

VIVID DRAMAS OF OLD ON U.S. TRANSPACIFIC AIRLINE ISLES

By JOHN WILLIAMS

Two men are alone in voluntary exile on a spot of sand in mid-Pacific. One is an American, the other, a Hawaiian named Opunui, the white man's man Friday.

It is Baker Island, one square mile of barren, waterless sand, almost on the equator, 1,300 miles southwest of Honolulu. The Year, 1869.

The white man, who does not write his full name, keeps a journal. He writes:

"The island is barricaded on all sides by a coral reef, which stretches out into the ocean and breaks the force of the incoming waves so that this frail sandwork is not swept away by the storms. . . . The greatest elevation is about 30 feet above sea level. The low outlines of the island, with its single house, and the flagstaff, upon which you see the Stars and Stripes of the Union, remind you of a rakish monitor with its turret alive with birds which swarm like the flies of Egypt's plague. Their discordant din echoes in your ears by day and night as long as you remain. . . ."

"The island is near that belt of the ocean known as the 'dol-drums,' which abounds in calms, variable winds, sudden squalls and rainstorms. Water-spouts, immense funnel-shaped cylinders of mist and water that seem to suck up the sea into the clouds as they revolve and away to and fro like weird spirits. . . ."

"The ocean swarms with voracious sharks, greedy and persistent. The white man who comes within their reach is snapped at in an instant by a score of hungry mouths. Strange to say, a dark-skinned Polynesian will swim in their midst and rarely be molested. . . ."

"The trade winds are the very breath of heaven. When they move, there is life and vigor. When they die, the spirit sinks. The shore and the sea become dazzling mirrors that torture the sense of sight. . . ."

"Another day. The white man sleeps in the shade of the exile life. Opunui, the Hawaiian, sits in the shade of the lone house, staring out at the shimmering horizon. Suddenly he is startled, leaps up, races to the sleeping American. . . ."

"They both look to windward at a strange nondescript craft. At first it looked like a Malay proa, but, as it drifts closer it is revealed as a Chinese junk. It flies a tattered yellow flag. There is a man bent hopelessly at the helm. He is exhausted. The junk drifts, drifts closer and closer to the jagged reef. . . ."

"Directing Opunui to run up the American flag, the American races to the beach. The man at the helm makes an effort to move the helm, to steer

the faded craft away from the strong current that swirls in the reef. Shark fins cut the blue water, stealthily, in grim earnest. Do they sense the impending wreck, the promise of a ghostly meal?

The American shouts to the helmsman: "Hard aport!" The helmsman evidently understands, at least the sign the white man makes. The junk swings round, noses in on a swell through a narrow cove in the reef.

The helmsman tries to throw a line ashore but his weakness is helpless. Luckily Opunui has a rope. He flings it to the helmsman who makes it fast. Half swimming, half pulling himself on the line, the American goes out through the sea and climbs aboard the junk.

The helmsman is a Chinese. He is emaciated, terror-stricken. He prostrates himself, touching his forehead to the deck at the white man's feet, and mutters as if at prayer.

By gestures and encouraging tones of voice the American tries to make the Chinese have no fear. But still the Chinese remains prone, still mutters hysterically. Nonplussed, the American stands in the blazing sun and contemplates the unhappy sight.

Finally, remembering a Chinese salutation he had learned years before, the American ex-

claims, "Akwai, and seven other Chinese, traded between Shanghai and the Loo Choo Islands, southeast. But what

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nary, was but one of the many exciting events of those years. James D. Hague, a chemist who worked on the islands about 1860, writes of ancient visitors, probably Polynesians. Did they drift, like Asing and Akew?

Hague writes: "On Howland there are excavations and mounds. The most extensive excavations are several hundred feet long, one 100 wide, and 10 and 15 deep, each side of which is carefully banked by walls of coral stone. . . . There are clusters of koa (not to be confused with koa) trees (the wood of which was used in calabash etc. making). . . . In another part of the island were remains of a hut, the fragments of a canoe, some pieces of bamboo (where did Polynesians first find bamboo?). . . . A blue head. Buried under a foot of sand, a human skeleton, which, when exposed to the air, crumbled to pieces. . . ."

Hague wonders, and, in later years, writes again: "Nature's processes of distribution by the great ocean currents bring to all these Pacific islands, sooner or later, not only the seed of life supporting vegetation, but also the drifting waifs of humanity, carried by the winds and waves from the over populated to the uninhabited islands. Many of these, known 50 or more years ago to be without population, have since been peopled in such ways. (So were some of the Polynesians such fine navigators, or were they simply so hardy that they could withstand the physical suffering of long drifts?) A modern instance was observed at Baker Island in 1863 when a Japanese junk was discovered drifting by, which on being overhauled, was found to contain the dead bodies of four Japanese men. . . ."

But not all the strangers to the islands landed from drifts. There were many wrecks. Hague, for example, witnessed two: The Silver Star, on Jarvis, and the British ship Virginia on Baker. Both wrecks were quickly smashed by the wild seas. Hague, incidentally, was a passenger in the Silver Star.

Mutinies aboard ship were common enough in the days of sail, but for a crew to mutiny on a small, isolated island, where the residents and workers on Jarvis island when the Ada Ven-

er of Newburyport was wrecked. She was sighted at dawn. Quickly she made her way to the island, too quickly because, in the grip of the strong current, she quickly swept the island, she piled high on the reef. The manager of the island

approached some of the sailors who lost no time in scampering to the beach.

He asked them: "Well, boys, did you come to stop?" "We're here to stop," was the curt reply. "We've piled up the prettiest bark ever floated down here on your blasted reef, and how on earth it was done we don't know."

All hands turned to and saved whatever they could from the wreck. Three days later the force of the ocean pulled the ship back into deep water where she sank.

At first the idle sailors were a novelty in the monotonous island life for the guano workers, but soon quarrels broke out, gathering in force day by day. The captain of the Venner had no authority over his men. They did their drift, like Asing and Akew?

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A greasy picture this, showing the old gravestone on the west rim of Baker island, looking east. But, if Pan American plane, great planes, en route from Hawaii to Australia, will make swift advances over this last lonely resting place of many American sailors and Hawaiian guano workers. This Bishop museum picture gives an excellent idea of the extensive flat land (or hard coral sand) which is available on Baker for the use of amphibian and land planes. What applies in this respect to Baker, applies to Jarvis and Howland Islands. The Kamohamoha boys who are occupying the islands today are establishing American sovereignty rights as well as compiling valuable weather data. It is understood that the British foreign office has notified the U. S. state department that Britain will not question American rights to the islands.

in this series in The Star-Bulletin, July 6 and 13. With Kamohamoha students now living on the islands, compiling meteorological records which will be used by the pilots of America's giant commercial transoceanic planes, it is interesting to delve into the written records of men and women who lived and worked on those islands when they played an important part in supplying mainland west farmers with fertilizers.

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the night and land at dawn. That would be an easy matter, they thought.

The child settled in his father's arms, and the young wife drew heavier clothes from her trunk (not an easy matter in a small open boat) and settled down for the long hours of the night. The castaways chatted in subdued tones.

Kimmo, the Hawaiian luna, was a fine singer. He led songs, comic, sentimental, tender and shadlike. The strange words rang out over the waste of water. Tales of olden times were recited: the women gave the men news of the faraway world from which she had just come.

Finally, at 2 a. m., silence fell upon the small boat as the unhappy people dozed in listful sleep.

Dawn found them out of sight of the island, at the mercy of the current taking them slowly eastward. Kimmo stood on a seat in the drifting boat, hands shading his eyes, looking for sight of the island, for the Madura.

After what seemed hours, he suddenly pointed to the horizon. There a white spot shone in the first rays of the rising sun. It was the Madura in full sail for the island. By a stroke of luck her course brought her

So, to an ignoble end, came American industry in those far-away isles. . . . Today, on one of the islands at least, the ruins of the guano workers' buildings are of use to the Kamohamoha students who, in parties of four, are living on each island. . . .

An old tram line and trucks, that were used to shift the guano from the center of Baker island to the beach for loading, have been used to haul the heavy cannon that was found by the boys to a surfboat from the coast guard cutter Itasca for removal to the Bishop museum. I wonder if the men who took part in this incident knew that two old horses, who worked on the island throughout the 20 years of the guano activities, used to haul the same trucks? The only relief the horses got was when it was windy enough for the men to hoist sails on the trucks, and so blow the loads along the rickety lines.

There are plenty of things the men who are taking part in the present occupancy of the islands may wonder about. James D. Hague, the chemist, for example, in 1902 wrote: "As will be seen by a map, Jarvis and Baker islands are both conveniently situated on lines connecting the Pacific coast of America with Australia and New Zealand touching at Hawaii and Samoa. The chain of ownership may sooner or later give rise to an international question."

Hague had in mind only cables. Little did he think of radio, or of giant commercial airplanes that take oceans in their enormous strides.

Before Uncle Sam's way shows may wing their path, many questions will have to be settled by diplomatic conversations. These will add still more color and romance to the stories of Pacific transportation—if the truth is ever written for posterity.

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