

Fiji Bone Search II

A second round of on-site investigation in Fiji for the bones and artifacts sent there from Nikumaroro in 1941 has answered many questions and raised more. TIGHAR members Marty Moleski and Roger Kelley spent from May 15 to June 17 in Suva, Fiji examining records and conducting interviews. Marty went on to spend several days in New Zealand

doing further research in the archives of the British Western Pacific High Commission now housed at the University of Auckland. Marty's full report of the trip is available on the TIGHAR website at www.tighar.org/Projects/Earhart/Bulletins/07_15_03Bulletin.html, but a few excerpts will serve to show the depth of the work accomplished.

The British records that TIGHAR found in 1997 trace the finding and analysis of the skeletal remains and other material from the spring of 1940 through August of 1941. ... The problem we face now is that there is no mention in the file at all of what was done with the evidence after the examiners closed the case in August of 1941. In the absence of evidence, we can only guess what might have happened:

1. Someone may have destroyed the evidence surreptitiously.
2. Someone may have kept some or all of the evidence as a curiosity.
3. The material may have been given to another institution for safekeeping.
4. The material may still be in government custody.

There are many variations on each of these hypotheses. At every meal and in every report that we made to TIGHAR, Roger and I toyed with the range of possibilities of what might have happened. We think we made some progress in ruling out some lines of inquiry, but in the final analysis, we remain perplexed and frustrated at our inability to close the question.

Roger did a very thorough search of the burial and cremation records, all of which are maintained by the Bureau of Prisons. ...

If someone had used these ordinary channels for burial, the records should show an unnamed

person of unknown gender who died on Gardner Island. Because people might have given the bones a name, Roger also looked carefully for any combination of Amelia, Earhart, Putnam and Gardner. He did find an Amelia who was buried in 1939, but no matter how hard we tried to imagine a scenario, we could not bring ourselves to believe that the Bureau of Prisons would have entered a burial date more than a year before the bones were brought to Suva. The way the records are kept pretty much precludes that kind of back-dating. Roger even toured four cemeteries, but there were hundreds of graves with virtually illegible stone markers and hundreds of unmarked depressions in the grounds as well, probably representing older grave sites.

A sample of the burial records Roger perused. TIGHAR photo by R. Kelley.

SUVA CEMETERY					
Date	Hour of Burial	No. of Grave	No. of Interment for Year	Witness or Minister	Name
7. 7. 42	3.30	9717	98	CARETAKER	STILL BORN CHIEF (M. THOMAS)
7. 7. 42	4 PM	9718	99	✓	MERRIA DENLEBA
8. 7. 42	3PM	9719	100	✓	EDENI
11. 7. 42	11.45	9720	101	✓	ULIKI RAM
11. 7. 42	12.00	9721	102	REV. FATHER ORINE	ANNIE STURCK
12. 7. 42	2PM	9722	103	CARETAKER	KABALAINI VAKAGBATI
14. 7. 42	2.20	9723	104	✓	HAROLD PATRICK E. (ADRIAN)
15. 7. 42	11AM	9724	105	✓	YUKANA. BEN KUTMAN
19. 7. 42	3.30	9725	106	✓	BROWN HENRY
24. 7. 42	12.15	9726	107	REV. FATHER ORINE	SONGERS. W. H.
27. 7. 42	8.20	9727	108	✓ REV. EARLICH.	SMOKY W. E.
✓ ✓ ✓	2PM	9728	109	CARETAKER	MOSINA
28. 7. 42	11AM	9729	110	✓	MERE AATEA
29. 7. 42	10AM	9730	111	✓	VAVULADY KAMA
✓ ✓ ✓	4PM	9731	112	MILITARY FATHER	REKKA HALTER
✓ ✓ ✓	11 AM	9732	113	REV. FATHER ORINE	ODDENIO FRANCIS

The easiest interpretation of the bones file – and the one most consistent with our evaluation of the quality of colonial record-keeping – is that Sir Harry just decided to hold on to the things collected from Gardner for the time being. There are many turning points in the history of the WPHC and the colonies when a later High Commissioner or Colonial Secretary may have decided to place everything in the hands of some other institution. Perhaps this later generation of civil servants did not have access to the bones file or did not know themselves how to find it in their archives; perhaps the material was judged to be of no particular value or interest to the WPHC and therefore did not win the full attention of the staff. The longer the time lag after 1941, the easier it is to imagine that something like this might have happened.

It is difficult to decide whether there is any hope of finding the things collected on Gardner and shipped to Suva so long ago. It is not hard to imagine that someone somewhere destroyed or stole some or all of the material. Such things happen every day. It is harder to believe that the bones, sextant box, shoe parts and corks still exist in official custody, needing only the right “Open Sesame!” to be revealed. But we have

not exhausted the work that could be done in Auckland, Tarawa or Honiara. It might even be valuable to go over the ground once again in Fiji, concentrating on the court system, government records and the history of the Central Medical Authority, whose records are bafflingly incomplete in Suva and (apparently) non-existent in Auckland. The key to unlock the mystery may still be hidden in the Western Pacific.

Martin X. Moleski, S.J., Ph.D.



Above: Marty and Roger at the airport in Fiji.

Left: Government House in Suva, Fiji, where much of their search was focused.

