

Bonin Islands

600 miles south of Japan, as the crow flies, lies a chain of islands with a history more closely associated with New England than most island groups in the Pacific Ocean.

Although discovered by the Japanese about 1585, they did not establish permanent colonies there and in the 1820s an American whaling captain landed there, compiled a map and applied names to several of the larger islands. The name as it appeared on this map reflected the captain's name, and for quite a time the group was called The Beechey Islands. In 1830 a small party of colonizers arrived from the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). The group was about equally divided between Americans and British subjects. Although friendly towards one another, they nevertheless maintained two separate communities, and always flew their national flag over each.

Commodore Perry arrived at the islands in 1853, and upon his return to the United States, strongly recommended that this country annex them so that they could serve as a coaling station for ships of the U. S. Navy. At that time the major seafaring nations were looking toward enhancing their naval presence, and the new steam powered ships required coal supplies strategically placed around the world. These islands, because of the presence of both nationals, became a bone of contention between Great Britain and the United States, and to head off what might have become an incident between themselves, brought in the Japanese, who had never given up their claim of sovereignty. The residents now took on the citizenship of Japan, and it remained amicably so until the outbreak of World War II. The Islands, especially the central group, the largest of which is Chichi Shima, was heavily fortified. The harbor, Futami Ko, was home port for the Japanese miniature submarine fleet. Large caverns were excavated in the hills on the north side of the harbor, and these were supplied with a system of rails on which the subs could be drawn out of the water and out of the surveillance of U. S. forces. It was also the center of the Japanese short wave radio broadcasts. It was the tall sending tower that former president George Bush was attempting to destroy when he was hit by anti-aircraft fire and forced to ditch just west of the islands where he was rescued by a U. S. submarine. It was either he or a subsequent pilot who succeeded in the tower's destruction, because when I was on Chichi Shima a few years after the war, it was lying in ruins caused by a bomb crater at its base.

With the war over, the U. S. Navy assumed control of all the small island groups in the central and western Pacific. They remained in control of the Bonins until the autumn of 1968. It was during my tour of duty in the early 1950s that my ship paid a visit to Chichi Shima. There were 40 or so inhabitants in the little village of Omura, situated on the north shore of the harbor on the bright, sunshiny day when two of my shipmates and I went ashore to explore the three by five mile island. We had no maps, nor had anyone on board ever been there, so we basically struck out following our noses.

There were many one lane un-paved roads leading to gun emplacements or other locations, mostly military. A large concrete building with six-foot thick walls, proved to be what we dubbed "radio central", as it obviously had been used for that purpose. The volcanic, conical hills topped off at 1, 047 feet, and from the base of the highest, we could just make out what looked to be a man-made structure at the summit. After climbing the steep sided hill, we discovered that it was an observation point, but with no obvious way to gain entrance. Looking through the viewing slots revealed a descending set of steps carved out of the solid bedrock of the hill. Descending to near the base, we

located an entrance to what turned out to be several tunnels leading into the interior of the hill. One turned into a winding stairway, which eventually brought us to the observation room at the summit. There was no exit, so we had to return the way we arrived.

One road led toward the interior of the island, and it proved to consist of one spectacular view after another. This island proved to be the most spectacular of all the very many islands that we visited in the western Pacific, and it has remained topmost in my memory of any place that I have visited in my lifetime for sheer beauty or climate. Adjacent to this country road, probably at an elevation of six or seven hundred feet, we came across a small clearing, once obviously a field, that contained several stone posts about three feet high and five inches square that turned out to be an abandoned Japanese cemetery. While wandering about looking at these oriental headstones, an inconspicuous pile of half-rotted brush was encountered near one edge that one of us stepped on, and immediately found himself waist deep in a water-filled hole. Removal of the rest of the brush revealed a man-made opening leading, by a set of steps carved out of bedrock, to a water-filled, cavernous hallway that led off to the left. There was about sixteen inches of headroom above the water to the ceiling, all of which was carved from solid rock. I was young and foolish, so I stripped off all my clothes except for my under shorts and was soon neck deep in cool water. Ahead it was inky-black, so I called for my buddies to hand me my Zippo lighter, as we did not have any other type of artificial light.

Now the flickering light revealed a corridor about fifteen feet long, four feet wide, and as previously stated, high enough to provide sixteen inches of air. Immediately it became apparent that the ceiling was liberally studded with very bright clusters of sparkling light. The nearest one soon revealed its true identity; they were the eyes of quite large spiders that were liberally sprinkled all over the entire surface. These black spiders had bodies about the size of a large grape, with legs that covered a four-inch radius. There didn't seem to be any webs, and none of them moved a muscle. However, I was navigating with an open flame, so had to be very careful not to let the heat come directly under one of them.

At the end of the corridor there was another ninety-degree turn, this one to the left, and after another fifteen feet or thereabouts, the floor began an ascent that eventually led out of the water. Along the walls were niches carved out for beds for the soldiers to sleep; they still had rice mats, on which a few coins still lay, waiting for their owners to reclaim them. I was in a machine-gun emplacement, with three slots four or five inches high and two and a half feet wide, through which the gunners could command the entire hillside below. But there was no exit, the way in was also the way out, and much as I dreaded it, there was no alternative, the return trip had to navigate past our ceiling friends. I shuffled along in my bare feet, hoping not to cut myself on broken glass, or jam one of my feet into the skeletal remains of whatever might be concealed under the water. My sense of feel guided my feet, while my sense of sight guided my hand, so as not to alarm any of the sparkly-eyed spiders bare inches above my head. (Which in those days was at least covered with hair!)

Many years later I ran across an article about the Bonins, in which it was stated that they are famous for harboring the largest black widow spiders in the world!

I'm glad it was long afterwards, because if I had even suspected that little jewel of information while standing in water up to my neck with my heat-generating Zippo, I would never have had this story to tell!