

Melanesian Winds in Polynesian Sails



by Richard Feinberg

Anuta is a tiny, isolated Polynesian island in the eastern Solomons, and its people are among the most traditional in Polynesia. They are ruled, as in the old days, by hereditary chiefs, imbued by virtue of their genealogies with awesome *mana*. Principles of kinship, family organization, ritual, and economic life remain largely unchanged.

Anutans are among the few remaining Pacific island people to make long deep-sea voyages in the old-style vessels. As recently as 1966, a canoe was sailed through stormy seas to Tikopia, over 70 miles distant. And annual voyages to Patutaka (sometimes cited as Fataka or Mitre Island), an uninhabited rock more than 30 miles to the southeast, continue to this day.

I had been living on Anuta for just under three months, engaged in the first stages of an anthropological investigation. One evening, at 10 o'clock, Pu Tokerau—my host and mentor in Anutan ways—approached to ask if I would sail with him to Patutaka the next morning. The purpose of the voyage was, he said, to hunt for birds.

I was surprised to see that he would undertake a three- to four-day ocean voyage with so little time for preparation. And I faced the prospect of the trip with trepidation, knowing it would be uncomfortable to sit for days in a wooden canoe, with no protection from the elements, no good place to sleep, and no promise of adequate food. Still, I knew I had been offered a rare opportunity and would not have missed it.

I expected that we would be leaving first thing in the morning, so I got up early to complete some notes and pack my gear. When I finished

around 10:00 a.m., I found the men still working to prepare the canoes. By the time that they had moved the vessels to the launching site, plugged some of the larger holes, rigged the masts and sails, and loaded the supplies, it was already mid-day.

Pu Toke(rau) had commented that we would not bring prepared food because it was in short supply. I suggested that we fire up a cooking oven and postpone our trip until the food was ready, but he argued that we ought to leave as soon as possible to take advantage of a favorable wind.

It seemed to me that there was not much wind from anywhere, and Pu Toke had said earlier that lack of food was one of the great problems of this journey. My concern, however, proved to be unfounded. In addition to biscuits and tuna, taken from my own supplies, each canoe was packed with about 50 drinking coconuts, two watermelons, several gallons of water, a couple bundles of sugarcane, and plenty of cooked food, including taro puddings, several varieties of *ma* (starchy food which has been fer-



Above: A sailing canoe of Anuta.

Left: Anuta is a Polynesian outlier in the midst of Melanesia.

mented in underground pits), baked *Cyrtosperma* corns, and a half dozen sweet potatoes.

About noontime, we finally got underway. The expedition included two canoes: a 32-foot vessel called *Puinga* and the smaller *Tapurupuru*, measuring 26 feet. I sailed in *Puinga* with Pu Toke and five other men; *Tapurupuru* had a complement of six Anutan sailors. In addition, one woman sailed in each canoe. This would be extraordinary on local fishing trips, but on a voyage that may last for several days, women come along to cook and tend supplies.

A man's first trip to Patutaka is marked by a rite of passage known as *te vai pa*, and despite the fact that I was just a short-term visitor, I was required to go through the ceremony. Thus, while the canoes were being readied, I was painted with turmeric and dressed in an Anutan waist cloth.

When we left, the sea was calm; the sky but slightly overcast. It soon became apparent, however, that the wind had shifted, and we had to paddle most of the way into a headwind which became stronger as the day progressed. To use the sail at all, we had to tack. On an Anutan canoe, this meant paddling for perhaps an hour and a half to the east, then sailing for 20 minutes to the south, and repeating the process.

Before we started out, Pu Toke had estimated that we would get to Patutaka between 7:00 and 10:00 p.m., but by late afternoon, when the two canoes rendezvoused for the evening prayer, our destination was still no more than an occasionally visible speck on the horizon.

As night fell, the air turned crisp and cool, but with the exercise of constant paddling, it was pleasantly refreshing. After a couple of hours at sea, we fell into a smooth rhythm. As we proceeded on our zig-zag course, my mind wandered to the thousands of similar voyages which took place over the centuries, populating and shaping the history of the Pacific islands. In our canoe, we had enough supplies to last a week at sea, and it struck me how easy it would have been to reach Tikopia or even more distant islands. It struck me how easy it was to develop a sense of con-

fidence that all you have to do is provision yourself for a week or two at sea and expect that in whatever direction you go you will probably find land. And it struck me how almost inevitable it was for seafaring people, with their sense of self-confidence and lust for travel and adventure, to find and settle virtually every habitable island in the Pacific.

As the hours passed, however, the warm glow of satisfaction soon gave way to boredom. After midnight, lightning brightened the sky, reminding us that the completion of our journey was not by any means assured.

As we paddled through the rain, the cold became intense. Pu Toke removed his shirt and gave it to Nau Rongovaru, who was crouching in the "hold" for some slight protection from the wind as she guarded the fire stick. Otherwise, my companions seemed oblivious to the temperature. I felt a bit bashful about putting on my plastic raincoat but finally conceded to my better judgement.

By 3:00 a.m., I started dozing off each time we took a break from paddling. But as we never halted long enough for me to find a semi-comfortable position, I probably did not get more than 15 minutes sleep. I had a short "battle" with Pu Tongotere, who wanted me to stop and rest. But all in all, I managed to remain awake and contribute to the shared effort.

When dawn finally arrived, Patutaka was clearly visible. I went astern to get my camera when suddenly there was a hit on one of our trolling lines. Despite taking down one of the sails, the fish held three of us to a standstill for 15 minutes before breaking the 80 pound test line and escaping. Within a few minutes, there was a hit on the other even heavier line, which promptly snapped. Pu Tongotere quickly put on a new hook

and bait. Immediately the line was taken—and snapped once more.

At about 8:00 a.m., after a good 20 hours at sea, we arrived at our destination—a two-peaked monolith with huge breakers crashing into its 500-foot rock walls, and sending spray 40 feet into the air. After rendezvousing for the morning prayer, we went around the island to a semi-protected cove where the waves looked almost reasonable. The boat pulled up to within 50 yards of shore, and the rest of the way we had to swim.

I decided to try taking all my gear at once. I had not counted, however, upon the strong current and rip tide created by the ocean rushing past the outside of the cove, the four- to six-foot waves pounding in toward the rocks, and the water surging back to sea. Thus, I got only about two thirds of the way before the package became too much of a burden and I had to set it down. The bundle was sealed well enough to float, but it was not completely waterproof. Especially, the bag with camera and film, which I had opened several times, leaked badly, saturating the contents.

Patutaka is as inhospitable an island as one could imagine in a South Sea environment. The landing site



Water-damaged souvenirs of the author's sail on a traditional canoe.

The bundle with his camera leaked while he swam to shore.

consisted of a narrow canyon, surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs and by the ocean on the fourth. The canyon floor comprised volcanic boulders, with no soil and not even a flat surface large enough to sit comfortably.

After a breakfast of sweet potato and limpets, most of us laid down to sleep as well as we could on the rocks. A few men went back to watch the canoes (there is no place where they might be beached) and did some fishing for the evening meal. And two or three men went around to the other side of the island to check out the trail to the summit.

The sun became quite hot, and it was impossible to sleep, so I decided to explore the island. But I soon found walking on the rough, hot boulders difficult and painful.

It was apparent that there was no place to go in any case. The rocks absorbed the sun's heat, making the canyon into a scalding oven, and the prospect of climbing out of the water again over the sharp rocks discouraged me from going for a swim.

The only "fresh" water consisted of stagnant pools in the rocks, where rain accumulated. The only mammals were rats. Yet, there were insects in

abundance. Nonetheless, the island is a fascinating place. The appearance of its cliffs and floor is very different from the other islands of the eastern Solomons. Its numerous tidal pools housed many species of marine fauna. Aside from limpets, there were fish and eels which I could not identify, crabs by the hundreds, and thousands of tiny fish which cling to moist rocks and jump several feet when startled. Especially at dawn and dusk, the sky was blackened with birds swarming over the hills.

By mid-afternoon, Pu Teakena and Pu Tongotere had returned from their scouting expedition to report that the trail to the hilltop was impassible, so there would be no bird hunting that night. Pu Toke said that we would check it again the next morning, and if the waves had not subsided enough to get ashore at the path, we would have to leave without the birds for which we had come.

That night, I slept upon a rock which was surprisingly well contoured to my body and was even protected a bit by an overhanging ledge so that with my raincoat as a blanket, I was able to stay reasonably warm and dry despite a good deal of rain. Pu Toke managed to crawl under the same ledge, but Pu Matauea and the two women slept in the rain all night. Most of the men went fishing; the rest went to the second hill and captured a half dozen birds.

The next morning, I was set to leave when I was told we would be staying another day to collect limpets in lieu of the birds. So I braced myself for another boring, hot, uncomfortable day. But by now, the paper I had brought was fairly dry, so I passed the morning with informants outlining Anuta's kinship system. In the afternoon, I asked if we could paddle once around the island. Pu Toke was about to pick up several people who had

gone in search of coconuts and yams, and he suggested that I join him.

Being prepared for the current, carting only my camera, and letting the water carry me, the swim to the canoe was very easy. Once we got out of the cove, however, the wind kicked up to over 20 knots, creating big waves and a chop that constantly sent water over the outrigger and into the canoe as we waited for our comrades. None of the party seemed to have much trouble getting through the 10- to 12-foot surf, but for their efforts, they found few dry coconuts and no yams at all.

With 11 people and a stormy sea, the vessel seemed more like a submarine as we circumnavigated Patutaka. When one sees the island from a distance, it is not apparent just how big it is. But after paddling around it, Patutaka looks to be perhaps a mile in length with peaks far higher than Anuta's hill. Hard as it is to believe, the spot where we camped was not only the flattest looking place on the entire island, but its four- to six-foot waves offshore constituted the best landing site.

When we returned to the campsite, it was almost dusk. After dinner, Pu Toke went out to watch the canoe for the night. I stayed ashore again and for the first time in three days got a fairly good night's rest.

The next morning, Pu Toke wanted to be underway by 7:00 a.m., so at daybreak we began loading the canoes. We would have been on schedule, but then we waited for a fairly lengthy prayer and spent a long time eating breakfast. By the time we actually put out to sea, it was mid-morning. But this time, running before a steady wind of 20 knots, we covered the 30-plus miles by early afternoon.

I was met at the beach by my "bond-friend" Pu Paone and several classificatory "father's sisters" to complete the *va pa* rites. As the remainder of the crew began to carry the canoes up to the beach, Puinga's bow broke off. I later asked what would have happened had it broken a few hours earlier. Pu Toke summed up the consensus when he answered with a laugh: "We don't know. Might be we could have died at sea."

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