

Three very lucky seafarers in Kiribati¹

During the 6–7 October weekend, the Hawaii-based US Coast Guard managed to rescue three fishers from Kiribati who had been lost at sea since Tuesday, 2 October 2012, in the open waters off Tarawa Atoll.

At the end of the week, search efforts began to find the three people on the small five-metre vessel travelling from Maiana Atoll to Tarawa. After being contacted, the US Coast Guard sent out a Hercules C-130-type, wide-body aircraft on Friday, 5 October 2012 to conduct air reconnaissance.

The plane methodically searched the zone in a grid pattern, taking into account the possible drift of this type of vessel. After spotting the boat on the plane's radar, visual contact was made at about 160 kilometres from Maiana Atoll and the plane then dropped a watertight container filled with food, drinking water and a GPS transmitter kit.

Next, a Korean fishing boat, which was deployed in that area, was contacted and changed course to recover the three survivors, who were in a satisfactory state of health according to the first reports.

In addition, on Saturday, 29 September 2012, 11 people, including two children, were rescued in Papua New Guinea after their life raft (an inflatable eight-meter dingy equipped with an outboard motor) capsized in Madang province, in heavy seas, the daily newspaper *The National* reported on Thursday, 4 October 2012.

They spent the night adrift, clinging to the overturned boat, before being rescued by a larger coastal vessel. Once again, this involved a trip between the main island and one of the islands off the coast of New Guinea. The accident occurred not far from the place where the Rabaul Queen ferry sank on 2 February 2012, resulting in the deaths of at least 150 of its passengers.

Troubling near-coincidences

The waters around Kiribati have been the site of several disappearances and, occasionally, reappearances of sailors lost at sea.

In mid-September 2012, a sailor was found in Kiribati after three and a half months adrift in the open ocean. The castaway, whose name was Toakai Teitoi, was spotted north-east of Nauru onboard his small skiff and then taken aboard a fishing boat sailing under the Marshall Island flag, the *Ali Ezekiah*. His overall health was relatively good according to a member of the crew.

He disappeared at sea after sailing out from the small atoll of Maiana (Kiribati) on 28 May 2012, for what was supposed to be a simple fishing trip.

There had been another man on board the small six-metre outboard vessel but he apparently died after they had been adrift for one and a half months, i.e. in early August 2012, according to the survivor. The small boat began its long journey after its engine broke down.

Numerous accidents of this kind in the region

In terms of the most recent incidents, in early March 2012, a small five-metre fishing boat and its occupant, who had disappeared offshore from Kiribati (formerly the British Gilbert Islands) several days beforehand were finally located by an Orion P3 from the New Zealand Army.

The small fishing boat had apparently drifted since it had been seen for the last time.

Called to assist on Sunday, 4 March 2012 after an initial unsuccessful search locally, the New Zealand authorities and their Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) rapidly put to work one of their specialised observation aircraft, the Orion. This quick action made it possible to locate the small boat before it drifted too far away, rescue workers felt.

The Orion arrived in the restricted search area at mid-day on Monday, 5 March 2012 and was able to locate the vessel just 20 minutes after its arrival. They then dropped food, water and first aid equipment.

A fishing boat crossing the zone was then contacted and changed course to take on the boat's single occupant.

Nevertheless, the New Zealand Army explained, the Orion has continued to fly over the waters of Kiribati as part of a second rescue mission, also in response to a request by local authorities.

A few miraculous survivors

In late February 2012, three young Samoans who had disappeared in the seas off the coast of Apia were found safe and sound and rescued by a cruise ship, which spotted them by accident a week after search efforts had been called off.

The three young men, Oli Faavae, Sailigi Simi and Tuitea Talavou, had gone out to sea on 6 February 2012 saying they would be back the next day.

¹ Article reproduced from: *Flash d'Océanie*, 8 October 2012 (<http://newspad-pacific.info>). Translation from French by SPC

On Monday, 20 February 2012, the Seabourne Odyssey, which was in that part of Samoan waters, spotted them and took them onboard before putting them ashore at the next stop in Pago-Pago, the capital of American Samoa. They were in fairly good health considering the circumstances.

The three miraculous survivors said they had luckily been able to catch fish to eat on a regular basis.

Search efforts, which had been coordinated by Samoan authorities with the support of New Zealand and the US, were suspended on Tuesday, 14 February 2012.

The police, who were coordinating these operations, had explained at the time that search efforts had been suspended as the rescue services were convinced that the small vessel had probably sunk in rough weather with all onboard, somewhere in the seas off the Upolu Islands.

“This is a sad end to an all too common story in our islands,” dramatically stated Superintendent Tagaolo Iosefatu Wright, Officer in Charge of the Samoan Police Maritime Wing.

After these three young men disappeared, several small fishing boats from Samoa and nearby American Samoa joined the search efforts to try to find any sign that the people on the little fishing boat, the Fefe i le Sou II, were still alive

The most extensive resources came from the New Zealand Army (an Orion, specialised in observation) but also, as American Samoa was close by, from the US Coast Guard, which sent out several vessels.

Again in the same region, two fishers from Kiribati, who had been missing for 33 days, were found safe and sound on Thursday, 24 November 2011 on a small uninhabited island south of the Marshall Islands, which they had managed to reach.

Kiribati authorities had been searching for the two men, 26 and 53 years old respectively, with the logistical support of the US Coast Guard, called in to take part in rescue operations.

The men had disappeared on 22 October 2011, after leaving Tarawa (capital of Kiribati).

After several unsuccessful search flights over this enormous area, the boat was finally spotted and located. A medical exam found the men to be in a “reasonably good” state of health, in spite of the severe lack of food, which had left them very weak.

The two men were then taken home to Tarawa from Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands.

One of the adventures that gained the most media coverage worldwide over the past few years involved three

teenagers who disappeared on 5 October 2010 off the coast of Tokelau and who were miraculously found east of the coast of Fiji by a New Zealand tuna boat, after being adrift for 50 days and covering some 1200 km.

The three young men who disappeared, two aged 15 and the third, 14, had gone out to sea on a small aluminium skiff whose motor was not working

Intensive search efforts were made to find them several days after the alert was raised by their country’s authorities, who had requested the assistance of Tokelau’s overseeing country, New Zealand.

During the days that followed the New Zealand Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre mobilised one of its military Orion aircrafts to conduct a series of flyovers of the area so as to extend the work of local patrol boats. But none of those efforts succeeded in locating the teenagers lost at sea.

After searching for three days, New Zealand authorities, who felt that the chances of finding someone alive inside this enormous area (about 25,000 km²) were very slim, decided to suspend the operations.

On Tokelau, the families had resigned themselves to this loss and held religious services in honour of the three young men, Samuel Perez, Filo Filo (15 years old) and Edward Nasau (14 years old).

But a few days later, when the New Zealand tuna boat the San Nikunau was crossing the ocean north-east of Fiji not far from Wallis and Futuna, the crew managed to spot the hull and then the silhouettes of the three young men onboard, who were waving to draw their attention.

They were taken on to the ship in a “relatively good” state of health and said they had survived by drinking rainwater, sometimes saltwater and eating raw fish and, occasionally sharing a seagull. They were given first aid on board, particularly for severe sunburn. “We gave them some cream to help with the pain but that was about all,” said one crewmember.

The tuna boat took these unexpected guests to Suva port, where the three miraculous survivors were given a thorough medical exam before returning to their home country.

Incidents of this type, involving small motorboats for inter-island transport or short fishing trips, are very frequent in this region, both in the areas around Kiribati and the Marshall Islands, but also to the west in Melanesia.

One of the most frequent causes is the breakdown of the small outboard motor or running out of fuel.