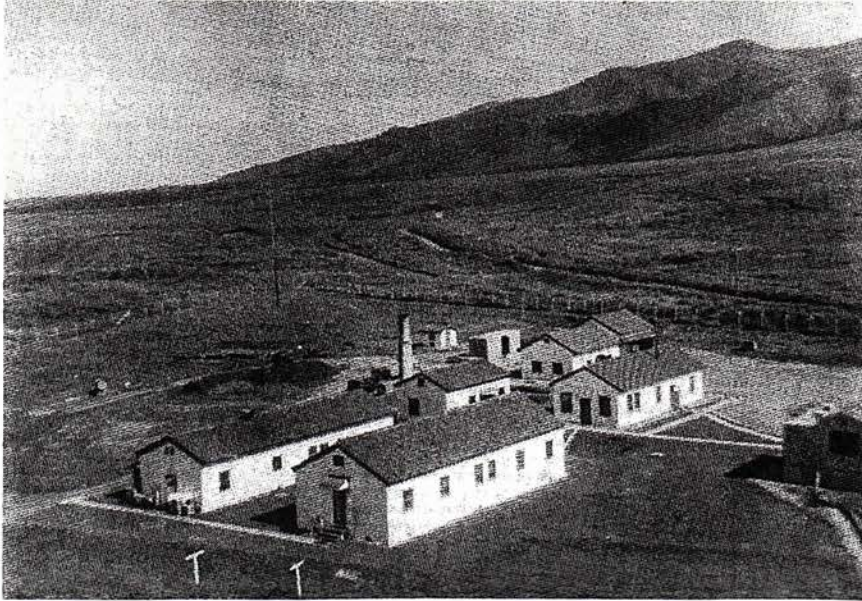


The Farthest...

by John LaBella



The Farthest

Usually, before embarking on any adventure, detailed plans are made. But it doesn't always have to work that way.

One of the most interesting, exciting and educational adventures in my life happened without any well laid out plans. Call it luck, fate or whatever, it set me on my course.

The year was 1955, I was a seaman on a U.S. Coast Guard cutter and our homeport was Honolulu. During the preceding year we made two voyages to the Marshall Islands in Micronesia and sailed to all of the Hawaiian Islands.

I was eighteen years old and serving my second year of a four-year enlistment with the Coast Guard. The tour of duty was for a two-year period in the 14th C.G. District and I had just completed one. So far, it was exciting and I was enjoying the faraway places, but my appetite was whetted for even more and distant adventures. My favorite book at the time was, "The Bounty Trilogy."

So I went to the ship's office and filled out a transfer request form. In the space for requested duty station I wrote in the words, "anywheres any station." The 14th C.G. District covered most of the Pacific area from Hawaii to Japan.

A few weeks later, the ship's yeoman handed me orders directing me to report for duty in Japan and shortly afterwards I was on my way.

Upon arrival in Tokyo I reported to the C.G. Commander's office where I was shown a map of Japan and the locations of all LORAN (Long Range Aid to Navigation) transmitting stations. They were established to aid U.S. ships and aircraft, but any plane or vessel with a LORAN receiver could benefit from their signals.

The stations stretched from Iwo Jima in the south to the island of Hokkaido in the north and when I was asked where I would like to be stationed, my reply was, "The farthest station north."

A few days later I would be on my way to Matsumae, a fishing village located on the northernmost island of Hokkaido.

In the meantime I would experience my first liberty in a foreign country and foreign it was.

The food, faces, language and customs. I was now a foreigner, but almost didn't get to begin my adventure as I stepped off a curb to cross a street. I looked to my left before crossing and was almost hit by a speeding (Kamikaze) taxi coming from the right. I didn't know that Japanese traffic moved in a different direction than ours did in the U.S.

It is said that the G.I. overseas is oversexed, overpaid and over here. Actually my pay was only \$90.00 per month. But the yen/dollar exchange rate was in my favor; there was an abundance of friendly ladies, the beer was excellent and I was now legally able to drink in a bar.

The Japanese words for beef steak and beer are beefu steaki and biru, so until I became more proficient in the language, I ate my share of steaks and drank my share of beer.

To get to Matsumae LORAN station, I caught a MATS flight out of Tachikawa AFB, Tokyo to Misawa AFB in northern Honshu Island. From there I took a train to the city of Aomori, the northernmost seaport on Honshu where I would board a seagoing ferry for a three-hour trip to Hakodate - Hokkaido's largest seaport. Not too long before, a ferry on this crossing capsized and sunk with hundreds of lives lost, so I made it a point to stay above decks and close to the lifejacket lockers.

From Hakodate to Matsumae, the last leg of the trip north, I rode an old steam train with wooden seats, very little heat and lots of soot. When I had arrived in Tokyo it was springtime and the weather was warm. Now the temperature was dropping, snow was falling and my pea coat was stowed in the bottom of my seabag. It would be a 50-mile trip with the train stopping at every village along the way, taking about five hours to arrive at Matsumae.

When I finally arrived at Matsumae, I was met by some crew members and driven to the station located outside the village. It was early evening and we drove on a dark dirt road for about a mile. During the next 14 months I was to walk that road many times at all hours of the day and night, during various weather conditions, sometimes sober--sometimes not.

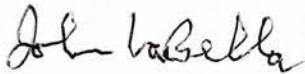
The LORAN station consisted of a half dozen buildings located on a high bluff overlooking the ocean. The crew consisted of 12 enlisted men, one junior officer and about ten Japanese civilians.

I was taken to the mess deck where supper had been saved for me. During the evening hours the mess deck served as a recreation area and this evening all hands were there waiting to look over the newcomer. Bottles of beer were everywhere and before I could hit the sack, I had to drink a few beers and answer those questions

usually put forth to a new face. "Where are you from? What was your last duty station? Did you know this guy and that guy?" The next day I would be officially welcomed by the station's skipper.

Discipline at Matsumae LORAN station was somewhat relaxed. The important thing was getting along at a semi-isolated location, regardless of rank.

My tour of duty was to be one year, but I stayed for 14 months and probably would have kept on extending my tour if not for a new Commander in Tokyo. He visited Matsumae and ordered all hands to put in for rotation back to the states if they had not already done so. He was upset about many of his men living with Japanese women and even marrying them. He gave us a long Christian oriented lecture on morals and the superiority of the American way versus the Japanese way of life. I will never forget him telling us to go home where people were happy and smiled all the time. I've often wondered what became of that man who was so full of self-righteousness.



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