

July 11, 2007

Dear Ian,

Tomorrow we depart for Nikumaroro (Gardner), so I should delay no longer in responding to your note of 30 April. We're flying to Fiji and immediately embarking for the island, a matter of about five days' sail as you know. We'll have about 17 days on the island if all goes well, and be back in the States on August 10th. We'll certainly be thinking about you as we walk (or chop) our way along the Sir Harry Luke Avenue – which is still quite discernible in many places thanks to its lining of coral slabs.

We've recently had some comparative photo-imaging done that we found pretty shocking; I'm enclosing prints. The black-and-white oblique image, of course, shows the village approximately as you saw it; the color print is a 2007 satellite image with the 1939, 1953, 1985, and 2001 shorelines marked. The 2001 line is from a satellite image; the others are from aerial photos. As you can see, a quite substantial part of the ocean shore has eroded away, particularly since 1985 – testimony, I'm afraid, to the effects of sea level rise driven by global warming. One of the planned targets of this year's archaeological work – the carpenter's house shown as "A" on the 1942 airphoto – may have been lost to us, though its remains were still there in 2003. Our other study location is the site at the SE end of the island where we think Gerald Gallagher and his colleagues found the bones in 1940.

I appreciate the information on Stan Brown, and the detail on your 1941 visit to Nikumaroro. And I take your point about the unlikelihood that the bones might have wound up in the bomb shelters of Suva. I've been led to think of this as a possibility by an account in a history of the Fiji Museum that I read in the Museum's library, which said its collections had been housed in the caves during the War, and came out significantly damaged by moisture. The odd things about the bones is that there is such a detailed record of their whereabouts up until late 1941, and then the record ends, with the bones in Dr. Hoodless' hands. Of course the outbreak of war doubtless rearranged priorities in all manner of ways, but other records did continue to be meticulously kept, and Henry Vaskess was so careful about such things that it's hard to imagine his letting the record lapse. But of course, he retired around the same time, and a good deal may have been lost in the transition.

In any event, I wanted to send my greetings, and tell you that we're (almost) on our way. The Associated Press is covering the project, and supposedly will be putting out daily updates. And I'll be in touch upon our return.

Best wishes,