

Hiyaking Hawai'i: Lucky Pitfall in Moanalua Valley.

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Note: Pictures were taken with my Canon SX110.



"I've fallen! I need a rope!"

The faraway cry came from Wil Kawano. Only a minute before I had seen him just ahead climbing up the uluhe covered spur ridge. Now he was about 50 feet below in a narrow ravine. I could not see him. But a slight indentation in the uluhe showed where he had tumbled down.

A few hours earlier, led by Thea Ferentinos on the morning of Sunday March 22nd at Moanalua Valley Park, about two dozen hikers started at around 8:30am. My friends Dudley and Darryl were waiting and we swapped personal happenings as we hiked on the road leading deeper into the valley.

Wil, Darryl, Dudley and I comprised the Hiking Gang of Four as we brought up the rear of today's group. Since Dudley and Darryl had never seen Pohakukaluahine, a large petroglyph rock near one of the many bridges. So Wil and I made sure to show them it. Most of the carvings were weathered and hard to discern. By the time we restarted hiking we were well behind.

Birds sung beautifully as the sun rose gradually overhead. Gray clouds billowed in contrast above. Our lively conversation kept time with our fast pace. Time passed quickly when we chatted and slowed when we didn't.

Though the road had numerous bridge crossings over which the stream flowed, the water was shallow and we easily tiptoed through it without getting wet. Sometimes, a newer bridge provided an alternate dry path as it was always higher than the older lower bridge.

After the lengthy trudge on the mostly level gravel road we finally reached the turnoff onto the trail after an hour. Thea was waiting for us along with

Justin Ohara, another HTMC hike leader. We dropped down to a streambed and easily crossed on gray boulders. Now the pace really slowed as it got muddy and numerous stream crossings forced us to watch our feet and overhead tangles of hau trees forced us to watch our heads

Dudley and I tried to keep track of stream crossings, but there were too many distractions.

“I’m good at counting switchbacks,” explained Dudley. “But I don’t count stream crossings well.”

With each stream crossing I avoided getting my boots wet by discerning the best route which sometimes wasn’t close to the trail. Others, like veteran hiker Big John, not into rock hopping finesse, just plowed into the water. Luckily there were enough rocks for me to cross dry each time.

Big John is a distinctive character. White haired, barebacked and muscular, he has been hiking with the club since the 1950’s he said. I had seen him on many hikes prior but never got a chance to talk to him much before. He is usually in the lead pack of hikers. Apparently an ankle injury was slowing him down today.



The last time I hiked this valley, more than a year before, numbered plastic bottle caps, nailed into tree trunks, were used to identify the stream crossings. Very few were still present I soon discovered. We surmised hunters or other hikers had removed them for their own puerile reasons probably.

Crossings came frequently. Most times we were enveloped in dense vegetation. Occasionally we came upon open stretches that helped ease the

claustrophobic monotony. Probably when we had done a dozen crossings we began to see beautiful tall plants with long purple and white flowers.

Looking like stacked circles of hanging bells with a Catholic nun's habit above each, they were a beautiful sight especially when a group grew together.



In between one of the many crossings, a lady named Judith stopped us. She said she couldn't find the trail ahead after the next stream crossing and had turned around. Big John, Dudley and I were puzzled by this development. Dudley decided to head back to find Thea. After a while I decided to check ahead myself and when I reached the stream I immediately saw a dirt path on the other side veering away on the left. I called loudly back to the others to continue on. They quickly caught up to me. Of course, Judith couldn't

understand how she'd missed the trail.

The pleasant company made for a pleasant time. Meanwhile, instinctively, we ducked, dodged and detoured up, over and around rocks, trees and roots.

Eventually, immediately after the 24th stream crossing (according to a bottle cap) we began the inexorable climb up to the Ko'olau summit. I huffed upwards behind HTMC veteran Big John and my friend Darryl. We came upon Wil and a lady. Wil, as is his nature, encouraged her as she was struggling to climb. Behind me were a couple of other people including Judith. After them, well out of sight, were Justin Ohara and Thea helping another pair of slow-climbing women.



The lady Wil was helping had red hair to match her pink outfit. She climbed slowly and eventually she stopped and suggested Wil continue on without her. Using the opportunity, the rest of us also edged past her with Big John taking the lead. Wil and Darryl soon also pulled ahead of me. Though I put my head down to focus on the steep climb I couldn't keep up.

Maybe half way up my thumping heart was stopped by a call from the gully below.

"Hey! I've fallen! I need a rope!"

It seemed surreal at first and it took a minute to register. I looked around in confusion.

Big John came back down and looked over the edge of the ridge.

I recognized the faraway voice as Wil's. Looking up and down the ridge I could see the other hikers spread out thinly. Something moved in the ferns way below.

"Man down! Man down!"

I shouted both up and down the ridge.

"I'm okay!" shouted Wil from below. "I just need a rope."

"Thea or Justin probably have one, or can radio for one!" I shouted back.

Suddenly, I saw Wil stick his head out. His tanned face and silver hair contrasted with the bright green foliage.

"You okay!" yelled Big John.

"Yeah! I'm fine! I just need a rope."

"Pass the word!" I shouted. "We need a rope."

No one nearby had one though. As we discussed options on how to contact Thea and Justin, Wil decided he would try to climb out. I was initially against this but soon saw quivering ferns below moving upwards closer and closer. I couldn't see Wil but saw the effects of his moving against the uluhe. He struggled up the near vertical sides of the ridge. Big John and I were the closest and we peered over the edge trying to catch a glimpse of him.

A group of hikers working their way down stopped to find out what was going on. I convinced one of them he should continue down to contact Thea or Justin. Ironically, it turned out he was the only doctor on the hike today.

It took a while but Wil worked his way about three quarters way up. But eventually he reached a point where it was too steep to continue. I had to stretch precariously past the overhanging ferns to see him. A nearby woman suggested tying hiking poles or stringing backpacks together, but Big John and I dismissed both ideas as too outlandish.

As we waited Wil explained he had grabbed a nearby tree branch on the left to hoist himself up and it had broken off. His backward momentum flung him right and off the side of the trail. He had tumbled head-over-heels five times he counted he said before finally crashing into a muddy ravine. After quickly ascertaining he was not hurt he had scrambled out.

“You guys go ahead,” said Wil casually. “I don’t want to hold you up. I’ll wait for the rope to come.”

Of course, both Big John and I laughed at his concern for us and not himself.

Finally, I looked down the trail and saw Thea and Justin hustling up the ridge. She was unraveling a rope. She passed it up the line of hikers now gathered on the steep ridge.

"Wil, hold on! They're bringing a rope!" I shouted.

Someone handed me the rope and I tied it the same tree whose broken branch had sent Wil tumbling. But the rope was too short by several feet. A

lady suggested I tie my hiking pole to it. I tried it and threw it down. This time with some stretching and maneuvering Wil managed to grab the pole but it slipped off the rope.

To save rope length I had foolishly only tied one knot.

I was suddenly surprised to see Justin appear in the ravine below Wil.

He had apparently climbed down to the ravine at a lower elevation and scrambled up to where Wil had landed. He suggested Wil come back down and they could climb out together. But Wil thought if he could reach our rope he could climb out.

Thea was now next to Big John and me. She suggested we remove the rope from the tree and just hoist him out by hand. I agreed and untied the rope. At first I was going to wrap it around my hand, but Big John quickly grabbed it and twisted the rope a couple of times around his massive forearm. I threw the free end down to Wil and he managed to reach it now. Big John held the rope as Wil pulled the rope taut.

"You're pulling me over," said Big John suddenly.

I slipped behind Big John and locked my arms around his waist. I leaned back and countered Wil's weight on Big John. Big John's muscles rippled as he pulled up Wil. Occasionally, Wil shouted for him to stop so he could get a good foothold. Finally after several minutes of this stop and go rope pulling, Wil's head slowly emerged from the uluhe. Several hands reached out and hauled him back up onto the trail. He was covered in green bits of uluhe.

Looking back down at Wil's path along the hill I noticed a lone gray tree that would have done him some serious damage, had he the misfortune of

falling a yard to the left.

"Now what about Justin?" I asked.

"Oh, he doesn't need any help," said Thea matter-of-factly.

"Justin's a tough hiker. He'll climb out by himself."

Justin did exactly that and worked his way back down the ravine to a more climbable spot and clawed his way up the uluhe until he was within reach of the trail.



After everyone had had time to regroup we returned to climbing the ridge. Big John was ahead of me and I tried hard to keep up. The redhead in pink was behind me and so she slowed down everyone behind her.

A mistake I've often made is trying to keep pace with stronger hikers. Soon I had to stop from exhaustion. Like a machine Big John kept going.

Looking back I couldn't see anyone below me. They were hidden by the foliage. Verdant Moanalua Valley stretched towards the far-off specks of buildings of Pearl City and beyond to Pearl Harbor. Eventually when a person's head appeared on the trail way below me I used that as a cue to resume climbing.

Ten more minutes of intense huffing and I finally emerged from dense foliage onto a small dirt and rock depression. On the right side on the grassy slope sat Dudley having lunch with several others.

I immediately went to the precipice. Strong gusts buffeted me and I edged as close to the cliff as I dared. Far below were the tunnel entrances for the H-3 highway. Miniature cars whipped into and out of it. I followed the flowing curves of the twin roads until it disappeared around a vertical mountain. The bright blue of expansive Kaneohe Bay next caught my attention. Round sandy spots speckled it. Above white clouds completed the picture perfectly.

I then crossed a shallow ditch on my right then up the slope to sit down next to Dudley. He and the others were quite surprised to hear the details of Wil's tumble.

It seemed to take quite a while before the other hikers appeared. Wil was with them and soon the windy summit was crowded. Initially like me they stood on the edge of the sheer precipice staring at the wonderful views. I ribbed Wil when he did the same.

"Stay away from the edge, Wil!" I shouted jokingly. "We don't have a rope long enough if you fall off here."

But the strong winds prevented him from hearing me. Lucky for me

probably. They then crossed the ditch and joined us on the grassy incline where they too also began to have lunch. Wil's tumble was a main topic of conversation of course.

Left and right, long, sloped, massive ridge walls channeled our windward views. Beyond, Kaneohe Bay spread out with its sandy splatters surrounded by sparkling blue. Below, H-3 curved seductively away against the base of the green fluted pali.

Amidst this splendid panoramic beauty Wil's rescue took on special meaning. With a little good luck and a lot of good teamwork, Thea, Justin, Big John, I and others had ensured his safe return. It felt good to have participated. I can only hope any future tumblers in Moanalua Valley will also enjoy a similarly happy ending.



The End.