

7 Sept. 1945

Dear Folks,

I am at present enroute back to Manila in the Philippines after a series of experiences that have been among the most exciting and interesting of my life. When I last wrote you I complained at some length about the inactivity at that time. Shortly thereafter I told you I was to go out of contact with civilization for a short while. I did just that, but not in the place expected. When we left Leyte in the Philippines the latter part of August we expected to make our way to Korea to help in occupation of that section. Our plans were frustrated by a typhoon which we fought for four days and which set us back so far that we could not have arrived in time to be of material assistance. In the meantime, however, our orders were changed and after considerable fooling around in the Chinese sea off Okinawa we reversed tracks heading for that strange and little known island of Formosa or Taiwan.

As you may recall it was frequently spoken of in news broadcasts the past year because of its proximity to China and its position in the path of any advance on Japan. Held by the Japanese for over fifty years it has a population of some 12 million and is probably about the size of Massachusetts. We did not have a large force with us and the army had not yet attempted to occupy the island. Our assignment: to get the prisoners of war out as quickly as possible.

That statement sounded all right when it came over but we little knew the conditions existing on the island--whether the Japs were going to willingly submit to have us come in and take prisoners away. Also there was the problem of Jap minefields which about which we knew nothing. Luckily (we thought) the Kretchmer and another vessel were detailed to proceed ahead of the task group, enter Kiirun and find out just what the local conditions were like and how soon we could make contact with the prisoners. To get an indication of what we were up against it is interesting to note that so far as we know not a single American man-of-war had entered any Formosan port since Commodore Perry opened up Japan in 1853. That then, was the situation. But not having tasted any real danger the crew was most happy to be assigned the advance scouting position. I was glad because it would break the monotony of our sea-life. I envisioned no danger, not having analyzed the situation out fully and not knowing

what I know now.

We got up at three o'clock on the crucial morning having ventured far ahead of the other ships. By day break we were lying off the Formosan coast every man at his battle station with the ship buttoned up like a zipper back. Men ~~were~~ who were not manning big guns carried revolvers and tommy guns ready for any possible offensive thrust by the Japanese. We wallowed about in the troughs for a couple hours until a small Jap craft was seen approaching. It came close to our other ship and then vied away. It apparently wanted us to follow it into the distant harbor, but it was taking such a funny zig zag course that we declined. A few minutes later the other vessel began to proceed towards the shore and we followed.

Soon a breakwater began to shape up out of the indistinct shore line--the first sign of human habitation we saw. High hills and cliffs surrounded the harbor into which we were steaming. They were pitted with gun emplacements and beside those emplacements we saw when we had approached closer (through glasses) were Japanese soldiers alert and ready.

You can imagine the tense situation. Two DE's with probably less than 500 men between them and a couple of popguns for cannon were entering a port that had not been entered by an allied ship of any kind since five years before. The Japanese had always kept Formosa taboo to foreigners. Overhead, it is true, we had the protection of a dozen planes. It was good to feel them up there. Really, I wasn't disturbed because I was not on the bridge where the action was being observed. But I knew before we even got there that if action broke out the two ships would be sunk like broken bottles in half an hour. Luckily, it didn't, as you can see.

To go on with the tale (stop reading if you are bored) we got beyond the breakwater and found ourselves in the inner harbor. There were signs of wide destruction from former Allied bombings. The town began to materialize--quite a large town with excellent docks and warehouses. (yes, in backward, distant Formosa, the most modern of warehousing and docking facilities) Here and there in the bay were sunken hulks of large Japanese freighters and smaller luggers. The place had had a good shellacking! At this point the small Japanese craft that had preceded us in began closing the gap between us and coming alongside. We shouted them off fearing treachery but they continued to come. Again and again we shouted. No response. Finally we trained all guns upon them and they backed away like a flash.

By this time we were practically uptown since the place was built right around the now narrow, river-like bay. Immediately ahead of us our sister ship was swinging around to a wharf and docking. We followed suit. There on the dock were coolies waiting to take our lines. Little men, they were, like children almost and eyes like monkeys and teeth like the cartoons. Across the bay we could see through the glasses were Jap officers watching us through field glasses. On the balconies of the warehouses Jap sentries with rifles narrowly had watched our progress up the bay. Immediately as we docked we put out a river patrol instructed to watch for Jap divers who might attempt to sabotage the ship. On the dock we mustered sentries well-armed. The gun crews stayed at their stations and we waited. Soon several Jap emissaries arrived at the other ship which was our senior. Negotiations were completed and it was promised that the first prisoners of war would arrive about five o'clock that afternoon. (We had tied up at high noon)

Shortly before five they did arrive. What a sorry looking bunch of men---thin, haggard, shuffling, with the complete bone structure outlined on many of them like the German atrocity films. We gave them a hearty cheer and they responded less strongly. We noted immediately that they were mostly British. We hustled them aboard and cast off heading for open sea as quickly as possible.

These facts we learned later--somewhat to my consternation: 1/ that we had through some sheer stroke of luck penetrated the only opening through a Jap minefield that was considered very good by the local Jap commander. (on the way out we had charts of the fields) He was amazed that we had not been blown up. (2) that on a Jap airstrip not far away our planes had located 30 Japanese aircraft fully warmed up and loaded with ammunition ready to take off despite strict Allied injunctions against any Jap flying whatsoever. What were they waiting for???

The prisoners were mostly British--we had 2,156 aboard each ship with 1000 remaining on the island at two other camps. There were Scots in their kilts and British in the uniforms they had carefully preserved since they were taken prisoner at Singapore on Feb. 15, 1942---three years and eight months previously. All this time they had been subjected to Jap imprisonment, ill-treatment, and semi-starvation. Many of them had beri beri as indicated by their swollen bellies and limbs. Their arms were pitifully thin and every rib in their body stood out like a barn.

We gave these men their first square meal in over three years---stew, potatoes, green beans, bread and butter, canned fruit, and ice cream. Most of them just looked in awe as the mess cooks piled their plates full. Later weak stomachs plus sea-action took some of the food away again---but they so enjoyed eating it at the time. What they wanted most was white bread, butter and jam.

The following day we went back, this time four of us, and got all except 80 hospital cases that were too ill to be moved. Then we beat it just as the British fleet started moving in for occupation. We transferred the bulk of the men to carriers, but kept fifty aboard.

At least one man we took aboard is expected to die before reaching Manila. Several others are in bad shape. Their stories would fill several volumes; sometimes I'll tell them to you. Right now I'll merely include a scratch paper on a story I am getting up on it for possible distribution to the newspapers. Our entire unit has been congratulated by the Admiral in charge of this part of the Pacific---and perhaps---! But more when I have time. With these extra men my work has shot up---naturally. We'll let them off at Manila and then---probably another assignment somewhat similar. There are a lot left in China and Burma and the East Indies.

Where have I been?? One month in Hawaii. Three days at Eniwetok atoll in mid-Pacific. One day at Guam; ten days at Leyte gulf---scene of the original landings in the Philippines. Wasn't hot up where we have been but as we come south again it gets hotter. The Philippines are in about the same latitude as central Africa!

Well, that's it, folks. Nothing for publication to the any news source since I'm in the navy and they give out all releases. The mine field was the greatest danger---and our guardian angels were just on the job there. I hope I have not over-dramatized but I know you want to hear about everything---so there it is. Keep writing and hope that I get back to the states by Christmas.

Love,

Ed