

This Could Be It

as told by Leah Early, February 2019

This could be it, I thought. The freighter made another abrupt lurch and nosedive to the left. More water crashed onto the deck below. I grabbed the corner of a built-in wall cabinet centered in the small room over the bridge of the ship. A cold shiver and skittering of nerves rippled down my spine.

This could be it! I imagined my parents' surprise upon receiving a telegram and notice of my death:

"Why on earth was Leah on a copra freighter?" I heard my mother asking my dad. *"Who would have ever dreamed she would go down with a ship? And in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? What is copra--anyway?"*

Well, let's face it. Our oldest girl had some strange ideas about living her life, didn't she, Honey?"

I see Daddy as he restudies the telegram, as if a second reading might explain everything."

The wrap-around glass window gave me a 180-degree view of the ship's tossing and dipping in the turbulent dark waters. *Here comes another one!* The swell grew deeper than before. It charged every cell in my body to push up and then stretch even further upward to bring the creaking ship out of its plunge.



What a trip! The year was 1975. Our party planned to gather data for the Marshall Islands Human Development Plan, while the freighter collected copra (dried coconut meat sold to cosmetic and soap makers of the world). The freighter was to wait long enough for us to complete a meeting on Mejit Island. Following the data gathering, we were to return to the shore, be picked up by small motor boats, and taxied back to the freighter. There were to be additional scheduled stops before returning home to the Majuro Atoll, the major business and government center for the Marshall Islands. Yes, that was the plan before the unexpected began intruding—just a few degrees north of the equator.

A dozen individuals made up “our party”, equal numbers of Marshallese volunteers and American members of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), a global community development organization with 24 projects, one in each of the 24 time zones of the globe. Although the ICA’s approach was comprehensive, here in the Marshalls we were focusing heavily on economic development. Through island meetings we aimed for input and participation from as many citizens as possible to the Marshalls’ development plan. So far, meetings had been held on the most populated atoll, Majuro.

Now, a small boat from the copra freighter slowed down near an area 10 to 12 feet short of the shore and idled. The driver motioned us into the water and on top of the coral--*No time to take in the beauty of Mejit, an impressive mountain jutting up from the floor of the Pacific Ocean. No! There was no time to ease into the water either.*

Over the side, I fell, crushing through the coral up to my thighs. Oh, and did I mention that I was balancing two marine plywood boards on my head? Each board measured $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick and 4 feet x 4 feet in size with a blue, green and white rendering of each inhabited island and 26 atolls of the Marshall Islands. The durable boards were striking décor for the island meetings we planned to hold that year. Meanwhile, balancing several boards on my head became tricky, as I walked over and through the jagged and crumbling coral reef to Mejit’s shore.

Three Marshallese hosts welcomed us, bandaged our bleeding coral scrapes and escorted us to the meeting site. We quickly set up the space and stood ready. All we needed now was to signal folks to come.

“They will come.” assured one of our hosts smiling. “But first, the King and his people are preparing a feast to begin the meeting.”

“Well, that’s a hospitable gesture,” I admitted. “Should we wait here or do we have time to see some of your beautiful island?”

A leisurely tour followed. Four hours later and now dark and raining, the King and his people served us freshly caught fish, fried breadfruit and slices of papaya in braided baskets made from coconut leaves. Delicious!

The island meeting proved lively with good participation, through periods of repeated translations, raising of eye brows and affirmative and/or negative shaking of heads. We made our notations of the Mejit peoples’ proposals to be included in an all island/atoll summary, thanked everyone, reset the space, and distributed the boards among us again for our trek back to the spot, where the freighter’s Taiwanese captain with a Napoleon complex told us to meet him. To our surprise, there was no ship in sight. In all directions, no ship! How could this be? As far as the eyes could see, n-a-d-a!

A Mejit couple, Naomi and Isa, walked with us to the shore. I had befriended them several months earlier on Majuro by buying their dried fish for selling in the KITCO store. While the dried fish was being unloaded, Naomi, Isa and I shared cups of tea and conversation. Naomi stood next to me now and she seemed to understand my frustration for she attempted to comfort me by patting my arm and inviting us to sleep on their screened-in porch.

“Yes, you must come!” she insisted. “The ship will return in the morning.”

Just how crazy-lucky could we get? This was the only screened-in porch, I had seen in the Marshalls. The screened porch was a generous space with a smooth,

polished concrete floor. *Sleeping here meant we wouldn't be eaten alive by mosquitoes!* Without any other considerations, that's what we did.

Early the next morning, Naomi and Isa graciously served each of us a boiled egg for breakfast and then offered us a visit to their breadfruit and copra production sites, while we waited for the missing ship to reappear. Two young Marshallese boys served as scouts and ran from shore to us numerous times shouting: "No sip, no sip!"

Meanwhile, I was impressed with Naomi and Isa's creativity and ingenuity. Their coconut and breadfruit trees were big and healthy. The couple had recovered fuel tanks from crashed Japanese WW II planes and repurposed them as containers in which they fermented breadfruit wrapped in banana leaves, called "bee-rue". Islanders loved eating the cheesy, fowl-smelling substance. Naomi assured me that over time I too would come to love it. This I seriously doubted, but I didn't let on. In other processes that I had seen, the fermentation took place buried in soil, sea water and covered with lots of bugs. Naomi proudly stated that their product was of a cleaner and healthier quality, since it was produced in the fuel tanks. Isa had created a narrow railroad track, also from WW II metal scraps, through his coconut grove to speed up and ease the harvesting of the coconuts. These two proved over and over to be quite an innovative team.

Our tour was interrupted by a member of our party announcing teammate Robert John was going into insulin shock. His medicine was on the ship and the ship was . . . yes, where was that ship? While Robert John was being carefully watched, another colleague Dan and I radioed my husband on Majuro to create a Plan B. Contacting Lee proved no easy task. We waited in a tiny radio shack for someone on Majuro to find him and bring him to Majuro's radio shack. Lee's return call sputtered, whistled and crackled over the ship-to-shore short-wave radio.

I explained our situation: "Lee, we have lost the ship. (pop, whistle, pop) Robert John's insulin is on the ship and without it, he is going into insulin shock. There are no medical options here." Long pause . . . (crackle, pop, sputter)

"What? . . . What do you mean you've lost the ship? Robert John . . . (whistle, shriek) in insulin shock? . . . (crackle, whistle, pop, pop) What the hell do you want me to do?" (screech)

"Well, I'm not sure, but I need someone thinking about this in addition to us. Let's both keep thinking and talk again in an hour. If I am not here, we are on our way and no problem. If I am here, we can discuss possibilities."

"Okay, in an hour then. Over and out." (crackle, crackle, pop)

Before the 60 minutes passed, the little boys reported excitedly seeing the freighter's smoke stack on the horizon. I dashed back to the radio shack and called Lee to say between radio noises: "We . . . are . . . on our way!"

"I'll share what I uncovered when I see you," he yelled. "Love you, take care. Over . . . and out."

I was not surprised at what Lee had lined up to deal with what we thought might be a life or death situation. In less than an hour, he had contacted an airplane pilot and arranged use of his seaplane; acquired a dose of insulin and doctor's instructions for Robert John; and hired a taxi for a quick trip from dock to the hospital upon our immediate arrival in Majuro. Plan B was in place, if and when we needed it. My experience with him had taught me to expect nothing less.

When all of our party had returned to the ship, the freighter blew its baritone whistle and was once again under way. Several of Robert John's cabin mates quickly saw that he received the insulin shot. Within 30 minutes we could see a remarkable difference in how Robert John looked, for color had returned to his face and his blue eyes became alert and focused.

I took a few minutes alone. The rocking rhythm of the ship soothed me considerably and I released a breath I had been holding for I don't know how long. Now, maybe I was ready to find our little captain. I had a question for him.

Oh yes, I heard him before I saw him, bellowing at some crewmen on the forward deck. I waited patiently about eight feet behind him until one of the crew pointed at me.

"Yes?" the captain snapped, giving me his full attention.

"Captain, I'm curious. What happened to the ship and crew last night?" I asked trying to sound nonchalant.

He produced a small grin, shrugged his narrow shoulders and admitted in staccato English, "Good poker, good liquor, we drift--away. No problem," and he waved his hand, as if dismissing the incident completely. "Excuse," and he was off abruptly to another more urgent concern.

Our team spent that afternoon and early evening hours playing card games plus "a world championship tournament of Slap Jack". We were a congenial group with frequent bursts of laughter interspersed with fun tall tales. Crewman walking by didn't necessarily understand the stories, but they certainly enjoyed laughing with us.

Nearing a sunset partially covered with blue-black clouds, the captain sent a crewman to move us from the deck into a room, overlooking the bow of the ship. The room was located up several flights of clanging metal stairs and toward the ship's center. The safer space was small but just right for our 12-person team to stretch out on the floor, shoulder to shoulder on our backs for a night's sleep. It was lights out for all of us and relaxed breathing and snoring began.

Suddenly, I was awake. I marveled that my friends could sleep through all the howling winds and rough waters, for this freighter tossed at the edges of a full-fledged Pacific typhoon. From my perspective three levels high over the main deck of the freighter, I saw waves crash over the right side of the ship. Before the water rushed off the deck completely, a greater wave flooded us from the left. The scene reminded me of an old movie with Errol Flynn swinging across a ship's deck or for a more contemporary reference, a flash of Johnny Depp from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Either of those actors would have fit believably in the sequence unfolding before my eyes.

"This could be it." A million little decisions had brought Lee and me to the Marshall Islands, as staff members of the ICA and to these island peoples, struggling to stand on their own while becoming a nation with pitifully few resources or skills for the task. Another million little decisions and actions created a cooperative buying group, a pre-school, certified high school teachers, a repair center, farming experimentation, renewed fishing industries, small business development, a business school, weekly fresh vegetable shipments from Pohnpei, a women's handicraft co-op, health surveys, clean up days, and island meetings focusing on the future.

Still another million little decisions had led to this very moment. *"Going down with the ship"—who me?* Several chuckles escaped on my deep sigh. *Maybe . . . maybe not.* While the waters of the Pacific continued to roar and pitch the freighter violently, I

returned to my spot on the floor, at peace while accepting it all gratefully—especially the possibility of few hours of precious sleep.

The sun brightened boldly over the still waterscape the next morning, as the captain checked in with us. He seemed exceptionally proud of himself.

“All’s well! Lost rudder in storm, but no problem.” Again he waved his hands, brushing last night’s hyper-anxiety into the past, or wherever the poker, liquor and drifting had previously gone.

As promised, the ship sailed into the Majuro lagoon before sunset. What the captain didn’t tell us was that “no problem and rudderless” meant his crew had to successfully lasso several harbor piers and pull the freighter by rope, hands over fists to the dock. While standing in the line for the departing ramp, my eyes glanced over at the business strip of Majuro. Sunset reflections filled every glass window. It looked as if candles were glowing in the windows to celebrate our homecoming. After living here three years, a brand-new thought dawned on me: *Majuro is beautiful!*

Down on the dock a large group of folks gathered to welcome passengers and family members. Spirits were high. Lee stood waving confidently with an unnecessary Plan B in his back pocket. *Lee looks good, too, as do our two young daughters throwing rocks in the water. Oh gee! Do I ever have an adventure to share with them!*