

Pacific and Asian Letters IV

We ended last week watching a fisherman and his son.

As we were about to leave, one of us brushed against a bush, maybe four feet high and five feet across. It was dark green and covered with deeply serrated leaves similar to a mimosa. All of a sudden both of us had a very strong feeling that something wasn't right. Something had changed, and for a couple of seconds we just looked carefully around ourselves, always with the fear that maybe there was Huk activity around. Soon the cause became apparent; the bush had instantly changed from green to a brown, leafless dead-looking pile of brush! We hadn't actually seen this happen, because we had brushed against it as we went past, and only became aware of a change due to our peripheral vision. As soon as it became obvious that this was not the hiding place of an assassin, our heart rate went back to normal, and we went down to the fisherman to ask him if he could tell us anything about this bush. Yes, he could. The native belief is that this plant, during the time of Christ, somehow had knowledge that he was going to be betrayed, and had not done or said anything about it. As a consequence, it and all of its descendants constantly show their shame whenever someone touches it by snapping shut their leaves, green on top, brown on the bottom, and hiding from view. Thus this Sensitive Plant bears the local name of "Shame Plant".

It was getting late in the day, so we returned to the village. It gets dark very quickly in the tropics; they don't have twilight as we know it. The jungle comes alive at night and sings with all sorts of weird sounds.

Diary entry, Monday, 22 March 1954 South China Sea. We left Subic Bay [north of Manila Bay on the island of Luzon in the Philippines] at 0600, operated most of the day not far from shore. At about 1400 we started westward on a course of 278° true, at 25 knots. The only thing this could mean is that we are going to French Indo China. I hope we don't get mixed up in that deal!

23 March. Noon position: longitude 16° 15'N, longitude 110° 24' E – Tonkin Gulf. Well, here we are with both feet in a bucket of shit! I wish we'd mind our own business and go back to Japan.

31 March, Tonkin Gulf. It seems that we are here to back up the French, who are having a rough go of it in Indochina. We'll probably get into the fray before it's all over. As long as the French hold out we'll be all right. We may be here two days and maybe two weeks, who knows?

Letter, 31 March 1954. Hi, Here we are, doing the same thing as we've been doing for the past eight or nine days – running back and forth between the 109th and 110th longitude and about the 16th latitude. I guess nothing will happen now. The Chinese keep track of us by their aircraft, but not so many now, just five or six times a day. There must be a lot of subs around though; we are all the time seeing blips on the radar that appears for ten minutes or so and then vanish. That is about the time it takes a submarine to warm up her radar and then pull the plug. [submerge]

The day before yesterday we had a fresh gale, which jumped upon us with little or no warning. One minute the sea was glassy smooth, and twenty minutes later a strong breeze blew up and 16 minutes after that the wind was a steady 35 knots, and we had waves of twenty feet or more. This lasted about four hours. Yesterday wasn't too bad. Today is all back to normal, although the sky is still obscured by potential rain clouds.

You asked about seasickness – Ha! Ask any tin can sailor how long someone lasts on the cans if he gets seasick! I got seasick one time – the first time I went out on the “Bowfin”, but submarines roll from side to side much more than surface craft. Unless of course you are submerged, then there is no sensation of moving, the exception being when you are making a turn.

When it gets really rough, you haven't time to be sick, you're too busy damning tin cans, the ocean, the navy and everything else that comes to mind. A guy gets pretty shook when he takes one step forward, slides back two, then slides three more to port or starboard. It is the funniest feeling to be going up a ladder when the ship is pitching badly. One minute you are as light as a feather and practically fall up the ladder, and the next, you're holding on for dear life due to the fact that you seem to weigh about 300 pounds. The same is true with walking on deck; sometimes you actually have to hold on to the lifelines, not to keep from going sideways, but to hold yourself down. Sometimes when the bow rises up quickly, and the deck is wet, your feet will slip right out from under you because you have taken on so much weight.

This morning we took on 64,000 gallons of fuel oil. This will last us about two and a half days. The danger of a typhoon hitting us when we are low on fuel would mean disaster, so we try and keep around 80 – 100,000 gallons on board at all times. The fueling and replenishment ships are due here on April 2nd, and we'll stoke up then.

When we are out here in the western Pacific for all these months, and completely cut off from the U.S., except for mail, which is quite spotty sometimes, we resort to creating and solving puzzles. Sometimes a good one will keep going for days, with the whole crew asking the fellow who started it one question at a time which can be answered by a “yes” or “no”. When someone solves it, he won't tell anyone. Finally everyone who is interested will work out the answer. I don't recall anyone ever giving up and asking for the solution. Anyway, here is an example that took me a couple of days:

A man lives in the penthouse in an 11 story building. The elevator there is the automatic type – no operator. When this man comes home with guests, he always rides clear up to the 11th floor, but when he is alone, he always gets off at the 7th floor and walks the remaining distance up the stairs. In the morning he always gets in at the 11th and rides to the bottom. Why does he walk when he's alone? The answer is a very simple one and makes perfect sense. I'll tell you the answer in the next letter.

To be continued.