

Pacific and Asian Letters V

Letters to Colebrook from Southeast Asia in 1954

Olongapo, Philippine Islands, 5 April, 1954. Here we sit, back in Subic Bay again. This time, just the Gregory, as all the others are still in the Tonkin Gulf. I'm glad you're keeping my journeys on charts. You can mark my furthest westward move as long. 107° 28.5' East. That was on Saturday, 3 April. We really got brave then, 30 miles from the area the communist forces have captured and 50 from Hainan Island. The water was so shallow that it was that particular pea green color that you see upon entering harbors such as Hong Kong. We call ourselves Task Group 70. We get lots of bogies now (enemy aircraft). Every time one of them appears on radar, our planes go to meet it. Nine out of ten turn out to have that big red star on her. We train our loaded AA batteries on them and watch their wing tips for orange flickers; that is the first indication that you are being fired upon, and we would return fire. So far it is a Mexican stand-off. If we're lucky, it will remain that way.

The other night when I was on watch, we spotted a medium freighter going south with no running lights. We challenged her and she gave her name and said that she was enroute from Hong Kong to Singapore. But when we asked what flag she was flying, and what her cargo was, she pretended ignorance, so the Essex (one of our carriers) turned her 36 inch searchlight on her and discovered that she flew no flag at all! There is nothing that we could legally do, so we had to let her go. She is probably bringing arms and ammunition to the communist forces. We always fly our flag. Once when we neglected to do so, we got shelled.

You should hear the flattering things Radio Peiping and Hanoi are saying about us! Did you realize that your son is an imperialistic warmonger who is adding to the black list of infamies of the Wall Street Oppressors by "invading" the sacred communist waters? They have the same tactics that Tokyo Rose had during WWII. We call ours Peiping Patty. She tells us how many ships we have there, our base courses and speeds, when we refueled last, when we replenish and how often. Also how many planes we have on each carrier and once in a while, how many planes we have in the air at that moment, as well as the course and speed of our task group. Well, none of this is the kind of information that bothers us; for one thing, we're close in enough for them to have us on their radar all the time, and they certainly have enough aircraft overhead, not to mention we know Russia has at least one sub up here in the gulf with us, so they would have to be pretty stupid not to know all this information. She plays music from the States for us. New stuff, some of it; songs that we have not heard, as they came out after we left the States, and we can't get any radio from stateside. Anyway, she will play a few bars, then there is the sound of a phonograph needle being dragged across the record (so as to ruin it). Once in a while she will say something to the effect that she is going to break this decadent imperialist music, and you can hear the sound of a record being smashed. The funny thing is that she has done this to the same record more than once! However, we are going to have to wait until we get back home to hear these songs in their entirety, as she sure as heck isn't going to!

In case you have given up on arriving at the answer to the puzzle that I left you hanging with in the last letter, he was a midget and couldn't reach past the 7th button!

Letter, 18 April, 1954 Olongapo, P.I. Last week the Gregory returned alone to have our sonar repaired. (7 inch crack) When we returned to the fleet, (the 12th), we were supposed to remain there two days, then all of us were scheduled to go back to Yokosuka, then Kobe. However, that all fell through, just like everything else. Instead of going to Japan, all of us came back to Luzon; the carriers to Manila. We escorted them there past Corregidor. I had always thought of Corregidor as a little piece of rock, but it is a darned good-sized island. Manila Bay looks like the ocean, it's so huge. I wish they would let us go there, but it is becoming obvious that no such plans exist. We are due to be relieved down here. The Wasp and Essex already have been, by the USS Boxer and USS Philippine Sea, which means that we are here to stay. Just another Korea, but hot instead of cold. The average temperature here is about 82° or 83°, day after day; the lowest that I've seen it the last two weeks was 78° at 0230 one morning. Right this minute, 1455, it is 93° wind temperature. That is nothing; they had a really bad hot spell here the first week we were here, when it hit 115°. We really thought we were in for a bad time, but the natives assured us it rarely gets this hot. It averages more like 90° this time of year. Pleasant thought!

We got hold of some fairly recent newspapers from Stateside, and I see they are building up public sympathy for this war. We saw it coming about a month ago. We won't be in any great danger though; there is just the railroad along the coast, and only two harbors. Pity the poor Jarheads (marines) and Dogfaces (army) who have to tramp around in all this heat. The only thing that could bother us are planes and subs, but we have a powerful air arm. In order to keep to ourselves, the commander of our task group gets his orders directly from CNO (Chief of Naval Operations) in Washington, instead of the regular chain of command, which comes to us from Yokosuka. The word is that everybody back in Japan thinks we have gone home. Just the other day we got two of our radiomen back from school in Yokosuka, and they didn't even know where they were headed. It seems likely that we won't go back there before we leave, but will go home the southern route via Guam and Kwajalein, then up to Hawaii.

[It still seems, even though we are now embarked on the twenty-first century, that this episode was never acknowledged by our government. Our textbooks give the beginning of our military involvement in the Vietnam War as commencing with North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacking U. S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin 2 August 1964, almost 10 years after Task Force 70's involvement.]

Letter, 24 April, 1954 I found out what makes that sensitive plant I saw in the Santa Rita Valley act the way it does. This plant has a delicate internal balance brought about by the percentage of water in the cells. When heat or heavy vibrations reach these cells, it causes them to either add or empty water with amazing rapidity; which causes each leaf to instantly fold shut against its opposite leaf. Because the undersides of these green leaves are brown, the illusion is that the whole bush changes from green to brown. It takes from 15 to 20 minutes to restore the plant to its former appearance.

While I was researching this at the library on the base (Yes, I was surprised to find that out also!), I came across this bit of information, which involves Lake Quannapowit in Wakefield,

Mass. [The town where I was born.]: One of the rarest forms of algae is found in its waters. There is one other location known in the world where this same algae occurs, and that is in central Japan. It is so closely protected that not the smallest amount is allowed to be removed except for scientific study. It varies in size up to that of a musk melon, and is either green or brown, and it floats. The force of a light tap causes it to sink to the bottom, where it will die. On the other hand, it can't float too high, or the wind will blow it ashore. It is round due to the fact that it grows on the side which faces the sun. When that gets top heavy, it rolls over, allowing the other side to equalize. It is kept afloat by gasses that form in its center.

Hot again today, but cooler than the past few days. Got up to 98° today, whereas yesterday it was 110°, and Thursday was a nice cool 112° with the humidity around 90. I don't usually say this, but I'd like to see a good heavy snowstorm! The last time I saw snow was off Wonsan [North Korea], but it's different when you're at sea. Last snow I stood on was on Mt. Rainier, Washington, and before that was home in the spring of '52. I've done more this past year, traveled farther, and seen more than all the rest of my life put together!