

THE DOGS THAT DIDN'T BARK



Scotland Yard detective: "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Detective: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident."

"Silver Blaze," *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1894.

Just as important as the numerous pieces of archival, photographic and artifact evidence that point to the Earhart/Noonan flight having ended at Gardner Island (now Nikumaroro) are the people and events that might have discovered the fate of the lost flyers – but didn't. These are the dogs that didn't bark and they provide us with as many clues about what happened as do the dogs that did.

July 1937

For the first five nights after Earhart disappeared the dogs were fairly baying at the moon. Scores of radio signals believed at the time to be distress calls sent from the missing aircraft were heard by professional operators, licensed amateurs, and ordinary people listening on their home sets. The first week of the U.S. Navy's search was based on the theory that the calls were genuine and were being sent from one of the islands in the Phoenix Group. USS *Colorado* steamed south from Pearl Harbor with orders to search the reefs and islands but by the time the battleship reached the area, the signals had stopped.



Radio signals believed to be from the lost plane were heard for the first five nights after the Electra disappeared.

The dogs were silent when three aircraft from USS *Colorado* searched Gardner Island on the morning of July 9. The naval aviators saw nothing of Earhart's plane or its wreckage, but the Senior Aviator noted "signs of recent habitation." He didn't know that the island had been uninhabited since 1892.

October 1937

Led by Lands Commissioner Harry Maude and Cadet Officer Eric Bevington, a British expedition to evaluate the Phoenix Islands for future settlement spent three days, October 13-15, at Gardner Island three months after Earhart disappeared.



The object on the reef north of the shipwreck, visible in a photo taken by Eric Bevington in October 1937, appears to be the wreckage of one of the Electra's main landing gear assemblies.

One of the fifteen photographs Bevington took during their visit appears to show a separated landing gear assembly from Earhart's Electra on the reef about a quarter mile north of the shipwreck (see "The Object Formerly Known As Nessie," p. 30) but this piece of debris went unnoticed at the time and, once again, the dogs didn't bark.

November/December 1938

On November 30, 1938 a ten-man team arrived at Gardner Island to map the atoll and lagoon as part of the New Zealand Pacific Aviation Survey. The next day a Supermarine Walrus launched from the cruiser HMS *Leander* took aerial photos of the island. In those photos no aircraft or aircraft debris are apparent on the reef or in the water. The



This December 1, 1938 aerial photo clearly shows the shipwreck on the reef but the object in the 1937 Bevington Photo is not discernible.

object in the October 1937 photo is either gone or hidden by the surf.

While the New Zealanders were there, and totally unrelated to their survey, the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme (PISS) got underway when, on December 21, Harry Maude returned with an eight-man work party of Gilbertese laborers to start clearing land for a village on the south side

of the main lagoon passage. The reports and correspondence related to that work mention nothing about aircraft wreckage.

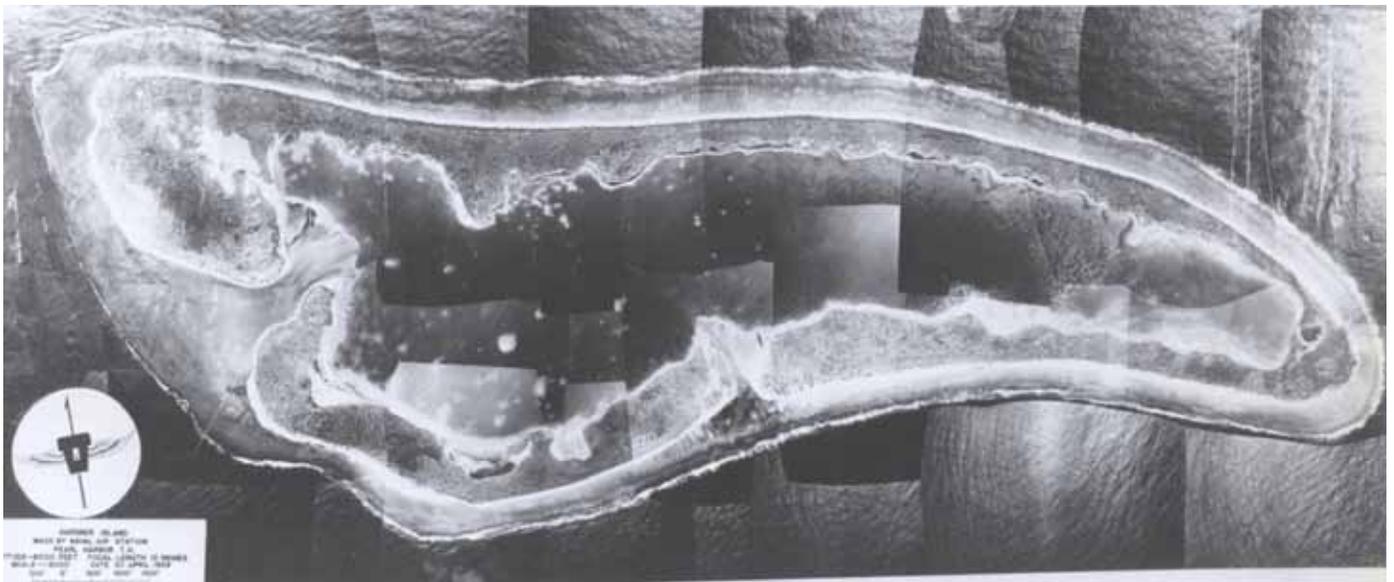
1939

The New Zealand survey party completed its work and departed on February 5, 1939. Their purpose had been to determine whether the island was a good prospect for the construction of an airfield. It wasn't, but the lagoon was judged to be suitable for seaplane landings. No aircraft debris was reported.

Clearing and construction of the village continued and, on April 28, the families of the Gilbertese laborers arrived – twelve new settlers. Two days later another aerial photographic survey of the island was flown, this time by the U.S. Navy as part of a Pacific islands strategic survey. A Grumman J2F "Duck" supported by the seaplane tender USS *Pelican* took photos for a mosaic of the entire island. No aircraft wreckage is apparent in the photo-mosaic but the photography was from high altitude.

On June 17, the arrival of more settlers brought the island population to fifty-eight (sixteen men, sixteen women, eleven boys and fifteen girls). In November a U.S. Navy team mapped the island and lagoon while the survey ship USS *Bushnell* took depth soundings in the surrounding waters. Through all this activity the dogs remained silent. No one seems to have noticed any airplane wreckage.

This photo mosaic of the island was created from high-altitude aerial photos taken on April 30, 1939. The individual images used to create the mosaic have not been found.



1940

The biggest dog who didn't bark was Gerald Gallagher, Officer in Charge of the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme. On September 23, 1940, soon after his arrival as the resident British colonial administrator on Gardner Island, Gallagher reported the discovery of a castaway's partial skeleton which he suspected was "just possibly that of Amelia Earhardt (sic)." Gallagher, a licensed pilot himself, was certainly aware that Earhart had vanished in an airplane and yet, in all of his correspondence with British officials, not once did he mention anything about an aircraft – no wreckage, no search for wreckage, not even speculation about what might have become of her plane. It could be that he knew the U.S. Navy's search had concluded that the plane had gone down at sea and assumed that if Earhart and Noonan had ended up on Gardner they arrived by liferaft. In any case, if there was an airplane wreck at Gardner in 1940 it seems likely that nobody knew about it yet – or at least didn't mention it to Gallagher.



Gerald B. Gallagher, Officer in Charge, Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme, in his residence on Gardner Island 1940 or '41.

1941

In 1999, then age 76, former island resident Emily Sikuli told us of seeing a rusty strut-like object on the reef edge north of the SS *Norwich City* wreck. The location she marked for us on a map is virtually the same place where debris appears in the 1937 Bevington Photo.

Her father, Temou Samuela, told her the object was part of an airplane. Temou, the island carpenter, was bought to Gardner from Funafuti in the Ellice Islands in January 1940. With him came his family, including seventeen-year-old daughter Segalo. In November 1941, Segalo left to attend nursing school in Fiji where she used an English first name and eventually married to become Emily Sikuli.



Emily Sikuli in 1999.

Emily/Segalo was on the island from January 1940 until November 1941. Gallagher was on the island from September 1940 until June 1941. He returned in September gravely ill and died within days. If Gallagher didn't know about the airplane debris and Emily did, the wreckage she described may have been discovered sometime in the five month period between Gallagher's departure in June and Emily's departure in November.

1944/45

For the first two years following Gallagher's death and the outbreak of war in the Pacific, British administration of the Phoenix Islands settlements was almost non-existent. The island had no resident European and visits by the District Officer, based at Canton Island two hundred miles away, were brief and rare. In July 1944, construction began on a U.S. Coast Guard Loran station at Gardner's southeastern tip. Construction was completed in September and the station went on the air in December. Coast Guard, and later U.S. Navy, PBY flying boats from Canton regularly re-supplied the unit's twenty-five personnel with mail and perishables.



Ensign John Mims

Between December 1944 and February 1945 Ensign John Mims, assigned to Patrol Aircraft Service Unit (PATSU) 2-2 based at Canton Island, made eight trips to Gardner as co-pilot of U.S. Navy PBY-5 BuNo 08456. On one of those visits the settlers proudly showed him a large fish they had just caught. Mims was astonished to see that the hook in the fish's mouth was crudely fashioned from aircraft aluminum and the "leader" on the fishing line was a control cable from an aircraft smaller than a PBY. As Mims wrote in a March 1995 letter to the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum:

I asked the native about the hook and leader, and he promptly informed me that it came from a wrecked plane that was there when he arrived some three years earlier (apparently no one lived on the island prior to 1941).¹

The first work party of the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme arrived in December 1938 so Mims' supposition that his informant arrived with the first settlers was incorrect, but the story does corroborate 1941 as a probable date for the discovery of airplane debris. When asked where the wreck was located Mims' informant just shrugged. Apparently by 1944 the wreck had either disappeared or whatever wreckage had washed up had been salvaged.

In addition to heavy-duty fishing tackle, Mims saw the islanders on Gardner using

...crude knives made from aluminum by grinding it with seashells and sand. At the present time I still have some jewel boxes and outriggers with inlaid diamond, heart, and star-shaped pieces of aluminum that they said came from the wrecked plane.²

TIGHAR had one of the inlays tested. It's aircraft-grade aluminum.

Ensign Mims was puzzled by what he had seen and the story he had been told. He couldn't imagine where an aircraft at Gardner in 1941 could have come from unless.... When he returned to Canton Island he asked the District Officer if the British had lost a plane at Gardner.

He replied that no British planes had been there and neither had the Americans lost any planes there. I asked him if this could be a part of Amelia Earhart's plane and he said it could well be, but he had little interest in a story of a lost pilot since the war was in progress. Also, he joked that the woman was American and that the 4th of July and Thanksgiving with the Americans was about all the American history he could take.³

Coast Guardsman Glen Geisinger was stationed on Gardner from late 1945 until the closing of the Loran station in May 1946. Like Mims a year earlier, Geisinger bought or traded for carved wooden boxes and model canoes that featured metal inlays said by the islanders to have come from "the downed plane that was once on the island."⁴



During later war years, American servicemen bought or traded for carved wooden items inlaid with metal said to be from "the downed plane."

The stories told by Emily Sikuli, Dr. John Mims, and Glen Geisinger are anecdotal recollections of events in the past. They may or may not be accurate but they are independent – in that each had no knowledge of the others when they told their story – and yet their stories are mutually corroborative and consistent with the photographic evidence in the Bevington Photo.

It appears that during the early war years – 1941 to 1943 – when the island had little contact with the outside world, the wreckage of an airplane, or pieces of wreckage from an airplane, became accessible to the islanders. Some, if not all, of the island people knew about the discovery of a skeleton rumored to be that of the famous American Amelia Earhart, but no one seems to have connected that event with "the downed plane."

The curious now-you-see-it-now-you-don't nature of the airplane wreckage continued. No reports have come to light for the period 1944 to 1952, but forensic examination of aerial mapping photos taken in 1953 shows what appear to be four pieces of light-colored metal, perhaps as much as two meters on a side, on the reef near the entrance to the main lagoon passage. Several former island residents describe seeing airplane wreckage on the reef and on the beach in that area later in the decade.

1 Letter to Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, March 1995

2 Letter to Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, March 1995

3 Letter to TIGHAR, March 2000

4 Telephone conversation with Glen Geisinger 8-23-2001

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the entire body of photographic and anecdotal evidence is how, each time wreckage is reported, the location is further south – as it should be based on the known environmental forces and as demonstrated by the distribution of *Norwich City* debris.

There is even some indication that debris from the aircraft may continue to move from the ocean, onto the reef, and into the lagoon. In 2002, during a marine biology expedition by the New England Aquarium, Dr. Greg Stone saw what appeared to be an airplane wheel stuck to the reef surface near

the southern shore of the main lagoon passage. It hadn't been there during TIGHAR's expedition the year before and when TIGHAR came back to look for the wheel in 2003, it was gone, but it was also clear that, in the interim, the west end of the island had been pummeled and over-washed by severe storms.

All of the barking and non-barking from 1937 to the present tells a story that, if we can learn how to interpret it correctly, should tell us where and how to search for whatever wreckage still survives. ◆

