

The Forgotten Men of the Vaiviri

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The Forgotten Men of the Vaiviri People

This is the story of two such men: **Captain Igua Kevau of Tanobada** and **Gari Kevau of Hanuabada** - two names whispered more than written, remembered by villagers long after the newspapers stopped printing their stories.

Many of us have someone we call a hero, though we rarely use the word. Not the kind from films or speeches, but the kind whose courage lives quietly, tucked into old memories or stories passed down at the dinner table.

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A Voyage That Should Have Been Ordinary

In June 1930, the small motor launch **Vaiviri** left Port Moresby for Kerema with 32 passengers and crew on board. Among them was a well-known Resident Magistrate, **F.J. Berge**, his wife, and their four young children.

The southern coast can be gentle one day and unforgiving the next. As the Vaiviri neared its destination, a violent storm swept in without warning. A single, monstrous gale hit the vessel broadside. In an instant it capsized, hung briefly upside down, then slid beneath the water.

Sixteen people would not survive.

Mrs Berge later described the moment before the wave struck - reaching out to steady her child, and then suddenly finding herself in open water, clinging to a tin container while the storm tore at everything around her.

It was in this chaos that **Igua and Gari** reached her.

Two Men Against a Wild Sea

The storm was furious. The wind howled like something alive, and pieces of the Vaiviri drifted past them, timber, clothing, someone's cooking pot.

Igua and Gari were exhausted, but they refused to let go of the woman they had found. They kept her afloat, pushed back against waves that rose taller than them, and scanned the water for any sign of the others.

Mr Berge and three of the children never surfaced.

Later, when a reporter asked Captain Igua whether he ever feared he wouldn't make it, he gave a reply so simple and so human that it has stayed with me:

"Oh Taubada, I couldn't think only one thing this Sinabada. She begged me not to leave her. I told her, 'Sinabada, if I die, you die too; if I get ashore, you get ashore.'"

There was no bravado. No self-praise. Just a man clinging to another life with the same determination he held onto his own.

A Shoreline of Survivors

One of the Berge children miraculously reached land but died soon after, likely from swallowing too much seawater. Eleven others also managed to swim ashore, some after ten gruelling hours in the dark, guided only by instinct and desperation.

When the vessel **Laurabada** arrived to retrieve the living and the lost, it found a coastline scattered with survivors battered, shivering, and alive because they had refused to surrender to the sea.

And in the middle of that terrible night, two men had held onto a woman they barely knew, refusing to loosen their grip even as the storm tried to tear them apart.

Honour That Arrived Too Late

For their actions, Igua and Gari were later awarded the **Lloyd's Medal for Bravery**, a rare honour presented by Governor Sir Hubert Murray. A fund was raised in their name to support them and their families - a gesture from a community shaken by tragedy.

But fate can be cruel.

Captain Igua died before he could receive his medal in person. His bravery lived longer than he did.

Echoes of Quiet Courage

Their story doesn't sit in history textbooks, and most Port Moresby residents today may never have heard their names. But among the elders of Hanuabada and Tanobada, the memory still lingers — the tale of two ordinary men who, when confronted by a storm, chose to become something more.

Real heroism rarely enters a room loudly.

More often, it is two men holding on to a stranger in the dark, whispering reassurance against a gale.

Captain Igua and Gari didn't save Mrs Berge because anyone would read about it.

They saved her because she was there, terrified and pleading, and they had the strength and heart, to pull her through the storm.

Their story remains one of the south coast's quiet legends - a reminder that sometimes the bravest people are the ones the world forgets... unless someone decides to tell the story again.

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