

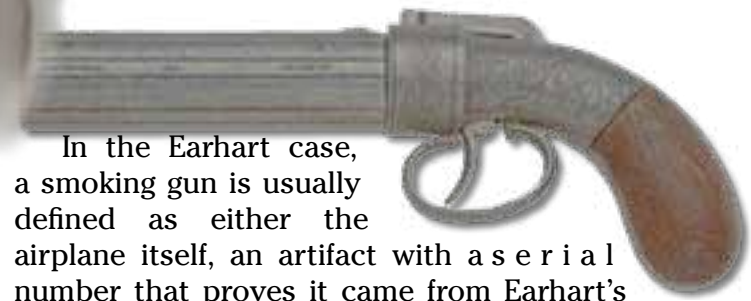
TIGHAR TRACKS

October 2008

Smoking Guns



Earhart and Noonan landed the Electra safely at Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro) and sent radio distress calls for the next three nights. Amelia met her end as a castaway at a place near the southeastern end of the atoll we call the Seven Site.



In the Earhart case, a smoking gun is usually defined as either the airplane itself, an artifact with a serial number that proves it came from Earhart's airplane, or human remains that can be DNA-matched to Earhart's or Noonan's living relatives. The airplane is, for the moment, out of reach. We think that what's left of it is in the water off the edge of the reef at a depth we have not yet been able to explore. The other two types of smoking guns, however, may already be in TIGHAR's possession. "Numbers Game" (p. 4) describes recent research successes that point toward a serial number connection. "Archaeological Update" (p. 2) reviews the latest analytical results on artifacts and materials collected at the Seven Site, including the unexpected, although still remote, possibility of DNA.

Whether you regard those statements as fanciful fairytales, reasonable hypotheses or established facts depends upon your familiarity with, and your opinion of, the evidence offered to support them. It has often been said that to conclusively solve the Earhart mystery TIGHAR will need to find a "smoking gun," but historical mysteries are rarely solved by the discovery of a single object of apparently unimpeachable provenience. A solution perched atop a single extraordinary artifact is precarious and, by definition, suspect. Reliable solutions to historical puzzles require a broad mosaic of evidentiary support that paints a consistent and credible, although seldom complete, picture of what happened. When individually conclusive pieces of evidence do turn up, their discovery can be purely accidental but is more often the result of good detective work. Simply put, your chances of finding a smoking gun are better if you have already figured out that Col. Mustard committed the murder with the revolver in the library.

In a sound-bite world, smoking guns are shortcuts to widespread acceptance of findings that would otherwise require an investment of more time and effort to understand than most people are willing to make. As investigators, our job is to follow the evidence where it leads, assembling the puzzle piece by piece, watching for and hoping for, but not counting on, a smoking gun to turn up.

