

## Pacific and Asian Letters

This is a collection of letters and diary accounts of some of my more interesting naval escapades. There is not a great deal of interesting information that can be written about while at sea, especially during periods when you are in a war zone. It was not uncommon to be at sea for periods of time exceeding thirty days; during a six months cruise, it might be that only five or six events happened that were worth telling the folks back home about.

**Yokosuka, Japan, 13 Jan. 1954** [*Aboard the Destroyer USS Gregory, DD 802. This was a 2,100-ton "tin can" carrying five 5 cannon, 4 torpedo tubes, several 40 mm anti-aircraft gun emplacements and "hedge hogs" and "ash cans" for sinking submarines. The Gregory was the flag ship and one of four similar craft that constituted Destroyer Squadron 17. We were the fastest of the four, being able to exceed 30 knots if given enough time to build up a head of steam; most of the time, when just on patrol, we averaged 15 knots. A nautical mile is slightly longer than a land mile, so that a ship making 6 knots is doing the equivalent of 7 land miles, or 12 knots being equal to 14 land miles.*]

After leaving the Hawaiian Islands, we sailed over relatively smooth waters (temperature 76°) and made our next stop at the Midway Islands. We arrived at 0800 and liberty went down at 0830 and expired at 1030. Not much time, but Midway is about the size of our farm – maybe a little larger, but not much. Midway is a typical coral-reef tropical island about 14 feet above sea level. It is covered with an odd type of tree, which has foliage somewhat akin to a jack pine, but with longer needles; averaging 8 inches or thereabouts. The odd thing is that the bark and wood resemble a hardwood. I don't know what classification it falls under, and could find no one else who knew, much less cared. [Years later, Frank Egler told me the tree was an import from Australia, used because of its ability to thrive in tropical, sandy soils. The Latin name is *Casuarina equisetifolia*. This last name means that it resembles our equisetum, which in turn translates into 'Horse tail'. These needles are segmented the same way our horsetails are.]

Sand, the main island (there are three), has what is considered to be some of the best beaches in the world. The sand, which is derived from coral, is remarkably fine and alabaster white. They stretch far out towards the coral reef, which lies about a mile to 3,000 yards off shore. These reefs keep any waves of great size from reaching the beaches. A swimmer can walk out several hundred yards before going in over his shoulders. The water surrounding the entire island is a story-book green, somewhat resembling those seen in large private pools, but a finer, purer shade; it is really gorgeous. I took 14 color pictures while I was there, and will send the rolls home.

Now the strangest thing (to me at least) about these islands is the largest natural inhabitant, a member of the albatross family [The Black-footed Albatross], very, very appropriately called the Gooney Bird. They are big birds, about the size of a large goose with a wingspan of six or eight feet. In the air, they are graceful birds, as most sea birds are, but on land are positively the most ridiculous thing imaginable. I'll give you a complete cycle, starting with a Gooney in flight returning from a foraging party in the lagoon.

He comes gliding slowly in over the treetops, motionless except for the movement of his head. He spies an appropriate landing place. Fine, now he has a place to land, but it isn't as simple as that. By the time he's seen the potential landing strip, he has overshot the mark. A wide, carefully-executed turn is made, and in he comes with a low swoop. Whoops! Too fast, have to try again. (This keeps up for about five minutes.) Finally he makes the final approach. Ah, perfection! Well maybe a Gooney Bird figures it's perfection; his feet are lowered like landing gear, and he starts to move them as though he's running in the air, both wings outstretched and motionless. Both feet hit the ground. Now comes the fun, and you've got to keep both eyes open, or you'll miss the action. He trips – tragedy! About two or three intricate somersaults are turned in remarkably rapid succession, whereupon he commences to roll over and skid on his back and belly until he comes to a stop. When he picks himself up, you'd think at first that he has crippled himself for life, for he walks as one does who has had a serious case of polio, but can still walk a little. He is now confronted with his next-door neighbor – must catch up on the news. The two walk up to each other until they are about six inches apart and then begin a rapid series of head motions, up and down and side to side, always with the tips of their bills almost touching. Then they stick their heads and ridiculously long necks straight up in the air and whinny like a frightened horse. They next move their heads from side to side and up and down so fast that they become a blur. They are so adept at this that it sometimes appears that they are Siamese twins. Suddenly, as though a signal had been given, both birds become absolutely motionless, beak to beak for perhaps three seconds; then one or the other will clack his huge beak several times. Again the up and down, side to side blur, terminated by one abruptly stopping everything to do what looks to be biting an imaginary flea. An odd fact: in all of those conversations that I observed in the two-hour interval that I was on Midway, every time they stopped to “bite a flea”, they always bit a spot just forward of, and on a level with their left wing. It must mean something in their ritual. Anyway, they will keep you in stitches watching them.

When they take off, they get on a long straight-of-way (the air strip, for example) and run as fast as their awkward legs can carry them, all the while beating their wings as much as their length will allow. Once in a while one of them will trip over his own feet while attempting to take off, which results in the same catastrophe as the landing did. On the water, circumstances are just the other way around. Gooneys take off with apparently a minimum of effort and land with surprising grace. This aquatic landing is done by extending both feet in front of himself at about a 40° angle and skiing to a stop. Usually he skis about six to ten feet before settling down in the water.

*To be continued.*