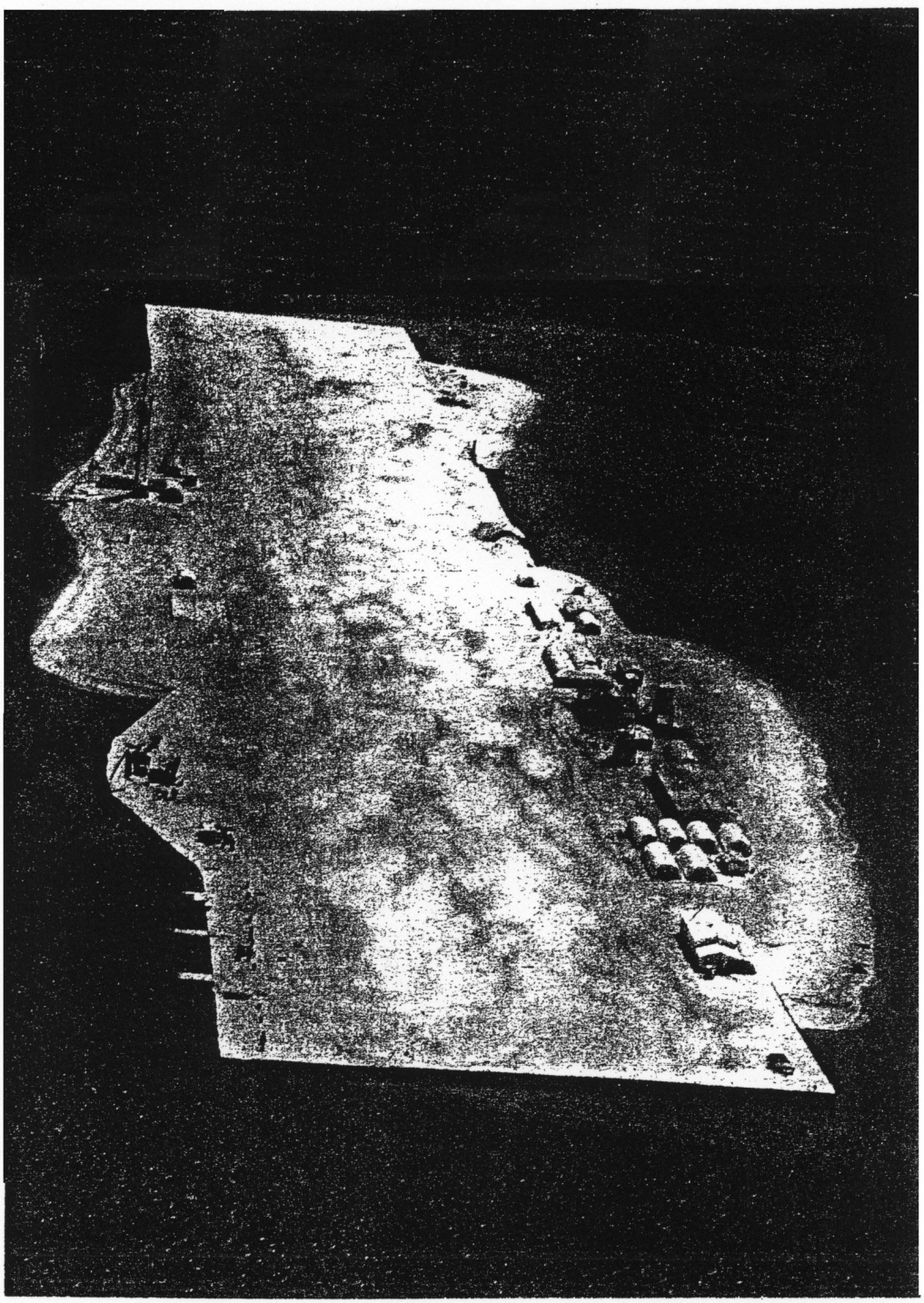

FRENCH FRIGATE SHOALS 165° W. Lon.—25° N. Lat.

3,000 Feet length; 300 Feet width; 3 Feet above ocean surface is 500+ miles West of Honolulu, Oahu, Hawaii—on the Tropic of Cancer. Made by U.S. Navy *SeaBees*, after December 7, 1941.

EAGLE AIR

French Frigate Shoals

As soon as the ground crewman secured the small door of our C-47 transport, the interior of the plane turned to black. As a windowless cargo carrier each side had a small, fold-up bench seat, with belts. Some of us grabbed clip-on 'chutes from a secured stack, which kept our bottoms from the hard aluminum floor. Adjusting to the sudden lack of the brilliant Hawaiian sun, I became aware of tiny, ill-fitting joints in the aircraft's skin, through which the bright sunlight found its way. After takeoff, it didn't take much increased altitude and airspeed to feel chilled, wearing nothing but "skivies"—Tee shirts and summer work shorts.

The day before, gathered in our hangar, Commander Strauss had assembled three of our CASU-1 groups, twenty-three Ford Island airmen. "What I have to say today is not my decision. That order comes from Washington to all Naval Air Stations. Our orders are to suspend flight status for all crews at this end of the Navy's war. There won't be many Japanese subs we'll find nearing Pearl anymore. The Japanese have finally surrendered. The war is . . . " He could not be heard over the wildness that expoded in that space. The war was over. We were done. We were going home. Then military reality broke through.

"You have been selected to decommission the *French Frigate Shoals* refueling-support emergency airstrip," Strauss continued. We would leave in two days, and would stay until the work was completed. Only then would we be flown back to Pearl, Completion of inventory, packing and sorting major tools and material had been estimated to take at least one month. None of us had any idea about what this surprise assignment meant.

"You'll find your names on the barracks bulletin, along with other members. As a long time pilot, I realize what this suspension of flight status means to airmen, but we are, first of all Navy men, and will do what has been ordered."

Immediately, the tension in the hangar space was palpable enough to produce electric shocks. It seemed as if the four walls of the huge hangar space had closed in around us. I felt a chill, my skin raising goose bumps with the sudden changes. The war being over was incredible news. It also meant a sudden end to flying, to not feeling more alive in the buoyant atmosphere above the Pacific. All of us had enlisted in the war—to fly.

We had become tough, skilled airmen trusting our ground maintenance and fellow crewmen aloft in big, four-engined planes, doing the pressured, dangerous work of military flying. We had always known that surviving the war's end would put us back on the ground—would end flying. For most of us poor guys with 'air in our veins', to probably end forever. It was a depression I had not allowed into my day-to-day mind.

Many of us had flown over the *Shoals* on our longer eastward flights but were hardly aware of them. *French Frigate* was a place too small to be called an island. We checked it on the western Pacific chart. *French Frigate Shoals* was about 500-plus miles due west of Pearl Harbor. It was maybe 200 ocean miles north of Johnson Atoll, and marked on the pre-war Navy chart as a partly-above-water "land" mass. The *Shoals* were not granite, but coral, snaking for perhaps a hundred miles, above and barely beneath the surface as a curving reef "archipelago." Navy SeaBees had dredged a runway out of the surrounding coral rock as an emergency landing place following the Pearl Harbor bombing.

On our fly-out day, with all required gear in my sea-bag duffel, we boarded the *Military Air Transport Service* [MATS] aircraft. In 1936, that twin-engine DC-3 [the military's Douglas C-47: *Dakota*] began its now famous history. It was the first real airliner, one I discovered as a ten-year old. For me, it had a special meaning just getting to fly in one. Many C-47s around the world are still airworthy, still hard working, now seventy-four years after their introduction. In aircraft lore, their active history is a testimony to a spectacular design—one that not many aircraft can share—an airplane that has lent itself to many different applications.

Just being up again—my body feeling more alive simply being aloft in cooler, clearer air—lifted my spirits. From our dark interior, I could imagine the ocean colors below, or schools of flying fish thrusting themselves into the air with bursts of energy, like tiny salmon leaping waterfalls. [Each time I flew recalled my first time, in a twin-engined Lockheed, over the tropically green Atlantic east of Jacksonville, Florida.] After flying a little more than three hours, with little turbulence, we descended to a smooth landing and swung the tail downwind, ready to off-load.

On the dazzling white, crushed coral runway all of us were buzzing, excited by the starkness of our remote surroundings. The horizon was an unbroken line, the *entire 360° rim* of the upside-down hemisphere of sky. With no delay, the Dakota took off to east, banked, and made a low pass over the runway doing a couple of "Dutch rolls" as a goodbye wave. Stacking most of our gear and proceeding to quarters, we found barracks and bedding in serious disarray, looking quite abandoned, as though taken over by castaway rodents seeking shelter from ocean storms.

After walking the runway to gather our stuff, "snow-blindness" at first dimmed and then completely blacked-out our vision. With all of us afflicted, we guessed that we were reacting to the tropically-hot reflections bouncing off the white, crushed-coral airstrip. Sitting around, still sightless after several hours—and now scared—we began to think that our eyeballs had been completely burnt out.

Charlie Abbott, who had never seen the sea while growing up, was the first to freak. Everyone must have been thinking the same thing: was this the way we would end our Navy service, with someone leading each of us home, blind? I never was more aware of sight when, hours later, light gradually returned and slowly images began to resolve.

Our temporary home was a bleached white, rolled coral slab, about 3,000 feet long and a bit more than 300 feet wide. A simple, rectangular shaped landing strip oriented parallel to the prevailing west-to-east winds, it was barely held together with corrugated, modular steel sea-wall units driven

deep into the coral rock. The runway—most of the total area of this man-made island—cleared the ocean's surface by a mere *three feet*.
Not a single green leaf appeared anywhere on this stationary "aircraft carrier."

On the wider northwest side of the runway's edge, the SeaBee builders had abandoned their now rusting heavy construction equipment—a 60-foot boom crane with shovel; a large, diesel bulldozer; a tilt-wheel road grader; one, heavy road roller; and a six-wheel dump truck. Smaller hardware included a "cherry picker" crane, various aircraft repair equipment, and scattered tools, the steel rusting in long unused wooden sheds. A diesel generator station provided electric power.

All of the heavy earth-moving equipment was left behind in the Navy's rush to pursue the Japanese into the western Pacific. This tiny, obsolete island base was a lonely naked outpost indeed. Here we heard only the natural sounds of open ocean—wind, water, and sea birds. With little entertainment available, it didn't take us long to tune-up and use the rusting, heavy-equipment for races down the white coral runway.
Small money bets promised made the competitions real.

Staring at the abandoned heavy road building machinery hulked at the east end of the runway, and thinking about all of the rusting hand and power tools in the maintainence and ‘tin knocker’s’ shops—lathes, millers, drill presses, all of that first-rate military-spec equipment and parts we found helter-skelter—I began to wonder why we were out here in this prison without walls. Was the Navy going to take our inventory and have all of it shipped back to Pearl? It wasn’t the way the Navy did things. The free-spending wartime Navy didn’t seemed to ‘count its change.’

The tropically warm and humid atmosphere quickly began to make problems for feet encased in Naval issue, heavy work boots. The standard, non-military answer was to cut away the leather above the toes, making the boot into a ventilated, semi-sandal with an industrial grade, "truck tire" sole.

Alas! In this Pacific island tranquillity, we quickly found a sizeable worm. More like a stinging insect, our crew commander—Lt. Shane O'Brien—was an angry, coarse and, as he continually revealed, quite stupid former Brooklyn police detective who, besides his other "attractive" traits, took pleasure in being a mean, sadistic bully. After only a week under his loudmouth, often dumb and cruel “direction”, there began to be serious, barracks muttering almost every evening about how we could rip this open sore from our midst and do away with him. That running anger worked to stave off loneliness.

Every six or seven days, the DC-3/ *Dakota* would fly in with our lifeline connection to Pearl Harbor's civilization. Food, beer and equipment arrived, along with any mail and news. Most important was our weekly ration of two, 16mm Hollywood [old] "feature" films. Then, all too soon, the dependable Pratt & Whitney radials would be cranked up, the plane taxied to the runway’s eastern end, and head back to Pearl and Ford Island.

About five miles over the southerly horizon, on a natural "desert island"—a part of our same reef chain—was a Navy radio and air communications station—a dot of coral sand barely big enough to hold it. The radio guys were a tiny group whose sun bleached plywood living shacks clumped around the transmitting tower was more starkly meager than ours.

Devoid of most opportunities for maintaining morale, they had been allowed to keep a dog—*Eskimo*, a frisky, terrier- sized, white Spitz—who made immediate friends with all of us except Lt. O'Brien, who had yelled the dog away at first contact. We would load the radiomen's share of the new supplies in our "one-lunger," an inboard-engined sea dory— really a Navy destroyer’s life boat—and go visiting. Two, isolated communities, excited by our initial contact, became instantly friendly. The seven radio guys and a cook had been out there alone, for six-month tours of trying duty. After delivering, and collecting their outgoing mail, exchanging limited news, eats and bad jokes, we would eagerly swap films—commenting on what we had seen—and chug-a-chug back to our own *Shoal.*

Those open-boat trips were a valued opportunity for socializing. During one of them, our brutish commander allowed his usual, chip-on-shoulder impatience to get out of control in the presence of the neighboring radio crew—illustrating to our friends his usual, monster nastiness. They suggested an "accidental" fall overboard on one of our trips. With no land or settlements for endless miles, really deep water and the always hungry sharks, not much O'Brien would be found.

Later, we schemed, when tough, Naval authority investigators would bear down, probing facts about the "accidental death," our radio mates would affirm our plight, all from first-hand experience. Always plotting, we were slowly trying to convince ourselves that we were gearing for a necessary murder. Those detailed fantasies made our daily lives possible, providing hope and occupation, no matter how far fetched. The unmuzzled, prone-to-screaming O'Brien never knew how close he came to feeding fishes.

Fish food prompts my recall of the clever arangement designed for the island's "heads" [Navy toilets.] Four stalls had been constructed along a narrow wooden pier that jutted from the west end of the runway over weed-free, clear ocean water about twenty feet deep. Each unpainted stall had a "one holer" seat, with nothing beneath but green salt water. By the time a user had walked out to a stall, a varied mass of always hungry fish, attracted by our footfall vibrations, were circling below the open hole, waiting for something to eat. The sizeable fish were the most boldly patterned and brilliantly multi-colored as any I have since seen.

The sixth morning on the island, after a slim breakfast of coffee and toasted Navy "sandwich bread" most of us went back to the machine shop to continue our inventory, tagging equipment for shipment back to Pearl. Before our eyes had adjusted to the gloom, O'Brien's voice charged with pent-up anger greeted us.

Sitting on the big, steel-topped machinist’s bench, his clothes already stained and grimed, he yelled, "You lousy cocksuckers think you're puttin' somethin' over on me." Mouth twisted open, and lips drawn back, he screamed, "You dumb, fuckin' assholes, you flyboys, always jerkin' off when

ya got work t'do. Ya think you're gonna keep me here on this hellhole by stallin'. Dont'cha. Well, y'ain't gonna pull that shit on me, see. You just keep stallin' like y' have an you're gonna get whacked." He was breathing hard, frustrated, "Always th' easy way, goofin' off in your fuckin' easy airplanes, flyin' around, an' we suckers do all th' God-damn grunt work, huh? Well, not out here with me ya don't. God-damn bastards"

I couldn't hear myself breathe but felt anger and frustration rising, Guys were looking down, faces dumb. I was staring at a white-painted 50 gallon drum with blue stencilled letters: **AIRCRAFT HYDRAULIC FLUID, SAE—A/N**, and a series of part numbers. Grimy hand-prints ringed the valve cock.

O'Brien kept beating us with his absolute command authority. "You get this fuckin' place secured by today, or no eats tonight, see. It ain't done—OK, I'm gettin' on the radio to Pearl 'n put you bastards up for Captain's Mast. You'll get brig time for not follow'n orders. Ya GET THAT? **Y' GET IT NOW**? I'll burn that snotty shit outa yas. Now, get on th' fuckin' stick, or I'll get on th' radio, ya God-damn lazy bastards."

We heard him still yelling, walking away down the runway. It was his second blow-up in the last three days. Like the first, it had little to do with any work we were doing, which he never checked. O'Brien knew none of our names, so we were all "guilty," all lightweight flyboys. It took until the middle of the afternoon to get his paranoia out of my gut.

If he filed a complaint, and it came to a showdown back at Pearl, we knew that every one of us, questioned individually, would tell the same story. It would be all of us against his blanket, crazy charges. Under our brilliant, central Pacific sunlight, a chilly depression was settling around us. I began to not care about what might happen in a contest back at Pearl Harbor.

With no facilities for bath or shower, we relied on the ocean for bathing. The first time I went into that warm water for a bathing swim, I walked over the reef wearing my work boots, so that my feet were protected from the sharp-edged, surrounding coral and dove in. As usual in ocean swimming, the experience is restorative, the water itself able to wash away

some of fatigue's down mood. Soaping and rinsing did the rest.

Getting out of the blue-green water was difficult. Finding a shallow access shelf, I crawled my way up and over the reef edge, aware that my chest was quickly getting scraped and bleeding. I had no experience with the sharp, kitchen-grater painful action of coral on skin. Dave Lewis and the few more experienced guys made sure that I soaped down and washed my wounds to prevent infections. Contact with some reef animals was highly toxic.

What was quickly slipping away was the considerable romance and novelty of high spirited, sunfilled days on our remote speck of reef—that solid skeletal material beneath our feet built over uncounted time by billions of generations—life cycles of branching polyps, animal communities finding their permanent residence in the Pacific's vastness.

As close as we had been living as brothers, elbow-rubbing our confined way through required tasks, it became clear that really understanding, reaching into an other with frequencies vibrating within parallel fundamentals, seemed as impossible as reaching one of the bright parts of the Andromeda Galaxy. In the blackness of moonless nights, after our energy would be claimed by the ushers of sleep, and the natural sounds of wind and water vied with the negative of absolute stillness, I was overwhelmed by our micro-scale relation to the celestial markers above, so brilliant here in the unlighted 'nothingness' of oceanspace.

Here, more acutely than in prior places or times, I felt dwarfed by loneliness. Here was the stark contrast of a cold and endless cosmos seen by we isolated, warm-blooded human beings. From this vantage, lives that had major significance, had contributed perceptions affording humans a fuller life—even those humanitarian giants I now saw as only anonymous, outstanding polyps, part of the world's coral reef.

Ernie Chase, a nose gunner and former lobsterman from South Harpswell,

Maine, observing the frequency of shark fins in our vicinity, suggested we try fishing for them. "Babu" Butuan, our fantastic Fillipino "cookie" [and lay psychiatrist] assured us that shark meat was delicious, that gently broiled shark would be hard to tell from swordfish, and that the shark's liver was tasty—not fish-oiled as is mackerel—besides being very nutritious. "Cookie" pushed us to have some shark to prepare, which set us making tackle and planning strategy. The very next day unexpected visitors arrived.

Busy at our decommission tasks, no one noticed an old, sixty-foot wooden fishing boat approaching. After some sign language exchanges and lots of laughter, the six-man polynesian crew out of Honolulu sat down to dinner with us. They came ashore with a tub of several large, cod-like fish that, grilled over scrap wood in a cut down gas drum, turned out to be excellent eating. And really fresh. The Hawaiians spoke some English and we managed to converse. They had been at sea for over three months living mostly on fish, and were heading home with over 500 miles to go. When we spoke of our interest in catching sharks, they eagerly unloaded basic shark fishing lore. Our fishermen visitors told us we would find coral or sand sharks near our reef. We had seen many dorsal fins in close.

Bud Pesetsky—a Lynn, Massachusetts, crackerjack Aviation Metalsmith —scrounging the old machine shop, whooped when he found a length of three-eighths inch, stainless steel rod. With an oxyacetlyne torch and a rusting anvil, he forged an eye on one end, a U-shaped bend and a nasty looking barbed point hack sawed on the other, making an unbreakable hook, about thirteen inches long. [Some of my pre-war Norwegian *Mustaad* fly-tying hooks were less than a half-inch long.] From one of the sheds I dug out a solid cork Navy life preserver.

Stripping out the cork and lashing it doubled, made a nice bobber-float. A length of stranded-steel aircraft control cable, wire-wrapped and sweated to the hook, became a "bite-proof" five-foot leader—connecting hook, cork "float," and line. We were lucky to find "fishing line"—a 200 foot coil of half-inch, tarred Manila rope which, in that size, the Navy insists is "line." In Navy ‘marlinspike seamanship’ lingo, rope-end winding [‘serving’]

"string" is called "small stuff." To float the bait just under the surface, we would try the rig with no added sinker weight.

‘Cookie’ supplied a chunk of fatty stew beef, which we "threaded" onto the large, shiny hook. The line was laid out on the western foot of the runway, which abruptly stopped at the wavy metal seawall. The rope was snaked in large "S" curves, to make it easy for the shark to run with our baited hook. Chase felt that shark-hunting late afternoon to early evening was the optimum time. That was confirmed by our fishermen visitors. Our small, "cherry picker" crane and heavy sueded welder's gloves were readied near the Manila rope.

When all was set and the baited hook flung out into the afternoon sea, Ernie volunteered as "hook setter," and put on the gloves. “If he goes for the bait, we have to make sure he’s on there, get that hook right into the fucker.” The rest of us hung back and waited, talking about girls and things we knew about fishing. Johnny Campanelli told us about working with his father smoking salmon filets for Boston restaurants. Shaking his head he admitted, “we never got anywhere near pulling any fish out of the water.”

A huge, hovering sun near the horizon made long, low angled rays. Wavelet tops sparkled with sunlight reflecting on millions of shapes in constant motion. After about three-quarters of an hour [which seemed much longer] Ernie signalled us quiet, pointing at a large, incoming fin attracted to the uncooked meat bait. Twice, the fin circled the cork float fairly close in. Abruptly, the big fish seemed to retreat as if uninterested or wary, then turning tightly, rolled over on its side to make a swift run at the bait.

With scary white teeth showing, the shark's gaping mouth grabbed and snapped as it passed the float. Immediately, our "glove-man" catching the rapidly out-running line in both hands, planted one foot against the seawall’s metal edge and heaved backward to set the hook. Chase, twisting backwards, dropped the fast running rope, it’s friction already heating the palms of his gloves. All of us, wide eyed, watched a fan spray from the rope and float zig-zagging with the shark’s panic to throw off the massive hook.

The big ‘bobber’ float now disappeared with the shark’s deep dive. Our rope line was furiously alive, its small wake catching the afternoon light as the shark thrashed in every direction. With the fish tiring and slower moving, six hands on the line maneuvered it ever closer to the metal sea wall. The mobile crane's cable hook snagged the steel leader and hoisted the still-wriggling giant fish. That first shark caught was almost seven feet long.

Cook ‘Babu’ had not exaggerated the taste of shark. Those thick, broiled, white meat steaks were an elegant change from Navy mess hall grub. This was not simply usual eating. We were *dining*. Great eats after the tense, exciting fishing game gave us something positive and high to occupy us—a change from the daily conspiratorial mutterings. That whole experience of setting up and catching the first coral shark and then getting to eat it had to be the best time we had on that white rock. Lt. O’Brien had kept his distance, seeing us so connected, and with outsiders present.

O'Brien continued to rage, most often with no provocation. He was short-tempered, impatient, angry at this assignment he hadn't wanted that had taken him from his Honolulu haunts. Lieutenant O’Brien was that in name only, a poor substitute for a Naval officer. We were not "his kind of guys," and he took it out on us in every way. He screamed his frustrations, getting red faced and tumbling over his words. We were, as he kept saying, goof-off "fly boys." He really meant elitists. Fliers were. . . "fucking spoiled kids. Shit, you fly guys never have to fight close-up."

He desperately wanted to be back at Pearl, and nervously irrational, treated every small unexpected change with a rising sense of near panic. He played no favorites, since he had none; was more alone here than any of us. O'Brien never called us by name since he knew none of us, and some few only by sight. Our nighttime plotting grew a more serious edge, reflecting everyone's gloomy despair, a swelling resentment blooming to uncaring anger.

With unrelenting meanness, O'Brian kept us in the dark, withholding any

Navy information affecting us. We had no idea about when commanders might fly us back to Ford Island. No sense of just how long we might be locked in an ocean prison with our "noble leader."

One evening, the showing of our latest 16mm B movie from the morning supply flight provided a few laughs. About halfway through the romantic comedy, the comely heroine slipped and fell coming down a flight of stairs. As she slid, Machinist Ed Barris, the oldest among us, yelled "STOP IT. STOP THE PICTURE!" Manny Chrisostomo, suddenly a very flustered projectionist, got the movie stopped and flipped on the mess hall lights, expecting something serious.

Barris, eyes wide and excited said, "Didya see it? Didya see what happened when she went down? Her whole fuckin' dress wen' up . . . . her dress wen' up'n covered her face. Crank that friggen movie back 'til you get to that place, and you'll see." That kind of desperation, needy cells reaching for pictures of other cells, had nothing to do with Shane O'Brien. The film was gone over, frame-by-frame.

Our “leader” spoke to us after morning chow. He seemed changed, as if he had just breakfasted at the Manhattan *Pierre's* elegant dining room—a meal he wouldn’t have paid for because the maître d' knew he was "that kind of cop." He'd had word from Pearl. We had been ordered back. Start packing our stuff, he told us, and secure the empty base against pirates and vandals. We had the next four days to do it, before the silver bird came and flew us back to Ford Island, and “normal life.”

The room exploded, sounding like all of us had just won a lottery, as the tensions we had long contained now vented. O'Brien, refusing to get involved, put space between himself and our "it’s really true" yahoos. Our return-from-exile plane was a different DC-3 than our weekly supplier. It had seats, with windows! With no height hazards, no telephone poles or towers, the *Dakota* flew east close to the water. I took my turn gazing, soaking up the changing ocean views. Groups of black porpoises leapt in unison, apparently for the fun of it. The warm Pacific horizon, “airbrushed" a faint purple, showed pale cumulous looking like the tethered balloons

moms use to decorate kid's parties. My body tingled. Moving through upper air made real, again, the romance of flying. Cooler now and more alert—ah-h, how a bit of altitude erased so much of my accumulated "mind-*mischigas",* an oppression that began to grow the day after we touched down at the *Shoals*. Very soon, our bullying monster would finally be out of our lives—for good.

The ocean about twenty miles from Pearl Harbor presented quite an unusual, large-scale spectacle. The fleet battleship *Nevada*—now a relic outmoded by the superior aircraft carrier, her massive 16-inch [diameter!] turret guns intact—had been completely repainted. The Navy standard battleship grey had been replaced with a brilliant red-orange, as if the giant warship had been dipped in red lead.

Anchored around her, over at least three square miles of ocean, were arrayed about thirty different types and sizes of naval ships. This flotilla was assembling to be relocated in the western Pacific, near the Marshall Islands' Bikini Atoll. The *Nevada* would become the centered, orange bulls-eye, with the other naval craft grouped around her to constitute the first, comprehensively designed targets for a monitored, nuclear bomb test.

Damage to the anchored vessels would then be analyzed and much still unknown data established to improve the design, application and efficiency of future nuclear weapons. Observing from our *Dakota*, we were looking down on scary history in the making. The next time we would see the scene beneath us, it would grace front pages of major publications reporting on the terrifying power of nuclear weapons.

Looking down at Oahu from one thousand feet, nearing a Ford Island landing, the green land [*green land*!] and blue water looked lush, like a National Geographic photo in real time. Below us was "home." Even a Naval base was a very welcome sight.

What a high it was to slowly descend into the landing pattern, returning to urbanity—and the hot water showers of the Air Station. I noticed, as we turned into the pattern's final leg and lined up with the runway, that quite

a few of the new carrier aircraft previously crowded on the tarmac tie-downs below were gone.

As we taxied to the Dakota's hangar tiedown, it looked like a lot of base personnel were lined up in ranks on the apron. It would be foolish to think that this was some sort of reception. As Lt. O'Brien reached the ground ahead of us, two civilians in dark suits and drab fedoras approached him. "Are you Lt. Shane Brian O'Brien?" one of them asked. Smirking, and cocking his head, O'Brien growled, "Yeah. And who th' hell are you?" "We're FBI, and we're placing you under arrest. You are charged with gross theft of U.S. Government Property!"

With his arm gripped, the second agent handcuffed O'Brien and hustled him toward a sedan waiting near the hangar. Dick Leavitt, an Ordnanceman gunner watching with open mouth called after him, "Hey, Lieutenant, maybe, if you're lucky, you'll get fifty years from your court-martial—and maybe not get shot." Under his breath he muttered, "Yeah, good luck, you low-life bastard." Then, Cookie exploded, "WOW! Goddamn, just like a cop—ripping off his own government." All the rest of us stood there, unbelieving, as the men standing in nearby ranks stared at us, having no idea of what was happening.

Commander Strauss, grim faced, barked us to attention, realigned the ranks and, steely voiced, announced that an FBI agent and two, Ford Island Petty Officer MP's would go through all lines to identify certain personnel. Each person pointed out was to step forward, at attention.

What followed produced an eerie chill. When the investigating three began to move down the rows, there was enough tension present to shatter glass. Altogether, seven sailors and a Supply Officer Lieutenant were "fingered" and marched to a bus by the MPs with 45 caliber sidearms. All of us indentured "*Shoalies,*" not able to believe these sudden and ironic turns of hard justice were actually happening, witnessed the drama with heart-thumping excitement.

Later, we heard that O'Brien had been a key part of a Hawaiian black

market ring. He had been sent out with us to give the Navy and FBI an unfettered period for investigation. We were the "cover" that made their intelligence gathering possible. The Navy really didn't give a damn about "decommissioning" French Frigate Shoals. We should have realized that when we found all of the heavy equipment there had been abandoned to rust. No one apologized for the bad time they knew we would endure under O'Brien—living in close quarters with an ignorant monster. Word "leaked" from administration said that, from the beginning, they were aware of our bad situation under O'Brien, but the scale of his theft finally involved tracking more Navy and civilian people than expected.

Navy MPs found a Honolulu warehouse with stolen Navy hardware. An accounts book, with large thefts itemized—along with small arms, instruments, and drugs taken from combat aircraft first aid kits—was damning evidence.

Combat aircraft medical kits contained morphine "Syrettes"—to quickly ease pain of anyone seriously wounded. Syrettes brought additional higher prices on the street because each tube had a sterile hypodermic needle attached, which made a "fix" instantly available. Considering the list of charges, evidence, and testifying cohorts, it was estimated that O"Brien's crimes could mean life imprisonment.

The next evening, settled into the civilized comfort of our barracks, we learned that the black market group included older, permanent station hands—those "regular Navy" men taken from the ranks after O'Brien had been arrested. The unexpected, theatrical event was swift and startling like a butcher's full-arm cleaver stroke through bone. We kept looking over our shoulders to see if *we* were being watched. Wasn't the FBI for civilians? The long arm of the law seemed quite a bit longer.

For eighteen long days, with no further wartime assignments, we moved about the airfield, doing laundry, packing, talking awkwardly of our futures. Waiting—wanting badly to go home—time dragged. Large numbers of personnel, cleared to leave for the States and discharge were collecting. Some arrived at Pearl from western, forward combat areas.

Fred Stotte, an older, assault forces medical corpsman I talked with, who had fought on Okinawa, had collected three dead Japanese officer's swords—two, fancy dress types, and a plain, curved "beheading" sword, arc-shaped in a curved wood scabbard. He said that he only wanted the dress swords, and offered me the plain one. Unexpectedly, I had a genuine war souvenir for the home folks.

Our island airbase was amassing a sizeable shipload of impatient airmen and ground crew sailors, all waiting for the promised *USS Olmsted's* arrival to sail us home. Word came from above that we were not returning to San Diego. Our goal was the Panama Canal, and then up to Norfolk, the big Chesapeake staging center. From the talk at mess, many guys had already begun distancing themselves from thinking 'Navy.' Talk was about what it will be like to get back into the real world—to that other [grounded] life back home. Some said, once home there'd be little appreciation for descriptive, four-letter Navy words.

The third day after returning from the *Shoals,* a small aircraft carrier, a CV-E, tied up at Ford Island's pier. Airplanes from the crowded tarmac tie-down areas were being towed by tractors to the carrier and taken aboard. When its decks were full, the flat-top blew black smoke and sailed out of the harbor. The war is really over, I reasoned, when the planes are going *back* to the 'States.

Two days later, a second carrier docked, and the aircraft loading resumed. I asked Chief Aviation Quartermaster George Piaseki about what was going on. Piaseki, a career-Navy old hand and lively native of Chicago's south side, was the guy who supervised the aircraft maintainance materials—and claimed to "know all of the best whorehouses in Boston." "Chief, all these airplanes going back to the States" I said. "We don't need them out here anymore. It's all over!"

The Chief laughed. "Listen Ace," he began—he called all airmen "Ace." His eyes squinched, face now all serious, "Right after you guys went out t' th' Shoals with that bastard Brooklyn cop, we begin loadin' th' carriers. Been doin' it for more'n three weeks—an' they're gonna keep doin' it."

"Keep doing it sure, because there are way too many here now. They're shipping them back." "Well, you're not goin' t' believe this, Ace," he said, shaking his head, "but all these God-damn carriers go out to deep water, and then they roll every one of these new babies over th' side. They're 'deep-sixing' em! Throwin'em away! Now, howd'ya like that, flyboy?"

"The whole thing's like it always is, Ace. Ya don't hear anybody talkin' about stateside, nope. The factories makin' these airplanes, all of 'em have tons of workers. All that machinery. They gotta keep it up—jus' like the war's still goin'. Y'know . . . keepin' the jobs goin'. They're not gonna stop 'til they get pushed off that big gov'mint tit, when th' time comes."

Getting ready to leave the wartime Navy, I reflected that the Navy had been more than a chance to get into the air, the way to assume my responsibility in my country's war effort. The Navy experience was turning out to be my freshman class intro into the wider world.

Years after I came home from from the Navy, there was an account about all of the "critical war materiel"—rubber, and steel, and tin—that civilians had been urged to save and collect, and how all of that stuff had been dumped. For several months before reporting for active duty, I had worked in a large unheated warehouse handling mountains of collected auto and truck tires being prepared for shipping to a 'reclamation center.' Citizen participation was part of the government's wartime public relations, of keeping up people's morale, of being able to do something for 'our boys over there.' The deep-sea dumping of new airplanes, far from eyes or press—that probably remained rolling, without much noise about it.

Two days later, the swift-looking attack transport, *USS Olmsted,* with cheering western Pacific area sailors already crowding her rail, moved slowly into Pearl Harbor without tugboats, and tied up at our Ford Island dock, eager to take us home.