

CLUES AND CONCLUSIONS

Eight years and over a million dollars of research have presented us with a complex body of evidence worthy of a Sherlock Holmes or an Hercule Poirot. Our abilities, sadly, are not the equal of those worthies nor is our investigation carried out in the comfortable realm of fiction. History is a far harsher arena where only solid research and sound logic produce happy endings.

It appears that the residents of the village on Nikumaroro had access to Amelia Earhart's aircraft and removed pieces of it for their own use. The entirely independent discovery of what appears to be the remains of one of Earhart's shoes on another part of the island strongly suggests that the Lockheed parts were not imported by the settlers but arrived on the island with the shoe. Unlike the B-24 parts, none of the artifacts attributable to the Lockheed seem to have been cut from major structural members, but are, rather pieces of easily removable components. This is also true in the case of the only known anecdote describing the presence of an aircraft on the island. In 1944 or '45, Navy pilot John Mims saw an aircraft control cable being used as a heavy-duty fishing line leader. Upon inquiring, he was told by an islander that when the first settlers arrived there had been an airplane there.

The scarcity of Lockheed pieces in the village implies a minimal rather than wholesale salvage of the aircraft. Further-

more, the apparent origin of the section of aluminum skin (see page 16) indicates that, at the time of its removal, the aircraft was either standing on its landing gear or lying on its back (otherwise, the protruding flap of skin would be crushed). That the airplane would be found intact and on its wheels on Nikumaroro was predicted in a message received by the original searchers on July 5, 1937. Coast Guard Headquarters in San Francisco advised:

OPINION OF TECHNICAL AIDS HEAR [sic] THAT EARHART PLANE WILL BE FOUND ON ORIGINAL LINE OF POSITION WHICH INDICATED POSITION THROUGH HOWLAND ISLAND AND PHEONIX [sic] GROUP. RADIO TECHNICIANS FAMILIAR WITH RADIO EQUIPMENT ON PLANE ALL STATE DEFINITELY THAT PLANE RADIO COULD NOT FUNCTION NOW IF IN WATER AND ONLY IF PLANE WAS ON LAND AND ABLE TO OPERATE RIGHT MOTOR [equipped with a generator] FOR POWER. . .

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A relatively successful landing on Nikumaroro is also consistent with well-established island folklore describing the discovery of the bones of a white woman and man by the first settlers in 1938 (see page 32). The credibility of that account is, in turn, bolstered by TIGHAR's recovery of what appears to be one of the shoes mentioned in the story (see page 25). Neither

the bone story nor the location of the shoe fragments is associated with aircraft debris. The available evidence, therefore, argues for an arrival which permits the occupants to exit the aircraft.

The physical evidence found on the island suggests that the aircraft landed successfully somewhere on Nikumaroro; that Earhart and Noonan perished near where the shoe fragments were found; that their bones were found by later settlers; and that the airplane itself was separately discovered and, to some extent, salvaged for useful material. Logically then, the bones and the rest of the airplane should still be there.

If that conclusion is correct, it must also be true that the airplane's location has been such as to elude discovery by the several formal surveys and many casual explorations of individuals who would have surely recognized its significance. Some areas of the island are overgrown with such dense vegetation that it seems marginally possible that an object the size of a Lockheed 10 might have remained undiscovered for all these years. A more likely hypothesis may be that the aircraft was in a relatively accessible location until after the first pieces were removed, and then moved, or was moved, to an inaccessible one. If we discount the possibility that the airplane was removed by some human agency without the knowledge of the locals (seemingly a safe assumption), we're left with natural forces (wind and water) which could remove it either seaward and over the edge of the fringing reef, or into the central lagoon. Virtually all of the natural force acting upon the atoll, from whatever direction, results in movement toward the lagoon, so it is difficult to see the ocean as a likely repository for the aircraft. By the same token, an aircraft washed into the lagoon by storm action would have to be on a part of the island subject to overwash in such events. There is only one such place on Nikumaroro.

Aerial photos taken in 1938, 1939, and 1941 show that a wedge of land just east of the southern lagoon outlet (Bauareke Passage) was, in those years, subject to overwash from large westerly swells. Free of vegetation at that time, and comprised of a hard level pan of coral rubble, this wedge presented at least 1,200 feet of acceptable landing area facing toward the lagoon and directly into the prevailing easterly winds. At least in theory, a Lockheed 10 could be successfully landed in this location, ending up not far from the lagoon shore. Taxiing the airplane into the

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shade of the bordering Buka trees to get it out of the blistering tropical sun would be a logical next step but could have unwittingly defeated the Navy's brief, unexpected (by Earhart and Noonan) aerial search a week later. The lagoon shore in this area, cooled by the easterly trades, is among the most pleasant on the island and would be a logical site for an encampment. This is the area where Eric Bevington saw "signs of previous habitation" three months later, and where island tradition holds that the bones were found in 1938. Just inland from this area is where TIGHAR found the shoe fragments. An episode of large westerly swells, such as the one reported to have occurred in January 1939, could have washed the airplane into the lagoon and covered it with enough silt and sand to obscure it from view.

This is but one hypothetical scenario to explain the abundance of evidence which places the Earhart flight on Nikumaroro. There may be others, but it is clear that a conclusive search of the village, the bush, and the lagoon stands an excellent chance of making further discoveries which could answer the riddle of the Earhart disappearance once and for all.

