

# The Carpenter's Daughter



**I**n TIGHAR's efforts to find a conclusively identifiable piece of the Earhart aircraft, it would be difficult to overstate the potential importance of Emily Sikuli's recollections. If credible, her testimony confirms the general scenario that TIGHAR had already deduced from other sources. She provides specifics that not only fill in the picture of what really happened, but may enable us to determine where we should look to find what we're looking for.

But Emily's information is anecdotal. It is a reminiscence of events that occurred over half a century ago and, in principle, is no more credible than the memories of those

who claim to have seen Earhart imprisoned on Saipan. How do we assess the accuracy of her recollections?

The first step is to pay close attention to what she said. Mrs. Sikuli was interviewed twice, once on July 15, 1999 by Project Archaeologist Tom King and again twelve days later on July 27th by Ric Gillespie. The records of the two interviews, separated by more than a week, and conducted by different researchers, provide a good check on how consistent Emily was in her story.

Transcripts of both interviews are presented as appendices at the back of this issue of *TIGHAR Tracks*.

## Evaluating Emily

**E**mily's startling description of airplane wreckage on the reef at Nikumaroro merits close examination. Although she had apparently never heard of Amelia Earhart and had little or no information about TIGHAR's investigations, she nonetheless described a situation which not only fit our hypothesis (that the aircraft was landed on the reef flat off the western end of the island), but also provided details (a specific location and appearance) which seem to explain what has always been the most disturbing aspect of the puzzle – how could the airplane have escaped the notice of the various Westerners who later visited the island?

If Emily's recollection is accurate, it seems that the landing was made on the outer portion of the reef-flat just north of the shipwreck.

*Emily Sikuli*



*TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie*

Although this is one of the few areas where the reef is smooth enough to permit a safe landing, it is also perilously close to the breakers along the reef edge. Calm conditions could have permitted the sending of radio transmissions for as much as a few days, but the building of any significant swell on the ocean could have resulted in surf that quickly reduced the Electra to the sort of nondescript debris Emily describes. Visible only at low tide, rusty rather than silver-colored, not far from the shipwreck, and masked to view from the populated part of the island by the shipwreck itself, what little remained of the airplane might have been easily missed, or if seen, dismissed by anyone who did not have

occasion to view it up close. The reef edge is a dangerous place and the only people with a reason to go there were the Gilbertese fishermen – so they were the only ones who knew. Later accounts of bits and pieces found along the shoreline, including some of TIGHAR’s own discoveries, could be chance encounters with a widely scattered debris field. It may be that Emily has given us the missing piece of the puzzle and our best clue yet as to where we should look for that elusive “smoking gun” artifact that will prove the case. It’s a tantalizingly tidy explanation, but it’s just a good story unless verified from sources that are not reliant upon the ever-fallible human memory.

## The Carpenter’s Daughter?

**I**n evaluating any anecdotal account it is essential to verify as many details of the testimony as possible through contemporary written records. This process is not intended to disparage the sincerity of the witness but rather to get a general impression of the reliability of his or her memory of the events in question. If our interrogation of Emily’s credibility seems rigorous it is only because her testimony is potentially so important.

To begin, we must ask the most basic question and establish that Emily is who she says she is. Emily says that her father Temou Samuela was the island carpenter on Nikumaroro.



*Emily's father.*

*Photos courtesy E. Sikuli.*

Photographs she showed us leave no doubt that Temou was her father, but was he the island carpenter? Dr. Duncan Macpherson’s first hand account of the death of Gerald Gallagher, dated November 9, 1941, specifically mentions that “...Temou (native carpenter at Gardner island) proceeded to prepare a casket for the remains.” It would seem that Emily is, indeed, the carpenter’s daughter.

The next task is to determine whether Emily herself was on Nikumaroro and, if so, just when she was there. This allows us to put her alleged experiences in a specific historical context and check them against known events.



*Emily's mother.*

## Date of Departure

**W**e are able to confirm Emily's presence on the island and establish the date of her departure by means of a rather obscure document which we examined in November 1998 at the archives of the Western Pacific High Commission in England. The provisioning records of His Majesty's Fijian Ship (HMFS) *Viti* show a charge of two shillings per diem for the transport of a "nurse" by the name of "Sengalo" from Gardner Island on November 30, 1941 to Suva, Fiji (11 days). Emily's first name in Tuvaluan is "Segalo," pronounced (and often spelled) "Sengalo." Is this Emily?

|   |  | December, 1941. |      |
|---|--|-----------------|------|
| VITI (S).   |  |                 |      |
| Lt. Commander J. Mellins.                         |  |                 |      |
| 1. Provisioning of passengers in H.M.F.S. "VITI." |  |                 |      |
| Novr. 1-30.                                       | Dessert Vails, 30 days at 2s.0d. per diem  | 3               | 0 0  |
| Novr. 19  | H.M.P. Taton, from Suva to Wall Island, 12 1/2 days at 3s.0d. per diem                 | 1               | 17 0 |
| to Decr. 1  |  |                 |      |
| Novr. 30  | Nurses Maria and Sengalo, from Gardner Island to Suva, 11 days at 2s.0d. each per diem | 2               | 4 0  |
| to Decr. 11                                       |  |                 |      |
| (launch)  |  |                 |      |
|   |  | 67. 3s. 0d.     |      |
| 5268/41.  |  | PAID            |      |

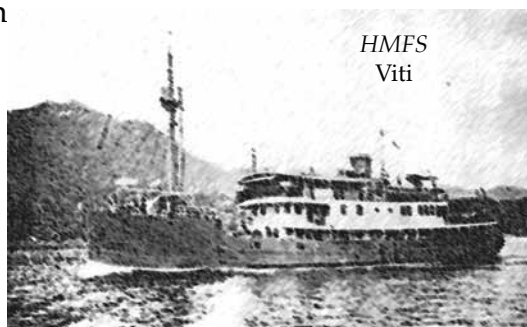
Excerpt from "Viti, H.M.F.S.: - Claims for Messing of W.P.H.C. and Coastwatching personnel on", WPHC List No. 4, IV, Vol. for 1940-41, M.P. No. 5268/1941, (Fiji).

**ES:** Yes. That is why I came.

**RG:** Mr. Tofiga, I understand that you remember this. You were there at that time. Is that right?

**FT:** I was aboard the *Viti*. We traveled from here [*Suva*] in the late November or early December of 1941. I never forget the date because we were at Nikumaroro when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

I n



From A South Seas Diary by Sir Harry Luke.

the earlier interview Tom King had asked:

**TK:** Where you there when Mr. Gallagher died?

**ES:** No, I wasn't. [*she has a brief conversation with Mr. Tofiga*] NO! I WAS there. When I was picked up [*to go to Suva to attend nursing school*] he had already died. It was Sunday morning, we were getting ready for church, December 7th, when I left. [*Emily traveled to Suva with Tofiga who remembers that she cried all night long and he felt helpless to comfort her.*]

**RG:** Tell me about when you left Nikumaroro, when you went away. How did that happen?

**ES:** That was the year we came away. It was the government that made that decision. Because we sat a test and it was decided that it was not practical to send us to Tarawa but to bring us to Suva. [*In an earlier conversation she had said that, as a teenaged girl, she assisted as midwife at several births on Nikumaroro and had later attended nursing school in Suva.*]

**RG:** Was it your whole family or just you?

**ES:** It was I only.

**RG:** So there was a test and you were selected because of this test?

That Mr. Tofiga was aboard *Viti* on that voyage is confirmed by the published diary of High Commissioner Sir Harry Luke who, in November/December 1941, made a tour of the Phoenix settlements in the wake of the death of Officer in Charge Gerald Gallagher the preceding September. "I managed to get on board the *Viti* by midnight of the 19th [November] and sailed at once. The party consisted of Dr. MacPherson, 'Mungo' Thomson ..., with Tofinga, the Ellice Islander clerk from the High Commission, as interpreter."

The ship's records show that *Viti* was at Nikumaroro on Sunday, November 30, 1941, not Sunday, December 7th, so Tofiga's memory of hearing about the Pearl Harbor attack while at Nikumaroro is apparently not accurate. However, Emily's recollection that she left on a Sunday is correct. Clearly the nurse "Sengalo" is Segalo Samuela, now Emily Sikuli, and she left Nikumaroro on November 30, 1941.

## Date of Arrival

**P**inning down just when the Samuela family arrived on Nikumaroro is a bit more difficult. Unfortunately, we don't have passenger manifests for all of the ships that transported settlers and skilled artisans for the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme, but transportation of personnel and supplies was enough of a problem for the struggling colony that the comings and goings of ships are fairly well documented. Emily was unable to give us a firm date for her arrival at Nikumaroro, but there are clues in what she remembers, and does not remember, which make it possible to constrain the date of her arrival.

**TK:** When did you get to Nikumaroro?

**ES:** We had not been on Beru Island a year when we were sent to Nikumaroro. Perhaps 1938-39. In less than 3 years, I left Nikumaroro.

Beru, in the southern Gilberts, served as a staging area for the settlement of the Phoenix Group. We don't know when Temou and his family came to Beru but we do know that Emily left Nikumaroro in late 1941. Her "less than 3 years" on the island puts her arrival not earlier than late 1938 but, in fact, there were no women at all on Nikumaroro until April 1939.

**TK:** What caused your family to move to Nikumaroro?

**ES:** Instructions from the government to build houses and plant coconuts. Uncle

Kemo went to Manra to build the hospital building and water tank.

There are a couple of good clues here. The big push to build houses and plant coconuts on Nikumaroro was in the early days of the settlement—from the arrival of the first women and children in April 1939 through Gallagher's death in September, 1941. "Uncle Kemo" is Jack Kima Petro (sometimes spelled Kemo Pedro). He was a half-Portuguese construction specialist who acted as foreman for many of the building projects in the G&EIC and PISS. He was on Gardner in early 1939 building the 10,000 gallon water collection cistern which still stands today, and Emily seems to imply that he was on Beru when she left for Nikumaroro. Gallagher's proposal for the hospital to be built on Sydney Island (Manra) is dated July 4th, 1939 and was drawn up on Beru. He left Beru on July 11th and went to Fiji for medical treatment and administrative duty, returning on November 7th. Gallagher left Beru to go back to the Phoenix Group on January 7, 1940 and his "Progress Report, First Quarter 1940" states that the building of the hospital on Sydney was underway between January and March. Emily's correlation of her arrival on Nikumaroro with the departure of "Uncle Kemo" to build the hospital on Manra seems to place the event in January 1940.

Further support for this hypothesis is found in another passage from Gallagher's "Progress Report First Quarter 1940." In describing the settlement on Gardner he says, "Apart from an expert canoe builder and



TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

*Model canoe and small boxes made from kanawa wood with inlaid aluminum, given as presents to PBY pilot John Mims by residents of Nikumaroro in 1944.*

his family of four, there have been no additions to the population of Gardner since the last report was written.” (This would have been Lands Commissioner Harry Maude’s Second Progress Report dated November 29, 1939.) Curiosity about this statement is what prompted me to ask Emily the following series of questions:

**RG:** Any brothers or sisters?

**ES:** Three brothers, I was the only girl.

**RG:** Did the whole family come to Nikumaroro?

**ES:** Only three of us. Our eldest brother was at Tarawa.

**RG:** Did your father ever work at building canoes?

**ES:** Yes, he used to build canoes.

**RG:** Was that part of his job on Nikumaroro?

**ES:** Not while I was there. He did build small model canoes as presents.

Although he may not have actually practiced that particular skill while at Nikumaroro, it would appear that Temou, his wife, and three of his children are the “expert canoe builder and his family of four.”

**RG:** Do you remember what ship brought the family to Nikumaroro?

**ES:** It was the government ship, *Kiakia*. Not a big boat.

There was, indeed, a small government ship named *Kiakia* which was used for administrative work.



Courtesy E. Bevington.

Royal Colony Ship *Kiakia*

**RG:** Were there many people who came with you?

**ES:** A policeman and his family came also.

Gallagher doesn’t mention a policeman and family but they could have been destined for one of the other islands.

**RG:** Was there ever a time when there were Europeans who came to the island to do things?

**ES:** No.

This would seem to confirm that she arrived after the USS *Bushnell*’s survey of Gardner Island which was conducted from November 28 to December 5, 1939.

Gallagher’s return to the Phoenix Group from Beru in January 1940 is the only known voyage which fits all of the conditions of Emily’s description. It is not clear from the record what ship was used, but it could well have been the *Kiakia*. In his “Progress Report, First Quarter 1940” Gallagher mentions that he stopped briefly at Gardner in January but doesn’t give the exact date. Other correspondence mentions that he arrived at Hull on January 14th and at Sydney, his final destination, on the 18th. Logically, that puts him at Gardner on or about the 12th. Unless better documentation turns up to the contrary, we will use mid-January 1940 for the supposed date of Emily’s arrival at Nikumaroro.

## Emily’s Age

It is not uncommon for older people in Oceania to have difficulty placing their year of birth because they tend to have fewer points of reference, or connections to recorded dates than is common in Europe and America. Emily’s statements about her age while she was on the island are not consistent. At one point she said, “ I came in 1938-1939, when I was 11 years old” which would make her year of birth 1927 or 1928. When Tom King asked, “How old were you when your father built the box?” she said, “14 years old, not yet 15.”

The box was built in the fall of 1940, so that would mean that she was born in 1926, but in response to my specific question:

“What year were you born?” she replied “1923,” which would make her 16 or 17 at the time of her arrival and 17 or 18 when she left to attend nursing school. Because most people can more reliably relate the year of their birth than how old they were at the time of a particular event in the past, and because the older age is perhaps more credible for a young woman to go away to school, it seems most likely that Emily was a youth of about 17 during the period in question. In either event, she was a youth or young adult, not a child.

Having established fairly reliably that Emily lived, as a youth, on Nikumaroro from mid-January 1940 to November 30, 1941 with her father Temou, the island carpenter, and her mother and two of her three brothers, we can now review the context in which her experiences took place.

## The Pioneers

When Emily and her family arrived on Nikumaroro in January 1940, the island’s population was made up of 16 men, 16 women, 11 boys and 15 girls, for a total of 58 individuals. Of the 16 men, one was the Native Magistrate, and one was a medic, known as a Native Dresser. The remaining fourteen were Gilbertese laborers who, with their wives and children, hoped to eventually become landowners in the new colony. Like pioneers everywhere, they were poor people who had come to the wilderness to find opportunity and a better life. They were Protestant Christians, as were Emily and her family, for the London Missionary Society had established a firm hold in both the Ellice Islands and the southern Gilberts. The laborers spoke the Gilbertese language and had little or no English. We didn’t ask but we must presume that Emily’s father, an Ellice Islander sent by the government to help people to whom he was a foreigner, spoke at least some Gilbertese.

We don’t have the name of the Native Dresser. In the British colonial system there were two categories of medical certification for indigenous people. “Native Dressers” received training in basic health, hygiene, and first aid. “Native Medical Practitioners” received more extensive instruction and served virtually as physicians for island communities between rare visits by the colony’s Medical Officer who was a British doctor.

## The Onotoa Man

The leader on Nikumaroro, whom Emily calls “the Onotoa man,” was the Native Magistrate and overseer Teng (Mr.) Koata. Formerly Native Magistrate on the island of Onotoa in the southern Gilberts, Koata had been recruited by Lands Commissioner Harry Maude to help establish the settlement on Nikumaroro with the understanding that it would be a temporary assignment. Koata, whose “exceptional qualities of loyalty and leadership had been proved in the Onotoa religious troubles of 1931” (Maude, *Of Islands And Men*) had been one of the senior Gilbertese delegates on the original voyage in October 1937 when Maude, assisted by Cadet Officer Eric Bevington, evaluated Gardner, Hull, and Sydney Islands for future settlement. Koata also helped Maude and Gallagher install the first ten-man work party on the island in late December 1938 and returned to take up residence on the island with his family in June



*Native Magistrate Teng Koata on Nikumaroro in December 1938. Photo courtesy Wigram Air Force Museum, New Zealand.*

1939. He left Nikumaroro in 1940 on the RCS *Nimanoa* and traveled to the Central Hospital in Tarawa in the Gilberts where he arrived on or about September 30th. Whether he ever returned to the Phoenix Group is not known but a memorandum by Lands Commissioner Paul B. Laxton circa 1950 lists him as retiring and being replaced by “Teng Iokina” in 1941.

## Kela

**T**he other player in the drama is Gerald B. Gallagher, Officer-in-Charge of the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme, whom Emily calls “Kela.” When the scheme was launched in early 1939, Gallagher, then 27 years old, made his headquarters on Sydney Island (Manra). He was able to keep track of events on Hull (Orona) and communicate with his superiors in the Gilberts and in Fiji by radio, but he was totally dependent upon rare visits by government ships for any inter-island travel. Because there was no radio on Nikumaroro until Gallagher moved his headquarters there in September 1940, his contact with the island prior to that time was sporadic at best.

Emily’s two years on Nikumaroro, 1940 and 1941, span a crucial period in TIGHAR’s investigation. She is there in the spring of 1940 when the skull is found. She is there in September when Gallagher arrives, learns of the discovery, and searches out the partial skeleton and artifacts. She is there when the bones are shipped off to Fiji in a box built by her own father. She is there the following Sep-



Gerald B. Gallagher,  
circa 1937

Photo courtesy D. Clancy.

tember when Gallagher dies. And she leaves the island a week before the outbreak of the war in the Pacific.

## The Plane on the Reef

**I**n Emily’s mind, the bones for which her father built the box are inextricably linked to the airplane wreckage she says she saw on the northwestern reef, and yet we know from Gallagher’s telegrams that the bones he found were near the lagoon shore on a completely different part of the island (which he describes variously as “the South East corner” and “on the South Eastern shore”). The correspondence also gives no indication whatever that Gallagher was aware of an airplane wreck on Nikumaroro. Clearly there is a conflict between Gallagher’s and Emily’s respective descriptions of the discovery.

Emily does not claim to be a witness to the finding of the bones and, in fact, says that she never saw them herself. Nevertheless, the documentary record leaves little doubt that bones were found. But what about the wreckage on the reef, which she says she saw on at least two occasions? Emily’s description of what she saw from the beach, which is roughly 600 feet from the edge of the reef, was consistent in both interviews.

On July 15th Tom King asked:

**TK:** Where were the parts of the airplane?

**ES:** Not far from where the ship was. Not toward the village but away from it. The struts were there. (holds up hands in circle, apparently indicating that the struts were round in cross-section, about 20 cm. in diameter)

**TK:** Did people use parts of the airplane?

**ES:** I don’t know for sure. When we got there only the steel frames were left, only the long pieces were there. We were frightened to go close to the plane. Where the shipwreck was—the remainder of the

plane was not very far from there. The waves were washing it in low tide.

And on July 27th I asked:

**RG:** Did you ever see any part of that plane?

**ES:** Only the frame, a piece of steel.

**RG:** And where was this piece?

**ES:** Nearby that wrecked ship. It was not far from there. From about here to that house. *[She points to a house across the road.]*

**RG:** OK. That's probably 100 meters. Was it on land or in the water?

**ES:** On the rocky part. It was not far from where the waves break.

**RG:** Let's look at a map. If you could show us the shipwreck?

**ES:** Is this the part called Nutiran? *[points to northwestern end of island]* Maybe this is the place. *[points to the small ship symbol on the map]* It was not very far from that place.

**RG:** *[explaining map]* This part here is the rock. The waves of the ocean break out here. The beach with the sand is here.

**ES:** That means this is where that plane was. It was not very far from the ocean where the waves break. That's why the parts of the plane got carried away quickly. That frame was also very rusty.

**RG:** Could you put a mark on the map where the plane was?

**ES:** *[marks the map]* It was here.

**RG:** And on the back of the map could you draw a picture of what you saw?

**ES:** It was a long steel. *[draws a line]* There was a round part of it. *[adds a small solid circle at the end of the line]* I do not know what part of the plane it was. We were forbidden to go there. I was following my father. When I went there my father stopped me.

**RG:** How big was this piece?

**ES:** About four arm spans. *[Holds her arms out.]*

**RG:** So it might fit in this room?

**ES:** Yes, barely. It was a big plane. *[The room was perhaps twelve feet long.]*

**RG:** How did you know that this was part of an airplane?

**ES:** I heard it from those who were there before us that it was part of an airplane.

**RG:** So the people on the island said that this was part of an airplane.

**ES:** Yes.

**Russ:** What color was the wreckage that you drew on the map?

**ES:** It was very rusty.

**RG:** What color rust?

**ES:** Very red. When it is seen at low tide. Not observable at high tide. At low tide it could be seen. Very rusty, bad, useless.



TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie.

Low tide on the reef flat where Emily says there was once airplane wreckage. The distance from the beach in the foreground to the surf line is about 200 meters.



TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie.

The reef surface near the shore is deeply pitted and quite jagged. The outer section of the reef flat, however, is relatively smooth.



**RG:** Was there other wreckage or debris around it or all by itself?

**ES:** Nothing.

**RG:** Did the people in the village have any pieces?

**ES:** No.

**RG:** You saw none of the other parts of the plane. The aluminum, the shiny parts?

**ES:** No, all gone. Nothing.

Fortunately we have a number of photographs taken between the date of the Earhart/ Noonan disappearance and Emily's departure from Nikumaroro which include the specific location she describes. If Emily could see the wreckage, we should be able to see it too. And we can, or at least we can see something that fits her general description of what she saw in the place where she says she saw it.



Photo #1 (above) is a copy photo of a photograph taken by Eric Bevington in October 1937 during the first British evaluation of the island for future settlement. It shows the western shoreline of Nikumaroro and the northern side of the wreck of SS *Norwich City* which is, at that time, largely intact. The sea is quite calm and a line of low breakers delineates the outer edge of the reef. Just north of the shipwreck and just behind the line of breakers two objects are clearly visible.

Photo #2 (right) is a photograph taken in December 1938 by the New Zealand survey party which was on the island at that time. The camera is looking out through a hole in the north side of the SS *Norwich City* and shows

the reef edge looking northward from the wreck. The photo is one of several dozen in a scrapbook of the expedition. The caption reads "Undertow through gap in side of Wreck." It is possible to make out what appear to be the same objects on the reef which appear in the 1937 photo.

Neither of these photos has been altered or enhanced in any way, but even from these "raw" images it is apparent that there was something where Emily says there was airplane wreckage.

The objects in the photos are not there now but forensic examination of better copies of these and other photos might provide more information about what they were and where they went. Of course, we can't tell from the black and white photos what color the objects were, but we should be able to get some idea



of how big they were by scaling them to *Norwich City* whose dimensions we have. Could the airplane pieces have been, in fact, merely debris from the shipwreck? That doesn't seem very likely. At the time the photos were taken the ship had not yet started to break up and when it did, the debris field scattered predominantly southeastward toward the shore and the main lagoon passage. Gales and high seas hit Nikumaroro almost exclusively from the northwest.

With photographic confirmation that there was something there, and in the absence of a good alternative explanation for what it might be, it makes sense to accept Emily's

second-hand identification of it as a working hypothesis. If further photographic research can establish that the material which is present in Bevington's October 1937 photo (a contemporaneous, primary source document) is from an aircraft, the implications are obvious. Air traffic over the remote reaches of the Central Pacific prior to October 1937 was extremely rare and is very easy to catalog. Only one airplane from this period is missing: Earhart's.

## The Bones from the Plane

**B**ut what about the bones? Emily quite clearly talks about two different groups of bones – one set which she associates with the airplane wreckage and other bones which she associates with the shipwreck. Of the former she said in the first interview with Tom King:

**TK:** Did you see the plane fall?

**ES:** No, it was already there when I came. ...The steel of the plane was there some-time before we got there. *[asked specifically about aluminium, she says no]* Fishermen found the bones. They were frightened and they brought the story of them to the Onotoa man.

**TK:** What did Koata do?

**ES:** He sent people to bring the bones. People were frightened. Only people working for the government received the bones. My father had to look at the bones. Mr. Gallagher asked my father to make the box.

And in the second interview:

**RG:** What can you tell us about the bones that were found?

**ES:** Some Gilbertese went to fish, they saw in the shallows some pools, at the place where the plane crashed, some bones, and they knew these were human bones because of the skull bone. They went and reported to Teng Koata, there were bones. So from that they assumed that

these must have been the bones of those who were in the plane when it crashed. These were under the plane, near the plane. This was near the top end of the steel.

**RG:** Did you see the bones?

**ES:** I didn't see them. We were forbidden, but my father told us.

**RG:** Were the bones found while you were on the island or did this happen before?

**ES:** These bones were found when we had already arrived on the island. These Gilbertese came and found bones and reported to Teng Koata. Then Teng Koata took them to the European. So it was arranged for a box to be made for the bones and the bones were brought. There were not many bones.

**RG:** Were any other bones ever found on Niku?

**ES:** Only these few bones they found. They do a search around that area but they found no other bones. Only these big bones that they found. I do not know how many. My father knew.

Aside from where she says the bones were found, her account actually tracks fairly well with the known facts. A Gilbertese work party found a skull which Koata knew about. The European (Gallagher) did find out about the skull and conducted a search. Not many bones were found (a total of 13) and most of these were relatively large. Gallagher had a box made for the bones. In short, it does seem that the bones Emily associates with the airplane wreck are the bones that were actually found elsewhere on the island.

For another opinion see "Where Were The Bones" by Dr. Tom King on page 38.



## Too Many Bones

Sorting out the bones associated with the shipwreck is more difficult. Emily told Tom King of “Maybe 10 different people whose bones were found along that area” (near the shipwreck). She is quite clear that these bones were found on land:

“You would come up on the reef, then the beach comes up where the island shrubs start to grow. That is where the bones were found.”

Emily’s account is consistent with the recollections of Gallagher’s clerk, Bauro Tikana, who wrote in 1991, “When we first arrived I saw the ship wreck and asked Mr. Gallagher about it. He told me that it was *Norwich City*. Later when the laborers were cleaning (clearing) the land they told me that they found bones near the ship. I do not know if Mr. Gallagher knew about the bones as I did not tell him about it. The laborers also told me they

found bones at the other end of the atoll.”

Mr. Tikana marked a map showing that bones were found on shore near the shipwreck, but to show where the “other bones” were found he could only circle the entire southeast portion of the island.

We know that there were eleven men lost in *Norwich City* wreck in 1929 and that three bodies washed up and were buried by the survivors. If the burials were not very deep and were on or close to the beach, it seems possible that they may have been uncovered by storms in the ensuing ten years or so. It’s also possible that other bodies from the wreck washed up after the survivors were rescued. However, if a body from the airplane wreck (Noonan?) also washed up or was buried on that same beach it could be indistinguishable from the shipwreck bones.

## Answers and Questions

Emily Sikuli’s story, supported by historical documents and photographs, offers some long-sought answers to the riddle of the Earhart/Noonan disappearance. Whether or not they are the correct answers remains to be seen. They do, however permit us to adjust and refine the hypothesis we are attempting to test.

But as answers to old questions are offered, new questions arise. Why does Emily associate the bones so strongly with the airplane wreck? And why did Koata put the area off limits? It is apparent that this was done before Gallagher arrived and found the other bones and the artifacts. Why did the finding of just a skull on a different part of the island cause Koata to put the airplane wreck off limits? And why didn’t Koata, or anybody else, tell Gallagher about the plane?

The association of the bones with taboo airplane wreckage is something that we’ve heard before. Tapania Taiki, in 1997, told us of seeing pieces of an airplane on the reef and in the shoreline vegetation when she was a child on Nikumaroro in the late 1950s:

“The older people said they saw the skeletons of a man and woman, one each. The elders said, ‘Do not go where the plane is. There are ghosts there.’ They were trying to scare us to keep us away from there.”



Tapania Taiki

Photo courtesy K. Spaulding

## Debris Field

**B**ut Tapania's plane parts were not seen in the same place Emily describes. Over the years we have come across a number of anecdotal accounts of aircraft wreckage seen at Nikumaroro; and we have ourselves found a few pieces of aircraft debris which we suspect might be from the Electra. Are these real and rumored airplane parts random and contradictory? Or do they all fit together to form a logical sequence of events?

On two occasions between January 1940 and November 1941 Emily Sikuli sees rusted structures, said to be the wreckage of an airplane, on the reef near the ocean just north of the shipwreck ([map reference 1](#)). Emily does not see the wreck up close and no aluminum is visible from shore, but fisherman have been to the plane.

Sometime in late 1944 or early 1945, U.S. Navy PBV pilot John Mims is shown an aircraft control cable being used as a heavy-duty fishing line leader by Gilbertese fishermen on Nikumaroro. When asked where it came from one of the islanders replies that when the Gilbertese people first came to the island there was an airplane here. When asked where the plane is now, he just shrugs.

Sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s, the schoolmaster on Nikumaroro, Pulekai Songivalu, sees aircraft wreckage along the lagoon shore just opposite the main passage ([map reference 2](#)).

During roughly the same time period, his daughter Tapania sees a "piece of a wing" in the water on the reef off the shore of Nutiran not far from the main passage. Aerial photographs taken in 1953 indicate the presence of anomalous light-colored, reflective material on the reef in this same area ([map reference 3](#)). Tapania also sees "airplane parts" in the shoreline vegetation ([map reference 4](#)). not far from a "Euro-

pean house" made of lumber rather than native materials.

In 1989 TIGHAR finds an aluminum aircraft component near the shore of the main passage in the abandoned village ([map reference 5](#)). The "dado," an interior feature usually found in the cabins of small civilian aircraft including the Lockheed Model 10, is a complete assembly still bearing a fragment of the quarter-inch kapok insulation which once covered one side. Quarter-inch kapok insulation was standard on the Lockheed 10. Unlike military parts, the dado is stamped with no part number.

In 1991 TIGHAR finds a section of aluminum aircraft skin on the island's southwestern shore in the wash-up from a recent severe storm ([map reference 6](#)). Although exhaustive research has not yet been able to match the rivet pattern to any aircraft, the general features of the skin (type of aluminum, thickness, rivet type, size and spacing) are typical of the Lockheed 10. The damage to the skin indicates that it was blown outward by a tremendous fluid force, such as wave action.

In 1996 TIGHAR finds a fragment of Plexiglas in the abandoned village which matches in material, thickness, color and curvature the specification for Lockheed Part Number 40552, the cabin windows of the Lockheed 10 ([map reference 7](#)). Also found are two lengths of what appears to be pre-war American radio cable with connectors of a type used in aviation applications. These were found near the shore of the main passage in the remains of what was once the shop of the island carpenter, Temou Samuela ([map reference 8](#)).

These seem to suggest that the aircraft arrived at or near the place where Emily saw wreckage ([map reference 1](#)) and was quickly, perhaps within days, destroyed by the violent surf. In the ensuing years, storms further scattered the wreckage along the natural lines of

force. Buoyant material would travel farthest and may account for Pulekai's sighting of wreckage on the lagoon shore (**map reference 2**). Some non-buoyant wreckage might eventually be pulled back out over the reef edge but most of the aluminum should be scattered southeastward along the flat, as is indicated by Tapania's piece of a wing and the 1953 photos (**map reference 3**). Storms could drive pieces of the wreck ashore anywhere to the leeward of its starting place where they might be found and used by the locals.

It is important to remember that, by itself, Emily's anecdotal recollections do not prove anything, but just as garbled anecdotal accounts of bones being found on Nikumaroro eventually led us to archival sources which documented a fascinating but forgotten chapter in the Earhart puzzle, so Emily's tale has set us on a trail that may lead us to whatever is left of NR16020.

