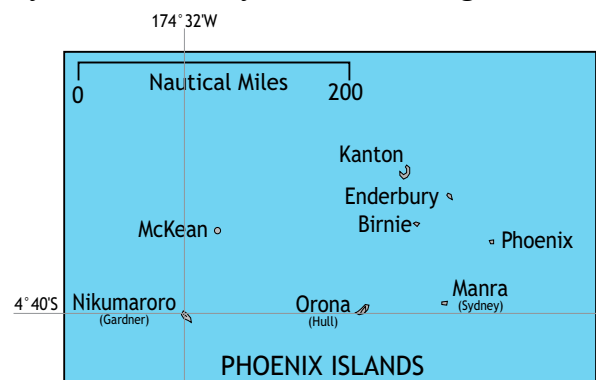




After many years of fruitless and frustrating research, TIGHAR has finally pinned down the details of an elusive World Two accident. The crash of an airplane on Sydney Island in the Phoenix Group is of interest to us primarily because of its possible implications in our investigation of another aviation loss that occurred in that same region of the Central Pacific six years earlier. We've found scraps of aircraft wreckage in the abandoned village on the island of Nikumaroro, an atoll about 200 miles west of Sydney. Is it just wartime debris or could some of the pieces be from Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Electra? Part numbers are in short supply and much of the recovered material is difficult to identify conclusively as to the type of aircraft it came from. To make an educated assessment of what we've found it's important that we document the possibilities.

Contrary to popular assumption, all Pacific islands are not littered with trash from World War Two. Certainly the archipelagos which saw major battles—the Gilberts, the Carolines, the Marshalls, the Solomons, etc.—are still haunted by the steel and aluminum ghosts of those events, but islands that were always beyond the combat zone have only the hulks of rear-area installations, shipwrecks and the occasional aviation accident to remind them of the bad old days. Fortunately for us, the eight islands



of the Phoenix Group fall into this latter category.

Canton (now Kanton) had an airfield and was a major steppingstone in a transpacific air route which stretched from California, to Hawaii, to Christmas or Palmyra, to Canton, to Funafuti or Fiji and on into the Southwest Pacific Theater of Operations. Three other islands of the group—Sydney (now Manra), Hull (now Orona) and Gardner (now Nikumaroro) had small civilian populations of Gilbert Islanders settled there by the British in 1939 to raise coconuts. The remaining islands—Phoenix, McKean, Enderbury and Birnie—were and are barren, uninhabited wastelands.

There were accidents at Canton and aircraft disappeared at sea on the way to and from there, but in only one known instance—the crash at Sydney Island—did an airplane go down on one of the other atolls of the group. No loss of Japanese aircraft on any of the islands was reported and an unreported loss seems highly improbable. A flight from the closest Japanese base—the airfield at Betio on Tarawa—meant a round trip of nearly 2,000 nautical miles. It was done once. Early in 1943 a bombing raid caused minimal damage on Canton with no losses to the attacking force. Tarawa fell to U.S. amphibious forces later that year. In 1944, Gardner became the site of a 25-man U.S. Coast Guard Loran navigation station resupplied periodically by a PBY flying boat from Canton. Records of those flights show that no accidents occurred. In short, the possible sources for aircraft wreckage found on Gardner (Nikumaroro) are few.

The crash on Sydney Island is of special interest to us because the Gilbertese settlers there were said to have used the wartime wreck as a source of aluminum. In the years after the war some of the Sydney residents came to live on Nikumaroro and it seems likely that they may have brought pieces of wreckage with them as raw material. Understanding just what happened on Sydney might help us better understand what we've found on Niku and either eliminate or fur-

ther substantiate the artifacts suspected of being from the Earhart aircraft.

But pinning down the details of the Sydney crash proved to very difficult. A search of all the usual, and many unusual, sources for accident reports turned up nothing. Rumor held that it was a “large, four-engined aircraft from Canton,” and because some of the parts found on Nikumaroro appeared to be from a Consolidated B-24 we began to suspect that the airplane had been a Liberator. Earlier this year, we obtained photos of wreckage seen on Sydney in 1971. They showed two 14-cylinder, twin-row radial engines such as those used on the B-24 and our suspicions were strengthened, but nowhere could we find a B-24 loss which might be the Sydney crash. Then this week a TIGHAR researcher stumbled upon the official U.S. Army Air Force accident file which tells the story. It is tragic, poignant, and different than we expected.

It was only one among the thousands of airplanes that struck the ground with unspeakable violence in 1943. They were only nine among the millions of young lives that ended suddenly and unnaturally that year, but perhaps because we have sought the facts about their death for so long, their end—as revealed in the dry tones of the official reports—seems real and very personal.

It was late November 1943 when Second Lt. William Prater, USAAF and his crew arrived at Canton Island in C-47A-60DL serial number 43-30739 enroute to their first combat assignment in Toatouta, New Caledonia. The airplane, Douglas constructor's number (c/n) 13890, had come off the Long



On November 24, 1943 they had set off across the Pacific Ocean in an airplane that was as new and as green as they were.

Beach assembly line for delivery to the Army on October 5th. Bill had gotten his wings the previous May and had less than 100 hours in type when he picked up his crew, Second Lt. John Barcharik, co-pilot; Second Lt. Morris Steinberg, navigator; and Sgt. Malcom Willson, radio operator, on November 15th. On November 24th they had set off across the Pacific Ocean in an airplane that was as new and as green as they were.



Sydney Island as it would have looked to the passengers and crew of 43-30739. National Archives photo.

Although Canton was supposed to be only a refueling stop on the long haul to the Southwest Pacific, somewhere along the way Prater had taxied into a guy wire and damaged the ship's right wing tip. They were stuck on Canton until it could be fixed. About a thousand miles off to the northwest, the bloody Tarawa landings and the re-taking of the Gilbert Islands had just been completed. Canton had played a major role as a staging area and the repair facilities were undoubtedly busy with business from that action. It was weeks before Prater's wingtip was tended to. There wasn't much to do on the hot, barren atoll. Pilots were allowed to take their aircraft out on local flights with little formality and jaunts to Hull or Sydney Islands, which were said to be interesting to look at, were not uncommon. Two civilian USO entertainers—Bob Ripa and Bobby Del Rio—were equally bored and shared quarters with the various transient crews. On at least one occasion the two entertainers had gone along on a sight-seeing hop even though, as civilians, their participation on such flights was against regulations.

By the afternoon of December 17, 1943 the C-47 had finally been fixed and signed

off as airworthy. Boredom, rather than the coincidence that it was forty years to the day since the Wright brothers' first flight, was the likely reason for Bill Prater and John Barcharik's decision to take a ride down to see Sydney Island. Morris Steinberg, the navigator, was up for it and they found several other guys who wanted to go along. The radio operator, Sgt. Willson, decided to let the officers have their fun without him. Bob Ripa and Bobby Del Rio were alone in the barracks shack reading, stripped own to their shorts in the heat, when Barcharik stopped by in a jeep and asked if they were ready to go. Del Rio wanted to finish his book and declined. Ripa hesitated for a bit but then decided to join the others. Bobby thought it was odd that his friend should accept because he and Ripa had just been on such a flight a few days before. Neither had any idea that they had just made life or death decisions.

To get around the regulations, Bob Ripa was listed on the manifest by his real name, Edvin Hansen. Second Lt. Ed Hall, the Assistant Operations Officer who approved the flight, assumed that this Hansen guy was an Army private. He knew that the only civilians on the base were Ripa and Del Rio. Around 3 p.m. Prater, Barcharik, Steinberg, Hansen, another 2Lt. named George Gee, and four Sgts—nine men in all—took off in 30739 and headed south for Sydney, about an hour's flight away.

The only first hand account of what happened next was later provided by the Native Magistrate of Sydney Island:



The wreckage of 43-30739 as it appeared in 1971.



The plane was crashed on land. Flew around the island more than four times. At last during the time flying it slide wheel down and flew off at a distance of not more than a mile and then return perhaps ten or twenty feet above sea level. When reached above there be fit [sic] flew up of all a sudden it bumped the palm with right wing. During that time the plane get in fire and at the last the body fell down beyond the Maneaba [meeting house]. All the crew found dead except one of the lot get breath not fifteen minutes later, then died again.

From this it would seem that the plane may have been attempting to land, but the accident report by Major W. C. Cotner, Commanding Officer of the Air Transport Command unit at Canton, paints a more complex picture. Cotner inspected the site the next day and wrote:

It was found that the right wing had clipped a tree, outside of the motor, at the beach while coming in low from the water. ... The right wing struck a tree breaking the tree off about thirty feet from the ground. The ship must have been in a right bank or there would have been other trees damaged in this vicinity as there was not enough room for a ship to come in between the trees. A portion of the right wing was found approximately 86 feet inland. The plane went up over the trees for a distance of about 150 yards and started coming down through the trees again, shearing off the trees until it came to rest approximately 376 yards from the first tree which was struck. The motors continued on after the plane came to rest, one for 46 yards and the other 63 yards from the plane. The airplane burned completely with the exception of the tail section and the left wing from the motor out, and the right wing which had been lost. The right elevator showed evidence of the plane having been scraped along the ground on the right side. The wheels were retracted and that the throttles and controls were in full flight

or cruising position. All evidence indicates that the pilot came in in a right bank, struck the tree, careened on over the village and other trees and finally hit ground with all power on. Both propellers were badly bent and broken off. One occupant was said to have been thrown clear of the plane but died a few minutes later. The remaining eight were said to have been found in the plane after the fire. The natives stated that the plane made several circles over the island and kept coming lower and lower and finally came in over the water quite low just before the crash occurred.

The Gilbertese wrapped the bodies in white sheets and covered them with woven mats in graves six feet deep. The next day an Army Air Force investigation team exhumed and recovered the bodies. Maj. Cotner put the cause of the accident to “low flying.” A review board later found that “it appears that the pilot may have been attempting a forced landing.” Whether Bill Prater simply smacked a tree while pulling a buzz job or had an inflight emergency and failed in a desperate attempt to land his airplane will never be known for sure. What is certain is that ten tons of Douglas workmanship and the lives of nine young men came to a fiery end on an otherwise tranquil Pacific island on an afternoon 55 years ago. It seems likely that relics of that tragedy eventually made their way to Nikumaroro and are among the artifacts collected by TIGHAR. It is also the case that knowing what airplane crashed on Sydney Island may allow us to eliminate yet another alternative explanation for recovered objects which we suspect are from a much more famous, but no less tragic, loss.

