

# The Pacific Adventures of John Cameron

by Hank Soboleski

John Cameron was born in Scotland in 1850, went to sea as a lad of 17 and, after sailing the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, he started his Pacific adventures in Honolulu in 1879 as second mate of the Pomare, bound for the South Seas on a labor-recruiting voyage for Hawaii's sugar plantations.

Labor-recruiting, or "black-birding," was dangerous business, since natives often were warlike and especially hostile toward recruiters for cruel treatment their fellows had received at plantations in Fiji, Samoa and Australia.

Accordingly, Cameron and his mates anticipated trouble at Tanna Island in the New Hebrides (today's Vanuatu), Pomare's first stop. And, at sea, when they stood on deck at night and saw the eerie glare of Tanna's volcano in the distance, it may have seemed to them as if the ship was entering into the domain of the damned. But, no mishaps occurred at Tanna and a native boat crew was hired and Pomare sailed on.

Action picked up soon after, however, at Mallicolo where about 400 men gathered on shore. Large numbers of men generally meant danger to be avoided, but the men gestured in friendly fashion and appeared unarmed as seen from Pomare's deck, so a decision was made to recruit them.

The ship's two shoreboats were lowered, with Cameron in charge of one of them. When they reached the shallows, the natives waded out to greet them.

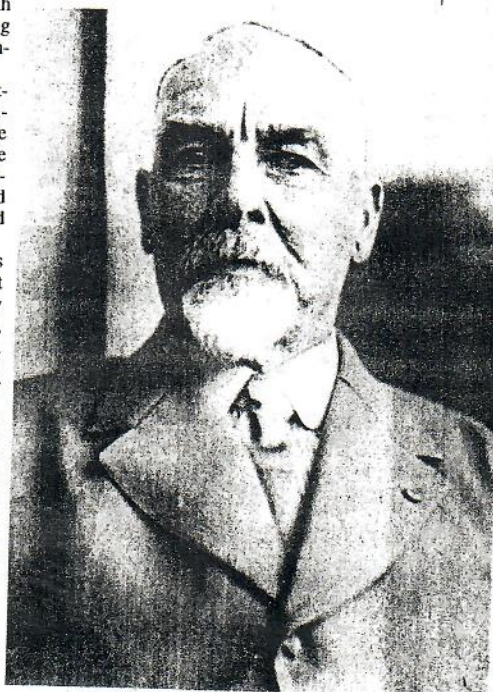
Then, without warning, they rushed the lead boat, attempting to seize it while Cameron's boat closed behind. Rifles and revolvers were fired, hatchets flew, knives were drawn and a fury of hand-to-hand combat ensued.

Incredibly, the natives were turned back by the outnumbered recruiters and Cameron received not a scratch, although a few of the crew were cut.

Later, at Pentecost Island, five canoes, each carrying about 100 warriors, were spotted two miles away being vigorously

paddled toward Pomare, which was becalmed inshore.

While the warriors paddled closer, yelling and waving their clubs and spears wildly, Cameron loaded his six-pounder and when they'd closed to 100 yards he fired the gun. Exploding shrapnel



John Cameron, a seafaring man who spent his last 25 years ashore. (Photos from *John Cameron's Odyssey*)

swamped two canoes, abruptly stopped the frenzy and the surviving warriors turned tail.

Similar adventures engaged Cameron before Pomare finally returned to Honolulu in 1881 with 87 laborers destined for the sugar cane fields. Cameron then took up more peaceful pursuits, serving as an officer on interisland steamships in Hawaiian waters for the next six years.

One of his most famous passengers was Princess Ruth Keelikolani, an alii (chief) of the highest rank and the wealthiest woman in Hawaii.

Cameron was first officer of the *Iwalani* in August 1881 when it transported Princess Ruth from Honolulu to the Big Is-

land so she could (amazing as this may seem) attempt to stop the lava flow that had advanced about 40 miles from its source at Mauna Loa and was endangering the town of Hilo.

Indeed, Princess Ruth seemed to be Hilo's last hope when she arrived to offer

sacrifices to Pele, the volcano goddess, six decades, by the way, after missionaries had established Christianity in Hawaii.

It's a fact that the flow stopped immediately after she made burnt offerings of pigs and pigeons and no one could have persuaded the Hawaiians that her actions were merely coincidence.

Another famous that Cameron made the acquaintance of was King David Kalakaua, the "Merry Monarch." Kalakaua made frequent voyages to Kauai while Cameron was sailing as master in service to that island and the two became friends and drinking companions, tipping many a glass together in the king's home at Iolani Palace in Honolulu and at the jolliest of parties elsewhere.

Yet, in 1887, Cameron exchanged a steamship captaincy and a king's companionship for the promise of more adventure as first officer of the *Wandering Minstrel* and a shark-fishing voyage to Midway.

Cameron soon found the adventure he's sought, for when the ship reached Midway, a hurricane struck. *Wandering*

*Minstrel* was wrecked and Cameron and his shipmates found themselves castaways, living in shanties and subsisting mostly on a diet of birds' eggs, fish and water.

Weeks passed and hope of rescue dimmed. A boat was fitted for sea, but it vanished in a storm. Another boat, an open 21-footer, was made ready and, after eight months of being stranded on Midway, Cameron and two others wet sail for Hawaii.

Once at sea, three straight days of storms with teeth-rattling cold proved beyond endurance, forcing Cameron to change course for the Marshall Islands and warmer weather to the southwest.

Still, horrible weather persisted. Huge seas terrified the men. They bailed constantly for days on end. Rain provided plenty of drinking water, but food supplies dwindled. A speared dolphin sustained them, but a shark they'd snared with a rope and killed with a knife cause them severe abdominal pain after they's eaten its poisoned liver.

On the positive side, Cameron was a skilled navigator, able to reckon his position at sea with his compass and a damaged sextant to avoid being lost. At 33 days out of Midway, he estimated he was due east of Mili Atoll in the Marshalls.

Not long afterward, the dauntless Scot noticed coconut husks floating in the sea—a sign of land. Ten days later, they saw the tops of coconut palms at Mili.

That Cameron and his mates had survived a voyage of 43 days in an open boat in heavy seas over 1,700 miles of ocean devoid of land, with only the barest of navigational tools on hand, is remarkable. (The remaining survivors on Midway were finally rescued by the schooner Norma in March 1889.)

Cameron decided to stay in the Marshalls and soon was commanding the trading schooner Ebon, visiting trading stations in several island groups with supplies to exchange for copra and shells.

Never loathe to turn a profit

in this trade, he also once sold rifles and cartridges to natives in rebellion against Spanish occupation at Ponape (Pohnpei). This transaction, illegal under Spanish law, earned him a bos of gold, but an informant named Christian reported the sale to Spanish officials and Cameron was arrested, but not before he'd hidden his treasure.

If found guilty, Cameron would have faced execution, but the Spanish couldn't find the golden evidence they needed to validate Christian's charge. Meanwhile,

Cameron steadfastly maintained his innocence during his trial.

Yet, his fate remained doubtful, until a surprising and most welcome appearance at court by his friend, Dick Cole, saved the day, for Cole held some sort of influence over Christian that convinced the informant to withdraw the charge.

The cry of "not guilty!" was the sweetest sound to Cameron's ears. Later, at sea aboard Ebon, Cameron retrieved the gold he'd stashed away in a shipboard water tank.

Cameron met with many other adventures during his Pacific voyages. To mention a few:

His ship was grounded on the reef at Nikunau in the Gilberts; he sailed to Tahiti as master of a cattle vessel and he survived run-ins with pirates; he made a round-about, 9,000-mile, island-hopping voyage from Kusaie (Kosrae) to Kobe, Japan, and he delivered a yacht from Japan to Vladivostok, Russia, during a typhoon in 1887, his final year at sea.

He met the famous author, Robert Louis Stevenson, in 1890 in Tarawa on the deck of the latter's ship, the Janet Nicoll. His replies to the writer's questions about the wreck of the Wandering Minstrel on Midway helped inspire Stevenson to write The Wrecker with Lloyd Osbourne.

Cameron also met the notoriousing Tem Binoka of

Abemama, Kuria and Aranuka in the Gilberts and Binoka's constant companion, a retinue of 25 women.

He married the daughter of a Mejit Island chief and their daughter was born during a gale at sea.

Standard Oil Company hired Cameron at Kobe in 1899 and he held that shore job for 25 years. In 1925, he set sail on his final and eternal voyage. ■



Princess Ruth Keelikolani was one of John Cameron's most famous passengers.

75 years old

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