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HIS SWORD COMES BACK A Naval Tale of Tarawa

BECAUSE the hundreds of thousands of men engaged on the battle fronts have only one main object, war experiences are necessarily somewhat similar in their dramatic content. But there is in Wellington a man who has, in his very recent memories, vivid thoughts of a spell of 28 days in an open boat during which he travelled 400 miles. He is Lieut.-Commander Harold Stead, R.D., R.N.Z.N.R., now Boom Defence Officer at Wellington.

At *The Listener's* invitation he told something of his story, but very briefly and in the ungarnished terms generally used in making an official report. Yet the full tale contains material for a novelist.

Although Commander Stead's adventures took place towards the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, he has just received a strong reminder of them by way of word from Tarawa, where he had left his sword and mess jacket in the care of a half-caste German native. They are now on their way to him in New Zealand.

In September, 1941, Commander Stead left Auckland on duty for Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands to join the Government motor-ship *Ninanoa* as first mate. A few weeks later, while the *Ninanoa* was lying in Tarawa, Japanese came from the Marshall Islands and occupied Tarawa. Immediately the *Ninanoa* was run on a reef to keep her out of enemy hands.



LIEUT.-COMMANDER STEAD
Material for a Novelist

There were four European officers—Captain Harness and Mr. Stead (deck officers) and Messrs. Sinclair and Hunt (engineers). For a while they were the prisoners of the Japanese. But the enemy did not stay long. After looting the place of supplies, they left the Europeans to settle down to a very restricted diet. Then careful plans were made for a getaway southwards.

In February there came into Tarawa a lifeboat from the Danish motor-ship *Donerail*. The story went that a Japanese submarine had attacked this harmless vessel of 3,000 tons on about December 9. She had been on her way from Suva to Vancouver when the enemy came alongside and sank her.

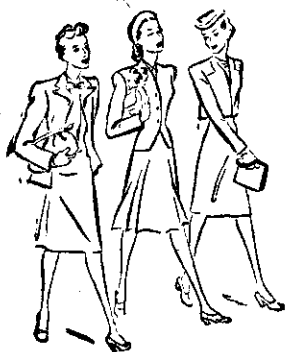
Out of those on board, 24 (including two women and a baby) were killed on deck by shells; others were killed while trying to launch the boats. Twenty-four got away in one badly-holed lifeboat. Head winds drove them away from Hawaii and they turned eventually for Tarawa. On arrival there, after much hardship, only seven of the 24 were left. For 38 days they had been in the boat and had covered 2,000 miles.

Back to New Zealand

In the *Pacific Islands Monthly* of April, 1942, the following passage appeared: "There is no further word of Captain (as he was then) Stead. We do not know whether he is still on an island in the Southern Gilberts, or whether he eventually reached his home in Taranaki, New Zealand. In any event he has some new adventures to add to his hundreds of tales of hazards by land and sea, collected when he was hunting submarines in the Atlantic in the last war."

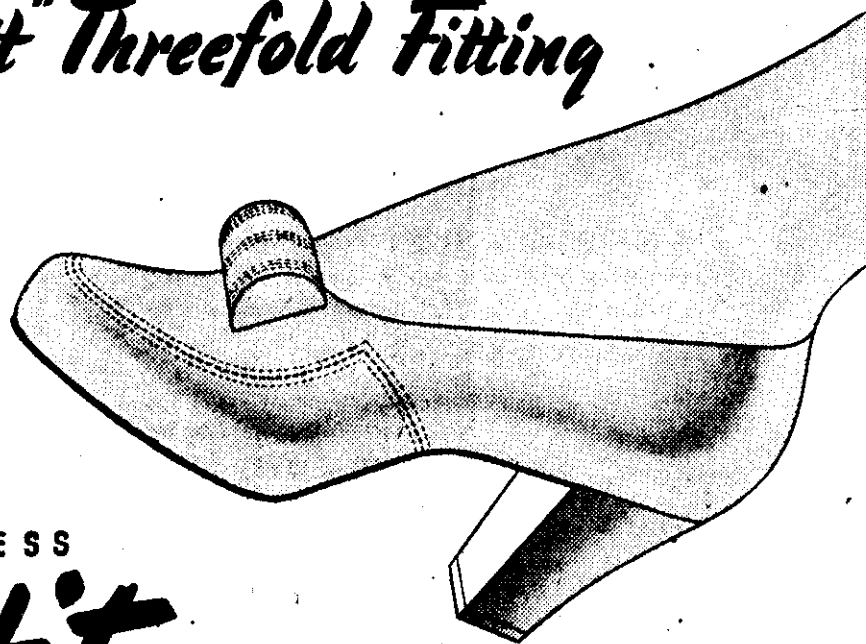
Actually, Commander Stead left Tarawa at night on February 9, in an open boat, having with him two white men, including one from the *Donerail* and a half-caste 17-year-old Chinese. On their way south they called at three islands. The two white men stayed on the second island while Commander Stead and the boy went on to the Southern Gilberts. They were picked up by a vessel sent out to look for escapees from the Gilberts by Sir Harry Luke, and were taken to Suva, thence to Auckland.

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