

It didn't take a fisherman to admire the catch.

PBY pilot Lt. (jg) John Mims USN and his navigator Lt. (jg) Eyvind Wahlgren USN stood on the beach at Gardner Island that morning in 1945 and marveled at the huge fish that lay before them on the sand. The beaming Gilbertese islanders who had fought the 1,000 pound giant all night long delighted in displaying their trophy to the two Americans, but

what fascinated Mims and Wahlgren more than the prodigious size of the fish was the tackle used to catch it. The hook still set in the gaping mouth had been fashioned from aircraft aluminum while the leader was, to the two aviators, obviously an aircraft control cable. Most puzzling was the cable's size. They were well aware that their PBY-5, now riding at anchor in the atoll's lagoon, represented the only type of airplane capable of landing at Gardner Island, and yet the cable before them was far too small to be from a Catalina. They speculated, in fact, that it seemed about right for an SNB, the twin-engined Beechcraft they had flown in training – but that made no sense at all.

The only Gilbertese who spoke English was the island's young radio operator who, when queried, explained that the metal had come from the wreck of an airplane—a plane much smaller than the Americans' flying boat – which had been on the island when his people first arrived a few years earlier.

As part of the crew of the only search and rescue aircraft in that part of the Pacific, Mims and Wahlgren were aware of no missing plane that could possibly account for what they had just seen. Upon returning to their base at Canton Island, 200 miles to the northeast, they made a point of asking the local British colonial administrator if he knew of any earlier unaccounted for flights. He didn't. The only possibility anyone could think of was Amelia Earhart back in 1937, but they dismissed the idea because she had been headed for Howland Island far to the north. On later visits to Gardner, Mims noticed the Gilbertese using crude knives made of aluminum. When his tour of duty ended he brought home, as souvenirs of Gardner Island, finely

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crafted wooden boxes and canoe models in which were inlaid, as decoration, small pieces of polished aluminum.

After the war John Mims finished medical school and enjoyed a long and rewarding career as a physician in his small Alabama town. He eventually lost track of his friend Wahlgren and his mementos from the Pacific became playthings for his children who knew them as “the boxes with the metal from the crashed plane.” Then, this year, Dr. Mims happened to see a television documentary about TIGHAR's investigation of the Earhart disappearance and his puzzling experience of half a century ago suddenly took on a new significance. His daughter contacted officials at the Smithsonian who, in turn, put her in touch with TIGHAR.

When, in early April, we received a letter relating Dr. Mims' story we were fascinated and, as always, skeptical. First we checked our copies of the original logs and flight plans for U.S. Navy and Coast Guard flights to Gardner Island during World War Two. Sure enough, Lts. Mims and Wahlgren made numerous trips to the island in late 1944/early 1945 flying PBY-5

Bu. No. 08456. They brought perishable supplies and mail from the large U.S. Navy base at Canton Island to the 25 Coasties who manned the Loran radio station at Gardner's southeastern tip. (Typical was the load for January 17, 1945: 40 lbs of personal gear, 140 lbs of mail, 30 lbs of cheese, 50 lbs of apples, 50 lbs of ham, 120 lbs of butter, 90 lbs of eggs, 20 lbs of franks, and 30 lbs of mayonnaise.) We next checked with Dr. Mims'

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daughter, Rosemary Fisk. Did this story first come up after her father had seen the TV show? No—the tale of the mysterious airplane wreckage on Gardner Island had been a family staple for as long as she could remember. We then wrote to Dr. Mims asking him to answer some specific questions for us in writing before we interviewed him by telephone. He was happy to oblige. By the time we actually spoke with him we were satisfied that we were getting the best recollections he had with minimum chance of outside influence.

Back in 1988 when the Earhart Project was launched we made the decision that anecdotes—that is, recollections related or written down years after the event—would not be regarded as evidence whether or not they appeared to support our own hypothesis. That, of course, does not

mean that all oral history is false. Quite the contrary. The problem is that, in the absence of corroborating sources (contemporaneous written accounts, dated photographs, or conclusively identified artifacts) accurate memories are impossible to distinguish from those which have been flawed or distorted over time. In short, with the best of intentions, we all often remember things wrong.

So how do we assess a story like Dr. Mims'? First of all, we accept that it is not, in itself, evidence. Second, we ask if there is real evidence which may help us make a judgement about its possible accuracy or inaccuracy. In this case, there certainly is. We know for a fact that the Gilbertese settlers on the island used aircraft debris for local purposes; we've recovered several such objects. U.S. Navy records agree with

Dr. Mims' memory that, at the time of the incident he relates, there is no readily explainable source which would make airplane wreckage of any description available to the Gilbertese on Gardner Island. Some of the airplane debris TIGHAR has found on the island appears to be from an airplane considerably smaller than the types that frequented the area during World War Two. In other words, our own experience is remarkably similar to that of Dr. Mims.

What, then, of the explanation that there was an airplane wreck on the island (not just wreckage washed up on the beach) when the first Gilbertese settlers arrived? Is it conceivable that an airplane could exist on that island for all these years, unknown and undiscovered by anyone except the settlers, despite numerous official surveys, government inspections, and wartime activity (not to mention two TIGHAR expeditions)? Technically speaking, it is impossible to prove a negative hypothesis (i.e. that such an airplane does not exist on the island), so, in a strictly logical sense, its existence is possible, although highly unlikely. Still, TIGHAR's original hypothesis that the aircraft debris found on shore was washed up after the airplane was destroyed on the reef-flat, is based primarily upon the assumption that there is not, and never was, an airplane in the bushes. What if that assumption is wrong?

If nothing else, Dr. Mims' story has given us an opportunity to review the hard evidence from a slightly different perspective and make sure that we plan our upcoming operations on Nikumaroro so as to explore every possibility for further discoveries. 🐾

