

I saw pieces of an airplane...

By our sixth and last day of being stranded on Funafuti, we had interviewed (out of sheer boredom) virtually everyone on the island who might have anything of interest to say about the old days in the Central Pacific. We had heard some interesting stories about Funafuti's time as an American airbase during the war and had even tracked down some B-24 wreckage, but nothing we had learned was of much use. The manager of the island's hotel had been born on Nikumaroro in 1959 and was, she told us, considered to be a granddaughter of the island's guardian spirit Nei Manganibuka. Because she was but a toddler when the island was abandoned in 1963, she could tell us little of life there but she did have a friend, slightly older, who had also lived on Nikumaroro as a child and whose father had been the island's schoolmaster. Unfortunately the old man was, according to his family, now senile. "That is very strange," she said. "He wasn't senile last week." Kent Spading and Ric Gillespie asked if they might pay a call upon the gentleman. The following are Kent's edited notes of that visit.

The Participants

Kenton Spading (KS) and Richard Gillespie (RG), interviewers.

Risasi Finikaso (RF), Manager of the Funafuti Vaiaku Lagi Hotel.

Ms. Finikaso was born on Nikumaroro in 1959. She is currently a resident of Funafuti. TIGHAR members spoke to her at length about TIGHAR, Amelia Earhart and Nikumaroro prior to the interviews described below. These discussions included the theories regarding the disappearance of Amelia Earhart's aircraft and the anecdotes involving the discovery of male and female bones on Nikumaroro. She speaks English as a second language and was very articulate. She mentioned that her husband is a lawyer.



Pulekai Songivalu, Risasi Finikaso, Richard Gillespie, and Tapania Taiki. Photo courtesy Kent Spading.

Pulekai Songivalu (PS), former Head Schoolmaster on Nikumaroro

Mr. Songivalu appeared to be 70+ years old. He is currently a resident of Funafuti. He arrived on Nikumaroro sometime after WWII and stayed for 4 years. He speaks English as a second language. We were warned before meeting him that about three weeks before our arrival he had been afflicted with occasional bouts of senility. We were told that he

might repeat himself a lot. On the contrary, he spoke well, was articulate and did not repeat anything unless asked.

Tapania Taiki (TT), Pulekai's daughter

Ms. Taiki was born in 1954 and arrived on Nikumaroro in 1958 or 59. She left in the early 1960's. She is currently a resident of Funafuti. She speaks English as a second language.

The Interview

This is the March 22, 1997 interview with Pulekai Songivalu at his home. The interview took place in the main room of the house.

RG: When did you arrive at Nikumaroro?

PS: I arrived sometime after the war.

RG: How long were you there?

PS: I worked there for 4 years as the head schoolmaster and then I returned. [Note: implying that he returned to Funafuti] ...

RG: Did people on the island use metal from the war to make things?

PS: ?? [Unclear answer]

RG: Do you remember any stories from the early days of the colony?

PS: Yes, I remember the ship wreck only. I think it was called [long pause, thinking] The Richards or something like that. [Ed. note: the ship is the S. S. Norwich City.]

RG: Do you remember stories of Nei Man-ganibuka?

PS: No, the Gilbertese would know about that.

RG: Do you remember any stories about clearing the land in the early days of the colony?

PS: Yes, the old men would tell stories. They had no houses when they first arrived. There was lots of hard work and lots of sunshine. The sunshine could last as long as 6 months.

RG: Do you mean a drought?

PS: Yes, a drought.

RG: Did they have a hard time finding water?

PS: Yes.

RG: Did you hear any stories of bones being found when the land was being cleared?

PS: No.

RG: What about fishing lures? How do you make them?

PS: [At this point Ms. Finikaso had to translate. He did not seem to understand the word "lure".] You get white or black chicken feathers and you tie them to the hook.

RG: How would you make the hooks? Explain to me how you make a hook.

PS: We would make hooks called tepi (sp?) for catching tuna. We would bend a piece of iron into a shape which is different from the hooks you buy. They were shaped like this [curling his fingers into the shape of a hook]. [Note: It looked to me like the modern "weedless" hooks.]...

RG: Did people use canoes to go between islands? Did people travel from one island to another, like up to Hull Island?

PS: Oh, that would be a long ways. But, yes they might. They would usually go in groups of at least four canoes.

RG: Would they do that from Nikumaroro?

PS: Yes, maybe a Gilbertese would. They are better seamen and have big fast canoes.

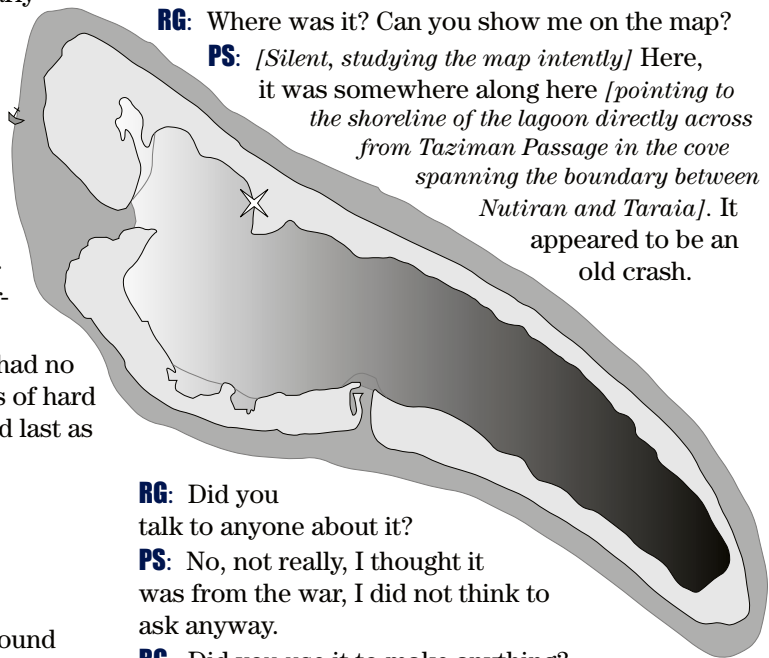
[At some point in here Ms. Finikaso got up and disappeared into the back room where I saw people standing earlier.]

RG: Have you heard of an airplane crash on Manra or Sydney Island?

PS: No, but I saw pieces of an airplane on the lagoon side [looking toward the 1943 map of Nikumaroro].

RG: Where was it? Can you show me on the map?

PS: [Silent, studying the map intently] Here, it was somewhere along here [pointing to the shoreline of the lagoon directly across from Taziman Passage in the cove spanning the boundary between Nutiran and Taraia]. It appeared to be an old crash.



RG: Did you talk to anyone about it?

PS: No, not really, I thought it was from the war, I did not think to ask anyway.

RG: Did you use it to make anything?

PS: Yes, they would use the metal to make plates and other things.

RG: Was the airplane near the lagoon?

PS: Yes. I think maybe it was a plane from Canton, I am not sure. I am trying to think of why it was there. I think the plane ran out of oil, or gas, maybe. They said the pilot was saved though. The people looked after him. I asked, "Where was the pilot taken?" They said he was taken by the Americans on a ship.

[Ed. note: there is no known record or rumor of an airplane crashing on Nikumaroro during World War II.]

RG: Did you ever visit Manra or Sydney Island?

PS: Yes, I went there to examine the school on a tour once.

RG: Have you heard of someone being buried far from the village on Nikumaroro?

PS: No. ...

RG: Did the people on the island use metal for cooking? How would they cook a fish?

PS: There are two ways to cook a fish. First you can bake it in an oven. Or, you can cook it on top of a piece of iron with a fire underneath. This is a very good way to cook a fish.

RG: Did you have much interaction with the local people?

PS: No, not too much.

At this point, Risasi reentered the room with Ms. Taiki. After introductions, Mr. Gillespie left Mr. Pulekai and me to talk while he engaged Ms. Taiki and Ms. Songivalu in conversation using the 1943 Nikumaroro map as a centerpiece. Ric and I had a conversation with Risasi after these interviews. She told us that, when we first arrived, Tapania was too shy to come into the main room of the house and meet us. No amount of persuading could change her mind. So Risasi asked her the following two questions:

RF: Have you ever heard of an airplane wreck on Nikumaroro?

TT: Yes.

RF: Have you ever heard of skeletons on Nikumaroro?

TT: Yes.

It was only after this exchange that she was able to convince her to talk to us. Risasi stated that these were the only two questions she asked Tapanai outside of our presence.

RG: When did you arrive on Nikumaroro? How old were you?

TT: I arrived there in 1958 or 59. I was 5 or 6 years old.

RG: Tell us what you saw on the reef.

TT: I saw a piece of airplane wing on the reef. I could see the ship wreck from there. It looked far away.

RF: I suppose it would look far away to a child.

RG: Show us where you saw it.

TT: *[Looking at the map]* It was along here somewhere. *[pointing to an area approximately halfway between Taziman Passage and the Norwich City along the reef]*

RG: What color did you say it was?

TT: *[pointing up at the exposed bottom of the dull, silver-colored corrugated steel roof on the house]* It was that color only much thicker. There were also a few other pieces of things laying around on the reef. It was not complete.

RG: What size was it?

TT: *[She seemed confused and not sure what to say]*

RG: Was it as big as this table? *[pointing to a table top approximately 4 wide by 9 feet long]*

TT: Yes *[she seemed unsure]*

RG: You also mentioned skeletons. Tell us about that.

TT: The older people said they saw the skeletons of a man and women, one each, the elders said "Do not go to where the plane is, there are ghosts there." They were trying to scare us to keep us away from there.

KS: Do you know others who have been to Nikumaroro?

TT: No.

RG: What about the European house?

TT: There was a European permanent house here. *[pointing to an area along the western shoreline of Nikumaroro approximately half way between Taziman Passage and the Norwich City.]* We would play with pieces of the airplane near there.

RG: Yes, we can see those structures in the old aerial photos right along that area.

Someone asked: Were the airplane and skeletons found together?

TT: No, the skeletons were there before the people arrived on the island.

RG: Had you heard of Amelia Earhart?

TT: No.

Note: At this point Ric told me that a man named Eti (sp?) at the hotel bar had told Risasi of an airplane wreck on Nikumaroro. I remembered seeing him also. He appeared to be between 30 and 40 years old.

TT, after an exchange of conversation: The kids would play with the pieces on the reef and near the European permanent house.

After a discussion of where airplane parts might end up on the island, Ms. Finikaso said, "When the people left the island they would likely have taken pieces of aluminum with them. When they left they took everything! They even took roof thatching with them. I clearly remember that. Anything of value was taken along."

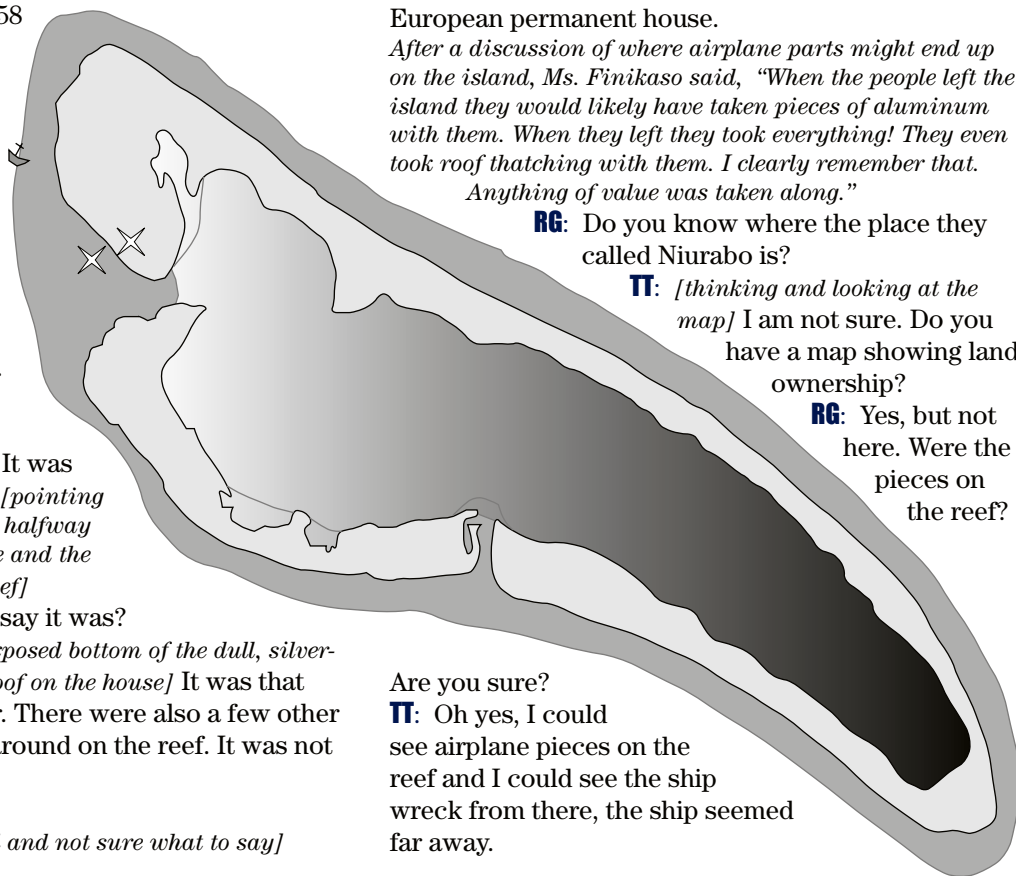
RG: Do you know where the place they called Niurabo is?

TT: *[thinking and looking at the map]* I am not sure. Do you have a map showing land ownership?

RG: Yes, but not here. Were the pieces on the reef?

Are you sure?

TT: Oh yes, I could see airplane pieces on the reef and I could see the ship wreck from there, the ship seemed far away.



RG: Did anyone say where the bones were?

TI: They never said where the bones were, but they were very clear....it was the skeleton of a man and a woman.

Ms. Finikaso and Ms. Taiki then started to debate how the islanders would have known the gender of the skeletons. Ms. Finikaso surmised that the island doctor would probably be able to recognize the difference.

At this point Ms. Taiki again related the story of the pieces of airplane being on the reef and on land in front of the European permanent house (where the New Zealand survey took place).

TI: Some white people came once in a government boat. They were taken in canoes to here (tracing a path with her finger from the village area across Tazi-man Passage along the shore toward the *Norwich City*) to take pictures of the airplane parts.

KS: What did they take the pictures with?

TI: A camera.

RG: What year were you born?

TI: 1954, I went to Nikumaroro at age 4 or 5. We left in 1961 or 62.



CORROBORATION

Prior to the interviews on Funafuti, the only account of a plane wreck on the island was from former PBY pilot John Mims (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol.11, No. 3 “Catch Of The Day”) who told of seeing an airplane control cable being used as heavy-duty fishing tackle during a visit to Nikumaroro in 1944 or ’45. The Gilbertese fishermen told him that the cable had come from a plane that been there when they first came to the island. When Mims asked where the plane was now, they just shrugged.

Now, for the first time, people who once lived on the island were telling us they had seen undisturbed aircraft wreckage in specific locations. Mr. Songivalu said he saw debris along the lagoon shore while his daughter, Ms. Taiki, recalled a piece of wing on the reef-flat and wreckage onshore near the main lagoon channel. These locations strongly suggest that the aircraft broke apart in the surf along the ocean reef and washed ashore in pieces. Anything that would float (seat cushions, fuel tanks, cabin skins with kapok insulation attached, etc.) might well end up along the lagoon shore directly opposite the channel. The stories made sense.

But, as we’ve said a hundred times, anecdotes are not evidence—they are merely folklore unless and until they lead to hard archival, photographic, or physical evidence. Without corroboration, the stories we heard on Funafuti are no more credible than are the tales told about the lady flier held prisoner on Saipan. We reasoned that if there was really airplane debris on the reef-flat in the late 1950s, it may have also been there in 1953 when detailed aerial mapping photos of the island were taken. We know that ferrous metal debris from the old shipwreck farther up the beach is scattered across the reef-flat in the area indicated by Ms. Taiki, but its rusty color is almost

identical to the reddish-brown of the coral. A debris field of aluminum wreckage should show up as small light spots distributed in a linear fashion. Any such anomalies would have to appear in at least two photos to insure that they weren’t flecks of dust or flaws in the developing process.

To find out if there was anything there we called on our old friend Jeff Glickman of Photek, Inc. of Hood River, Oregon. Photek’s state-of-the art digital imaging capabilities and Jeff’s forensic skills had already proved their worth in the Earhart investigation (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 11 No. 3 “The Earhart Electra, Part 2” and Vol. 12 No. 1 “The Niku III Preliminary Expedition”). A careful examination of the reef-flat in the indicated area revealed not only four objects which met the necessary qualifications for aluminum debris (light color, small size, linear orientation, appearing in two photos) but, in one photo, one of the light-colored objects was even exhibiting a specular reflection (the type of glint normally seen only from sunlight shining on metal).

Jeff next examined the shoreline for any sign of the airplane wreckage. No detailed photography was available of the lagoon shore where Mr. Songivalu reported seeing debris, but where Ms. Taiki said she saw wreckage on shore, a 1988 aerial photo taken by the Royal New Zealand Air Force revealed another specular reflection indicating the presence of shiny metal of a rounded, perhaps even capsular, shape. This portion of the island is known as Nutiran (pronounced NewZEEran) and was named after a New Zealand survey party that was camped there when the first Gilbertese settlers arrived. It is specifically because the area was closely examined in 1938 that TIGHAR has always considered it to be the least