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Tin Can Mail

A rare intersection of swimming skills and mail delivery

By Elaine K. Howley

"Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds," reads the unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service.



But about 100 years ago, on the other side of the planet, a particularly dedicated team of postal carriers took their pledge to always deliver the mail a step farther and literally swam the mail to and from shore for residents of Niuafo'ou, a 19-square-mile volcanic rim island between Fiji and Samoa.

Niuafo'ou (which, in Niuafo'ouan, means "many new coconuts") is one of 36 inhabited islands in the 169-island archipelago of Tonga. Spread across those islands, which span 500 miles of remote Pacific Ocean, live 105,000 residents. And lots and lots of coconut trees.

A sunken volcano with steep cliffs that plunge into the deep blue sea in a ring formation, Niuafo'ou has no natural harbor, inlet, or beach landing, meaning there is no place for boats to comfortably dock. But that didn't stop the island from becoming a hub of copra (dried coconut kernels and their oil) trading in the early 20th century. Trade boomed and drove outsiders to the distant tropical land in search of their fortunes.

Among them was a young British man named Charles Stuart Ramsay, who arrived in 1921 after serving on the front lines of World War I. He'd been gassed in France before following his brother, Bob, to the South Pacific in search of adventure.

In 1938, Ramsay published the book "Tin Can Island: A Story of Tonga and the Swimming Mail Man of the South Seas," co-written by Charles Plumb. In it, he described some of the challenges associated with living on an isolated rocky atoll, including corresponding with the outside world.

Soon after his arrival on the island, Ramsay noted that the SS Tofua, owned by the Union SS Company, "made a monthly round trip from Auckland to Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji. It passed Niuafo'ou en route from Samoa to Fiji and had, when the weather permitted, sometimes fired ashore a rocket to which was attached a packet of mail," Ramsay reported.

However, "this method was very unsatisfactory, as it allowed only the receiving of letters, not the sending of them. Also, the packet of mail was sometimes ignited by the rocket or lost in the bush," he noted.

But as any swimmer knows all too well, when there's water in the way, there's always a solution available. Why not swim the mail in?

Ramsay claims credit for concocting the idea of ferrying mail to and from passing cargo ships via swimmer. But other sources suggest the practice started much earlier, in 1882, when William Travers, a plantation manager working for the firm Osterman Derry & Company in Sydney, Australia, found himself stuck on Niuafo'ou. A few miles offshore, he could see passenger liners steaming past, but none ever landed on the island because of its lack of harbor and the deep, moat-like Tongan Trench that prevented anchorage.

No matter who came up with the idea, the plan was ingenious: Stuff mail in the empty biscuit tins or kerosene cans, common aboard ocean liners, to make a waterproof mail container. Once sealed, the air trapped inside the container would enable it to float. Then, as the ship neared the island, the tins could be chucked overboard with a flag attached.

Strong swimmers watching the approach would see the flag and dive in carrying long, buoyant poles cut from the fau tree, a type of hibiscus plant. These poles helped them float in rough water and gave them a place to lash the tins full of mail for safekeeping.

The mail swimmers were all native Tongans save for Ramsay, who reveled in this quirky and athletically challenging role and is reported to have completed 112 postal swims. In just their swimsuits, rain or shine, wind or calm, night or day, the swimmers braved treacherous waters to retrieve and deliver mail.

The postal service came to an abrupt halt in 1931 when a swimmer named Folau was killed by a shark. From then on, all mail deliveries were handled by outrigger canoe, and in 1983, an airstrip was built on the island, making mail service much simpler.

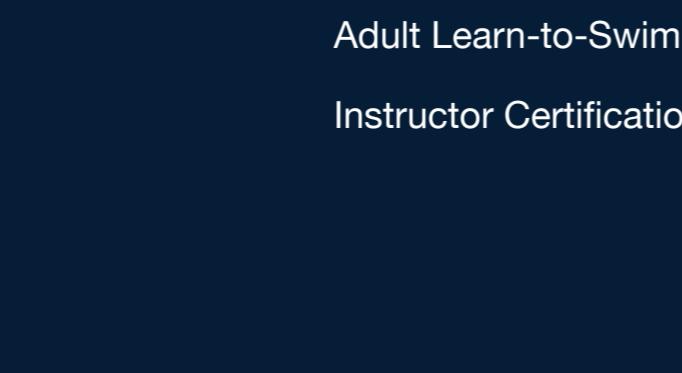

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Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including AARP.org, Atlas Obscura, espnW, and U.S. News & World Report. A lifelong swimmer who specializes in cold water marathon swimming, she has contributed to SWIMMER magazine since 2009 and USMS.org since 2012. Contact her via her website: elainekhowley.com