

TIGHAR TRACKS

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP FOR HISTORIC AIRCRAFT RECOVERY

A PROMISE OF CERTAINTY

We're going to know. We don't know yet, but we now know that we're going to know whether or not Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan landed their Lockheed at Nikumaroro. TIGHAR's most recent expedition to that far away island has returned with airplane wreckage – bits and pieces of aluminum and other materials which were, without question, once part of an airplane. The artifacts recovered are of sufficient variety and complexity to permit a conclusive identification of the aircraft from which they came. Is it the Electra? Are these shards of debris the long-sought answer to the Earhart enigma, or can Nikumaroro be eliminated from the puzzle? This expedition, organized and executed at such cost in dollars and sweat, has taken the problem out of the realm of theory and speculation and made it an issue of conclusive material analysis. The significance of that accomplishment can hardly be overstated. We're going to know.

SURPRISES

In historical investigation it is wise to remind ourselves that we really don't know one tenth of one percent about anything. History hands us tiny scraps of certainty around which we try to assemble a picture using theory, probability and conjecture to fill in the huge blank spaces. If we're careful, disciplined and rational, the picture we concoct will bear some resemblance to what really happened, but it will never, ever be exactly right. It may, however, lead us to the discovery of more of those precious scraps of certainty with which we can correct our picture, and begin the process anew. Surprises, therefore, in an investigation like The Earhart Project should not be – well – surprising. And indeed, Nikumaroro handed us a number of surprises during the ten days the expedition spent at the island.



DISAPPOINTMENTS

The grave which we suspected might contain the bones reportedly found by the island's early settlers turned out to contain the remains of a tiny, possibly stillborn, infant. The excavation was undertaken only after we had re-examined the whole situation with the aid of our representative from the government of Kiribati and obtained his concurrence that the grave was very suspicious. The dig was meticulously executed over several days under very difficult conditions and, in the end, we were rewarded with the knowledge that all we had done was disturb the grave of a baby. As badly as we felt, as we carefully restored the grave we also knew that we had had no choice if we were to carry out the investigation we had come there to do. Speculation had been replaced with another scrap of certainty. The contents of the grave are now known, although the reason for its odd location and the origin of other objects found nearby are still a mystery.

Less conclusive was the search for the possible remains of a campsite seen by World War II Coast Guardsmen on the island's eastern shore. Day after blistering day of metal detector sweeps along the carefully surveyed and gridded beachfront yielded nothing unusual or unexplainable. Whatever the Coasties saw in 1944 is now either gone or hidden deep in the impenetrable underbrush. The TIGHAR team carried out an excellent search under truly brutal conditions and all we know for sure is that there was nothing where we were able to look.

HOPE AND FRUSTRATION

There is, however, no underbrush in the ocean and the sonar search of the waters surrounding the atoll was more conclusive. The 1989 expedition had determined that there was no intact airplane parked on Nikumaroro.

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The 1991 expedition proved that there is no intact airplane resting on the ocean bottom anywhere near the island. In fact, Oceaneering International found the sea floor adjacent to the atoll remarkably free of any debris except for one spot along the section of beachfront photographed by the U.S. Navy search planes in 1937 and directly off shore of where World War II Coast Guardsmen reported seeing an unexplained campsite. There are anomalous sonar contacts in that area that are too small to be an intact airplane and might simply be unusual coral outcroppings. Then again, they could be chunks of airplane. Maddeningly, the targets were too deep for inspection by divers without special support equipment, and too close to the reef-edge to permit visual inspection with our ROV (Remote Operated Vehicle), so any further information about these targets will have to come from analysis of the sonar read-outs. At the very least, Oceaneering's sonar search has allowed us to make a fundamental correction to our historical picture. If the Earhart aircraft landed at Nikumaroro it has not survived intact.

REVELATION

Along with the confirmation that there is no intact airplane, wet or dry, at Nikumaroro came the discovery of components from a very much un-intact airplane scattered throughout the long-abandoned Gilbertese village. The most obvious parts were not visible in 1989 but had appeared, or re-appeared, as the result of severe beach erosion caused by very large waves which hit the west end of the island sometime between our two visits. Other pieces were, in 1989, undoubtedly right where we found them in 1991. In our failure to recognize them on the first expedition is a valuable lesson in historical investigation. We have always been, and must necessarily be, our own worst skeptics. In our abhorrence of the wild speculation and unfounded leaping to conclusions which have typified Earhart research for more than fifty years, we have gone to great lengths to avoid such errors in TIGHAR's work. And yet healthy skepticism, if taken too far, can become blindness. In 1989 we were quick (too quick it turns out) to ascribe aluminum debris seen among the ruins of the village to non-aviation sources. After all, there had been a Coast Guard Loran station on the island during World War II. Surely they had left behind objects made of aluminum, and weren't scraps of the metal found in the village more likely to be from that source than from an airplane? It was only when confronted with a box-like structure stamped with what looked suspiciously like an airplane part number that we were willing to concede that it was worth checking out. And even that artifact, which turned out to be the navigator's bookcase, took two

years to thoroughly analyse. A handful of other pieces of aluminum were also collected, almost grudgingly, but they didn't have numbers and never received much analytical attention. Then, on this expedition, the island handed us more aluminum artifacts which are quite obviously airplane parts. We're pretty dense, but eventually we catch on. A harder look at that 1989 junk reveals that several pieces are undoubtedly from an aircraft. So focused had we been on the notion that there had to be an intact airplane somewhere that we hadn't seen the evidence under our noses. The airplane at Nikumaroro, whatever airplane that might turn out to be, ended up in little pieces. With that realization it's hardly surprising that our searches for a complete aircraft, on land and underwater, came up negative. Of course, we would have much preferred an intact airplane – better visuals for the media (who would go to see *Raiders of Debris From The Lost Ark?*) – but when we set out to learn history's story it's best to remember that it's not Hollywood writing the script.

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

So what's next? The press and the public are clamoring for answers. TIGHAR's critics (primarily Earhart authors who see their royalties threatened) are predicting that we'll announce results that are just unfounded speculation. Some are so frightened that they're shouting "fraud" before we've even made an announcement. The TIGHAR membership, on the other hand, has been understanding and supportive of our decision not to say anything until we know for certain what we have. Meanwhile, NBC News Productions is working on its two-hour documentary to be syndicated nationally in early April. LIFE magazine is waiting to see how the analysis comes out before deciding whether to run the story. And all the while we're measuring, testing, comparing, squinting at reel after reel of poorly microfilmed aircraft plans, consulting dozens of experts, doing everything we can think of to make positive identification of the materials and structures discovered.

FINISHING THE JOB

But artifact analysis is expensive in dollars and in time. The major sponsors whose loans made the expedition possible are 100% behind the project, and fund-raising on TIGHAR's behalf by The Pacific Society in Japan has exceeded all expectations. Nevertheless, our ability to finish the job quickly and thoroughly is directly dependent upon membership support. The expedition's full story has yet to be told (and quite a story it is too), but first we have work to do and, as always, we need your help to do it.

