

# TIGHAR TRACKS

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TIGHAR · 2812 Fawkes Drive · Wilmington, DE 19808 · USA · www.tighar.org

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## Seven Site Research Report

**SINCE OUR RETURN FROM THE NIKU III** expedition last September, the dozens of man-made and natural objects we recovered from the Seven Site have been, and continue to be, the object of intense scrutiny in our attempt to piece together what happened at that remote and forgotten place. Scientists and experts from Hawaii to England have been examining, measuring, categorizing, and identifying bits and pieces of metal, glass, bone, shell, wood, and even charcoal to help us accurately reconstruct what happened there. Meanwhile, we've been scouring the historical record for documentary evidence.

The Seven Site was the scene of a series of events of uncertain number occurring over an only vaguely definable period of time. Each event left behind its own debris and we must sort out which pieces belong to which puzzle. Just as the

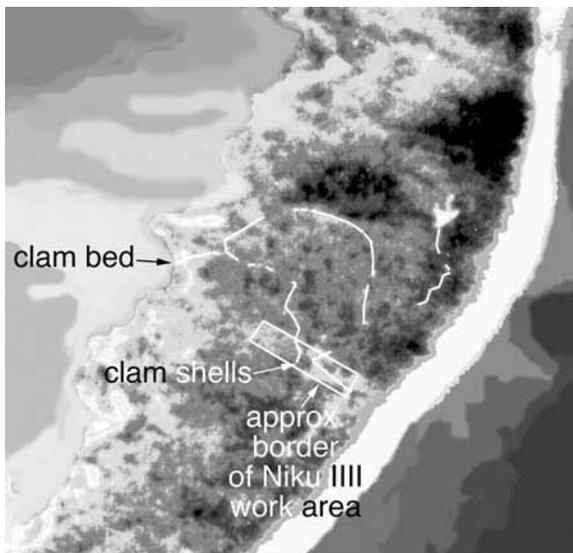


pioneering 19<sup>th</sup> century archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann had to dig through the rubble of later cities in his search for the Troy of Homeric legend, so we must try to discover which, if any, of our recoveries are associated with the object of

our quest: the Gardner Island castaway who may have been Amelia Earhart. Our task is complicated by the very short span of time over which the events took place – decades rather than centuries – and the lack of any meaningful stratigraphy (layering) in the coral rubble and rotting vegetable matter that passes for soil on Nikumaroro. It is also worth remembering that ol' Heinrich identified the wrong Trojan layer as dating from the time of Agamemnon, Hector and Achilles.



The events at the Seven Site for which we have at least some evidence are:



### Event: Castaway's Campsite

Time: circa 1938

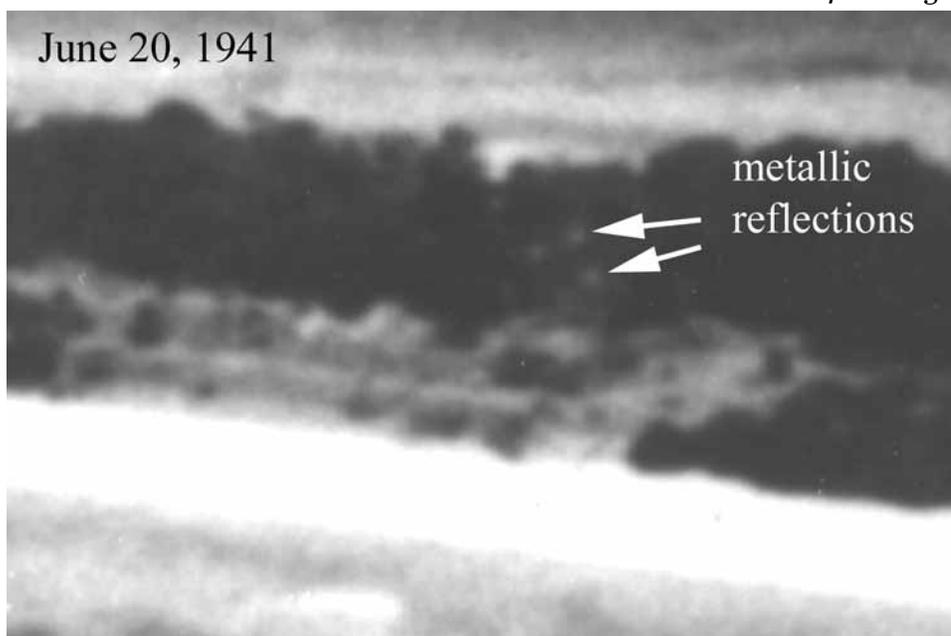
**Evidence:** An aerial photo taken December 1, 1938 shows what appear to be man-made trails connecting a place on the lagoon shore where we found the remains of an old clam bed with the Seven Site where we found two deposits of clam shells. The site also fits Gallagher's general description of the place where the castaway's bones were found in 1940, including the presence of "dead birds, turtle and fire."

## **Event: Gallagher's Search**

**Time: September to mid-November 1940**

**Evidence:** Sometime around late April 1940, laborers found and buried a skull. Gallagher arrived in September and, hearing of the incident, conducted an initial investigation which turned up a castaway's bones, a few artifacts, and an apparent campsite. On September 23<sup>rd</sup> he reported the discovery, and his suspicion that he had found Amelia Earhart, in a telegram to his immediate superior, the Resident Commissioner of the Gilbert & Ellice Islands Colony on Ocean Island. The RC quickly passed the news to British colonial headquarters in Fiji and there followed an exchange of questions and answers directly between Gallagher and senior officials. On October 17 Gallagher told his superiors that an organized search of the area would take several weeks "as crabs move considerable distances and this part of island is not yet cleared." On October 26, 1940, he received orders to conduct the organized search. In a later routine report Gallagher wrote that stormy weather prevailed from mid-November through the end of the year and "properly organized work at any distance from the village was impossible." It would seem, therefore, that Gallagher's "organized search" for more bones probably took place roughly between October 27<sup>th</sup> and November 15<sup>th</sup>.

An aerial photograph taken on June 20, 1941 shows significant clearing of beachfront vegetation at the Seven Site and what appear to be reflections off metal seen through the trees further inland. The



*This aerial photo shows the clearing and metallic reflections which appear to correspond to remains of corrugated metal sheeting found by TIGHAR.*

reflections seem to correspond to the location of very rusty remnants of corrugated metal sheeting found by TIGHAR and may indicate that a structure of some kind was erected either to provide shelter or as a rain collection surface draining into a nearby barrel (the remains of which were also found) or both.

## **Event: Planting Operations**

**Time: 1941**

**Evidence:** In a letter to his superiors dated December 27, 1940 Gallagher reported the completion of the organized search and added, "[It] is possible that something may come to hand during the course of the next few months when the area in question will be again thoroughly examined during the course of planting operations, which will involve a certain amount of digging in the vicinity." During the Niku III expedition we noted several small depressions and piles of accompanying backfill in the coral rubble just inland from the lagoon shore at the Seven Site. Metal detector sweeps of the area found small flecks of rusted iron near some of the depressions. A document found in the Kiribati National Archives in Tarawa entitled "Recommendations Made to the Overseer, Gardner Island, Regarding Plantation work. 12th November 1947" describes how to transplant coconut trees.

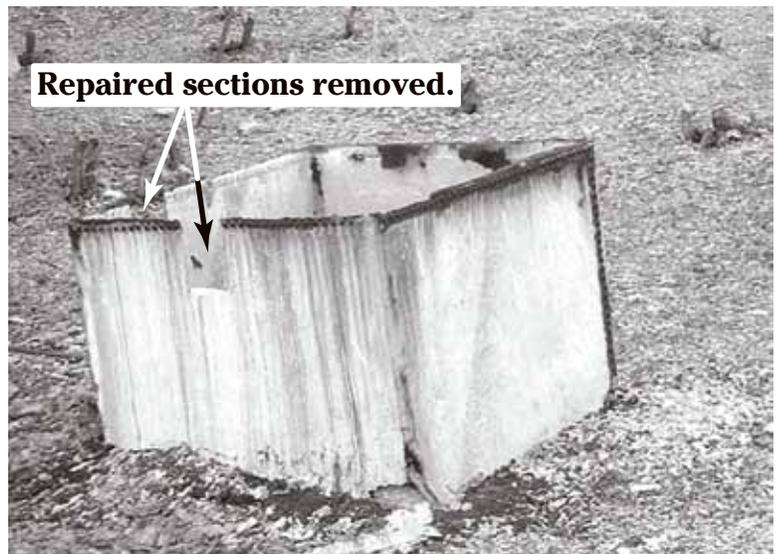
### **Transplanting**

*Holes should be dug at least a week before transplanting takes place. They should be about 2 ft. deep. When the germinating nuts are transplanted to them from the nurseries a mixture of soil, rotting leaves ("mange"), and bits of iron should be put in the holes covering the nuts by about 2 inches. As the sapling grows the holes should be "fed" with "mange" (at intervals of about 2 months) but the hole should not be filled in to ground level until the sapling has grown to about 6 or 8 feet tall. The purpose of keeping the level of the soil around the sapling below surface level is to prevent the drying out of the soil on which the sapling is living.*

## **Event: Coast Guard Target Practice**

**Time: July 1944 through May 1946**

**Evidence:** Twenty .30 cal. U.S. military shell casings were recovered from the Seven Site along with several shards of broken white stoneware plates, one of which included a U.S. Coast Guard logo. Also recovered were broken internal components from large vacuum tubes of a type that may have been used in the Coast Guard Loran transmitter. Coast Guard veteran Glen Geisinger tells of a site on the island's northwest shore where there was a metal tank used by the villagers to collect water. One of his buddies put a bullet through the tank and had to patch it. The metal tank at the Seven Site has what appear to be two bullet holes that have been sealed by the insertion of large machine screws and washers. Is this the repair, and therefore the same tank, described by Mr. Geisinger? During the Niku III expedition the repaired sections of the tank were removed and are currently being analyzed.



*The water tank at the Seven Site showing the repaired areas cut out by TIGHAR for analysis.*

## **Event: Visit by Paul Laxton**

**Time: Early 1949**

**Evidence:** Laxton was a British administrator who spent several months on the island in 1949. In an article entitled “Nikumaroro” that he wrote for the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* he described a tour of the island. After passing the deactivated and secured Coast Guard Loran station at the southern tip, Laxton writes:

*Turning the tip to return along the northern rim, narrow, thundering with surf driven by the north-east trade winds, the path ends in a house built for Gallagher on a strip of land cleared from lagoon to ocean beach so that the fresh winds blow easily through. Beyond this there is no path, save along the steeply sloping, sandy ocean beach.*

This passage has tormented us. A house built for Gallagher? Gallagher makes no mention of a house at that end of the island in any of his reports or correspondence. Gallagher died in 1941 and the Coast Guard didn't get there until 1944, but none of the Coast Guard veterans remembers a house.

Materials found at the Seven Site do suggest that there was some kind of structure there at some time and, as noted above, the 1941 aerial photo suggests the presence of shiny metal. It could be that Laxton's “house built for Gallagher” was nothing more than a water collection awning built at Gallagher's direction to serve the needs of the laborers who were conducting the search for the bones. The strip of land cleared from lagoon to ocean beach was probably the result of the bone search and the later planting operation, but if it was still largely clear of vegetation three years later, somebody was maintaining it. It's possible that the corrugated metal awning had collapsed by the time the Coasties were there three years later. If so, then Laxton is describing wreckage in the bush. Or was the structure rebuilt after the war? And if so, why?