

TIGHAR TRACKS

A Publication of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery
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The Niku Vp expedition is finally underway and by the time you read this the team will have reached Nikumaroro and begun its work. As promised, now that the TIGHAR team is on-site, we have released a full account of what New England Aquarium marine biologist Dr. Greg Stone reported seeing at the island in June of last year (see “Wheel of Fortune” page 5). The results of the on-site investigation (unknown to us when this newsletter was mailed) are reported in the daily Expedition Updates on the TIGHAR website at www.TIGHAR.org.

There have been two changes to the expedition team since the latest issue of *TIGHAR Tracks*. Tom Roberts (TIGHAR #1956CE) decided to forego participation in this year’s trip and will be on the Niku V team next year. Taking his place on the the Niku Vp team is veteran TIGHAR expedition member John Clauss (TIGHAR #0142CE).

Another new addition to the team was to be Kiribati Wildlife Officer Aobure Teatata. The Republic of Kiribati has a firm policy that any visit to the uninhabited islands of the Phoenix Group must be accompanied by a government representative. We pay for the transportation and expenses of the assigned officer who also performs Customs and Immigration clearances for the expedition. We’ve always seen their participation as a valuable addition to our expeditions. This time, however, a cascade of difficulties conspired to prevent Mr. Teatata from getting from his home island of Kiritimati to the expedition’s port of embarkation in American Samoa and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tarawa

graciously allowed the expedition to proceed without him. The full expedition party is made up of:

- S/V *Mollie* owners/crew, Ken Durey, Louise Fry, and daughter Mollie, age 7
- Expedition leader and diver, Van Hunn (TIGHAR #1459CE)
- Coral reef geologist and diver, Howard Alldred (TIGHAR #2489)
- Niku expedition veteran and diver, Walt Holm (TIGHAR #0980CE)
- Niku expedition veteran, John Clauss (TIGHAR #0142CE)

The plan is to spend seven days at the island, which we anticipate will be Monday, July 28 through Sunday, August 3. The work will include an investigation of the “wheel of fortune,” a reconnaissance of the “overwash” area on the western end of the atoll in preparation for next year’s search, the detailed measurement of the reef and portions of the *Norwich City* shipwreck debris which will help us further refine tidal data, and continued underwater examination of the reef edge. If time permits, the team will briefly visit the Seven Site at the far end of the island to see how well, or how poorly, our attempts to secure the archaeological site in 2001 have fared. Everyone should be home by Saturday, August 9.

There is an old saying at TIGHAR that “adventure is what happens when things go wrong.” Just getting this expedition launched has been quite an adventure. Reproduced below are the first few days of updates from the TIGHAR website. Let’s hope the rest of the trip is less fraught with adventure.

Adventures in the Pacific

Dateline: Monday, July 14, 2003, Wilmington, Delaware.

The departure of the Niku Vp Expedition was delayed due to an interruption in airline service to the South Pacific. The team was originally scheduled to rendezvous with the expedition vessel S/V *Mollie* in Pago Pago, American Samoa on July 3rd but in late June, deteriorated runway conditions at Pago Pago forced a suspension of all overseas service. Some quick repairs were made and it was hoped that service would soon resume but an FAA inspection on July 3rd found that further repairs were needed.

Expectations at that time were that the runway at Pago Pago would be closed until September so we made the decision to shift the expedition's port of embarkation to Apia in neighboring Western Samoa. Over the next week *Mollie* repositioned to Apia and we rebooked the team's airline travel to that destination at a considerable increase in cost. Then to everyone's surprise, the runway at Pago Pago reopened and service resumed on July 12th. Backlogs, delays, and cancellation penalties, however, made it impractical to go back our original plan.

The above summary of the events of the past two weeks is, in all honesty, a gross over-simpli-

fication. To relate the whole story would be as cruel as it would be pointless. All that really matters is that we're now (in theory) set to embark the expedition from Apia on July 17th .

As of Monday July 14:

- Our New Zealander coral reef geologist, Howard Alldred, is with *Mollie* in Apia.
- The Kiribati Wildlife Conservation Officer designated to accompany the expedition as a representative of the Republic of Kiribati, Aobure Teatata, was scheduled to travel on Sunday to Honolulu from his home island of Kiritimati (Christmas Island) and thence on Monday to Pago Pago where he'll have to wait until Wednesday evening to catch a commuter flight to Apia.
- On Tuesday, July 15th, Van Hunn, Walt Holm, and John Clauss will fly from Los Angeles to Auckland, New Zealand and from there to Apia, arriving early on Thursday morning July 17th. Assuming *Mollie* sails on the 17th she should arrive off Nikumaroro sometime late on Sunday July 20th or on Monday the 21st.

Another Delay

Dateline: Wednesday, July 16 2003, Wilmington, Delaware.

The communications and travel difficulties that still plague remote Pacific island nations have forced us to postpone departure of the Niku Vp expedition until July 24. Because the representative of the Republic of Kiribati who must accompany the expedition did not get the word about the schedule change, he did not make the once-a-week flight from Kiritimati (Christmas Island) to Honolulu on Sunday. We now have no choice but to move all of the travel ahead one week and deal with the cost

and scheduling problems such a shift always entails.

Putting these expeditions together is always a challenge, but this trip has had to overcome more than its share of obstacles. In November 2002 we arranged to piggy-back the expedition on a commercial tourist dive trip to the Phoenix Islands organized by *Nai'a* Cruises in Fiji. *Nai'a* scheduled the expedition for departure in June 2003, but by mid-January thought they'd have to cancel the trip because not enough customers

were signing up. We mobilized the TIGHAR membership and by early March we were able to add four TIGHAR's to the passenger list – enough to make the trip a paying proposition for *Nai'a*. The trip was on, but it was also becoming increasingly obvious that the United States was about to start a war. The non-TIGHAR members of the *Nai'a* expedition to the Phoenix Islands began to discover that they had schedule conflicts or personal obligations that prevented them from participating. On March 19th *Nai'a* cancelled the expedition. That same day President Bush announced that military operations against Iraq had begun.

Fortunately, we had a Plan B ready to go. The New Zealand-based sailing vessel *S/V Mollie* would meet our four-person team in Pago Pago, American Samoa and support a one week stay at Nikumaroro. The schedule would slip to early July and the team would change somewhat, but the TIGHAR expedition would go forward.

Mollie sailed from Auckland in late April and started making her way north toward Samoa.

May was spent planning the work to be done on the island, assembling gear, and handling the thousand logistical details that are the heart of all field work. In early June a fifth participant was added to the expedition when the government of the Republic of Kiribati specified that a Wildlife Conservation Officer from Kiritimati would accompany the TIGHAR team (a Kiribati representative has always gone with us to Nikumaroro).

By late June all was in readiness when events beyond our control once again intervened to thwart us. After two weeks of uncertainty and hassle we were able to put the expedition back on track only to have the communications/ travel glitch described above force us to, once again, reshuffle the deck.

The new plan calls for *Mollie* to sail on Thursday, July 24 which should put the team at Nikumaroro on or about the 28th. If a giant asteroid crashes into the middle of the Pacific in the next week or so we may have to amend that schedule.



Van



John



Walt



Howard

Two Steps Back, One Forward

Dateline: Thursday, July 17 2003, Wilmington, Delaware.

Space has opened up on flights that were previously full so that we're now able to get the expedition team to Pago Pago, American Samoa on Monday July 21 rather than have to wait until Thursday July 24. *Mollie* will need to re-relocate from Apia, Western Samoa back to Pago Pago but the expedition should now be able to begin the voyage to Nikumaroro late on Monday or early Tuesday. The new ETA for Niku, asteroids notwithstanding, is on or about Friday, July 25.

The Game's Afoot!

Dateline: Monday, July 21, 2003; afternoon, EDT

In theory, Kiribati Wildlife Officer Aobure Teatata traveled from Kiritimati (Christmas Island) to Honolulu yesterday and will, later today, meet up with TIGHAR team leader Van Hunn and expedition members Walt Holm and John Clauss who are – in theory – now enroute from California to Hawaii. Tonight they'll all fly from Honolulu to Pago Pago, American Samoa where – in theory – they'll join expedition member Howard Alldred who is already aboard *Mollie* which is – in fact – standing by in Pago Pago and ready to depart for Nikumaroro.

At this point, no news is good news. As Sherlock Holmes used to say, "The game's afoot." And, if all goes well, the next hard news we expect to have will be via a satellite phone call from Van aboard *Mollie* sometime around midday Tuesday (EDT).

Left Behind

Dateline: Tuesday, July 22 2003; morning, EDT.

Van, Walt and John have arrived in Pago Pago, American Samoa and are now with Howard aboard *Mollie*. However, at the last moment Aobure Teatata, the representative of the government of Kiribati who must accompany the expedition, was denied boarding on the flight from Honolulu to Pago Pago because he did not have the documents necessary to enter American Samoa. At his point we're not yet sure how or why this problem came about but we're hoping that we can get it straightened out quickly and get him to Samoa in the next few days so that the delay doesn't cut into the seven days the team needs on Nikumaroro to accomplish the various aspects of their mission.

Needless to say, this is a very frustrating development. As soon as we can get Mr. Teatata to Samoa the expedition will depart for Nikumaroro.

Underway At Last

Dateline: Wednesday, July 23 2003; 0700, EDT.

Through the courtesy and cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kiribati, TIGHAR's Niku Vp expedition has been cleared to depart Pago Pago for the Phoenix Islands without being accompanied by a government representative. This special exception to official policy was extended to TIGHAR rather than further delay the expedition's departure. *Mollie* will now proceed directly to Kanton Island where the expedition party will clear Kiribati Customs and Immigration formalities before continuing on to Nikumaroro.

All of these diplomatic negotiations were handled in a rather intense few hours yesterday afternoon (early morning in Hawaii, Samoa, and Tarawa). As soon as I had the clearance from Foreign Affairs I phoned Van aboard *Mollie* and released the expedition for departure. They were going to put to sea as soon as they cleared U.S. Customs and Port Security. Van will check in by satphone later today with a progress report.

The detour via Kanton will add an estimated day and a half to the sailing time from Pago Pago. We now expect *Mollie* to arrive off Nikumaroro on or about Monday, July 28.

Check for daily updates on the expedition at <http://www.tighar.org/Projects/Earhart/NikuV/dailies.html>. There is also a link to the daily reports on the home page.