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FEAR AND LOATHING ON DESERT ISLANDS

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One of the aspects of fieldwork that distinguishes archaeology in the outlying islands of New Zealand and elsewhere in the Pacific from common experience in many other regions is the potential for disaster. A boat trip almost anywhere amongst the remote inhabited islands usually involves casual overloading, absence of safety gear and an unreliable outboard motor. Pacific archaeologists and anthropologists tell hair-raising stories and laugh nervously, and it is both amazing and a testament to the seafaring skills of Pacific Islanders that none of us have yet been lost at sea (touch wood, my friends).

There can be hazards, too, on desert islands. Here are a couple of yarns which elaborate first-day fieldbook entries from my two earliest expeditions north of mainland New Zealand, to 'Ata Island, Tonga, in 1977 (Lau-Tonga expedition of the Royal Society of New Zealand), and to Raoul Island, Kermadecs, in 1978.

Gallipoli and after

'Ata Island fieldbook, 28th June 1977 [the day after the Tongan earthquake of 1977]:

Bastard of a day. Heavy seas and swell. Raised 'Ata c. 7 a.m. Could see the earthquake damage from the ship [*Tangaroa*] and continuing falls of rubble. Swam ashore through heavy surf from rubber boat... Very heavy surf, backwash and current meant a good deal [of gear and supplies] lost or smashed, including ... personal gear, all excavation gear [and] most of water. Whole time continuous rockfalls all around us from c. 500–800 ft cliffs behind. Much of time could not see for dust and spume. Eventually managed to stagger [after dark] around crumbling cliff bottom c. 2 km to old village site. Utterly exhausted. 90% of gear still on Gallipoli Beach [as we named it]. We'll be lucky to survive the rockfalls.

Well, of course we did—Otago geologist Roy Johnstone and I—but it did not get a great deal easier. We had some food and a tent, but we were down to a half-pint of water a day until it rained a week later, and had continuing problems thereafter. There were some coconut palms but the only ones we could climb were those growing more or less horizontally from the edge of the cliff, and as often as not the nuts disappeared into the rubble below. Later we found that castaways, probably the Tongan boys marooned there in 1965, had cut depressions in the crooks of fig trees to collect water.

Roy had the harder task, trying to record the geology of an island subject to occasional aftershocks and continual rockfalls and slides. I found it difficult trying to record and excavate sites. The Auckland department's antique brass level and tripod were last seen entangled with my favourite short-sleeved lambie, tumbling beneath the surf. The only surviving tool was a machete, and I was reduced to drawing maps and plans on flattened-out soup packets. Working under the heavy forest was not a good place for the superstitious. The trees moaned and squealed in the strong winter winds and there were white owls flying in the daytime gloom. Occasionally, rounding a tree, I would see, with a sudden shock, a recent dendroglyph of a head or skull pierced by a knife, and 'Sione' or 'Kolo' written beneath—the solitude had evidently got to the Tongan boys too.

When the ship returned, three weeks later, the seas were typically rough. With all Roy's rocks and my load of archaeological samples the rubber boat was twice upended and holed on Gallipoli Beach before we could get off, and the outboard motor destroyed; so 'Ata proved tough to the end.

Trust us, we're doctors

Raoul Island fieldbook, 23rd September 1978:

Up at 5.45 am and away in whaleboat... rough ride in 50 knot winds and high waves for c. 2 miles ... transferred to zodiac 300 m out... In afternoon we began survey of N. end of Denham Bay in blustery wind and rain. Soon after started [one of the team] ate a piece of taro pith and developed strong poisoning symptoms – difficulty breathing, strong burning sensation of mouth, throat and chest, dizziness etc... Now (8 pm), can't talk, breathing trouble, coughing and salivating heavily. Have tried 3 pm, 4 pm, 6.30 pm and 7 pm to raise main base by radio – no luck... If no substantial improvement by morning will have to take him out.

The Raoul Island expedition was my first to the Pacific islands as team leader, and it was not looking good. We had been landed from the *Monowai* during a storm but had managed to get everything secure by lunchtime. Now,

waving our new machetes like a bunch of tyro pirates, we headed into the bush. Two of us slashed through a patch of taro, and my cobber, a man of diverse interests, sampled some pith from a leaf-stalk. He then staggered out on to the shore, dived into the heavy surf in his raincoat, and began rolling about, bug-eyed, clutching at his throat and foaming at the mouth. Somewhat unnerved, we shouted enquiries from a safe distance, upon which he crawled up the beach and wrote in the sand “I am fucking dying.” As this seemed entirely probable, we half-dragged him several kilometres along the beach to the hut, and tried to force some antihistamine tablets down his throat.

He was by now in bad shape, almost unable to breath, a state that deteriorated visibly as we discussed the options. Unable to raise any help by radio, we decided that if he did not improve we would have to perform a tracheotomy. However, as our anatomical debate about whether the cut should be horizontal or vertical was inconclusive, and given the mute but unmistakable opinion on the matter of our ailing friend, we decided to wait until morning. By then, his health had improved rather more than his opinion of his colleagues, and it was some days before we saw his charming smile again.

‘Ata and Raoul proved archaeologically interesting (Anderson 1979, 1980), the former with abundant remains of an abandoned 19th century village and evidence of earlier occupation as well, which is now known to extend to the Polynesian plainware era (Burley *et al.* n.d.), and the latter disclosing remains of extensive early East Polynesian colonisation (see also Johnson 1995). There were subsequent projects on other desert islands, as they were at European contact, in the New Zealand region (Lord Howe, Norfolk, Aucklands), but with the loss of expeditionary innocence faded the loom of imminence.

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