

NIGHTFALL ON THE TIKAL-UAXACTUN TRAIL

by Donald Callender as Told to Marshall Becker

After reading Marshall Becker's paper on the unusual skills of some individuals operating in forested regions, Don Callender reports that he would never try to navigate unfamiliar reaches without a compass, but that Dennis Puleston did have a knack for it. Callender wrote to Becker and attached the following incident from Tikal.

"During survey work at Tikal early in the summer of 1966 I found an unusual, ditch-like feature running east-west along what was considered the northern margin of the "city" of Tikal. This feature (see Puleston and Callender 1967) seemed to be a human construction rather than a natural feature. We followed it for some distance and made records of what we found. The complex ditching and earth works was recognized as important, but it was years before another team came to focus on what it all meant (cf. Webster *et al.* 2004, Webster *et al.* 2007).

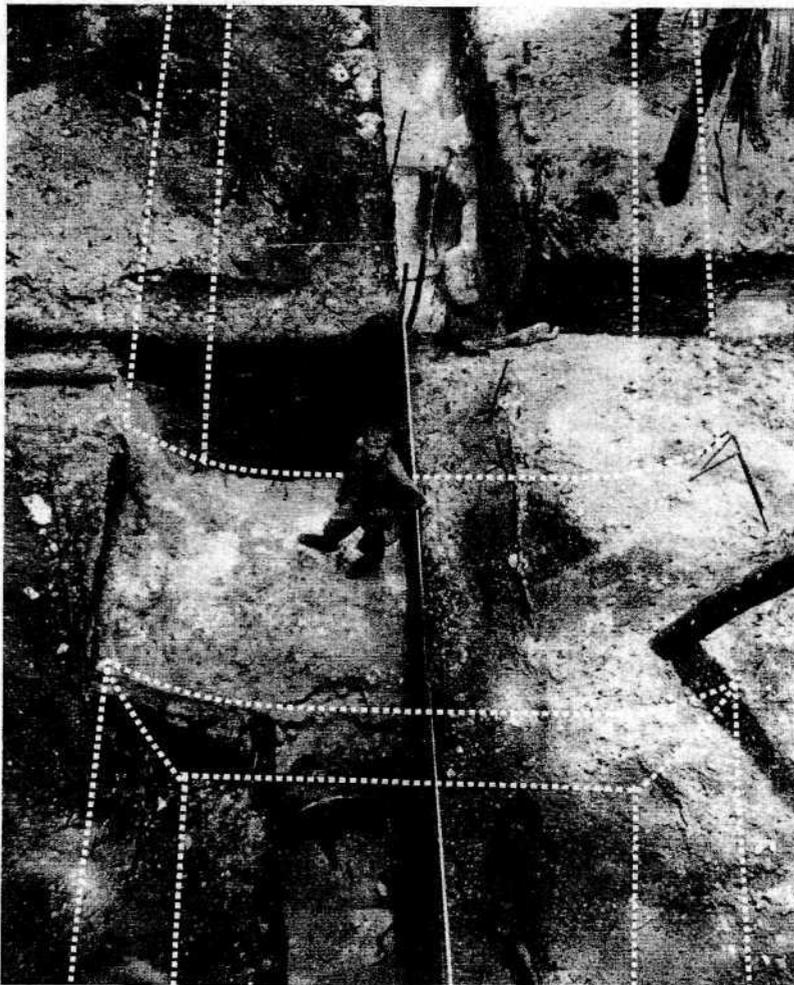


Figure 1. Looking down on the narrow causeway; Don Callender is standing on the causeway. The dotted lines show the position of the trench, much of which is still unexcavated. (From: Puleston, Dennis and Donald W. Callender Jr. 1967 *Defensive Earthworks at Tikal. Expedition 9:3: 40-48.*)

Near the end of the 1966 field season at Tikal, during which the Puleston mapping team returned to work in the area of what was called 'Don's Ditch,' we were trying to finish a series of sectional drawings late in the afternoon.



Figure 2. West of Uaxactun trail, "Bridge" excavation, view looking west from the eastern end of the eastern section trench; showing the east side of the exposed southern half of the crossing in its earlier form, August 1966. (Donald Callender, University of Pennsylvania Tikal Project Negative 66-92-16 All rights reserved. University of Pennsylvania Museum.)

Dennis was determined to finish the sectional drawings of trenches that the field crew had made earlier in the day as we were planning to take a flight out of Tikal the next day, to return to the USA. We continued to work until the sudden sunset common in the tropics ended our work. We had no flashlights! There was no moon! I asked Dennis how we were going to get back to the Tikal camp. He replied that we were going to 'feel' our way back.

We started to walk slowly in some direction that he chose, waving our arms in front of us trying to "feel" for fallen trees, branches, or vines. We walked strangely, raising our legs high like sleep walkers in the hope of not stumbling. I couldn't see a thing. The forest was pitch black, leaving me feeling like a blind person. Dennis was talking loudly, making up a narration about how this procedure was going to get us down to the trail from the excavated area, and then along that winding trail that led to the more open Tikal-Uaxactun Trail. For years there had been an easily followed "Mulero" trail that connected Tikal with the site of Uaxactun, only 18 kilometers to the north. That almost-road, 1-2 meters wide, was a path that might be identified; and might be followed in the dark.



Figure 3. Jimbal, camping on main plaza, 1965. (Christopher Jones, University of Pennsylvania Tikal Project Negative 65-43-696. All rights reserved. University of Pennsylvania Museum.) (While Jimbal was not our project at this time, this photograph shows the type of dense forest we had to “feel” our way through in the dark.)

Dennis claimed that the backs of our hands, and our cheeks, could ‘feel’ open space. It seemed to work. As two zombies we stepped high and waved arms around as I followed the disembodied voice leading the way. I actually believed that we would walk in circles until daylight, or worse. Then there appeared a glow from some kind of moss or reed-like plant. Dennis took the reed or branch and broke it in half. One half he placed into his belt at his back, to act as a beacon for me to follow. The other half he held in his left hand as a light, but it was not so bright that he stopped waving his right arm in front of him. On went this small but strange procession, for how long I have no idea.

At some point we reached what seemed to be a vast open space, and Dennis pronounced it to be the Uaxactun trail – perhaps. This was, he thought, the point at which we needed to turn to the right, to go south to Tikal. The feeling of openness was confusing. After the closeness of the east-west trail, this broad path of perhaps two or three meters breadth was disorienting. Just making a ‘right’ turn was confusing, and the width of the open space allowed us to wander crookedly toward the south. The slow

walk might have taken the full night to get us back into the area of the few familiar 'roads' of the Tikal trail network.

Of course, as soon as night fell and we were not present in camp, a rescue party had been organized. A group of workers led by Denny's wife, Olga Stavrakis, met us – on the correct trail home, as it turned out. She had interesting words for Denny, but with a bevy of flashlights the walk home was not much more than a stroll.”

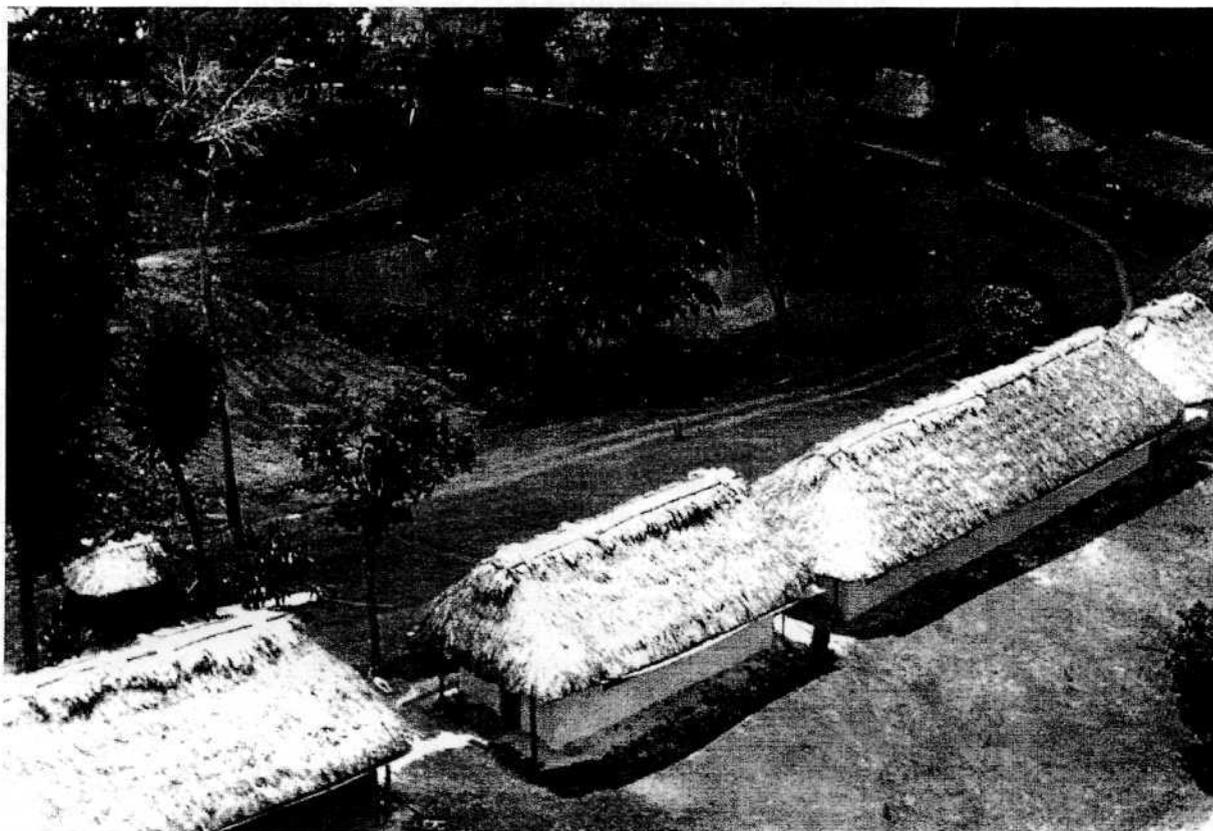


Figure 4. Aerial View Of Camp , 1958. (William R. Coe, University of Pennsylvania Tikal Project Negative CX58-4-21 All rights reserved. University of Pennsylvania Museum.)

References:

- Puleston, Dennis and Donald W. Callender Jr.
1967 *Defensive Earthworks at Tikal*. *Expedition* 9:3: 40-48.
- Webster, David, Timothy Murtha, Kirk D. Straight, Jay Silverstein, *et al.*
2004 *The Great Tikal Earthworks Revisited*. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 32 (1): 41-64.
- Webster, David, Jay Silverstein, Timothy Murtha, Horacio Martinez, and Kirk Straight
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