

# Fiji Bone Search

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## Introduction



TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

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The Tarawa File (*TIGHAR Tracks* 13:1) and the files of the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC) (*TIGHAR Tracks* 14:2) document that the human bones found on Nikumaroro in 1940 were sent to Fiji for analysis, in a box built on Nikumaroro of kanawa wood (*Cordia subcordata*). The WPHC files contain the report of Dr. D.W. Hoodless of the Central Medical School (CMS) on his inspection of the bones, including his measurements. Though Dr. Hoodless concluded that the bones were most likely those of a European male, re-analysis of the measurements using modern anthropological procedures suggests that they may represent a European female of about Earhart's height (*TIGHAR Tracks* 14:2).

The last document we have about the bones is an exchange of notes among Dr. Hoodless, WPHC Secretary Henry Vaskess,

and Sir Harry Luke, the High Commissioner of the WPHC and Governor of Fiji. On April 5, 1941, Dr. Hoodless says: "I will take charge of these bones until it is decided what to do with them." On April 11 Mr. Vaskess passed Dr. Hoodless' offer to Sir Harry, whose responding note directed him to "request him (Hoodless) to retain the remains until further notice." On April 12 Mr. Vaskess asked the Central Medical Authority to "take action accordingly." After this, the WPHC papers (at least, those we've found so far) have nothing to say about the bones.

Needless to say, it would be useful to find those bones. We could then (it is to be hoped) extract DNA that could be compared with that of living Earhart relatives. So on June 26 the Fiji Bones Search got underway.

## The 1999 Bones Search

Actually, the search had been underway for several months, thanks to the enthusiastic cooperation of the Fiji Museum. The Museum is very much TIGHAR's partner in this project. Without the support of its Director, Kate Vusoniwailala, the Director of its Archaeology Department, Tarisi Vundadilo, and the whole staff, we would have made little progress in

the search at all. By the time we arrived in Fiji, the Museum had already contacted all the appropriate government ministries to make arrangements, held press briefings, and located and interviewed a number of retired physicians and others associated with the CMS and its successor, the Fiji School of Medicine (FSM). The Museum made its offices available to us,

and took care of all ongoing contacts with the various elements of government with which we worked and will continue to work, for the Bones Search will go on.

Our search focussed on Suva, the capital of Fiji, on the eastern end of the island of Viti Levu. Suva is a city of about 90,000 (400,000 in the metropolitan area), with a rich colonial architectural tradition—in other words, a LOT of old buildings dating from the time of the WPHC and CMS. Reasoning that the box of

bones might have been tucked away in an attic or basement or closet in one of these buildings and forgotten, one of our first orders of business was to find and search the buildings most closely associated with the Commission and the Medical School. Another high priority was to examine the collections of human bones kept by the FSM Anatomy Department and by the Fiji Museum itself, since it was possible that the Nikumaroro bones might have been absorbed into one of these collections.

## Bones, Bones, and More Bones

**I**n the first week, the Search team was made up of forensic osteologist Dr. Karen Burns and me, so much of our work—besides initial



*Kar Burns.*

meetings with ministries, press conferences, and the like—was focussed on finding and examining known collections of bones. Armed with Dr. Hoodless' measurements, her calipers, and her laptop loaded with the FORDISC classification program, Kar first went through all the unprovenanced (i.e.: unknown origin) bones in the collections of the Museum's Archaeology Department. No matches. Next she examined the collection of the FSM Anatomy Department (we'd been told that this collection had been "disposed of" when teaching methods changed at the School, but it turned out that a dedicated Lab Manager, Satya Deo, had saved it). Unfortunately, no matches there either. Incidentally, the Anatomy Department is housed in a modern building that comprises the "nerve center" of the FSM and that is named "Hoodless House" in honor of the doctor himself, renowned as one of the founders of western Pacific medical practice.

Early on, three young men generously volunteered their time to assist us. Faiz Ali

and Elaitia Vakarau are students at the Fiji Institute of Technology, while Steven Brown is a martial arts instructor (all are now TIGHAR members). While Kar measured bones, "the guys" and I searched old buildings. The old CMS building is now the Dental Clinic at the Fiji Colonial War Memorial Hospital. Completely renovated several times over since Hoodless' time, it still has an attic that hadn't been looked at in years. It turned out to be full of stuff—some of it apparently dating back to World War II (old field medicine cases and such)—but alas, no kanawa wood box, no bones. Dr. Hoodless' residence still stands, too; it's now the office of the Student Housing housekeeper. It has an attic, too, but it turned out to be empty.

About the time we arrived in Fiji, a skeleton was found in the rainforest near Navua, west of Suva. As (probably) the most experienced forensic osteologist in several hundred if not thousand miles, Kar felt obligated to offer assistance to the police in their investigation of the discovery. Besides, it gave us a good opportunity to see how bodies decay in an environment not unlike Nikumaroro's. She examined the bones at the Hospital, and then we trekked out to the discovery site and recovered more bones. The skeleton turned out to most likely be that of a tourist who had gone missing back in April, leaving a suicide note. The interesting thing from our point of view was

that the body had become completely skeletonized, the bones more or less scattered, some

of them chewed by animals, and a number of them missing, in a mere three months.

## Weeks Two and Three: Searches and Interviews

**O**n July 5, Kar departed for Nikumaroro aboard *Nai'a*, and Education Director Barbara Norris arrived. About this time we had a bit of a flap over the fact that the government had declined to allow us to search the President's mansion, where Sir Harry had had his offices and residence. This



Barb Norris.

not altogether surprising decision (what would the U.S. do with a Fijian request to search the White House?) was picked up by the media, which caused some disquiet in the government. Eventually this got smoothed over, and the work continued. We had run out of known

bone collections, but had plenty of buildings to search, plenty of archives to inspect, and plenty of people to talk with.

A search of the Fiji Intelligence Service building (formerly WPHC Bachelor Officer Housing) yielded no bones. An interview with the head of maintenance for the Public Works Department resulted in his agreement to get all government maintenance workers to keep eyes open for the box. We ran down a rumor of "bones in a box" in the local Masonic Lodge — they were bones used in Masonic ritual, and didn't match the Hoodless description. In the Museum library we reacquainted ourselves with Margaret Guthrie's biography of her father, Dr. Hoodless, which sent Barb and the guys off to search the old garage that the Hoodlesses had used for storage. Noth-

ing there but collapsed cardboard boxes and old tires.

An interview with Sir Leonard Usher, who had been with the government since 1930, gave us valuable information about Fiji during World War II, and especially about Vaskess. Examining the WPHC file, Sir Leonard said that its organization — elaborately annotated and cross-referenced — was "pure Vaskess." He described Vaskess as a "prince of bureaucrats," who made sure that records were kept in good order — suggesting that if government had done anything with the bones on Vaskess' watch (which ran until after World War II), it would have been entered in the file.

Meanwhile, thanks to Peter MacQuarrie (TIGHAR#1987), Kenton Spading (TIGHAR #1382EC), and Mr. Metuisela Moa, the generous head of the Fiji Intelligence Service, we had met Mr. Foua Tofiga, who became perhaps our most valuable contact and, I hope, a good friend. Mr. Tofiga is from Tuvalu, educated in Tarawa, and he came to Fiji in 1940 to work for the WPHC. He was literally in Sir Harry's office when the bones were sent in; he was a bit sorry that "the English" hadn't shared the matter with him, the "only brown face" in the office, but he understood their perceived need for secrecy.

Mr. Tofiga described Gerald Gallagher as his great friend; he had assisted Gallagher in loading the colonial ship *Viti* for the voyage that was to take Gallagher to his death on Nikumaroro. He had worked closely with Vaskess, and said he had seen the sextant box from Nikumaroro, which Vaskess kept in his

office. He travelled to Nikumaroro with Sir Harry in December of 1941, where he visited Gallagher's grave; *Viti* was on the high seas leaving Nikumaroro when word came of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Almost in passing, he mentioned that on this trip they had brought Emily Sikuli away to work in medicine for the WPHC. Emily, he said, was the daughter of Nikumaroro's carpenter, who doubtless had built the kanawa wood box. Needless to say, we were very interested in interviewing her.

On July 12, Kris Tague arrived. Since Kris' speciality is archival work, we'd reserved most of this kind of work for her. First, however, we



Kris Tague

went after the old U.S. military base at Tamavua, where the CMS had moved in 1953; a number of people had suggested this as a likely place, and Steven Brown knew of tunnels under the facility, that he'd played in as a kid. Kris, Barb, and the guys slipped and slid through the

tunnels—to no avail—while I negotiated for, but failed to get, permission to search the War Memorial Hospital itself. About this time, permission did come through to search the cellar and bomb shelter at Government House—the President's mansion. This search, too, produced no bones, no box.

Meanwhile Mr. Tofiga had arranged a meeting with Emily Sikuli. We met over tea at the home of Mr. Tofiga and his wife, and began by asking Mrs. Sikuli about her father. She promptly produced pictures of her parents, said she well remembered her father's construction of the box, described it, and then mentioned, sort of in passing, that the bones that were put in it had been found "near that airplane wreck on the reef."

When we picked ourselves up off the floor, we asked her to continue and she gave us a great deal of useful information. Since much of this was subsequently duplicated in a long videotaped interview with Ric, Kris, and Russ, I won't get into it here. Suffice to say that the first thing we did upon getting back to the TIGHAR apartment was to get a radio message off to *Nai'a* about looking for wreckage on the reef north of *Norwich City*.

## Weeks Four and Five: Interviews and Archives

The day of our interview with Mrs. Sikuli was also the day of my departure, but Barb and Kris carried on. Mr. Tofiga suggested another look at the Museum's collection, and it turned out that there were more unprovenient bones there, in a collection not maintained by the Archaeology Department. Some of these looked promising, but when Kar examined them on her return from Niku-

maroro, they turned out not to be those we're looking for. Barb returned to the U.S. a few days after I did, and Kris continued, shifting focus substantially to archival studies whose results she is digesting as this is written. She also arranged, with Mr. Tofiga, for videotaped interviews both with Mrs. Sikuli and with Mrs. Otiria O'Brian, widow of the wireless operator on Nikumaroro.



# Conclusions

Obviously, we did not return from Fiji with a box of bones. We did, however, get a good deal of information about the circumstances surrounding their sojourn in Suva, and about the individuals involved in whatever it is that happened to them. We searched a lot of the most obvious places to look for the bones, and we left with the offer of a reward for information leading to their recovery. This coupled with the extensive media coverage we received and the knowledge that's been spread among government and Medical School employees should guarantee that people will keep a lookout for them. And of course, we met Foua Tofiga and Emily Sikuli, who provided information that we'd never expected to get.

So, where are the bones? We don't know, of course, but I came away finding it hard to imagine that they were just thrown away – though of course, in the early days of the War, almost anything could have happened. One possibility is that they were stored in caves during the War, and never came out. Lots of things were thus put away for safekeeping – the Museum's collections, for example – and

most of the World War II era caves have been sealed up. The tunnel complexes under both Government House and Tamavua are reputed to be much larger than those we inspected, but their entrances may have been blocked and forgotten.

Another possibility is that they were buried. The Medical School has a pretty organized system for the burial of the cremated remains of cadavers no longer needed for teaching; apparently this system has been in place for a long time. Would unneeded bones have been burned? Maybe. Buried? Maybe. It's something to pursue.

They may have gotten sent on with the WPHC files to Honiara in the Solomon Islands when the Commission's offices moved there, or to Tarawa when Kiribati achieved independence. They may have been sent to London. Or they may still be languishing somewhere in Suva. There are lots of possibilities to check. What we need to do now is more archival and interview work to narrow the range of likely possibilities, and to continue the search.

