

Drama in Real Life

The three crewmen of the hijacked *Kamalii* concluded that just three questions faced them: Where, how and when will we be done away with?

BY STEPHEN G. FREEMAN

A Dime of Pure Gold

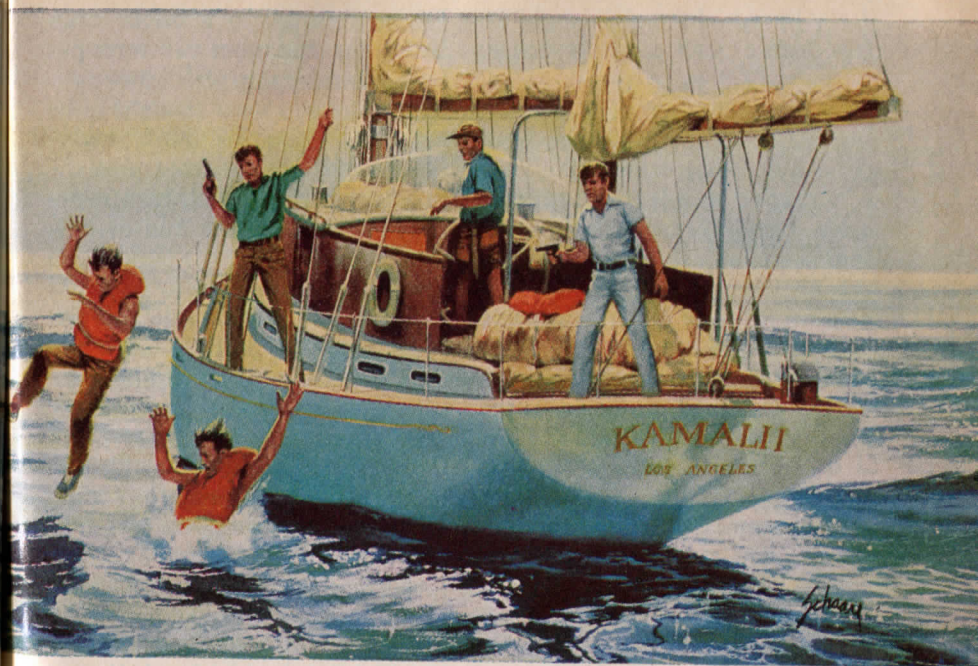
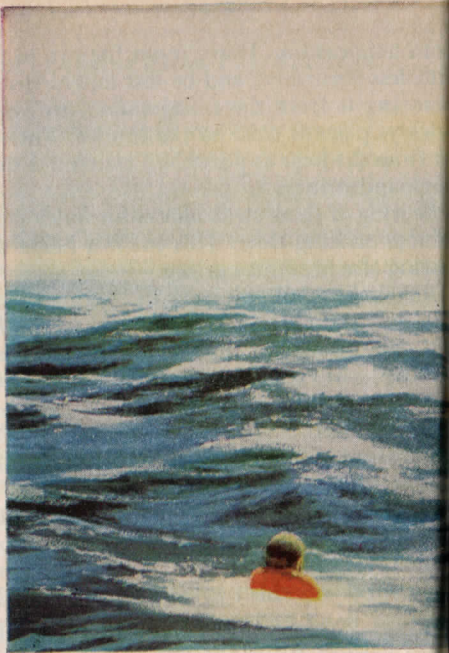
THE 75-FOOT ketch *Kamalii* lay at her berth in Honolulu's Ali Wai Yacht Harbor. She had competed recently in the Transpacific Yacht Race, and was now provisioned for the return to her home port in California.

It was 11 p.m., August 6, 1971. *Kamalii's* three crewmen were aboard and asleep. Mate Frank Power, age 47, awoke abruptly in his after cabin. He heard footsteps on the main deck. Why would anyone be boarding *Kamalii* at this hour? A small porthole looked out at deck level. Legs passing, moving forward. Power rose, mounted the steps to the bridge—and almost

walked into a pistol pointed at his stomach!

Power saw that three men stood on the bridge, all with pistols drawn and ammunition belts worn across their chests and circling their waists. Two of the three also held knives in their left hands.

When Robert Waschkeit, 49, *Kamalii's* captain, and John Freitas, 52, the cook and able-bodied seaman, also appeared, the three crewmen were ordered to lie down on the deck of the salon. Their wrists were handcuffed behind their backs, their ankles roped, then drawn up behind and made fast to the handcuffs.



At first, skipper Waschkeit thought it was a stickup and was thankful that little cash was aboard. But when the gunmen left the salon and returned with three duffel bags and a roll of charts, he was not so sure. Then they freed Waschkeit's ankles and ordered him to the engine room, where they had him explain details of *Kamalii's* operation. Brought back to the salon, he was again trussed, and all three crewmen were gagged—their mouths stuffed with absorbent cotton and lips sealed with surgical tape. Each was carried sack-of-potatoes fashion into the forecabin, where one gunman stood over

them. "Make any noise," this man said in a high-pitched, uneven voice, his gun barrel quivering, "and I'll kill you." He would, they knew.

Now *Kamalii* was backing out of the slip. Waschkeit winced as a piling was hit hard, then scraped. He soon realized that they were heading out to sea. Moreover, he knew that no one would impute any significance to *Kamalii's* departure, since she had been preparing for a voyage. Only if owner E. L. "Larry" Doheny III, now enjoying his island home on Oahu's south shore, appeared at the slip to find *Kamalii* gone would an

alarm be raised—and it could be days before such an appearance.

THE three gunmen, all in their 20s, were slender, clean-shaven, with hair short-trimmed. They were dressed simply and appropriately. They were obviously long-time acquaintances. Their names, unknown, of course, to *Kamalii's* crew, were Kerry D. Bryant, Mark E. Maynard and Michael R. Melton—the latter seemingly their leader. Melton had been in the Coast Guard, and Bryant and Maynard had been together in the Marine Corps in Vietnam, then later in communes in California and Hawaii. Their conversation, their captives soon discovered, verged on preoccupation with things paradisaical—Bryant's in particular. He seemed obsessed with the "groovy commune" they would set up "out there"—a world of peace somewhere in the South Pacific. "Like with Gauguin," Maynard added.

Bryant, the one whom the prisoners would come to refer to as The Slapper—he continually slapped the flat side of his bared knife into the palm of his left hand in a slow *plat . . . plat . . . plat*—told them, "We're going to make it easier for you. No one could hear you now even if you did holler." The gags were removed and the behind-the-back trussings released. Wrists were handcuffed in front of the bodies, ankles still lashed, with wrists tied to ankle ropes. Wasch-

keit was moved to a single cabin amidships; the other two were put in the double cabin aft.

It's piracy! Power thought as he lay helpless on his bunk. *Unbelievable!* No matter what plan the hijackers had in mind, each member of *Kamalii's* crew had by now concluded that the young men would ultimately have to get rid of them. The crew's clothing and personal gear had already been put over the side, wallets with all identification included. Having made off with the boat—a \$475,000 theft—the hijackers would certainly have to eliminate any clues to its destination. *There could be no witnesses.*

For a while, they'll need us to run the boat, Waschkeit thought. *They know little navigation.* (Melton had toyed with the ship's sextant, but finally tossed it aside apparently finding it incomprehensible.) *And the way they're gunning the engine she'll be out of fuel after 800 miles—which leaves them nowhere. To proceed under sail, they'll need us.*

Power found hope in the thought that they might be put off on an uninhabited island. And Freitas, who as a young man had fought 46 professional boxing bouts, kept thinking about how to wrest a gun from the hijackers.

AUGUST 7—morning. The weather was sunny and warm, the sea flat. The hijackers were steering an

erratic course on a generally southwesterly heading. At noon, Power estimated their position 120 miles off Honolulu on a bearing of 230 degrees.

Power asked at 3 p.m. if his cramped legs might be freed so he could walk a bit on deck. At 5:30, Waschkeit was taken from his cabin and escorted topside, his legs released. Watching, Power assumed that the captors had decided to allow them, singly, a turn or two.

But no. Within the next few minutes, Power and Freitas were brought on deck; their handcuffs were removed—and all three were abruptly ordered to jump overboard! *Without life jackets!* they remember thinking. *In these shark-infested waters!*

Waschkeit pleaded for a life raft. Maynard seemed hardly attentive, but finally motioned to The Slapper, and the two joined Melton at the wheel. They conferred for some time.

Maynard returned to Waschkeit. "Okay," he said. "You'll get a life raft. But first the three of you go overboard in life jackets. We'll turn the ship around, come back and toss over the raft."

Why not put the raft over now? Waschkeit was thinking—but he had already answered his own question. *They probably have no intention of letting us have a raft. They'll simply sail off.*

The men got into the life jackets. "Let's go," Maynard said.

Slowly they stepped over the guardrail, their hands holding to its top strand behind them, feet on the gunwale. The boat's speed had been reduced.

"Jump!" Maynard ordered. No one did. Aberrantly, Power was thinking of Neil Armstrong's "giant leap."

"You first," Maynard said, poking his gun into Waschkeit's back. Waschkeit let go. The others followed.

THE men surfaced and held hands, a small triangle in the sea. The boat was moving away, fast. Would the pirates come back? If so, to shoot them like ducks in the water? To drop the life raft? Or to drop the raft, let them get in—and then gun them? And perhaps they'd toss in a pistol or two, to make it appear that the crewmen had killed one another—if they were found.

From sea level, distance assumes a different dimension. *Kamalii*—the trio in the water could still see the gilded name on her transom—was diminishing rapidly.

Then she turned.

She was alongside. The rubber raft was put over and inflated. Maynard stood over the trio as they climbed in. "We were undecided whether to let you have a raft or not," he said, "so we finally tossed a coin." He reached into a pocket. "You were lucky." *Kamalii's* propeller was churning; she was beginning to move

away. "Here," he said—and he threw a dime into the raft.

IT WAS 6:30 p.m. *Kamalii* was gone, over the horizon. The raft's position was roughly 140 miles southwest of Honolulu. Power and Waschkeit, both former merchant mariners, had been moodily silent. They knew that their position put them in waters as desolate and untraveled as any in the Pacific. Commerce between Asia and the Americas passes far north of Hawaii; even ships calling at Honolulu use the Kaiwi Channel to the north. Furthermore, the raft was not provisioned for prolonged survival. Among its equipment were two parachute distress signals, three small hand flares, eight pints of fresh water—but no rations.

The three men were already fatigued. Waschkeit took the first watch; Power and Freitas fell asleep immediately.

The night was clear, calm and moonless. Waschkeit, having difficulty staying awake, decided he'd stand and identify as many stars as he could. He'd raise an arm, point at a star, name it aloud. His words were slurring, his arm was dropping. He felt himself rocking, dozing—or perhaps hallucinating. He was afraid he might pitch over the side. He kneeled, then sat.

Two lights! He saw two lights. Was he hallucinating? "Land!" he cried confusedly, and shook Power and Freitas.

The lights were real; the range lights of a ship—five or six miles off. "We've got to get her," Waschkeit muttered. He sent one of the two big parachute flares arcing into the night sky. Seeing no change in the ship's course, he lit one of the small flares and held it aloft. Again, no response. Soon the ship would be broadside, and then moving away.

Waschkeit sent up their last parachute flare. It arced into the sky, then dropped softly into the sea—and the night became much darker.

Nothing.

Then, very slowly—imperceptibly at first, yet gradually, steadily—the ship turned toward them. Suddenly, the three of them were sobbing.

Soon the ship, at dead slow, was almost on them. From high on its bridge, its searchlight burst alive, darting about hungrily, searing the night with its shaft of platinum, bringing sudden life to the black sea, until in its eye, it seized them, fixing the raft and men in a tableau of deliverance.

AT 9:40 P.M., the three men were safely aboard the freighter *Benadir*. They would accompany her to Yokohama, where she was bound with a cargo of bananas. Those of *Benadir's* men who were not on watch began questioning the survivors.

After *Kamalii's* men had told their story, Waschkeit asked *Bena-*

dir's Captain Di Domenico how it was that his ship was in these waters, some 1300 miles south of the summer shipping lanes.

The captain laughed, and explained that *Benadir's* engines had broken down twice shortly after they had left Ecuador. He had therefore changed his course in order to pass closer to ports of repair en route to Yokohama.

"You can thank this man here for your rescue," he said, jovially gesturing toward *Benadir's* chief engineer. *Benadir* was a German-built ship, newly acquired by Italian owners. All the instructions for running its complex engines were in German, and had not yet been fully mastered by its new crew.

The engineer smiled. "From the bad sometimes comes the good—eh?"

Simultaneously a thought oc-

curred to each of *Kamalii's* men. They looked at one another for a moment, then nodded. Bob Waschkeit spoke: "We would like to give something to you, Captain Di Domenico." And from a pocket he withdrew their lucky dime.

Benadir radioed news of the hijacking to the U.S. Coast Guard at Honolulu, where a search was organized. Next day, air force and Coast Guard scouting planes spotted *Kamalii*, and a day later two Coast Guard cutters intercepted the yacht. The hijackers were imprisoned in Honolulu pending trial, and charged with armed robbery, grand theft, kidnapping and attempted murder. At this writing, the trial is expected shortly.

Numbers, Please

(Answers on page 192)

EIGHT men are in a room. Each man shakes hands with each of the others once. How many handshakes are there? — Roger Devlin

BE PREPARED for the answer by the time you finish reading this paragraph, without retracing your steps: A bus started out empty. At the first stop it picked up 10 passengers. Stopping again, it let off five passengers and picked up 12. At the next stop, eight passengers got on and two got off. When the bus stopped again, 14 passengers got on and nine got off. One more stop and two passengers got on and one got off.

Ready with your answer?

The question: How many stops did the bus make?

— Leon Smith