

# TIGHAR TRACKS



September 2000

## STAYING IN TOUCH

Over the past few years TIGHAR, like everyone else, has benefited from the communications revolution. The steadily increasing popularity of the TIGHAR internet website ([www.tighar.org](http://www.tighar.org)) and the Earhart Search Forum email group have enabled us to greatly accelerate our historical research and increase our educational impact, but in the midst of this unprecedented growth we've struggled, and often failed, to meet the needs of TIGHAR members who rely upon more conventional means of communication. Realizing that frequency is more important than style, we've decided to go back to a simple monthly newsletter that will feature excerpts from the website and the forum. Once a year we'll also put out a glossy *TIGHAR Journal* on the pattern of the Vol. 15 *TIGHAR Tracks* you received earlier this year. We hope this new system will permit all TIGHAR members to stay informed and participate in TIGHAR's exciting work.

## NIKU IIII

The dates have been set and the deposit has been paid to reserve the ship for TIGHAR's next expedition to Nikumaroro. A twelve-person TIGHAR team will meet *Nai'a*, the Fiji-based 120 foot motor-sailer we've used for the past two expeditions, at Pago Pago, American Samoa on September 3, 2001. From there we'll embark on the three-day voyage to Nikumaroro where we'll have twelve to fourteen days on-site to accomplish the search operations now being planned. These will include:

- a detailed search of the "7 Site" (see the article in this newsletter).
- the inspection of one, and possibly two, suspect graves.
- an underwater search of a ledge off the western edge of the reef.
- an underwater search of the lagoon bottom inside the main passage.

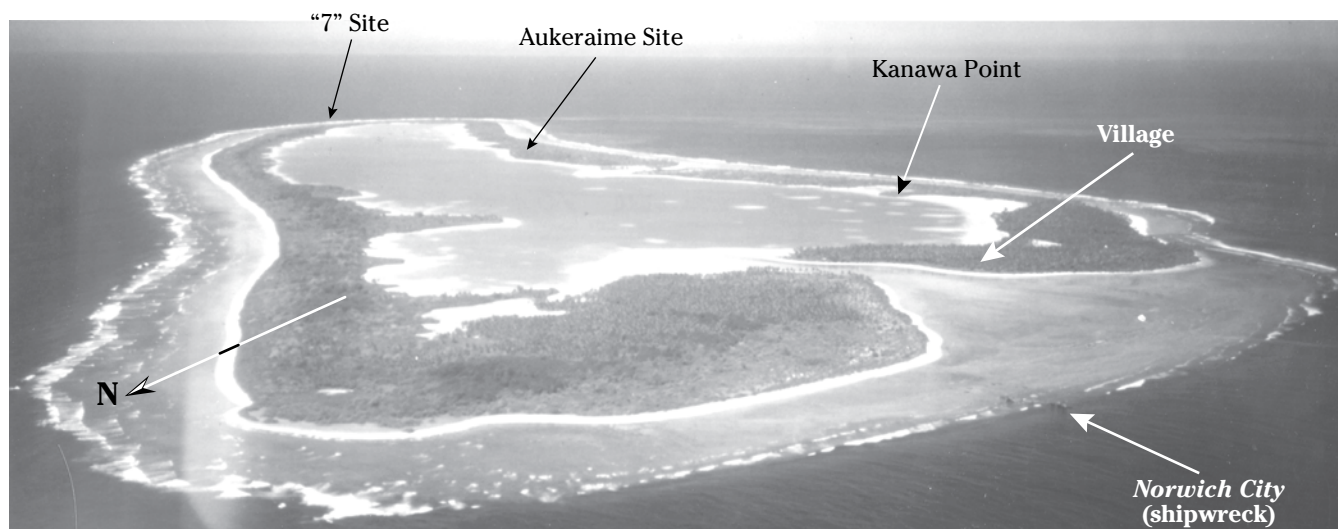
It is our hope that these operations will result in the discovery of human remains and artifacts which can be conclusively identified as being from the Earhart flight. The cost of mounting and conducting the expedition is projected to be \$300,000. That's a lot of money to raise over the next twelve months, but the prospects for finding the proverbial "smoking gun" evidence have never looked better and TIGHAR has never been stronger. We can do it, but as always, it will take all of us pulling together to make it happen. Please use the enclosed card to send in your contribution today.

# The 7 Site

In 1940, the bones of a castaway were found on Nikumaroro. It now appears possible—even probable—that the deceased person was Amelia Earhart. Searches carried out by British authorities at that time collected a partial skeleton and a few artifacts which have since been lost. TIGHAR's next expedition to Nikumaroro will attempt to find the castaway's bones that were not recovered in 1940 plus any additional artifacts which may survive. A successful DNA match would be the long-awaited conclusive proof of Earhart's fate.

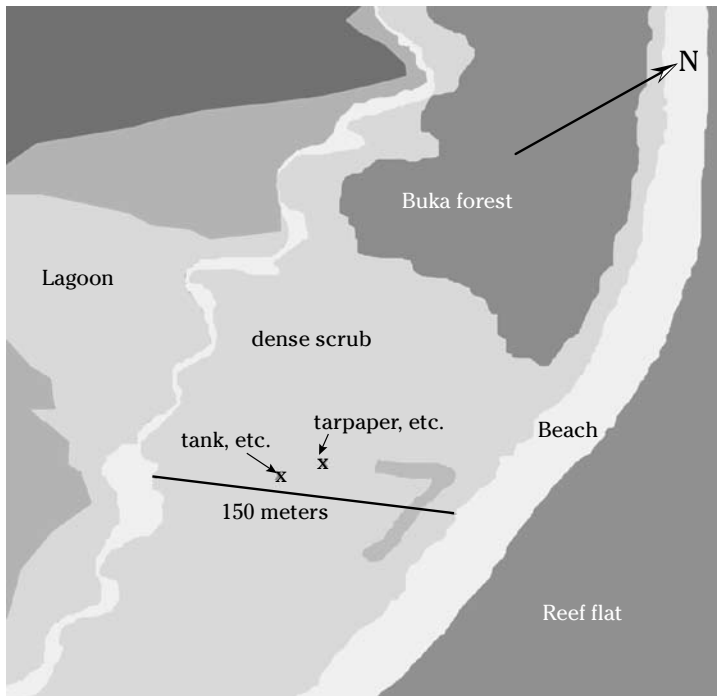
But to do the search, we need to figure out where the original discovery was made. Three candidate sites—Kanawa Point, the Aukeraime site, and the “7” site—have been identified and evaluated based upon the available clues. Of these, the “7” site appears to be the most promising and is now scheduled for intense examination during Niku III, our next expedition to the island.

We call it the “7” site because it features a unique pattern of coral rubble which is naturally devoid



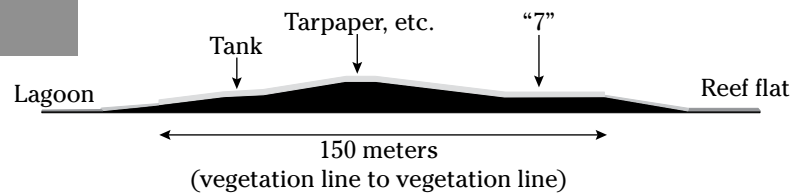
of vegetation and, from the air, forms a distinctive number “7.” This seems to be a coincidence of nature and does not seem to be man-made. However, other aspects of the site are definitely man-made. The general character of the site depicted below is based upon the brief initial survey done by TIGHAR in 1996.

At present, our working hypothesis is that the tank and tarpaper and other evidence of human occupation we found there in 1996 are the result of operations carried out in 1940 in response to orders from the Western Pacific High Commission for the island's administrator, Gerald Gallagher, to carry out an “organized search” for more bones and artifacts.



The approximate cross-section of the land is depicted below. No measurements of elevation were taken in 1996 but the difference between high point and low point is very modest—not more than ten feet.

The photos below were taken in 1996 by John Clauss, TIGHAR #0142CE, who climbed one of the few trees that dot the expanse of dense scaevola which now covers the area.



This view looks toward the ocean.



This view looks toward the lagoon.

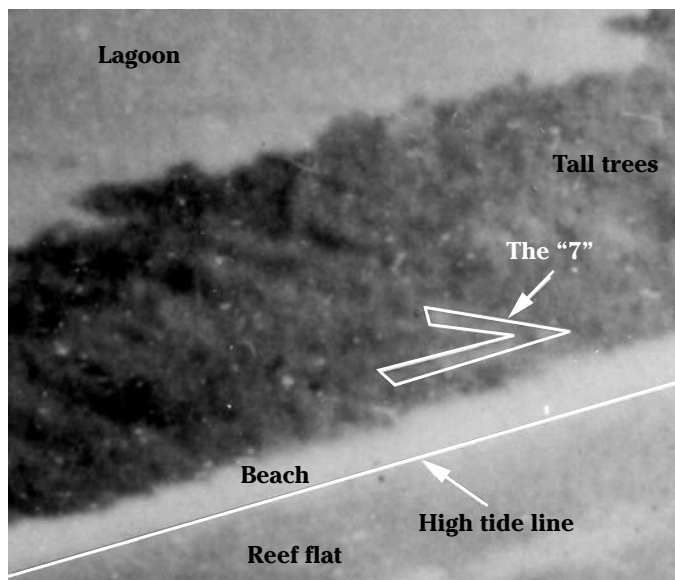
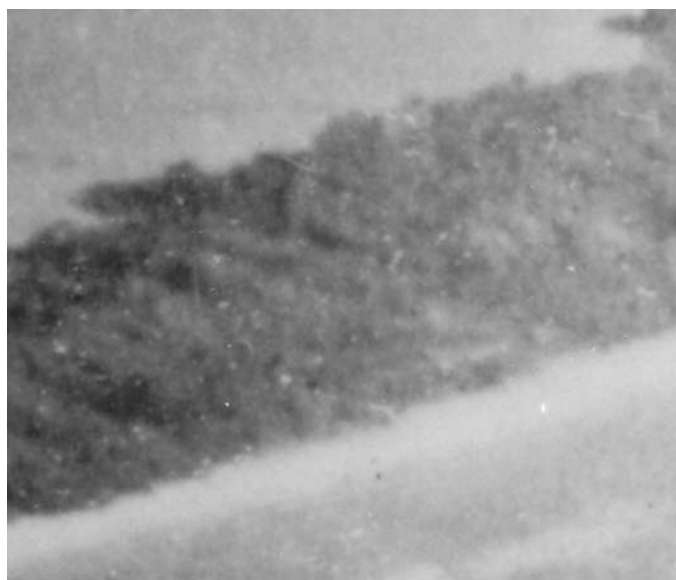


*TIGHAR photos  
by J. Clauss.*

On the ground, the view is rather different. The tangle of scaevola is nearly impenetrable.

But the “7” site was not always as inhospitable as it is now. Aerial photos taken in 1937, 1938, 1939, and 1941 present a very different picture and enable us track some interesting changes in the site’s appearance and may provide clues to what happened there.

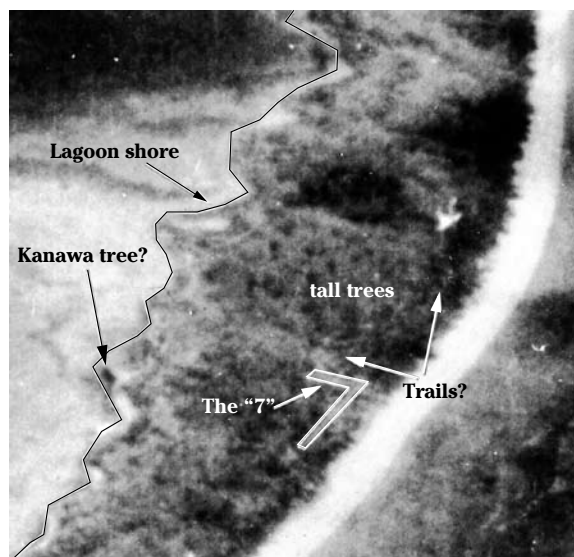
On July 9, 1937 three floatplanes from the U.S.S. *Colorado* flew over Nikumaroro (then known as Gardner Island) during the search for Amelia Earhart. The only photo known to have been taken at that time happens to include the “7” site. Although resolution is very poor, the photo does provide the earliest known aerial view of the site.



If our speculation is correct that Earhart and Noonan landed near the shipwreck on the west end of the island on July 2nd, it seems unlikely that one or both of them were on this opposite end of the island only one week later.

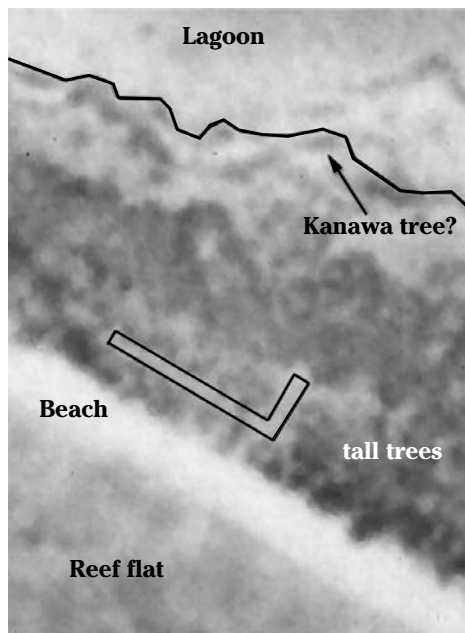
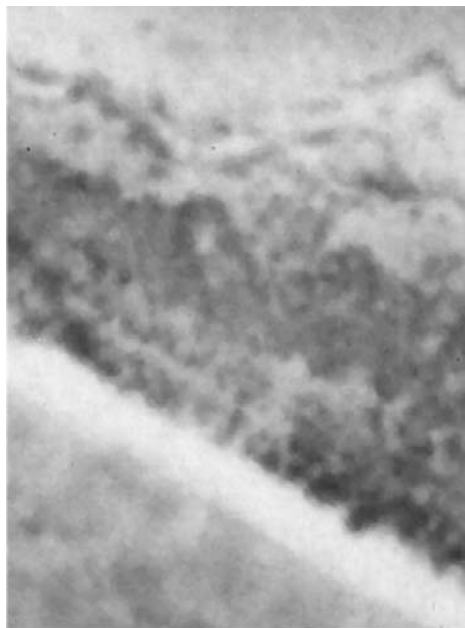
On December 1, 1938 a seaplane launched from the British cruiser HMS *Leander* took a photo very similar to the one taken by the Earhart searchers in 1937, but from closer to shore and with much better resolution. A detail from that photo provides an excellent view of the site and reveals the presence of features that appear to be man-made trails at a time when the island was still officially uninhabited a year and a half after the Earhart disappearance. It is worth noting that in the time between the 1937 and 1938 photos, the island had experienced severe drought conditions and the vegetation had gone from lush to withered and sparse. Another item of interest in this photo is what appears to be a large tree on the lagoon shore. Might this be the kanawa tree that Gallagher says stood on the lagoon shore not very far from where the bones were found? (right)

The next aerial photo was made just five months later on April 30, 1939 by an airplane from the seaplane tender U.S.S. *Pelican*. This is a direct overhead shot that was part of an aerial mosaic of the entire island. A work party of 10 men had arrived





in late December and, just two days before this photo was taken, their families (12 people) had finally arrived. Rainfall had returned to normal and the island was beginning to return to its more usual appearance. No “trails” are in evidence and the tree on the lagoon shore seems to be present, although not as prominently visible from directly overhead.



Just over two years would pass before another aerial photo was taken, this time by one of at least four U.S. Navy PBVs that visited the island on June 20, 1941 as part of an intelligence gathering survey of islands in the area. A lot had happened in that time.

According to Gallagher, the kanawa tree on the lagoon shore was cut down around December of 1939. Then in roughly April of 1940, a skull was found and buried by a work party (Doing what? Cutting down more kanawa trees?). In September

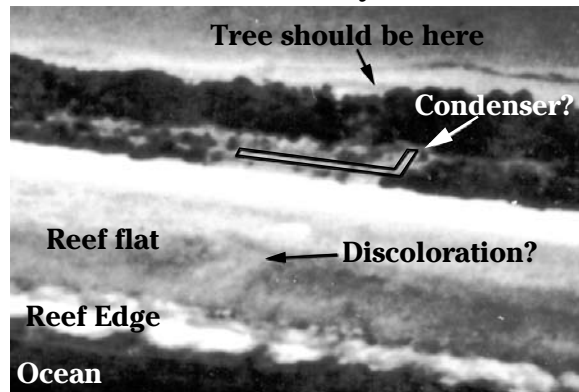
1940 Gallagher arrived, heard about the skull, and by September 23 had conducted what he termed a “thorough search” and found bones and artifacts. On October 17 he advised his superiors that an “organized search” would take “several weeks as crabs move considerable distances and this part of island is not yet cleared.” On October 23, Dr. Macpherson in Fiji recommended that “the search be continued with a view to discovering farther [*sic*] bones, personal trinkets, etc.” and on October 26 the Secretary of the High Commission wired Gallagher that an “Organised search should be made in the vicinity....” Finally, on December 27, 1940, in a letter accompanying the bones and artifacts as they were shipped off to Fiji, Gallagher confirmed that an “intensive search” had been made. Gallagher himself left Nikumaroro for temporary duty in Fiji on approximately June 12, 1941 and so was not present on the island when the U.S. Navy PBVs made their visit and took their photos on June 20. Did all this activity described by Gallagher take place at or near the “7” site?

A detail of one of the photos taken that day shows the “7” site from the seaward side and appears to exhibit considerable evidence of human activity. The low angle of the photo makes it hard to say whether the tree—thought to possibly the kanawa tree mentioned by Gallagher—is present. A considerable amount of beachfront vegetation seems to have been cleared since the previous photo and a fairly large, rectilinear object (perhaps 5 feet on each side and 12 feet high) seems to have appeared. There also appears to be some discoloration of the reef flat directly in front of the

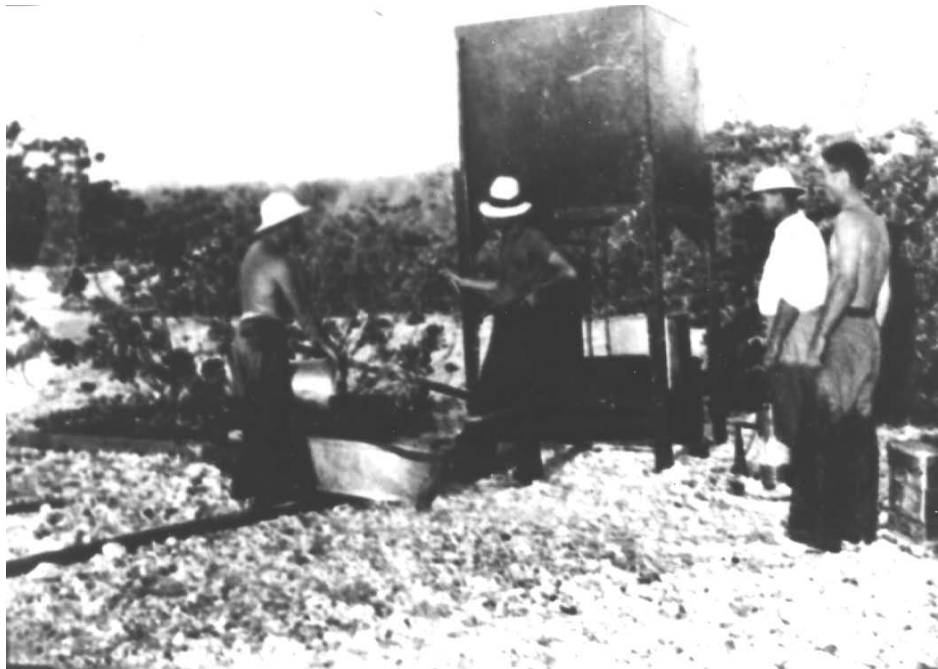


cleared area.

Just what the significance of these changes may be is unknown at this time, but a water condensing unit



used during the 1938/39 New Zealand survey of the island bears a striking resemblance to the object in the photo. This particular condenser was at the other end of the island and, according to the survey report, didn't work anyway, but the photo does at least show what water condensers looked like in those days.



In summary, it would appear that there is photographic evidence of:

1. Human activity (i.e. trails) associated with the “7” site before the island was officially inhabited.
2. Human activity (i.e. clearing, etc.) associated with the “7” site that is consistent in time and appearance with the “organized search” carried out by Gallagher.

The hypothesis that the “7” site is the place where the remains of the castaway were found is, therefore, supported by these data. That hypothesis will be tested by a detailed examination of the site and the surrounding area during Niku IIII, TIGHAR's next expedition to Nikumaroro now scheduled for September 3 through 24, 2001.

