

P-O-O-F . . . It Disappeared

Marshall Islands story by Leah Early, May 22, 2020

In 1975 my two young daughters and I hurried across steaming tarmac and into an Air Micronesia jet that flew from the Marshall Islands of the Pacific back through Honolulu for an overnight and the next day on to Chicago. Along with our one bag full of everything we owned, I lugged a load of tangled emotions. I could hardly wait to see my parents and extended family after an absence of four years. And yet, leaving proved difficult. My husband and I worked on a team that invested a great deal of time and energy into launching a development project involving many Marshallese people, outside advisors and consultants. Initial efforts led to promising outcomes, however, much still remained incomplete and unfinished. That I regretted.

During the 45 years since, my journey swept me to other fascinating places throughout the world. I carried to each an amazing assortment of memories from my family's time in the Marshall Islands. Unlike old, faded Kodak pictures in a box under my bed, these images sharpened with frequent remembering. They flashed unpredictably like movie scenes in technicolor and highest quality digital sound. What triggered these events? Almost anything: a smell, a rusted nail, the color of clear turquoise, adrenaline rushes, and words--two or three words strung together set off a vivid memory.

Just such an update came on one occasion while I stood in a large room that

hummed with the voices of 140 plus adults. The rolling blend of noises came from volunteer judges relaxing and waiting between competitive rounds at a debate event. The University of Nevada at Reno sponsored the day for high school teams throughout the state. The room held community leaders, parents, teachers, former debaters and coaches, who came to listen and rank teenagers in four to five rounds of debating. When debaters proved to be outstanding, a tournament day might go from 8:00 on a Saturday morning to 9:00 or even 10:00 at night.

Having checked with my youngest daughter's team representing Incline Village High School at Lake Tahoe, I agreed with the group's other coaches that our debaters looked ready and confident for their next rounds. I headed to the host's table to ask if I needed to serve as a judge. The judging pool turned out to be generous that Saturday. So, I received a surprising break. I grabbed a cup of hot tea and half a tuna sandwich from the buffet and scanned the room for an empty table and chair. For some reason, my eyes focused on a foursome standing and laughing in the center of the room. Even with all the other buzz, I heard three words coming from that huddle: "the Marshall Islands".

Like a swift arrow whizzing toward its target, I headed straight for the group, while thinking to myself: *Strange, few people living on our planet know of the Marshalls. Who in the world can this be? Maybe he is a veteran who served under General Douglas MacArthur's command in the Pacific theater of WWII . . . But, no one here looks that old. Oh well, perhaps the voice came from a scientist studying the results of*

radiation poisoning due to atomic bomb testing during the 1950s on Bikini and Eniwetok. Hmm, curious and more curious, I aimed to find out.

Unobtrusively, I slipped into an open space beside a young woman. The three words came from a stunning gentleman wearing a stylish bright-green V-necked sweater over a matching plaid dress shirt and slacks. With energy and passion, he recounted a recent experience of his, while serving as lead counsel in one of the most unforgettable experiences of his career. The case involved a Japanese fishing company and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

"Are you familiar with the Marshall Islands?" he asked the small group of listeners. "I wasn't either until recently."

Shaking heads indicated they possessed no knowledge of the key players in his story nor their whereabouts. I listened. We shifted closer as the attorney changed vocal gears and became a well-practiced storyteller. He paused in telling his tale as a few other folks joined the group. Then he began. "Newspapers have published for years stories about companies ignoring international fishing laws throughout the Pacific. Being 'outed' never stopped them. Then some of the same companies grew too excessive for one official in a newly formed island nation, the Republic of the Marshall Islands. This time, the Japanese fishermen pushed too far, and **their abusive poaching** could not be tolerated."

A click sounded in my brain as a film reel spun a memory into replay. I recalled a conversation between coworkers over 17 years ago in the Majuro offices of Kwajalein Importing and Trading Company (KITCO):

"Us--a nation? That's crazy talk!" the warehouse man Abuit said almost shouting. "There's no-o-o way we can ever be a nation. We don't got a navy!"

"Well, guys, not every nation in our world needs or has a navy," I offered.

*"We'll get over-run again. . . over-run and occupied by a stronger bully like Japan during WWII . . . or earlier with Germany and Spain." said Lanen sweeping his hand over his balding head, as if to wipe away horrible things caught there. "No one wants to go back to that **physical pain.**"*

"And we don't got guns either!" Abuit added.

"Many of us think we're not ready to come out from under the protection of the United States. Being our own nation, whew! What a big step." admitted Freddy Narroon, KITCO's general manager. "We're not strong enough yet. I don't care if it's been more than 30 years since the war, we're still too weak."

I wondered to myself if they intended my knowing their darkest fears, doubts and negative self-stories. They never brought up the subject again. I left the words to simmer and age.

Clearing his throat, the storytelling attorney said: "A Marshallese government official sent three of his best men to warn the Japanese fishermen to fish in international waters and only in international waters, not in Marshallese waters. But the fishermen ignored the requests. They joked and jeered at the warnings in front of the three messengers who delivered them.

The next contact between the two parties happened at Majuro's dock a week later. While the fishermen purchased additional fuel and supplies for their next period of illegal fishing, the same three Marshallese gentlemen reappeared and invited all the men to join them after work for drinks at a local bar. The crew members received the invitation with big smiles and cheers. They agreed to meet at sundown.

Everything proceeded as planned. The three Marshallese gentlemen, now the evening's hosts, met their guests at the dock and guided the fishermen down Main Street to a popular lounge in the business area of the atoll. Liquor flowed. No one kept count of the number of drinks consumed or by whom except the big-eyed owner. He anticipated a record amount of sales for this evening. While he updated the tally, the hungry men emptied multiple plates of fresh tuna sashimi and the group grew louder

with laughter, songs and speeches about having new friends. Every address, including those no one understood, ended with whistles, exaggerated nods, more clapping and another round of toasting. The hosts of the evening remained patient and ordered another round of drinks. In the third hour of carousing, an inexperienced, young man threw up his sashimi and spiked juices. He passed out in a sprawl on one of the tables. And, the party continued without interruption, but with a tad less exuberance.

Meanwhile back at the lagoon dock, half a dozen other Marshallese men boarded the Japanese ship, pulled anchor and sailed out of Majuro's lagoon. They headed toward the closest safe harbor on Arno Atoll--30 miles away. The vessel slipped through the night soundlessly and invisibly to the human eye. A thin slice of moon faintly illuminated a dark navy sky and darker ocean horizon.

The next morning fishermen woke up in strange hotel beds their hosts had provided. They stumbled and fumbled about in their rumpled clothes, held their throbbing heads and hunted for the fishing boat as feverish, clumsy and comical as the three stooges in a project they attempted in silent movie days. The frustrated and embarrassed fishermen reported to their superiors: **'Poof, it disappeared!'** Four days later their company arranged for tickets to fly them all back to Okinawa."

The attorney continued his tale, while my memory captured another gathering, this time with project staffers in the early 1970s. The group discussion focused on Marshallese myths, cultural icons, and folk heroes who served as the main way for

passing on ancient pieces of wisdom from one generation to the next in their oral tradition.

John, a young, blond American, taught teenagers at the high school on Majuro Atoll. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed beads of perspiration dripping down his cheeks and splatting on his notes. "Man, this heat!" he smiled while turning pink and started with what he knew about folk heroes. "One character shows up repeatedly in stories here," he said, "the Trickster, called Letao.

Communities with strong oral traditions around the world loved and respected tricksters. Quite a few Native Peoples of North America admired Coyote Trickster, while African tribes imitated Anansi the Spider trickster. Tricksters used laughter and joking to teach and expose new viewpoints, and different ways of doing things. Legends do not refer to Coyote Tricksters as good or evil, but rather as creatures that bring some sort of balance to life.

*The Marshalls' hero, Letao, possessed no strong physical powers; he never won a single confrontation with muscles. He didn't have any. He showed up as a nobody, and never as an acknowledged leader. However, when his people needed rescuing or a way out of dire straits, Letao appeared and performed his ridiculous but victorious antics. He out-maneuvered his opponents. In several stories, Letao acted as a clever magician and made objects and/or people ... **poof ... disappear.**"*

At this point in the attorney's story, he entered the actual struggle between the two belligerent parties. "Months passed swiftly. The second year's negotiations started and stalled and started again between the new Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Japanese fishing company. Finally, the case reached the International Maritime Court."

The lawyer represented The Republic of the Marshall Islands. According to him, "We got lucky. The case landed in the courtroom of an older judge with a great deal of experience and little patience with modern day poaching situations like this one. He ruled in favor of the Marshallese. The judge's resolution directed the Japanese fishing company to assume all court expenses. In addition, he ordered them to pay more than substantial fines and a chunk of cash to the Marshallese government for prolonged inconvenience. The final element in the judgement included turning over the title of ownership for the fishing boat to the Marshallese--in case, the missing ship turned up found!"

The attorney beamed. His listeners, now friends, congratulated him by giving bear hugs, shaking his hands and clapping for the victory. His timing proved impeccable for a bell rang signaling the next debating round. Members of the group scattered to their judging assignments, while I selected a spot for writing down as quickly as possible the attorney's story. My husband loved hearing about this incident, another event on the Marshalls' path to becoming an independent nation.

History books record the Republic of the Marshall Islands declared itself self-governing in 1979. Obviously, these people re-discovered their personal and collective strengths and courage. They wrote a constitution and created structures of governance. The new nation's membership into the United Nations happened with pomp and trumpeting fanfare in 1991. And, by using wisdom from Letao, the Republic of the Marshall Islands transformed the missing Japanese fishing boat into their nation's first official naval vessel.