

# Mrs. O'Brian

by Ric Gillespie

While still on Nikumaroro during Niku IIIIP we had received word via satellite phone that the team in Fiji had talked to a woman who was a former resident of the island. She described seeing aircraft wreckage on the Nutiran reef north of the Norwich City shipwreck. A few days later, another interview with an early settler, said to be the widow of the island's radio operator, appeared to confirm that villagers on Nikumaroro in the prewar years were aware that an airplane had come to grief there at some time before their arrival.



Photo courtesy R. Mattheos.

Ric Gillespie on Nikumaroro learns via satellite phone of new information uncovered by the TIGHAR team in Fiji.

During the voyage back to Fiji, again via satphone, we made arrangements to do follow-up interviews with the two women. No video or audio tape had been made of the initial interviews out of concern that cameras or recorders might create an intimidating atmosphere, but a friendly rapport had been established and we hoped that it would be possible to videotape the second interviews. We arrived in Suva, Fiji early on the morning of Sunday, July 25 and were scheduled to fly back to the U.S. the night of Tuesday, July 27, so it was imperative that we waste no time in arranging and preparing for the interviews.

## Foua Tofiga

(pronounced "fowOOa towFINGa")

That afternoon, July 25, Kristin Tague and I met with Foua Tofiga who had worked as a clerk for the Western Pacific High Commission in Suva during the years in question and had been instrumental in helping our Fiji Team locate and contact the two women. He also served as translator during the interviews. Kris and I spent a pleasant two hours with him at his home. I



TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie.

Foua Tofiga

I found him to be a well-educated, articulate, and soft-spoken man with an excellent command of English. Having studied the files of the Western Pacific High Commission, I was quite familiar with the names, procedures and personalities of the WPHC and in chatting about those times and those people it was immediately apparent that Mr. Tofiga was entirely genuine in his representation of his experience. He was, in fact, able to clear up several questions we had about the meaning of various abbreviations in the files and flesh out our picture of the various officials with personal anecdotes.

## Tofiga at Nikumaroro

Mr. Tofiga has only been to Nikumaroro once, in late November 1941 with High Commissioner Sir Harry Luke who was touring the Phoenix Islands settlements in the wake of the death of Officer-in-Charge Gerald Gallagher in September. Tofiga's presence on that trip is confirmed in the published diary of Sir Harry Luke (*A South Seas Diary*, Nicholson & Watson, London, 1945) who says: "The party consisted of Dr. Macpherson and 'Mungo' Thompson with Tofinga [sic], the Ellice Islander clerk from the High Commission, as interpreter." Tofiga has no recollection of seeing or hearing about bones or airplane wreckage during that visit but Sir Harry's diary indicates that the ship was only at Gardner one day (Sunday, November 30, 1941).

## The Sextant Box Remembered

Despite his close association with the top officials of the WPHC, Tofiga had not been aware of the discovery of bones and artifacts on Gardner nor had he seen any of the official correspondence about attempts to identify them. This was because he worked in the Accounts section rather than in Correspondence and, as we know, the whole issue of the castaway of Gardner Island was kept "strictly secret." Tofiga does, however, remember that Henry Vaskess, Secretary of the WPHC, kept a collection of curios on a credenza in his office. The centerpiece was a wooden box which, Tofiga says, looked very much like the photos we showed him of the Pensacola sextant box. His recollection matches the official record which last mentions the sextant box as being stored in Vaskess' office. Mr. Tofiga doesn't remember whether it had any numbers on it and has no idea what may have eventually become of it.

## Otiria's Odyssey

Otiria (pronounced "ohSEEria") O'Brian was interviewed twice by TIGHAR, once by Kristin Tague, with Foua Tofiga serving as translator, on Monday, July 19th and again by me, accompanied by Kris, with Tofiga again translating, on Tuesday, July 26th. The latter interview was videotaped. Mrs. O'Brian, despite her Irish surname, is a Gilbert Islander by birth. Her late husband, Fasimata O'Brian, was not Irish either but was born in the Ellice Islands. (Perhaps there was an Irishman involved somewhere along the line but that was not clear.) Otiria speaks and understands virtually no English. The interviews were conducted in her bedroom in her son's home where she is confined by her frail health. Tofiga translated my questions into Gilbertese, and her answers into English.

Throughout both interviews she appeared to be alert and lucid, and although some of her memories seemed to be jumbled, others tracked quite accurately with documented events. Otiria O'Brian is a Protestant Christian and, to my astonishment, began her videotaped interview by turning to the camera and singing several verses of a Gilbertese song which Mr. Tofiga later explained was a hymn about "Standing firm for Christ." She says she is 80 years old which would make her year of birth 1919, and her general appearance seems consistent with that age. But when asked what year she was born she said she was born in August of 670 and went to Nikumaroro in 178. It is possible that she was using a numbering system that is not familiar to Tofiga or to us.



TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie

Otiria O'Brian

## Correct Recollections

Otiria says she was born on the island of Onotoa in the southern Gilberts. When asked how she and her family came to live in the Phoenix Islands, she says that the government came and told the people that “Those who wished to own land—they could go.” That’s a good description of what happened and most of the first settlers did come from the southern Gilberts, including several from Onotoa.

In both interviews Mrs. O’Brian said that she never lived on Nikumaroro but only stopped there briefly en route to Sydney Island (Manra) where she and her family settled. This seemed odd given the amount of detail she remembered about the island and the stories about an airplane wreck and bones. Our other interviewee, Mrs. Emily Sikuli, was adamant that Mrs. O’Brian had lived on Nikumaroro for a time as the wife of radio operator Fasimata O’Brian. Subsequent research has shown that Emily was correct. We have been able to track Otiria’s movements through clues gleaned from her answers to various specific questions and from the official record.

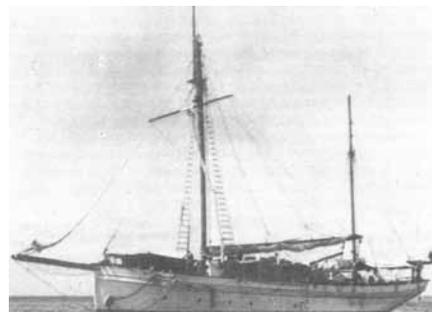
## Arrival Date

As best we can reconstruct events, Otiria traveled with her family from her home island of Onotoa in the Gilberts to settle on Manra, making a one night stop at Nikumaroro along the way.

Although Otiria doesn’t remember the name of the ship that brought her to the Phoenix Group, she does recall that it was a “big ship” that “belonged to Banaba” (Ocean Island). “Word came from Heaven saying that it was all right to go on this ship because it was from the government.” This could be a reference to an endorsement of the Phoenix Island Settlement Scheme by the London Missionary Society, the predominant religious presence in the southern Gilberts. Ocean Island was the headquarters for the Gilbert

and Ellice Islands Colony which administered P.I.S.S. Its principal vessel was the Royal Colony Ship (RCS) Nimanoa. Indeed, most of the settlers for Gardner (Nikumaroro), Hull (Orona), and Sydney (Manra) were transported in Nimanoa.

RCS Nimanoa



*Photo courtesy E. Bevington.*

Sailing from the Gilbert Islands they came first to Nikumaroro where they went ashore in boats that belonged to the ship and spent one night in the village where there was a “wooden house.” About “20 or 10” people, including some women and children, “whose names were for Nikumaroro” stayed behind when, the next day, the others numbering “20 or 30” reboarded the ship and continued on to Orona where some disembarked. The rest, including Otiria and her family, came finally to Manra.

Gerald Gallagher, Officer-in-Charge of the Phoenix Island Settlement Scheme, whom Mrs. O’Brian refers to as “Kela,” was already in residence on Nikumaroro when she got there. He had “a house that was just built” and he had “servants to cook for him.” She says that he came with them when the ship continued on to the other islands.

Given that Otiria was from Onotoa, I wondered if she might remember the name of the headman on Nikumaroro who had been a prominent figure on Onotoa before becoming Native Magistrate on Nikumaroro. To my surprise, the name she came up with was not Teng Koata, but “Tikana.” Bauro Tikana was Gallagher’s clerk and interpreter. He arrived with Gallagher in September 1940 at the same time that Koata took a leave of absence and traveled to Tarawa. This is a further indication that Otiria was not on Nikumaroro prior to Gallagher’s arrival.

It seems that Mrs. O'Brian's initial visit to Nikumaroro was sometime after Gallagher's arrival in early September 1940 but before his departure for Fiji in early June 1941. We can further constrain the time because, according to Gallagher's "Progress Report, Fourth Quarter 1940," his house on Nikumaroro was not sufficiently completed to permit occupancy until the middle of November. It is also clear from his report that no ships and no new settlers arrived between his arrival in September and the end of the year. He does mention that "RCS *Nimanoa* paid a very hurried visit to the District to distribute essential stores" in early January 1941. The ship called at Nikumaroro first, apparently on the 11th, and Gallagher accompanied it to Orona and Manra to check on the progress of those settlements. No mention is made of the ship bringing any new settlers but neither is it specifically stated that it did not. The "Progress Report, First Quarter 1941" specifically states that aside from *Nimanoa*'s brief visit in January, "No shipping has been available for the transport of settlers, stores, or equipment..." through the end of the quarter (March 1941). During the spring of 1941 RCS *Nimanoa* was being overhauled in Suva and no other ships are mentioned in the record as having visited Nikumaroro.

It would therefore appear that there is really only one documented possibility for when Otiria O'Brian spent her night on Nikumaroro en route to Manra: January 11, 1941.

## Return to Nikumaroro

Sometime later in 1941—we're not sure just when—Otiria married Fasimata O'Brian on Manra and traveled with him to the G&EIC colonial headquarters on Ocean Island. The provisioning records of HMFS *Viti* show that "Fasamata" [sic] and "Atiria" [sic] left there on September 11, 1941 and arrived at Gardner a week later on September 18th. This was the same voyage that would end with

the death of Gerald Gallagher. After a brief stop at Gardner on the 18th, *Viti* continued on to Canton, Sydney and Hull, returning to Nikumaroro on the 25th with Gallagher gravely ill. He died on September 27, 1941 and was buried at the foot of the island flagpole. This would seem to explain Otiria's answer to my question:

RG: How did you hear about this thing [airplane crash] that happened on Nikumaroro?

OO: This I heard because this happened before we arrived at Nikumaroro. We arrived and we followed the burial procession. The man who died was a government official. He was buried under the flag, not in the common graveyard.

## Date of Departure

Otiria and her husband lived on Nikumaroro for the next two months until *Viti* returned with High Commissioner Sir Harry Luke. According to the ships records, on November 30, 1941 "Fasamata [sic], W/T operator, and wife" were transported from Gardner Island to Hull Island, arriving there the next day. By coincidence, this is the same voyage that took Emily Sikuli from her home on Nikumaroro to nursing school in Fiji—so Emily and Otiria left the island at the same time and on the same ship. In her earlier interview with Kris Tague, Otiria had said that Fasimata had been assigned to Orona for only a short time before settling on Manra where she says she spent the war years.

## Otiria's Bone Story

Having placed Otiria's initial arrival at Nikumaroro in January 1941, well after Gallagher had found the bones the previous September, it's clear that any information she has is second hand at best. Indeed, the same ship that brings her to the Phoenix Group carries the box of bones and the arti-

facts away from Nikumaroro when it leaves (Gallagher's letter that accompanies the shipment is dated December 27, 1940). This may help explain her confusing response to my question:

RG: Was there a shipwreck at Nikumaroro?

OO: No. It went aground, but was not broken up. Maybe it is still there. There was no damage to it. It was right on the reef but there were no people on board. I remember seeing it. Standing there firm. Nothing broken. No people. Another ship came and took away the people from the ship. The government put a stop to people going on board.

When Mr. Kela [Gallagher] arrived he went to that ship and found a person that had been killed but he was put under the ship, below the ship. Mr. Kela then directed certain ones to come and build a box and put this person in it and take it to be buried. The person was lifted and put in the box. The one who died was not a European. He came from Onotoa.

The story about the body and the box may be a very garbled rendition of something she heard on the island about the bones Gallagher found and the box built to contain them. We've heard other stories about bones being found near the shipwreck which may or may not be true, but Gallagher certainly made no mention of any such discovery. Her assertion that the one who died was from Onotoa could stem from the fact that the original discovery of the skull seems to have been made by Teng Koata, the Native Magistrate from Onotoa who left the island when Gallagher arrived.

## Two Crashes, One Memory?

If Mrs. O'Brian's recollections about Kela finding a body are difficult to match with known events, her account of an airplane wreck at Nikumaroro is even more confusing. Greatly complicating the issue is the fact that

she spent the war years on Sydney Island (Manra) where we know that a C-47 crashed catastrophically on December 17, 1943 (See "The Crash at Sydney Island" TIGHAR Tracks Vol. 14, No. 2, page 15). How much of what she remembers of that event is mixed up with what she says about what she heard talked about on Nikumaroro is hard to determine.

In her initial interview, Kris Tague asked her whether she had seen wreckage of any kind at Nikumaroro. She answered:

OO: Many things I have seen. Things that float or move about in the sea. People said they were parts of an airplane.

[Note: As far as we know, Mrs. O'Brian had no idea that Kris had any interest in an airplane. I later asked Mr. Tofiga if, in setting up the initial interview, he had told Mrs. O'Brian that we are searching for an airplane. He was quite sure that he had not.]

People and even members of the government came to look at it. ... Men were making expressions of sadness about the fate of those whose plane crashed. I didn't see because we were there only briefly. ... It is said that they broke up and sank in the ocean. They said that the parts were seen by a ship and they went to look for more of them.

In her second interview eight days later, I tried everything I could think of to give her an opportunity to talk about the airplane wreckage without "leading" her. I asked if there was anything unusual about the island. She said the fishing was very good. I asked if there were other wrecks on the island besides the ship that was on the reef. She said there were other wrecks there and on Orona, but volunteered no details. (There were no other shipwrecks at Nikumaroro but there was a shipwreck at Orona). Finally, in desperation, I asked:

RG: Did the people on Nikumaroro say anything about an airplane?

OO: We did not stay on Nikumaroro. I was on Manra.

Okay, I thought, let's see if she knows about the crash on Manra.

RG: How long did you live on Manra?

OO: We were there when we were young and when we were girls. [giggles]

RG: During the war?

OO: Yes.

RG: Do you remember an airplane crashing on Manra?

OO: There was one, but it landed in the lagoon. [As indeed it did.] Nobody died. Only a few days and they went away.

I said nothing while she thought for a minute.

We buried three of them and maybe the one who piloted the plane. One died and one lived. I do not know for sure if they were American or British. [In fact, there were nine fatalities in the Sydney Island crash. All died on impact except one who lived for about fifteen minutes.]

I then said to her as a statement, not a question:

RG: But you remember nothing about an airplane at Nikumaroro.

After a long thoughtful pause she said,

OO: There was a plane that crashed at Nikumaroro. There was a woman. No. A couple. A man and a woman. The man was the pilot. He was the one flying the plane.

Another long pause during which I said nothing.

A bullet hit him in the eye [gestures toward her eye] and of course that made him lose control [moves her hands as if rocking a steering wheel]. One died. The Onotoa people came and lifted him out and made a box for him. When he was questioned why he didn't take care, he said that he was hit and he didn't have any control. The Onotoa people were

very angry so that that one became very frightened [here she laughs] and he was saying, "I didn't kill him. I didn't do anything bad to him. He was my brother." And he left his plane and followed the Onotoa people. One died. The other lived.

Which details belong to which crash? The pilot of the plane who was questioned by the Onotoa people could be the one brief survivor of the Sydney crash. The C-47 had been circling the island and inexplicably hit a palm tree on a low pass. Was the fatally injured pilot trying to explain to the islanders who found him that a bird had come through the windshield and struck him in the face? Were the protestations of innocence that Mrs. O'Brian found so amusing, in fact, the hysterical apologies of a guilt-ridden dying pilot? We'll never know.

It would be tempting to ascribe all of her memories about crashed airplanes to the one accident we know happened on the island where she lived, except that some of the details she offers about the Nikumaroro wreck don't fit the Sydney wreck at all. The mention of "a woman, a man and a woman, a couple" is remarkable. She also describes not a witnessed crash but parts said to be "pieces of a plane." The Sydney crash happened in full view of the villagers. The phrase "the parts were seen by a ship" can be interpreted as "the parts were seen by people on a ship" or it could mean "the parts were seen near a ship." If she meant the latter, then her recollections match those of Emily Sikuli who says she saw aircraft wreckage on the reef at Nikumaroro near the wreck of the S.S. Norwich City.

In the end, Mrs. O'Brian's recollections are not terribly helpful except as garbled corroboration of Emily Sikuli's far more detailed and specific account of an airplane that was wrecked at Nikumaroro before the first settlers arrived in 1938.

