By H. IAN HOGBIN

A Backwater of the Pacific

Natives of Rennell Island

Rennell Islander.

PROBABLY the most unvisited of the inhabited islands in the Pacific is Rennell Island. I would hesitate to call it the loneliest because it is much closer to centres of white population than, say, the more famous Pitcairn and Easter Islands. Rennell is the most southern of the Solomon Islands, lying one hundred miles south of Guadalcanar, the largest of them.

Let us visit these Solomon Islands. We shall arrive first of all at Tulagi, the tiny settlement on a small island off the coast of the larger island of Florida. Tulagi is a typical outpost of white civilisation. The residents are practically all government officials who have come from England or Australia to administer the settlement. There is, however, an extensive Chinese quarter. The Chinese are the carpenters and shipbuilders of most of these Pacific islands. The harbour is wonderfully beautiful with its fringe of green hills dotted here and there with the grey-brown native villages or the red roofs of the European houses. Opposite Tulagi and within the harbour is the island of Makambo, the business centre.

Steamer day is an event for Tulagi and Makambo. The vessel from Sydney only comes once in six weeks. The harbour is crowded with small craft from the outlying plantations, launches, luggers, schooners, cutters, anything that will carry a man on the sea. At steamer time, too, the couple of inter-island vessels are usually in port. The chief trade of the Solomons is in copra and trochus shell. These commodities are picked up from plantations and trading stations by the two inter-island ships and brought in to the more central depots, such as Makambo, ready to be taken aboard by the Sydney steamer.

But neither Makambo nor Tulagi is our destination. We are going on to Rennell. Some time ago an expedition was formed to visit Rennell. It was made up of Mr. G. A. V. Stanley, myself, and Mr. N. Wilson, who acted as wireless operator. We were probably the first white men to spend more than a night or two ashore despite the fact that the course of the mail steamer from Sydney to the Solomons lies comparatively close.

When we left Sydney, practically all we knew of the place was that a few years ago two native missionaries who attempted to Christianise the people were killed. However, a few brief visits to the island have been made since by European vessels and *beche-de-mer* luggers in charge of Japanese on their way to Indispensable Reef, further to the south, have also put in a few times for fresh vegetables.

We collected our stores and within a few days were taken to Rennell in the Resident Commissioner's yacht *Ranadi*. On the fifth day we saw Rennell on the horizon, and as we drew closer we made it out as a sort of low plateau falling off at the edges in high perpendicular cliffs. The island is actually a raised coral atoll; these cliffs were originally the face of the reef below the level of the sea. The atoll probably was of normal formation, that is to say, a ring of coral islands surrounding a lagoon. When the uplift took place the islands became a ridge running round the outside of the new land mass. This ridge slopes in towards the centre of the island to form a flat basin. At one end there was slightly less uplift, and the old lagoon consequently formed a land-locked lake. From end to end the island is fifty miles long and at its narrowest it is eight miles wide, though it broadens out considerably at other points.

To find the only safe anchorage, and that in but one season of the year, we had almost to circumnavigate the island. Late in the afternoon we turned into Kunggava Bay, on the shore of which we were to make our base camp. This bay is a wide expanse of water, deep on the outside, but towards the shore seamed with coral reefs, so that even the small *Ranadi* had to anchor a long way out. Kunggava Bay is bordered by the high cliffs which everywhere surround the island. Generally these cliffs are covered with greenery, but at different points bald and whitened faces show themselves rising sheer out of the sea. From the yacht we could see in one corner of the bay a beach with coconuts growing upon it, and it was to this that we made our way in the dinghy. Canoes came out before we reached the shore, rather clumsy, narrow dugouts with a single outrigger. Then we saw the natives. They have always been called Polynesians by casual visitors and they certainly do speak a Polynesian dialect. It is sufficient to say that the Rennellese cast of feature is not like any recognised Polynesian type. The hair, which grows into a magnificent mop, is quite like that of some of the Melanesian peoples of the Solomons. The natives are fairly tall but are not as well built as the Samoans, and by no means as comely. Their skin is a light copper colour.

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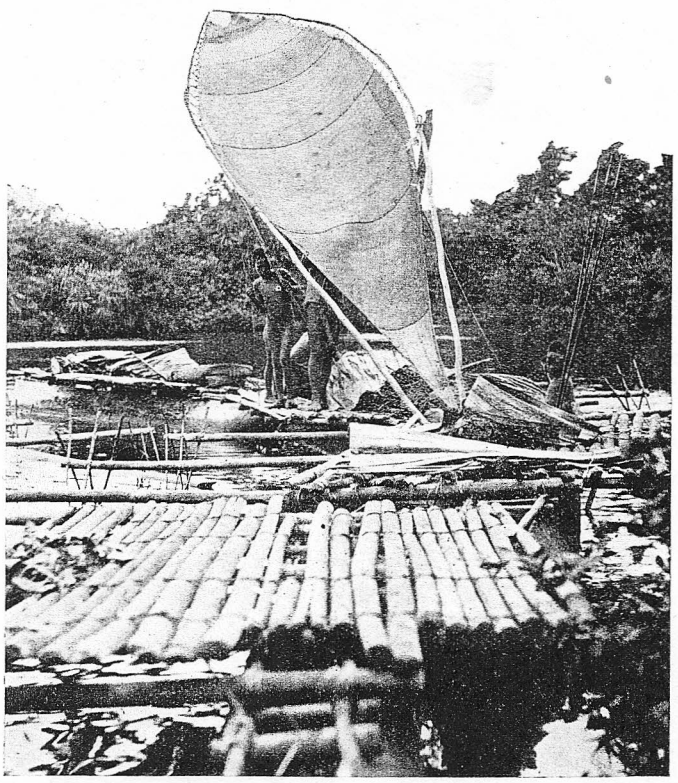

Rennell Island canoe. The sail is made from pandanus leaf mat.

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On this, our first day, we did no more than land and have a look around the houses on the beach. There were three of these, all built on the same plan. They could more accurately be described as shelters, for instead of the quite comfortable houses of some other natives, these were merely roofs, so constructed that they came within a foot or so of the ground. There were no walls, and ingress was obtained by crawling under the eaves. To one of the houses we were taken to be introduced to a chief. The place was hung with shark tails, but they were probably of no more significance there than the trophies of the chase in any club smoking-room.

Next day we were all up early and went ashore to pick out the most suitable site for our camp. At home we had always considered that dry ground and convenient fresh water were both requisite. Here we had to dispense with both and put up our tents on the beach. It would have required an army of bearers to have shifted all our gear and stores up those cliffs, since in many places the path to the top demanded the use of hands as well as feet. Even inland, owing to the porous nature of the rock, fresh water is very scarce. There are no streams, but here and there pools are to be found in the depths of subterranean caverns. The natives do not wholly rely on these pools. They are able to drink the brackish water of the inland lake and that obtained from holes scooped in the beach sand. Fortunately we had a small tank with us and that proved to be sufficient for the base camp.

The natives have but lately emerged from the stone age, and we were able to pay our labour, chiefly bearers, with steel axes, knives and fish-hooks, together with red calico beads and mirrors. The reason for this extraordinary backwardness is that they have had such little contact with the outside world. This is largely due to the fact that they present no attractions to the trader. The three most important articles of international trade which come from this part of the world, coconuts, *beche-de-mer* and shell, are not present in anything like payable quantities. Even if they were, there is the lack of harbours to be considered.

It is impossible to make more than a rough estimate of the population but I am inclined to think that it does not much exceed 1,000, since all the districts we were able to visit were but sparsely settled. There are no actual villages, and for the most part the people live in small family groups. Each group owns three or four gardens in different places and migrates from one to another, sometimes roaming down to the coast to spend a few days in fishing.

Soon after we had arrived people came to Kunggava: they kept on arriving till at least a couple of hundred had walked from inland, all to see the white men, and, if possible, to earn an axe or knife in exchange for some weapons of their own or else as payment for doing work for them. After curiosity had been satisfied these people began to return home and soon all that remained of the crowd were the half-dozen regular inhabitants of the village, if we can dignify three houses with the name of village. I wished to get an insight into their habits and customs and it was therefore necessary for me to do some visiting to see what their own homes were like. I therefore decided to make an expedition inland to the lake.

The lake is a huge sheet of water some six miles wide by twenty miles long. The canoes of the lake are much larger than those which we used on the sea-lagoon. They are of the same design except that a platform of boards is built on the outrigger. Some of the larger canoes carry a sail of pandanus leaf mat. This is oval in shape and over eighteen feet long. It is fixed to the bow of the canoe and points over to the after part, making the canoe a graceful and fairly speedy craft.

Around the shores of the lake are more villages, generally of not more than two or three houses. Many of these have a small yam store-house built on high posts to keep the rats from the food. Each

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house has a grave before it—low mounds over which a small house is erected. Weapons of the dead seem frequently to be put on these graves.

To the side of the house is the kitchen. This is sacred to the women, and men are absolutely forbidden to enter it. The cooking is done by the usual method in Oceania, that is to say, in ovens of hot stones. Behind the house stretch the cultivated fields of taro or yams. Taro grows best in the mud at the lakeside. It is a plant resembling the arum lily in appearance but with a coarse edible root. Yams are cultivated in drier soil. Sometimes there is a banana plantation with the young banana plants fenced in to prevent the scrub hen or megapode from uprooting them. These birds are a great pest, and alongside a large garden one frequently sees a house raised on high stilts. This is used as a lookout post. A watcher sits within, and as soon as a scrub hen gets into the garden he gives the alarm so that the children can chase it away.

One of the most interesting sights we witnessed in Rennell was a funeral. As we approached a village one afternoon we could hear a dreadful wailing. A strange sight met our eyes as we turned into the village from the path. There were four or five adults sitting around a corpse, apparently in the abandonment of grief. They had mutilated their foreheads with knives and blood was streaming over their faces. This weeping continued all that day and night, and not till next day was the body buried. It was laid out on fine mats and rubbed with turmeric. Shell ornaments were placed around the arms and new bark clothing was put upon it. It was finally buried in extended position in a shallow grave and a house was raised above it.

Unfortunately after two months in Rennell we were compelled to return, by Government orders, to Tulagi. Since then, except for a visit by a scientific expedition collecting specimens of birds, the island has again been left alone. There it remains, not fifteen hundred miles from Sydney, an island still in the condition in which Cook and other navigators found Hawaii, Tahiti, and other important commercial centres.

Friendship

Friendship is the gift of Heaven
With all emotions that are tense and strong,
Hope and Love are freely given,
Friendship is God's natural song.

—Anthony Kyle.