

Hell & High Water

Niku III was the expedition that couldn't happen, but we made it happen anyway, and for a while we wished we hadn't, but then we were awfully glad we did.

Making It Happen

In the spring of 1996, prospects for another major expedition to Nikumaroro looked promising. We had just concluded a short preliminary trip to the island (our first since 1991) which had turned up some interesting new artifacts—the plexiglas and the radio cables (see TIGHAR Tracks Vol.12, 2&3). Two project supporters had made pledges totalling nearly \$200,000 which gave us an excellent start toward putting together the estimated \$1,000,000 budget for a major operation in the fall of that year. For media coverage, the PBS science series NOVA had indicated a strong interest in doing a documentary about the expedition. The coming year, 1997, was to mark the 60th anniversary of Earhart's disappearance and the 100th of her birth. If there was ever a time to solve the mystery "Once And For All," this was it. Accordingly, we made a commitment to mount the long-awaited Niku III Expedition and began the always daunting task of assembling the logistics, the team, the technology, the media, and the funding.

The first problem that turned up was ship scheduling. No suitable vessel was available for our desired September/October time period. November looked like a possibility. Then NOVA decided that they would prefer that the expedition happen early in 1997. We were a bit concerned that this would put us into the Central Pacific's cyclone season, but the region around Nikumaroro rarely experiences storms, so we agreed to reschedule the trip. NOVA also insisted that we provide some way for them to get aerial views of the island. That meant equipping the expedition with an ultralight aircraft—a major expense and complication—but two team members came to the rescue with an offer to equip the expedition with an ultralight aircraft on floats. NOVA made it clear that they wouldn't pay a rights fee for the privilege of filming the expedition, but they indicated

a willingness to pay their share of the ship charter and to give TIGHAR a share in videotape sales of the documentary. They also wanted to cover the expedition live on their internet website. We weren't at all comfortable with that idea, but everyone agreed that such issues could be worked out in negotiations toward a mutually acceptable written contract.

Then both of our financial supporters backed out of their pledges. No hard feelings, but no money. Contributions from the TIGHAR membership made it possible for us to continue to look for major funding, but it ultimately turned out to be a fruitless search. Dozens of proposals to corporations met with the same response: no. However, getting product support (as opposed to cash) was relatively easy. A growing number of companies were pledging and providing technology and services, but without funding there could be no expedition. By mid-January the situation was desperate. Our credibility as an organization rested upon our promise to do this expedition, but there was no money to do it with. On top of that, after six months of work and assurances, there was still no contract with NOVA and negotiations were stalled on a number of issues.

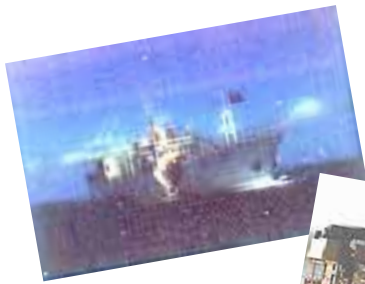
By reducing the projected stay at the island from one month to two weeks, and by changing to a smaller, more economical ship, we were able to get the expedition's cash budget down to \$200,000, but it may as well have been \$2 billion. Then, in a triumph of generosity over judgement, a member of TIGHAR's board of directors offered to loan the organization \$100,000. Suddenly we were halfway home, but where could we possibly find the other half? Earlier, ABC News had expressed interest in the project but we had explained that we were trying to conclude a contract with NOVA. Now,

with the situation critical and those negotiations deadlocked, we notified NOVA that we were opening the door to other possible offers. ABC stepped forward and, with the Discovery Channel, offered to complete our expedition budget and produce two one-hour documentaries, one to air on the network's Turning Point series, and the other to air as a Discovery special. A formal contract was quickly concluded, we breathed a huge sigh of relief, and preparations for departure moved into high gear.

Our high spirits were short-lived. NOVA and its parent WGBH filed a lawsuit against TIGHAR and against its Executive Director personally, alleging that there had been an implied contract. Damages of \$101,354 were sought. ABC was not named in the suit. Our dismay can be imagined, and the need to make arrangements to defend against these allegations was the last thing we needed on the eve of departure, but if the intent of the suit was to stop the expedition, it didn't work. On February 20, 1997 the Niku III team departed Los Angeles aboard an Air Pacific 747 bound nonstop for Fiji.

The Expedition

Practice makes, if not perfection, at least familiarity. TIGHAR first sailed out of Suva for Nikumaroro in 1989 and fully half of the twelve-person team on this trip were veterans of that initial expedition. For the fourth time the TIGHAR flag flew from the masthead of a ship bound for the far away Phoenix Group. As we left the harbor, we passed the rusting hulk of *Pacific Nomad*. Nine years ago, proud and fit, she had been our home for Niku I. As we slipped by, with our graying hair and our reading glasses, she whispered to us of time, and mortality, and the false god Glory.



Pacific Nomad in her glory days, 1989. TIGHAR photo by M. DeWitt

Pacific Nomad in Suva Harbour, 1997. TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher



Our ship this time out was *Nai'a* (pronounced "NIGH ya," meaning *dolphin* in Hawaiian), a graceful 110 foot motor sailer that normally makes her living as a live-



TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

aboard dive excursion vessel around the Fiji Islands. Able to support 18 passengers for an extended voyage, and with her towering sail providing added stability and enhanced fuel economy, she proved to be the ideal ship for our needs.

At 8 to 10 knots, the 1,000 mile passage to Nikumaroro took the usual five days, during which some team members studied up on technology, others debated search methodology, and a few laid seasick in their bunks and prayed for death. But Niku, like the dawn, always appears eventually and, one morning, it was there—a dark sliver that slowly spread across the horizon, turned green, and grew



Nai'a and friends. TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

a white line of surf along its base. The local dolphin delegation came out to surf the bow wave of their namesake as familiar landmarks became distinguishable along the shoreline.

As we approached the landing channel—a narrow, dynamite-blasted passage to the beach through the surrounding reef—we could see that we had a problem. Normally, the set of the sea swells at Nikumaroro is from the east, which puts the landing channel on the leeward or protected side of the island and makes for easy access to the shore. But these were not normal times. While we were en route, a tropical depression formed behind us, grew into a storm, and soon matured as a full-blown cyclone (as hurricanes are called in the South Pacific). The far away swirling disturbance was generating large swells that pounded Nikumaroro from the northwest and transformed the normally calm landing channel into a vicious, churning cauldron. For the next two weeks, just getting people and equipment on and off the island was to be



The plume of spray marks the entrance to the channel. This is the only way on and off the island. The launch, with a load of TIGHARs, is visible to the left of the breaking wave. TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher.

village, search and survey operations were hampered by torrential downpours that threatened expensive equipment and made life miserable for the soaked searchers. Still, over one hundred separate artifacts including a number of aircraft-related objects, were mapped and recovered for later analysis.

As the time approached for us to leave the island, Tropical Cyclone Gavin moved farther away allowing the seas to subside just enough for us to demobilize and get our gear and people back aboard *Nai'a*.

But then, to our dismay, another tropical depression formed between us and Fiji and quickly grew to become Tropical Cyclone Hina. This was the "worst case scenario" everybody talks about—like finding a grizzly bear in the middle of the trail back to the cabin. Within four hours of departing Nikumaroro (a day earlier than originally planned),

had a daily near-death experience. Some planned operations to be scrapped entirely due to the high seas. The ultralight aircraft, obtained and transported at such trouble and expense, could not even be fully assembled, let alone flown. GPS (Global Positioning System) control of the archaeological work was defeated when the data-collecting base station on the beach had to be disassembled and moved to prevent it being washed away. Other operations were carried out through improvisation and determination. A remote-sensing EM (electromagnetic) survey of the



Kent Spading and Veryl Fenlason search the lagoon with magnetometry and EM technology. TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie.




Tom King and Lonnie Schorer lay out a grid using the Pentax Pulse Laser. TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

area where the remains of a woman's shoe were found in 1991 turned up indications of a possible unmarked grave, but excavation failed to reveal signs that the earth had ever been disturbed in that spot. However, the remains of a very old campfire were discovered, excavated and recovered very close to where the shoe parts had earlier been found. In the lagoon, an EM and magnetometer survey, supplemented with visual searching by divers, failed to turn up any indication of airplane debris in the covered area. However, only a small fraction of the three mile long lagoon could be examined in the time available. In the abandoned

we found ourselves in a white squall with driving rain and rising seas. Hour by hour the storm intensified. Wind speed became a matter of speculation when the anemometer was carried away. Sea heights eventually reached an estimated 40 feet, more than enough to capsize *Nai'a's* 30 foot beam had she been caught broadside. The ship had never before been asked to survive in such mountainous seas and all nonessential crew and passengers were confined to their cabins lest they fall (or be felled) on the wildly pitching deck.

With the storm continuing to build, the decision was made to abandon our course for Fiji and make for the sheltered waters of Funafuti Atoll in the island nation of Tuvalu. On the fourth day of our beleaguered return voyage, a battered but still buoyant *Nai'a* entered the atoll's spacious lagoon. During World War II the tiny island was a B-24 base and today Air Marshall Islands provides airline service to Fiji. It was hoped that we could still make our scheduled flight back to the U.S. and three team members took the last seats on the flight out that day. By late the next day the weather had improved

(cont. p. 8) 



Don

John

Veryl

Ric

Pat

The Team

(clockwise from top)

- John Clauss, TIGHAR #0142CE
Homewood, California
- Veryl Fenlason, TIGHAR #0053EC
St. Cloud, Minnesota
- Richard E. Gillespie, Executive Director, TIGHAR
Wilmington, Delaware
- Van Hunn, TIGHAR #1459EC
Ft. Worth, Texas
- Thomas F. King, Ph.D., SOPA, TIGHAR #0391EC
Silver Spring, Maryland
- Tommy L. Love, D.O., Col. USAF, TIGHAR #0457EC
Fairfield, California
- Gary F. Quigg, TIGHAR #1025EC
Crawfordsville, Indiana
- Carolyn J. Schorer, TIGHAR #1376EC
Burke, Virginia
- Kenton Spading, TIGHAR #1382CE
St. Paul, Minnesota
- Kristin Tague, TIGHAR #0905CE
Foster City, California
- Tonganibeia Tamoia, Senior Examining Officer,
Customs Division, Republic of Kiribati
- Patricia R. Thrasher, President, TIGHAR
Wilmington, Delaware
- H. Donald Widdoes, TIGHAR #1033ECB
Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania



Van



Tonga



Tom



Kris



Tommy



Kent

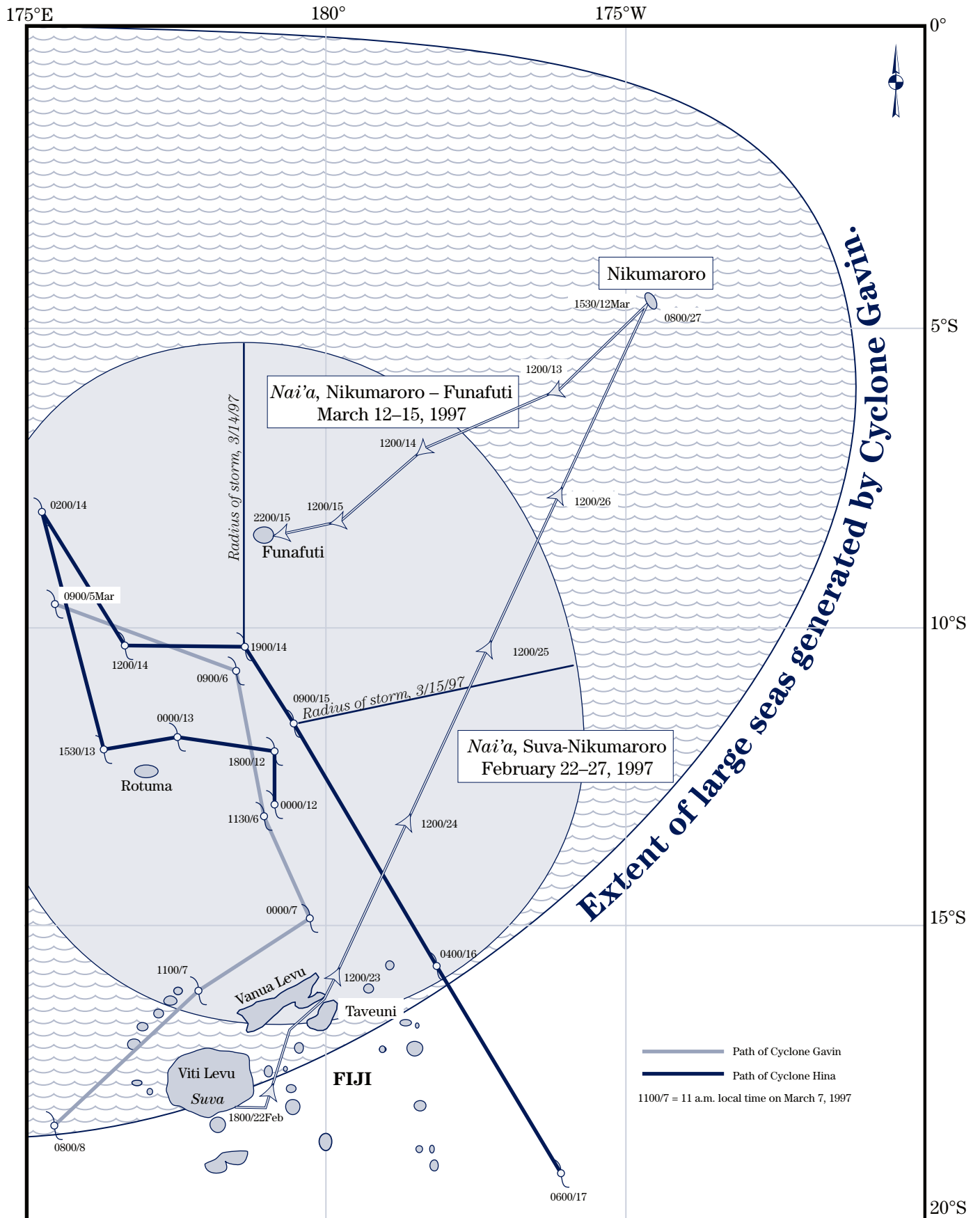


Gary



Lounie

The Storms






Into the storm. Photo courtesy John Claus.

enough for *Nai'a* to continue her voyage, but nine team members elected to stay behind on Funafuti and catch the following day's flight to Fiji. The flight did not come that day, or the next day, or the next. Air Marshall's entire fleet (both airplanes) was grounded by mechanical and crew availability problems for the next six days and the "Funafuti Nine" found themselves stranded on an island they never intended to visit in the first place. It seemed a frustrating end to a disappointing and often harrowing expedition, until the last day.

Some say it was the storm. Others contend that it was a change of heart by Nikumaroro's guardian spirit Nei Manganibuka. Still others say that perseverance simply pays off. Whatever the reason, beginning with the interviews that occurred that last day on Funafuti (see "I Saw Pieces Of An Airplane..." next page), TIGHAR's luck changed dramatically and the five months that have passed since the expedition's return have seen piece after piece of the Earhart puzzle suddenly fall into place. The new evidence that has surfaced since our return is providing a fresh picture of what really happened long ago on an island far away. Much of what was once speculation is now documented fact and the prospects for a "once and for all" solution to the Earhart enigma are very bright indeed. Even the NOVA suit appears to be on the brink of settlement. In June, a series of articles in the *Boston Globe* castigated NOVA/WGBH for its arrogance and poor business practices, includ-

ing a penchant for frivolous lawsuits. Ultimately, ABC offered to buy the footage NOVA shot of TIGHAR expedition preparations, in return for which NOVA has agreed to drop the suit and any allegation of wrongdoing by TIGHAR. As we go to press, the settlement documents await only their signature.

This expedition tested our resolve in many ways, and we met the test. Thanks to the unfailing support and encour-

agement of the TIGHAR membership we've come out on the other side of the storm with a new promise of ultimate success. There are still many questions to be answered on Nikumaroro. The world still wants a serial number, and that will come. For us, the questions now are not questions of whether or not, but questions of how, why and precisely where. As we approach the end of the puzzle, the pieces fall more and more quickly into place. This is the fun part. It was worth the effort. 



The Funafuti 9+1. Back row, L to R, Sam Painter (ABC cameraman), Kent Spading, Don Widdoes, Tommy Love, Kenny Kosar (ABC sound man), Howie Masters (ABC producer/director), Peter Cooper (a Kiwi stranded with the rest of us); front row, L to R, Van Hunn, Veryl Fenlason, Ric Gillespie. Photo courtesy Kent Spading.