

Roger Kehm World War II LORAN service

transcribed by ETCM Bill Dietz, USCG, ret.

San Mateo, Canton Island, Pan Am & LORAN

During WW II, LORAN was a secret electronic navigational system and even the word was classified. After I finished 2 radio schools and the LORAN school in Groton, CT, I was sent for a couple of weeks to a station in Rehoboth Beach, DE, for some on the job training. And then for the train trip across the States to the Treasure Island, San Francisco USCG Receiving Station. There were seven of us that made the train trip, 5 LORAN operators and 2 LORAN technicians, Maurice Angel and I. Our stay at Treasure Is. was brief for we were waiting to be shipped out to the SoPac and a duty station.

The Sunday that we were there Angel and I got a pass and we decided that we would hitch-hike south down the coast to see a bit of California before we shipped out overseas. By a couple rides we had gone a few miles when a nice mature lady stopped to pick us up. She asked where we were going, we told her our "mission" and she said she was going to the Country Club in San Mateo to have Sunday dinner with some friends. And would we care to join her? (You know what the answer was.) (She had 2 sons in the service and was especially nice to men in uniform.)

At the dinner table there were 2 or 3 other ladies and a man in civilian clothes. Introductions around and the man was introduced as a Captain Briggs, a Flight Captain with Pan American Airways. There was a pleasant table conversation during the dinner.

Captain Briggs asked about the rate on our sleeves and we told him we were rated as RT's---Radio Technicians. He wanted to talk about that and we told him we were involved with a facet of electronics that we couldn't talk about.

He said---"would that be LORAN?"

Good Heavens! Here was a civilian talking about a secret war-time navigational system at a dinner table at a Country Club on a Sunday afternoon. It turned out the Pan Am through their experience was flying routes in the Pacific for the military and Captain Briggs was flying between San Francisco and Australia.

To make matters worse, one of the ladies said---"What is LORAN?" Where upon Briggs explained all about it to those around the table. Angel and I died a "thousand deaths."

Back at the base, Angel got word that his wife was in a sanatorium and he got an emergency leave to go home to Kentucky for a few days. I shipped out on a troop transport and wound up on Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides Islands. A few days there and I caught a Navy PBM flight, with a stop at Funafuti Is. for refueling, to Canton, Island. (They brought out a barge and tied it up to

the PBM so the guys on the plane could step out and relieve themselves, but, took the female Red Cross worker that was aboard ashore so she could go to the bathroom. She on her way back stateside, pregnant.)

The oil they put in one engine on the plane had water in it. About a half an hour out on our way to Canton, Is. the pilot came back, looked out a window and discovered the reason why the engine was not functioning right. It was throwing out the oil and water. We turned around and went back to Funafuti with a sputtering engine and losing altitude all the way. It was a good thing we were only a half an hour out and were at altitude at the time. There was no mechanic on the island so all the pilot could do was run the plane up and down the lagoon, throwing out the bad oil, adding new until the engine again ran smoothly. The rest of the flight was uneventful.

I got to Canton Is. after a sea voyage across the Pacific, a stay for a few days on Espiritu Santo and the Canton flight and who would meet me but Maurice Angel. He had flown back to Kentucky, spent 10 days with his wife, flown back to San Francisco. And they flew him out to Canton.

But I digress.

The interlude with the gracious lady and her friends at the Country Club in San Mateo that Sunday was very pleasant indeed. Times were different then. America was at war, folks were behind the war effort and service men were greatly respected. She was a great hostess and showed her support in the things she could do to make life a bit more enjoyable for the guys in the service.

When we left the Country Club Captain Briggs said if we were going to the SoPac and were at a location where Pan Am flew into, we should look him up.

Late one afternoon Angel and I saw a Pan Am plane come into Canton. We speculated about it and decided later to go over to the Officers Club and "check it out." We found a crew member from the plane and inquired of him if he knew a Captain Briggs. Yes he did---had had just flown in with him!

We found the Captain in the dinner room having his evening meal and of course he remember us. We again had a nice conversation.

In visiting with him he told us he was 2 days out of the States and could bring us a couple of quarts of fresh milk in the refrigerator on the plane. (When it was available fresh milk was selling for \$75.00 a quart on Canton.) He also said that under no circumstances could he bring any mail in and certainly take any mail out back to the States because of censorship. And in the conversation he mentioned that he really shouldn't bring us any liquor, but---and then he hesitated---maybe it could be arranged.

He was tired from the long flight from Hawaii and we didn't keep him too long. But what a coincidence to happen to meet him in the SoPac. He left the next morning and we never saw him again.

Angel and I were on Canton Is. for a time until the USCGC Balsam (WLB-62) took us and supplies for construction of CG Unit 93, Atafu Island in the Tokelau Group for the Phoenix LORAN chain.

LORAN SERVICE IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC – WORLD WAR TWO

by Roger Kehm - K0ROG

Loran duty in the South Pacific during World War Two was isolated duty in most instances. USCG Unit #93 was a part of the Phoenix Chain, a single-pulsed slave station on Atafu Island in the Tokelau Islands. The double-pulsed master station was on Gardner Island in the Ellice Islands. The other singled-pulsed slave was on Baker Island, a coral island with no trees but lots of Gooney birds. The headquarters island for the Phoenix chain was on Canton Island and had the chain's monitor station.

Personnel from CG Unit #211, a construction detachment (CD) built these stations. The loran technicians (RT) went in with the #211 folks to build the station on Atafu. I arrived just after the trees and jungle had been cleared and came ashore on an LCM along with all the construction supplies and stores.

Atafu was a coral atoll consisting of many small island circling a lagoon approximately 1-1/2 by 2-1/2 miles across. The loran station was on one of those small islands about 300 feet wide and about 10 feet above sea level. Truly, we called it the "Atoll of the Pacific"!

The station consisted of seven Quonset huts—loran/radio shack, barracks, mess hall, power/generator shack, store room, recreation hall/store room and the skipper's Quonset. A steel tower about 120 feet tall for the transmission of the loran signals and wood poles for other antennas completed the station.

When construction was completed, Unit #211 left for another construction job; the remainder of the manning personnel came ashore to put the station on the air. The skipper, Chief RT, and four RT's eight loran operators, MoMMC, two cooks and bakers, a pharmactist's mate, radiomen and seamen, completed the complement of about 25 people. We went on the air with the Phoenix loran chain 1944.

A few Tokelau Island natives lived on Atafu, an island 300 miles from the closest base at Canton Island. Contact with the outside world was possible about every six weeks, when a PBY would land in the lagoon with mail and supplies. "Isolated duty" is an apt description.

Midnight Small Stores

Upon completion of construction, Unit #211 was scheduled to leave with their equipment, construction tools, and the left-over material and supplies needed for their next loran construction job, which was moved to a site where the LCM

could come ashore from the supply ship waiting off the island. Loading was to take place on a certain morning at high tide.

After midnight on the day #211 was to leave Atafu, we were awakened in our tents by the Chief Motor Mech. And silently made our way to the site where the material was piled. The stack of 4x8 plywood sheets, pails of paint, a large roll of heavy canvas, bolts and nails, hand tools, the four cylinder Kohler AC generator, sacks of cement, and so forth, were spirited away and hidden hip deep in the undergrowth away from the staging area.

High tide came early the next morning; #211 had to load out and leave and, voila! #93 had enough stuff to make Atafu our "Little Island Home". After all, the manning unit had to make a bar and a ping pong table in the rec. room, a concrete base for the flag pole, and perhaps the AC generator could be used down in the native village.

Stump Juice

There was one wooden barrel on the island, a 50 gallon barrel the natives used to collect rain water. The Chief Motor Mech., always one to have the well-being of the unit in mind, thought it would be a fine idea to chisel the tops out of six 55 gallon oil drums, paint the inside with our midnight small stores paint to prevent rust, and trade them to the natives for the wooden barrel. They got a good deal by greatly increasing their water storage capacity, and we the coasties got something which we put to good use.

Yup! The cooks had a large supply of dried apples, raisins, sugar and yeast. And in the tropical heat (300 miles south of the equator) the stuff was cheerfully bubbling away three days later.

The bar had been built in the rec. hall from midnight small stores and a party for those not standing watch was held. 'Twas a smashing success!

Breakfast the next morning consisted of pitchers of hot coffee and tomato juice, and saucers of PC tablets—the standard hangover cure. The Chief Motor Mech. Was heard to remark at breakfast, and I quote, "That was quite a party last night, but the best part about it is that we still have 40 gallons left!"

The Flag Pole

As part of the material supplied for loran stations construction, the U.S. Coast Guard rightfully furnished a flag and steel flag pole. It was installed, centered and out from the six Quonset huts that were in a row. The Stars and Stripes were dutifully raised and lowered each day. It was a touch of home to us. Everyone

showed respect for the flag, and it was displayed and lowered each day and folded according to protocol.

One fateful day, the skipper, who has been listening to short wave news in his Quonset, suddenly burst out of the Quonset and command a coastie near the flag pole to "half mast the flag, President Roosevelt has died". A period of mourning was observed there in the South Pacific theatre of operations at Unit #93.

We were fortunate to have in our crew a talented commercial artist who was one of the loran operators. Some of the midnight small stores cement was used to pour a base around the flag pole with the official Coast Guard Emblem etched into the concrete by the artist. We had been operational for a couple of months when a Commander from the 14th Naval District (and an Ensign traveling along) arrived on a PBY for an official inspection of the unit.

All was in order and neat. The inspection party toured the Quonsets, the power hut, mess hall, barracks and spent considerable time in the loran/radio shack. The inspection tour ended at the flag pole. Breathlessly, all hands were watching this final stop. The Commander and the Ensign looked at the concrete base, then the Ensign looked at the Commander to see what his reaction would be. The Commander let out a big, hearty laugh—then the Ensign laughed.

On the beautifully done Coast Guard Emblem in the concrete, instead of saying "Semper Paratus-Always Ready", it said "Semper Paratus-The Bastards Forgot Us!"

This may give the impression that Unit #93 was a bunch of hell-raising misfits. We were actually a close-knit group, all working together in our various jobs. It was a fine group of coasties who had little or no difficulties within the unit. Lasting friendships were made on that isolated duty station that carry on to this day—50 years later.

Operating efficiency was important, and Unit #93 was always up as near 100% as we could get. Rules dictated that we alternate transmitters on the air every 24 hours, so #1 was taken off at noon, antenna connections were changed and #2 was put on the air. The whole chain went down for this, but we soon found out that changing transmitters every 24 hours contributed to added outages and maintenance due to the salt air and humidity. Put it on, let it heat up and stay on for a longer period of time and enjoy less humidity problems and outages. So, "misfits" that we were, we technicians kept each transmitter on for a week, shut it down every Saturday noon for a change-over on schedule. Sunday through Friday at noon we just killed the plate power on

the finals and "they" thought we too had changed transmitters. We had excellent on-the-air proficiency.

Even though isolated duty, loran service in the South Pacific during World War Two was good duty. A necessary part of the war effort, and one that all of us were proud to be part of.

The People of Atafu Island

I was very fortunate for LORAN duty in the SoPac during WW II to be sent to an island where there native people. Atafu is part of the Tokelau Island chain—Atafu, Nukunonu and Fakaofu. These 3 islands are New Zealand mandated and Swains Island--Olosenga is also considered a part of the Tokelau's but is part of American Samoa. At the time I was there only Atafu and Nukunono were populated. The Tokelau Islands are located south and east of the Marshall Islands and Atafu is about 300 miles south of the equator.

There were about 400 native on the island and they were Polynesian people. They were extremely friendly and helpful to the Coast Guard. All of us "Coasties" were adapted by a family in the village---we were known as having a "true friend." My family was Aluia {sp?}, Pua and their little daughter Meliani. {Pua means flower and Meliani translated means Mary.} They were probably in their mid to upper 30's. They were wonderful to me.

As friends I tried to give them gifts that they could use. The natives of course were barefoot and we decided that we would not give them shoes for when we were gone they would not have access to replace them. {Ugh---barefoot on the coral but they were use to it.} We gave the soap, other toiletries, shorts, dungarees, t-shirts and all sorts of practical things that they could use. They wore lava lavas for the most part. The lava lava was a "skirt", a cloth worn around the waist and about mid-calf length. They had a method of gathering and folding at the waist like we would wear a bath towel. The women wore "Mother Hubbard" dresses. I sent home for a quantity of colorful yard goods to give to my friend for lava lavas.

The native friend was really a "true" friend. Pua did the washing of cloths for me. Just skivvies and shorts---a pair of cut-off dungarees. But that was nice of Pua. I would often go down to the village after a 24 hour watch to sleep---it was hot during the day and a bit more quiet down in the village at my friends open thatched roof house. I would lie on a mat, covered with a light sheet and a pillow. Many times Pua would have Miliani or one of the other children in the village fan me to sort of keep me cool. They were really "true" friends and we in the CG were united in our resolve to not take advantage of the truly good people.

I would often go down to Aluia and Pua's house on Sunday morning---it was across from the native church and listen to the singing of the hymns. They

were usually familiar ones that we all sing. The people were good singers and they sang loud and clear. That was always a pleasant time on Sunday morning.

Speaking of the church, it was the only traditional built structure in the native village. It looked like a traditional church building and had a small steeple with a bell that they rang on Sunday mornings. The Missionary was a Samoan and he and his wife had a little girl. He was strictly no good as an individual! I never attended the service at the church and I don't believe of the other Coasties did either. We all knew what kind of a guy he was and treated him accordingly. He acted like a little king to the people and treated them very badly. I believe the denomination was of the Church of England and he was sent to Atafu by them. He was a bad man! We would send our left over food each meal to the village for them to share---how ever they would want to divide it up. We learned that the Missionary did not take his turn---he got it every other day! He was a bad man! And so on the day that he got the food, our Cooks put some soap power in it! He was a bad man!

The native people were extremely good to us and we tried in every way to treat them nicely. Each day there would be 4, 5 or 6 native men that would come up to our site, they would be there making craft items and be available for any work around the station that they could help us with. One time the drain field on our septic system needed maintenance and they insisted that they would do the work for us. They were awfully nice people.

They were in contact with Samoa---briefly---each day. A native who preferred to be called Jim would send the weather information by CW code. It was a very low powered transmitter and I guess I never knew about his batteries that powered the transmissions. But they were and had to be very brief.

About once a week the village would have a community Hulu dance. And we Coasties would go on occasion. Generally it was divided into 3 groups--the children, the young adults and the older people. And of course the native Magistrate and the village Council would be at end of the thatched roof building. Each group took turns, singing dancing and entertaining. The Coasties had to take their turn---and we got tired of singing You Are My Sunshine or any other song we all knew. I had an Ocarina in my sea bag that I play once in a while around the station and the guys talked me into taking it to the Hulu one night. I played a song when it was the CG turn, there was applause and then the Magistrate and Council members were talking. Finally they said they really liked the "bird", thought it was special and that I should bring it every time we came to a dance.

When the building of the station was completed and right after the Construction Detachment {Unit #211} left there were the 25 or so manning {Unit #93} left on the island to operate the station. The CO---Chief Warrant Officer---Al Padgett had a meeting for all hands. He had a directive from the 14th Naval District that had to be presented to us. It said that since Atafu was a New Zealand possession there were rules that had to be in place concerning the native people. We could only go as a group for a couple hours on Sunday

afternoon and had to be accompanied by of the two Chief Petty Officers. Padgett read it to us. Then he stated that he would not enforce it because we would be on Atafu a long time and it would be unenforceable as far as he was concerned. He then stated that if anyone got in trouble down in the village--- "I'll throw the book at 'ya!" Nuff said. {one of our cooks got in trouble with one of the native girls and he went to Baker Island where there was no vegetation--- just coral---and no natives. We got one of their cooks and he was glad to be on Atafu.}

Right after the world ended, Aluia, Pua and Meliani left for New Zealand. I gave the \$50 for their trip. They were very good friends.

CHATHAM, MA and the USCG USSCG SPARS

At the end of WW II in November 1945, I came back to the states from the SoPac at Long Beach, CA and knew that I would get a 30 day leave to go home. Ernie Zehms, an RT from Gardner Is. In our LORAN chain and I were together at the CG Station in Long Beach and bought the Chief Yeoman a fifth of whiskey so that when our requests for leave extension came to him we could be home for Christmas that year. He then would see that the CO would get it and we were assured that the leave extension would surely be granted.

I went home and was enjoying my time when about a week before I was to go back to Long Beach I got a telegram from CG Headquarters in Washington, DC to report to the District CG Headquarters in Boston, MA for transfer to CG Unit #21. What to do as I didn't know who to write to in Boston for a leave extension. So I had to go to Boston and miss Christmas at home.

When I checked in I was mighty unhappy about the change in orders and immediately asked where Unit #21 was located---and the guy told me it was the CG LORAN station at Fredrichsdal , Greenland. I blew my stack! In that I was a little over a month out of the tropics, my blood was thin and the CG was sending me to the arctic in the middle of winter!

SPARS were women Coast Guardsmen and there were several of them in the office and happened to hear my outburst. One of them cam over to the counter and asked the guy why I was so upset and he explained to her my story and where I would be going.

She said Unit #21 was down on Cape Cod at Chatham, MA and was a CG LORAN monitor station manned entirely by SPARS. I asked her how she knew that and she told me several of her girl friends were stationed there and she knew her facts for certain.

About that time Ernie also checked in---he had got similar orders at his in Green Bay, WI---and so went the next day to Chatham, MA

Unit #21 was one frame building on the grounds of the Chatham Light House. It housed the Monitor station and several 4 person bedrooms and baths

for the personnel. Would you believe. With a full roster of SPARS manning the station all sleeping room were practically full. One room had only 2 girls in it. So--guess where Ernie and I bedded down for a few nights.

Each of the rooms had 2 bunk beds and the 2 girls took the lower ones and Ernie and I took the uppers. The deal was that the girls got up first, put on their robes and went to the bathroom to dress and then Ernie and I got up. That arrangement was approved by the female SPAR CO and worked very well for a few days.

You see Ernie and I were the first of male personnel to relieve the SPARS as they were eligible for discharge. Other guys arrived in a few days to coincide with more "orderly" change-over in staffing of the station.

I can assure you that the situation was on the up and up. NOTHING HAPPENED! Talk about the ultimate integration in the Armed Service.

www.loran-history.info