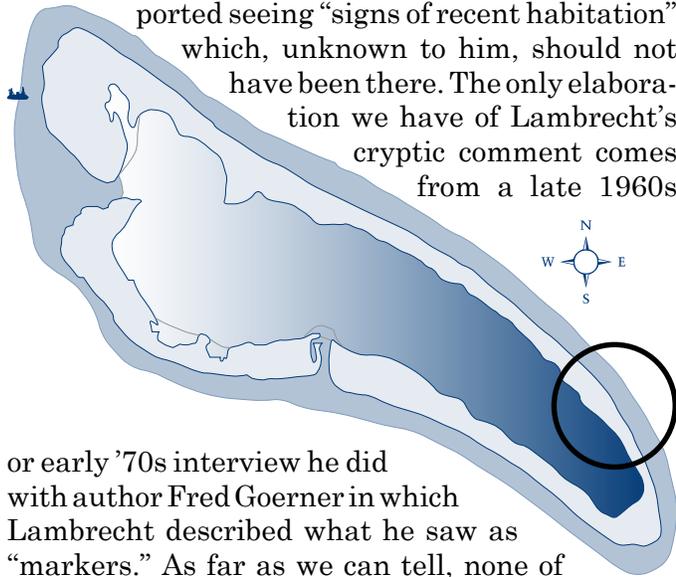


A Whole New Beach Party



A newly discovered photograph of Nikumaroro taken in 1941 shows what may be the abandoned campsite reportedly seen by U.S. Coast Guardsmen in 1944. Followers of TIGHAR's investigations will recall that we had previously come upon several indications of an unexplained human presence on the atoll's windward beachfront. In brief:

- Lt. John Lambrecht, Senior Aviator on the U.S. Navy's aerial search of the island on July 9, 1937 (one week after the Earhart disappearance) reported seeing "signs of recent habitation" which, unknown to him, should not have been there. The only elaboration we have of Lambrecht's cryptic comment comes from a late 1960s



or early '70s interview he did with author Fred Goerner in which Lambrecht described what he saw as "markers." As far as we can tell, none of the pilots or observers who took part in the Gardner search flight are now living. The only aerial photograph known to have been taken during that flight is a picture of the windward beach near the island's southeast tip.

- In August or September of 1944 a group of four Coast Guardsmen from the Loran station at the island's southeastern tip (construction began on July 24, 1944) came across an abandoned camp of some kind along the island's windward beach. When later asked, the island's residents said they were unaware of it but the Coast Guardsmen attached no importance to the site. In December of 1990 one of the four, Richard Evans, sketched for TIGHAR a "water collection device" he had seen at that spot. What he drew was a rectangular tank with rounded corners above which was rigged on poles a rectangular sheet of heavy cloth so as to collect and direct rainwater into the tank (drawing at right is based on Evans' sketch). In size and shape the structure he sketched bears a striking resemblance to one of the fuel tanks from the cabin of Earhart's Electra

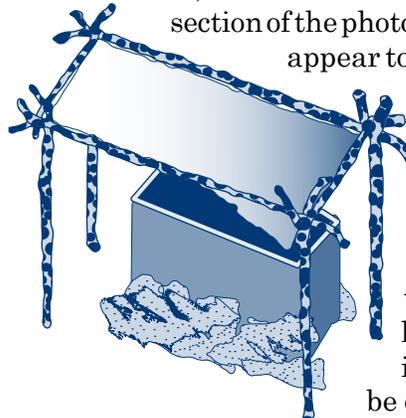
with a canvas engine cover stretched on poles above it. Herb Moffitt, who was also there, remembers a low bench, a rusty can and a pile of bird bones and feathers. The other two men present that day are now dead.

- In 1949 a British Colonial Service official by the name of Paul Laxton spent several months on Nikumaroro. He later wrote an article for the Journal of the Polynesian Society in which he mentioned that the local inhabitants had showed him "a house built for Gallagher on a strip of land cleared from lagoon to ocean beach so that the fresh winds could blow easily through." His account of where he was on the island when he saw the "house" seems to match the place photographed by the Lambrecht flight and spot described by Evans and Moffitt, but his explanation of what the site is doesn't make sense. Gallagher, the island's first and only resident British administrator, did have a house on the island but it was situated in the settled area fully three miles from the site in question. Gallagher lived on the atoll from September 1940 until his death just a year later. No mention of a house being built on the remote windward beach (officially designated as Bush Reserve) appears in his quarterly reports. Also, none of the Coast Guardsmen who were there during WWII ever saw a "house" on that part of the island.

TIGHAR's 1991 expedition made a determined effort to locate traces of the site described by Evans and Moffitt but, without a specific target area, the nearly impenetrable beachfront vegetation limited the search to a metal detector sweep of the beach itself. Nothing of interest was found. However, with the recent discovery in the National Archives of a photo which shows what appears to be the site in question it's a whole new beach party.

On June 20, 1941 at least two and probably three U.S. Navy PBYS visited the island and somebody in one of them took several low altitude oblique aerial photos. Apparent in one photo is a clearing on the windward beach which, based upon our own experience, is unnatural. An enlargement of that

section of the photograph revealed what appear to be not only a cleared area but man-made structures and a scarred area on the reef-flat. According to Dick Evans the site appears more open in the 1941 photo than he remembers it being in 1944 (as would be expected). But aerial



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photos taken in 1939 show that the clearing was there then but not as open as it was in '41. Also, a clearer print of the Lambrecht photo just received from New Zealand confirms that the cleared area was there on July 9, 1937 looking about like it did in '39, but neither the '37 nor the '39 photo is detailed enough to tell if the structures are there.

There are a hundred questions that come to mind about the possible significance of the structures on the windward beach, and we still have no firm answers about what happened there. But at least we now have a photograph, however fuzzy, of something we have searched for and couldn't find and which we previously couldn't even prove was ever there. Now we can go to a specific spot on the beachfront, cut back into the undergrowth and find whatever is left of whatever was there.

