

It's been almost a year since cousins Beunnang Tootoki and Taabo Tiotaake boarded a boat bound for Maiana, an island located to the south of Tarawa. Tragically, the vessel and more than half of the passengers and crew did not make it to their destination. An estimated 55 passengers and crew were on board and it is believed that 33 perished in the tragedy. Beunnang and Taabo recently shared their amazing survival story.

On Monday morning, 13 July 2009, Beunnang Tootoki, 21, and her cousin, Taabo Tiotaake, 19, boarded the large outrigger canoe called "Uean Teraoi II" (Queen of Peace) bound for Maiana, an island located to the south of Tarawa. The cousins had been planning to spend a week holidaying on Maiana Island.



Typical inter-island transporter canoe boat in Kiribati similar to the "Uean Teraoi" that sank.



The outrigger canoe had a main hull of about thirty feet long and the outrigger about fifteen feet long. The main hull where the passengers sit was enclosed into a cabin with sliding windows.

The forty kilometer journey started at 10am and they were making good time toward Maiana Island. Beunnang estimates that they were about five to six kilometers from Maiana (because they could see the white sand beaches of the island), when a man fell overboard and the captain turned the boat back to pick him up.

After rescuing the man, the boat turned back around to resume its course to Maiana. Suddenly, a wave came up from the outrigger side of the canoe lifting the outrigger and flipping the boat upside down.

All of the passengers were trapped inside the cabin under water. Beunnang and Taabo managed to open one of the sliding windows and swim out through the opening. When they got out, they found that two of the women passengers had drowned during their struggle to get out from under the capsized canoe.

The passengers gathered around the main hull and the outrigger, and tried to hang on. After counseling together, they decided that some of them would swim to the island of Maiana to get help. There were four men who volunteered to swim ashore to get help. The rest of the group waited for a long time, but no one came back. As night came they noticed they were drifting farther away from Maiana Island.

On the second day, four more people tried to swim to Maiana Island, but were unsuccessful. These men drowned.

There was no water and very little food on the boat. The scant food they had consisted mostly of bits and pieces of soggy biscuits. They were blessed with rain a few times during the four days they were lost at sea, and caught whatever they could in their mouths during that time.

On the third day, while still waiting to be rescued, they decided to try to flip the boat over. They used a knife to cut off the ropes that attached the outrigger to the main hull and somehow were able to turn the boat over.

When the boat turned over they found some life vests, but there were not enough for everyone. Beunnang said that she found a life vest but then gave it to another woman who seemed more desperate than she was. She said that she and her cousin took turns holding on to a plastic bucket.

She swam up to an older man who had a life vest and asked him if she could hold on to him for a short time, because she felt very tired. The old man told her that she could, but only lightly, and so she did. After resting for a short while she swam back to her cousin. The next morning Beunnang learned that the old man with the life vest had disappeared into the ocean.

The group began to realize they had drifted away from Maiana, and were now closer to Tarawa. They decided to use the outrigger connecting timbers to erect a little timber mast on top of the hull, as a beacon, to indicate where they were. There were others who decided to leave the boat swim ashore, but disappeared.

On the morning of the fourth day a local fisherman noticed their mast and as he came closer he found them still hanging on to the boat. The fisherman's boat was too small to rescue everyone. He called out to the people that he would return with help. Soon after that he came back with a second boat, and between the two small boats, they were able to be rescued.

When asked about the ages of the people that were hanging onto the capsized boat, she indicated there were adults as well as children aged two and three, and an old man in his seventies. The two-year-old child's parents panicked, became hysterical about their situation, and tried to swim ashore but drowned. The remaining survivors took turns passing around the two-year-old child. Sadly, the three-year-old died, along with many others.

The young women said that during the time they tried to turn the boat over, they had to get the people away from the boat, and that's when a few more of the passengers drifted away and drowned.

When asked how they felt spiritually during this horrific event, Beunnang said that on the first day they prayed constantly in their hearts for help, but on the third day they started to pray as a group. They sang hymns. She was cold, especially at night, and she would sing the hymn "I am a Child of God" which comforted her. As she prayed and sang, she says that she felt a reassuring and peaceful feeling that they would be alright.

When asked, "Why do you think Heavenly Father spared your life?" Beunnang said that she didn't know, but she believes that maybe there is something God wants her to do. She has been planning to go on a mission.

Almost a year after this harrowing experience, Beunnang Tootoki is now fulfilling her dream to serve as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She is currently attending the Missionary Training Centre in Hamilton, New Zealand.