

The McGregor Report (On the Syria Rescue Operation [1884])

[This is a report prepared by Dr. William McGregor the Chief Medical Officer for the Colony of Fiji in 1884 and then the Acting Colonial Secretary for Fiji. CSO 84/1068. Copies of the handwritten document are in the public domain; a copy is available at the National Archives of Fiji. The report is transcribed for publication here by Nilima Prasad, a postgraduate student at the University of the South Pacific.]

Colonial Secretary's Office
May 16th, 1884.

Sir,

I have the honour to report that on Monday, the 12th Just about 9 p.m Dr. Shaw, Surgeon to the Indian Immigrant Ship, "Syria" bound for this port, arrived at my house in a state of exhaustion, and reported that the "Syria" was on a reef, that the ship was breaking up, and the lives of all on board in imminent danger. He had arrived partly by wading, and swimming, and partly by means of a native canoe. It was not possible to ascertain from Dr. Shaw, whose knowledge of the country is of course only slight, the position of the ship, beyond the fact that he had passed the island of Nukulau on his way to Suva; but a note from yourself that reached me through Capt: Hedstrom about 10 P.M. showed that the "Syria" was on the Nasilai Reef.

The S.S "Clyde" was at once got ready for sea, to proceed towards the "Syria", and the S.S. "Thistle" was engaged to start at daylight with stores, and provisions for the Indian Depot at Nukulau. Five government boats, all that were available at the time, were got ready, and, in addition to these, a boat was lent by Capt. Hum-

burgh of the ship "Rewa" then in port, as also a life boat by Capt. Gomarty of the S.S "Penguin". To man these boats were Capt. Hedstrom, and his own crew of Fijian prisoners, two crews of police constables under the direction of the native officers Ratu Joshua and Ratu Roseati, the whole commanded by Mr. Fowler, Acting Superintendent of Police. Mr Anson had his own crew in his boat; and twenty men of the armed native constabulary, with whom was no officer, served to man the other boats. Dr. Patullo, Dr. Shaw, and Lieut Malan also accompanied the expedition.

Mr. James Robertson, General Manager for the Colonial Sugar Company, who fortunately happened to be in Suva, most willingly put at the disposal of the government one of the company's fast and powerful steam launches, under the charge of faithful and experienced men.

With these eight boats in tow, and provided with food and stimulants for the Immigrants, the "Clyde" and the steam launch started soon after midnight. The S.S. "Penguin" had come from Levuka on hearing of the wreck under command of the master, Captain Gomarty having on board Captain Cocks, Harbour Master of Levuka, and the Honorable Captain Barrack President of the Marine Board. The "Penguin" came from Levuka, to Suva as near to the reef as was deemed prudent, but nothing was seen of the wreck by those on board. It was arranged that the "Penguin" should start back again early in the morning, skirt along the reef to give from outside what aid she could. The "Clyde" people it was decided should go inside the reef, because from Dr. Shaw's account, the wreck could be reached from the shore side of the reef only, and it would moreover have been dangerous to go outside the reef with the boats in tow. The "Clyde" and the launch with their boats, arrived at Nukulau about sunrise. Mr Adolph Joske had left Suva a little before the "Clyde's" party started, to proceed to Nausari with a note from Mr. Robertson to order the company's steamer "Cakobau" to Nukulau to await orders in the event of the services of that vessel being required.

As it was, around at Nukulau that the sea was very rough at certain places beyond that island which were unprotected by any reef, and as the steamer launch could not have lived in such rough water, and as in addition to that it was by no means clear whether the wreck could not be reached sooner by ascending the Nukulau mouth of the river and descending the Nasalai branch, and as it was not quite certain that the wreck could be reached by proceeding

along the shore reefs, it was decided to be more safe to divide the boats. Accordingly those in charge of Dr Pattullo, Captain Hedstrom, Superintendent Fowler, and Constable Kingston, proceeded by way of Laitaraqa whereby they were loaded by the "Clyde" and thence they rowed across the reef to the wreck, while the other boats with Mr. Anson Dr. Shaw and Lieutenant Malan went by way of the river in tow of the steamer launch. As the shore partly passed Nasoata Mr. Davis very kindly and considerably came off in a canoe accompanied by a single Fijian, whom he put on board one of the boats to serve as a guide and render all assistance he could. In spite of the utmost exertions of the crews the three fastest of the shore party boats, which left together, did not reach the scene of the disaster until about noon, as the distance was considerable, the wind contrary and strong, and the water "lumpy". The river party reached the wreck two or three hours later.

It was found the ship was on the point of the Nasalai reef, about four miles from the nearest land, where the native town of Nasalai is situated. The ship had been driven about ten or twenty yards on to the reef. Broken shallow reef extends from the ship for about a couple of miles towards land, covered at most places by a depth of water varying from one to three or four feet at low water, but with certain large areas of deep blue water intervening here and there. A large pond of deep water is situated about a quarter of a mile from the ship right between it and the land. There are one or two broad channels of deep water near the shore again which could be crossed only by a boat. Large portions of the reef are covered thickly by a spiny branching [illegible, but reads like 'stag-haru'] coral into which ones feet and ankles sink, and which renders walking exceedingly painful and dangerous.

When the first boats reached the scene the majority of the Indians were in the water on the reef, making as far towards the land as they could, but a considerable number were still in the wrecked vessel, chiefly women and children. The ship lay on her port side. The masts were all broken into fragments, and spars, sails, ropes and debris, of all kinds were mixed up and dashed about in the breakers in wild [illegible, reads like "confluence"]. The front third of the hull was completely separated from the posterior two thirds, and driven about four or five yards further onto the reef than the posterior portions, and the sea rolled with tremendous fury through this gap, and sometime broke right over the whole wreck. The Captain

of the "Syria" was the only European found on board struggling heroically at the constant risk of his own life to get the women and children extricated. Dr. Pallutto, Mr. Fowler, and Captain Hedstrom made every effort they could to rescue those that were drowning in the water within their reach and to transport all that had left the ship across the first deep water, in which no doubt any left behind would have drowned at night. As the tide rose, the sea became more furious about the ship, and there was great danger when near it of getting infected by the floating wreckage, or of being swept off by the irresistible force of the reflux of the breakers.

The Captain did not leave the wreck until he believed that all the people were out of it, then he started from the after portion of the ship bringing an Indian woman who was half drunk, along with them. He had to conduct her across a piece of broken mast that lay at a slight incline extending across the gap that existed between the two portions of the hull, and which formed the only possible means of reaching the posterior portion of the wreck. As the Captain started to leave the wreck, he and the woman he was supporting were knocked down by a wave and began to roll over and over towards the yawning perpendicular edge of the reef, the woman having grasped him by the neck like a vice. Mr. Fowler who was at hand pluckily dashed into the breakers at the risk of his own life to save that of the Captain, but no sooner had he reached the drowning couple than he too was knocked down and caught by the woman, and all those were being rolled along to destruction when they were finally rescued. Mr. Fowler was as stated at hand, waiting at the end of the broken mast to rescue an unfortunate woman with a broken leg. This poor creature, as it happened unluckily the heaviest woman on board, had fallen into the wreckage and sustained a bad compound fracture of the leg, was discovered by her moaning after some search, in which the Captain took part, wedged in amongst a pile of broken planks, ie, over which the sea was breaking. It is a matter of congratulation that this helpless creature is now in Suva hospital. When the strength of the person that rescued her from the debris of the wreck was exhausted she was carried off on the back of the Fijian put on board by Mr. Davis as mentioned above, across a dangerous passage through which the sea was breaking furiously.

The Captain was faint from loss of blood, having bled most profusely from a wound of a foot, but he persevered in his efforts to render assistance at and near the wreck until he was totally exhausted and quite unable to save himself. It is a matter for much re-

gret that one man, a drunken lascar was left on board and could not be rescued. He was brought out of the wreck once and put into a position where he could have saved himself, but he watched an opportunity of scrambling into the wreck again. After all others had finally been rescued a return was made to the ship, over which the breakers were then coming with terrific force as tide and wind were both rising, but the unfortunate man could not be found. Ratu Joshua most bravely searched a large portion of the wreck, but without finding the drunken man, who had secreted himself somewhere; another man was unexpectedly found whom Joshua with some assistance brought off successfully and who is now alive.

About two hours after the three boats mentioned above arrived at the wreck three Fijian canoes appeared from the direction of Naselai. Only one of these seemed really desirous of rendering active assistance. It belonged I believe to the Chief of the town of Nasalai and was brought as near the wreck as the state of the tide could admit. It was the largest of the three, and as at that time many people in spite of every endeavour, were drowning - for if an Indian fell to the water it was seldom that he or she ever rose without help again - as many people as could find a place on the canoe and outrigger when stranded in shallow water were by direction put on her, so that the canoe was rendered incapable of floating, the instruction being to keep them there until boats arrived to take them off. Certain Fijians, I believe from the two other canoes, manifested a callousness that to those who were straining every nerve to save people drowning all around them was exasperating in the extreme. With men, women and children dying helpless before their eyes, with the bodies of the drowned floating all over the reef, and the struggling forms of the feebly living straining in the water for a last chance for life some five or six of these [illegible; "stalivart"] Fijians went on collecting bundles of blankets, calico cloths, and so on that they could have stolen just as easily next day and would not and did not give up their occupation to aid in the work of humanity. It is but right, however, to state that one of these same plunderers, frightened by the threat of instant violence, did bestir himself, and aided a woman and child that were in danger

Perhaps about three o'clock the boats that went by way of the river arrived. Up to this time it appeared as the majority of the Indians would be drowned, in spite of all that could be effected to save them, but the arrival of Mr. Anson, Mr. Malan, and Dr. Shaw came

fresh courage to all. These set to work at once, and were indefatigable in their efforts to save lives. They began immediately to move towards the land those that had been rescued from the wreck, and to take the last across the first deep water.

Soon afterwards the Rev Mr Langham arrived with his boat, which, as the tide was now rising, proved of great use. Mr Langham's boat from its size, the discipline of its crew, prepared to obey every behest of its master, carried ashore, not without risk in the darkness, no fewer than forty- eight Indians. Moreover, the cool courage, and the hopeful, fearless, manner of the Rev gentleman greatly encouraged every person with whom he came in contact. The Rev Mr Lindsay also arrived with his boat, and rendered every assistance he could. The last boat to come out before darkness set in, was the boat in charge of Constable Kingston. He went to a sandpit on which a number of men stood, and took in many as his boat could carry. But I shall ever regret that he was unable to remove all. He reported that he left some eight or ten men. What became of these is not known; it is possible that they got on shore by means of one or two canoes that were about, but at present it cannot be affirmed that they were saved. It can however, be most positively asserted that no blame whatever should be attached to Constable Kingston, whose boat was so loaded as to risk his own life, each time he had to cross the deep water. On hearing this, the Rev Langham kept his own boat within sight and shouting distance of the other going ashore, his plan of action being to disembark those in his own boat in water shallow enough for them to live in, if he should have to lighten his own boat to rescue those in Constable Kingston's boat.

About 8 P.M the last of the boats reached the native town of Nasilai, the chief of which had rendered much aid in the afternoon, and who received the Immigrants and all others hospitality, providing them with quarters and water, and next morning breakfasting, of his own motion, the Europeans and their crews. Sufficient food for the Indians had been brought by the relieving boats.

As soon as the moon rose, for until then it was rather dark, about 9 or 10 PM, three boats, under Mr. Anson, Lt. Malan, and Constable Kingston went out to search for the eight or ten men left and last seen by the latter just as it was growing dark. The boats cruised about all over the reefs, but there was then no living human being, so that the fate of these poor men is still uncertain.

On the evening of Tuesday, 12th inst, it was arranged at the town of Nasilai that the Colonial Sugar Company's launch, the master which was there, and prepared to render any assistance in his power, should come to that town next morning at high water - about 9 am - with the large iron-built lighters belonging to the Company to carry the whole of the Indians to Nukulau by way of the Rewa River. It was, however, deemed prudent to make arrangements that would provide for their transit, should it be found impossible to bring the launch and lighters through the river on account of shoals, a contingency that no zeal on the part of the officer in charge could overcome. Of that officer's willingness I entertain no doubt whatever, but in spite of all good intentions and perseverance on his part, he failed to get beyond the Rewa branch, and was unable to render further aid.

A little before high water all the Indians except about a hundred of the strongest men were embarked in the eight boats taken from Suva, and in the boats of the Rev. Mr. Langham and the Rev. Mr. Lindsay, and brought on to the Rewa branch of the river. Of those brought thither in the boats some came on to the Depot at Nukulau in boats, others were taken on board the Colonial Sugar Company steamer "Ratu Epeli" which was promptly sent on by the Company's representative in place of the steam launch that could not get over the shoals. The strongest of the men, as mentioned above, were marched under the conduct of Mr. Anson from Nasalai to the town of Rewa on Wednesday the 14th, and in the morning of Thursday the 15th brought in by the "Ratu Epeli" to the depot at Nukulau.

It appears from all data to hand at present that about fifty Indians, chiefly adults, are drowned. But for the perseverance, courage and devotion of those that took part in the work of rescue it is fearful to contemplate the loss of human life that could have occurred. The seriously wounded have been [illegible; "removed"] to the General Hospital at Suva. Of these two cases while enquire amputation. The others will without much doubt make good recoveries, but it is only natural to expect a certain number of severe cases of illness, such as inflammation of the lungs, diarrhea, and dysentery, consequent on prolonged abstinence and immersion in the water.

It now remains that I bring to your notice those that specially distinguished themselves in this trying work of mercy.

Unfortunately of a few Fijians, supposed to be men of Notho, I can speak only in terms of disgust and reparation. It is true that on behalf of these men it may be argued that under such circumstances as those in which the Indians, once they were clear of the wreck, were placed, Fijians would easily survive by swimming and by means of their superior physical power, still truth requires that it should be held that the bodies of dead and drowning Indians were being driven about all over the reef under the eyes of these same Fijians so that they certainly knew the danger in which the Indians were and moreover, several of them paid no attention to the sergeants and to the frantic appeals for help made to them by the Europeans present.

It is, however pleasant and refreshing to know from these few inhuman wretches to what it is gratifying to say formed the great majority of the natives, who willingly and fearlessly risked their own lives when ever called as to do so to save their fellow creatures. Foremost amongst these natives I mention the man put on board our boats by Mr Davis of Nasoata, a special instance of whose services are related above. Next to him comes for zeal and efficiency, Ratu Joshua. Native Sub Inspector of police who incurred great risk to his own life in rescuing the last man out of wreck.

Constable Apram removed from the wreck and took successfully through the breakers, a child in each arm and the mother on his back.

Police corporal Siwani [word illegible; possibly ran] in to the breakers after a woman with their infant in her arms, that was being carried out to sea, and rescued both.

These four men are strongly recommended to your notice as men that are worthy to wear the medal of the Royal Humane Society for saving life. This recommendation is made to you in the certain knowledge that these men have saved human lives at the imminent peril of their own. It is very likely that the effect produced by conferring on these men this distinction would be of much benefit in future. It would be well, however, in the first instance to give each of them pecuniary reward say £5.

The other native members of the police force, animated by the devoted and energetic examples of Acting Superintendent Fowler, rendered most excellent service, more especially Constable Osaia. I trust that you may be able to allow these men some pecuniary reward, say £2 per man.

Next to the native Police came the Fijian prisoners, forming the boats crew of Captain Hedstrom. For these men, not of whom failed to show real courage at the critical moment, perhaps the most gratifying the recommendation to them would be a curtailment of imprisonment in all cases in which you could deem such a proceeding advisable. The members of the armed Native Constabulary did much good work, although in the absence of an officer - for these natives are greatly influenced, and guided by example - they were not so efficient as the police, and I would recommend a gratuity of £1 per man to these.

Of the Europeans engaged, I have no hesitation in saying that in the small band present every man was prepared to risk his life again and again, whenever required to save the lives of those dying around them. That Superintendent Fowler freely rushed to rescue the Captain of the "Syria" at the imminent hazard of his own life has already been stated. That Dr. Patullo, Mr. Anson, Dr. Shaw, and Captain Hedstrom saved each many lives, by succouring those whose strength was gone, is indubitable. Of the self-denial, and devotion of the Captain of the "Syria", mention has been made already, as also of the invaluable, generous, and spirited assistance rendered by the Rev gentleman mentioned above, more particularly of the Rev F. Langham.

But this record would be incomplete did I not mention to you that all along the route beginning at the native town of Nasilai across the delta to Rewa town, the natives received the Indians as they marched across with great kindness, and cordiality, presenting them with food and fruit in the most warm and generous manner, which renders all the more unaccountable the heartless indifference, and cupidity of the few wretches cited above as coming out to the reef to pilfer in the midst of drowning men, women, and children.

In conclusion, I should remind you of the kindness, and generosity of the Chief of the Town of Nasilai, who rendered all available aid, who has, I believe, lost one of his best canoes, broken by the weight of the people put on her, who has undertaken to bury the dead and to collect what he can from the wreck, and preserve it. I would recommend to this chief a gratuity of say £20.

But I should bring to your special notice one person of whom you might not hear; I mean the second mate of the "Syria". This young man, I am assured by Mr. Anson and Dr. Shaw, rendered excellent service in conducting the Indians across the deep water to the

native town, and I am in a position to say that the attention and kindness of this young man to the sick and wounded Indians has made on me a most favourable impression. I have come across him several times with a wounded Indian on his back. His name is Johnson. He has lost everything he possessed.

In the meantime, thanks in no small degree to the industry, and energy of Mr. Vaugham, Government Store Keeper, the Indians are comfortably housed at the commodious, and comfortable Depot at Nukalau, and, in about a couple of weeks from now, many of them will, I trust, be able to proceed to the plantations on which they are to spend their period of indenture.

I have the honor to be, Sir

Your most obedient servant.
[Signed: by Dr. William McGregor]