

NOT WORTH THE TRIP

Many TIGHAR members recently noted a short press item announcing that “Papua New Guinea’s war museum will send a search team to a remote jungle to look for what may be the wreckage of the plane Amelia Earhart was flying when she disappeared. The team will travel to East New Britain, an island northwest of the mainland, where an engine has been found. It was first discovered by an Australian Army patrol in 1944.” Worth checking out? We don’t think so, and our reasons for discounting what others apparently see as a promising lead may provide some insight into how TIGHAR decides when and when not to mount an expedition.

First, as usual, the media have the facts wrong. There is no war museum in Papua New Guinea. The museum referred to is probably the Modern History Branch of the National Museum and Art Gallery. East New Britain is, of course, not an island but rather a district on the large island of New Britain. The engine was found not in 1944 but on April 17, 1945. The newspaper story gives the impression that the engine or wreckage has been seen since then. That is not the case.

TIGHAR has been aware of this story since May of 1991 when its originator, Donald A. Angwin of Perth, Australia, first wrote to us. We interviewed Mr. Angwin by phone on May 10, 1991. According to Mr. Angwin, he was one of a patrol of 20 soldiers from D Company, 11th Australian Infantry Battalion, which departed Kalai Mission at Wide Bay, New Britain on the morning of 15 April 1945. The patrol area was on the eastern tip of New Britain which is dominated by the port of Rabaul, a major Japanese base throughout the war. At approximately 1300 hours on the third day, the patrol came across a large aircraft engine imbedded in the mud of the jungle floor. Lt. Kenneth Backhouse

and Warrant Officer Keith Nurse inspected the engine and copied down details of the lettering and numbers visible on its data plate. Their impression at the time was that it was not a military engine, that it had been there for several years, and that it was probably from the wreck of some pre-war civilian aircraft.

About a month after the patrol returned to base interested enlisted personnel, including Corporal Angwin, were told that the information on the engine had been sent to Battalion or Brigade Headquarters and a brief note had come back stating that the engine could be from a Lockheed Electra with Wasp engines. Angwin made notes of this opinion on a waterproof pouch which he subsequently kept as a souvenir. It was not until he heard of TIGHAR's investigations that he decided that the engine he saw in 1945 might be from Earhart's aircraft.

We carefully considered Mr. Angwin's story and evaluated it according to the same standards we use to judge all potential evidence. We noted the following:

- The engine information is missing. The only contemporaneous documentation of the entire story is Angwin's notation on the waterproof pouch to the effect that an opinion was offered that it could be from an Electra with Wasp engines.

- The term "Wasp" was used by Pratt & Whitney as the trade name for a whole family of aircraft engines in wide use during the 1930s and '40s. Earhart's aircraft carried R-1340-S3H1 Wasps (serial number 6149 and 6150) as did the other 14 Model 10Es built. The Lockheed Model 10A Electra used the R-985-SB, known as the "Wasp Jr." Three of these aircraft (c/n 1060, c/n 1105, c/n 1108) were operated by Guinea Airways during the late '30s and, in fact, serviced Rabaul. "Wasp" engines were also used on Ford Tri-motors and a variety of other aircraft servicing the bustling New Guinea gold mining industry. Taken in historical context, it is not unfair to say that if one should chance to come upon a civilian aircraft engine of the pre-war period in that part of the world, chances are excellent that it will be a Pratt & Whitney "Wasp."

- Experience has taught us that the prospect of returning to a specific spot in a wilderness area where someone long ago saw something the significance of which is only now realized is a classic formula for frustration. Even if there was reason to believe that Mr. Angwin's engine was worth re-discovering, the problem of finding it again in the jungles of New Britain based upon 48 year old recollections would be hard to overstate. Barring phenomenal luck, the only chance of finding the engine is if local people have come upon it and know where it is.

- Earhart departed Lae, New Guinea at 00:00 Greenwich Time on July 2, 1937 with enough fuel for, at most, about 24 hours of flight. Twenty hours later she was somewhere within about 100 miles of Howland Island (as documented by the strength of her radio transmissions received by the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca*). For her to reverse course and fly more than 2,000 miles back to New Britain in the four hours before her fuel ran out would require a groundspeed of some 500 knots.

Mr. Angwin's story is not unlike literally dozens of other recollections of Earhart wreckage seen in various locations spanning the South Pacific from New Guinea to Saipan. If we, at TIGHAR, have learned anything in ten years of aviation historical investigation it is that anecdote is not evidence. Calling war stories "oral histories" does not make human memory any less frail, and archeology is a most unforgiving science. Believe what you will – the stuff is wherever it is and you will only find the stuff you seek if what you have chosen to believe is the truth. Sometimes a story or recollection fits documented fact so well that it's worth checking out on the chance that it will lead to real evidence. But to chase a hypothesis which directly contradicts voluminous and mutually supportive historical records is, in our opinion, not worth the trip. 🐾

