

TIGHAR TRACKS



breaking news

This year's expedition to Nikumaroro is on!

TIGHAR has received word from *Nai'a* Cruises in Fiji that enough passengers have been booked to enable them to go forward with the "2003 Phoenix Rising" voyage to the Phoenix Group. A key element of that trip will be TIGHAR's Niku Vp ("p" for preliminary) expedition and it is essential that we raise the needed money to take maximum advantage of this opportunity.

The Plan For Niku Vp

A small TIGHAR team will carry out vital reconnaissance and data collection work needed in our preparations for Niku V, the major archaeological expedition planned for next year. The team will, of course, also investigate the artifact seen by a marine biologist during a brief visit to the island in 2002 which, from its description, may be an identifiable component of a Lockheed Electra.

The expedition will depart Lautoka, Fiji on Saturday, May 31, 2003 and is scheduled to return on Monday, June 23. The TIGHAR team will stay in touch via satellite phone and there will be daily coverage of the expedition on the TIGHAR website, just as in the hugely successful 2001 Niku III Expedition. A five day, one thousand mile voyage will bring *Nai'a* to the remote Phoenix Group where scientists and divers will spend approximately two weeks conducting underwater and onshore surveys of the reefs and atolls of this remote and pristine region. (Last year's expedition discovered a new species of fish at Nikumaroro.)

There's Work To Be Done

Several days will be dedicated to work at Nikumaroro where the TIGHAR team will carry out a number of tasks.

☞ The team will examine and, if appropriate, collect the suspicious object seen last year. To protect the artifact from looters we've had to restrict the release of detailed information about just where it is and what we suspect it might be, but once *Nai'a* has sailed we'll open the team's "sealed orders" (in the finest Hollywood tradition) and let everyone in on as much as we know. In our briefings and reports about this and other aspects of this expedition's work at Niku we'll be making reference to the beautiful satellite photo grid map that we produced prior to Niku III. If you don't have yours yet, or need another one, just use the enclosed order form or order online at www.tighar.org.

The team will also reconnoiter the “overwash” area on the island’s western end. Studies of the natural forces acting upon the atoll, combined with information about where airplane parts have been found in the past, point to this area as a likely repository of more wreckage. We know very little about this part of the island except that its vegetation can vary from sparse to impenetrable depending upon how recently it has been inundated by a major storm. The recon team should be able to get the information we’ll need to plan a thorough search of the area.

This trip also gives us an opportunity to test and refine the tidal data we’ve computed for Nikumaroro since the 2001 trip. No tide tables for the island seem to exist, but such information is essential for accurately determining the water level on the reef at crucial times in 1937. Retired naval officer and computer modeling specialist Bob Brandenburg (TIGHAR #2286) has found existing tidal information for Orona (Hull Island) 140 miles to the East and is able to adjust those figures for Niku by using the giant triple-



expansion steam engine of S.S. *Norwich City* as a gauge to measure water levels in photos taken at known dates and times. It’s a creative approach to a difficult problem and it is yielding impressive results, but to refine his calculations Bob needs good measurements of some specific visible features on the engine itself. The Niku Vp team will get those measurements. If we can find and acquire the right technology, the team will also install an automatic tide measuring and recording device that we’ll retrieve when we return next year.



In addition to the work on Niku, this voyage will give us a chance to have a look at some of the other islands of the Phoenix Group that we’ve never seen. Of special interest will be Manra (Sydney Island) where we know there is surviving wreckage from a 1943 C-47 crash. Comparisons between what survives from that event and the kind of airplane debris we’ve found on Niku could provide important perspective for our search.

The Niku Vp Team

So far, the TIGHAR team will be made up of three TIGHAR members who are generously paying their own travel expenses.



Richard B. “Skeet” Gifford Skeet Gifford is a retired United Airlines pilot. He is employed by Lockheed Martin as a part-time research consultant at NASA Langley and is co-author of a technical manual on the Flight Management Computers. Skeet serves on TIGHAR’s board of directors and is a veteran of Niku IIIp in 1999 and Niku III in 2001.

Richard W. “Walt” Holm is an electrical engineer currently engaged in defense-related research. Walt was a member of our Dive Team on the Niku III Expedition in 2001.





Karin B. Sinniger (TIGHAR 2485CE) is an attorney and highly experienced SCUBA diver. Karin obtained her “C” and “E” TIGHAR qualifications at last October’s aviation archeology course and field school near Edwards AFB in California.

A major goal of TIGHAR’s current fundraising campaign is to be able to send our Dive Team leader on this expedition. Col. Van T. Hunn USAF (ret.) followed his 24 year career as an Air Force pilot with several years as a commercial pilot. He has extensive experience as a sport SCUBA diver with specialized training in underwater search operations. Van has been the Dive Team leader on three expeditions to Nikumaroro – Niku III in 1997; Niku IIIp in 1999; and Niku IIII in 2001. He also been active in archival research of the Frederick J. Goerner papers at the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg Texas, and, with TIGHAR’s Ric Gillespie, the records of the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme in Tarawa, Kiribati. Most recently, Van has been instrumental in finding technical documents pertaining to the Electra component which seems to match the description of the object seen at Nikumaroro.



Fiji Bone Search II



We also have a unique opportunity to continue the work of the 1999 TIGHAR team which began the search to find the castaway’s bones brought from Nikumaroro to Fiji in 1941. Strongly suspected by TIGHAR to be the remains of Amelia Earhart, the bones were last known to be stored at the Central Medical School in Suva, Fiji, but our attempts to discover if and where they still exist have, so far, been frustrated. If we can raise the needed money, EPAC researcher Martin X. Moleski (TIGHAR #2359) will spend six weeks in Fiji pressing the search. As a Jesuit priest, Marty is able to use diocesan accommodations in Suva that greatly reduce the expense of sending him on this mission.

What It Will Take

Our first goal is to raise the \$15,000 needed to send Van to Niku and Marty to Suva. Thanks to the growing popularity of the Paradise Now raffle and a special grant request to a major Philadelphia-based foundation by an anonymous TIGHAR member, we’re already more than halfway to that goal.

But putting good people like Skeet, Walt, Karin, Van, and Marty in the field doesn’t help unless there is a strong and healthy TIGHAR to support them and make use of the information they collect. We need to raise \$60,000 to carry us through the period of this important field work, so our total fundraising goal is \$75,000. Please use the enclosed form to make your contribution to this important work.

