



A Story of the Hui Panalā‘au of the Equatorial Pacific Islands

Would you have the courage and determination to volunteer to live on a deserted tropical island with no connection to the outside world for months at a time? Would you succeed or succumb to the harsh environment and isolation?

In the 1930s and early 1940s young men that attended or graduated from high school in Hawai‘i were faced with these questions. They not only survived but also thrived and proved to be an important part in the United States’ continued possession of Howland, Baker and Jarvis Islands.

After the Guano mining era of the 1800s, Howland, Baker and Jarvis Islands, located in the Phoenix and Line Islands archipelagos, sat relatively unnoticed until the 1930s when they became desirable stop-over points for commercial air travel between Hawai‘i and Australia. Then, as World War II intensified and the Japanese Empire advanced across the Pacific, establishing ownership proved to be of great importance. In order to establish the three islands as U.S. territories, President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the U.S. needed to colonize them with permanent residents. In other words, the U.S. needed to prove that people were residents of the islands, living and sleeping on the islands for at least one solid



Graduates and students of Kamehameha School onboard the Itasca, 4th expedition, January 1936. Back row, left to right: Luther Waiwaiiole, Henry Ohumukini, William Yomes, Solomon Kalama, James Carroll. Front row, left to right: Henry Mahikoa, Alexander Kahapea, George Kahanu, Sr., Joseph Kim. (Photo courtesy George Kahanu, Sr.)
downloaded from: <http://www.oralhistory.hawaii.edu/pages/historical/panalaaui.html>

year. It was necessary to find individuals who could survive for months at a time in the isolated and harsh conditions of Howland, Baker, and Jarvis. Representatives from the U.S. Bureau of Air Commerce suggested that the best group of people from which to recruit were young Hawaiian men due to the stereotypical belief that they could handle the harsh environment of the South Pacific better than other groups.

The U.S. federal government worked initially with the Bishop Museum and Kamehameha Schools in Honolulu, Hawai‘i to recruit Hawaiian boys to

takepart. They sought young men who were single, physically and mentally fit, cooperative, and disciplined. Many were even part of the ROTC program and readily took to the military protocol and procedures.

On March 20, 1935, the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Itasca secretly set sail from Honolulu Harbor. It was not until they were well underway that the group of students was advised as to where they would be going. They were on a on a five-day voyage to Jarvis Island, another three days to Baker Island, and one more day

to Howland Island. The camps initially consisted of groups of five, with two of the recruits along with three furloughed army personnel.

The boys were told they would be colonizing the islands for commercial airline use. They took meticulous daily records of weather and other environmental conditions and surveyed seabirds.

After the first expedition went well, all the boys received high praise from their supervisors for their performance. The Army realized the boys didn't need additional survival oversight so subsequent deployments did away with army personnel and included groups of four Hawaiian high school graduates. Many of the colonists were even excited to return for a second term. During free time, they would dive, surf, fish, and look for shells, among other island activities. On Jarvis, the colonists even used planks from a shipwreck to construct surfboards.

Eventually, the federal government began recruiting boys from other high schools, particularly Roosevelt High School and McKinley High School. Asian-American men, primarily Chinese with one Korean, were also recruited as radiomen and aerologists working with new radio stations that were built. By this time, the Department of the Interior was providing materials for cabins, stoves, and radio stations and the young men were hired as Interior Department employees.

In 1937, the colonists of Howland Island set to work constructing a runway specifically for Amelia Earhart, who was scheduled to land and refuel before carrying on with her ill-fated but planned record breaking flight around the world. They were excited for her arrival. One mother even sent some curtains for the window of the room she would be staying in, and the boys constructed a freshwater shower out of a 52 gallon water jug with shower head, made from a tomato can, just for her. She disappeared on July 3, 1937, never making it to Howland Island. Tragedy struck a year later in 1938, when colonist Carl Kahalewai fell ill with appendicitis and passed away aboard a U.S. Coast Guard ship on the ride back to Honolulu.

On December 8, 1941, a day after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the Pacific Island territories were also bombed including Howland, Baker, Jarvis, and Canton and Enderbury of the Phoenix Islands group. The United States had officially entered into World War II and as the U.S. recovered from Pearl Harbor losses, retrieving the colonists became a lower priority. The December 8 attacks on the small islands even went unreported in Washington.

During the first wave of attacks, two young men on Howland, Joseph Keli'ihanuani and Richard "Dickey" Whaley, were fatally wounded. They were buried by their fellow colonists on the island in bomb craters and the graves were marked

with small crosses. The islands were bombed numerous times, both by air and submarine, after the initial wave of planes had passed. With the threat of repeated fire, the colonists were forced to hide during the day and eat and drink only at night. Rescue by U.S. Coast Guard did not occur until January 31, 1942, for those on Howland and Baker Islands. Colonists on Jarvis and Enderbury were not evacuated until February 9, 1942.

Upon returning to Honolulu during the war, the colonists were instructed to remain silent about what had happened on the islands. Many of the former colonists formed a group to "perpetuate the fellowship of Hawaiian youths who have served as colonists on American equatorial islands." The group was initially called "Hui Kupu Aina," giving reference to the idea of sprouting, growing, and increasing land, but was soon renamed "Hui Panalā'au," which has a variety of meanings including: "club of settlers of southern islands," "holders of the land society," and "society of colonists."

The Hui Panalā'au was successful in petitioning the U.S. government, and in 1954 the bodies of Joseph Keli'ihanuani and Richard "Dickey" Whaley were brought back to Hawai'i. and buried at Schofield Barracks on the island of O'ahu. It was not until December 8, 2003, that they received proper burial at the Hawai'i State Veterans Cemetery in Kaneohe, Hawai'i, as well as honored with



Baker Island National Wildlife Refuge, March 2012. Photo: K.Ernsburger/USFWS

traditional Hawaiian ceremonial chants and performances. The presentations of traditional hand-carved spears were also presented to the families. The ceremony was a step towards honoring the work and sacrifice that these young men made for the State of Hawai'i and the United States of America.

The 2010 documentary film *Under a Jarvis Moon* tells the incredible story of the Hui Panalā'au. Co-directed by Noelle Kahanu and Heather Giugni, it is a tribute to Noelle's grandfather George Kahanu, Sr., and the other Panalā'au members and chronicles our important history, nearly forgotten, that she discovered in

the archives of the Bishop Museum.

The contributions and sacrifices made by these young men established these islands as part of the United States, thus setting the stage for their conservation status as national wildlife refuges and the marine national monument of today.

For more information on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument:
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Pacific_Remote_Islands_Marine_National_Monument/about.html

This story was written using the following references.

For more information about the Hui Panalā'au, please visit these websites:

Hui Panalā'au: Hawaiian Colonists in the Pacific, 1935-1942, Univ. of Hawai'i at Manoa Ctr. for Oral History, Social Science Research Institute (2006).
http://www.bishopmuseum.org/media/2011/pdf/Hui_Panalaaau.pdf

Link to Bishop Museum Website:

http://www.bishopmuseum.org/special/under_a_jarvis_moon.html

Under a Jarvis Moon Flickr set:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/bishop_museum/sets/72157625047187285/

Stream the movie Under a Jarvis Moon online:
<http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi3879443993/>

Kamehameha Schools Archives:
<http://kapalama.ksbe.edu/archives/historical/huipanalaaau/Default.php>

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Government Officials and Colonists at the dedication of the Jarvis beacon to Carl K. Kahalewai. December 11, 1938.
Photo: AirForce Archives



Howland Island Camp. January 23, 1937. Photo: National Archives