

CORROBORATION

Prior to the interviews on Funafuti, the only account of a plane wreck on the island was from former PBY pilot John Mims (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 11, No. 3 “Catch Of The Day”) who told of seeing an airplane control cable being used as heavy-duty fishing tackle during a visit to Nikumaroro in 1944 or ’45. The Gilbertese fishermen told him that the cable had come from a plane that been there when they first came to the island. When Mims asked where the plane was now, they just shrugged.

Now, for the first time, people who once lived on the island were telling us they had seen undisturbed aircraft wreckage in specific locations. Mr. Songivalu said he saw debris along the lagoon shore while his daughter, Ms. Taiki, recalled a piece of wing on the reef-flat and wreckage onshore near the main lagoon channel. These locations strongly suggest that the aircraft broke apart in the surf along the ocean reef and washed ashore in pieces. Anything that would float (seat cushions, fuel tanks, cabin skins with kapok insulation attached, etc.) might well end up along the lagoon shore directly opposite the channel. The stories made sense.

But, as we’ve said a hundred times, anecdotes are not evidence—they are merely folklore unless and until they lead to hard archival, photographic, or physical evidence. Without corroboration, the stories we heard on Funafuti are no more credible than are the tales told about the lady flier held prisoner on Saipan. We reasoned that if there was really airplane debris on the reef-flat in the late 1950s, it may have also been there in 1953 when detailed aerial mapping photos of the island were taken. We know that ferrous metal debris from the old shipwreck farther up the beach is scattered across the reef-flat in the area indicated by Ms. Taiki, but its rusty color is almost

identical to the reddish-brown of the coral. A debris field of aluminum wreckage should show up as small light spots distributed in a linear fashion. Any such anomalies would have to appear in at least two photos to insure that they weren’t flecks of dust or flaws in the developing process.

To find out if there was anything there we called on our old friend Jeff Glickman of Photek, Inc. of Hood River, Oregon. Photek’s state-of-the art digital imaging capabilities and Jeff’s forensic skills had already proved their worth in the Earhart investigation (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 11 No. 3 “The Earhart Electra, Part 2” and Vol. 12 No. 1 “The Niku III Preliminary Expedition”). A careful examination of the reef-flat in the indicated area revealed not only four objects which met the necessary qualifications for aluminum debris (light color, small size, linear orientation, appearing in two photos) but, in one photo, one of the light-colored objects was even exhibiting a specular reflection (the type of glint normally seen only from sunlight shining on metal).

Jeff next examined the shoreline for any sign of the airplane wreckage. No detailed photography was available of the lagoon shore where Mr. Songivalu reported seeing debris, but where Ms. Taiki said she saw wreckage on shore, a 1988 aerial photo taken by the Royal New Zealand Air Force revealed another specular reflection indicating the presence of shiny metal of a rounded, perhaps even capsular, shape. This portion of the island is known as Nutiran (pronounced NewZEeran) and was named after a New Zealand survey party that was camped there when the first Gilbertese settlers arrived. It is specifically because the area was closely examined in 1938 that TIGHAR has always considered it to be the least

likely area to hold aircraft wreckage. Consequently, very little searching has been done in this region. The photographic evidence corroborating the Funafuti anecdotes now suggests that the wreckage allegedly seen there in the late 1950s may have only washed ashore during or after World War Two. Because no aircraft is recorded as having been lost at or near Nikumaroro during the war, it must be assumed that either the wreckage was floating debris from a distant wartime wreck which happened to wash ashore, or that some time prior to the island's settlement in late 1938,

an aircraft landed on or near the reef-flat, sank out of sight at the reef edge, and was eventually broken up and washed ashore by storm activity.

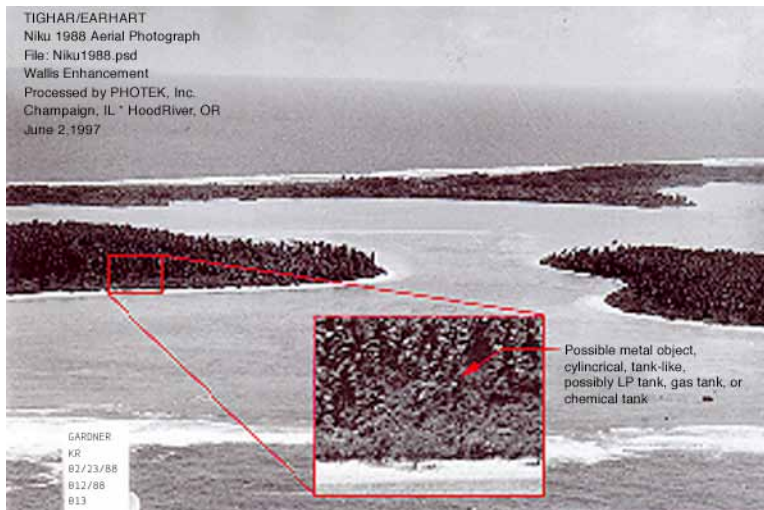
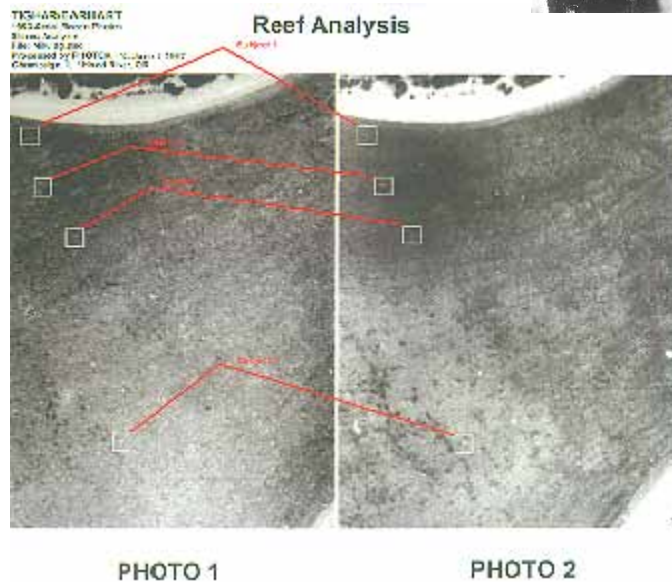
In any event, we now have a specific, very promising and previously unsearched area to examine for aircraft wreckage when we return to the island next year.



In these two aerial mapping photos taken in 1953, the large land mass is Nutiran district at the island's west end. The photo at left shows the white line of breakers on the fringing reef and the broad reef flat between it and the beach. The photo at right shows Tatiman Passage which leads into the lagoon. The roads and structures of the village can be seen on the land to the south of the passage.



Enhanced enlargements of these photos, as processed by Photek, disclose four small (a few feet across) light colored objects visible down through an estimated three to four feet of water standing on the reef flat. In Photo 2 the fourth object is exhibiting a specular reflection characteristic of shining metal. This is the part of the reef flat where Ms. Taiki says she saw part of an airplane wing in the late 1950s.



In this view of Tatiman Passage taken by the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1988, Nutiran district is on the left and the now abandoned and overgrown village is on the right. Photek has identified a specular reflection from an unidentified object back in the dense vegetation along the Nutiran shore in the same area where Ms. Taiki says she saw airplane wreckage. The only "tanks" we've encountered on Nikumaroro are of ferrous construction and are heavily rusted.