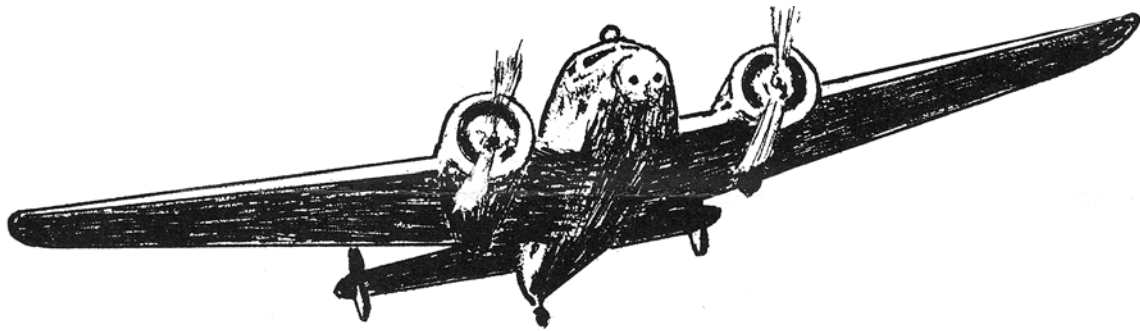


TIGHAR TRACKS

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP FOR HISTORIC AIRCRAFT RECOVERY

FINDING AMELIA



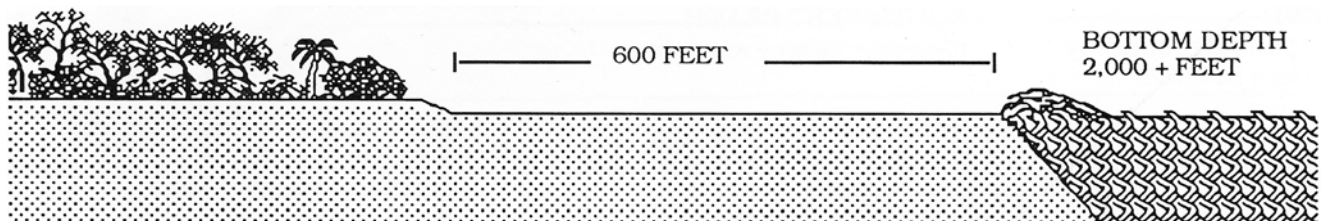
The expedition has returned, and the answer to the universal question "Did you find her?" is maddeningly, but predictably, "Maybe." Like all scientific expeditions this one produced volumes of carefully collected information -- reams of journal entries, thousands of photographs, hours upon hours of videotape and some very interesting artifacts -- all of which must be catalogued, compiled and evaluated before the results are fully understood. A few general conclusions are, however, immediately apparent.

- No great silver airplane was found lurking in the bushes or clinging to the reef. But that doesn't mean it's not there. Nikumaroro (Gardner Island) offers more obstacles to search operations than are apparent on maps or aerial photographs. The lack of any safe anchorage, the steepness of the fringing reef and the island's almost impenetrable vegetation make it a virtual fortress. In three weeks of intense effort the TIGHAR team was able to do selective inspections of many areas but a

conclusive examination of the entire island was out of the question.

- The broad, flat expanse of hard coral which surrounds the island's shore dries at low tide to provide a very attractive surface upon which to make a forced landing. However, a disabled aircraft on that reef-flat would, at high tide, be partially afloat in 3 to 4 feet of water. Over a period of a few days tidal cycles would move the aircraft inexorably toward and ultimately over the edge of the fringing reef. From there it's a steep plunge to depths of 2 to 4 thousand feet (far deeper than our divers could search). Such a scenario would explain radio distress calls that lasted only three days and were received only at times corresponding to low tide at Gardner. It would also account for phrases in those messages such as "on coral southwest of unknown island" and "don't hold -- with us -- much longer -- above water -- shut off."

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The reef-flat at Nikumaroro dries at low tide to provide an attractive landing area. Tidal hind-casting done for TIGHAR by NOAA indicates that Earhart would have arrived over the island at low tide.

If Earhart and Noonan did end up marooned on the beach at Nikumaroro we can say with some certainty that they would no longer be able to respond by the time the Navy search aircraft came over a week later. TIGHAR search teams operating on that beach recorded temperatures routinely above 120° F and consumed one quart of water per hour to compensate for fluid loss. In 1937 there was no fresh water available on the island and a week is about the limit of human endurance under those conditions. That would account for the “clear signs of recent human habitation” reported by search pilot Lt. John Lambrecht as well as his failed attempts to “elicit an answering wave.” It might also explain the woman’s skeleton wearing American shoes reportedly found on that beach when the first settlers arrived there in late 1938.

In short, the expedition found no instant, easy answer to the Earhart puzzle. What it did find was a place where the pieces of that puzzle fit together to make a clear and rational picture. There is still a great deal of work to be done to find out whether or not the picture is an accurate one. Nineteen separate artifacts were recovered from Nikumaroro, some of

which give the impression of being aircraft parts. A cigarette lighter found buried on the southwest beach could conceivably be Noonan’s. There is also reason to suspect that British records from the early days of the colony at Nikumaroro may contain confirmation and detailed descriptions of the bones reportedly found there.

The Earhart Project now moves into its third phase. The first phase was an exhaustive review of the documented facts surrounding the disappearance. That research clearly indicated the need for Phase Two, an on-site examination of the most likely place for the flight to have ended. That phase was completed with the return of the expedition. Phase Three will involve the compilation of data gathered during the expedition, the publication of those results, the evaluation of the artifacts recovered and the investigation of new sources such as the British colonial records. It’s going to mean more work, more time, and, of course, more money. You, the members of TIGHAR, have made The Earhart Project the success that it is. As always, we’ll be demonstrating our appreciation by making available to you the results of the work you make possible.

