

THE CRASH AT SYDNEY ISLAND



A crucial piece of information needed to evaluate the wreckage found on Nikumaroro is the identity of an aircraft reported to have crashed on another island some 200 miles away. The logic goes like this:

- TIGHAR has established that the Gilbertese settlers on Nikumaroro used a variety of aircraft components as a source of lightweight metal. The abandoned village was fairly littered with little, and not so little, pieces of aluminum which were once part of an airplane and had been subsequently torn, hacked, and sawn apart for any number of local uses.
- Since December of 1938 when the first settlers arrived, there has been no recorded instance of any aircraft ever being damaged or abandoned at Nikumaroro. Therefore, either an airplane came to grief at the island prior to its settlement, or wreckage was brought there from a crash that occurred somewhere else.
- There have been no civilian aviation losses in the region (except a rather famous one in 1937). During World War II, only one military wreck is believed to have occurred in the Phoenix Islands which might have provided a source of airplane parts which could have, subsequently, ended up on Nikumaroro. The problem is, we don't know what kind of airplane it was.

As early as May of 1989 we started hearing rumors concerning a large aircraft that supposedly crashed on Sydney Island during the war and was picked apart by the settlers there. Then, about a year ago, Dr. Tom King (TIGHAR #0391CE) came across this passage in an anthropological work entitled *Titiana* written by Kenneth Knudson:

“During the late war years, a large four-engine aircraft from Canton Island crashed on Sydney. ...[I]t circled the island once before attempting to ditch in the lagoon. The approach was made too low, however, and the airplane ... crashed just inland from the village. It burned on coming to rest, but the islanders hastened to pull the crew members from the wreckage. One man lived for a short time, but succumbed after an hour or so as he was badly burned. ... The next day a ship arrived from Canton and the bodies were removed and taken aboard. ... After the ship left for Canton, the wreck became the chief source of aluminum for the islanders, who had learned on Canton to make combs and other ornaments from this material. Eventually almost nothing remained of the aircraft.”

After the war, traffic between Sydney (later renamed Manra) and Nikumaroro was not uncommon and there is certainly a possibility that pieces of the Sydney wreck might have

left that island. We can't eliminate that airplane as the source of the wreckage we found on Nikumaroro until we know for sure what kind of airplane it was. Here's our reasoning so far:

- U.S. Navy operations out of Canton were flown by elements of Fleet Air Wing Two. A check of the records shows that they had only two losses out of Canton for the whole war: a PB4Y-1 lost at sea on October 18, 1943, and a PBM-3D lost at sea on September 5, 1944. It would appear that the Sydney crash was not a Navy airplane.
- Army Air Force combat operations out of Canton were associated with the Gilberts and Marshalls campaigns in late '43/early '44. The 7th Air Force was flying B-24s, the most common “large four-engine” aircraft of the Pacific Theatre, so it could have been a battle-damaged or lost Lib trying to get back into Canton.
- Later in the war, Canton became a major waypoint for cargo and personnel flights enroute between the States and the Southwestern Pacific. However, the lack of mention of any cargo or unusually high loss of life seems to argue against it being one of these aircraft.
- Perhaps the most promising lead is a mention by Knudson, in another part of his book, that the Gilbertese on Sydney were receiving repeated airdrops of supplies from aircraft operating out of Canton. Sydney is not really on the way to anywhere so it's easier to explain a crash by an airplane that has a reason for being there. But what unit was doing the airdrops and what kind of airplanes were they using? Let's get the TIGHAR network cranking on this one.

