

Pacific and Asian Letters III

We begin with the continuation of a bicycle ride through the island of Kyushu, Japan.

Further on we passed through an extensive pearl farm situated on an inlet of the ocean. There was not much to see here, as it is the off-season. About a half mile past there, we came to a small village consisting of one street with a few pseudo roads leading off to the outlying districts. Now this is typical. It was situated by the side of a small stream about the size of Indian Meadow Brook. All the town's sewage and garbage (what little there is to throw away) goes into it. The stream was thick with refuse and filth. The street was filled with small ragged urchins all calling to us in the only English they knew: "Hello, hello" and "Gum Joe". I carry packs of Chiclets gum, primarily because there are more in a unit than the standard pack of regular gum, which has only five sticks, as opposed to the ten small, sugar-coated Chiclets. We don't have pockets in dress blues (that can be legally used according to navy regs.), and as a result, you would be surprised how many Chiclets packs fit into our navy-issued black socks! At least they don't beg like the children do in Sasebo. There is nothing more degrading for a people, I believe, than to see their little ones out begging for "ten yen". The rural Japanese have nothing, but they do have honor and are a proud people.

Personal experience has taught me that if you want to firmly establish a good relationship with the Japanese, just be kind to their children and pass out Chiclets gum! In no time at all, you will find yourself surrounded by smiling, friendly faces. And take their pictures! Don't ask me why, but each and every person that I met in Japan went into throes of ecstasy when you took pictures of them or their families. All in all, we passed through three of these villages last weekend in the course of about eleven miles.

It is also interesting to note their method of transportation outside the cities. I say "outside the cities", as they have about as many automobiles there as we do. Mostly they are small cars about half way between an English Austin and a Plymouth. Out in the country however, the majority of motor-powered vehicles are tricycle trucks. These are powered by an engine resembling a motorcycle's. The single wheel is at the front and the other two at the rear. The truck bodies on these measure perhaps 6 by 7 feet. All the drivers drive at breakneck speed and take all sorts of harrowing chances, but I have yet to see one so much as sideswipe anything, nor have I heard of any such incident. All I can say is that they all lead charmed lives!

In the country, most of the wheeled vehicles seen however, are bicycles. Just the same, about 9/10 of the population use their two feet to get from one place to another.

The road we traveled that day is a main highway for Japan, but it was in a deplorable state of neglect. It was macadam, but it has deteriorated by now into a solid pattern of potholes and sections of just plain gravel. Every other road that we passed leading off the highway was nothing more than dirt. For that matter, so are the side streets right here in Sasebo. The same is true for Yokosuka, but then they say you can tell a great deal about a country's status by their transportation system.

As I re-read what I have just written, I have the feeling that I really haven't done justice to the Japanese people. What I wrote is true, but don't forget that the war took a terrible toll on both country and people that will take more than a few years to wipe out. I believe that the Japanese people are our friends, and that they are a valuable ally. Many things remain to be done here, but progress is being made, and the situation is changing. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Diary entry, Sunday, 21 March 1954 Olongapo, Philippines. I walked out the road into the valley with a radarman that I had met from the oiler USS Cacapon. There is a war going on here between the government forces and the local communists known as Hukabalabuks, usually referred to as just plain Huks. This probably means something in the local language, which is called Tagalog. Because of the hostilities, we are not supposed to go outside the town, but damn!, I have to see all that I can while I'm here, I may never get the chance again.

There is a beautiful valley, which extends northward, through which flows a river the size of the Farmington at Pleasant valley named the Santa Rita River. I believe the valley goes by the same name. The Death March went right through here. All this is in the Province of Zambales. On the opposite bank of the river the jungle comes right down to the water's edge, while our eastern side had some clearings with bamboo and grasses. We were keeping our eyes peeled for any signs or sounds of human activity, because by now we were beginning to wonder whether or not the navy might have had some accurate information as to the dangers from the Huks. You never know, they might be right about something, sometime! Presently we saw a man and a boy of about 10 who were fishing. The man had a thin bamboo pole that looked to be 30 feet long; I've never seen such a long fishing pole in my life! From the tip of this he had a line tied. On the end of this was a frog. He would cast the frog almost to the other side of the river. The frog, which was tied just in front of his hind legs, began to swim. Before too long there was a disturbance in the water, and the frog disappeared. At this point, the fellow gave a mighty tug and a fish was catapulted fifty or sixty feet into the clearing. The boy would run and remove the fish. The father would make some adjustments on the line securing the frog, and back into the river he went. In just a few minutes we saw him land three fish. These fish look a little like our bullheads, but without whiskers. They have a tongue similar to a frogs – it's anchored at the front and is soft like a frogs.

To be continued.