reporter that in 1946 he was dismantling the Loran station at Gardner when one of the Gilbertese colonists told him a bizarre tale of a woman's skeleton with American shoes found by the first laborers brought to the island to clear underbrush for coconut planting late in 1938.

TIGHAR learned of the story in 1989 (by which time Kilts was long dead) and we've been trying to figure out how much of it might be true ever since (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 6 No. 1, March 1990, "Bones," p. 6). In 1991, our discovery of "American shoes" on the island in an area which had been cleared early in the island's colonial period prompted a closer examination of the anecdote. According to Kilts, the skeleton was found "in the brush about five feet from the shoreline." Where could that be? Certainly not on the atoll's barren oceanfront shore. Only along the lagoon shore does the underbrush come down close to the waterline and it was, in fact, close to just such a spot that TIGHAR found fragments of what had once been an American woman's blucher-style oxford, size eight or nine, with brass eyelets and a replaced heel. AE was wearing just such shoes when she disappeared.

In January of 1992 we learned that this spot on the lagoon shore was the place where, in October of 1937, British Colonial Service officer Eric Bevington had noted "signs of previous habitation" which, he said, "looked like someone had bivouacked there for the night."

Heads Will Roll

One technique used in examining old stories is to focus on odd details. Because everybody wants to be believed, anecdotes tend to evolve so as to sound more credible. Elements which don't seem to make sense but remain part of the story may have survived because they are true. Kilts said that "farther down the beach he [the brush clearer] found a man's skull, but nothing else." Why just a skull?

And what became of the rest of the skeleton?

We recently came across a possible explanation:

"Because one of the [body's] heaviest parts is supported by one of the most fragile, when a body disarticulates, the head will often fall off the neck and go its separate way. Sometimes, when the remains are at the top of an incline ... it travels so far that it is the only part to be recovered." (*Bones—A Forensic Detective's Casebook*, Ubelaker & Scammell; Harper Collins Publishers, New York 1992, p. 145). If we say that Noonan died in the shade near the lagoon shore lying on his back with his head propped up on something, it is not difficult to explain how his skull could end up down near the waterline while the rest of the skeleton remained out of sight up in the bushes (the suspected area is just at the edge of the old coconut planting). If that's what happened, some of the larger bones could still be there.

To pursue this line of thinking a bit further, it would seem that Bevington's visit to the site on October 14, 1937 occurred at a time when the bodies did not reveal their presence by smell but before the skull had rolled down onto the beach. Given Nikumaro's aggressive ecosystem this would seem to indicate that Earhart and Noonan survived on the island for a matter of weeks, but not months, before succumbing. The alternative, of course, might be that they were not yet dead but just somewhere else on the island when Bevington visited their campsite.

This kind of exercise is not merely idle speculation. By thinking through what makes sense and what doesn't in the light of known experience we stand a better chance of correctly focusing our search when we return to the island.



Photo courtesy National Archives.

A group of dual-interest TIGHARs has set up a ham radio group to discuss the Earhart Project and Earhartia generally. They come up on the 20 meter band on 14.290 at 1600 EDT (2000 UTC) every day, and would welcome any TIGHARs who care to tune in. Among the member participants are Tom Gannon, #0539 (WA4HHJ) and Lynn Wilke, #1131 (WA2DAC). Also in the loop: Herm Stevens, retired Lockheed structural engineer and shop foreman (KA3ZSO).

