

# HARD EVIDENCE

Fifteen years ago a single paragraph appeared on the back of a “*TIGHAR Tracks Extra*” news sheet mailed to TIGHAR members in August 1988:

**A new Amelia Earhart theory** is generally received with a sigh and a glance at the ceiling. So when we say "We've seen documentation that justifies an expedition to the Pacific" we can hardly believe it ourselves. TIGHAR members Tom Willi and Tom Gannon of Florida have spent years researching a fresh approach to the problem, and recently presented their case before TIGHAR's Executive Committee. Their work shows exhaustive original source research, application of extensive training and expertise, and (most unusual in Earhart research) no suggestion of conspiracies, capture, or cover-ups. The theory looks so good and reasonably easy to investigate that we can't go public with it, but we'd welcome inquiries from potential sponsors.

“Reasonably easy to investigate...” – my, my, my – were we ever that young? Sponsors did step forward and of course we did go public with the theory that the Earhart flight ended on Nikumaroro. Fifteen years, eight Pacific expeditions, four overseas research trips, and a few million dollars later it's fair to ask whether it has all been worth it. Are we any closer to solving the Earhart mystery today than we were when we said, “We've seen documentation that justifies an expedition to the Pacific” and is that call to action still valid?

Perhaps the best measure of our success is the “hard evidence” – contemporaneous documents, verifiable photographs, and identifiable artifacts – that has come to light as a direct result of TIGHAR's efforts. We have done innumerable studies, re-assessments and interpretations of existing information; and we have collected many recollections and anecdotes that have fueled the search for verifying documentation, but it is new hard evidence that moves the investigation forward.

## DOCUMENTS

### *The Chater Letter*

This eight page letter, written days after the disappearance by the general manager of Guinea Airways, details Earhart's stay in Lae, New Guinea and answers many essential questions about her preparations for the fateful flight to Howland Island. It

was found and brought to TIGHAR's attention in 1991 specifically as a result of press reports about our second expedition to Nikumaroro.

### *Lockheed Reports and “Daily Express” Records*

Found in obscure technical archives by TIGHAR researchers, Lockheed Report 465 “Flight Tests on Lockheed Electra Model 10E” dated November 16, 1935; and Lockheed Report 487 “Range Study of Lockheed Electra Bimotor Airplane” dated June 4, 1936, provide engineering data which, when combined with the real-world performance record of the only other airplane like Earhart's – Lockheed 10E special NR16059 dubbed “Daily Express” – and specific fuel management recommendations given to Earhart by Lockheed engineers, establish that the Earhart flight should have had more than enough fuel to reach Nikumaroro.

### *The Bones Files*

Long-discounted rumors that bones thought to be Earhart's had been found on Gardner Island (Nikumaroro) prior to World War Two proved to be true when TIGHAR researchers discovered original British files in Tarawa and in England detailing the incident and its aftermath. This discovery revealed an entirely new and previously unknown chapter in the Earhart mystery.

## ***Betty's Notebook***

This original hand-written transcription of what is believed to be a genuine distress call from Amelia Earhart in the days following her disappearance may be the most poignant glimpse into the tragedy ever to come to light. The woman who heard the transmission and made the notations as a fifteen year-old girl came forward in 2000 because the situation she heard Amelia describing matches TIGHAR's hypothesis. The notebook prompted an exhaustive study of all 184 alleged receptions of distress calls from Earhart. The results of the soon-to-be-published study leave little doubt that the Earhart aircraft did not go down at sea.

**PHOTOGRAPHS** *Aluminum Debris Field.* Forensic imaging of two aerial mapping photos taken of Nikumaroro's main lagoon channel in 1953 corroborates numerous reports by former island residents of the presence of scattered aircraft debris on the reef in those years.

*The Castaway Camp.* Analysis of a 1941 U.S. Navy aerial photo of Nikumaroro's northeastern shoreline corroborated wartime Coast Guard accounts of a cleared area and man-made objects on that remote part of the atoll. On-the-ground investigation has revealed a rich archaeological site that is believed to be the location where the bones of a castaway were found in 1940 (see "The Bones File" above).

**ARTIFACTS** *Dados.* The island's abandoned village has, in 1989 and in 2003, yielded the remains of three and probably four "dados" which appear to be components from a wooden-floored civilian aircraft of the general size and specifications of a Lockheed Electra (see "Dados Galore," page 3).

*Part Number 40552.* A cut section of polymethylmethacrylate (Plexiglas) found in the village during TIGHAR's 1996 expedition matches the material, color, thickness and specific curvature of Lockheed Part Number 40552 the cabin windows of Earhart's Lockheed 10E Special.

*Aircraft Skin.* A roughly two by three foot section of the external aluminum skin of an aircraft was found during TIGHAR's 1991 expedition in the wash-up line from a recent storm. Although the rivet pattern is not an exact match to any known aircraft, all of the many discernable features of the artifact are consistent with the Lockheed Electra and suggest that it is from a repair to a relatively small aircraft that was torn apart by the surf.

## **RAIDERS OF THE LOST LOCKHEED?**

Popular culture has encouraged a mythic view of archeology in which searches for lost treasures end in immediate gratification. Indiana Jones always finds the prize on the first trip, but the pattern of TIGHAR's Earhart investigation does not fit the myth. What it fits is the two-steps-forward, one-step-back painstaking and painful pattern of successful scientific inquiry. The hard evidence listed above, important as it is, amounts to clues, not proof. Some of the pieces that now look like part of the puzzle may eventually have to be thrown out, and further research may well reveal that pieces we already have are more important than we previously knew.

Over the years, the picture of what happened at Gardner Island has grown steadily clearer and we've long since reached the point where the simplest and least outrageous explanation for the clues that have been found is that the Earhart flight ended there. There is every reason to believe that further work on the island will discover more artifacts and information that will bring us a better understanding of what became of the airplane and its crew – and that's exactly what we intend to do.

