

Preliminary Synopsis of Oral History Interviews

at

Rawaki Village and Nikumaroro Village

Solomon Islands

by

**The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery
(TIGHAR)**

November 26, 2011



Nikumaroro Village

Preliminary Synopsis of Oral History Interviews, Solomon Islands 2011

From August 20-30, 2011, John Clauss, Nancy Farrell, Karl Kern, Baoro Laxton Koraua and Gary F. Quigg, of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) conducted a research expedition in the Solomon Islands consisting of oral history interviews with former residents of Nikumaroro Island (Kiribati) as well as a thorough examination of relevant archival materials in the Solomon Islands National Archives. This preliminary synopsis provides an initial overview of the research conducted by TIGHAR as a part of further testing the Earhart Project's Nikumaroro Hypothesis. A more detailed report will follow, when the audio and video recordings have been completely transcribed and analyzed.

Procedures

Upon arrival in Honiara (Guadalcanal), Clauss, Farrell, Kern and Quigg were met by Koraua at the airport. Mr. Koraua is a resident of Honiara and the son of Paul Laxton. Mr. Laxton, who served as Assistant Lands Commissioner for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, was the British Colonial Service officer in charge of the settlement on Gardner Island (Nikumaroro Island) for several years following World War II. Born on Nikumaroro Island in 1960, Mr. Koraua was relocated to the Solomon Islands along with the entire population of the Nikumaroro Island colony in 1963. Mr. Koraua was crucial to the success of the expedition, acting as interpreter, logistics coordinator, ambassador and gracious host. Further, Mr. Koraua provided for our transportation between the outer islands of Kohinggo and Vaghena aboard his boat, the M/V *Temaui*.

The team spent the first three days of the expedition in Honiara gathering provisions for the upcoming voyage on *Temaui*, testing audio and video recording equipment, and conducting archival research in the National Archives. Despite a full day and one half day reviewing hundreds of documents of the Western Pacific High Commission, no pertinent information on Gardner Island (Nikumaroro) or other subjects related to the Earhart Project was found.

On Tuesday, August 23, the team flew from Honiara (Guadalcanal) to Munda (New Georgia) via Solomon Airlines to begin field research. Arriving in the afternoon, a local truck driver provided transit along the coast road to the harbor at Noro where *Temaui* was docked. Once the team was aboard, *Temaui* motored across the narrow harbor to Rawaki Village (Kohinggo). Although sundown was nearing the team elected to go ashore on *Temaui's* dinghy, introduce ourselves to the village residents, and meet with our first interview subjects. We were welcomed into the home of Taniana and Ona (Tionae) Bourika who invited us to gather in the family maneaba adjacent to their home. Having settled in the maneaba, the team explained the purpose of the visit by kerosene lamp light. Through Mr. Koraua's interpretation Taniana and Ona graciously agreed to be interviewed the next morning.

Spending the night aboard *Temaui*, anchored just off the village, the team went ashore at 830am to conduct the first interviews on Wednesday, August 24. Taniana and Ona had invited Ona's life-long best friend Ritema Tapwaitu to join us, and the team interviewed all three subjects. After spending six hours conducting interviews the team departed Rawaki, and, aboard *Temaui*, motored back across the harbor to Noro to take on additional fuel for the twelve hour voyage to Nikumaroro Village.



M/V Temauri

Enduring rough seas on the overnight crossing from Noro (New Georgia) to Nikumaroro (Vaghena) through the New Georgia Sound, the team was eager to get ashore Thursday morning, August 25. Once in Nikumaroro Village, Mr. Koraua led the team to the community maneaba where we met our interview subjects: Aberaam Abera, Teauama Abera (wife of Aberaam), Boraing Abera (brother of Aberaam), and Matakite Amerike. Our final interview subject in this village, Teinamati Amerike (brother of Matakite), is unable to walk so the team interviewed him in his home after conducting the interviews in the manaeba. Upon completing all interviews the team went back aboard *Temauri* to spend the night before motoring three hours to Kagua Island in the morning to catch the Solomons Airlines flight back to Honiara on Friday, August 26.

The team spent the remaining three days in Honiara. During this time the interview recordings were checked, the collection of artifacts on exhibit at the Solomon Islands National Museum was reviewed for any objects that may have found their way from Nikumaroro Island, meetings were held with the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education as well as the United States Consul to the Solomon Islands, and two interviews were conducted with former Nikumaroro Island resident Joseph Nemaia on August 27 and 28 at his home. Having completed all expedition initiatives the team departed Honiara for Los Angeles on Tuesday, August 30.

Summary of Interviews

Individuals interviewed during this expedition were former residents of Nikumaroro Island (formerly Gardner Island) in the Phoenix Islands who were relocated to the Solomon Islands in 1963 when the British colony on Gardner Island was abandoned. All individuals interviewed were selected by Mr. Koraua as being the oldest residents in Rawaki Village and Nikumaroro Village (with the exception of Mr. Nemaia of Honiara). These elders are the only residents of the villages with memories of their time on Nikumaroro Island. Mr. Koraua himself was born on Nikumaroro Island in 1960, emigrated with the

former colony residents to the Solomons in 1963, and grew up in Nikumaroro Village on Vaghena Island before moving to Honiara as an adult.

All interviews (totaling approximately eight hours) were conducted through translation by Mr. Koraua. The TIGHAR team asked questions of the informants in English and Mr. Koraua would then re-state the questions in I-Kiribati (Gilbertese). The informants (with the exceptions of Mr. Teinamati Amerike and Mr. Joseph Nemaia who responded in English), would then respond in I-Kiribati and Mr. Koraua would re-state the answer in English. While the younger generations of village residents speak English, Pidgin and I-Kiribati, the older village residents speak I-Kiribati predominantly and usually have a limited understanding and usage of English.



Interview with Aberaam and Teauama Abera, August 25, 2011, Nikumaroro Village

A video camera (with audio) and two audio recorders were used for each interview. Clauss, Kern and Farrell operated the recording equipment. Farrell took copious hand-written notes of each interview. Quigg led the questioning, with all other team members assisting with follow-up queries. With the exceptions of Mr. Teinamati Amerike and Mr. Joseph Nemaia, who were interviewed in their homes, all other informants were interviewed in a maneaba. In the I-Kiribati culture, a maneaba is an open structure consisting of poles and a roof of either palm fronds or corrugated metal used as a gathering place for social, civic, and religious purposes.

Questions were developed to avoid leading the informants, so that answers would be objective. To further guard against potential contamination of information given in answers, the team strictly avoided

mentioning the Earhart Project, aircraft, pilots, Amelia Earhart or anything associated with work conducted by TIGHAR on Nikumaroro Island until the last interview had been completed. The following interview summaries provide only highlights relevant to the Earhart Project's Nikumaroro Hypothesis from each recorded conversation; more details will be provided in a complete report when all recordings have been carefully reviewed.

Mr. Taniana Bourika, age 74, Rawaki Village August 24, 2011

Taniana came to Nikumaroro Island with his parents in 1945 when he was eight years of age and remained there until the colony was abandoned in 1963. Most interesting among Taniana's memories of Nikumaroro Island was his recollection of finding shiny metal debris, including what he described as a door (curved) on the beach of Aukaraima South, and just inland of the beach. Other interesting information from Taniana focused on his activities on what he called the far side of the island. In this area, Taniana described how he and other boys would climb Buka trees to catch Frigate birds. To prepare the birds for a meal, the wings, feet and heads were cut off before being placed on a fire or in an earthen oven. Taniana also explained that he and his comrades would hunt turtles on the far side of the island and butcher them there, using everything from the carcass except the bones and shell. When Taniana and his friends would stay overnight on the far side of the island, he explained that they did not use a single fire pit over and over, but would move the location of their fire.

Ms. Ona (Tione) Bourika and Ritema Tapweaitu, ages 74/74, Rawaki Village August 24, 2011

Ona and Ritema were interviewed together, as they were life-long best friends from the time they were young girls on Nikumaroro Island. Ritema arrived at Nikumaroro Island in 1945, and Ona arrived in 1952. Both remained on the island until the 1963 relocation. The women shared that they heard about the discovery of the shiny metal Taniana and other boys had found on the island, but explained that girls were not allowed to explore the island. They also mentioned they had heard rumors about bones being found on the island, but had never seen any bones.



Team with Ona Bourika, Ritema Tapweaitu and Taniana Bourika, August 24, 2011, Rawaki Village

Mr. Aberaam Abera and Ms. Teauama Abera, ages 71/68, Nikumaroro Village August 25, 2011

Husband and wife, Aberaam and Teauama were interviewed together. Both were born on Nikumaroro Island, Aberaam in 1940 and Teauama in 1943. They both remembered a pair of shoes having been found on Aukeraime South. They did not see the shoes themselves, but heard many people talking about them. Teauama remembered her father having a large piece of aluminum. When she was later shown a photograph of artifact 2-2-V-1, Teauama said her father's piece of aluminum resembled the one in the photograph. Teauama explained that aluminum was used to scrape coconuts. Teauama did not know where he father got the aluminum, but thought perhaps from Manra or Kanton.

Mr. Boraing Abera and Mr. Matakite Amerike, ages 70/70, Nikumaroro Village August 25, 2011

Interviewed together, Boraing arrived at Nikumaroro Island in 1959 as an adult, and Matakite arrived there as a child in 1943. Both confirmed that they had spent nights in Karaka's (Gerald Gallagher) house on the far side of the island. Neither had knowledge of aluminum or bones found on Nikumaroro Island.

Mr. Teinamati Amerike, age 79, Nikumaroro Village August 25, 2011

Teinamati is Matakite Amerike's older brother. Teinamati arrived on Nikumaroro Island in 1942 and left in 1944 to attend secondary school on Tarawa. His only memory from these years is exploring the shipwreck with other boys. Following his schooling on Tarawa, Teinamati went to Suva, Fiji to attend the Central Medical School where he studied under Dr. Hoodless, graduating in 1954. He returned to Nikumaroro Island in 1963 just prior to the colony's abandonment, and served as Native Medical Practitioner on two of the trips from Nikumaroro Island to the Solomon Islands. This interview was conducted in English, as Teinamati is fluent in the language.



Interview with Boraing Abera and Matakite Amerike, August 25, 2011, Nikumaroro Village

Mr. Joseph Nemaia, age 61, Honiara August 27 and 28, 2011

Born on Nikumaroro Island in 1950, Joseph left with his family in 1951. Though he has no memories of the island, his parents (Nemaia Tebarere and Martina [Kiron] Tebarere, who were among the first wave of settlers to Nikumaroro Island in 1939) shared their memories of the island with him. Among the more relevant things Joseph was told by his parents was that his grandfather was buried on Nutiran, and that a large platter they used for cooking (known as a tengabingabi) was made of aircraft aluminum from Nikumaroro Island. Joseph described the tengabingabi as being about one foot by two feet in size, very thin, with rivet holes. He does not know where the tengabingabi is now, but knows it was kept with the family throughout their moves from Nikumaroro to Manra to Ghizo to Guadalcanal. Joseph also mentioned that his uncle, Taumarea Nemaia, made a lot of combs from aircraft aluminum from Nikumaroro. This interview was also conducted in English as Joseph is fluent in the language.

Plan for Further Evaluation and Initial Conclusions

At this time the back-up audio recordings of the interviews are with TIGHAR Archaeologist Thomas King, PhD, for review and transcription. Nancy Farrell is in the process of preparing mp3 files of the primary audio tapes for review and transcription. Karl Kern has created DVD copies of the video recordings and has sent these, along with the original data discs, to Gary F. Quigg for review. Plans for further analysis include checking the accuracy of Mr. Koraua's translation by an individual fluent in the I-Kiribati language, and a complete transcription of all interviews to be made available on the TIGHAR website. Further, Dr. King has suggested that an in-depth article be prepared focusing on this expedition for an academic publication such as the *Journal of Pacific Studies*.



Karl Kern, John Clauss, Nancy Farrell and Gary Quigg

Thus far, limited analysis of the data (anecdotal evidence) relevant to the Earhart Project obtained in the Solomons during this expedition includes the following initial conclusions:

New anecdotal information presented on what may be aircraft artifacts on Nikumaroro Island heretofore unknown to TIGHAR, along with the general location of their discovery.

New anecdotal evidence presented on the existence of shoes discovered on Aukaraime South.

New anecdotal information on the possible origins of some of the ecofacts, artifacts, and features found on the Seven Site.

New anecdotal information on the use of aircraft aluminum by colonists on Nikumaroro Island.

New anecdotal information on the use of “Karaka’s house” (Gallagher) by colonists on Nikumaroro Island.

The Solomons Expedition 2011 team wishes to thank TIGHAR administration, and the board of directors, for their support.



Rawaki Village