

INSURMOUNTABLE

A Majuro story by Leah Early, April 2025

“David Rebstock here. I’ve been meaning to call you.” he announced cheerfully over the phone. “Is this a good time to talk, Leah?”

“Yes of course, David. It is good to hear your voice.” I responded. “This is a special treat getting to talk with you. What’s up?”

“I know you’re writing some stories about your experiences in the Marshalls. That’s great! I’ve got a story for you to write. The occasion turned out to be my last trip to the Marshall Islands. I hope that you’ll include it with other stories about the Marshalls,

“Okay, I like that idea. Let me get my pen and tablet.”

That telephone call happened before Facetime or Zoom capabilities for me. I had not talked to David in years. And yet, I recognized his voice immediately. It reminded me of the voice of Mark Twain in a PBS special. The show featured recordings of Twain telling his stories as well as faded copper brown photographs. Twain’s voice cracked as he giggled and laughed about humorous adventures, he had during newspaper days in Nevada and California. The only differences between Twain and David as storytellers turned out to be a century in time and David didn’t smoke cigars or chew on a pipe. Nevertheless, David’s voice came across as if he too were getting a huge kick out of sharing his tale. The incident took place in 1977 on the Majuro Atoll in the Marshall Islands--in those days a good eight-hour flight south from Honolulu.

His warmup brushed away a little dusty history for both of us: the Marshalls Islands, held in US Trusteeship since World War II, scheduled a weeklong Consult II facilitated by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). Marshallese citizens as well as guest consultants produced a comprehensive development plan.

One ICA team remained in Majuro to aid in the initiation of the plan, while a second group from Chicago documented the plan, which resulted in a yellow-gold bound book. A third team also operating out of Chicago tracked a 1.8-million-dollar funding proposal through years of governmental bureaucracy in Washington D.C. Finally, the US government funded the development project. The exact date and final funding total remained unknown. Dean Joe Mathews of the ICA sent staff members: David Rebstock,

a CPA and Sandra True, a public health nurse to deliver to Oscar DeBrum, the Administrator of the Trust Territory of the Pacific, an invoice for expenses incurred by ICA's D.C. grant tracking team.

Once on Majuro Atoll, Dave contacted Oscar DeBrum and received an invitation to share dinner at Oscar's home. The event happened during a beautifully soft orange sunset over the Pacific. Oscar welcomed warmly Dave and Sandra as friends. After all, Dave and Oscar had participated in multiple experiences during Consult II and in various funding strategy sessions.

David didn't hesitate to give his host the letter and invoice from Joe Mathews. Oscar opened the letter with a wide smile that turned quickly to an expression of sober concern. "Was there a contract? I never saw one . . . I never heard of a promise either."

Then looking at his guests directly Oscar said, "No one deserves this money more than the Blue Shirts. You guys went all out to get those grant monies for us. It would not have happened without you. The reality is the monies are gone. All gone.

I want to tell you what we did with it, if you will let me?"

"We know, Joe and those who worked on the \$1.8 million funding package will be interested in knowing." Sandra said calmly.

"Yes, I'd like to know myself." David responded. *He found himself wishing he had talked more specifically with Joe about how to handle this possibility. At least they had found out after all this time that the money had arrived. What did they do with it?*

Oscar's voice flowed on seamlessly between serving plates of charcoaled fish, fried crisp breadfruit slices, and a papaya-pineapple relish. A gift Oscar brought to all events and used to his advantage was his storytelling skills. And so, he began.

"Sandra and David, you may remember two little boxes from our development plan called 'Marshallese Training Corp (MTC)' and 'Hazardous Training Academy (HTC)'. Remember those?"

In between chews and swallows, they paused long enough to give quick smiles and nods.

"Well, that's where we invested most of the grant monies.

Friends in Saipan and Truk hooked us up with a company out of Australia and New Zealand. The company makes its money from scrap metal collecting. Their ships come with powerful cranes and the capacity to pick up heavy amphibious vehicles from WWII. They also supply munitions and hazardous waste consultants.

Huge pieces of debris have scared our lands for more than 40 years. Crashed airplanes, that never made it back to bases—Japanese or American--cluttered our 26 atolls and two islands. The ugly debris deterred our tourism efforts. Stashes of hidden but live munitions laid scattered throughout our lands. Some have exploded accidentally killing or maiming our people at alarming rates.”

”You know, I believe the first time I came to Majuro, I saw a huge lump of metal corroded by salt-water on oceanside.” added Sandra.

”Yes, you saw it then, but not today. It’s gone!”

Over after dinner drinks, Oscar continued: “I must share with you how proud I am of what was accomplished by the Marshallese Training Corp (MTC) and how pleased my family is that our son became a member and participated in the massive clean-up efforts. My son saw more than most young Marshallese men ever see of the Marshall Islands area of the Pacific. He also received training in defusing munitions of all kinds as well as surveying and testing soils. The need he witnessed affirmed his decision to be a part of that team and the work gave him a sense of serious purpose.

My son told me at times during the long trip, he often began to take things a little for granted. And WHAM! Something happened. Suddenly, an event caused him to realize how important this job was. For example, one day he and three others in his small working unit walked into a clearing on a remote outer island. A family had built a small house under three large breadfruit trees. Immediately, he saw five toddlers plus a young woman caring for the children in a flat, shady space under the trees. The children rolled, walked on, stumbled over, and bumped together live WWII missiles that measured three feet long and eight inches in diameter. Earlier, instructors had trained the guys not to alarm people unnecessarily. My son said he almost bit his tongue off to keep from screaming.”

“The house owners used several similar missiles to prop doors open and shut. That event ranked as his most frightening moment of the trip, but it wasn’t the last to change his ways of thinking.

Potentially life killing trash from WWII no longer clutters our beaches nor threatens Marshallese lives. Now incidents of lost limbs or deaths by exploding bombs are almost non-existent. The clean-up project was nothing short of miraculous.

But Dave, Sandra, there’s more.”

Oscar lowered his voice and slowed his speaking. Then he continued as if sharing a secret. “A year after the WWII cleanup, Wotje Atoll recorded a remarkable increase in the production of the Marshalls’ only export--copra. We sell and ship copra, the smoked white meat of the coconut, to a variety of industries in Japan. They produce cosmetics and health products like vitamins and minerals. To make a long story short, copra production more than doubled over the previous year.

Some of us asked: How did that happen? The Wotje copra growers credited the work of the all-island clean up. Removing the ugly as well as deadly WWII debris by the MTC and the HTA made the difference. Specifically, the growers pointed to getting rid of aging, unexploded munitions, and contaminated soil supported healthier coconut tree growth and more coconuts. Consequently, we recorded the largest copra harvest in our history. That’s also miraculous, isn’t it!”

“There’s nothing like getting more than you bargained for!” David said.

“What an unexpected surprise!” Sandra chimed in. “And a good one at that.

Before leaving the next day, Sandra and David dropped by Oscar’s office. Oscar sat at his receptionist’s desk with an open gold Consult II book.

“I just said ‘No thanks and good-bye!’ to a Chinese delegation visiting island communities in the Pacific. The Chinese want development partners in the mid and south Pacific. In other words, they want footholds of influence and power throughout the Pacific.

“I couldn’t help myself.” Oscar smiled. “I showed them this gold book, the development plan we are working. They don’t do anything this thorough.”

Again, he apologized for the miscommunication regarding the invoice. Oscar expressed his appreciation to the ICA for helping his people think in new ways. They laughed and shared wishes for more successes with the insurmountable--made doable--development tasks in the Marshall Islands. After all, that’s the only kind the people of the Marshalls tackle.

From miles away in Minnesota, I heard David shout: “Have you got all that?”

“You bet! The only thing missing is the conversation with Mathews after you got home.”

“Oh, he wasn’t surprised about the money. He perked up about the all-island clean-up efforts and wanted to know how they managed that enormous effort. I don’t know of course, but maybe our trip helped him get some closure regarding the Marshalls. Maybe he felt, like I did, that they were on their way.”

Thanks for your story, David.”

Leah Early
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