

A View To the Sea

I consulted several things in my situation, which I found would be proper for me.

First, health and fresh water...

Secondly, shelter from the heat of the sun.

Thirdly, security from ravenous creatures...

Fourthly, a view to the sea, that if God sent any ship in sight I might not lose any advantage of my deliverance...

—Robinson Crusoe, *His Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*
D. Defoe, 1719



Continuing research into an unnatural-appearing area visible in early aerial photography of Nikumaroro (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 11 No. 3, “The Gilligan Hypothesis”) has prompted further speculation about its cause and possible significance. Whether this highly uncharacteristic break in the island’s beachfront vegetation is associated with the Earhart disappearance is still an open question. That the area (long since grown back to dense bush) merits detailed on-the-ground examination when TIGHAR returns to the island in September seems obvious. In the meantime, there are some observations which can be made through comparison of the four photographic images and their correlation to available historical and environmental data.

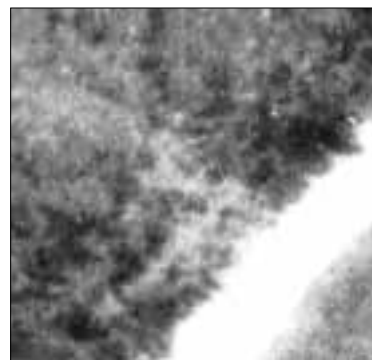


July 9, 1937

This is a detail from a photo taken at about 08:30 in the morning, one week to the day after Earhart’s *Electra* disappeared. The picture, shot from one of three float-planes launched from the

battleship U.S.S. *Colorado*, is the earliest known aerial photo of the island. Although the quality of the image is not good, the opening in the beachfront vegetation is clearly visible. Historical records show that the region is receiving normal rainfall during this period and the island’s foliage is green and lush.

The next time the island was photographed from the air was fifteen months later when a New Zealand survey team arrived to assess the island’s suitability as a refueling stop for transpacific air commerce (“not suitable” was the verdict). In this enhanced detail, the opening in the beachfront vegetation is more pronounced than it was

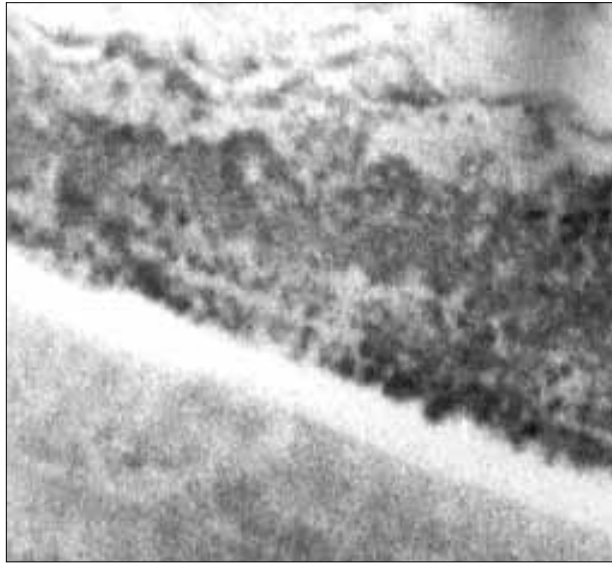


December 1, 1938

in 1937, possibly because the region had been experiencing a severe drought for the past year. It is apparent that the bare areas are oriented along straight

lines—a strong indicator of human rather than natural causation. At the time this photo was taken the island had been uninhabited since 1892.

The first overhead mapping photos of the island were taken by the U.S. Navy as part of a survey of the entire Phoenix Group. The detail below appears to show some recovery to the area, which



April 30, 1939

makes sense given that the drought broke in January and the region had once again been experiencing normal rainfall. Oddly, however, there now seems to be a plume of discoloration on the reef-flat which appears to

emanate from the beach directly in front of the open area and trail off to the southeastward. At this time there were roughly two dozen Gilbertese settlers on the island clearing land for a village three miles from this spot.

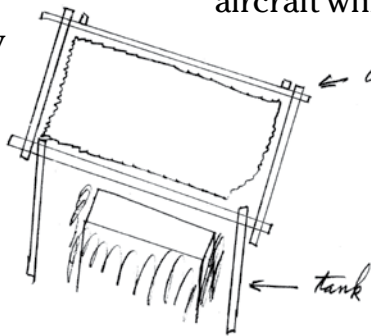
The latest view we have of this feature (below) is also the best. As tensions in the Pacific rose, the U.S. Navy started to gather information about various islands. As part of that process, at least four PBYS of VP-22 visited Gardner and took a number of low altitude oblique photographs. This is a detail from one of those photos and, although there is no indication that the Navy thought this feature was interesting, we find it rather intriguing. In the two years since the last photo, there appears to have been a considerable deterioration in the vegetation, despite the fact that the region's rainfall had been normal and the rest of the island looks healthy. Not only has the clearing grown, but we can now see individual features which differ in appearance from the bushes and seem to be more characteristic of structures, as if coverings of some kind have been erected on poles to provide shade. The discoloration of the reef-flat seen in the 1939 photo is still apparent. At the time this photo was taken, about 57 Gilbertese were living at the other end of the island.

June 20, 1941



RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

At this time, all we can say with certainty is that there was, for several years, an opening in Nikumaroro's beachfront vegetation which exhibited features characteristic of Astern sketch human activity and that this was present well before any documented settlement of the island. Without a photo pre-dating July 1937 it is impossible to know whether the opening was there prior to Earhart's disappearance. However, if these are the "signs of recent



habitation" reported by Colorado's Senior Aviator; if one of the objects visible in the 1941 photo is the "water collection device" seen in 1944 by Coast Guardsman Richard Evans; if somewhere back in the bush is the aircraft which PBY pilot John Mims was told about in 1945; if the aircraft parts TIGHAR found in the abandoned village in 1989 and 1991 came from here; then the implications of these photographs with respect to the amount of time Earhart and Noonan may have survived on the island are staggering.