

Cyclone relief with Sea Mercy

December 22nd
We have spent the last few days after cyclone Yasa working with a group called “Sea Mercy” a non profit organization that uses Volunteer cruising sailors to help with disaster response here in the Pacific.

Several vessels have signed on to help the tragically effected outer islands that found themselves in the path of this immensely powerful cyclone.

We are going out in several groups and the first group leaves today with water makers and emergency supplies.

Our tasked mission is the island of Yadua about 80 nautical miles to the NNW of Denarau and the word is that they are desperately in need of help. Someone managed to get an emergency plea for assistance out from the island and we know of at least one death occurring here as an older man was crushed by a falling wall.

Now it's our turn to return some of the kindness we have received in Fiji over the last year.



Sea Mercy water makers ready to go.



Volunteer cruisers meet and discuss a plan of operation in the Yacht Club. Port Denerau.



Olena's crew ready to depart for Yadua Island



Emergency supplies behind one of the Volunteer vessels helping Sea Mercy mission to Yadua Island



S/V Olena flying the Sea Mercy flag departs for an overnight sail to Yadua Island

For those of us on the second wave it's "hurry up and wait" as more supplies were arriving and a clearer picture of our mission would present itself.

December 23rd
Finally after a scorcher of a day sorting more equipment and loading it onto our respective vessels we were ready to go. I also managed to sort out our Iridium mail account so we could now send and receive emails at sea.

At 1530 Vava-u lead our little fleet out of the harbor. Hullabaloo, Blue Spirit and O2 followed close behind. Our revised mission is to sail through the night arriving at Yadua the following morning where we will drop off more equipment to team "A" then we would proceed on to an island called Galoa another 20 miles further to the NE.



Ofelia and yours truly moments after our departure from Port Denarau, proud to be able to help Sea Mercy



Kenny with one of the desalination plants

Kenny's youthfulness and strength will be vital on this mission as most of us going are in our 60's. I for one am a very tender 67 years old and "Don't think I'm not bitter about it".

The rest of the volunteers are only slightly younger and they are quite envious of us having Kenny onboard.

As it turns out we had contrary wind the hole day so with one of our little Volvo diesels pushing us along at about 6 knots we pushed north. On and on we motored until finally clearing the reef at Yavena Passage around 11pm.



The sunset was our reward today

After clearing Yavena Passage Kenny and I started watches so we could both get at least a little rest during the night. Vava-u and Blue Spirit were single handing so it would be a very long night for them.

December 24th at 6am we were just 6 miles south of Yadua Island, perfect timing.

Now with good light we slowly made our way around the reefs to the harbor entrance navigating through numerous coral bommies as we entered to anchor beside "S/V Olena".



As the sun comes up our GPS puts us just a few miles south of Yadua Island



Part of the Sea Mercy fleet. The S/V O2 anchored with S/V Olena, S/V Vava-u, S/V Sky Bird, S/V Pogyeon and S/V Hullabaloo.

Yadua Island 24th December 2020



Yadua Island Panorama



The school at Yadua Island

I didn't get much time to fly the drone in Yadua as our mission was to pass some extra supplies to team A and based on what they had found here in Yadua modify or continue with our mission for Galoa Island. We discovered here that Sky Bird had struck the reef outside the harbor entrance and had suffered some damage. Fortunately I believe not too severe.

Soon we were on our way again and for a short while at least we could motor sail as we proceeded east towards the main island of Vanua Levu.

Unfortunately here we had again to turn north into a very hot brisk wind with temperatures soaring to unprecedented highs. An unmercifully sun beat down and reflected off our white decks. Not even the strong breeze could blow this heat away. It was brutal and I spent as little time at O2's exposed helm as possible standing watch from the center window of our main salon to avoid being burned to a little black crisp.



Vava-u taking the lead on the way up to Galoa Island

Finally at about 2pm we motored into Monkey Face Passage. Making easterly again we could motor-sail, all be it very close to the wind.

It seemed that the further east we turned the wind would shift with us like it was trying to make us work for every damn mile.

At about 3pm there was only one reef between us and Galoa now visible in the distance.

Hullabaloo set her main and headsail and quickly accelerated towards our goal.

Flying our main was a little more complicated than pressing a button so I stayed behind Vava-u and with just the genoa flying we closed the island at a more sedate 6 knots.



Hullabaloo under full sail sprints to the finish line after a day of hot nasty contrary wind

As we neared our objective we could see several fires on the shore. From out here the damage seemed minimal so after anchoring I decided to fly my drone to inspect the damage. Watching my drone images come in told a different story

from the air the damage looked extensive and it was at once obvious that these people had suffered a catastrophic hit from this cyclone.



14 houses completely destroyed, others without roofs and tree's were down throughout the village. The church was severely damaged and trash lay everywhere.



On Christmas eve afternoon the crews from Vava-u, Hullabaloo and O2 went into the village of Galoa and now at ground zero we could see the full extent of the damage.

Making our way to the Turaga Ni Koro “the Village Mayor” we performed the ever important Savusavu after which we began discussions on how best to assist the village with their immediate needs.

We assumed fresh water would be a problem here but after some discussion we learned that they had a huge water tank on top of the hill behind the village however they had no idea how much water was in it.



I was expecting to see a lot of sad faces on our arrival but no!!!!. This is Fiji

We marched on up the hill through broken homes and fallen tree's and on reaching the water tank yours truly scrambled up on top and peered inside. It was half full and we calculated there is enough for 2 liters a day for all the villagers for the next 3 weeks.

This water came from the main island through pipes that had been broken during the storm, an important piece of information for our damage report.

Water problem temporarily solved and as it was now growing late in the day we returned to our vessels and discussed how we would proceed.



A broken home in Galoa Village



Martin from Vava-u walks through the rubble



Another immediate need that was quite obvious was a chainsaw to help clear the downed tree's. Once back on board the O2 Kenny and I assembled and made ready one of the new chainsaws Sea Mercy had supplied.

Somehow during all of this drama Ofelia miraculously had managed to prepare an amazing Christmas dinner and in the evening Martin from Vava-u and Rene from Blue Spirit came across to celebrate the most unusual Christmas I think any of us had ever experienced.



Left to right: Myself, Martin, Kenny, Ofelia and Rene

A sobering thought though, not 200 meters away the village of Galoa having gone through the strongest cyclone ever to hit this area of Fiji, people were eating and sleeping under temporary shelters made from scraps having lost everything they own, while we on the O2 we are eating a roast pork dinner, drinking chilled white wine and finishing off with chocolate brownie and ice cream. We are truly blessed.

December 25th
The Turago Ni Koro requested that we wait until after 2pm before entering the village. Fijians are very religious and even with this disaster they wanted to celebrate a Christmas lunch with their families.

At 2pm we loaded up the donated supplies. A chainsaw, 10 sanitary kits and a number of small back packs for the folks that had lost their homes. Also we had from “Sea Mercy” a bag of much needed tools “hand saw, hammer, nails etc” so they could begin to rebuild.



Sanitary kits for Galoa Island



Chain saw, tool kit and sanitary kits donated by
Sea Mercy



The village church

A description of the storm from one of the villagers

At 3pm the storm started blowing in earnest. About 20 of us ran from our homes to the church where we stood huddled together wet and cold as the building, being pounded by the wind vibrated around us.

After a while the windows blew in and one of our group received a large cut on her knee from flying glass.

As the storm intensified we had to scream to be heard.

The children grasping frantically to the legs of their parents crying and terrified as our church disintegrated around us.

A short time later the roof started to blow apart and collapse in on us the corrugated iron was ripped away from the roof joists like sheets of paper.

To survive we had no choice but to make a dash 200 meters up the hill to the community center (still in tact) as flying debris driven by 130 knot “250 kilometer” wind tried to rip the clothes from our bodies.

Drenched by the driving rain we miraculously made it into the relative safety of the community center.

There we stood huddled together with standing room only.

18 families dripping wet, cold and terrified we huddled together soaked to the skin shivering from cold and fear for 6 long long hours as the storm raged outside.

As it grew dark TC Yasa reversed direction and intensified now pounding our little village from the south.

Complete darkness soon engulfed us and the atmosphere was filled with an immense roar of the wind and pounding rain on our flimsy iron roof which was threatening to disappear at any moment.

We thought every moment was our last.



The church, once a sanctuary soon became a death trap



The chief “Napolioni” stands in the ruin that was once his home



Having just completed a rebuild this launch was completely trashed during the storm.



This boat was found half way up a tree. The large hole in its center wrapped around and held it suspended above the ground.

The survivors and the volunteers



Ceve, Joe, Seru, Seini.



Julia, Selai and Ofelia. Selai lost her home in the storm.



Seini, Seru, Tambua.



Julia, Tomu and Ofelia. Tomu receiving the gift of a sanitation kit from Sea Mercy.



Lilo



Julia “Sea Mercy” handing Jone “who lost his home” one of the sanitary kits.



Rene from Blue Spirit lifting the spirits of the kids.



Kenny, Napolioni "The Chief, Ofelia and Martin with tools provided from Sea Mercy.



Ofelia distributing Sea Mercy aid to the village.



Julia from S/V Hullabaloo.



Undaunted spirits, smiles are an easy gift to give for Christmas even when your community has been destroyed.



Mali



Maca



Napolioni “the chief” with Ofelia and Martin.



Lilo and Sopa



The chainsaw we delivered to Galoa assembled and ready for work.



Seru and Ceva



Wasei having lost his home received a back pack and sanitary kit.



Seini



Christmas lunch over, Raitoko returned to the massive task of chainsawing all the downed tree's in the village but no little storm will diminish this smile.

As we moved through the village on December 25th, family groups were sitting under temporary shelters having Christmas Lunch.

Every group we passed was full of smiling faces and they immediately invited us in to share their meal.

My idea of photographing grieving villagers in front of their destroyed homes was quickly diminishing.

It's obvious that a little breeze was not going to daunt the spirits of these amazing people who have been through hell and lost everything yet and yet they were still willing to share what ever it was they still have.



Christmas decorations lie amongst the rubble.



Tubuna



Dia



Una blowing through a hollow branch to fan the fire as she makes tea.



A huge smile from Bili. The warmth of these people is amazing



Dia cooking for Sunday lunch



Navi



Boi



Bili



Taukei



Sio



Mele



Alfred



I fell in love with Honey, such a sweet girl



Bill



Desele



Vaseva



Boko in the door of her roofless home.



Ame



Big, yep thats his name



Dressed in his Sunday best, Seru does a little pose for me.



Mali making some treats.



Joe



Happy to be alive Saula rests with his son Joe on a lazy Christmas day.



Napolioni with Julia and Ofelia working on the list of the most effected villagers who would receive the first aid.



Lilo



Lilo



Joe



Lilo cooking Sunday lunch



Piri



Oliva, Una and little Seru



Seru relaxing after church.



David



Ame. What a Christmas for this little guy



Sala



Selai, Taukei, Mele, Kata.

December 26th Martin Ofelia and Rene using Vava-u's dingy had been across to the village of Tavea and while the village had received some damage their water supply was intact and they seemed to have plenty of food and shelter.

Every day now more assistance is arriving and we all feel that our mission is close to completion.

We returned once again to Tavea in the afternoon and gave them some tarpaulins and a chainsaw. Departing there we feel fairly confident that they are in pretty good shape.



Flying the flag for “Sea Mercy” in Tavea



The owner of this house along with his sister look for belongings that haven't been stripped away by the tremendous wind.





Imagine this is your Christmas.



Rene, Blue Spirit spreading good will in the villages



Josevata with his new chainsaw. Tavea Island



Martin, Vava-u on mission for Sea Mercy

December 28th
Our mission complete in Galoa we are now re-tasked to another island to the east.

Vorovoro has 3 villages of concern where the water tanks have been contaminated by salt spray and they have no drinking water.

These may be candidates for the water makers that both Vava-u and O2 were carrying and for sure we could immediately supply them with drinking water from our desalination units.

So another day motoring east but at least there was some relief from the powerful sun as we had full cloud cover.

We even managed to sail a little as the breeze came from the north, all be it very light.

Anchoring to the north of Vorovoro Island, Martin, Ofelia and I went in to a tiny settlement of just 4 or 5 houses to perform the most important Savusavu. This may be a small settlement but this is where the regions chief lives and apparently they take it quite seriously.



Vava-u and O2 anchored near Vorovoro Island



A typical Kava bowl was already prepared when we arrived. I'm not sure if it was prepared for us but Martin and Ofelia took a cup. I for one cant stand the stuff so I respectfully declined



The chief at Vorovoro Island Apenisa



Bale enjoying a cup or 2 of kava



Picking up drinking water from Vava-u



Delivering fresh water to the village





Simon, Rosa and Ana with the O2 in the background



Skipper



Lavenia



Ana



Wati

Vorovoro Island had very little damage with just a few downed trees and a piece of roofing here and there.

The main problem was the salt water contamination into their fresh water systems as they use water catchment on the roofs here. During the storm huge waves crashing on the shore had produced a salty foam and spray which ended up in their tanks.

Our first task was obviously to get them fresh water and so immediately we began to supply from our vessels. Fortunately soon after we arrived a heavy rain squall came in across the sea so tonight at least, they should be able to flush their tanks ready for refilling.

Luckily its the wet season here in Fiji.



A rain storm makes its way across the reef heading our way. It will be a blessing for the small community and allow them to flush their tanks of contaminated water. O2 will get a much needed wash down.

December 29th

At 7am Kenny and I filled a 60 liter container with fresh drinking water, we then delivered it into the village. Vava-u quickly followed with many more buckets. Back on board the O2 we made more water and after a second delivery felt sure we are leaving them with enough for a couple of weeks at least hopefully by then they will get some good rain to refill their systems.

At 0930 Martin, Ofelia and Rene took off in Martins dingy to check on the 3 villages on Mali Island close bye. We would then assess where to install the 2 water makers we have on board.



Martin, Ofelia and Rene leave to check out the other villages.



Vorovoro island with Mali Island in background
Vava-u, Blue Spirit and O2 anchored in the foreground.
16° 20.37' S. 179° 18.63 E



Nakawaga Village, finally a traditional house



Vunadi, Laite, Naisa.



Rain falling on Vanua Levu but unfortunately does not make it to Mali Island where they really need it.

December 30th
Today we went in early to the village of Nakawaga on the island of Mali and began the installation of the water maker we had onboard. We found a spot on top of the hill above the village where there was a tank with thousands of liters of water but it was undrinkable having been pumped up from a deep dirty well. We were going to turn that water into clean drinking water. A few hours later the water maker was up and running turning out 60 liters of fresh water an hour powered by 2 solar panels we also installed on a small structure we had the villagers build. Its not pretty but it will work. Vava-u, Blue spirit and O2 supervised the installation and we joined later by Stephan from Olena to help finish off.



Digging post holes for the structure.



Creating the platform for the batteries and water maker.



Rene Hooking up the solar



Stephan adding some final touches



Installation complete part of the team pose for a photo in front of our creation.



The final result. Good clean healthy water.

The essence of life.

It's not much but just maybe we can help avoid a lot of people getting sick in the village. Tomorrow we will ensure that the villager responsible is comfortable with the operation and maintenance of the unit then our mission is complete.

Clean water starts to flow from the product hose on the water maker.⁹

December 31st
The last day of this unforgettably year.
Tonight we will pass into 2021 and hope like hell it's better than 2020.

No more cyclones please and let's also have an end to Covid-19 so we can visit our families in far away places.

Today we check the water-maker and our tasks for Sea Mercy are complete.

Hopefully we will have a memorable sunset so I can leave you with a nice image to finish this blog.



As it turns out sunset was a bit of a non event but we did have a great crew with us to help celebrate the new year.

Above the crews of Olena, Blue Spirit, Vava-u and O2
Happy new year to every one.



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