No Signal

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Flying over the Pacific from one small Polynesian island to another, I idly wondered how the pilots of old coped with no GPS, just dead reckoning. Below me was sea, from horizon to horizon, featureless but ever-changing: here a sudden white wave-cap, there a few seabirds squabbled over some edible treasure. We droned on, a white cloud straight ahead starting to appear above the horizon, the first sign of our destination, Tuloha – every island in the Pacific has a cap of white cloud that appears above the horizon whilst the island itself is still hidden. I scanned the horizon, several such clouds indicating other distant islands.

We were in an old World War II Sunderland flying boat, which I had had updated with all the modern instrumentation: GPS, electronic attitude indicator, radio altimeter and even a simple autopilot. The Bristol Pegasus XVIII radial engines were noisy but reliable and the passengers had a reasonably comfortable ride in the capacious hull of the boat. We carried some cargo but mostly passengers around the smaller islands of the Pacific. The great advantage of the Sunderland is that it has an enormous range, and the ability to land anywhere where there is water, so we could serve islands that had no airstrip.

Suddenly we dropped a thousand feet or so; the engines raced and howled briefly; some clear air turbulence, I presumed. A few bleeps of alarms from the cockpit and I had to take over the controls as the autopilot signalled that it could not cope. It had felt like we dropped a thousand feet but the altimeter said we were still at the same height. I looked at the GPS: “No Satellite Signal” blinked over an otherwise unmoving screen, our last recorded position. “Back to dead-reckoning,” I thought and asked Charlie, my co-pilot, to get out the maps. I looked ahead for the cloud that we had been aiming for; not there. I scanned the horizon, wondering if we had gone off course with the sudden turbulence, but could see no sign of islands, no low-lying clouds. I checked the compass, and was alarmed to find it swinging lazily. I opened the throttles for more height, and climbed steadily for a few minutes, but still could see no familiar signs. I did a slow circle and looked for signs of land; there was one largish cloud that had been hidden by my wing-tip float. The old Polynesian navigators could tell where an island was by the patterns of waves. I looked down and tried to discern some sort of pattern, but could see nothing that meant anything to me. I was starting to panic. We should be picking up the Tuloah navigation beacon about now, and the instrument said “No Signal”.

I asked Charlie to radio Tuloha and report a navigation systems failure and asking them to check their beacon. We were getting no reply from them. “Dozy operator’s asleep I reckon,” announced Charlie. “Raise a Mayday on the emergency channel, Charlie, I’m going down over there,” I could start to see the island; not one I recognised, and I had landed at most in this area. “Last known position one-seven-nine, forty-nine west and oh-oh-one, ten south.”

Time to tell the passengers what’s happening. I thought about *Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a total navigation systems failure and we don’t know where we are. We’re going down near the only land in sight which I don’t recognise so I can try and find out where the hell we are.* That would not do. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very sorry to announce that there will be a short delay in our journey today as we need to make an unscheduled landing. We are experiencing a navigation systems fault and we have to make repairs before we can continue our journey. There is no cause for alarm, and we will make sure that the delay is as short as possible.”

The island was in sight now, quite a large one, maybe ten kilometres long and four wide; a big hill at one end, clearly an extinct volcano. Lots of seabirds flying around. No sign of a settlement, no rooftops visible between the trees, no boats pulled up on the beach.

Charlie said: “No response from the emergency frequency, Boss, and I’ve scanned all the bands and I’m getting nothing on any frequency, not even much static.”

This was worrying, as there is always radio noise from somewhere – the frequencies are very crowded.

I had flown right around the island by now, gradually losing height, and there appeared to be no human life anywhere. Fortunately I wasn’t dependent on any landing strip as the old WWII Sunderland flying boat could land on any suitable stretch of water. I reduced the revs and eased her down in the lea of the island where the water was reasonably flat. I revved the engines and gently steered towards the beach hoping that there were no nasty underwater rocks to make a hole in the hull; that would delay us for sure. We gently grounded on sand. Charlie leaped out with the mooring rope and tied us to a tree a hundred metres or so back from the shore. I told the passengers: “Ladies and Gentlemen, if you want to get out and take a walk around whilst we check the equipment, please do so but please be back here in half an hour’s time.

Running off the batteries, I again tested the GPS – still “No Satellite Signal”. Charlie again tried to raise the emergency frequency but got nothing. I put out the emergency satellite beacon. It generally floats on water if we have to ditch somewhere and lets the authorities know where we are. I was starting to get really worried. Had civilisation suddenly stopped functioning?

One of the passengers, an elderly Polynesian gentleman knocked on the side of the hull. “Please Cap’n ma’am.” I went out to talk to him.

“I don’ want to worry you, ma’am, but dis ain’ any place I know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dem trees: ain’ never seen befo’. Fruit on dem trees, ain’ never seen neither. Fish in de water, no fish I ever seen and I fish all my life. Sea-birds all strange. Dis ain’ de earth, dis another planet. You done navigate big ma’am! We first people walk on dis islan’. Taste de water in de sea – not so salt as our sea, diff’ren’ taste. An’, no plastic trash on de shore.”

That last remark convinced me, the seas are all full of plastic: there is always plastic trash on the tide-line. *I’m dreaming*, I thought, *this can’t be happening*. “What do we need to do?” I asked him, quietly.

“You know de way back?”

“No.”

“Den we gonna stay here. I guess we godda learn to live here. We stuck! You got any fishing gear on dat boat?” Turns out that he had his own fishing gear in his luggage, so he was just winding me up. However, the plane did carry refreshments for the passengers and this included bottled water and drinks, enough to keep us going until water could be found. “Don’ throw away dem bottles – we use dem for fetch water.”

Turns out that he had his whole family on the plane; he was the grandfather, two sons with their wives and a whole bunch of kids. There were also some tourists from Australia and Europe. Grandfather had brought with him the usual motley selection of baggage that we often see on these inter-island flights, including several goats, chickens and dogs. They had been moving the whole family to Tuloah; now they would be setting up on a different island – no big deal. They were remarkably philosophical about the whole thing.

Grandfather and I convened a meeting of everybody. Mostly they had started to realise that they were not on the Earth any more. There was some heated and panicky argument but we soon had them called to order and informed them of their predicament. The two Australians, Jan and David Welsley were not happy: “We’ll sue your company for everything you own,” they said “We have a family business to get back to and we need to be back in Australia by the end of the week.”

“So phone your lawyer,” I said, “or are you getting ‘no signal’ like the rest of us?” I waited for an answer, but they just looked embarrassed.

“The entire assets of my company on this planet consists of that Sunderland flying boat plus anything you can find on board that doesn’t belong to any of the other passengers. Take it and see how far it gets you. There is fuel for about four flying hours before you need to fill up with more. Not sure where you’ll find fuel. Do you have sea-plane piloting experience? It’s a special skill, you know, you’ve got to have special training to get a sea-plane licence.”

They got bright red at that but said nothing. It was clear that they didn’t have any experience of flying except as passengers. I decided not to wind them up any more.

The Europeans were a bunch of eight back-packers, four girls and four boys, who seemed quite excited at the prospect of learning to live on a small island and wanted to go and explore. They were a very mixed bunch. Abigail and Danielle were a lesbian couple, Mark and Peter were a gay couple, Jo and Robin were a hetero couple but with Jo clearly wearing the trousers, and Jason and Laura were also hetero but with Jason clearly dominant – the top of Laura’s head was level with his armpit.

Grandfather was quietly practical and philosophical. “We need to build shelter. We need to find if we can eat de fruit. I got goats but we can spare one to test de fruit. Dogs will test the fish, but we gotta catch de fish first. Anything doesn’t kill de animals I guess we can eat. We need to find good water. You kids,” pointing to the backpackers, “go see if you can find a stream or pool of water on dat hill. Collect any different fruits you can find on de way back but don’ eat dem. My sons make shelter. You,” pointing to the Australians and to Charlie and me, “help dem build. I fish.” He quickly designated a lavatory area: “do your business dere and nowhere else or we all get crap on our feet.”

By nightfall there was enough shelter for everybody. The dogs had drunk some of the water the kids had brought back in their bottles, we waited half an hour to see if there were any adverse effects – none, so the water was pronounced fit for consumption. The selected goat refused one of the fruits but happily ate the rest. After an hour of anxious watching, the rest were pronounced safe to eat. There was grass among the trees, which the goats seemed to be happy with, and they seemed happy to eat the leaves on some low-growing bushes.

Grandfather had caught a selection of fish, some with hooks, some with nets and some with a spear. There were also some shellfish that he picked off the rocks or out of the sand. A couple of them he “din’ like de look of,” and the dogs refused them, but scraps cut off the rest were wolfed up.

“If the dogs get ill, how do you know which fish caused it?” I asked.

“Cos I give one type to one dog and another to another dog and so on to all de dogs. Den I wait before I give any more. I know which dog has which fish.” The dogs looked much the same to me but he clearly knew which was which. However, none of the dogs turned up their toes or vomited so we had fresh fish for supper later that night, and it was good.

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It had rained in the afternoon, Grandfather told me this was common on such islands. They collected a cloud overhead during the day, and this rose up and cooled until the water precipitated. The shelters were built to keep out the rain, but the night was warm and humid but dry. However, we were all a bit anxious about the future, so not much sleep was had.

In the morning we all explored. The backpackers had found a waterfall over a deep pool which was ideal for swimming. Soon all the young children had their kit off and were splashing around naked, so most of us stripped off and did the same. The Australian couple were a bit uptight about stripping off, and kept their backs modestly turned as they entered the water, but the majority view prevailed. I brazenly stripped and dived in. We refilled our bottles with fresh water from the waterfall. We each carried two bottles to keep us supplied through the day.

We all climbed to the top of the hill, perhaps five hundred metres high, I scanned the horizon for any signs of land nearby, but there was nothing in sight. I told the others that I could fly the Sunderland up as high as it would go, about twelve thousand feet, to see if there was anything else to see, but that this would reduce the remaining flying time available to get there. There was a lot of discussion, and all eventually agreed that, if we were on a different planet, we were as good here as anywhere. The island had sufficient resources to keep us for now, although the inevitable population growth would change that, but before then we could build boats to explore further. The only down-side was a large population of flying insects that were no doubt good for pollination of the fruit trees, but which buzzed around us in an annoying way. Fortunately, none of them seemed to be blood suckers, flesh-eaters or stingers; little surprise as there was nothing on the island for such insects to live off.

“Boat good for fishing,” said Grandfather, and set his sons to find a suitable tree to make into a dugout canoe.

Back at the shore later, Charlie and I started to unload the Sunderland, to salvage as much as possible that could be useful to us. Seat-belt strapping would come in useful: unwoven, the fine tough synthetic thread would make fishing line and nets and perhaps traps to catch birds that could be eaten. Personal baggage was unloaded; people would need changes of clothing for as long as it lasted. Eventually we would abandon worn out boots and trousers and either go naked or fashion garments out of local plant fibres, goat skins and the like.

The Sunderland’s equipment included some ropes attached to anchors, which we used when no suitable jetty was available to tie up to, and a couple of semi-rigid inflatables one of which we had used for ferrying the passengers ashore. They could be used for fishing until a more substantial boat could be built. There was a kit of tools that we used for running repairs: wrenches, hand-drills, files and screw-drivers; some knives and an axe that would come in useful for cutting firewood and constructing the boat. Some odd bits of metal in the various spare parts we carried would make fish-hooks or other tools. Eventually we would dismantle the engines and retrieve enough steel and aluminium to keep us in fish-hooks for many years to come.

There was a lot that would not be useful: all the electronic equipment, for instance, depended on electricity being available, and also a working infrastructure, satellites and beacons for the navigation equipment, other radio operators for the communications. There was no point in even switching it on.

I retrieved a large sheet of aluminium panel; polished up and beaten into shape it would make an effective solar cooking stove. Eventually we would dismantle the wings and tail

to make more such stoves, also oars for the boats we intended to build. I intended to keep the boat part of the fuselage intact to use as a big boat in case we ever needed to debunk to another island somewhere.

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Fourteen years have passed, or twelve depending on how you measured them. We soon found that the days were a little longer than Earth days: watches gained about forty-two minutes each day. I used the plane's sextant to calibrate this, also to estimate the year's length, about three hundred and eighty days. We also established where the axis of the planet lay, based on the directions of sunrise and sunset. The planet has much less axial tilt than Earth, about seven degrees, so very little seasonal change occurs. This also makes it difficult to establish the precise length of the year, which I had to do from the stars, none of which I recognised. I guess the year-length doesn't matter too much. Also the moon appeared smaller and more distant so the tides were much smaller, just over one a day.

I had taken the Sunderland up just once, about a month after we arrived on the island. I was afraid that if we left it much longer, things would seize up, the battery would run down and the plane would be unusable – there were limits to what repairs we could do without cranes and a workshop with a mains electricity supply. There seems to be no magnetic field on this planet, so I was a bit anxious about going out of sight of land, but using the sextant and with a rough knowledge of the local time means that, as long as we can see the sun, we can find our way back again. Charlie had tweaked the original clock on the Sunderland to match local time, but it was a bit old and worn and tended to drift. On Earth we used to use the GPS for time as this updated itself from the satellites.

We set out early and went as high as we could, and then did a long slow circle until the tanks were nearly dry. In short, we saw no land but grandfather thought he could see patterns in the waves that indicated land to the north-east. We also saw distant clouds on the horizon in this direction that might mean land. There was not enough fuel to take the plane there but it established a direction to search with the boats. We glided in, the engines having by then cut out from lack of fuel. We then had to get out, swim for shore and use one of the semi-inflatables to tow it in. The plane is now a gradually diminishing source of useful bits and pieces.

Our population has grown. The lack of contraception means that most of the women, including myself, are producing babies about every other year. Abigail, one of the lesbians, has never produced one, but Danielle, her partner, has several kids and they seem happy enough bringing them up together. Clothing has mostly been abandoned: there is no need for it in this climate. All of us sport varying degrees of sun tan. Fortunately, the atmosphere seems to filter out much of the harder end of the UV spectrum as we have never had a problem with skin cancers. All of the grandchildren have grown up, paired off and have been producing kids, and the first kids to be born on the island were now approaching puberty. In short, the island, once sufficient for our needs, was now showing the strain of overpopulation.

Early on we had built a small fleet of dug-out canoes, and some of the people had done an expedition of exploration a few years ago, lashing two or three canoes together to make catamaran or trimaran arrangements. They set out to the north-east where we had seen signs of possible land. Grandfather did not go with them, but had taught the boys all he knew about boats and navigation out of sight of land. They reappeared about three weeks later and informed us that they had seen a bunch of islands, some smaller, some

larger, but no signs of intelligent life. They had, however, seen some colourful gecko-type creatures which seemed to live off flying insects. As the insects were far less populous on these islands, they had brought a few of these geckos to release on our island in the hope that they would thrive and breed; this would help to manage the insect nuisance. This has certainly made a difference over the years since then.

Then there was the question of who would go and who would stay. I was all for staying, as was Charlie. I still felt that the Sunderland would be a valuable source of useful bits and pieces, and I was still rather fond of it, truth be told. The Australian couple, now too old to have more children, had set up a little homestead for themselves. They had produced two kids, a boy and a girl, in the first years after we landed. After their initial empty threats to sue me, we had become good friends. In fact, I rather think that David might be the father of my second boy, Danny – there is something about the boy's eyes, and the timing was about right. They all decided to stay.

Grandfather was all for staying and keeping a few of his grandchildren with him. He felt he was too old for a long sea-journey. All the back-packers wanted to move, they had had itchy feet for a while and had been the main instigators of the earlier expedition.

My eldest boys, Peter and Danny, already had girlfriends among the Polynesian kids, and they all decided to stay. My youngest girls, Matilda and Katie, also wanted to stay, but the older girls decided to go off with their boyfriends. They promised to return from time to time as we bid them a tearful *bon voyage*.

Thus we became a small but diverse community once again, well within the island's capacity to sustain us for a generation or two.

The others send a canoe over a couple of times a year to exchange news: who had produced babies, who had died, who was paired off with whom. They also stocked up with bits and pieces from the Sunderland to make knives, spears, fish-hooks and other tools. Some of us have started to find suitable stones – the volcano is a rich source of igneous rock – to make stone tools. Several of us have developed flint-knapping skills. We quip about our stone-age ancestors, and the hunter-gatherer life-style. We stretch and cure the goat hides for any fabric that we need, but we really need very little, just something to cover us at night for extra warmth.

Do we miss the Earth, civilization, crowded cities, motor cars and aeroplanes, the Internet and mobile phones? At first we did, we craved the artificial entertainment and the ease of communication. Now we are glad to be free of the stress and intrusion that these things caused. Do we miss shoes, clothing, dressing up, make-up, soap and shampoo? Frankly, no. What do I miss? I broke my comb a while ago and my efforts to make one or to construct a brush have been rather dismal failures; I do miss teasing out the tangles after I have washed my hair in fresh water under the waterfall. The only scissors I brought with me were a pair of nail scissors in my carry-all; they have become rather dull over the last few years. I have tried sharpening them but without success. I would like to keep my hair cut back but cutting hair with dull scissors or a home-made flint knife is not easy. Charlie just laughs at me now; he went almost totally bald a few years back but has a long flowing beard. I tell him he could do with a shave!

The kids don't miss anything – they listen to our stories of Earth with increasing boredom, and have started to answer our every nostalgic longing with the positives in what we have. We have no diseases to speak of, no annual 'flu epidemic, no winter colds – no winter. Nobody gets immunised, no need. Very few wounds get infected, although some require a few stitches or a splint. We bite hard on a stick when a bone has to be reset or a wound stitched as we have no anaesthetics. Teeth are also surprisingly healthy – increasingly we eat our fish and meat raw and this seems to keep them strong and us healthy. The

goat population is fairly stable – we eat enough to meet our needs and also produce some milk and cheese. The dog population was a problem at one time, but we soon made a strict rule – one dog per person that wanted one. All puppies in excess of this are culled at birth.

I do miss having something to read. The few books that we had by chance brought with us were read to exhaustion long ago. The kids don't see the need for them and protest at being made to learn to read and write. Some of them have become excellent story-tellers.

I have made some paper out of the larger leaves of certain trees, dried in the sun and woven in papyrus fashion, I can write on this with a stick of charcoal. I can even make some ink with charcoal ground fine and mixed with some tree-sap, which also makes a passable glue. A feather from a big bird makes a pen to write with. But the question is: what to write about and who will ever read it? I have a watertight plastic picnic box that happened to be on the Sunderland; I now keep my stories in it. Maybe someone will find this little saga on some far-off future day and make something of it; who knows? If we found our way here, perhaps others might, through some similar accident, follow us.