



HANDOUT



SOLIDARITY, FRIENDSHIP, AND THE REAL *LORD OF THE FLIES*

Perhaps the most famous castaway story is William Golding's 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*. A group of boys attempt to rule themselves when stranded on an island. The resulting self-destruction of their society made *Lord of the Flies* one of the most-read books of the 20th century.

In real life, there has been one recorded instance similar to *Lord of the Flies*. In the 1960s, six school-age boys from Tonga found themselves stranded on a deserted island. The story of their 15-month ordeal was largely forgotten until historian Rutger Bregman revived it in his 2020 book *Humankind*. He called the boys' experience "The Real *Lord of the Flies*." To be sure, there are many differences between Golding's book and what unfolded on Tonga's southernmost island. Nevertheless, their experience is the only known example of a group of young people shipwrecked on an island.

Their fate was much different than what unfolded in *Lord of the Flies*.

SOLIDARITY AND FRIENDSHIP

The real *Lord of the Flies* began on Tongatapu, Tonga's main island, in June 1965. Six students living at a strict boarding school grew bored, so they made plans to sail off to a new life. The six were Sione Fataua, "Stephen" Tevita Fatai Latu, "David" Tevita Fifita Siola'a, Kolo Fekitoa, "Mano" Sione Filipe Totau, and Luke Veikoso.

They ranged in age from 15 to 17 and were originally from the Tongan island of Ha'afeva.

The boys packed up some bananas and coconuts, along with a small gas burner, and stole a 24-foot whaling boat from an ornery local fisherman. Sailing off on a calm warm night, their adventure began perfectly. They dropped anchor about eight kilometres from shore, fished for a while, and dozed off.

The peaceful slumber of their first night was broken by a violent storm. Soon, the boat was ripped from its anchor, its sail was torn, and its rudder was broken. The boys were now at the whims of the sea, helplessly drifting across the southwestern Pacific Ocean. The boys first ate their coconuts and bananas, along with the few fish they had caught. It was not long until all they had to consume was meagre amounts of rainwater that they managed to collect in coconut shells.

Unbelievably, after eight days adrift, an island appeared on the horizon. It was 'Ata, the tiny southernmost island of Tonga. About 160 kilometres south of Tongatapu, 'Ata is a mere 450 acres, with steep cliffs and thin rocky beaches. In the mid-1860s, the King of Tonga ordered it to be abandoned after about half of the island's 400 or so residents were kidnapped by Peruvian slave traders.

Using planks from their disintegrating boat as floats, the boys swam to 'Ata's shore. The swim took them a day and a half. Utterly exhausted, survival in the first days was anything but easy. They lived on a thin rocky beach, digging a small cave for shelter, drinking the blood of birds and eating coconut shoots to stay alive. After some days on the beach, they managed to find a route to the top of the island.

On the top of the island, things were much better. 'Ata harboured the remnants of the abandoned settlement. The boys soon built a hut and started a fire by rubbing sticks together, which they kept burning continuously. Not long after, they became self-sufficient farmers. They corralled 200 chickens that had been on the island since the earlier inhabitants left. Meanwhile, they planted bean crops and restored the settlement's banana plantation. The boys continued to catch wild birds, and created angling equipment with remnants of their destroyed boat that washed up on shore. Their diet of eggs, wild birds and fish, beans, and bananas was supplemented by the island's native papaya and coconut trees. The boys even managed to tap water from trees, remembering their parental teachings about how this could be done.

Beyond providing with basic necessities, the boys did a remarkable job of organising activities to keep themselves busy and finding ways to govern their castaway life.

Physically, they created a makeshift weight gym, ran races, and even created a badminton court. Their exercise routines helped keep them in excellent physical health.

When it came to governing their lives, the boys sought to make life sustainable both environmentally and interpersonally. They placed limits on hunting wild birds, and preserved their chicken flock primarily for egg production. They created strict duty lists that were rotated through in pairs. This included kitchen, garden, and guard work. The lookout duty was particularly important and particularly disappointing: only four ships passed by the island and none spotted the signal fires they lit.

Solidarity was helped along through song and prayer. They would bond through prayers in the morning, with the eldest as their spiritual leader. At night, they would compose and sing songs. They even built a guitar from driftwood, coconut half-shells, and six wires salvaged from the wreck.

Disagreements were resolved with time outs. If there was an argument, boys would be sent to opposite sides of the island for several hours. This would give them time to cool off and put their priorities back in order. When they would reassemble,

apologies were exchanged. As Mano Totau told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation many years later, "Our culture tried to teach us to [respect] each other and try to be [loving] to each other no matter how hard the life is."

The boys' respect and love for each other was well-demonstrated when one took a tumble down a cliff. Languishing at the bottom with a broken leg, the others scrambled to his rescue. They set his leg using sticks and hot coconut fronds, following traditional practice. The leg healed perfectly.

Even humour was present on the island, helping with their resilience. Several good jokes were later recounted that made light of various hardships. For example, when their boat left them stranded, they joked that "we must tell Tanelia [the boat's owner] his boat is just like himself—no good," and as the



Peter Warner in the centre, with (left to right) Stephen, Kolo, Luke, David, John and Mano. March 1, 1968.

Photo Credit: Golding/Fairfax Media via Getty Images

boy with the broken leg healed, they teased that “We’ll do your work while you lie there like King Taufa’ahua himself!”

As the days turned to months, the boys began to believe that they would be trapped on ’Atu forever. Adding to their worries, the dry Tongan summer left water incredibly scarce. Sad and missing their home and families, the boys built a raft. The raft even included a cabin to protect them from the elements. With their raft ready for sea, they loaded it with supplies and set sail southwards, believing that they were close to Samoa. In what is looked back upon as incredibly good fortune, the raft broke up barely a kilometre from shore. The boys swam back to ’Ata, unaware they had actually set out into empty waters.

After 15 months on ’Ata, fortune shone upon the boys. In September 1966 an Australian fishing boat neared the island. Its captain, Peter Warner, noticed burned grass along the island’s sides. Knowing that wildfires were rare occurrences in these parts, he sailed in for a closer look.

As Warner peered at the island through his binoculars, the boys spotted his ship. One dove into the ocean and swam out to Warner’s boat. The others followed. At first Warner suspected he stumbled upon criminals: Polynesian societies often banished the worst of their wrongdoers to isolated islands.

When the boys told Warner their shipwreck story, he put the ladder down so they could board his boat. He radioed into Tonga, gave the dispatcher their names, and asked the dispatcher to call the school where they said they had lived. Twenty minutes later the dispatcher radioed back. Through tears, he told Warner that the boys had been given up for dead. Their funerals had already been held.

Warner and the boys became good friends. He hired them to work with his fishing operations across the south Pacific, helping the boys achieve their adventure they had earlier set out upon. Following several years of working with Warner, the boys eventually spread out across the world to settle down. Warner and one castaway, Mano, maintained a close relationship until Warner’s death in a boating accident in 2021.

BEHAVING DECENTLY

The castaway boys on ’Ata were very successful in creating a makeshift island society. They delegated work to ensure basic needs were met. They had systems in place to deal with conflict and wrongdoing. They created communal acts to build solidarity, such as prayer and song. They recognised the importance of exercise and physical activity. They understood the need to respect and preserve the wildlife of the island. And perhaps most importantly, they cared for and respected one-another.

In many ways the life and systems set up by the castaways of ’Ata were remarkably similar to the life and systems of the *Grafton* castaways on Auckland Island. Despite coming from very different backgrounds and living a century apart, and despite one group having a primarily written way of rule and the other having a primarily oral way of rule, in both cases the castaways recognised perhaps the most important aspect to the success of any organised society: being responsible to and decent to one-another.

Václav Havel, the former President of the Czech Republic, may have best summarised how any system of rule must be accompanied by this sense of human decency. In his book *Summer Meditations*, a reflection of life and governance, he wrote:

I am convinced that we will never build a democratic state based on the rule of law if we do not at the same time build a state that is—regardless of how unscientific this may sound to the ears of a political scientist—humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and cultural. The best laws and best-conceived democratic mechanisms will not in themselves guarantee legality or freedom or human rights—anything, in short, for which they were intended—if they are not underpinned by certain human and social values.... The dormant goodwill in people needs to be stirred. People need to hear that it makes sense to behave decently or to help others, to place common interests above their own, to respect the elementary rules of human co-existence.

The Tongan boys showed how this could be done.

DISCUSS

1. When the boys returned to Tonga, they were arrested. The boat's owner had insisted that charges of theft be pressed against the boys. Is this justice?
2. Warner sold the rights to the story of the boys' shipwreck and rescue to an Australian broadcaster. He used the money to repay the boat owner, which got the boys off the hook for the theft. Was this the decent thing to do?
3. In a 2020 interview with the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, castaway Mano Totau addressed accusations circling around that Peter Warner had inappropriately profited off the boys' shipwreck. Unhappy with much of the rhetoric being put forth about his lifelong friend, Totau said, in part,

I know a lot of people say to me things about "Mr. Warner makes a lot of money from our story." Who cares? If no Mr. Warner, we never survive, if no Mr. Warner we won't be here to tell our story. If Mr. Warner makes some money from it, good luck for him, that's my opinion. I would tell everybody please shut up.

Totau added that he someday may write a book telling his story of life on 'Atu, with the hopes of using any profits to help his children.

- a) Do people sometimes tend to stoke outrage over things they are not directly connected to or do not fully understand? Why do you think this happens?
 - b) Does stoking outrage help build human decency?
 - c) Can outrage deliver justice?
4. In what ways is the Tongan boys' society "humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and cultural"? How would this have helped along their system of rule?