

ESCAPE FROM MURDER.

Miracles do sometimes happen. Of the two tales told hereunder, the first, if it does not constitute a miracle, yet seems to me to have miraculous elements in it, whilst the second one can, I think, be incontestably described as a miracle.

The setting for both tales is the same - the central Pacific and, in particular, the phosphate rich Ocean Island, formerly known as Banaba.

The timing of both tales is also very similar - World War II, when the Japanese had invaded and occupied the island about August, 1942, after the British authorities had blown up the industrial complex of the British Phosphate Commissioners on the island in order to deny it to the Japanese.

The characters in both tales is also similar - the Japanese and the Gilbertese.

Coincidentally - for their stories, or perhaps feats is a more apt word - the two Gilbertese who are the central characters in the tales came from the island of Nikunau, having been recruited by the British Phosphate Commissioners to work in the surface mining phosphate industry on Ocean Island. Nikunau is a small island in the Southern Gilberts, with a population in those days probably not exceeding 1600 souls. It has no especial claim to fame, save perhaps that it was first discovered on the 2nd July, 1765, by Commodore John Byron (more popularly known as "Foul Weather Jack") in H.M.S. Dolphin. It is otherwise perhaps notable as far as the Gilbert Islands are concerned for its excellent inland fish ponds, in which the baneawa fish are born and bred.

But there the resemblance between the two Gilbertese ends, for their feats were quite separate and distinct.

In view of certain aspects of both tales, a few comments on the Gilbertese way of life will not be out of place. During the economic depression of the late twenties and early thirties, life was, in the words of the poet both "real" and "earnest". The Gilbert Islands have no natural resources. The people subsisted almost wholly on fish and coconuts, occasionally supplemented with some babai (a large root vegetable resembling a coarse form of dalo), and on rare occasions by a little pork, and some muscular chickens and their coconut-flavoured eggs. Apart from fishing and the collection of coconuts, life then consisted largely of building or repairing their native style houses, undertaking with others communal works on, for example, the large village maneaba (meeting houses), building or repairing canoes, sails, fishing nets, etc., and making some copra. But the latter was then hardly worth making, since the trading firms offered little more than 20/- or 30/- a ton. Indeed, an average family income might well have been less than £10 per annum; and folk could not afford to buy cloth for their lavalavas or materials for the dresses of their womenfolk, so that toplessness and grass skirts became the order of the day, and coconut oil had to be used for lighting instead of the usual kerosene. It was therefore on the whole a somewhat dull and hard existence, based on a fairly rigid regimen of work and diet, which in turn made the Gilbertese menfolk spare, tough, practical, resilient, and with a developed will to live. And, if it had not been for those very qualities, these feats might never have been told.

And so first to the odyssey of Nabetari.

What person would wish to travel for seven months over 1500 miles in the open sea in a canoe, with only a few inches of freeboard, alone and without even primitive sails, for a third of that journey, sometimes in bad weather but often ^{idle as} "a painted ship upon a painted ocean", reduced to quenching one's thirst by drinking shark's blood after one's water ran out, subsisting on raw fish to satisfy one's gnawing hunger, and, finally, without any real knowledge save by reference to the sun, as to whither one was bound?

But such is the story of Nabetari, although the prologue must first be told.

At the time of the invasion and occupation of Ocean Island there were some 800 native of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands employed there by the British Phosphate Commissioners and that number, together with their wives and children and some 700 Banabans, or Ocean islanders, totalled about 2500 souls. There were in addition six Europeans. But Ocean Island, which is in any case small - being only some 1500 acres in area - whilst a rich source of phosphatic rock was, because of the very extensive coral pinnacles with which the rock was interfused, very largely infertile and incapable of supporting such a population without considerable imports, which were almost wholly cut off. The only vegetation which appeared to thrive was pumpkins, which were extensively grown during the Japanese occupation. As a result, the Japanese deported the majority of the native population to the Japanese mandated territories of the Marshall and Caroline Islands, as well as to Tarawa and Nauru. The natives who remained - about 150 - were employed in various capacities such as fishermen. Strangely, about 100 of them were also trained as soldiers, apparently in the hope that, should the Americans or their allies attempt to retake the island, the natives would fight shoulder to shoulder with the Japanese, which provides once more evidence of their failure to understand the psychology of the South-East Asian and Pacific native, and was often so detrimental to their cause.

The six Europeans were a Mr. Cartwright, a District Officer of the Colony Administration; a Mr. Mercer and a Mr. Cole of the British Phosphate Commissioners; a Mr. Third, a radio operator in Government service; and Father Pujubet and Brother John of the Roman Catholic Sacred Heart Mission. The four first-named volunteered to stay on after the official evacuation of the island, whilst Father Pujubet and his colleague resolutely refused to desert their flock.

In February, 1945, the Resident Commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, then at Tarawa, radioed the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in Suva that he had been advised that a Gilbertese man by the name of Nabetotoya had escaped from Ocean Island and had arrived in Manus Island, a huge Allied base in the Admiralty Islands, lying to the north, and being part, of New Guinea. In view of the distance involved, the news seemed scarcely credible, but the Resident Commissioner asked that Nabetari (as his real name proved to be) should be returned to Tarawa for interrogation with a view to the compilation of evidence as to the Japanese forces holding Ocean Island and as to the commission of crimes by the Japanese authorities on the island.

Nabetari arrived in Tarawa on the 6th April, 1945. As might be supposed, he was much shaken by his experiences and for the time being quite incapable of sustained mental effort.

The story of his experiences can best be told in his own words, in the form of interrogations which he underwent in Tarawa. The first interrogation was fairly brief in view of his physical and mental state, and the record reads as follows:-

"My name is Nabetari, a native of Nikunau. I signed on as a labourer for the British Phosphate Commission about 1940, and went to Ocean Island. I think the Japanese first came to Ocean Island in about 1942. There were four or five Europeans and over 3000 natives (there), including the Banabans. They were Mr. Mercer, Mr. Cartwright, a wireless officer whose name I do not know, and Mr. Cole. There was also a European priest and one brother. Before I left the island all the Europeans were dead. There were only about 100 natives left on the island. A good many died of starvation, the rest were shipped out. They were sent to Kusaie and Ponape. One lot came to Tarawa. I think that there might be 200 natives left. I was given a gun and told I was a soldier; sometimes I did patrol work.

I escaped with others in three canoes. I went with one boy in my canoe; one other canoe had two men, and the other had three men. This was about 4th April, 1944 - I am sure of this date. We set out hoping to get to Tarawa. On the first day out we could still see the island; that night we lost one canoe, the one with the three men in it. At night we tied a rope between the two canoes that were left. We lost sight of the other canoe after we had been together for about five months. We had sails but we lost them through bad weather. We arrived at an island in November, 1944. The boy in my canoe died about a fortnight after we lost sight of the other canoe. I lived on fish and rain water. I made fish hooks and a rod and caught the fish that followed the canoe. Sometimes a shark would swim alongside the canoe. We caught a shark and the other boy was bitten in the arm. When we had no water, we drank shark's blood.

We left Ocean Island because we wanted to escape. We did not know that Tarawa had been recaptured, but we thought (so); because we were being raided by American aeroplanes we thought it might be so. The Japanese did not seem to know.

Before the last party was shipped out, they had to dig holes. They dug as many holes as there were natives on the island. I think they were graves. They had not been used when I left.

When I left I think there was only sufficient food on the island for one month; this included all the growing plants.

I know there were about 500 Japanese in July, 1943. There have been no more soldiers arriving, and none have left there since".

On his return to Tarawa, Nabetari was, as already noted, in a confused state of mind and bewildered by his experiences but, after being allowed to rest a while and live with his brother amongst his own people, his physical and mental condition improved. In giving his further evidence, however, he was also handicapped by his lack of other than a very basic primary education.

Nevertheless, as his health improved, a series of brief informal interrogations were held with him, the cumulative results of which were recorded as follows:-

"I am a native of Nikunau. I am 24 years of age. About 1940 I signed on as a labourer for the British Phosphate Commissioners and went in the (m.v.) "Trienza" to Ocean Island.

" I remember when the Japanese landed, but I did not see them come ashore. I saw one battleship, but when it shelled the island I ran away and hid.

While the Japanese were there, the food ration was very small and everyone was getting thinner.

When the first American planes bombed the island, they hit the rice store and most of the rice was destroyed or damaged.

At different times natives were sent away on ships, and I remember the lot that came to Tarawa. At this time Mr. Cartwright and Mr. Mercer had died. Mr. Cole stayed at his house at Ooma (one of the villages on the island) all day. Mr. Third (the radio operator) was acting as cook and steward for the Japs at Ooma. Father Pujubet was still at Tabwewa (another village), and Brother John was in Ooma working as a carpenter. Mr. Cole went into hospital at Tabwewa. Then the other three were taken to the same hospital. I did not see them go, but Brother John's servant told about it. He said that Brother John had told him it was to get injections to prevent sickness. Brother John returned to work at Ooma, but the others stayed in the hospital. Brother John was very sick and only worked for two or three days and then went back to hospital. After that no one ever heard any more about the Europeans. I do not know anyone who knew exactly what happened to the Europeans in the hospital after the injections, but everyone knew that they were dead. All this happened before February, 1944.

The Japanese made about 100 of the younger natives into soldiers. I was made a soldier too, but was detailed as a fisherman for my section, and the Japs. It was the fishermen who escaped.

The fishermen were:-

<u>Name of fisherman.</u>	<u>Home island of fisherman.</u>		<u>Base on Ocean Island.</u>
Nabetari	Nikunau	}	Fishermen from Bukinteriki.
Reuera	Tamana		
Tekamino	Tarawa		
Bateriki	Nikunau	}	Fishermen from Tabwewa.
Teieru	Nikunau		
Taebo	Nikunau	}	Fisherman from Etani-Banaba.
Kaiaia	Tabiteuea		

Each of these groups had their own Ocean Island type canoe. We fished most days and some nights.

It was Bateriki who suggested we escape. We had a meeting one night, and left that same night in our canoes. We kept the same parties except that Tekamino went in Taebo's canoe. Bateriki was the leader and said he was a good navigator and would find land.

We took a few eating coconuts and filled some Jap water-bottles. There were two of these in my canoe. They would be about quart size.

We got away on the 4th April, 1944. I know the day because there was a calendar I used to see marked off. I am sure it was April too because we had a meeting every month. This meeting was of the various groups of soldiers from all the villages. There was a group from each of Ooma, Tabiang, Tabwewa, Bukinteriki, and Etani-Banaba. On the last day of each month the soldiers gathered at Ooma and, after lunch, went to the playing field north of the European quarters. Here we were paraded and then taught to fight. One Japanese watched, and one Japanese taught us. We were divided into two groups about 50 in each. One lot hid, and the others tried to find them.

The first meeting like this was on the last day of February and I was there. I was there for the parade at the end of March but I got away before the next one.

" We got away about midnight. We could still see land in the morning. The following night we lost the canoe with the three men in it. After that we tied a rope between the two remaining canoes each night. We had sails but we lost them in bad weather. We lived on fish and rainwater. If we had a good catch, we preserved the fish by drying them in the sun. We used a feather bait to catch fish which followed the canoes. After about five months we lost sight of the other canoe. Only Reuera and I were left now. Some weeks after we lost the other canoe, Reuera was bitten in the upper arm by a shark. About a week after this, Reuera and I were asleep on the canoe one night. Something must have capsized it for I did not know anything until I was in the water. I called to Reuera and asked how he was. He said he was very weak and needed encouragement. I went over to him and gave him a paddle and an empty tin to support him. Then I righted the canoe. When I called to Reuera again, I could not get an answer and was unable to find him again.

I did not attempt to paddle the canoe but just let the wind and tide take me, for I did not know which way to go.

Twice I saw aeroplanes but they were very high up. I waved cloth but they did not see me. I saw two ships. One was a long way away, but the second was quite close to me. I saw this last ship towards the end of my voyage. This ship was very close to me and I could see the men on it. I think they were Japs. The ship had one high mast, and was high at the bow and low at the stern. It was travelling very fast as though it was being chased.

I was very weak when I saw land first. I think I saw it in the evening, but it was not till the next afternoon that I was washed up on the reef. I crawled ashore but there was no one there. I just lay on the beach that afternoon and that night. Next morning I started to crawl along the beach to try and find a village. I crawled along in the water so that my body floated. That afternoon, late, I could see a village, and three young people and an old man found me and carried me to their village. I was four days with the people of Maron village. Then a doctor came in a launch. I think the people must have sent a message to him. He took me in the launch to his hospital.

After the main Tarawa party were shipped to Tarawa, there were two more ships. These ships were before Christmas, 1943. After that there were no more ships. The ships brought a little food and took more people away. They took about 100 on each ship. The people were mixed and from all villages. I do not know how they were selected. When I left there would be about 200 natives left. Half of these were the native soldiers.

When I left, there was still a little Japanese food, but a Japanese engineer told me that their stocks would only last about a month longer".

Thus ends the story of that most remarkable voyage, and it only remains to mention that the Allied Forces took Nabetari to Ocean Island to attend the ceremony at which the Japanese formally surrendered and the Union Jack was once more hoisted over the island; his attendance there on that occasion must have given him tremendous pleasure.

If the first tale can fairly be entitled "The Odyssey of Nabetari", the second may reasonably be entitled "Kabunare - The Unexpected Witness".

It is succinctly told in a radio message sent by the Acting Resident Commissioner, in Tarawa, to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in Suva on the 6th December, 1945. The text was as follows:-

"Japanese activities on Ocean Island. On the afternoon of the 2nd December, just prior to my departure from Ocean Island, I was working in the former transshipment store when a party of natives brought along a scared looking man, with a shaven head and a skin bleached almost white, whom they had discovered beside the road in Tabiang village about ten minutes previously.

2. Interrogation elicited the fact that the man's name was Kabunare, of Nikunau Island, a British Phosphate Commission labourer who had signed on at Onotoa Island during the last pre-war recruit. He stated that he was one of the final force of over 100 single labourers retained in Ocean Island by the Japanese after the rest had been taken to Nauru or Kusaie. His statements on occurrences on the island up to the departure of Nabetari for the most part coincided with the information already conveyed to Your Excellency.

3. After Nabetari's flight, Kabunare continued his former work as fisherman to the Japanese stationed at Tabwewa until one day "in the middle of August", when the natives were suddenly informed that the war was over, and that the Japanese would probably, as a consequence, be leaving the island within a few weeks, leaving them behind to carry on their work as before. That same afternoon they were told to fetch their belongings and collect at Ooma, where they spent the night. The next morning the natives were told off in groups of five to ten, each in charge of a party of Japanese, and sent to various parts of the island, ostensibly to collect toddy. Kabunare's party consisted of seven Gilbertese and Ellice islanders who were taken through the police lines to the sea cliff beyond Tabiang village, where the Japanese suddenly brandished firearms, swords and bayonets, and told them they were going to be shot. They were then blindfolded, their hands tied behind their backs, and a volley of shots fired at them from close range as they stood in a row on the edge of the cliff.

4. By a miracle, Kabunare was unharmed by the volley but almost simultaneously with the first shots toppled over the cliffs into the sea. The Japanese then threw the other bodies over the cliffs beside him, fired a few more shots at them (which also providentially missed him), and went away. After a time, Kabunare succeeded in getting his hands free and, having ascertained that all his companions were dead, hid in the rocks close by for three days. On the third night after the massacre, he made his way to a bangabanga (cave) above the police lines at Etani-Banaba, where he had been in hiding ever since; he added that, before he left the coast, he saw the sea full of the dead bodies of the natives thrown over the cliff by the Japanese. He slept in the cave during the day and at night came out to collect the coconuts on which he lived; he appeared reasonably well-nourished (though very pale from lack of exposure to the sun), but complained of stomach troubles.

"5. Kabunare stated that he had been in the cave, by his reckoning, about 91 days. He remembered seeing various ships arriving, but thought that they were Japanese. He also saw the Union Jack flying above the police lines, but felt that it was probably an example of Japanese trickery. On the day he was found, however, he had climbed a big itai tree from which he watched a lorry passing along the road with what seemed to be Gilbertese passengers. Later, he saw two Gilbertese passing along on foot and called to them; these men brought him along to me. He still bears the look of a hunted (and very scared) man.

6. Although my opportunity for questioning Kabunare was brief and details set out above may require amendment in the light of more complete interrogation being conducted, one point stands out clear and was repeated by him over and over again: that the massacre of the native population was entirely unprovoked and took place after peace had been declared, contrary to all the evidence given by Lieutenant Commander Suzuki and all the other Japanese. I am in little doubt that the reason for the massacre was the fear that the natives would give evidence regarding the deaths of the six Europeans on the island. Kabunare's own preliminary statement on this subject was as follows, but he made it clear that it was all hearsay and that there were others among the massacred (who worked as house servants, etc., to the Japanese) who could have given more direct evidence:-

- (1) Cartwright - refused to eat Japanese food and died of sickness caused by starvation.
- (2) Cole - bayoneted in the neck while lying asleep in the hospital at Tabwewa.
- (3) Mercer - died of ill-health.
- (4) Fujubet - died as the result of a stomach operation.
- (5) Third - killed by being given an injection.
- (6) the Catholic Brother - killed by being given an injection.

7. It is suggested that a mass murder such as is recounted by Kabunare, perpetrated after the war was over, should be classed as one of Japan's major war crimes and it is to be hoped that the authorities concerned will ensure that the Japanese responsible receive their deserts. It seems probable that but for the spectacular appearance of Kabunare, they might well have got off scot-free."

That preliminary account deserves to be supplemented, however, by a few additional items which emerged from incidents at, or information arising from, interrogations of Kabunare. On arrival in the trans-shipment store, he was described as "a yellow skinned native, with completely shaven head and wild eyes" who burst into a torrent of speech in Gilbertese. His dramatic gesticulations of the typical positions of victims for beheading or bayonetting showed beyond doubt that he must have witnessed such horrors, and in one of his outbursts he declaimed that "the Japs had killed everyone with bayonet, sword and pistol".

As there were eight Japanese detailed as executioners (not seven as mentioned in the radio message quoted above), this meant that there was one such executioner to each native. This renders their failure to shoot all the eight natives, including Kabunare, somewhat inexplicable. One can only presume that Kabunare anticipated his fate and fell backwards a fraction of a second before the shot was fired, or that the marksman assigned to shoot Kabunare must have fired a fraction of a second too late.

Fortunately for Kabunare, the tide was then making, though the water was reasonably shallow. Having fallen, he feigned death and drew breath each time as the water receded. Though more shots were fired, he was not hit. But he stayed in the water for some time, until he was satisfied that the Japanese had gone. He then waded over to a sharp rock where he cut the ropes from his wrists and removed the blind-folding from his eyes. The other boys were all dead, so Kabunare knew that he must find a hiding place; and he found a small cave in the coral cliffs ideally suited to his purpose. Next morning two bodies were washed up to the entrance to the cave, but he decided to remain hidden. About midday he heard an aeroplane flying low for about half-an-hour, which was in fact an American aircraft which had been dropping leaflets with news of the declaration of peace and seeking the surrender of the Japanese. Late in the afternoon, some of the Japanese came down to the beach and dragged all the bodies out to a launch near the reef, which towed them out to sea.

He continued to remain in his hide-out for a second night and all next day, however, without food and drink, before deciding to take a chance and move inland where he might be able to obtain some coconuts and water; and, on the high ground above the police lines, he found a small cave into which he slid feet first so as to keep a watch on happenings outside. And there he lived for over three months, coming out at night to search for coconuts and water.

The scene now shifts to Rabaul, located in the island of New Britain, part of the Territory of New Guinea. For there, on the 20th June, 1946, an Australian newspaper reported that two Japanese naval officers were charged in the War Crimes Court with the mass murder of 200 natives on Ocean Island on the 20th August, 1945 - after the surrender of Japan to the Allied Powers. The Japanese principally charged were Lieutenant Commander Suzuki, officer in charge of No. 67 Naval Garrison Unit, stationed at Ocean Island, and his "quartermaster" Lieutenant Yoshio Nara. The charge was that, on or about the 20th August, 1945, they murdered Falailiva, Ueanteiti and other persons unknown. The prosecution alleged that Suzuki knew that Japan had surrendered when he ordered the executions, and, immediately the trial opened, the prosecuting officer presented a sworn declaration by the sole surviving native, Kabunare.

The following highlights of the trial were recorded in the newspaper under the caption "Surrender News" as follows:-

" Kabunare said that he was employed as a fisherman by the Japs and, if he did not catch any fish, he had his face slapped.

One day all the natives in the area were assembled on parade and a Jap officer addressed them through an interpreter.

He told us that the war was over, but we must still work for a while, and then the Japs would go away and leave us here.

We were too scared to show our happiness, so we just bowed our heads and went back to our houses. Then we laughed and talked of the good news.

Next day the natives were again assembled and told they would be divided and sent to new sections.

They were led away in groups and witness (Kabunare) found himself in the last group of eight men. They marched to the police lines, where they were confronted by Jap soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets.

" The hands of all the natives were tightly bound and they were led down a winding track to the cliffs below Tabiang village.

When we reached the cliff our eyes were tied up with cloth said Kabunare. Falailiva was the first to be tied and was on my left. He said to me "Are you ready to die?", and I replied "Yes".

Everything was quiet for a moment and then I fell over the cliff. I did not try to, but just fell. Almost at the same time I heard a scream and someone fell on top of me - I think it was Falailiva.

I heard others fall, but no more screams. Then I heard a lot of shots fired.

Falailiva was still on top of me, and some of the bullets were close to me. This was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

Water kept breaking over us, but I could breathe as the water receded each time. I stayed there without moving till I thought the Japanese had gone.

I bit Falailiva's shoulder to see if he was still alive. He was still lying partly on top of me. Falailiva did not cry out so I knew he was dead.

Kabunare said that he stayed in the water for an hour, then rose to his feet.

The Japanese had gone and all his companions were dead.

That night and the following day he hid in a cave, and late the following night he went into the jungle where he hid in a hole. For four months he stayed hidden.

One day he climbed a tree and saw many ships in the harbour, but thought they were Japanese ships. He also saw a Union Jack flying from the police lines, but thought it was a Japanese trick.

On December 2 he met two natives from the Gilbert Islands, who had landed with the Allied occupation force.

He went with them to the police lines."

Suzuki's defence, when first questioned at Ocean Island, was that the Gilbert and Ellice islanders, numbering about 160, had risen against them, and that they had all been shot in self-defence in the ensuing struggle. With the Japanese invaders armed to the teeth, and the natives without arms, it is difficult to believe that he can ever have hoped to persuade the Allied authorities that there was a grain of truth in such a statement. However, at the trial he changed his defence. He argued that he had been ordered by his superiors to kill all the natives as the Japanese garrison on Ocean Island numbered 500 men, and the 200 natives might be a danger in the event of an Allied landing. This was a somewhat strange defence since the Japanese had trained about 100 of the natives as soldiers in the hope and expectation that they might oppose an Allied landing. And, although he had previously denied that he had ordered the executions after hearing that peace had been declared, he finally admitted this at his trial and took full responsibility for the executions.

Eventually no fewer than twenty-three Japanese, including Suzuki, the commander of the Ocean Island garrison, his adjutant (quartermaster), his four company commanders, nine of his sub-lieutenants, five of his ensigns, and three of his non-commissioned officers were charged with the massacre of the natives. The results of the trials were that Suzuki, the adjutant,

the four company commanders and three of the sub-lieutenants were sentenced to be hanged, seven of the others were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment, three to 15 years' imprisonment and two to seven years imprisonment. One of the ensigns and one of the non-commissioned officers were acquitted.

Both Nabetari and Kabunare were present at the trials, the latter giving evidence, apart from the submission of his sworn statement. It cannot but have given them both a deep sense of satisfaction that those who had massacred their comrades in cold blood - and especially after peace had been declared - should pay the extreme penalty. It is hardly likely that they can have been moved in any degree to pity when they recalled the brutal massacre of their 160 comrades, and who shall blame them if they felt that justice, and perhaps more than justice, though long delayed, had been done when the sentences were carried out.