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TOPIC:

ORAL HISTORY (FIJI)

SERVING IN THE MERCHANT NAVY

DURING THE WORLD WAR II

INFORMANT:

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PLACE:

NAILAGA

BA

PLACE OF INTERVIEW:

SUVA

INVESTIGATOR:

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SERVING IN THE MERCHANT NAVY.

I will be telling you the story about our involvement in the merchant navy in 1944 during the World War. They were thirty four men chosen to sail on the ship and we left the harbour of Suva at about four o'clock in the afternoon of Friday in the year 1944.

All our relatives, mothers, wives and children were at the wharf at that time to farewell us. When the ship lifts its anchor up and sail forth from sometime, an order was sent telling everyman on board to come and gather at the deck. Not long, every crew were there at the deck and a sergeant by the name of INOKE TABU came forward with a big bag of yaqona. Sitting there among the men, he mentioned that they would all be presenting a yaqona ceremony to the ancestral gods, requesting them for the guidance during the long voyage. When the yaqona was prepared and ready, I was told to make

a speech-presentation (VAKACABORA) for the yaqona on behalf of the other islands, particularly the Solomon islanders present on that ship. I clapped my hands respectfully and present the yaqona as the SEVUSEVU. I mentioned even some of us are people of other islands, we are vasu (mother's side) to the land of TAILLEVU. I also mentioned the dedication of requesting him to guide the ship and her crew through the long journey. Going through the war times, I continue, there are chances that some are going to be killed. With our sincere request, we obey the gods to protect us during the war and bring us ~~during the~~ alive back home. The ready mixed yaqona was partly poured into the sea after its presentation.

The quarter master was in the watch when we left the wharf, until the ship reached NABUKELEVU, when night fall. Two other men came to replace the quarter master since he is going to have his rest. The order was loud that in every four hours, the men should change to take watch.

I sent to take my bath during the night since I would soon be on the watch with another mate. Few of us taking watch at that time did not know how to read a compass. From the time we start our watch, we were looking for any signs of other ship or anything that would of interest. I was walking around the ship, making sure that no light should be seen from outside. During that voyage, no one is allowed to light anything, especially during the night. The purpose of this was to keep our watch on the bricks until the morning of the next day.

I was taught carefully how to use the compass during the voyage by the two mates, during that night. At first, I was really reluctant to learn, telling them that I did not know a little thing about a compass and how ~~the use~~ to use it. Eventually the two friends of mine convinced to learn the compass, and at the same time giving in the wheel of the ship. I took over from the

other man and I was directed of the ship's course.

Taking over a wheel of a ship for the first time is not an easy task, and this is what I experienced on that night. I did not want far, turning to the direction where the compass points when I felt that something broke inside the ship. It came to my mind first that the rod or cord connected to the engine must have snapped. I was nervous and not long, I realised that my legs were shaking. The ship went in a circular direction and it continued to do so, not long after the incident. I could recall that I was trying to repair the defect for about two hours when the telephone rang enquiring what was going wrong. I answered the phone explaining that the compass is not working and I suggest that something must have come across the bow of the ships, obstructing the ship route. With this explanation I was directed to go ~~xxx~~ out and check what was the cause of the incident. To my surprise, I saw a very very big fish, and not long, it was away again. The rest of the crews were informed of the big fish but unfortunately they did not see it. I was told by them that I was lucky to see such a very big fish. The ship was alright again soon after the departure of the ship and she went forward with her new course.

The crews were singing songs and having a happy moment during the day, but when the night falls in, the crews sat quietly eating their snapper. We soon went off to sleep thinking of the work to be done the next day.

The men on watch gave the alarm that the light house ~~x~~ was on sight, and not long we were told that soon we would be embarking at the wharf. The mates came around telling that many Europeans were on the wharf to greet the crews. That day, I was not feeling alright, because I had a severe head-ache. The crews were going outside when by at the same time, requesting him to get some pills to relieve my head-ache. The man returned with the pills and soon after I took into my mouth, I went off to sleep. I was told later by the crew

on their return that they were taken for a short time around the place. The ship left the port of Melbourne and sailed up to Sydney. In the afternoon, we disembarked from Melbourne and on the next day, we were at the open sea, seeing nothing at all. We sighted a reef during that day and we saw very big steel net closing the opening of the reef. The ship slowly approaches the opening ~~of the reef~~ and slowly lift the big steelnet away from the reef. To our surprise, we saw the very big fish again. It jumped from one side to the other and something which surprised us is the bang that it makes when it lands in the surface of the sea after each jump. The sound is as big as the bang of a gun. When the net was taken away, the big fish slowly disappear from sight.

As a normal routine during the war, the naval base would be in contact with us to check if we are alright or having some problem. In every report, we were told by the navy that our ship is very lucky because she has not met any trouble so far during her voyage.

The crews all believed that we are having some kind of good blessing, and all reasoned that it was due to the big fish. In everywhere we sailed, we would see the same big fish from time and again.

In that period of time we were given weapons such as machine gun, short guns, etc, to be ready for any attack. The guns were checked and cleaned from time to time, whenever we are free.

We all came home alive, after the war is declared over. I could recall that during ~~one~~ one morning I called my cousin (TAVALE) and told him that I dreamt of him during the night, explaining that he was bloodied from the face and down wards. I requested him to beware of any possible accident that would come during his work. In the olden days, as this elders explained, if you will dream of someone, you have to let the person know thoroughly of what you dreamt about him. Typically the person would prepare and present a yaqona

ceremony to thank you for explaining to him what you dreamt. The yaqona is ~~sent~~ sort of a payment for the dream. The cousin of mine did the same, presenting us the yaqona for the dream that I saw.

On that day, my cousin was in charge of the crews unloading the cargoes from the ship. Big long blocks were used in the olden days to lever cargoes up from the ~~inner~~ inner deck and at the same winch it to the other side. He was directing the crew to pull the cargoes to one side when one of the heavy blocks fell on the place where he was standing before. Furthermore the place was just some inches from where he was standing. I was shocked to see my cousin running towards me ~~and~~ and telling me of what had happened. I confronted him saying that things are going to be alright.

In another occasion, I dreamt of another elder by the name of DAVETA, who was blockaded all over. I went to DAVETA and told me what I dreamt. Instead of thinking of me, he cursed me saying that the spirit which reveals the future to me is telling a lie. For the historical events of this elder, he is known to possess power healing people through giving traditional medicine. Reluctantly, I did not exchange words with him but thank him for what he says. I was surprised to learn the next day that DAVETA was hurt while working. He did not look up at me for a long time when I visited him to ~~see~~ see how he is. Of course he must have thought that I had casted a bad spell but nevertheless I went to explain that I dreamt of him hurt the other day. From that day, many men were having hard feelings against ~~me~~ us thinking that I was really hurt. Actually when I dreamt of something, it has some meaning to it.

During this time, our ship was anchored at Suva harbour awaiting for my orders from the Navy. Usually we ~~we~~ would ~~we~~ cruise around SUVA following ~~the order from the~~ *the order from the* ~~the~~ Navy headquarters.

Few days, we anchored at the harbour with heavy rain falling. The crew stayed onboard drinking yaqona ~~in~~ and playing cards while men on the watch continued on with their duties. Returning from duty one night, I came to a room and saw the crews sitting and drinking yaqona. I was offered a cup of yaqona to drink no long after. I took my seat. Soon after drinking the yaqona, I felt my teeth aching. I went to my room feeling ill. The aches on my teeth went on for four days and nights, and it worsen from time to time. I took different kinds of medicine to ease the pain but unfortunately, it could not. A big bottle of 'rum' was brought to be drink after I could not tolerate the pain in my teeth. Even though I was drunk, it still could not stop the pain. I could recall that I drank a few cups of hot stuff that night, but it did not ease the pain. One night, when I was sleeping, I had a dream, seeing someone, coming to my bedside and holding ~~at~~ my shoulder. The stranger asked me how I was feeling. I answered saying that I was experiencing terrible pain on ~~my~~ my teeth. The man told me that the cause of the pain was due to the yaqona that I drank the other night and he also mentioned that the yaqona prepared that night was a sacrifice to the spirits. In reality, I was not afraid of what the crews had done to me because ~~the God Almighty for healing and~~ I know that I can turn to the God Almighty for healing and peace. Sailing in the open sea or encountering any difficulty, I feel unafraid of the consequences because I believe that there is a living God who has power over all other spirits.

The stranger who was staying at my bed side that night told me to go to see my cousin, who is also a crew, and to tell him not to repeat the making and the drinking of the yaqona, which he has done earlier to me. I woke up the next morning to realise that there was no longer any pain on my teeth. Walking to the room of my cousin, I walked in and told him what the stranger has said. I also warned him not to repeat such practice and if he would continue, it would

mean death.

The next day, our ship left the Suva harbour and continue her voyage to the island of ROTUMA, Tonga and Samoa. This was the first time we ever sailed up this course. Not long after our voyage, we came against a very heavy mist. It was so thick that the crews could not see one another at a very close distance. We saw difficulty at the first stage but this was solved by the useage of a black mirror. We were told that we could see things moving at the radius of ten miles from the ship by using the black mirror, even how much the heavy the mist would be. The master of the ship ordered that the ~~ship~~^{ship} should be sounded in every fifteen minutes for the purpose of not colliding to any vessel. The engine of our ship came to a halt in the middle of our voyage and it drifted for thirty one days before the engine could be repaired again. Our drinking water and food was a little but short, but fortunately not after some days, we arrived at Americaa. The crew were having good times seeing the places in America, and they were stationed at an Army Headquarters in America. The demonstration of the American weapons was shown to us, and all the crew were surprised by it. Just before the ship unload its cargo to the mainland, we were told that the dock-workers are on strike, and this kept us anchored for six more weeks.

One night, nine of the crew went out to town for a walk. Two of our members were singing aloud, while we continue with our walk. Not long after we were walking across the street, we saw a car speeding up and come to a halt at once. Later, we knew, that the two were policemena and they are taking us to prison. We went along until we came to an underground house where we saw prisoners locked in their cells. The prison warden werr having batons in their hands, shouting: "step in and step out!" The prisoners ran quickly up and down the corridors, as we ~~we~~ stood near by. We were later told to join the other, running up and down the passage. The orders given by the officers were

firm and we just obeyed it, with the understanding that we would surely receive the baton if we want to reason with them. Staying in our cells, we saw letters being dropped down through the ceilings. We were told later on that there are from the female prisoners, who are staying upstairs. The crews one, remained in the cell until breakfast the next morning. The officer in charge told us the next morning and I asked him why we were under arrest. He answered saying that we crossed the street during the moment when the 'red' light was on, which indicates that we should not cross the street. With the payment of fifteen dollars levied on us, we were free soon after.

The ship left the American sea and sailed up to Vancouver in Canada. The crews were all the time in surprise of the new thing they saw. The cargoes were all left there and we return to Fiji, Australia and Rotuma was first our port of call on that voyage before we came to Fiji. In Rotuma, we brought copra and sailed straight to Tonga. Our next voyage was assigned for Vancouver in Canada again. Before leaving, we were told that our ship was not in a good shape for the voyage, since it is too late. We waited and waited until a new ship was given to us. All this time, we were working for a Company called Carpenters. The new ship was on the sea and we loaded timbers to be brought to Fiji.

-- You mentioned about dreams with its deep meaning, could you explain to me about this?

As I have mentioned already, that dreams tend to show us what is going to happen according to what we dreamt. In the olden days, the elders would present a yaqona ceremony to the person who dreamt of him.

-- If the yaqona ceremony is not done?

The meaning of the dream would come true. If the dream is about something bad to occur, the yaqona ceremony would stop it.

-- Is there anything else you want to say?

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I think that is all.

THANK YOU. THE END