



World War II in Tuvalu

NELI LEFUKA'S WAR YEARS IN FUNAFUTI

This Chapter is from Logs in the Currents of the Sea, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978. The book is about Neli Lifuka's account of the Vaitupu colonists of Kioa island in Fiji.

One day, in 1941, we received a telegram that the Japanese had dropped bombs on Ocean Island [within two days after Pearl Harbor]. A few months later we saw airplanes for the first time, and soon afterwards we received another telegram from Colonel Fox-Strangways, the Resident Commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. It was an order to dig foxholes. Later, Mr. Fox-Strangways came to Vaitupu with his people to show us how to dig foxholes and how to fall down if any bombs were dropped on the village.

We knew about the war from the wireless. The wireless also had the BBC news, so we could hear what was going on. Our magistrate, Peni, organized everything. He asked the people to build three canoes, each for ten men. These canoes had to be out on the sea day and night to watch out for ships and planes. If they saw anything they would come back to the island and the magistrate could call Funafuti on the wireless. That's what we did.

I built a house in the bush on the east side of the village because I had been appointed to watch the sea from there. After a few months we saw planes flying very low. They had big stars on their wings. Colonel Fox-Strangways had given us photographs of all the planes; so we knew that those were American planes. From that time we forgot about watching, because the Americans had come to take over the job. We moved back to the village then.

One day a ship came to Vaitupu with the Resident Commissioner for the Ellice Islands. The ship came from Nui, it was recruiting people for work in Funafuti, Canton, Palmyra, and Christmas Islands. People for Funafuti, Canton, and Palmyra were to help the Americans, and the people for Christmas Island were to cut copra. Because the Gilbert Islands were occupied by the Japanese, no workers from there could go to Christmas Island.

Eighty of us wanted to go, but the doctor who had come with the ship allowed only 61 to go. When the ship had left for Funafuti, the District Commissioner came up to me and said that he wanted to talk to me. I knew the commissioner because I had treated a wound on his leg when I was working in the hospital on Ocean Island. At first he didn't recognize me, but then he remembered.

We went to his cabin, and he told me that he wanted me to select the men for the islands: who was to go to Funafuti, who to Canton, who to Palmyra, and who to Christmas Island. He asked me, "Which island do you want to go to?" I said, "I want to go to Palmyra, Sir." I wanted to go to that island because I had never been there. But he didn't let me go to Palmyra, because it was an American island and he wanted me to be on Funafuti or Christmas Island, because they were British.

So I selected the men for the islands: 12 of us for Funafuti, 12 for Canton, 12 for Palmyra, and the rest for Christmas Island, where most were needed. I put those who had been in school on Funafuti, Palmyra, and Canton because you don't need much education for cutting copra. In the lagoon of Funafuti there were many, many ships, American warships. I had never seen such

ships. The first thing they did in Funafuti was to assign a foxhole to everybody, because a week before the first person had been killed by a Japanese bomb. But after that nobody else was killed. The ship left with the people going to Christmas Island, all the others stayed in Funafuti. We went around the island to look at all the trucks and big machines. I had seen trucks on Ocean Island but nothing like that. And all the time the planes were taking off and landing from the airfield the Americans had built. We had no idea about war. We thought that only some people would come to the islands to fight and then go back to America, or Germany, or England. But the real war looked different: from one end of the island to the other there were landing boats, big guns, boxes, trucks, cargo, foodstuff. That made me think that a war is a very difficult thing.

One night we saw a movie; everybody came to see the movie, also the sailors from the ships. Suddenly somebody came with a report that Japanese planes were coming. It was full moon; the Japanese always attacked at night. We ran to our foxholes, but some of us couldn't get in because the sailors from the ships got there before us. The commissioner threw them all out and made them dig their own foxholes by the beach. Soon we heard the planes. We were very scared. My heart was beating, but I didn't know what to do. The boys asked me to say a prayer. I said, "I can't; I don't know what to say. What about you making your own prayer?" I wanted to pee, but I said to myself, "No-I can't do that here." I wanted to shit, but I couldn't do that there either. But then when the bombs fell I don't know how it happened-I was shitting. All the boys were shitting. We heard the guns, and we thought, "Ah, very good." But the planes kept coming back. The whole island was shaking, because it's a very small island. We didn't talk for a very long time. After one hour we heard the siren. That meant the attack was over. Nobody could sleep. Everybody thought about his family. I thought about my wife and the children and that they were maybe facing some hard life now.

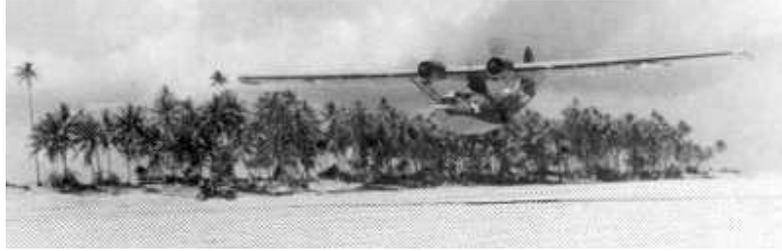
Next morning we had our breakfast with the Americans. We always ate together, we had the same food. We mixed like that with the Americans.

A week later the boys for Palmyra took off, and a month later the boys for Canton left. There were about a hundred natives working for the Americans on Funafuti. We were called "casual labor." We had to unload the cargo from the ships. It was hard work but the Americans looked after us very well. The only trouble was with the British. They didn't want the Americans to give us the wages they wanted to pay. We got seven dollars and fifty cents a month, that is three pounds and fifteen shillings. I was the paymaster for all the natives, because I knew about that.

The American quartermaster told me about the trouble with the British. He showed me a paper which said that we should get 70 dollars a month. So he said that we should keep the money for us that was left over when I had paid the laborers but keep quiet about it. There was always more than I needed to pay the laborers.

After some time we were no longer scared about the bombing. When we heard the siren, we just went to our foxholes but didn't go down until they started dropping bombs. We watched the planes and swore at them.

We wrote letters to our families and sent them things. The Americans were very kind to us. They used their dive bombers to drop our mail and parcels at Vaitupu and the other Ellice Islands. Of course we didn't hear from our families, because the mission boat and the government boat didn't go around the islands any more. Sometimes the PT boats would take some officers to Vaitupu for the weekend and they would bring letters back. I received maybe two or three letters from my family while I was on Funafuti.



The Americans were really very good to us. Whenever the boys wanted something I went to Colonel Hicks and asked him, and he always said, "O.K., you can have it." That's why we worked very hard, even on Sundays. The boys didn't want to work on Sunday, but I told them, "This is wartime, mind you! In wartime you work, day and night, hurricane time or not, until the job is done. So forget about Sunday until you are back in Vaitupu." When I explained that, they agreed to work also on Sunday.

I was working in the quartermaster's office. One day the Colonel told me that I had to give out the goods from the store. Often the Americans had gone to the store with one of our men to pick up an order but they had just taken what they wanted. The first time I went there with a list of things I had to give out, two of the men started taking cases with boots and shirts from the store and loading them on their jeep. I told them to put the cases back. They swore at me. I just laughed at them. I said, "I know I am a native, but I do what my boss tells me to do." They did put the cases back.

Later the sergeant told me to be careful, because that battalion was made up of bushmen. He said that few of them had any education and that I must watch out. He liked me a lot, I think. After that a corporal came with me every time.

We had been on Funafuti for many months when we heard that the Americans had received a message that the Japanese wanted to be in Funafuti by Christmas. In November we had a big attack. It lasted all night. The Japanese planes flew very low. They dropped bombs and used their guns. Next morning the air base was very damaged. We worked very hard to level the ground and to clear up the mess.

Then one day the Colonel took me out to the far end of the island in his jeep. He let me look through his binoculars and I saw many, many ships sailing north. The Colonel said that they were American ships going to attack Tarawa. Next morning the whole beach was crowded with Americans. They were the marines who were going to attack Tarawa. They stayed for maybe three days. The Japanese bombers never came back to Funafuti. We couldn't sleep for two weeks then, because the American planes took off and landed day and night, day and night, on the Funafuti airfield. Some planes came back with one wing half broken off or with part of the tail gone. That was something; that was what the war was like.

After maybe three weeks we received a message that the Americans had landed in Tarawa [November 1943]. Everybody was happy and shouting. That was the time when the Colonel told me to open the store and give the marines everything they wanted.

After the Americans had taken Tarawa, other marines came from the United States. They were all Negroes, only the captain was a European. They were all right, these people, but something was different for us then. I learned that myself. They were like natives, and maybe it was too hard for them to be kind to other natives, I mean to us Ellice people. Maybe they thought, "We have the same skin, but we are from America." Anyway, they treated us differently. They always said bad things about the [white] Americans, and that they would get back at them

sometime in the future. They reckoned that they were not treated like the European Americans.

I think they were wrong because they were educated by the Europeans; they didn't know anything by themselves. How can I go against a person who teaches me things? That's bad. The Negroes were natives just like us, but they always talked smart. Well, I don't know, they just weren't like the Europeans.

After the Americans had taken Tarawa, the commissioner made a list of all the Ellice people who had been on Ocean Island before the war. When the Japanese came to Ocean Island they sent many people to other islands, some to Nauru, some to the Marshall Islands, and some to Tarawa. I heard that Penitala was in Tarawa, and so I wrote him a letter, which a good friend, an American chief engineer in the air force, on a B-24, took to Tarawa. After about three days I received a letter from Penitala. He wrote all the names of the Ellice people who were there. My son, Loto, who had been adopted, as I told you, was there, too. I was happy to hear that he was all right.

My house was very close to the airport. One night, my friend came to my house. He and his friends had just landed their plane and they were hungry and needed some food. Their own camp was about ten miles away from the airport, and sometimes they couldn't get any food when they came late. So I went over to the house of the cook of the navy, who was my friend, and I got them some dinner. After they had finished eating, they told me to go and get two bags that they had brought. I went to get the bags and when I opened them I saw two Japanese heads inside. The heads smelled badly. They said, "That's our souvenir, Neli," and they laughed.

We talked and yarned for a long time, and then they asked me for something to drink. I said, "I am very sorry, but I don't have anything." You know what they did? They had a bottle of shaving lotion and they wanted to use that. Then I remembered that I had a bottle of whiskey in my box. I had forgotten about it. A sailor had left it for me one day, when I wasn't at home. But I never drank, you know. I gave it to them and they finished it. In the morning they shot bullets into the heads of the Japanese soldiers.

A while later we moved into the quarters where the American air force had been. About that time I was appointed sergeant of the labor corps on Funafuti by the Resident Commissioner in Tarawa. The boys from all the Ellice Islands signed up except the boys from Nukulaelae. They didn't want to work or something. I found out that my job was to be working in the office, so I refused. I told Mr. Burn, "I can't organize the work outside when I sit in a chair. I don't want to be the sergeant major. That's a storekeeper. I want to be a senior sergeant and work outside with the boys."

We were now back under the British administration, but still working for the Americans. I went to one of the English—he was the treasurer—to tell him about that job. He talked with Mr. Burn, and next morning they sent a telegram to Tarawa about my transfer. They put Noa in my position. Noa was so fat he couldn't even walk.

There were only 200 of us in the labor corps on Funafuti. We worked very hard on cleaning up the island. We cleaned up all the rubbish from the war. The problem was the drivers of our truck. That was the only job done by an American. They always wanted us to stop working on time. Sometimes we had just 15 minutes or half an hour more to work to finish a job. So I got angry with the drivers. I told them to take off. We would first finish our job and then walk back for our dinner. I didn't like to deal with people like that.

We also loaded and unloaded cargo from the ships because there were still many Americans on the island. I could organize the work with the barges because I had learned all about that on Ocean Island. Even the Americans called me "Sarge." Of course, they also called me by my native name, but when they saw me organize the work, they called me "Sarge." The American captain showed me his reports; my company-we were the G-company-was always the best.

One time I was very sick and the captain allowed me to go on a holiday to Vaitupu. They took me there by a small LCT boat. I stayed at home for about one month. I stayed so long because no PT boat came to pick me up earlier. So I was stuck there until the government boat came with the doctor. That was the first tour of the Ellice Islands by a doctor after the war. The doctor didn't want to take me, because there was not enough space on the boat. So I asked my two half brothers to take me to the ship in their canoe. The Chief mate saw me in the canoe. He asked me to come on the ship. I explained my situation and the chief mate went to talk to the captain. I heard them talk in the captain's cabin. The chief mate was very angry because at first the captain didn't want to take me to Funafuti. But in the end I could go. I was very happy about that because I wanted to go back to my duty with the labor corps.

First we went to Nui. The doctor took me ashore because I could speak English and because I knew about the medical work. We went to the other islands, too, and I helped the doctor. I also told the people on the islands about the war. On every island I talked about what we had been doing in Funafuti during the war. In every village we visited many women knew me. They showed me the children born on Ocean Island when I was working in the clinic there.

One day when I was working with my gang on the point of Funafuti Island, the American captain drove up to us. He called me aside and said, "Neli, I am very proud for you about what I heard. The Commissioner wants you to go to Vaitupu to be the magistrate." In those days Vaitupu was the dirtiest island in the whole Ellice Group. The magistrate had not done a good job. But I knew that the people must agree on their magistrate.

In the evening I had to see the District Officer. I explained that the Vaitupu people had to agree, but he said that the government appointed the magistrates. So, next week the "Kiakia" took me to Vaitupu. I was not supposed to say anything to the people until the District Officer would come to Vaitupu himself.

That was in June 1945 and the war was not finished yet. So the people asked me why I had come back. I told them that maybe I was too old to work. The word spread around that I had been sacked. After about one week, when I passed by the house of the government scribe, he called me in. First we talked and yarned. Then he told me that he knew why I had come back. I asked him, "How do you know?" And he said, "Well, when the District Officer was here, he told me that he was going to change all people in the native government except maybe myself. He also said that he was sending one Vaitupuan from Funafuti to be the new magistrate. So, when I heard that you had come back, I knew why." I told him not to let anybody know, and he promised to keep quiet.