

Welcome aboard our Coast Guard

Loran Station Marcus Island

by HM1 Scot Evans

While working in my secure sickbay in North Carolina, I received an ominous phone call from my detailer. It was a year ago when he called to personally break the bad news. He spoke to me for some 15 minutes as I listened in mild shock; I was to be separated from my family for a year of restricted duty on an unknown dot in the middle of the Pacific ... Loran Station Marcus Island.

Just yesterday, it seems, time ran out as I quickly unloaded the jeep and purchased my ticket to California. In painful haste, I scooped up my one-year-old daughter, three-month-old son and hugged my wife in one last consolidated embrace. I was called to hurry as I kissed my wife and wiped the tears from her eyes. The pilot yelled out to me from the cockpit to pick up my plane ticket to Japan. It had fallen unseen on the runway in my haste. In another minute, the jet was in the air and my family was on the ground, left behind, to fend for themselves.

Once in Japan, Mount Fuji loomed in the distance. I gazed thoughtfully through the small round window of an Air Force C-130. I found myself traveling with a USO show bound for the same solitary detachment. Only until the fringes of Japan passed beneath us and bonded with the vast and limitless blue Pacific, did I start to think back on the chain of events which led up to this flight of seemingly no return.

My thoughts were eventually interrupted as I heard the loadmaster speak to me. We were more than 1,000 miles southeast of Japan when he invited me and my camera up to the cockpit. A small, green, triangular, natural platform, smaller than Central Park in New York City, emerged from the sea. The island was immaculately bordered with white and blue. It's affectionately referred to as the White Pearl of the Pacific. The Japanese call it Minami-tori Shima, literally translated as South Bird Island probably because of the bird sanctuary. How the island acquired such names as Marcus, South Bird and Weeks Island is a mystery.

Twenty-eight Japanese naval airmen and meteorologists occupy one end of the island and 28 Coast Guardsmen the other. The 1,350-foot transmitting tower, tied with Iwo Jima's Loran tower, radiates synchronized pulses at a peak power of three million watts. The island was a bustling place during World War II, when the Japanese maintained an air and naval base with more than 4,500 men. Ruins of an intricate and well hidden network of bunkers, trenches and tunnels remain. A U.S. carrier task force raided it in March of 1942 and it was bombed occasionally. The minute damage incurred speaks highly of the defense preparations made by the Japanese. U.S. forces occupied the island from the end of the war until 1968, when it was returned to the Japanese. This easternmost point in the Japanese empire is one of the most isolated inhabited places on earth; its nearest neighbor is 800 miles away on Iwo Jima.

The relationship we have with the Japanese on the island is amazing. Both engage in intense rivalry of softball twice a week and volleyball occasionally. We beat them, more often than not, in softball but they make up for any losses during the volleyball games. Participation in the latter has tapered off since our "jungle rules" and their more classical approach makes the referee's job very difficult. We are frequently invited to dinner parties only to discover tasty items we never before imagined on the menu. A first night's initiation for newcomers with a Japanese prepared drink known as "the Marcus Island Special" is a memorable one, if one's memory happens to be functioning the next day.

The temperature averages about 80 degrees year round. At times, the sun shines so often that we begin to wonder if rain still exists. Rain, the only source of drinking water, is collected from the tennis court and roof tops. An occasional typhoon hits to break the monotony and the tsunami warnings keep us humble.

Like many Pacific areas, skin diving here

intoxicating. The island is surrounded by a reef, filled with many brightly colored coral heads, beautiful fish and glistening cowries. The ocean beyond is accessible via "Shark's Alley" (a canal which has been blasted through the reef) or by diving into a crevice corridor of the many ledges along the reef's border. So far, the reef sharks found at the reef's edge have remained curious and nonchalant. Still, their presence is always respected when we snorkel among them. For some reason, most commanding officers feel uneasy and have mixed feelings about snorkeling. (I hope I don't eat my words when some nonconforming shark decides to have a hot lunch.) At any rate, the sea turtles, tuna and bass, the giant clams, humpback cowries and staghorn coral, the sinister sharks, moray eel's and porcupine blow fish are enough to

develop rapture of the reef.

Other pastimes include beachcombing for Japanese glass ball fishing floats and convoluted sea shells, tennis, weight lifting, jogging, archery, softball, basketball, football and studying; all effective pacifiers.

While there are those that don't agree with my enthusiasm about this small island, it goes without saying that there are innumerable negative aspects. This is nothing unique; the same holds true of many jobs — in or out of the Coast Guard. Dwelling on these negative points will only make time stand still. Once in the proper frame of mind, Marcus Island or any isolated duty remains an invaluable experience. It tests one's maturity and adaptability.

