

THE KANTON MISSION



On February 14-16, 1998 a thirteen person TIGHAR team flew to Kanton Island to investigate the possibility that an engine from Earhart's plane had been inadvertently brought there in 1971 during a U.S. Air Force missile testing program (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol 13, Nos. 2 & 3, "The Canton Engine"). Bruce Yoho, the individual who recovered the engine in 1971 (and now an active TIGHAR member), came along to show us where he dumped the Pratt & Whitney R1340 which he had found on a reef on one of the other islands of the Phoenix Group. Although he was able to locate the spot, we were surprised and disappointed to find that the contents of the dump had since been buried.

When Bruce Yoho told us that, in 1971, he had disposed of the engine in a junkyard just off the end of the main runway at Canton Island, the first question we had was, "What happened to the junkyard when the Air Force left?" To find an answer, TIGHAR researchers went to Vandenburg AFB to examine the files of SAMTEC (Space And Missile Test Center), the 1970s missile test program of which Bruce was a part. The paperwork was extensive and it was clear that environmental concerns had a very high priority. Report after report stressed the fragility of the islands' ecological balance and set procedures to protect plant and animal life.



As the Air Force prepared to shut down the project and leave the Phoenix Islands in March of 1976, there was much official discussion as to how Canton should be cleaned up. Earlier, some scrap metal had been dumped at sea but this was determined to be expensive and dangerous. A November 1974 memo on Environmental Conditions of Canton Island states that "Most bulky noncombustibles are

deposited in an area adjacent to the landfill, but there are other scattered areas with minor accumulations." The small junkyard where Bruce dumped the engine would seem to be one of these. The report continues, "Although the disposal areas may appear unsightly, they are not causing any apparent environmental problems or health hazards." Consideration was given to building a jetty out over the reef edge for the dumping of "bulky noncombustible wastes" but a January 1975 report entitled Environmental Protection rejected the idea as "not feasible." It appeared, from our research, that the disposal areas for noncombustible waste (such as old Pratt & Whitney airplane engines) had been left alone. We were wrong.

Once we were on the ground at Canton Island (officially Kanton since 1979) it became obvious that much had been done that was not mentioned in the official paperwork. At Bruce's junkyard, a trench roughly the width of a dozer blade and perhaps five feet deep had been dug about 20 yards to the east. It appears that everything in the dump, except a disabled bulldozer which was apparently too big to move, was then pushed into the trench and buried. Beyond there the landscape is



An unnatural landscape. TIGHAR photo by H. Gillespie.

strewn with conical hills and gouged valleys. But there are no hills and valleys in the coral atolls of the Phoenix Islands. These are the burial mounds and graves of heavy equipment and other assorted debris and would seem to be evidence of a different and much grander disposal operation than the clean up of Bruce's dump.

Just how and when all this happened is not clear, but the question now is what to do next about finding Bruce's (and maybe Amelia's) engine? We're quite sure that we have the right spot. The map Bruce drew

from memory turned out to be surprisingly accurate and one of his co-workers from that time even remembers that the junkyard contained a disabled bulldozer. The area to be excavated is quite manageable, provided one has some power digging equipment. There is a small, fairly new Kubota L295-II tractor in use on the island. We're presently investigating the cost of acquiring a backhoe that would fit it (about \$6,500) and transporting it to the island (that's the part we don't have figured out yet).



*Somewhere under there is Kanton's Kubota tractor.
TIGHAR photo by H. Gillespie.*