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12 tell of living 2 months adrift

Twelve survivors found aboard a 20-foot cabin cruiser that drifted for two months in the western Pacific said yesterday that they ate fish caught by hand and drank rain water to sustain themselves.

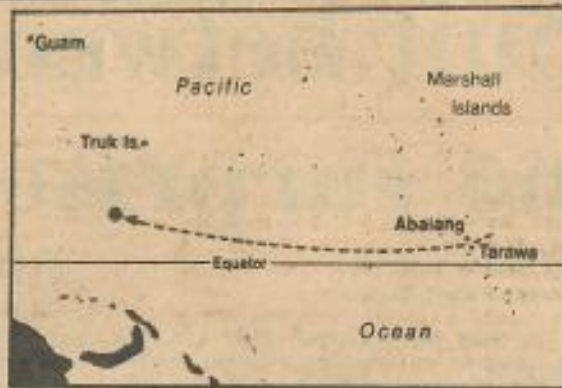
Nine others died from starvation and dehydration, the survivors said.

The survivors, believed to be Gilbertese, were taken to Truk, where doctors judged them in good health, according to Keith Spangler, a Coast Guard spokesman in Honolulu.

The six women, five men and one 3-year-old boy will be flown home to Kiribati today, he said.

The ordeal began when 21 people set out March 26 to make a 60-mile routine crossing between Abaiang and Tarawa in Kiribati.

What was supposed to have been a trip of a few hours turned into a nightmare when the motor gave out.



Apparent route of cruiser drifting from Kiribati.

The group lived off provisions on the boat for two weeks before those ran out and they were forced to catch fish.

The rain water would last for "three to four days at a time," according to Spangler, and at times they were forced to drink sea water.

A fish-spotting helicopter belonging to a large tuna ship based in San Diego happened upon the cruiser and took the survivors to Truk.

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Survivors of Sea Ordeal Recuperating in Hospital

Twelve survivors of a two-month ordeal at sea in the Western Pacific are in good condition today in a hospital on Moen Island in the Truk district of Micronesia, the Coast Guard reported.

The Pacific Islanders drifted 1,300 miles during the two months they were at sea in a 20-foot cabin cruiser which had developed engine problems.

They are scheduled to return to their home in Kiribati on an Air Micronesia flight June 10, the Coast Guard said.

Nine of the 21 residents of Abaiang Island aboard the boat, however, did not survive the trip that began March 26 as an intended two-hour, 23-mile trip to the neighboring island of Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, formally known as the Gilbert Islands, the Associated Press reported.

Authorities said the bodies of those who died apparently were buried at sea one by one, but there was no information on when the deaths occurred, AP reported.

A helicopter spotting fish for the San Diego-based tuna boat Tifaimona sighted the drifting cabin cruiser Friday, about 700 miles southeast of Guam, according to a Coast Guard

The survivors were transferred to a U.S. Trust Territory vessel and taken to Moen where they were being treated for malnutrition, dehydration and exposure, according to a hospital nurse.

Some of the 21 on the boat were going on vacation and others were taking food to a market in Tarawa, according to Cinarata Teaanene, a police constable on Tarawa. The boat's single engine quit and the vessel began to drift on prevailing currents to the west.

The food they had aboard ran out after two weeks and they subsisted on rain water and fish they could catch with their bare hands, including shark, the Coast Guard said.