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Fred Lohrer and the story of Richard Archbold's expeditions, part 2

Archbold Biological Station

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Seven second Expedition members showing some of the physical effects of exploring "Papua, Oroville Camp;[left to right] Juhlstedt, Rand, Tate, Archbold, Burke, Healy, Brass. Archbold Expeditions Collection, Department of Mammalogy, American Museum of Natural History."

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In the early years of the 20th century, the island now known as New Guinea was a place that very few Westerners knew much about or had visited. This island is the second largest in the world at over 300,000 square miles, and much of the interior is mountainous and very difficult to navigate. The island's plants and animals were only beginning to be seriously studied by biologists when Richard Archbold decided to lead the first of his Expeditions there, in 1933.

Archbold and his crew attempted to traverse through the unforgiving terrain of New Guinea during the first expedition largely on foot. A scientific expedition requires an immense amount of goods, clothing, equipment, food, etc. to be transported along with the expedition members. According to Archbold Biological Station Librarian Emeritus, Fred Lohrer, "On the first New Guinea expedition, the expedition scientists learned that hiring local tribesmen [to help transport food and goods] was inefficient; first, because the men did not want to travel beyond the boundaries of their tribal domain, so a second group of men had to be hired, and second, because a man can carry only so much, which has to include his own food. Foraging off the land was not an option because there was limited local food cultivation. Therefore, penetration deep into the interior of southern New Guinea was difficult."

The lessons learned from this first expedition suggested that a new strategy would be needed for future explorations. Lohrer says, "The first expedition experience convinced Archbold that for future New Guinea expeditions he needed an amphibious plane to carry men and supplies deep into the interior, to the base of the central mountain ranges, and taking advantage of New Guinea's several large rivers." For the second Expedition of 1936-1937, Archbold purchased an aircraft, named Kono, for use in the transporting of people and goods.

A critical member of these expeditions was Richard Archbold's friend and confidant of more than 40 years, Dr. Austin Rand. Rand had a remarkable scientific career and he lived six years longer than Archbold, dying in 1982. Rand spent the last years of his life in Lake Placid working on local Florida fauna, spending time with Richard Archbold, and serving in several capacities at Archbold Biological Field Station. Lohrer mentions that "Austin Rand told me that on the second New Guinea expedition up the Fly River, the expedition was camped along the river at the base of the mountains, and the airplane, Kono, was ferrying supplies and food. Then, at Port Moresby, a sudden storm, a 'Guba', turned Kono over, and the plane was later damaged beyond repair when it was hoisted out of the water. So, the expedition was 'up the creek without a paddle.' Luckily, they had radios... [and] built rafts to float specimens, supplies, and men down the Fly River to the coast, where they could be rescued by ship. Rand told me that one night he was awakened by noise or movement and he quickly discovered that the river was rising rapidly because of rain upstream, and the rafts, tied to trees, were in danger of being capsized in the rising water. The expedition dealt quickly with that emergency; did not lose any specimens or supplies; and floated downriver to the rescue ship."

The expedition members were adventuring through territory that was little charted and was forced to battle the elements, and insects as well. However, the experiences of these two expeditions did not sour the members and many would join Archbold on his Third New Guinea Expedition of 1938-39. This last Expedition led by Richard Archbold himself will be discussed in part three of this series.

More details about Archbold Expeditions and Richard Archbold can be found in the book "Richard Archbold and the Archbold Biological Station," by Roger A. Morse. Details on the aircraft used by Archbold and crew can be found in a five-part series written by Aviation enthusiast Curtis Adkisson, at archbold-station.org/documents/publicationspdf/Adkisson,C.S.-199697-ArchboldHappenings-AviationArchboldExpeditions.pdf. The official logs, journals, specimens, etc. from the Archbold Expeditions are housed in the American Museum of Natural History, Department of Mammalogy, Archbold Expeditions Collection located in New York City.