

Thirty Years in the Jungle! Could you do it?

SHOICHI YOKOI

On January 24, 1972, two residents of the village of Talofofo in the southern part of Guam were out hunting along the Talofofo River when they heard a sound in the tall reeds. They thought it was an animal or maybe a child in the bushes, but out came a very old and wild-appearing Japanese man carrying a shrimp trap. The hunters were startled at first, and after a few confused words, they subdued 56-year-old Shoichi Yokoi and took him back to their corrugated metal home in the jungle, about an hour's walk away. Eventually, the police were summoned, and the story of Shoichi Yokoi's saga became known. During WWII, Yokoi had been transferred from Manchuria to Guam, and he served as a sergeant in the supply corps. When the Americans came, he and nine other men hid in the jungle. Their numbers gradually dwindled to three, and they shared a cave for a while. He knew from a leaflet he found in 1952 that the war was over but never gave himself up because "we Japanese soldiers were told to prefer death to the disgrace of getting captured alive". Eight years before he was found, the other two men died, leaving him alone. How did Yokoi handle the basic necessities of life? Food? Water? Clothing? Shelter? Tools? Let's explore, one by one, how he managed to provide these necessities in a situation where he had no hope (or desire) of returning to "civilization".

FOOD

According to Yokoi, obtaining necessary food was "a continuous hardship". He described it as his single hardest on-going task, despite

the fact that food in the jungle is said to be plentiful. His diet included mangoes, various nuts, crabs, prawns, snails, rats, eels, pigeons, and wild hog. Though he had no salt for flavoring or as a preservative, he boiled coconuts in coconut milk. He built little traps and caught shrimp and eel from the river. He put grated coconut into the traps to serve as bait. He would then skewer the eel and shrimp and grill them over his fire. Yokoi had fashioned a rat trap from wire, based on a design that was formerly very common in Japan. Yokoi's trap measured about 10 by 6 by 4 inches, and just the slightest touch of the bait caused the lid to shut. He said he liked rat meat, especially the liver. However, he added that he could not afford to be concerned with whether or not he "liked" any of the food he obtained. He ate it all. On one occasion, he caught a wild pig and became ill. Apparently, he hadn't cooked it well enough and he experienced severe stomach pains for a month.

CLOTHING

Reporters who saw Yokoi's clothing were amazed. They were unable to determine from what sort of materials they had been made. He even had home-made buttons! His clothes were made by beating the bark of the pago tree into flat pieces of fabric. The pago tree is very common in the mountains of Guam. He then beat pieces of brass in order to create a needle shape, and gradually drilled holes in his sewing needle using an awl. His thread also came from the beaten bark of the island's pago trees. He wove cloth from the beaten fibre, and sewed the pieces together to make a total of three "suits" during his 28 years on the island. By the way, Yokoi had been a tailor before the war, a craft that



served him well. His three sets of pants and shirts were hand-made and then he would constantly repair them to keep them serviceable. On each of his shirts, he made outside pockets for carrying things. His pants even had belt loops! And he took plastic from a flashlight and fashioned buttons, button-holes and all. He manufactured one belt by weaving the pigo fibres, and on the belt he had a hand-made buckle that he'd fashioned from wire. It turned out that in the past, the people of Guam used to manufacture a rough cloth from the pigo fibre, and they turned these into something like burlap bags. It is said that this is no longer done today, so Yokoi – out of necessity – rediscovered one of nature's secrets.

SHELTER

Yokoi lived in different shelters during his 28 years. One of his shelters was a small house made from rushes he collected. He also lived in a hole that he dug under a bamboo grove. Yokoi said that he chose that particular site because it was well hidden and because the ground is more solid under a grove of bamboos. Officials had reported that it was nearly impossible to see the opening to his cave even when you were right next to it. The entire cave was dug with a trowel that Yokoi fashioned from an old cannon shell. He carried the excavated soil, handful by handful, to a nearby grassy area and scattered it so that no one would notice. After one month of digging, he was able to move in, even though he continually expanded the interior space. The opening to his cave was about two foot square, which he kept well-camouflaged. A bamboo ladder led eight or nine feet into the inside. The inside of this cave, even at its highest point, was still just

slightly more than three feet tall, which meant that Yokoi always had to squat. Inside, he had a toilet hole so well designed that it would flow off naturally to the river below. At another end of the cave – the “kitchen” – Yokoi had some shelves, and a hearth with a cooking pot. Keep in mind that the interior of this cave was pitch-black, so Yokoi had devised a coconut shell lantern which burned oils. He had fitted the cave with a ventilation hole, and kept bamboo leaves on the floor.

TOOLS

Yokoi described the acquiring of food as his single greatest hardship; the second greatest hardship was the production of tools and other articles of daily use. Remember, no hardware store, no supermarket, no K-mart. All he had to work with was raw nature, and whatever metal and other objects he could scavenge from the island. Yokoi collected whatever he found, such as discarded cans. He carefully cut a Japanese canteen in two, and made a frying pan from one half and a plate from the other half. He found a water kettle and repaired the leaks so he could use it. He took cylinders of bamboo and used them to collect rainwater and as dippers to collect water from the river.

HEALTH

Doctors who examined Yokoi after he was found said that he was fine both physically and mentally. Though the two hunters who initially discovered Yokoi thought he was much older than 56, they did report that he seemed quite strong for his size. Apparently, he remained healthier in the jungle than most folks do in front of their televisions and behind the wheel of their smog-belchers.

