

Letter From Yau Fai Lum.

In 1989, Yau Fai Lum corresponded with TIGHAR member Tom Gannon about his recollections of being a radio operator on Howland Island during the Earhart search.



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January 10, 1989

KGGNW

KHGCW

Thomas F. Gannon
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Dear Thomas:

A half century is a long time ago to remember things accurately. For memory has faded and time and age has taken its toll. I will try to give you a short synopsis of my nine months on Howland Island.

Howland Island is a very small island near the equator which is about one mile long and half-a-mile wide. It is flat about 20 feet above sea level. The chief and original inhabitants of the island are thousands of sea birds like the frigate, booby, marlyn, terns, etc. They build their nests on the sandy ground, lay their eggs, and raise their young. Sailing ships used to stop by to retrieve guano which is in abundance. There are also thousands of rats that are not afraid of man. There are just a few trees about ten feet tall. But there are an abundance of sea food from fish to squid to lobsters. We killed many sharks for their jaws as trophies and their fins for soup.

We worked for the Dept. of Interior, three Hawaiians from Kamehameha School and myself, the radio operator. I had a SW3 radio receiver and a home built transmitter with a 807 in the final. The Zepp antenna hung from the top of the flag pole to a shorter pole 65 feet away. Our electrical sources were borrowed from the army with their hand-cranked generator which put out 400 volts, storage batteries together with a generator-charger, and a dynamo. I had special authority from the FCC to operate on 31 meters on the Coast frequency, because the ham bands had too much QRM.

With only men (four) on the island, we ran around naked all day long and did not shave for nine months. Every three months the Coast Guard ship Itasca stop by to provide us with provisions and transfer personnel who wish to leave. All food and water in 50-gallon drums were brought in from Honolulu.

Pan American Airline was pioneering the Pacific at that time, and we provided them with weather reports on the ground and in the upper atmosphere. We rotate every four days to stand watch and take weather readings like barometric pressure, temperature, wind direction and speed, cloud formation, etc. Once a day we set up the theodolite and inflate a huge balloon. As one person release the balloon, he has his log and pencil ready to log the readings as announced by the other person manning the theodolite. The readings give upper atmosphere wind speed and direction. Once a day all these information were relayed to another ham in Honolulu who telephoned PAA with the figures.

About a month prior to D Day when Amelia Earhart was to arrive, the Coast Guard brought and landed heavy equipment of bull dozer, grader, tractor, etc., to build the airfield. It was relatively easy for the land was flat, sandy, with no huge boulders to move or dynamite. One concern was that if the navigation was not perfect, they may miss or overshoot the island. From 30,000 feet up, the island is just a fly speck in the Pacific. Hard to see. The other concern was the thousands of sea birds flying about which may damage the plane.

On the evening of Day minus 1, I was aboard ship enjoying a good meal and splashing in a hot shower. On Howland we do not have such luxuries. We bathe in the ocean and cannot use soap. Salt water do not wash soap off our skin. Afterwards I went on deck just in time to witness a loud boom on the island when the army personnel set off a couple of cases of dynamite trying to scare the birds away. When the blasts went off, all the birds took flight about 100 feet into the air, chirping in fright. The whole island shook and vibrated sending ripples of small waves around the island. After a few minutes, all of the birds returned to their nests.

The Coast Guard radio personnel brought ashore portable radio equipment, direction finders, etc., and occupied a shack next to the main house. We did not bother them so as not to interfere with their duties. In the afternoon as I walked past the shack, I heard one of them say, "They are low on gas." I assume they were refering to Earhart, but I did not bother to ask.

The army personnel built an eight-foot high stand and hoisted a 50-gallon drum of water atop. They attached a show head and a pull cord to release the water. Tarpaulin surrounded the structure to offer privacy since Amelia will be the only female within miles of the island. This will be her shower room. No hot shower for the temperature was about 90°.

In the meantime, I was busy giving up my bed for her. It was one of those folding steel bed about 30" wide with a thin mattress on it. I spread a clean sheet on it and changed the pillow case. She will have privacy here for this is a room towards the back of the house where she could sleep without being bothered.

When she did not arrive as scheduled, the Coast Guard ship began circling the island in expanding circles until out of sight trying to locate her. They came back a few days later empty handed.

There were many rumors about her disappearance, all without proof. That the Japanese held her prisoner, the Japanese shot her down, she was spying, and she never left on her last leg to Howland, etc.

I was never in radio contact with Earhart, for that was left entirely to the Coast Guard. My SW3 receiver only had a few coils in the ham bands and two that I wound to receive the Coast Guard frequency on 31 meters and a broadcast coil to receive KGMB in Honolulu. I do not know anything about hearing signals from Earhart after she went down.

Sorry to have taken so long to answer your letter. When your letter dated Dec. 17, 1988 was in transit, we left on Dec. 19 to visit our grandchildren in Tennessee. We just got home to find your letter together with a huge pile of mail awaiting. I am surprise to find so many people researching the same subject at such a late date. I have an appointment with a fella who is coming on Jan. 22 to record our conversation on TV.

I hope the above information will shed some light in your research. Good luck and hope you will come up with all the correct answers. 73.

Very truly yours,

Yau Fai Lum
Yau Fai Lum