

THE TARAWA FILE

The recent discovery of an obscure, formerly secret file in the Kiribati National Archives has come as a thunderbolt to TIGHAR's investigation of the Earhart disappearance. Labeled "Discovery of Human Remains on Gardner Island," the folder (List KNI 11/I, File 13/9/1) contains fifteen official telegrams and one letter which establish that, in 1940, bones and objects suspected at the time as being from the lost Earhart flight were found on Gardner Island. Knowledge of this event went all the way up to Sir Harry Luke, the senior British government official in the Pacific region. Incredibly, the matter was dropped on the basis of a dismissive and apparently casual identification of the remains as being those of an elderly Polynesian male. American authorities were apparently never notified.

For TIGHAR, the story begins with Floyd Kilts, a 68 year old retired Coast Guardsman who told an outrageous tale to a San Diego *Tribune* reporter in 1960. At the height of new allegations that Earhart had been a spy, Kilts came forward to say that the conspiracy buffs had it all wrong. He had been part of a work party sent to Gardner Island in 1946 to dismantle the wartime Loran radio station. While there he was told a story, through an interpreter, about an incident which had supposedly occurred when the atoll was first settled in 1938.

[A] native was walking along one end of the island. There in the brush about five feet from the shoreline he saw a skeleton. What attracted him to it were the shoes. Women's shoes, American kind. No native wears shoes. Couldn't if they wanted to—feet too spread out and flat. The shoes were size nine narrow. Beside the body was a cognac bottle with fresh water in it for drinking. The island doctor said the skeleton was that of a woman, and there were no native women on the island then. Farther down the beach he found a man's

skull, but nothing else. The magistrate was a young Irishman who got excited when he saw the bones. He thought of Amelia Earhart right away. He put the bones in a gunnysack and with the native doctor and three other natives in a 22 foot four-oared boat started for Suva 887 nautical miles away. The magistrate was anxious to get the news to the world. But on the way the Irishman came down with pneumonia. When only 24 hours out of Suva he died. The natives are superstitious as the devil and the next night after the young fellow died they threw the gunnysack full of bones overboard scared of the spirits. And that was that.

By the time we first heard the story in 1989, Kilts was long dead. Could there be any truth to it? A few parts tracked well with the island's known history—first settled in 1938, no women, a magistrate with an Irish name (Gallagher)—but other parts were clearly nonsense. Gallagher never tried to go to Fiji in a small boat and he made no mention of any bones in his detailed quarterly progress reports. He did die, but not at sea and not of pneumonia. And just where on the island were these bones supposedly found? Kilts says only "along one end of the island." Gallagher's clerk Bauro Tikana, now living in Tarawa, remembered something about bones being found on "the other end of the island," meaning not near the village. Dr. Teinamati Mereki, a former resident of Nikumaroro now living in the Solomon Islands, remembered hearing about the bones. He placed their discovery just east of the southern lagoon passage. This was the same area where we found pieces of a woman's shoe in 1991 and where we excavated and collected the remains of a very old campfire in March of this year. Was the shoe we found the mate to the one in Kilts' story? Had we found the place where the bones were found? Or was it all, as many warned, a fantasy built around unremarkable objects and wishful thinking?

and other British colonies throughout the region answer to the Western Pacific High Commission headquartered in Suva, Fiji.

Koata is the Native Magistrate and senior Gilbertese official on Gardner Island. Apparently he is returning to Tarawa for medical treatment.

Document #2

TELEGRAM.

From The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is. ,

To The Resident Commissioner, Ocean Island.

No 71

(Date) 23rd Sept., 1940.

Some months ago working party on Gardner discovered human skull - this was buried and I only recently heard about it. Thorough search has now produced more bones (including lower jaw) part of a shoe a bottle and a sextant box. It would appear that

- (a) Skeleton is possibly that of a woman,
- (b) Shoe was a womans and probably size 10,
- (c) Sextant box has two numbers on it
3500 (stencilled) and 1542 - sextant
being old fashioned and probably painted
over with black enamel.

Bones look more than four years old to me but there seems to be very slight chance that this may be remains of Amelia Earhardt. If United States authorities find that above evidence fits into general description, perhaps they could supply some dental information as many teeth are intact. Am holding latest finds for present but have not exhumed skull.

There is no local indication that this discovery is related to wreck of the "Norwich City".

Gallagher.

This message is sent the same day as the first message—September 23, 1940—but goes to Gallagher's immediate superior, the Resident Commissioner of the Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony at Ocean Island. Gallagher has only recently arrived on Gardner, having previously run the Phoenix Scheme from Sydney Island.



Photo courtesy Eric R. Bevington

Gerald B. Gallagher, O.I.C.,
Phoenix Scheme, in 1937.

Document #3

A week later the Administrative Officer in Tarawa says that Koata has handed over the bottle which he describes as a "benedictine" bottle. Benedictine is a specific product—a liqueur produced in Fecamp, France since 1510. Today Benedictine bottles have the name molded into the glass. If that was also the case in the past, it would explain the specific identification of the bottle. According to Eric Bevington, a Benedictine bottle was highly unusual in the Central Pacific of 1940.

TELEGRAM.

From The Administrative Officer, C.G.I.D., Tarawa Is.

To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.

No _____

(Date) 30th Sept., 1940.

Your telegram 23rd September. Koata has handed to me one benedictine bottle.

A.O.C.G.I.D.

Document #4

TELEGRAM.

From The Resident Commissioner, G & E.I.C., Ocean Island.

To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.

No ____66

(Date) 1st October, 1940.

Your telegram No. 71. Information has been passed on to the High Commissioner particularly with a view to identifying number of sextant box.

Information on following points, where possible, would be of interest:

- (a) How deep was skeleton buried when found,
- (b) How far from shore,
- (c) In your opinion does burial appear deliberate or could it be accounted for by encroachments of sand, etc.,
- (d) Is site of an exposed one (i.e. if the body of Mrs. Putnam had lain there is it likely that it would have been spotted by aerial searchers)?
- (e) In what state of preservation is shoe,
- (f) If well preserved does it appear to be of modern style or old fashioned,
- (g) Is there any indication as to contents of bottle.

Do you know anything of wreck of "Norwich City" - e.g. when did it take place, where any lives lost and how long were survivors marooned at Gardner Island?

Resident.

The next day, the Resident Commissioner replies to Gallagher. He has passed the word up to his boss, Sir Harry Luke in Fiji, but his questions indicate some skepticism of Gallagher's suspicion that this might be Earhart.

TELEGRAM.

From The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.

To The Resident Commissioner, Ocean Island

No 72

(Date) 6th October, 1940.

Your telegram No. 66.

- (a) Skeleton was not buried - skull was buried after discovery by natives (coconut crabs had scattered many bones),
- (b) 100 feet from high water ordinary springs,
- (c) Improbable,
- (d) Only part of sole remains,
- (f) Appears to have been stoutish walking shoe or heavy sandal,
- (g) "Benedictine" bottle but no indication of contents,

There are indications that person was alive when cast ashore - fire, birds killed, etc., "Norwich City" wrecked and caught fire 1930 or 1932. Number of crew sailed to Fiji in lifeboat, remainder picked up later at Gardner by "Ralum". Think Board of Enquiry held Suva - loss of life not known. This information derived from gossip only.

Gallagher.

Document #5

Five days later Gallagher replies. His information about the wreck of the *Norwich City* "derived from gossip only," is not very good. The freighter went aground on the reef November 30, 1929 off the island's northwest end with the loss of eleven lives—five British seamen and six Arab stokers. Three bodies washed ashore and were buried. The twenty-four survivors were all rescued five days later by S.S. *Trongate* out of Samoa. No one was left on the island.



The S. S. Norwich City in 1937. Photo courtesy Eric R. Bevington.

Document #6

TELEGRAM.

From The Secretary, Western Pacific High Commission, Suva.

To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.

No 1.
Confidential.

(Date) 15th October, 1940.

Please telegraph to me particulars of finding of skeleton in Gardner Island, including where found and state reason for believing it to be that of a woman and whether this belief based on anatomical characteristics. State dental condition and whether any evidence of dental work on jaw, length of skeleton from vertex of skull to arch of foot, approximate age and condition of bones and whether any hair found in the vicinity of skeleton.

What have you done with skeleton? It should be carefully cared for and placed in a suitable coffin and kept in secure custody pending further instructions.

Keep matter strictly secret for the present.

Secretary,
Western Pacific High Commission

By the 15th of October the higher ups in Suva are very interested. This message comes directly from Henry Harrison Vaskess, Secretary of the Western Pacific High Commission. Gallagher is to provide more information to headquarters and "keep matter strictly secret." Note that this is telegram No. 1 from the WPHC to Gallagher. It's the first time the High Commission has had any need to communicate directly with the lowly O.I.C. P.I.S.S.

TELEGRAM.

From The Officer-in-Charge P.I.S.S., Gardner Island-----

To The Secretary for the W.P.H.C., Suva.-----

No 1. (Date) 17th October, 1940.

Confidential.

Complete skeleton not found only skull,
lower jaw, one thoracic vertebra, half pelvis, part
scapula, humerus, radius, two femurs, tibia and fibula.
Skull discovered by working party six months ago - report
reached me early September. Working party buried skull but
made no further search.

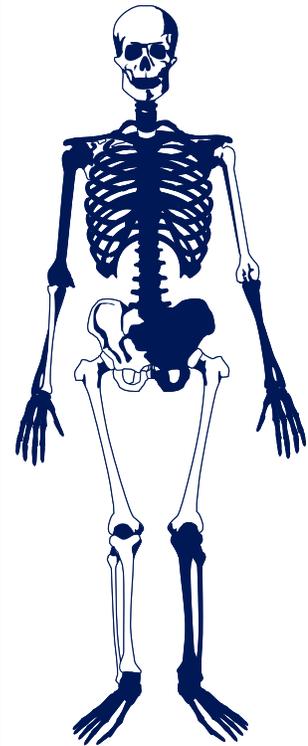
Bones were found on South East corner of
island about 100 feet above ordinary high water springs.
Body had obviously been lying under a "ren" tree and
remains of fire, turtle and dead birds appear to indicate
life. All small bones have been removed by giant coconut
crabs which have also damaged larger ones. Difficult to
estimate age bones owing to activities of crabs but am quite
certain they are not less than four years old and probably
much older.

Only experienced man could state sex from avail-
able bones; my conclusion based on sole of shoe which is
almost certainly a woman's.

Dental condition appears to have been good
but only five teeth now remain. Evidence dental work on
jaw not apparent.

Document #7

Gallagher answers the Secretary's questions and provides more details. A "ren" tree is *Tournefortia argenta*, a type of scrub tree typically found in association with dense underbrush.



*Unshaded portions of skeleton
are the bones recovered in
1940*

-2-

We have searched carefully for rings, money and keys with no result. No clothing was found. Organized search of area for remaining bones would take several weeks as crabs move considerable distances and this part of island is not yet cleared.

Regret it is not possible to measure length of skeleton. No hair found.

Bones at present in locked chest in office pending construction coffin.

Gallagher

Document #8

TELEGRAM.

From The Secretary for the Western Pacific High Commission, Suva,

To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Island.

No 2.

(Date) 26th October, 1940.

Confidential.

Your telegram 17th October. Organised search should be made in the vicinity and all bones and other finds, including box, sextant and shoe, should be forwarded to Suva by the first opportunity for examination.

Secretary.

Shipping everything to the High Commission in Suva means jumping the normal chain of command, bypassing the colonial administration. There is also a misunderstanding that a sextant has been found.

GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS COLONY.

Nikumaroro (Gardner) Island,
Phoenix Islands District,
27th December, 1940.

Confidential.

Sir,

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your confidential telegram No. 2 of the 26th. October, 1940, and to state that two packages are being handed to the Master, R.C.S. "Nimanoa", for eventual delivery to the High Commission Office in Suva. The larger of these packages is the coffin containing the remains of the unidentified individual found on the South Eastern shore of Gardner Island; the second package is the sextant box found in the immediate locality and contains all the other pieces of evidence which were found in the proximity of the body.

2. The fact that the skull has been buried in damp ground for nearly a year, whilst all the other bones have been lying above ground during the same period, was probably not apparent from previous correspondence,

The Secretary,
Western Pacific High Commission,
Suva - Fiji.

Document #9

This is a letter rather than a telegram. The original probably accompanied the shipment to Suva. R.C.S. (Royal Colony Ship) *Nimanoa* was the rather decrepit sailing vessel that periodically serviced the islands.



R.C.S. Nimanoa, tied off to the wreck of the Norwich City, 1937.
Photo courtesy Eric R. Bevington.

- 2. -

but may be helpful in determining the age of the bones. In spite of an intensive search, none of the smaller bones have been discovered and, in view of the presence of crabs and rats in this area, I consider that it is now unlikely that any further remains will be traced. A similar search for rings, coins, keys or other articles not so easily destroyed has also been unsuccessful, but it is possible that something may come to hand during the course of the next few months when the area in question will be again thoroughly examined during the course of planting operations, which will involve a certain amount of digging in the vicinity. If this should prove to be the case, I will inform you of the fact by telegraph.

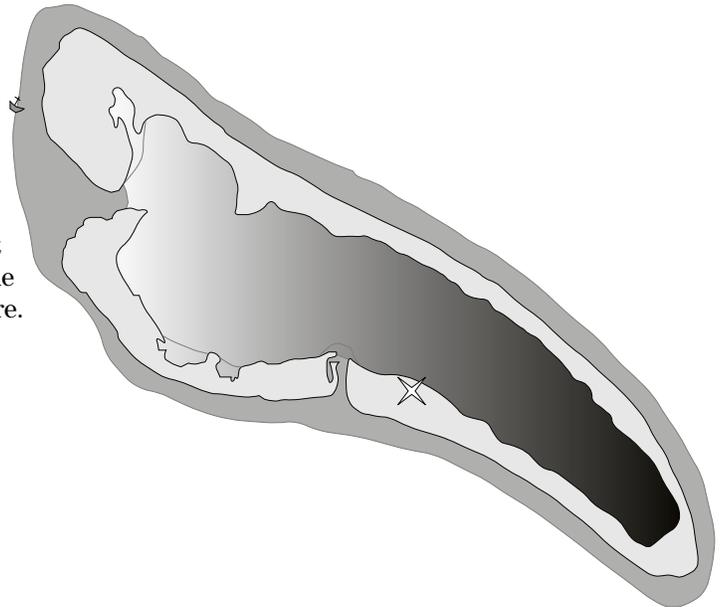
3. Should any relatives be traced, it may prove of sentimental interest for them to know that the coffin in which the remains are contained is made from a local wood known as "kanawa" and the tree was, until a year ago, growing on the edge of the lagoon, not very far from the spot where the deceased was found.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servant,

(Sgd) Gerald B. Gallagher.

Officer-in-Charge,
Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme

The location, as described (southeast part of the island in an area soon to be cleared and planted, specifically near the lagoon shore 100 feet above the high water line) matches perfectly the spot where TIGHAR found the shoes and campfire.



Document #10

This is trouble. More than three months later, on the way to Suva, the *Nimanoa* puts in at Tarawa where the senior medical officer gets wind of the bones. He is 30 year old Dr. Lindsay Isaac, who will later change his name to Lindsay Verrier. He has “no knowledge of the matter” because the affair has been classified as strictly secret. To him, it looks like young Gallagher is not properly acknowledging Isaac’s position. Those who knew Isaac personally describe him as “a strange little man” and “very full of himself and easily offended.”

TELEGRAM.

From The Medical Officer, Tarawa Island
To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Islands.
No _____
(Date) 6th February, 1941.

I understand from the Master R.C.S. Nimanoa, that he has certain human remains on board consigned to Suva.
As I am in charge of Medical and forensic investigation of such objects throughout the whole colony and have no knowledge of the matter, I preassume that the package was intended to be consigned to myself?

Isaac.

Document #11

TELEGRAM.

From The Resident Commissioner
To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Island.
No 3.
(Date) 7th February, 1941.

Senior Medical Officer repeated to me his telegram to you regarding human remains addressed to Suva on "Nimanoa". I am informing him of position and there is no need for you to take further action.

Resident.

The Resident Commissioner recognizes the problem and tells Gallagher he will straighten it out. Later correspondence implies a heated exchange between the Resident and the Doctor but Isaac examines the bones anyway.

Document #12

In one sentence, Isaac dismisses the bones. A present day physical anthropologist had this opinion of the probable accuracy of his analysis: "It's highly unlikely that a British colonial medical officer of the 1940s, or almost any other decade, would be conversant in physical anthropology. Some early and basic publications in physical anthropology were available at that time ... but I don't think that said medical officer would know them well enough to apply them competently."

TELEGRAM.

From The Senior Medical Officer, Central Hospital, Tarawa.
To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.
(Date) 11th February, 1941.

No -----
Confidential

For your information remains taken from "Nimanoa" part skeleton elderly male of Polynesian race and that indications are that bones have been in sheltered position for upwards of 20 years and possibly much longer.

Isaac.

Document #13

TELEGRAM.

From The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.
To The Senior Medical Officer, Central Hospital, Tarawa.

No -----
Confidential

(Date) 11th February, 1941.

Your confidential telegram 11th February.
Many thanks - rather an anticlimax! ~~Personal should be delighted if you keep box but matter has been mentioned in private letter to High Commissioner who is interested in timber used and may ask to see it.~~ It would be fun to make you one for yourself or perhaps a little tea table - we have a little seasoned timber left. ~~Please let me know whether you prefer box or table and if former give any particular inside measurements.~~

Gallagher

The same day, Gallagher acknowledges and apparently accepts Isaac's evaluation, considers trying to placate him with an offer to build him a tea table, but then changes his mind and crosses out everything but the first sentence.

Document #14

TELEGRAM.

From The Senior Medical Officer, Central Hospital, Tarawa.

To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.-----

No -----

(Date) 14th February, 1941.

Your telegram 11th February. Confidential.
Matter became somewhat tense and complex after guillotine conversation between us. As I had (and still have) no information save presence of remains and therefore quarantine from no danger infection, I am still wondering how wretched relics can be interesting.

Isaac.

This message only makes sense if it is Gallagher's copy of a message Isaac directed to the Resident Commissioner. It's clear that Isaac still has no idea why everyone was so interested in these "wretched relics." There is some indication that he intends to quarantine the bones before sending them on to Suva.

Document #15

TELEGRAM.

From The Secretary for the Western Pacific High Commission, Suva.

To The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Is.-----

No 2-----

(Date) 28th April, 1941.

Confidential

Your letter 27th December. Remains and sextant box received, but no sextant. Did you forward sextant?

Secoma.

It is almost two months later before the bones, etc. arrive in Suva, so maybe Isaac did quarantine them. There is still confusion about the sextant.

Document #16

TELEGRAM.

From: The Officer-in-Charge, Phoenix Scheme, Gardner Island,
To The Secretary, Western Pacific High Commission, Suva.

Confidential.

Date; 28th April, 1941.

Your telegram No 2. No sextant was found.
Only part discovered was thrown away by finder but was
probably part of an inverting eyepiece.

Gallagher

Gallagher clears up the confusion and provides one last detail, and with this the matter was apparently closed. In May, Gallagher came to Fiji on leave but we have no way of knowing if he tried to follow up on his discovery after Isaac's put down. He returned to Gardner in late September aboard the S.S. *Viti* but arrived gravely ill with peritonitis from a burst appendix. His friend, Dr. D.C. M. "Jock" MacPherson operated to try to save his life, but Irish died on the table in the house he had built on Gardner Island. He was buried beneath a cement monument which can be seen today.



The survival of the file itself seems little short of miraculous. Tarawa was virtually levelled during World War Two and we can only conclude that the folder now in the archives is that which was kept by Gallagher at his headquarters on Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro). His files must have been transferred to the colonial headquarters in Tarawa sometime after the war. When the British Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony became the independent nations of Kiribati and Tuvalu in the late 1970s, the file became part of the Kiribati National Archives.



Gallagher's house on Nikumaroro, circa 1940. TIGHAR Collection.



Gallagher's grave. TIGHAR photo by John Clauss.