

Nail File and Hub Cap

Leah Early, Human Connections, December 9, 2019

There is a kinship—even a genuine affection—one feels toward another human being when sharing a load of purpose, darkest despair and unbelievable fulfillment. Human connections forged in and during these intense states of being are not easily erased by time, distance nor changes of interests. Such is the case with Australian-born Don Baker and the Early family.

The year the Earlys accepted assignments to the Marshall Islands, there were a total of seven staff members from the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), working on the Majuro Atoll. Four staff members poured their creativity and energies into education: one in developing a preschool, one teaching in an elementary setting and two in a high school. My husband Lee, a CPA and I focused on economic development, mainly transforming the Marshalls' barter economy into a cash economy capable of participating with businesses of the world.

Today, those of us still living have a few hair-raising stories to tell about our experiences in comprehensive human development that just might dwarf a James Michener novel. Here is one from the economic arena that needs sharing.

After several dramatic years of turning a company around from the edge of bankruptcy to solvency, refinancing and obtaining a SBA loan for Kwajalein Importing and Trading Company (KITCO) and a start-up loan for a shark fishing venture called Bako Bako, the three of us in the economic arena stopped a minute to evaluate what had happened. It became noticeable to us that we were watching some new monies trickling into the economy. Folks in the larger community of the atoll began upgrading their business exteriors. We saw more professional signs and several new taxis appeared on the streets. Mr. Bienne started building a new hotel. A tourist venture called “Wild Rivers Rafting” out of Colorado created an off-season money-making option for their business: bringing tourists to the Marshalls for week-long “Camp outs on Arno Atoll”. A laundering facility and a new yard-movie theater popped up. Yes, what we were feeling, we decided, was a modest degree of economic momentum.

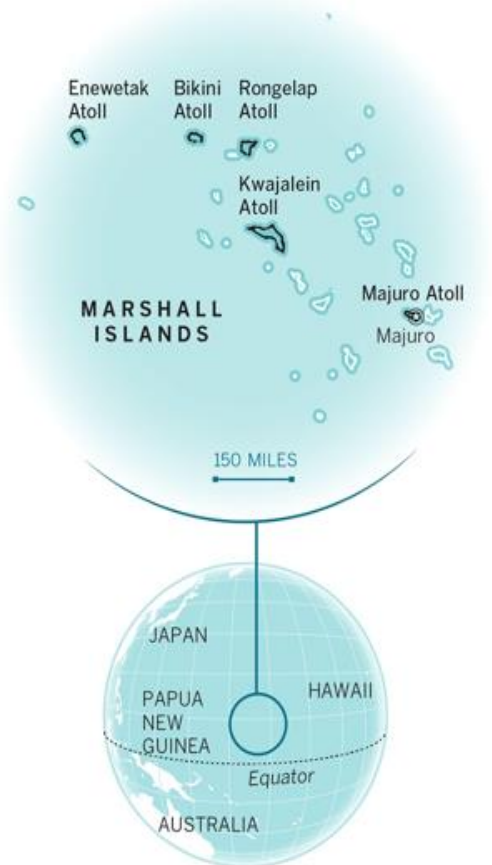


Image: S. Rust, Los Angeles Times, 11/10/2019

Early signs of momentum plus our 109-page project document gave us

courage to shift into the next tier of economic development, involving initiating a cooperative buying group Trans-Atoll Service Corporation (TASC) that purchased popular goods in large quantities at lower prices. TASC resold items like white rice, Ivory soap, Schlitz beer, canned tuna, etc. to a dozen neighborhood atoll stores. Small business ventures were launched: a few women prepared packaged snack chips made from breadfruit with the guidance of a woman formerly in banking from Dallas, Texas. It was called The Breadfruit Tree. A women's handicraft outlet sold handmade baskets on main street. Their first big order was to Nordstrom Department Stores.

Next came infrastructure and business servicing: a business school, sawmill, a Toyota dealership, monthly accounting services for small businesses, a Dawa (Japanese) Shipping agency and, last but not least, a Multi-Purpose Repair Center.

Lee had his eye on a space for a Multi-Purpose Repair Center. The need was certainly obvious. Machines, cars, refrigerators, window air-conditioners—any item that moved—stopped dead in its tracks from wear and tear, heavy humidity, and a thirty-foot high sea spray. Inoperable things cluttered Majuro Atoll, looking like a junkyard full of rusting throwaways.

It was into this chaos, a tall six-foot-two, big-boned “mate” from Adelaide, Australia strolled. Don Baker had a great easy-coming smile that started just left of his lips and slipped across his entire face in slow motion, softly transforming every pore and leaving eyes that twinkled brightly. His large, strong hands, more times than not, were cut or nicked, and even with numerous washings, dark rings around each nail never disappeared.

Don's relationships to dogs and broken engines proved to be magical. By dogs, I speak of the caramel colored ones with long snouts and substantial tails. One dog looked like all the others due to close interbreeding. They followed him walking across that white coral, as if they were integral parts to the newly formed team at the Multi-Purpose Repair Center. When he worked in the shop, he relished listening to classical music and singing with the dogs. He worked hard for a long spell and then took a break to pet the dogs. His touch literally drove those dogs crazy! They wagged their tails in ecstasy until the enthusiastic wagging threw the dogs off balance and they fell to the coral. All one could see were dog legs up in the air and tails going sixty miles an hour in all directions, literally a canine frenzy!

The Marshall Islands must have been paradise for a man like Don who got his kicks out of fixing things. It seemed that every possible moving item on the atoll was in disrepair. If it were not a broken-down pickup truck he was messing with, then it was an outboard motor, a bicycle and/or a huge refrigerated frozen food storage unit. Broken items stacked up because almost every repair job needed parts. And, the consequences of breaking some little something, that could be held between two fingers were complicated, costly and extremely time consuming. There wasn't a neighborhood O'Reilly's Auto Parts or Ace Hardware for thousands of miles. Realistically, most

replacement parts could be found in Guam and/or Honolulu. In the meantime, Don fashioned a crude forge and created parts on his own.



1970 Continental/Air Micronesia Flight Route Through Micronesia

Google Maps

In the 1970s, a Continental/Air Micronesia jet flew west from 1 Los Angeles to 2 Honolulu. The next day it flew west again, making stops for refueling, passengers and freight at 3 Midway/Johnson Island, 4 Majuro, 5 Kwajalein, 6 Pohnpei, 7 Truk, 8 Guam and 9 Saipan. The following day the plane flew in reverse order from Saipan to Honolulu. A jet arrived in Majuro once daily. Arrival and departure times varied considerably. Occasionally, part purchases had to come from equipment makers in Tokyo, San Francisco and/or Los Angeles. Airfreight to the Multi-Purpose Repair Center on Majuro could be very expensive. The fact that these were pre-Internet and iPhone days only added to the challenge of locating parts and then purchasing them. On many days, the best solution was to hear about folks headed to one of those specific destinations and convince them to pick-up a part on behalf of the Multi-Purpose Center. This extremely frustrating situation proved over and over again to be the chemistry that ignited Don's unbelievable creativity and resourcefulness.

One of my favorite stories from our time in the Marshalls involved the Multi-Purpose Repair Center, a.k.a. Don Baker and an intercoastal freighter called the *Tatami Maru*. The freighter was stranded at Kwajalein Atoll, about an hour's flight time from Majuro via Continental/Air Micronesia.

What was true in the 1970s, when my family lived in the Marshalls, is still true: Majuro Atoll was/is the business and government center for the Marshall Islands with its handful of merchants, a Bank of America branch, hospital, post office and schooling opportunities. Kwajalein Atoll still serves as an important USA Pacific missile base with strict security regulations, especially for non-military folks.

In this case, the ship's Marshallese owner Mr. Adjirik Bienne received a message via CB radio from crew members on the *Tatami Maru*. The ship had broken down while collecting dried coconut from a few islets of the Kwajalein Atoll. USA authorities wanted the freighter removed as soon as possible. Mr. Bienne's non-functioning vessel had stalled in Kwajalein Atoll's lagoon, near its north pass and a highly sensitive USA radar operations on the islet called Roi Namur.



Tatami Maru

The owner hurriedly hired Don to go to the freighter, appraise its condition and, if need be, fix it. "You can just make today's plane. I'll meet you at the airport with your ticket."

While I found a car to drive, Don disappeared long enough to throw a few things into a small duffle bag. I drove like a mad woman to the airport and arrived as the plane's engines roared to life and the last passengers were boarding. Without any words Mr. Bienne, handed a ticket to Don. And without stopping, Don nodded and quickly boarded the plane with duffle bag, ticket, a few tools in his bare hand and his imagination.

It happened so fast. A deal never closed so rapidly. Then, came the waiting. Mr. Bienne checked in every few days to see if we had news. One morning weeks later, among the scratchy sputtering of the CB radio in the KITCO office on Majuro, where I was employed, I heard sputtering and thick Australian-English.

"KITCO Majuro, calling KITCO Majuro . . . (more crackling and spurting interference) This is Don . . . Baker, calling KITCO Majuro. Do you read me? Come in please!"

"This is KITCO Majuro. Go ahead, Don. I read you loud and clear. How's it coming with the *Tatami Maru*?" I shouted, as if that helped him hear me better.

“The engine room of the *Tatami Maru* is three-feet deep in water. (sputter, sputter, whistle, crack) . . . She is listing starboard.” (more interference: pop, crackle, spit-sputter)

Then in his most sober, deeply dramatic voice he admitted: “The crew has abandoned ship . . . but, Elijah--the ship’s engineer and I remain.” The CB radio crackled even louder. All was quiet. Then, nothing. We later learned this call had been made from the *Tatami Maru*’s CB radio, and like the ship in the Kwajalein Lagoon, it wasn’t working at full capacity. Still more time passed, so many days that I forgot to count.

Suddenly one afternoon, a young Marshallese man came running into the KITCO offices shouting, “*Tatami Maru* . . . sighted at pass of Majuro’s lagoon!”

Folks were shocked. Confusion and excitement reigned.

“The *Tatami Maru*? What? She’s entered the pass!”

“How can that be?”

The *Tatami Maru* docked. Elijah and Don disembarked, walking tall and straight down the gangplank and beaming with the smiles of a couple of reserved, unassuming heroes. They had done it! As incredible as it was, they had succeeded.

Don shared that after arriving by jet to the Kwajalein islet, he still had to find a water taxi to get him the additional 39 miles north across the lagoon from the airport, just to get to the broken-down freighter. He left no bloody details out for the dozen or so spellbound listeners. His eyes lit up, while explaining how he and Elijah rigged up a forge on the back of the ship. With the use of coconut hulls, they built up a fire and sustained its temperature long enough to forge a replacement part from a nail file and an automobile hub cap.

Elijah said his full-time job was ship engineer, not sailor. He spent most of his time below deck, when the ship was working. To get the freighter running again was one thing; sailing the thing was something else. But this event gave him a serious reason to remember navigation stories he’d been told while he was growing up about his ancestors navigating Pacific waters. Don had never sailed anything of this size either. However, they knew it was up to them to get the freighter back to Majuro. These two guys sailed daringly the 275 miles in rough seas to bring her home.

It is true that the old freighter’s engine ran a bit louder than usual, but Mr. Bienne was happy. Others who witnessed the homecoming event, began spreading the tale about Don and Elijah being at the center of a modern-day miracle. Miracle or not, the sailing of the old freighter was a sign that gave many Marshallese and others of us who stood very close that day, a reason to lift our heads with hope.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is today a nation because its people rediscovered courage and self-determination. Perhaps the new nation exists in part because men and women such as Don and Elijah figured out repeatedly how to turn the impossible into the possible.