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The Hokule'a

Latest trip a near-breeze, navigator Thompson says

By Beverly Creamer
Advertiser Staff Writer

The voyage wasn't a breeze, but it was the next best thing.

"Nothing went wrong," said Hokule'a navigator Nainoa Thompson when he returned home yesterday morning from New Zealand after the third leg of the canoe's "Voyage of Rediscovery," retracing migration routes of early Polynesians.

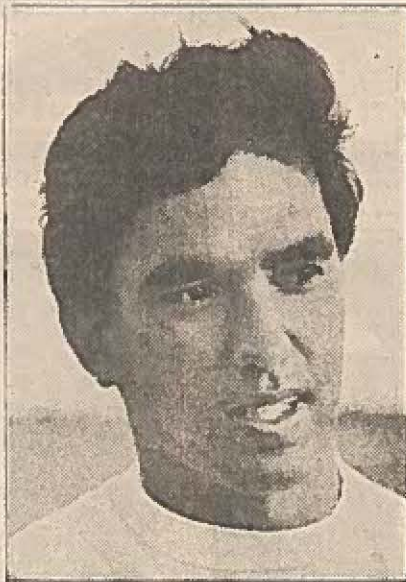
"We were lucky."

The weather was good, the winds were usually dependable, the canoe was sound, the fish were plentiful and the crew was perfection.

"None of these trips are a breeze — everybody's glad to get back to land — but it wasn't the continuous bad weather we had on the first trip. There were times we could relax.

"The first trip (from Hawaii to Tahiti) was twice as long and the longer you stay, the more fatigue. The elements are wearing you down."

The 16-day, 2,000-mile journey from Rarotonga in the



Nainoa Thompson
"Nothing went wrong"

Cook Islands to Waitangi, Bay of Islands, New Zealand, was an exultant one for Thompson because it showed that Polynesian sailors could make the voyage from the warmer tropical regions to an area of har-

sher weather.

"It's a real extreme area for Polynesian sailors because you're so exposed to the weather," he said. "It's different than any of the other legs. All we can show is that it can be done."

Despite the pre-voyage concern about the dangers of this leg, no tropical storms materialized and the weather didn't reach the freezing lows anticipated (45 degrees Fahrenheit was the lowest they recorded). In addition, the crew operated like the well-oiled team it has become.

"There were no mistakes," Thompson said. "We got to places quick because the guys knew exactly what they were doing." In fact the canoe put in its fastest day so far — 160 miles in one 24-hour period.

"We're beyond theory," he continued. "Now we're learning from experiences and the more experiences we have, the more competent we become."

Only one night, during a squall, did he call for the sails to be dropped. "We didn't need

o," he admits. "We were just being more cautious."

This was the first major voyage that Thompson has sailed without having his teacher, Micronesian navigator Mau Piailug, on board, but his initial hesitation faded quickly. "When I got out there, I just felt normal."

Mau's presence would have been particularly important had the canoe hit bad weather, Thompson explained. "He's the one who can make the quickest, clearest, most definite decision because he's had the experience. That's basically why we'd like him on board. And just his presence is good. He's a wealth of information and everybody likes sailing with him."

But Thompson didn't think about Mau's absence once he began concentrating on the task at hand — following the sun to New Zealand.

"The main star (I used) was the sun because you had long days — 14 hours — and shorter nights and they tended to be cloudy."

Normally Thompson uses the stars, the wind and the ocean swells to find direction, but this time the swells, too, were of little help.

"I didn't use them at all because they were so confusing and messed up. It was kind of what we expected because we were going out of the tropics into another wind system. I've never seen an ocean more confusing."

Once again, Thompson's non-instrument navigation proved uncannily accurate. The Hokule'a found the Kermadec Islands two-thirds of the way to New Zealand — a major landfall — and that vastly simplified his work from then on.

He explained why: "Your landfall requires that you keep the memory of your course, distance sailed and how fast, from the last landfall. For instance, from Hawaii to Tahiti you have to remember all the way. But with this trip, whatever happened before (reaching the Kermadecs) you can erase once you hit them."

From then on, he just needed

to keep track of the daily progress from the Kermadecs.

In the early part of the trip to help avoid tropical storms Thompson took the canoe in a more southerly direction away from Tonga and the Coral Sea areas where they brew.

The move was a trade-off. While there's less chance for hurricanes farther south, there's also less chance for strong trade winds. As things turned out, Thompson got the best of both — no storms and continuing strong winds.

As an added safety precaution, their escort vessel, Dorcas, let them know if there was storm activity in the area.

At this point, the Hokule'a and her sailors will have a four-month rest. The canoe will remain in New Zealand until April, then sail to Tonga. Once again, weather will be a factor as Thompson waits out the dangerous summer months in the southern hemisphere — January, February and March. With the coming of winter in April, the fear of hurricanes should fade.