

Bligh's Escape from Tofoa
An Eyewitness Account
By Nordoff and Hall

Here is an excerpt from The Bounty Trilogy by Nordoff and Hall, an eyewitness account of Bligh's narrow escape from the Island of Tofoa, Ha'apai Group, Tongan Islands, 1789 — told in the voice of that time.

The calabash was passed rapidly from hand to hand, for we knew it would be impossible to get the water to the launch; each man had a generous sup, and it was needed, for we had been on short rations for three days. All this while Bligh had kept a firm grip with his left hand on Nageete's arm, holding his cutlass in his right. He was determined that, if we were to die, Nageete should die with us. The man's face was a study. I have not been able to determine in my own mind, to this day, whether he was playing a part or was genuinely friendly towards us. I imagine, however, that he had a heart as treacherous as those of his countrymen.

Bligh had already instructed us in what order we should proceed to the beach. Cole, also armed with a cutlass, took his station with the captain on the other side of Nageete; and the rest of us fell in behind, with Purcell and Norton bringing up the rear.

"Forward, lads!" said Bligh. "Let these bastards see how Englishmen behave in a tight place!" We then proceeded toward the beach, everyone in a kind of silent horror.

I believe it was the promptness, the unexpectedness of our action alone that saved us. Had we shown the least hesitation, we must have all been slain; but Bligh led us straight on, directly toward one large group of Indians who were between us and the launch. They parted to let us through, and I well remember my feeling of incredulous wonder at finding myself still alive when we had passed beyond them. Not a word was spoken, nor was a hand lifted against us until we reached the beach.

Fryer had, of course, seen us coming, and had slacked away until the launch was within half a dozen paces of the beach, in about four feet of water." In with you, lads! Look alive!" Bligh shouted. "Purcell, stand by with me- you and Norton!"

Within half a minute we were all in the boat, save Bligh and the two men with him. Nageete now wrenched himself free from Bligh's grasp and ran up the beach. The captain and Purcell made for the boat, wisely not attempting to bring in the grapnel on shore; but Norton, who Bligh thought was immediately behind him, ran back to fetch it. We shouted to him to let it go; but either he did not or would not hear.

The Indians by this time had been roused to action, and they were upon Norton in an instant, beating out his brains with stones. Meanwhile we had hauled Bligh and Purcell into the boat and got out the oars. The natives seized the line which held us to the shore; but Bligh severed it with a stroke of his cutlass, and the men forward quickly hauled us out to the other grapnel and attempted to pull it up. To our dismay, one of the flukes had caught and two or three precious minutes were lost before it was gotten clear.

It was fortunate for us that the savages were unarmed; had they been possessed of spears, or bows and arrows, the chance of any man's escaping would have been small indeed. The only spears amongst them were those carried by the two chiefs. Macca-ackavow hurled his, which passed within a few inches of Peckover's head and fell into the water a dozen yards beyond us.

But whilst they had no man-made weapons, the beach offered them an inexhaustible supply of stones, and we received such a shower of these that, had we not been a good thirty yards distant, a number of us might have met Norton's fate. As it was, Purcell was knocked senseless by a blow on the head, and various others were badly hurt. The speed and accuracy with which they cast the stones were amazing. We protected ourselves as well as we could with bundles of clothing which we held before us. Meanwhile the men forward were hauling desperately on the grapnel, which at last gave way and came up with one fluke broken. Bligh, at the tiller, was in the most exposed position of any; that he escaped serious injury was due to the efforts of Elphinstone and Cole, who shielded him with floor boards from the stern sheets.

We now began to pull away from them, but the treacherous villains were not done with us yet.

They got one of their canoes into the water, which they loaded with stones, whereupon a dozen of them leaped into her to pursue us. Our six men at the oars pulled with all their strength, but we were so heavily laden that the savages gained swiftly upon us. Nevertheless, we had got out of the cove and beyond view of the throng on the beach before we were overtaken. They now had us at their mercy, and began throwing stones with such deadly accuracy that it seemed a miracle some of us were not killed. A few of the stones fell into the boat and were hurled back at them; we had the satisfaction of seeing one of their paddlers struck in the face by a stone cast by the boatswain. However, that was a chance shot: we should have been no match for them at this kind of warfare even had we possessed a supply of ammunition.

In the hope of distracting their attention from us, Mr. Bligh threw some articles of clothing into the water; and to our joy they stopped to take them in. It was now getting dark, and, as they could have had but a few stones left in the canoe, they gave over the attack, and a moment later disappeared past the headland at the entrance to the cove. We were by no means sure that others would not attempt to come after us, so we pulled straight out to sea until we caught the breeze.

With our sails set, we were soon past all danger of pursuit. I was busy during the next hour caring for our wounded, of whom there were nine in all. Purcell was badly hurt. He had been struck a glancing blow on the head, which laid open his scalp and knocked him unconscious, but, by the time I was able to attend to him, he was again sitting up, apparently but little the worse for a blow that would have killed most men. An examination of the wound assured me pretty well that the skull had not been fractured. It was necessary to take half a dozen stitches in the scalp.

Elphinstone had had two fingers of his right hand broken while protecting Captain Bligh, and Lenkletter had been deeply gashed across the cheek bone. The other wounds were bruises, the worst being that of Hall, who had been struck full on the right breast and nearly knocked out of the launch. It can be imagined with what feelings of gratitude to God we watched the island of Tofoa dropping away astern. Now that we had time to reflect, a truer sense of the horror of the situation from which we had so narrowly escaped came home to us.

The death of Norton cast a gloom upon all our spirits, but we avoided speaking of him then; the manner of his death was too clearly in mind, and it seemed that we could still hear the yells of the savages who had murdered him. Captain Bligh took his loss very much to heart and blamed himself that he had not thought to inform us, beforehand, to give no heed to the grapnel on shore. But he was by no means at fault. What the situation would be on the beach could not have been foretold, and poor Norton himself should have seen the folly of trying to save the grapnel. Nevertheless, his was an act of heroism such as few men would have been capable of attempting. The wind, from the east-southeast, freshened as we drew away from the land; the darkness deepened, and soon Tofoa was lost to view save for the baleful glare from its volcano, reflected on the clouds above.

**A
VOYAGE
TO THE
SOUTH SEA,
UNDERTAKEN BY COMMAND OF
HIS MAJESTY,
FOR THE PURPOSE OF
CONVEYING THE BREAD-FRUIT TREE
TO THE WEST INDIES,
IN HIS MAJESTY'S SHIP THE BOUNTY,
COMMANDED BY
LIEUTENANT WILLIAM BLIGH.
INCLUDING AN ACCOUNT OF THE
MUTINY ON BOARD THE SAID SHIP,
AND THE
SUBSEQUENT VOYAGE OF PART OF THE CREW, IN THE SHIP'S BOAT,
FROM TOFOA, ONE OF THE FRIENDLY ISLANDS,
TO TIMOR, A DUTCH SETTLEMENT IN THE EAST INDIES.
THE WHOLE ILLUSTRATED WITH CHARTS, ETC.**

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