

The Young Men & the Sea

The Harrowing
Account of
Three Boys
Lost in a Small
Boat in the Vast
Waters of the
Pacific Ocean

We all know that consuming alcoholic beverages dulls the judgment and that can lead to very serious consequences. This article graphically illustrates how wrong you can go from getting a bit inebriated. This is the gripping account of three young men who went out to sea in a small boat after a drinking bout. By the time they sobered up, they found themselves drifting at sea with no food, drink, fuel or any idea of where they were. How long could they last under such conditions?



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When emergencies happen on Atafu, one of three Pacific islands comprising the tiny nation of Tokelau (a semi-autonomous territory of New Zealand), the town secretary makes the rounds of the huts with a shrill whistle to alert the residents.

On the morning of October 4, 2010, the residents were startled to hear the sound of that whistle. They immediately knew that something had happened.

It turned out that their fears were legitimate. Soon everyone on the island was discussing the terrible news that was spreading fast across the island: three young men went missing last night. They had left the island on a boat and their whereabouts were unknown.

The residents of Atafu were shocked by the young men's sudden disappearance. "On no, don't tell me it happened again," was a common response, as islanders recalled the tragedy that happened eight months earlier. In February, three Atafu men were on a boat not far from the coast when a storm broke out and overturned their craft. The three bodies washed up later on the shore. Now the forecast predicted storms and everyone feared the worst.

Soon all of the island's men assembled in Atafu's meeting hall. The leader of Tokelau is called the "ulu." Addressing the assembled men, he asked: "Why did they run away? Were they angry at someone? Did they take along food?"

He asked everyone to search the entire island for clues. As ulu, he also contacted the leaders of the other two islands. (The position of ulu rotates every year among the three islands, and when the boys ran away it was Atafu's turn.) They agreed to send volunteers to help in the search.

Throughout the day, the people of Atafu combed the island for a trace of the missing youths, but they could find nothing. The following morning they notified the Royal New Zealand Air Force to assist in searching for the missing boys.

The Air Force immediately sent out a P-3 Orion, a large military surveillance airplane outfitted with advanced radar capable of picking out at sea an object as small as the periscope of a submarine. The crew of the Orion searched an area greater than 8,500 square miles, traversing the area three times before heading to Samoa to refuel. It was a clear day and the plane spent eight hours searching for a small boat. Eventually, the Orion returned empty handed.

For Atafu, the world turned dark. All the inhabitants grieved. In such a small community, when tragedy strikes, everyone feels it.

Teenagers

The ordeal began on October 3, 2010, when a group of boys got together in a house at the edge of the only village on Atafu, an island with a population of 524, situated on 1.4 square miles of land. Actually, Atafu has no "land" to speak of. Rather than soil it is made up mostly of bits of broken coral. It has no land, no airport, no dogs, no prisons and few visitors. Once every few weeks a ferry brings a selection of packaged food and drinks to supplement the islanders' main diet of fish and coconuts.

Only 15 feet above sea level at its highest elevation, completely besieged by water in every direction, the nearest island to Atafu is 57 miles away to the south. The nearest densely inhabited land is Samoa, 28 hours away by boat. In short, Atafu's inhabitants are among the most isolated people on Earth.

This isolation did not make a happy situation for 15-year-old, tall and well-built Filo Filo. (In Tokelau it is common to have the same first and last name.) His parents originated from Tokelau, but Filo spent most of his childhood in distant Sydney, Australia, where his mother moved after separating from his father.

While in Sydney, Filo developed the reputation as a troublemaker. Consequently,



Tokelau consists of three islands far from any mainland.

three years previously, his mother had sent him back to Atafu to be raised by his disciplinarian father, a fisherman. (There isn't much else to do on the island of Atafu.) Of course, the change from a bustling, cosmopolitan city to a tiny, isolated island was very difficult.

Back in Atafu, Filo befriended another boy, Samu Tonuia. Also 15, he was a classmate of Filo's in their class of seven. Like Filo, Samu was tall and muscular, but unlike Filo he had never been off Atafu. Unlike Filo, Samu was a good student... until the day Filo returned and they became friends.

On the night of October 3, Filo and Samu, along with a handful of other boys, met in a private clubhouse—a room with broken sofas and graffitied walls near the end of Atafu's lone village. Like always, Samu took a seat next to his best friend. With a devilish look, Filo took out a bottle of wine and offered it. Thinking his friend cool—after all, he had lived in civilization for three years—the susceptible Samu accepted and took a swig. Drinking was strictly forbidden for teenagers and they would have been in for a hard time had they been caught. But like so many

teenagers the world over they thought they knew better and it was no big deal.

The boys chatted away until someone brought up the story of another group of boys who had done something very daring about five or six years earlier. They had stolen a boat and committed one of the most foolish acts possible in Tokelau: setting out to sea without the accompaniment of a *tautai*, an experienced fisherman licensed by the leader of the island.

Atafu has a serene blue-green shallow lake that serves as a calm swimming pool. The ocean, however, is a dangerous place where waves can carry a boat away without effort and storms can appear out of nowhere. Even the most experienced *tautai* knew better than to wander too far away from the shoreline.

Teenagers, however, can have a distorted sense of themselves and reality. The boys who had run away five years earlier wanted more excitement in their lives. They didn't really care where they went or what dangers were involved, as long as it was anywhere but where they were.

After stealing a boat and heading out to sea in the jolliest of spirits, they got more than they bargained for when they ran out of gas and spent five harrowing days in the Pacific Ocean, drifting aimlessly. They were



Satellite photo of Atafu island. The island consists of an atoll made up of coral reef, and a large freshwater lagoon in its center.