Kon-Tiki

For 101 days, five Norwegians and a Swede undertook an incredibly dangerous voyage across 4,300 miles of the Pacific Ocean on a tiny 40-foot raft. Their objective: to prove that South American Indians crossed the Pacific Ocean and peopled Polynesia.

Like their ancient predecessors, the Scandinavians built their craft without motors or modern technology, but depended only upon the wind and the east-west current. They braved sharks, whales, storms and other life-threatening situations.

The epic voyage captured the world's imagination and made its organizer, Thor Heyerdahl, an international hero. His storytelling skill turned his experience into the book Kon-Tiki, which became a best seller that sold more than 50 million copies and was translated into more than 70 languages. A tall, lean man with a Viking build scans the ocean. He and five others are adrift on a raft made of balsa wood in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. From atop the raft's flimsy-looking mast, a lookout also tries to catch sight of any sharks or large creatures emerging from the depths of the sea.

Giving the all-clear sign, they watch Knut Haugland gently prepare to lower himself into the waters. No stranger to danger, Haugland was a World War II veteran, decorated for his work as a resistance fighter and his role in the sabotage of Nazi heavy water plants, which were part of Germany's plans to develop an atomic bomb.

Haugland's task is to swim beneath the raft to inspect the lashings that keep it together. He first descends into a "diving basket" made out of the rough-and-ready rope and materials the crew had at hand. If a shark suddenly appeared, Haugland would crouch down inside the basket for protection and get hauled back on deck by the crew as quickly as possible.

The diving basket is lowered. Adjusting his goggles, Haugland takes his place inside the basket as it gently slips into the water. Now underneath the raft, the Norwegian swims away from the protection of the basket to inspect the underwater moorings. Almost immediately, he stops. He has never seen anything like it. Numerous tropical fish of all sorts of shapes and colors swim about. It is as though he is inside an aquarium of exotic sea creatures. He has never seen anything so beautiful.

Reminding himself that he has a job to do, and not much time to gawk at the scenery, he swims a little further underneath the raft. He pulls on some ropes. They seem secure....

Then, suddenly, he hears a shout from above, albeit muffled by the waters. Haugland grasps his knife and twists his body around as he retreats toward the underwater basket. Then he sees it! A huge shark, its jaws agape. Does he have time to reach the basket...



In this recreation of the actual event, this Kon-Tiki crew member's only protection against the shark is the rope basket.

"Why I Undertook the Voyage"

It began with a question and an observation. How did the people of Polynesia get there? Did they come from the west or the east?

Polynesia is an area of over 1,000 islands scattered over the central and southern Pacific Ocean. The inhabitants share many similar traits including language, culture and beliefs. There were two basic theories about how humans came to settle on these islands. Did they originate from Taiwan via the Philippines, or did they come from mainland Asia itself? In 1937, a 23-year-old University of Oslo graduate named Thor Heverdahl began to wonder if there was a third possibility: that they came from South America across the Pacific Ocean in primitive rafts. No one took Heyerdahl's hypothesis seriously because the distance was so great and the technology to get across it so primitive.

Nevertheless, during a year living off the land and studying the local flora and fauna in the Marquesas Islands, a remote island group in French Polynesia, Heyerdahl began to notice things: "I kept coming across sculptured stone statues among the prehistoric remains, which reminded me of similar relics of extinct and vanished civilizations in South America. Could there be a connection?"

At the same time, he looked at the clouds

that drifted overhead and noticed that they were always moving in the same direction. Similarly, he realized that the powerful ocean current that reaches the Polynesian islands originates from the coast of South America.

"Gradually the possibility dawned on me," Heyerdahl said, "that ancient civilizations had arrived from the coast of South America."

When Heyerdahl shared his thoughts with fellow scientists and colleagues, he was met with extreme skepticism or outright ridicule. Migration of the kind he proposed was inconceivable. After all, the only vessels the ancients had were primitive rafts made of balsa wood. It was asserted that balsa wood was so brittle that the large timbers in the rafts would collapse as soon as they encountered the open sea.

Undeterred, Heyerdahl continued researching. He found in the writings of the Spaniards who discovered America that they had recorded how the natives had traveled many miles out to sea on large balsa rafts equipped with sails. Heyerdahl was convinced that balsa rafts could have taken people from South America to Polynesia.

However, the only way to test his theory was to build one of those rafts, launch it into the sea and find out if wind and current would in fact waft him ashore on some Pacific island. Such a trip would be fraught with danger. Nevertheless, Heyerdahl was not deterred. During World War II, he had returned home to fight for the Free Norwegian Forces in his occupied homeland and had served as a paratrooper behind Nazi lines. It was highly dangerous work which saw him decorated for bravery.

Now, too, undaunted by doubters and danger, he undertook to build a raft and navigate it across the Pacific Ocean.

Building the Raft

The first thing he did was put a team together: four Norwegians and a Swede. Though the recruits knew Heyerdahl, they did not know each other. Most were



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intimate with danger as members of Norway's wartime underground. They had either been spies or saboteurs.

Their first task was to procure balsa logs and build the raft in Peru. Jumping in a jeep and driving south along the Andes mountain range "down through sunburned valleys where llamas browsed and the mountain Indians lived their primitive life," Heyerdahl and another member went looking for balsa trees. They soon found them, and with the help of the natives cut down the nine largest trees they could find. They peeled off the bark and dragged them down to the river. "We then stepped on board our logs, taking with us a certain amount of bamboo, and in company with our native helpers floated downriver, through the jungle all the way to the Pacific coast."



Heyerdahl speculated that ancient peoples from South America used crafts like this to sail thousands of miles west across the Pacific Ocean to Polynesia.

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