

Tale of South Pacific gunplay Piers Akerman

Like all good sea stories this one starts with a meeting of strangers over a drink on a ship.

In this instance, the yacht Van Diemen was hosting cocktails aboard for a handful of sailors at her berth in Opuia Harbor, New Zealand, the night before we set sail across the Pacific. Among the guests was an American sailor (we'll call him Joe) and his wife and sailing mate (we'll call Nancy), who seemed most at home talking about their ocean cruises. Even in the dim twilight it was impossible to ignore a sweeping scar down one of Joe's legs from thigh to below the knee and in the course of the evening the question was asked whether it was a result of an accident at sea. Not quite, but close by, was the answer. It was the reminder of a night of gunplay in the bar at the Waikiki Yacht Club, in Honolulu. Over a few drinks, Joe told us how he had been sitting at the bar having a quiet drink when shots were fired, and he went down with a bullet-shattered knee. It was May 17, 1980, the day of the annual Pearl Harbor race, and the winner, yacht club member Rodney Inaba, a Japanese American contractor, rather tastelessly hoisted the Japanese Rising Sun battle flag on the forestay of his yacht after he claimed victory. Flourishing this emblem, he sailed into the little Waikiki Harbor, where it was seen by Rob Hall, who has been described in newspaper accounts as a "rather cantankerous" businessman. Hall challenged Inaba when he entered the yacht club but Inaba was, according to witnesses, insensitively dismissive. It was a mistake, and the aggrieved Hall left the bar for the club car park, returning with a pistol with which he then shot a number of people, including the offending skipper. It was an interesting footnote in yacht racing history and set aside as an anecdote for retelling when such racing stories are retold in waterfront bars around the world. Until last Monday when Van Diemen berthed at the end of the Waikiki YC's C-dock and her crew ambled up to the bar to wash away the salt from the last 1000-mile passage. After the second beer, the question was asked of Cliff, the barman, what was the story of the shooting? "Right where you're sitting," he said, "and those plaster patches on the pillar behind you cover the holes where he missed." "The defense lawyer claimed that the particular Chablis the shooter had been drinking upset his chemical equilibrium and got his client off on the grounds of temporary insanity." Clyde, the night barman confirmed the story. During the proceedings, Hall's attorney David Schutter said an unspecified ingredient in white wine the defendant drank before the shooting caused an "organic brain dysfunction" resulting in a phenomenon called "pathological intoxication" that left Hall unable to control his actions, newspaper accounts show. Though a panel of Hawaii Supreme Court judges upheld Hall's indictment in a 1983 ruling, saying he "fired a gun wildly into a crowd of people, hitting three people below the waist and narrowly missing a fourth", Hall was subsequently acquitted and had the incident expunged from the records. The little tale could have come from the pages of James Michener's Hawaii but that is because these islands are storybook stuff.