

TIGHAR TRACKS

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Jigsaw Puzzle



The Seven Site on Nikumaroro presents a classic archaeological challenge. The ground holds artifacts from several periods and events. There is good reason to suspect that some of those artifacts are associated with an event of great significance, but how can we be sure? How do we go about sorting out which artifacts go with which historical period? Normally, archaeologists are greatly aided by stratigraphy. Soil builds up over time. Older objects are found in deeper strata. But there is no soil at the Seven Site. The surface is a jumble of small coral chunks known as “rubble” (see photo at right). The coral rubble does not build up over time so there is no stratigraphy. Objects deposited on the surface either stay on the surface or settle down a few centimeters between the pieces of

loose surface rubble. As the scaevola underbrush that covers the site grows it churns the coral



rubble, effectively stirring the pot and further confusing the archaeological picture.

In tackling this problem we've found the jigsaw puzzle analogy to be a good one.

You have a big box of puzzle pieces and no picture on the box cover. You quickly figure out that the box contains pieces from several different puzzles and you think that one of them might be the picture you're looking for. It would be nice if there was one piece somewhere in the pile that contained enough information to prove your point, but even if there is no one "smoking gun" piece, it doesn't mean the puzzle can't be solved. The only way to proceed is to sort the pieces and assemble all the puzzles as much as possible.

To figure out which pieces go with which puzzle, first you have to identify what the piece is. That may or may not be possible. Of the pieces you can identify, you look for pieces that fit together to form a picture. For example, at the Seven Site, carbine shells from Coast Guard rifles and broken Coast Guard crockery present a picture of Coast Guard target practice.



Once you've assembled the pieces that make other pictures you're left with pieces that don't seem to fit and MIGHT fit together to form the picture you hope is there. If you're wrong, the more pieces you find, the harder it will be to pound them together into a reasonable picture. If you're right, the more pieces you find, the easier it will be to fit them together into a picture that becomes clearer and clearer. At some point, the picture becomes clear enough to be recognizable. That point will vary from individual to individual, but if enough pieces can be found, eventually the picture will be obvious to everyone except those who simply refuse to see.

On Nikumaroro we have at least four pictures, i.e. known historical events, that might be represented by artifacts and features at the Seven Site.

The Castaway

It appears certain that sometime before 1940, and probably prior to the island's colonization in late 1938, a castaway or castaways lived for a time and ultimately died somewhere on the southeast end of the atoll. If we can find and assemble enough pieces of the castaway puzzle, the picture will be clear enough to see whether or not our suspicion is correct that the castaways were none other than Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan.

Gallagher's Search

In the fall of 1940, after learning that a human skull had been found and buried by an island work party, British Colonial Service officer Gerald Gallagher searched for and found a partial skeleton and a few personal effects at what appeared to be a castaway's campsite at a remote spot on the southeast end of the atoll. The presence of part of a woman's shoe caused him to suspect that he had found Amelia Earhart.

Planting Operations

An aerial photo taken in June 1941 shows brush clearing in progress at the Seven Site and appears to confirm Gallagher's December 1940 statement that the area where the bones were found would be subject to planting operations in the next few months. Administrative maps as late as 1954 suggest that the site was set aside for some special government purpose. By 1959 the site seems to have been abandoned. Shallow depressions and a few stray coconut trees near the lagoon shore suggest an experimental, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to grow coconut palms on that part of the atoll.

Coast Guard Visits

On an unknown number of occasions between July 1944 and May 1946, U.S. Coast Guard personnel from Unit 92, the Loran radio navigation station at the southeast tip of the island, visited the Seven Site. Interviews with veterans indicate that their activities were limited to sightseeing and informal target practice.

There were, of course, other events at various times on other parts of the island – the wreck of freighter *SS Norwich City* in November 1929, a visit to the island by British officials in October 1937, surveys of the island by New Zealand and U.S. parties in 1939 – but because the bones weren't discovered until 1940, it's not likely that people associated with these events ever visited the Seven Site. Still, in examining the site it is important to consider whether objects or features at the site might fit one of these or some unknown post-1940 event.

Naturally, of greatest interest to our investigation are the artifacts and features that seem attributable to the castaway. Are they random pieces from unknown events or do they fit together to begin to form a picture? And if they do, what does the picture tell us about the identity of the castaway?

Over the next several issues of *TIGHAR Tracks*, and in Research Bulletins on the TIGHAR website, we'll take a close look at the artifacts and features of the Seven Site to see what they are, how they fit together and what they tell us.

We'll start with Artifact 2-8-S-5.