

THE GILBERT ISLANDS

The call for help was even more urgent from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands where the colony's medical services were coping with the clinical work but in urgent need of someone to replace medical administration on a business-like footing and restore confidence. As DWH wrote himself for the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, September 1954 and later for the *Times British Colonies Review*, First Quarter 1956:

"Sir Arthur Grimble's book *Pattern of Islands* gives a delightful picture of the glamour and romance of the Gilbert Islands as they existed some thirty years ago, but the Second World War and the Native Co-operative Trade Scheme have caused a complete change. During the years 1942 and 1943 when the Japanese military and naval forces occupied the Gilberts they maintained their chief garrisons on Tarawa and Butaritari. Their aircraft and destroyers regularly visited the other 14 islands of the group to capture the European coast watchers and make certain that neither the natives nor the Roman Catholic Missionaries were using wireless transmitters to communicate with the outside world. The most westerly islet of Tarawa is called Betio and here one finds long lines and heaps of worn-out and rusty wrecked American landing craft and motor vehicles, the remaining material evidence of the Japanese and American Occupations. But the effects of the war on the natives themselves and their way of life have been far reaching.

British administration in the Gilberts up to 1939 was a simple affair, for it did not matter much whether things were done today, tomorrow, or next week and although there was little money available, prices of ordinary commodities were low. The placid conditions were followed in 1942 and 1943 by a system of forced labour under the rigid discipline of the Japanese forces. The Japanese destroyed most of the European property (bungalows, launches etc.), and ruthlessly cut down whole groves of coconut palms in order to make air strips or to use the coconut tree trunks for the formation of their defensive gun emplacements. The destruction of palm trees by the Japanese was one of the chief causes of complaint by the Gilbertese, for whom the coconut trees are the chief source of existence.

When the American forces succeeded the Japanese during 1944-45 they showed the Gilbertese a third way of life notable for its freedom and easy manner and an extravagant use of American dollars. Lasting benefits were bestowed by the American marines and soldiers. They made the most accurate charts of each of the principal lagoons, put down many new beacons and improved existing roads. For all these works the Gilbertese labourers received good wages.

When, at the end of the war, the British administration returned, the Gilbertese were hopelessly puzzled and befogged but one new condition offset the various war time complications. This was the high price of copra which was three times higher than before the war and by 1950 the Islanders appeared to have returned almost to their former free and easy life."

DWH found a situation of government in contrast with Fiji because the Gilbert and Ellice Colony, under the control of the Resident Commissioner, assisted by European and Gilbertese officers, was without any executive council, legislative or even advisory council. The residents were therefore without the usual means for ventilating grievances and hardship whether real or imaginary.

In such a situation Colonial Office regulations, if too rigidly applied, could cause absurd results. For instance a Gilbertese medical practitioner who had received no salary for three months, owing to lack of communications with Tarawa, and who was without any relatives on his particular island, was compelled to spend most of the day in his fishing canoe in the lagoon to provide food for his family. DWH concluded that some form of advisory council to assist the Resident Commissioner was long overdue. Having served a number of terms himself as a member of Fiji's Legislative Council, with its balance of Government appointed and elected members he was well aware of the need for adequate communication between all races, at all levels, if justice was to be seen to be done.

The Hoodless's departure for Tarawa in November 1948 was on S.S. "Myrtlebank". They were signed on as Ship's surgeon and stewardess for one shilling a month. Enroute they had a four day stop at Rotuma to load copra, a pleasant diversion for the Hoodlesses because one of DWH's old pupils of Nasinu days, Freddie Ieli, was the District Officer and he, along with AMP Tingaroa, made them welcome visitors. Hilda noted that:

"The one disadvantage of travelling on a copra ship is that the little black copra bugs fly, run, glissade everywhere. They are seemingly clean creatures; they do not smell or bite; they are just with us all the time. We pick them off the table, off our beds, our clothes and ourselves."

On Wednesday 6 December they arrived at their destination. Hilda wrote:

"The first launch was from the hospital on Abaokora, with the Health Officer Dr Rudyard accompanied by AMP Lupasi. After the formalities were complete we boarded that launch for the 1½ hours trip across that rough lagoon. We descended into a hell of misery. Not even crossing the Styx could be worse than crossing Tarawa lagoon from the anchorage to Abaokora in that launch which looked like a prairie waggon and behaved worse than a bucking bronco. We pitched and tossed and rolled and shipped seas. After ten days of being a good sailor it was ignominious to be sick on that wretched little boat . . .

At last about 5 p.m. we approached the beach at Abaokora where (thank heavens) it was nearly high tide. If it had been low tide we might have had a ¾ mile walk, which would have been the last straw. Native police waded the few yards to the launch and we were carried ashore like babies. The whole hospital staff was drawn up in two parallel lines on the beach to meet us. On the right 4 AMPs, 1 clerk, and 15 dressers, on the left Sister Fraser, the New Zealand nursing sister and Dr Phillips, an Australian woman doctor, whose husband is the captain of the recently bought a small steamer "Nei Nimonoa" and the Gilbertese nurses, headed by a heftily built staff nurse who looked as though she could put Lofty Blomfield on the mat in two minutes. DWH made a few friendly remarks but he would much sooner have gone to a quiet spot where he could have cursed.

In less than ten minutes after landing we were escorted to our new home. And what a home it is!! Heath Robinson and Robinson Crusoe would both have felt at home in it; in fact each might have obtained a few useful tips. The houses are all

native built, of heavy timber frame with cement floors (all covered with native mats), the partitions are reed screens about six feet high, but there are no outer doors except reed blinds which can be let down, so we shall be living much in the public eye. The high pitched roof is thatched with coconut palm leaves. The shower is fed from a 44 gallon drum, the lavatory pan has to be emptied each night. The prisoners come around each night to do this and refill the shower drums.

A cook boy was awaiting us. We are told he makes good bread and is willing. I am glad about the bread. I don't mind if he cannot cook much else.

We awoke this morning to an almost macabre scene, as like a Hollywood idea of a tropical scene as possible. About 20 feet in front of the house is the water and about 50 yards from us another small island. We see water, land, water, land, water, land, the farthest bit being a fair sized island with thick trees. At 5.30 a.m. there was a glowing sunrise over the farthest land and in the darker foreground a fat pig was rooting in the mud left by the receding tide, a black pig with an absurd white ruff on his tail. He looked as though a fish and coconut diet suited him well.

Incredible as it may be, here, only one degree north of the Equator, there is a constant succession of gusty breezes so that one feels quite chilly."

Their stores did not arrive for several days and they became embarrassed continually accepting the hospitality of the Rudyards and others. Eventually Sister Fraser, who had to go to Bairiki discovered on their behalf that the Customs Officer did not even realise that the Hoodless's goods and chattels were awaiting his inspection. He hurried things up and had them placed on the launch which arrived back on a dark evening with the tide going out too quickly to allow the launch to go right inshore, so everything had to be transferred into a dinghy. One case of tinned goods fell overboard but those were easily dried out with no ill effect. When the Rudyard's previous order from Sydney was sent over by barge practically the whole consignment, breakfast foods and all, had to be fished out of the lagoon. Their year's supply of washing blue added colour to the lagoon.

In the evenings they would watch the sunsets. Hilda wrote:

"Tonight was the most gorgeous scene Daddy and I have ever gazed at. All the East was a pink glow. The sands and water even had a warm glow with the palms standing very green against it. Down at the landing we looked on the whole semi-circle of sky and sea and it was all brilliant in colour. To the west all the sea was a flood of gold with the little waves standing in blue ridges against the gold. The sky showed every shade of gold and yellow, from the horizon to the zenith where little golden puffs of cloud showed a bright blue sky. Round to the south the colour was all bright blues and greens with ripples of gold. As it changed it was still colourful until there was finally a fiery red sky above a deep blue sea. We never have seen a more glorious sunset or one that stayed colourful as long.

Along the foreshore of the native settlement is a row of privies. Each is a reed and leaf hut on high stilts some 20 to 50 feet from the high water mark. Each is approached by a long wharf made from two logs side by side, not easy to walk along except with bare feet. Very hygienic, very friendly and matey, for in the evening there is usually a group waiting on the wharf, chatting, sometimes even fishing. One is expected to arrange one's timetable to suit the tides; the outgoing tide is the better: it is a social faux pas to do serious business when the tide is half a mile out. The tides have been high this week in the early evening; hence the groups to be seen when we are walking".

One day the flame-belching, wood-burning stove collapsed. The wires holding it together had snapped. DWH and the cook boy wired it together

again and when the Administrator arrived Hilda told him what she thought about him ignoring her written applications for safer, if not more adequate cooking facilities. It was just one small aspect of the continual war between hospital staff and the Administration. DWH longed to be able to do some clinical work but the whole time was taken up with seeing that all the complicated sets of salary vouchers for the doctors, nurses, AMPs, dressers and clerks, attached to the medical department for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Phoenix and Line Islands (scattered over about 1000 square miles) were in order. He also had to check equipment, stores and other service orders. He wondered why a doctor had to be sent from Fiji to perform this work.

In one respect he was aware his presence meant a great deal and gave heart to the Gilbertese AMPs. Some of them had coped with all manner of war-time tribulations. As soon as they were settled in, AMP Tutu and his wife Eretia came to dinner. Tutu was the first Gilbertese student who had graduated from the CMS. The event was somewhat astonishing to their staff. The cook had his hair cut for the occasion and the housegirl changed into her best clothes. The few other Europeans noted the event with equal astonishment. DWH and Hilda were somewhat amused at the minor stir caused unwittingly by the close rapport between DWH and his former students.

The AMP's made the Hoodlesses welcome. AMP's Pine and Moeki took them in the hospital punt across the arm of the lagoon to Noto to visit the Catholic mission to call on the French priest Fr Grandgeorge, who remained at the mission along with four Australian sisters throughout the war. The Japanese inspected them once a week but otherwise did not interfere. They were often very short of food and at one stage did not know what their next meal would be as their boat had been removed from them and they were unable to fish other than from the shore. They had been unable to catch anything for a while. The nuns decided that though they were loathe to pray for their own personal needs their situation was such that they felt they had to seek divine help. When they came out from the chapel they found a school of flying fish had just beached themselves. Their need was never as great again.

They were invited to the *Maneaba* or meeting house to watch the Bateri, a native dancing contest between a team of hospital nurses and dressers and a team of visitors from another island. A number of the dances were vigorous noisy affairs but at one stage when the *Maneaba* was packed to capacity there was a sudden lull. Everyone became quiet. A young woman in native dress stepped forward and then stood still as a statue with outstretched arms. Quietly the drumming started and they were watching the bird dance.

With quick but only slight movements of the head and wrists they saw an imitation of a sea-bird patiently standing in shallow water, searching the water ahead. Everyone native and European alike was spellbound. There was not a sound except the monotonous low beating of the drum while the girl remained almost immobile, with staring eyes fixed on some distant point of the horizon.

Christmas Eve was a day of festive celebration on Abaokora. In the afternoon a children's party was held at the Rudyard's house for about 60 children, those of the AMP's, dressers, and others connected with the hospital or government services. They played the usual European children's party games like Nuts and May, Musical Bumps, Oranges and Lemons. They had a

strange party meal but it seemed to satisfy the children — rice with tinned beef, a piece of Christmas cake and a banana each. After the meal there was a puppet show. The puppets were made by the doctors and Sister Fraser from plaster of paris poured into plasticine moulds and then painted. The AMP's worked the puppets and did the talking in Gilbertese. Their story was a Gilbertese version of the Babes in the Wood with coconut palms and a wicked uncle instead of a witch. The wicked uncle was properly punished in the end so everyone was happy and the younger children laughed just watching the puppets move.

Father Christmas' arrival in red robes trimmed with hospital cotton wool, slightly thinned the crowd. Some were so startled they left for home and mother. Most bravely stood their ground and were rewarded with a bag of candy.

In the evening the nurses and dressers formed a lantern lit procession winding through the compound singing *Adeste Fidelis* and other carols while everyone else joined the procession, as their houses were passed, until they all ended up again at the Rudyard's Christmas tree. There, Father Christmas had quite a task handing out presents to everyone, and long before the giving was over he was tripping over his ragged cotton wool hem. DWH was delighted with a Gilbertese hat in a fine close weave in creamy white with discreet brown stripes diagonally down crown and brim. He could just visualise the envy of his friends at the Suva Bowling Club when they saw his hat.

Christmas Day itself, was very quiet with everyone either quietly sleeping off the effects of the parties or attending Mass but the few Europeans gathered for dinner together in the evening.

In contrast New Year's Eve was hardly noticed on Abaokora. The Resident Commissioner had invited everyone to Bairiki but the Hoodlesses stayed along with Dr Phillips and her husband Captain Milner. It was not until January 2 that the locals celebrated and the cause was a visiting party from Abemama who had brought a girl for a betrothal and a marriage a couple of days later. The girl was not allowed to walk abroad but was carried always on the shoulders of the young men. The dancing was accompanied by drumming on a large hollow wooden crate. About eight men sat beside it pounding in unison with their hands. The resultant noise was deafening and resonant, going on and on for hours at a time. Hilda felt the pounding must hurt the men's hands or maybe it was more that she felt it ought to because her head hurt and she longed to escape the din, a bit awkward on an island that only took half an hour to walk around. She wrote:

"You might think this island far from the maddening crowd of cities would be very quiet. Actually it is the noisiest place I have lived in. Only a very short distance from the outer shore is the main reef and there the huge breakers roll in day and night with ceaseless roar. With any wind at all the rustle of coconut leaves cannot be distinguished from heavy rain. Every short while a dead coconut leaf falls like an avalanche, or a nut thuds down."

It rained very little while they were there, in fact rain was badly needed but when it came:

"The wind blew so gustily that the blinds had to be let down all along the seaward side, and the electric lights were swinging so that DWH anchored them

with strings. All night the reef roared, the trees competed with the reef, and the rain added its quota of noise. In the morning all the floors were unbelievably filthy with the debris which had blown down from the roof. The roof of the infectious ward, which had stays of tubular iron (left-over war time stores), instead of pandanus poles, collapsed last night. Luckily the patients heard it creaking and without waiting to see what the creak meant, took themselves out. So no one was hurt. Now the worry is that several other buildings which were built about the same time and also have iron stays may also collapse. The iron rusting in this climate has rotted the binding cords. The curse of the Gilberts is that everything is temporary, and has been temporary ever since the war ended, and seems likely to continue so for several years yet.

Another factor of life was a most extraordinary sameness about these islands. This little square island of Abaokora has so many buildings on its small area that it is fairly well defined. The two-mile-long island on either side of us is flat and apart from its one road following the inner coast, is closely planted with coconuts with just two or three other kinds of trees which are so alike it is difficult to keep any sense of direction when one is in the middle of it. So it was with all islands comprising Tarawa atoll."

The same sea with its fish was vital to life for the people. During his second trip to the Gilberts in 1953 DWH watched a fleet of twenty canoes at Tamana each containing one or two men with huge palm-leaf torches emitting showers of sparks and billows of smoke into the evening air. With a sudden movement the scoop nets would flash, sweeping flying fish from the sea into the canoes. Up and down the six mile coast the canoes sailed keeping quite close to the ocean side of the reef, fishing as long as their palm leaf flares lasted.

DWH and Hilda were not sure how long they were to stay at Abaokora but by early February a row was brewing between medical and administrative staff again, that time about housing for the new pharmacist. DWH saw a way out of the deadlock by offering his house and leaving a month or so earlier than originally planned.

The editor of the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, R.W. Robson, persuaded Hilda to write an account of this 'Thousand Miles of Sea-Sickness' for the 1950 issue. Her account of that 'truly dreadful' ten days on the little ship was as follows:

"In a rash moment — or at least, because there seemed no other way — my husband and I decided to return to Suva from Tarawa via Canton Island. The little ship "Nei Nimanoa", was to go to Canton Island, nearly 1,000 miles almost due east of Tarawa, to take a new manager and about 20 Gilbertese labourers to Canton Island.

About 11 a.m. on a Saturday we at last set out on what was hoped would be a six and a half day voyage. Within a couple of hours of raising the anchor, the "Lady Nimanoa" was battling against a strong easterly wind and the South Equatorial current. When the South Equatorial current, flowing due westwards, is whipped furiously by a persistent easterly wind, sailing against it is like trying to swim up a waterfall.

"Nei Nimanoa" had very little cargo aboard, no ballast except for a few extra water tanks and about 40 persons and their luggage. Consequently, she bobbed like a cork, bucked like a frightened mule and rolled jerkily on the great Pacific. The current was setting her back about 70 miles a day from her normal speed and the experience was unpleasant for all.

At night, we could gauge the roughness of the sea by the noise or the quiet amidships. The Gilbert Islanders love to sing and dance accompanied by a band of

their heftiest young men, who beat with their hands and forearms on an empty case, shouting with added glee if the protesting case breaks beneath their drummings.

It was impossible for anyone but a sailor to walk about or even stand up without holding on to the nearest stanchion or railing with both hands. Our choice was between lying in an airless cabin down below, or clinging to a stretcher bed on the upper boat deck. Obviously, we chose the boat deck, together with the east wind. The deck was small and had no sides to it apart from a two inch footboard and a rope about four feet above decking.

After a seemingly unending nine and a half days we neared Canton Island and for the last two hours on Sunday morning (March 5) an officer or a passenger gazed eastwards through binoculars until the welcome word had passed round that the wreck at the lagoon entrance could be just seen, together with the wireless mast. The first indication of Canton Island from the sea is the wartime wreck of one of the great President ships. The island itself is only a few feet above sea level.

Our welcome by the happy little community on Canton Island was so friendly and so kindly that it did much to make us rapidly forget the discomfort of our sea voyage. Added to this personal friendliness was the pleasure of drinking pure fresh water after three months of brackish well-water and the joy of having fresh milk brought by air from New Zealand or Honolulu less than 24 hours before. We shall not soon forget our afternoon and evening spent on Canton Island which is only six hours by air from Fiji."