

The Gilligan Hypothesis

There is an episode of *Gilligan's Island* in which the

Minnow's resolute mate stumbles across an abandoned airplane (a twin Beech) hidden deep in the island's underbrush. Although we try to keep similarities between the Earhart Project and that regrettably immortal sitcom to a minimum, new information has forced us to acknowledge the possibility that next year's NIKU III expedition could encounter a truly bizarre case of life imitating art (if you want to call it that). For years now, we have resigned ourselves to the notion that the Earhart Electra in all probability no longer exists as an aircraft, but rather as a scattering of debris. Our fondest hope has been that our return to the island will uncover something—anything—that qualifies as the Any-Idiot Artifact (see previous page). Then along comes Photek, the forensic image processing company which confirmed the loss of the belly antenna at Lae (see page 17), with a cautious suggestion that we might want to take a closer look at an unusual feature which appears in some early aerial photography of Nikumaroro.

Three years ago, an article in *TIGHAR Tracks* (see Vol. 8 No. 4 "A Whole New

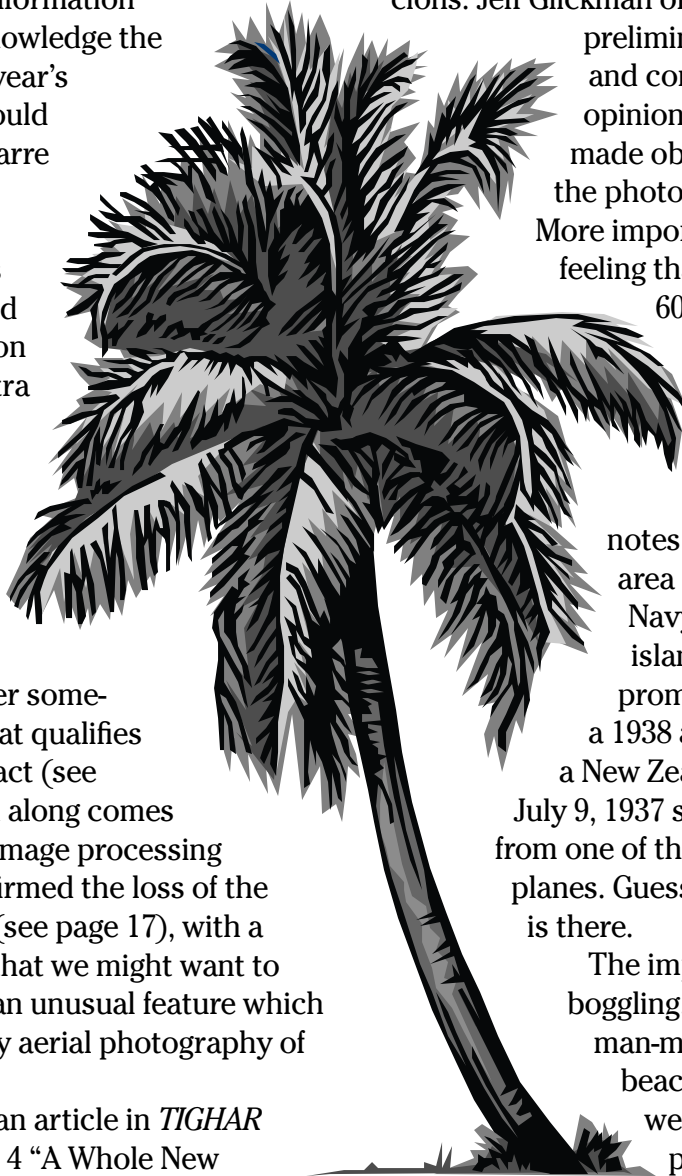
*The ship's aground on the shore
of this uncharted desert isle ...*

Beach Party") described the discovery of a 1941 U.S. Navy aerial photo

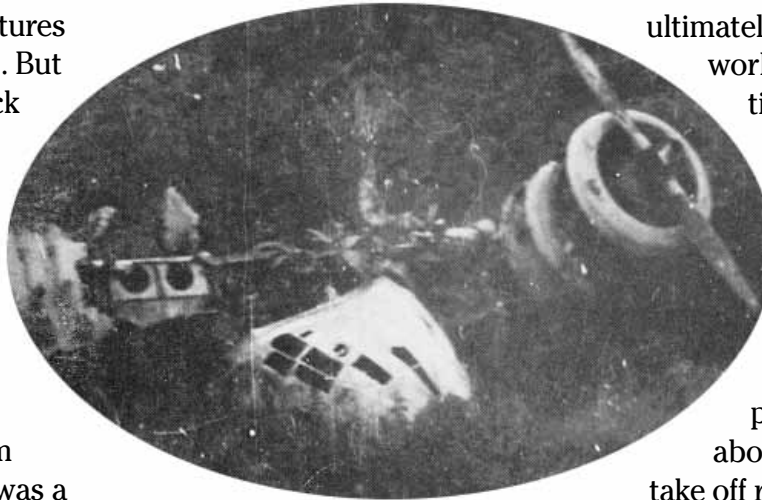
which, we suspected, shows the abandoned campsite along Nikumaroro's shoreline which had previously been described to us by two Coast Guard veterans. All we had at that time were suspicions. Now we have more suspi-

cions. Jeff Glickman of Photek has done some preliminary work on the photo and concurs with our original opinion that there may be man-made objects on the beach, but the photo is too fuzzy to be sure. More importantly, he echoes our feeling that the long (estimated 600 feet) cleared strip in the beachfront vegetation is not a natural feature. Later photos show that it had grown back in by 1975. He also notes that the same cleared area is visible in a 1939 U.S. Navy overhead photo of the island. That observation prompted us to reexamine a 1938 aerial photo taken for a New Zealand survey and the July 9, 1937 shot of the island taken from one of the USS *Colorado's* search planes. Guess what. The cleared strip is there.

The implications are mind boggling. If there was, indeed, a man-made clearing in Niku's beachfront vegetation one week after Earhart disappeared, how did it get



there? Is this what Navy search pilot Lt. John Lambrecht meant when he wrote in his official report, “Here, signs of recent habitation were clearly visible...”? The island had been uninhabited since 1892. Certainly, ocean-roaming Micronesians could have visited there despite British strictures against such travels. But why would they hack out a 600 foot-long strip of bush—a miserable job (as any TIGHAR team member can attest). Is it possible that back under the trees, sheltered from the equatorial sun, was a Lockheed 10? Might it still be there just waiting to be discovered by Gilligan? One thing is certain. If that clearing is man-made it



was done by somebody who was highly motivated—like somebody who could only save her heavily-mortgaged airplane and her career by calling for help and getting the Coast Guard to bring fuel. With 200 gallons she could ferry the aircraft to Howland Island and, ultimately, complete her world flight. Calculations based upon Lockheed specs indicate that taking off into Niku’s prevailing 15 knot wind, a Lockheed 10E with only 1,200 pounds of fuel aboard would need a take off run of, say, 600 feet. Rank speculation? Of course. Worth getting excited about? Not yet. Worth further research? Absolutely.

