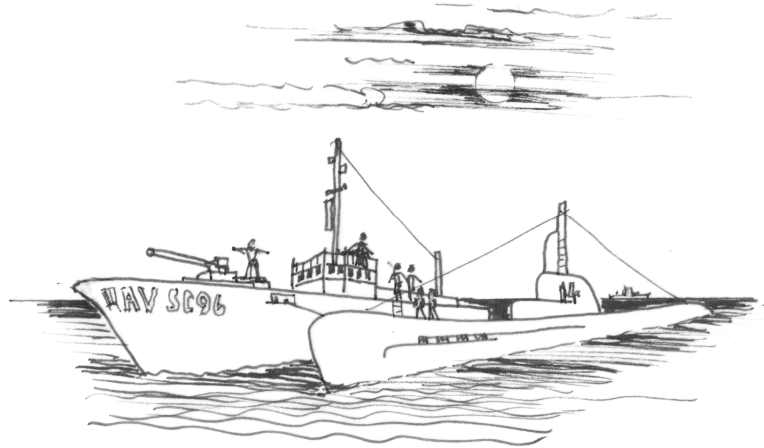


Usala Sotutu



The chiefs of the Bua area on Viti Levu, Fiji were considering which students from their village primary schools should be selected to progress to Queen Victoria School, which was the government secondary school. It was the year 1919.

“We have some very good students, but I believe Usaia Sotutu is the most outstanding,” observed the chief of the Tavea area. “The teacher there often speaks of Usaia as the brightest student he has ever taught.”

So it was agreed that Usaia would join the group of boys who would, in the following year, progress to the first year of the best government primary school in Fiji. Usaia felt honoured to be chosen. There were very few good primary schools in Fiji at the time, so he was very pleased and looked forward to his new school the following year.

One day he and his friends were out in a canoe on the sea when suddenly a storm blew up. A strong gust of wind overturned their canoe, throwing all the boys into the rough water. Fortunately some men in a canoe nearby saw them, came to their rescue and they were saved from drowning.

Usaia knew they had been in serious danger and that they would have drowned if the men in the canoe hadn't rescued them. When he reached the shore and had time to think about this episode his thoughts turned to God, for his parents had trained him to follow in the Christian way.

“Thank you, God, for sending those men to rescue us.” he prayed... “I promise I’ll do whatever you tell me to do from now on. I want to serve you for the rest of my life.”

From that time on Usaia began to have a sense that God was speaking to him and the message he was hearing did not please him at first. It seemed God was saying, “Usaia, I don’t want you to go to Queen Victoria School. I want you to go to the Methodist School at Davuilevu.”

Never before had he been so sure this was truly God speaking to him, not just his imagination. Some weeks before the start of the new school year Usaia went to his parents, “I know the chiefs have chosen me to go to Queen Victoria School,” he began, “but since I was rescued from that boating accident God has been speaking to me.”

“What has He been saying?” His father asked.

“God is telling me I should go to Davuilevu instead of Queen Victoria School. I made a promise to God after I was rescued from the sea that I would do whatever He wanted me to do.”

“Then you’d do well to keep your promise to God,” said his father. “It’s more important to obey God than anyone else.”

So Usaia’s father visited the local chief to explain the situation and Usaia prepared himself to attend the Methodist Mission’s Industrial School at Davuilevu. His mother proudly prepared new shirts, sulus and sandals for him and wove him two beautiful mats for his bedding and for carrying his things in. His father bought him a brand new cane knife and a file to sharpen it. This was essential equipment for all students to cut grass and firewood and work in their food gardens. Clothing and all other necessary articles were packed carefully into the mats, folded into neat bundles and tied with bush string. The week before Usaia was due to enter his new school he and his father set off from Tavea, each with a mat bundle slung over a shoulder. They followed a track around the coast to Nausori, and then climbed a hill to reach the Davuilevu compound.

After enrolling Usaia they found their way to the dormitory he would share with twenty other boys. Some mosquito nets had already been hung up in long open building with its shutter windows. Usaia unpacked his mats and placed his few possessions on his allocated shelf. His father waited until his son was settled then said goodbye. “It will be only twelve weeks until you come home for holidays. We’ll look forward to that time. God bless you, my boy.” And he was gone.

Usaia soon made friends with the boys around him and made the most of his opportunity to learn. Besides the academic subjects the boys were taught carpentry and mechanics. This equipped them for building houses, making furniture, running a mission boat or an engine to produce power for lighting on a mission station, among other things. Along with the industrial training there was a Bible and pastoral training course to prepare the men for Christian leadership.

During Usaia's time at Davuilevu Dr. George Brown from the Methodist Mission office in Sydney, Australia, visited Fiji and spoke to all the students. He was recruiting volunteers to go to the new mission stations in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Usaia was 19 years old at the time and his heart was stirred. He went to speak to Dr Brown.

"I'd like to offer to go as a missionary to a new mission station, sir. I know I'm young, but I believe God is speaking to me so I have come to volunteer."

Dr. Brown encouraged Usaia to complete the training he was doing at Davuilevu, then he would be welcome to join the mission staff. In 1921 he went out as a single man to the Western Solomons first, then transferred to Skotolan, Buka, a small island just north of Bougainville. He was mission boat engineer and general assistant for the Solomon Islands Methodist Mission, so his technical training served well.

Usaia's co-worker was Allan Cropp from Australia. They were a good team and worked together very happily. Together they built a large house for use in their mission work; it was partly Fijian and partly local in design. They were both able to adapt to their situation, learning how to include the local people in their building projects.

Usaia quickly learned the language of Buka, which was used in their churches, the Petats language. He wrote a book of stories about Jesus in Petats for the children to read in the mission schools. He was also a 'barefoot doctor', able to use the small quantity of medical supplies that were available. But he was also familiar with the 'bush medicine' used in Fiji and was able to find similar remedies in the bush on Skotolan. Fijians are skilled in massage and Usaia was also able to use these skills on injured people from time to time.

When Usaia was preparing for leave after his first term of missionary service, Allan Cropp gave him a piece of good advice. "My friend," he said, "while you are in Fiji you must find yourself a wife."

Usais met Makereta, a gifted teacher and strong in the Christian faith. She and Usaia were married in Fiji and went back together to serve on Bougainville. Makereta taught in the mission school and translated Bible stories into Petats. She taught the women and girls the Fijian crafts of weaving mats and baskets, methods of gardening and food preparation.

Usaia and Makereta had five children - two boys and three girls. Makereta loved to sing hymns and pray. This strength in both Usaia and Makereta helped them to survive the years of testing when the Japanese entered the war in the Pacific in 1941.

As the Japanese infiltrated the islands from the north, ships loaded with Japanese soldiers wove their way south establishing bases on islands in strategic places. Noisy, threatening planes screamed overhead, dropping bombs. The people living in the coastal towns and villages packed up their few possessions and fled for protection to the dense mountain jungle. Usaia knew the jungle as well as any local person and he became leader of a 'spy-ring', the 'coast-watchers'. A handful of Australian soldiers were stationed in a strategic spot at the top of the mountains with a radio transmitter. Usaia posted the message-bearers at intervals of 2 or 3 miles from the coast right up the mountain to the radio operators post. Information about enemy placements was passed from the coast-watchers to message-bearers who relayed it up the mountain to the Australian radio operators. The location of placements was made easy by the provision of United States Air Force grid maps. The signalers on the mountain top received the information and were able to pass it on to military Headquarters. The following night U.S. bombers would target the enemy sites reported to them the day before.

Usaia became a 'wanted man' by the Japanese, so when they bombed Buka and his coast-watching activities began, he said to Makereta, "It's not safe for you and the children to be with me. The Japanese want to capture me. You take the children and go up into the mountain jungle in the centre of Bougainville Island. There are many of our friends staying there, you will be safe with them. I must help the allied forces against the Japanese."

Usaia and Makereta were separated by distance, but they remained one in spirit. They both had dreams and intuitions given by God that brought direction to one or the other of them. They found on many occasions that they both received the same guidance through dreams or in prayer as to where to go and what to avoid.

They managed to survive the hazards of living in the jungle until the end of 1942, when orders came for Makereta and the children to prepare to be evacuated by submarine. But they were delayed and the submarine left without them. They continued their jungle existence for three or four more months when another message came, "A submarine will be in Kekesu harbour on Sunday night. Makereta and the children must be ready to be evacuated on it." Kekesu is on the north coast of Bougainville.

This meant a long and hazardous climb down the mountain and a wait in the dense jungle in sight of the harbour. To their dismay a Japanese boat was anchored in the exact spot where the submarine was to pick them up. They waited all day and through the night until Monday morning, expecting to see Japanese troops land, but nothing happened and the enemy ship moved on.

There were sentries posted every half-mile along the coast, watching to report any sightings of Japanese. When they concluded it was safe the evacuees boarded the submarine. There were 12 Australian soldiers and 36 civilians including Makereta and the children, who boarded the submarine which left on the Monday evening. During the night the submarine surfaced, but traveled under water during daylight hours. On Wednesday evening an American sub-chaser came alongside the submarine. Under cover of darkness, one by one the evacuees were passed from one crew member to the next until all 48 evacuees were transferred from the submarine to the sub-chaser. There were Japanese vessels everywhere and the rescue ship had to weave around and circumnavigate islands to avoid detection by the enemy. They arrived at Honiara, on Guadalcanal, on Thursday morning, relieved to have come safely this far.

After the evacuees had waited three weeks sheltering in the bushland near Honiara a large convoy of ships was sighted sailing into the harbour. There had been a rumor around the islands that there was a contingent of Fijian commandos coming to support the US and Australian troops. Everyone watching the ships felt growing excitement at the thought that relief was near, especially the Fijians who were pleased that their fellow countrymen were in the relief party.

That night every populated centre around Guadalcanal was heavily bombed by the Japanese but the people sheltering in the jungle escaped air attack. While they waited in Honiara, Makereta and the children met a relative, Sergeant Joe Kindon, who was a commando in the first contingent to come from Fiji. This contingent was now preparing to return home to Fiji, having completed their term of service in the Guadalcanal area. Joe needed to go back to the gold mine in the mountains to get some personal possessions he had left behind there. Makereta's second child, Paul, aged 9 years, spoke up at once, looking pleadingly at his mother. "Please may I go with him?"

"It should be safe enough, I think," Joe said, "I don't expect there will be any Japanese up there. I'd be happy for him to go with me. I promise to look after him."

On Sunday morning Paul and his uncle Joe set out for the gold mining camp in the mountains. It proved to be far more hazardous than Joe expected. There were enemy troops everywhere, making it necessary for them to hide frequently to avoid being captured. However they did get through to collect Joe's goods without being detected and arrived back at Honiara on the Wednesday morning, as planned.

In the meantime, on the Monday night, Makereta and her children were ordered to board the submarine along with the other evacuees who had left Bougainville with them.

"What about my son, Paul?" she asked. "He's still away in the mountains with his uncle."

"We'll look after him," the authorities assured her. "We'll see he is on the next vessel leaving Honiara. You look after the four children with you. We'll see Paul is safe."

With a prayer to God for Paul and Joe to be kept safe, Makereta and the four children boarded a submarine to be taken to Noumea, New Caledonia. It was at times like this when Makereta's faith in God kept her from undue worry and made her an inspiration to those around her. Eventually a submarine took them home to Fiji where they landed, very relieved to be out of the danger zone.

Paul spent the next three weeks in a military camp on Guadalcanal staying with his uncle, Joe, waiting for the next opportunity to escape from the war zone around Bougainville. It came three weeks later, when a US troop ship sailed into the harbour, A Fijian evacuee was assigned to look after Paul who became the mascot for the troops and civilians on the ship. He wore shirt and shorts that his mother had made from parachute silk. And he carried a small .22 rifle with which he killed rats. (It was reported wrongly in the U.S. that he killed Japanese soldiers with it!)

They sailed first to Noumea, New Caledonia, where they disembarked. After waiting there for two weeks, another troop ship arrived which was going to Fiji. The last leg of the journey home to Fiji was uneventful. After stopping at Lautoka to drop off some passengers, Paul was welcomed home in Suva a few days later by a very relieved mother.

Usaia returned to Fiji for a short time, but three months later he was recalled by the commander of the allied forces on Bougainville. He had such an intimate knowledge of the jungle tracks and of the allied forces in the Pacific that his services were considered indispensable.

After the allied forces had landed at Torokina, on Bougainville they prepared to build an airstrip high up in the mountains. Usaia Sotutu was given the task of choosing a suitable site and suggested a position on a small plateau high up on the side of the mountain.

Five hundred men in a battalion of Fijian commandos were assigned to go up, clear the ground of all growth and prepare the airstrip. They were not expecting any enemy attack, believing the Japanese knew nothing about it, so they were only lightly armed. However, a local man, who was helping the Japanese, betrayed the Fijians and reported the allied forces' activities at the airstrip to Japanese headquarters on Bougainville.

The Japanese were elated. Not long before this, in the Western Solomons, the Fijian commando force had completely routed the Japanese. Now they could see a way to have revenge on the Fijians. Posting large groups of soldiers all around the mountain below the airstrip, they blocked off every exit point they could find from the coast up to the air strip. The allied commanders were distressed, "There's no way we can get those men out. They're completely surrounded by the enemy. We'll lose every one of them," they cried.

Usaia heard of their dilemma. He went to the US officer in command. "I can get the men out, sir," he said with great assurance. "I know every track on the whole of these mountains. If they close off ninety-nine exits I'll find the hundredth one. At least let me have a try."

Usaia spoke with such confidence that the officer finally relented. Usaia was sent off in a small, light plane, and dropped off quickly on to the roughly-finished airstrip.

The plane quickly took off again. "I'll lead you and your men out of here, sir," Usaia assured the Fijian officer in charge, "but first we must pray for God's protection as we go."

Usaia prayed for the safety of the men, their protection from the enemy and commended the whole exercise to God. As they began their exit torrential rain poured down. This was the very best means of protection for them, reducing visibility and covering their tracks as all 500 men followed Usaia single file out from the airstrip to safety. They crawled through heavy undergrowth, slipped on wet rocks and waded through swollen streams, following Usaia on a trail few people had any knowledge of. For a week nobody heard anything of them.

The Japanese forces surrounding the airstrip attacked, and were astounded to find the place quite deserted. How could those Fijians possibly get past the huge number of troops they had watching every track through the bush? Usaia's detailed knowledge of the bush tracks, combined with his trust in God, had performed the miracle.

When the Fijians did eventually arrive back at their camp in the jungle near the coast, the commanding officer listened to their story in amazement. He was full of praise for Usaia and wrote a report recommending he be awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest British military honor. Unfortunately that citation was lost in transit and the award was never made.

When the war was over Usaia returned to Fiji for a time, then he and Makereta returned with the two youngest children to help rebuild the war-torn Methodist Mission in the northern part of Bougainville. They served a three-year term before returning home to Fiji because of Usaia's poor health. After a time of recuperation he was able to return to active work in the church in Fiji. He had been ordained into the Methodist ministry in Bougainville, some time before World War 11, so back in his home country he continued in ministry, serving his people and his God faithfully. He died in 1983.

On their return to Fiji, Makereta went back to teaching, continuing to use her Christian leadership gifts until her death in 1992, at the age of 84.

Usaia and Makereta were much loved and respected by everyone; they lived out their faith in God amongst their people. Their children rise up and call them blessed.