A HUNDRE

SEVENTEEN MEN OFF TO SEE A CHAMPIONSHIP FIGHT FOUND THEMSELVES INVOLVED IN A GIGANTIC STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL AS THEY BATTLED THE HORRORS OF HUNGER, THIRST AND DEATH FOR ONE HUNDRED DAYS ON A STRIP OF CORAL HUNDREDS OF MILES FROM NOWHERE

HULK OF JAPANESE SHIP WASHED UP ON MINERVA SUPPLIED FUEL TO KEEP TONGANS ALIVE, HOUSED EQUIPMENT TO MAKE FRESH WATER.

DAYS ON MINERVA REEF

It was after ten o'clock at night when I returned to the Fiji School of Medicine and was told that Mr. Gilchrist, the deputy principal, was wanting to see me. I had come from the Technical Institute where I was studying building practices as part of the course for my diploma as a health inspector. But I was sure this request had nothing to do with my school work.

As a Tongan, I am sometimes called upon to act as interpreter or to outline some part of the school study program to the five other Tongans studying here. And I felt that this was what I was wanted for now. But why at this time of night? I was soon to know.

Mr. Gilchrist told me that a radio message had just been received from Kadavu, an island about sixty miles from Suva, telling of two Tongans who had drifted to the island on a raft on the previous day. They told the police at Kadavu that they were from a Tongan yacht which was wrecked on Minerva

BY TUPOU VAIPULU AS TOLD TO ROB WRIGHT ☐ PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROB WRIGHT—PIX

Reef, and that other survivors were still alive on the reef. Even at that moment, a Royal New Zealand Air Force flying boat was winging out to the reef with food and water, to see if the men there were still alive. Another plane would be going out in the morning to try to land on the sea, and I was requested to go as an interpreter and also because I am a senior first-aid member.

I was very excited when I was told this news. Excited and glad to know that some of the men from the *Tuaikeapau* were still alive, for I had thought them dead somewhere in the deep water near our islands.

Two months before, I had heard the news that this Tongan boat with seventeen people on board had not arrived in New Zealand after it had left Nukualofa on July fourth. The radio news told of ships and planes from New Zealand searching for the yacht. But they could not find it and the search was stopped. And now—here was news that some of the men were alive.

As I went to get things to take with me, I wondered where Minerva Reef was. I knew it was not in the Tongan Group or the Fiji Group. So while I was waiting I went to the library and got out a book on the southwest Pacific. I found that Minerva was more than 400 miles in a southeasterly direction from Fiji, and more than 300 miles from Tonga.

The big flying boat took off at nine in the morning. Besides the captain and the crew, there was the air force medical officer and myself. While we were flying out to the reef, I asked some of the men on the aircraft what they had seen on Minerva Reef the night before.

They told me that when they got there in moonlight, as they circled the reef, they could see the wreck of a Japanese ship which had been there for three years. It was on this wreck that they counted seven men who waved to them. The aircraft dropped flares and then food and water and a message to say that help would be arriving soon. As they left to return to Suva, they saw the men pick up the packages from the water.

When we reached the reef, and the flying boat began to circle, I looked through a window and saw the wreck and some of the men. Three were waving and the rest were lying down. My heart was sad and my eyes filled with tears because of pity for them. Here, on this broken hulk, were countrymen of mine who had fought with the sea and the sun and with death. How many had won the fight?

As we flew 'round and 'round, I could see that Minerva Reef was a big place. It was a ring of coral surrounded by blue sea. Nothing else. No trees, no bushes, no grass—just sea and coral. In the middle was a big lagoon where the sea was not as rough as outside. The Japanese trawler was lying near the dry part of the coral. On its side was painted in big letters, "SOS." And then I was told that the captain was going to land the flying boat in the lagoon.

We came down slowly and touched the water and started to go toward the wrecked ship. Then we anchored, a rubber dinghy was put out and the captain, the doctor, an airman and myself got into it and began to go toward the reef. A man came toward us and signaled to show us the way through the coral. It was high tide and we were able to get in close.

When we were about twenty yards away, the man saw me and recognized me and became very excited. "Tupou!" he called. "Tupou! Tupou!" His voice was weak with emotion but I could not see him well because of the tears in my eyes and his face was covered with thick black hair.

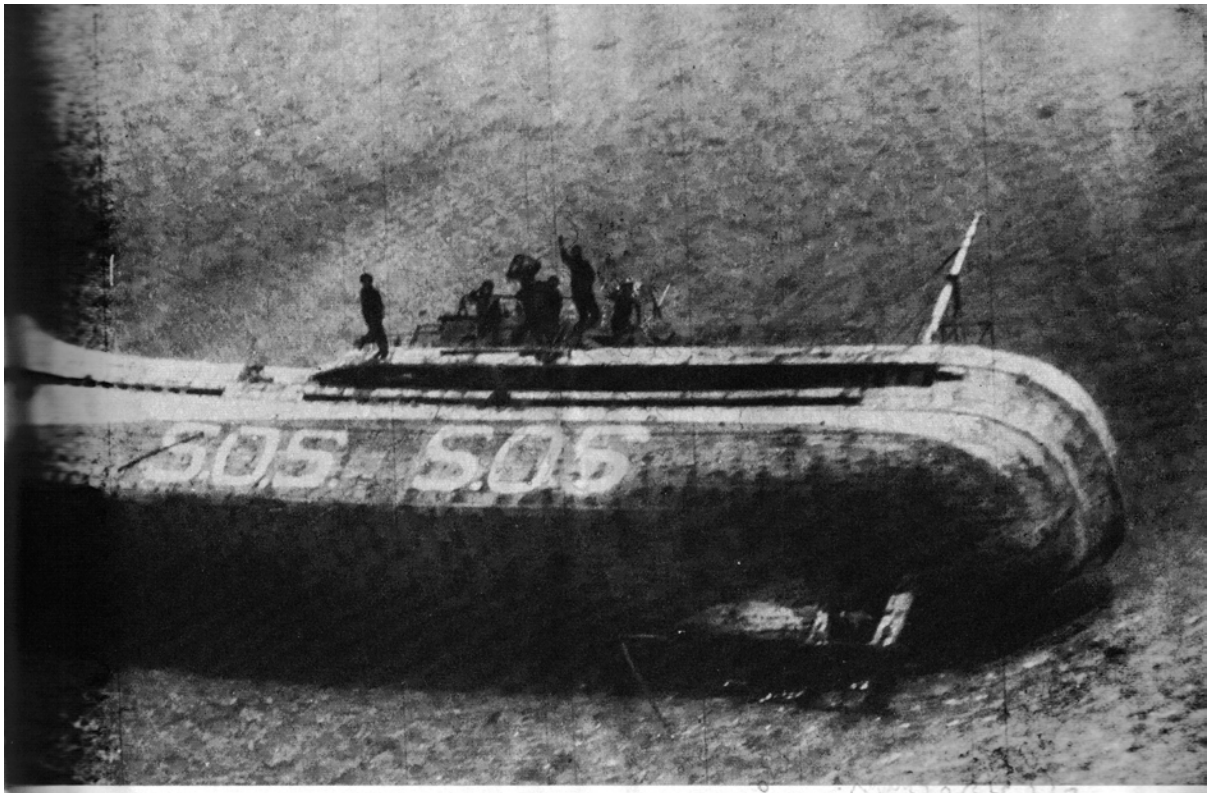
Then the other men on the wreck started to come toward us, some trying to run and others crawling over the coral. And then I saw one I knew and who knew me. He was Sokai Pulu and he was standing on the ship. "Tupou," he cried, "my son is dead! My son is dead." And he pointed to a still figure wrapped in canvas. And I wept with him.

We embraced, these Tongan men and I. There were ten of them. Dirty, unkempt, red-eyed and hollow-cheeked, they were my brothers and they had been in bad trouble. But it was all finished now and they would soon be getting food, water, and rest. All the men wanted to get in the dinghy at the same time. So I talked to them and I called to Sokai Pulu and the mate to quiet them. The mate's name was Ve'tutu Pahulu.

We talked. I told them it was best for the men who were very sick to go in the dinghy first. They agreed, and Finau Laione, Sipa Fine, Fine Feuaki and Saia Peni were assisted to the dinghy. Sick and weak as they were, they smiled happily like children.

While they were going out to the flying boat, I asked the other men some questions. When had they come on this reef? And how? They told me they left Nukualofa in Tonga on July fourth in the yacht *Tuaikeapau*. It was forty-five feet long. They were going to New Zealand to see the great fight between the Fijian champion boxer, Laweni Waqa, and the champion of New Zealand, George Mahoni. He was also a Tongan. Among the seventeen men on board were Sokai Pulu, a former boxing champion of Tonga, and his son, Fetaiki Pulu, who was following in his father's footsteps. There were also Saiai Peni, Jone Sikimeti and Sipa Fine—the best boxers of these islands.

The captain of the yacht was *Tevita Fifita*, a man who had much (*Continued on page* 96)



▲ *One hundred days after the wreck that cast them up on the deserted strip of coral, survivors wave to flying boat circling above. Men who sailed in homemade raft brought rescue party.*

◀ *Helped by Sergeant Harding, New Zealand Air Force, first group of Tongan survivors is ferried out to flying boat for trip to hospital. Of the original seventeen, three died of disease, starvation, thirst and hardship. First question they asked "Who won the big fight?"*

A HUNDRED DAYS ON MINERVA REEF *Continued from page 52*

experience in sailing the waters of the South Pacific. He had held a master's certificate since 1939. With him he brought his two sons, Talo and Sateki. The mate, Ve'tutu Pahulu, was another island mariner with much experience.

After leaving Nukualofa, they first visited Ata Island nearly a hundred miles to the southwest of Tonga. Here they fished and cooked meals ashore before leaving on a course for New Zealand. Then, on the night of July seventh, the yacht hit hard on Minerva Reef. Almost immediately, it began to break up in the huge waves which pounded the coral. The men seized whatever they could to keep afloat and fought their way through the surf to the shallow waters beyond reach of the breakers. Exhausted, they awaited the dawn.

By the time first light came, they saw that the *Tuaikeapau* had been smashed to pieces. Then, as the light grew stronger, they saw the wreck of the Japanese fishing boat about a mile away. This was the hand of God. Their ship could have been wrecked on the other side of the reef and they would never have seen the hulk. Stumbling over the coral, they pushed their way to the wreck. Here was safety from the sea. But what of food and water?

They scoured the reef and picked up what they could of food stores washed ashore from the *Tuaikeapau*. There was some *taro* (a potato-like root) which had been flung into the water when their ship broke up, and on the reef were plenty of *vasua*, the giant clam which is a delicacy in the Pacific. But there was no fresh water, and the *taro* had to be cooked to be eaten.

At this time, the dinghy returned to the reef from the plane and with it came hot soup and water. The men rushed with eager, outstretched hands. It was pitiful. They drank and drank. When I told them too much water would make them sick, they took the soup.

It was then that Sokai Pulu turned to me and asked, "Who won the fight"?

For a moment I was puzzled. Was his mind giving way? Then I remembered that they were going to New Zealand to see the championship fight when they were wrecked.

"Waqa," I said. "Waqa knocked out the champion."

Sokai was jubilant. He turned to the other men. "See," he said, "I told you. I told you Waqa would win."

Because the food and water made them feel better, the men began to talk more. They told me they had found a box of matches on the Japanese ship. This was their salvation, they said. They made a fire on the high part of the ship where no water could reach it, and this fire was to burn night and day for a hundred days. The men took turns watching it lest it die.

In the ship, they found half an oil drum, a piece of rubber tubing, and an old kettle. They set the drum over the fire, filled it with sea water, covered the top with pieces of metal to form a lid, and inserted the rubber tube. The other end of the tube they put into a kettle, and when the water boiled, the steam condensed into the kettle and precious life-giving drops of water were gathered. But two pints was all they could make in a day. Two pints among seventeen big men meant half a cupful each, every twenty-four hours.

Each day, the men had their tasks to do. Some had to go out and fish. Others had to get firewood. Others had to watch the fire and tend it and keep the water boiling. To get the firewood, they used iron bars to break the timber out of the ship, sometimes part of the deck, sometimes other parts of the hull. But they tried to keep good the parts which sheltered them.

Little groups had their own places to sleep. Two men here, three men there. And they kept this way most of the time. Because the ship was lying on its side, they slept on the walls instead of the floors. Sometimes when there was a very high tide, the ship would rock uncomfortably.

There were no fights among the men, but sometimes there were arguments, mostly over food and water. Then Sokai Pa who was the leader of the boxers and t oldest man among them, used to co them. Together with Tevita Fifita, the c tain, and Ve'tutu Pahulu, the mate, kept good discipline.

It was now time to return to Suva. some of the men had a last request bef they left the reef. Could they take som their belongings with them? Each accumulated a little store of things he found. Some had fishing lines and hooks. Some wanted to take back fishing floats. Another had penicillin lets and sulphur drugs found on the trawler, which he wanted as souvenirs.

Sokai had his own special request. C he take back the body of his son, Fe iki, who had died at seven o'clock the vious evening, just before the first plane over to drop supplies of food and wa

All requests were granted with the ception of the man who wished to b the distilling apparatus with him. It too heavy and big to fit in the aircraft.

Before we left, I saw a wooden c sticking in the coral. "What is that?"

"The grave of Fatai Elfeafi," I was t

Fatai died after twenty-four days on reef. It was the custom for the men to h prayer meetings every evening, when t would sing hymns and pray to the L for help. Some were Catholic and s Wesleyan, but they all gathered toge for these meetings. After one meeti they found Fatai sitting with his head his hands. He was dead.

They took iron bars and dug holes in coral. They wrapped him in canvas, bu him in the shallow grave and erecte simple wooden cross over him.

But a thought passed through my m It was a wicked thought, but I had rea people eating others under similar circ stances.

It took some minutes to gain courag ask this question of the men. But denied even thinking of such a thing. Air Force doctor and I walked over to grave and he put his hand through loose coral and felt the body. It was and decaying, but it was all there.

As we were going back to the flying I looked over the reef toward the Japa ship. It was nothing but a shell. Mo the superstructure was gone and muc the decking had been torn out, and it doomed, like Efeafi, to decay on this coral reef. But it had been a home shelter for these men. It had provided wood and fishing lines, timber and and—above all—salvation. Truly it had placed there by the hand of God.

During the three hours' journey Minerva to Suva in the plane, the me me many other things about their orde the reef. They talked freely as though wanted to be rid of what they had to

I asked how they had remembered d Sokai Pulu had the answer in a di which he wrote everything that had pened. The captain, too, had a diary.

They said that after the first death curred, two more men, Jone Sikimeti Sione Lose, had died after a little w But they could not dig the graves for

"You won't find a more steady clientele anywhere."

two as they had done for Efeafi. They were too weak and the coral was too hard. So they wrapped the bodies in canvas, waited until high tide, and then pushed them into the waters of the lagoon.

Fourteen of the original seventeen now remained on Minerva. They were getting weaker day by day. It was hard to maintain discipline because of this. On hot days, the men began to shirk their appointed tasks. Some wanted to lie down and not get up again. But when the weather became cooler, they got up and did their work.

Then they thought of building a raft or a boat. Earlier, while they were much stronger, someone had suggested this, but the captain said they were so close to Fiji that a ship was bound to find them soon; it was better to save their energy. But now rescue seemed remote.

To build a boat meant a lot of hard work because they had no tools. They had found a hammer on the ship, and there were big deck spikes and a fish-cleaning knife. They sharpened the edges of the spikes to use as chisels. When they were ready to cut their boat timber, they would mark it with a knife, heat pieces of iron in the fire, and lay them on the marks. They would then take the sharpened spikes and hack at the burnt wood until it would break. In this way, day after day, they gradually formed the hull.

They had decided on an outrigger boat because they knew this type of craft was seaworthy. Tongan navigators had used them for centuries. For the outrigger, they used part of the mast from the wreck. It was a hard job to cut through this with their primitive tools. But each day they said prayers and God gave them strength and they finished the boat.

Tevita Uaisele, the carpenter, was the man who did most of the planning and the fitting of the timbers. The boat was eighteen feet long and four feet six inches wide in the main hull. The outrigger was supported by three pieces of timber six inches wide and two inches thick. It was nailed and lashed across the hull. To give the boat strength, they lashed and bound everything they could with steel fishing trace wire. Every seam in the hull and decks was puttied carefully and covered with strips of metal taken from the Jap ship. A piece of bamboo was fitted as a mast. The sails were cut from pieces of canvas. And when the boat was finished, it was named *Malololelai,* Tongan for "Good Health and Good Luck."

They had been on the reef for fifty-seven days by the time they started the boat. It was now October third, and they had been occupied in this task for thirty-nine days. Now was the time for their desperate bid to look for help.

Tevita Fifita, the captain, chose to go in the boat because he was a sailor and a navigator. With him went Tevita Uaisele, the carpenter, to make any repairs while they were sailing. The third man was Sateki Fifita, the captain's son. A compass and a sextant were taken from the wreck, and they took some cooked shark, octopus and a bottle of water. The captain also drew a rough chart on a piece of board.

This much I learned from the survivors of Minerva as we were being flown to Suva. We landed at the Air Force base just after dusk where waiting ambulances whisked the men straight to the hospital.

On the following day, I again flew with the flying boat to Kadavu, the island whence the first news of the shipwreck came, and there we picked up the captain, Tevita Fifita, and the carpenter, Tevita Uaisele, to bring them to Suva. It was from the captain that I learned the other part of the story—the incredible 350-mile voyage in the reef-built boat to Fiji.

After prayers and tearful farewells, the boat and her crew of three put to sea on October fifth. As night fell, the wind and seas increased in force, putting so much strain on the rudder that it broke. Fifita had no alternative but to turn the boat back to Minerva, but this time to the other side of the lagoon. Here they fashioned a steering sweep from a piece of long timber and, at daybreak, they set off again.

The nearest land to them was the Fiji island of Ono-i-lau in the eastern part of the group, but more than 200 miles away. They headed in this direction, with the captain steering a roughly estimated course by compass. Three days from Minerva, their food and water was finished. The boat was in danger of swamping because of the seas breaking over it, and had to be bailed incessantly. Then the wind changed direction, forcing them away from Ono-i-lau.

On Sunday, October fourteenth, they sighted the island of Kadavu. They had sailed 350 miles in nine days. It was their last chance to make land. Beyond were endless wastes of water.

Fifita headed the boat for a gap in the fringing reef, but as they were entering, a huge wave caught and overturned the boat, throwing the men into the water. They were a mile from shore and they began slowly to swim. But Sateki, the captain's son, weak from exposure and lack of food and water, soon started to sink. Tevita supported his son in his arms, and waved to Uaisele to bring help.

But help was not needed. The captain knew it and Sateki, his son, knew it. Slowly, together they mumbled through a prayer, and Sateki died in his father's arms. His father kissed him and let his body sink below the waves before he turned once more to swim for the shore.

Once more on dry land, Fifita and Uaisele rested on the sand. Then they commenced a methodical walk along the seashore. Soon they were seen by a Fijian from a nearby village, who took them to his chief.

At the village, the captain and the carpenter were massaged with hot water and coconut oil, while women served them with hot cups of tea and food. Word was then sent to the police outpost on the island and the first news of the plight of the shipwrecked Tongans was flashed to Suva and the world by radio.

When we landed at Suva, Tevita and Uaisele were taken to the hospital and there reunited with the men from Minerva. They embraced and rejoiced and offered praise to God for His help. I was proud of these men, these countrymen of mine. For had they not proved to the world that with prayers and faith they could surmount any obstacle? Even a hundred days on an isolated reef in the vast Pacific. • • •