

Adrift on the Oggie: By Tall Ship to Australia

By Trevor Greene

**Dedicated with love to my son, Noah,
who dreams of the wild, wide ocean**

In 1997, I joined the Royal Canadian Navy. After freezing through basic training in the dead of a Quebec winter, I was posted to HMCS Venture, the naval officer training centre in Esquimalt, British Columbia. After the first phase of naval training, which involved classroom instruction and simulators, it was on to phase II, practical training at sea. We were incredibly lucky to be posted to the Navy sail-training ship, HMCS Oriole, which was deploying to Australia. So, there we were: 11 newly minted naval officers, looking at our ship for the first time. She's a steel-hulled ketch with a tall main mast and a shorter mizzen mast about two metres aft. The infrastructure and deck were teak with brass fittings with which we would become intimately familiar. We slipped from the jetty at 1045 on 14 October 1997 on an overcast mild autumn day with the 11-member permanent crew. There were a few wives, kids and sweethearts on the jetty sniffing and smiling bravely as the padre prayed for our souls and intoned the Naval Prayer. The watch captain barked the orders, and we warped slowly along the jetty, standing at attention at the guardrail and piping the salute to the impassive gray hulls of our brand-new frigate fleet as we passed to the harbour mouth. Eight of us stowed our kit in the forward mess, right in the pointy end of the ship; eight racks chained to the deckhead (ceiling) in a narrowing compartment a bit bigger than a minivan. We crammed our clothes, uniforms, boots and foul weather gear into myriad nooks and crannies provided by pipes, hatches and rigged ropes. There was a slight chop and an even breeze in the Juan de Fuca Strait for the few hours it took to clear through to the Pacific proper; a few hours to gain false confidence in our apparently sturdy sea legs and iron stomachs. Our first port of call was San Francisco; aiming for Alcatraz. We cleared the northeastern tip of Washington State just as dusk started to fall, came left to 180 degrees and school wuz in. Almost immediately, we began taking three-metre seas rolling in from starboard astern. There was a steady cold breeze blowing rain on a down-collar slant. The skipper ordered the two headsails taken in. We staggered to the bow and clutched in the nylon

sails hand over hand, bracing on the slippery sea-washed deck and staring down into the wave-walls as they slid past. As the bow dips, you feel suspended, weightless above the suddenly amorphous, intangible deck. Then Oriole climbs the wave face and you're hammered into the suddenly very tangible deck; face plant, licking teak. The pressure seems to squeeze you right through the wood, into the forward mess, past the chained racks, by your mates on the other watch asleep on their racks, thru the steel-plate hull into the ocean, perhaps into a pod of started porpoises, clucking wondrously at your bizarre frame, to finally end up mashed into the seabed, slowly making angels in the soft, cold mud. It's all actually over in a second or two; you're still on deck madly clinging to the sail and the rush of cold seawater that came over the bows has filtered over your hideously goose bumped skin and is gone. But there's yet another wave-wall waiting just up ahead a ways, night has fallen, the thick black curtain of the sea, and there are still five and a half hours left in your watch.

It's when that exhilarating, tiring, frustrating (" ... heave in on the jumbo downhaul...!" " ... the what...?"), frantic first watch is over that the sickness comes, gradually tiptoeing into your stomach. Queasy with the rollercoaster slides and squiggles of the ship when you're topside? Find yourself getting that slightly anxious, mildly upset stomach feeling when you are up in the fresh air, can move around and can make out at least some semblance of the horizon? Okay, my son, let's go below. Go below to the pointy end where the ship's movements are the strongest. Peel off the soaked wetskins and boots and get a sense what it's like to feel every corner of your stomach at the same time. Watch your mates go pale and see their eyes begin to dart around the humid, cold cabin. Take turns or just share the spew bucket. Lose the fried baloney, hash browns and cake that you rented for supper. Rub your wounded gut, strip down and huddle in your clammy sleeping bag. Search for sleep in the moon-tinted softball shape of the porthole; the bow wake streaming past one second, the cloud-furred night sky the next. Shaken awake at

0230 for the 0300 watch, retch air at polite intervals into the spew bucket, which strangely doesn't have the keg-party stench you expected. Pull on soaked gear and boots, climb the six steps up through the hatch to the upper deck and you're at it again. Four hours. Try to follow the commands shouted out over the engine, sail, sea and wind sounds. Try to figure how to break a backstay. Try to figure out what a backstay is. Stand forward lookout for your 30-minute watch; stop moving and feel the cold-damp seep in and settle under your gooseflesh. Finish your watch, go back down below and into your wet rack again. Make the mariners' eternal invocation of fair winds and following seas. See the wish come true the next day. Get your sealegs gradually, keep your meals down and enjoy a nice cup of Navy coffee once and awhile.

10/16 Into our third day at sea. The weather is clear and the sun and wind have begun to touch our faces and hands with red. Porpoises mock our clumsy passing, flirting with our bow wake, and flights of albatross glide long and strong over the eight-foot wavetops as we stride down the west coast 100 miles off Seattle then Portland, Roman Nose and Navarro Head, capes Flattery and Disappointment. The trademark Oriole spinnaker, the second largest on all the seas of the world, is flying today off the portside boom, shading the length of the ship. The stylised black and orange oriole at dead centre of the blue, white and red sail has become cock of the walk and never looked so good, not even on the left tit of Baltimore baseball players. Spinnakers are the colourful, fat-triangle sails you see yachts flying in strong, steady winds. To prepare our spinnakers, we gather them in three long legs, and tie them off loosely every few feet with lengths of twine known in the Navy as rotten cotton. The top of the sail is hoisted up the mainmast and the two corners are gradually pulled apart until the wind catches and the spinnaker deploys with a thwack-thwack-thwack as the billowing sail breaks the rotten cotton with

an easy muscularity and surges gracefully with a low whomp. When not flying a spinnaker or a hybrid critter called a gennaker, Oriole's bow sports a jumbo, yankee or genoa; triangular headsails which range in size from camping tarpaulin to pool cover. Midships, we hoist our mainsail up the 100-foot mainmast, while the smaller mizzen sail flies aft on the mizzen mast, just ahead of the wheel. On each of the two watches are five junior officer students with two or three permanent hands ranging in rank from ordinary to master seaman, and a petty officer as watch captain. The skipper, a lieutenant-commander, keeps his own hours.

The skipper abruptly orders all the sails down and the engine cut. Immediately, these pepperoni rollers that had been slipping neatly under the keel at 10 knots (one knot = one nautical mile per hour) started to put their shoulders into our becalmed ship. Three of us were hauling up the mainsail, stretching to full length on the mainmast halyard and heaving up the sail as fast as we could, when the ship took a swell square on the opposite beam and we started to swing over the side, a helpless clump of arms and legs. The starboard watch captain braced on the guardrail, caught us and muscled us back to the deck. There was a tire swing feel to that little adventure, except it was exciting as opposed to fun, and the old waterhole was blue-gray, mean and a thousand fathoms deep. This was my first real, visceral, eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with the oggie. I have no idea how long Canadian Navy sailors have been calling the ocean the oggie (a casual take of the Royal Navy's nickname, oggin) but I suspect it is an attempt to pay full respect to the concept of the all-powerful endless sea that we sail upon, yet make it something familiar. Loathe to belittle King Neptune's domain, maybe Canada's salts just wanted to give it a fun nickname. We wear jeans to this party; nobody comes in suits.

10/19 0134 hrs The day we make Alcatraz has just begun and we are taking big seas,

slipping under-keel and driving the bow to the sky. Turning into the wind to reset the sails, we become sitting duck's bow on to the waves and taking green water midships. The only way to haul on the halyards and still stay on board is to brace one leg against a cleat and the other in the waterway, a drain at deck level.

0805 hrs A flight (gaggle? flam-fart?) of three landlubber pelicans terrorising a school of mullet means Alcatraz is near. We tie the sails to the booms and go to main engines. To prepare for harbour entrance, we cheese up, or coil, the lines on deck. It is still cold, but it's a warm land-cold and we miss solid ground and the comforts of land, so we don't mind. Dead-on for Alcatraz.

10/17 0635 hrs We have been running all night on the main engine to come to a new course heading that will allow Oriole to slant into San Francisco. Big meaty 15-foot seas are rolling under our stem. The skipper stood to all hands a short while ago to raise the main, mizzen, jumbo and yankee sails.

1927 hrs We are now bearing slightly Southeast, trying to ride a thin sliver of wind that keeps the gennaker gorged with wind without luffing, or spilling air around the edges, which would push the wind back against the sail and collapse it. The centre of the sail is full, fat and throaty but the edges are often nervous and fluttery, registering disapproval with scolding snaps. Oriole rides well on the moderate, patchy 4-foot swells, gliding easily in a sinewy, ropy rhythm. We are 85 miles off Cape Mendocino when we have our first sea beast sighting in two days; a dead five-foot sunfish, shaped like the front half of a sickly tuna. We are hoping for a great white shark sighting because we are sailing into

the triangle cornered by Point Reyes and San Francisco, home to one of the greatest concentration of the beasts in the world. However, it is often difficult to make out shapes on the oggie, what with the angular, shape changing nature of the waves and the glare of the sun, moon and stars; especially standing forward lookout in the bow at night. Just before a small dory full of panicked refugees gets hammered to splinters by our merciless white bow, the apparition morphs into churned sea foam from a crossing sea. Just give your head a shake and go below. The watch is over. Time to listen to the oggie. The oggie whooshing past the porthole by my head is clear and distinctive. You're in an old apartment building, the kind with copper pipes in the corners. Four or five floors up, someone is emptying the bathtub. Put your ear to the pipes and listen to fragrant water sliding through old copper. Mingle the copper-water sound with that of a girl trailing slender fingers behind a meandering rowboat on a summer warm drowsy lake. Really listening to the oggie left me with a vague sense of being submerged. Most nights, my mental soundtrack for crawling into the rack after watch and listening to porthole whoosh is Tom Petty's "Free Fallin'", punctuated occasionally with the erratic drumbeat of a log hitting the side with a huge "choonk", then a couple of faint dug-dugs as it end-over-ends down the hull. The same girl who emptied her bath into the old copper pipes is trailing her fingers behind my rowboat on our warm summer lake, but I can't yet see her face.

0918 hrs I'm standing forward lookout, hanging onto the wire stay for balance and aiming my binoculars into the fog. Keen to impress, I see something huge looming in the mist up ahead and turn my head to sing out excitedly, "Captain, Sir contact bearing 20 degrees off the starboard bow. Large." The skipper, standing about 10 feet behind me, murmurs dryly, "Mr. Greene, that it is the Golden Gate Bridge." Aye-aye sir. The fog thins as we sail under the most famous bridge in the world and then it lifts, gifting us with the sight of San Francisco. Alcatraz, an ugly mound of rock with rooms, is half a mile to port, right where it belongs.

1202 hrs We're on land, on a concrete jetty, the most solid piece of ground in the world and the motion of the ship is missed; ingrained into muscles and nerves, ruled by the inner ear. The first land shower is an event. That close-the-eyes-put-the-face-to-the-stream thing feels good until you lurch into the wall, counterbalancing for the roll of a ship that has never left the embrace of the water and is riding gently on her hawsers a few miles away. Walking isn't bad until you bend your knees, when the sways and wobbles set in.

2034 hrs I'm on duty the first night in Frisco, watching the jetty try to eat my ship. We are in some sort of maritime history park with interesting-looking schooners, paddle-wheelers and tugs moored around our jetty on a small bay on a green space in downtown Frisco. The bay is frequently criss-crossed by swimmers. In October. In the North Pacific. Tough locals. When we tied up to the jetty, we were dwarfed by the creosoted pilings, barnacly ladders and the jetty surface, about 10 feet up. We put out our fenders, three-foot rubber bumpers to keep us from rubbing our teak deck rail off on the jetty. Amidships and at about eye-level from Oriole, there was a three-tire fender combo attached with huge bolts and steel plates to the jetty, intended no doubt to keep visiting ships the size of small islands from bonding permanently with San Francisco. As we rose with the tide around supertime, we became a quick Oriole-sized snack for the hungry tires. As the wind and tide rocked us on and off the jetty, the tires pushed over our midships stanchions, and the steel plates began to chew into Oriole's teak railing. We had to run two lines out through the anchor windlass to some buoys about 40 yards out in the bay and actually heave the ship away from the jetty. The tires remained impervious to our dirty looks and foul language.

1900-2300 hrs Alone on deck as the brow watchkeeper. My duties are to do rounds every hour to make sure most of the oggie is staying outside the ship, and to stand around

by the gangway for four hours. The boys have gone downtown, well into the sights and lights of Frisco and I am losing a stare down with three huge worn-out truck tires. The lads are revelling in the sound of the city after days of listening to the oggie; my aural backdrop is the endless throat-clearing of the generator and our midships berthing lines groaning on the death tires. The time passes easier when the cook comes up on deck for a cigar and a chat. An army master corporal, he used to be a rigger/electrician on big-name concerts. Cookie once scooped Tina Turner off a Fredericton stage after she collapsed trying to do her third straight concert in 48 hours. Cookie no doubt would have had more to tell, but he is flying back to Esquimalt tomorrow. Chronic seasickness.

10/20 0900hrs Finally on the streets of San Francisco, which is living up to my perceptions of a loose, busy bohemian town. Climbed a big cop car-jumping hill and wandered over to North Beach, where Little Italy's cafes give way to Chinatown, with the raunch district a blue bubble off to one side. The cafes are packed on a sunny Sunday mid-morning. Cliche-hunting at the marble-counter Cafe Roma Deli, I watch a Dean Martin type in his mid-30s welcome guests, chit-chatting about his cafe website. He's keeping his eye on the 49ers game on the TV high up in one corner and asks in mock exasperation "how come nobody's watchin' the game... is the coffee that good?" Brief smiles from the yuppie and art school student-ish crowd, who would probably prefer an early Bergman film or David Brinkley yapping from Washington. At first impression, except for an annoying habit of turning up the collars of their coats and shirts, San Franciscans appear to be reasonably similar to the denizens of any other North American city. I left Dino with his white-collar guests and his 49ers and was searching out a laundromat when I ran into my second Frisco cliché in as many hours. Leaning on the terrace railing of a smart French restaurant were two catalogue-good-looking models doing a photo shoot. At the break, the guy, a rugged sideburny Brad Pitt type turned and gestured delicately across the street at an ocean-theme mural on a building side and said

in fruity bell-like tones "look at the whales!"

1330 hrs Create your own San Francisco Chinatown: take any six-to-seven block area of Downtown Kowloon. Hack the skyscrapers down to about four stories, tops. Hose down the streets, sandblast everything exposed to the air and run two or three hilly ridges under the whole works. Populate it with meat- and fish sellers chanting their rough Cantonese singsong out on the sidewalk, while in the rear of the shop have dead-eyed cooks hack sow bellies down to size and reduce ducks to pieces. Scatter around some old men braining bony-headed sculpin with their hooked fish hammers. Throw in some gwailo, their noses wide and wrinkling at Asian odours and their eyes wide with fascination and disgust, stepping gingerly on the animal-matter-stained floor hoping their shiny deck shoes don't get dirty or their Tommy Hilfiger shirts soiled. Wander by the wrinkled old grandfathers on the packed streets, speaking their old boatman Hakka dialect to their grandchildren. Throw in a faux California touch by housing a Citibank branch in a fake concrete and brick temple. I visited Saigon Garden restaurant around the corner from the Citibank to have a Vietnamese noodle dish called Pho, pronounced "faa". My buddy Vu Tran introduced me to pho in Victoria. He came to Canada in 1985 aged 15, from Saigon. We have gone through basic training together and are now slowly crawling across the Pacific Ocean together, trying to have pho and visit the Chinatown of each port we visit.

1855 hrs Ashore in a world of showers and indoor lighting, taking stock of the body begins: fingernails chipped and crammed with dirt and brass polish; fingers red and worn and blunted with multiple hangnails; bruises and scratches on hands and arms; knees bruised and raw-sore from bracing on the deck; face red from the wind and rain; and arms wiry and tough from hauling on the lines. Our sea legs cause us to lurch to port every now and again.

10/22 A loaf of sourdough bread and a bottle of Napa Valley red wine for lunch. For

supper at the Stinking Rose garlic restaurant; chunks of bread with olive oil, a cheap but tasty plate of pasta and a glass of chianti, smoky and peppery, served in a plastic tumbler by a Mexican waitress after a Taiwanese maitre'd took the order. I find myself wondering if Bill Russell, the greatest rebounder in the history of basketball, ever ate here when he was a student at U.S.F. in the 60's. Famous things and people seem to have happened to every cafe and restaurant in Little Italy: Robert Downey Jr. hamming in the Stinking Rose; a five-picture series of Francis Ford Coppola, neat in a sports jacket and tie and bushy beard supposedly writing the script for "Apocalypse Now" in Caffè Trieste; Pavarotti. .. everywhere with a fat arm around everybody.

2309 hrs We're in a Vietnamese coffee shop/girlie bar in the bowels of Chinatown. Mama-san is elegant in a rough brown silk shirt and trousers, talking about her 10 years in Chinatown and how Northern (Vietnam) music sucks. A couple of broken-down gwailos, regulars it would appear, drink their beer and look at the three young Vietnamese girls in party dresses swaying listlessly to the Hong Kong techno pop playing on the karaoke machine. At the bar, two old men play a game with six dice, rattling the die violently in a cup then slamming it down onto the bar. Every seventh throw one of them slams money on the bar in mock disgust, while the other chortles in high-pitched, staccato Vietnamese. Mama joins in the chortling when she tires of the gwailo with the notebook. In ten minutes there is about \$200 on the bar. We're enjoying the sights of course, doing sailor-ashore stuff, but part of us wants to get back on Oriole, to turn to sea again and suck in the trade winds and slide for Hawaii because that's what we do. At least for the time being, that's our purpose. The people walking by have their purpose; to live in these blocky, funky homes climbing all these hills; they have jobs or some other means of paying for their cappuccino and pretty, upturned-collar clothes.

10/23 My first panhandler approaches on the edge of Japantown: a very black, very thin

woman with Ethiopian features, in her mid-30s, short and worn-looking, dressed in a ratty oversized blue cardigan and jeans. She started eloquently by assuring me in measured tones that she was not a prostitute and wasn't going to pull any weirdness on me, but that she had been reduced to begging because she needed \$4.75 for diapers. She got all the change in my pocket and my best wishes. On to Japantown, a microcosm in two long, low buildings with tea, sushi, videos, books, taiko drums, ikebana, art and coffee shops, with a few satellite restaurants scattered around. Later on, more inventive, thoughtful, even witty panhandling: a young dude with a blonde beard in an army overcoat carries a "residentially challenged" sign; squatting in Jack Kerouac Alley, an oldtimer, mid-60s, gaunt with scraggly straight gray hair and an eyepatch holds "Unable to choose anymore, so this must be begging"; the placid tall black man standing on a street corner holding "nonaggressive panhandler". They all did well, getting some change from every fourth person. Then there's the self-named bushman near Fisherman's Wharf, holding a clump of cedar shrubs beside a concrete rubbish bin and jumping out to startle unsuspecting tourists. He draws a good-sized crowd most days, including former startlees standing off and watching and chucking some change in the small knit cap he has beside the bin, then walking away chuckling... "I had no idea he was there.. ..! haven't been startled like that for years."

10/24 A white and black bumper sticker that touts "Jury Alternate Bob Licky" adorns the towel dispenser in the men's room of the most fascinating bar in Chinatown. The Li Po, at the corner of Jackson and Grant, is about the size of a large living room. It is done up like a temple, with high ceilings, a huge fringed Chinese paper lantern hanging over a long L-shaped bar with a 3-foot Buddha in an ornate red-lit shrine in a corner. Bob Licky's favourite bog is down a set of dark, worn-carpet stairs. Right at the bottom, a storeroom is splintered and bashed in; you can picture a drunk rolling (or being pushed down) the stairs... yup, that's right about where his head would have smucked the bottom panel, then

his legs and feet would have followed through right about waist-height. The neon Miller and Bud signs, the stylised Chinese landscape mural in yellow and brown covering one wall and the signed dollar bills tacked all over the place give Li Po the air and ambience of a Hong Kong Vietnam War R&R girlie bar, but with only one girl, the beautiful, insouciant Chinese bartender. The next best restaurant-bog bumper sticker is in Vesuvio, run by bossy young Italian chest-hair models: "Food prices high? Eat the rich."

10/25 0805 hrs Leaving Frisco for our longest haul of the deployment, 13 days to Hawaii, but we aren't nervous. Rather it is the trepidation one layer below nervousness. It's like swimming across a lake, resting on warm rocks and enjoying the sun but thinking uneasily about the long swim back.

10/25 2300-0300 We came up on deck and tore the sails down, hauling on the lines, pulling and punching the air from the death grip of the nylon, grappling the sails flat and tying them down to the booms. The skipper flashed the main engine and we sailed south to try to pick up the trade winds. Gusts are blowing diesel fumes over the quarterdeck. The watch system, six hours on, six off, four on, four off, four on, combined with three cleaning stations a day will soon take a toll on us. On-watch, hallucinations, daydreams and night dreams take on the same texture of a docudrama, filmed with a shaky handheld 9mm camera. Murmuring answers to spectral questions, we mechanically don our wetskins and climb through the hatch to our watch stations.

10/26 2305 hrs Tonight, a low crescent moon is glaring yellow and malevolent as we steer 200 degrees through the night. Standing in at helmsman, it means aiming the compass arrow two blobs to the right of the S on the pale radioactive-red glow of the gyroscope floating on its stand in front of the big spoked wheel. Smells are coming into play now, a little farther south, as the temperature warms: the musty neck-sweat scent of the binocular strap; the 50-others-before-me thrift store odour of our wetskins and

immersion suits; the fresh-washed-dog tang of the wet lines in our hands; the greasy-spoon reek of the galley; the dry industrial-nylon aroma of the white headsails that fills the nose as you desperately try to batter it to the deck in a crosswind.. What people call the smell of the sea is actually that of the land meeting the sea. Adrift, the oggie smells like a salty rain shower.

2250 hrs We are tacking in pretty active seas. Killer Kowalski and I are working at our tacking station, which is making the backstay. The backstay is a wire rope triangle based on a block and tackle which supports the mast when we hoist sail. It is hooked to the deck up forward. We were on the low side and the oggie was speeding past, often in the waterway and sluicing over our boots, braced in the scuppers. Once unhooked forward, the two wire ropes hooked to the mast become live things and Killer and I are slowly wrestling the bucking triangle of wire, rope, and block and tackle aft. Nothing much can happen until we clip the stay to the deck, so as the rest of the watch watches [ahem] We feel like a pair of prize oxen at the fair, straining away and trying not to poop.

10/27 0700-1300 The cloud cover is complete. A blue-gray cake lid looking from the inside out, except for a series of layered horizontal flashes where the sunlight makes a laser show waterfall.

1425 hrs The weather has warmed up enough for a swim ex(ercise). The coxswain, the senior non-commissioned member of the crew, stays on deck with an assault rifle in case of sharks. Having sailed over a decent chunk of the oggie, cold and wet and weathering its rough slap now and again, it was good to see and embrace a gentler oggie and then climb out feeling refreshed and reasonably clean, rather than feeling that you have been playing rugby with wet, Venusian salt critters. The cobalt-blue sense of swimming in a huge sapphire was complete once we dove in. What the porpoises see when they scoot into Oriole's bow wake is a deep-bladed keel painted red oxide, and above the waterline a

long white 8-eyed (portholes) inflexible animal with a low brown hump and two long brown spines. I was soaping up on deck to jump in again when a valve in the engine room gave an audible, ominous hiss. Someone's wet laundry hanging in the deckhead pipes had apparently started to smoke, setting off the halon fitted system. The swimex cancelled, I quickly pulled up a bucketful of oggie and frantically tried to get the gooey sea soap off my carcass and hair. The hair lost, leaving me bearing a startling resemblance to a tired Billy Idol. There are 1,000 nautical miles to go to Hawaii and we have a bit of a dilemma on hand. We have enough fuel to motor all the way (which may prove necessary in these doldrums); and its always good to have lots of go-juice in the middle of the oggie. But to do so, we can't burn any gas to make water. So, we either sail all over creation trying to find wind and get into Hawaii for Christmas, or we get a little stinky, so the skipper orders strict water rationing.

2320 hrs Just after the watch change, all is quiet and dark on deck. We are running stealthily without lights and I am alert and ready and brushing my teeth. We have altered course and changed to a port tack after many days on a starboard tack, so we are not quite used to the movement and alignment of the ship. I was idly standing by the mainmast, brushing away, when the ship heeled to starboard. I kind of shuffled along, giving a few short steps, mind elsewhere subconsciously waiting for the ship to right itself. I was unconcerned and merely flexed my calves to stay in place, still brushing. The normal heel of the ship had been boosted by a large, long roller that had slipped under the stem portside, and a longer, sharper than-normal roll had resulted. By now I was Karen Kaining on tippy-toes towards the guardrail and was looking for a backstay or a halyard or the Virgin Mary or a Volkswagen to latch onto. I met the guardrail mid-thigh and mid-calf and engaged in a battle of will with the oggie: its timeless, moon-ruled immensity versus my ass and lower-back muscles. The oggie must have smirked and gone off in search of more brisk entertainment, for Oriole rolled easily back to an even

keel and I scrambled back to passionately embrace the mainmast, smothering the cold wood with gooey kisses... thank you God, thank you God. I unpuckered about a week later; it was a Friday I think. Fortunately, no one was watching my dice with death, intent, apparently, on that dark night on such mundane matters as the safe navigation of the ship, fuel consumption and rice crispie squares (delicious, with chocolate chips on top).

10/30 0200 hrs Fireboating, or peeing off the side of the ship, is now a pretty common thing what with the water rationing. Back aft, you clip your safety harness onto a line, hang onto the zodiac davit, unzip, and raise the oggie. At night, it tends to foster odd feelings, such as what would happen if I was washed overboard and my body was recovered with my fly open. Being dead, it wouldn't matter much, and it is actually exhilarating to pee under a black moon, to push body fluid onto the green bits of bioluminescence floating past in the wake. We're not too busy tonight, so we flop on the sailbags amidships and look at the smear of icing sugar with sparkles that is the Milky Way at sea at night.

2135 hrs Back down in our racks, we drift in and out of sleep as Oriole slips into and over a curving open sea, tag-teaming conscious thought (Oh God, I'm awake again, I think. Let's see, 25 minutes till we go back on watch) with unconscious dreams (Rufus, hand me your sword).

10/28 0230 hrs In a momentous occasion, we turned our hooded hatch cover forward from facing aft, seeking the cool breeze rather than trying to shoulder it away until Australia, a million miles away.

0405 hrs Standing forward lookout on a star-lit night and practicing tying bowline knots with a piece of line should have been a relatively peaceful exercise. Tying my leg to the stanchion. Untying my leg from the stanchion. Off to starboard, I could see multiple irregular wavelets where no wavelets should have been and listened until I could hear the

telltale nasally pah! of a small pod of porpoises; soft, clean fedora-gray bullets against the inky oggie. They veer in from astern, make right angle torpedo runs midships, then scoot up to thrash in the bow wake. Caught up in their stoned-on-life symmetry, I realised two things. One, the song "Come on Eileen" by Dexy's Midnight Runners was popping into my head at hourly intervals. Two, I had firmly secured my leg to the stanchion with multiple, impenetrable bastardised bowlines and was two minutes late to relieve Killer back aft at lifebuoy sentry. Fortunately, I had my knife and was able to get free before amputation became necessary.

0545 hrs Oriole is trying to outrun a squall off the port quarter, a square band of butter-yellow sunrise at the horizon bookended by squat violent blue-gray thundercloud mushrooms. Astern is a narrow monk's fringe of raincloud across a wide arc of horizon. Personally, I think we should go up, straight up into the blue stuff that must be up there in the stratosphere, tum into a 747 and be surfing on the North Shore in a few hours. We felt a freshening of the breeze about a half an hour ago and eased out the main and mizzen, but we only made 7.5 knots out of the attempt, so we hauled down the sails and flashed the engine again.

0620 hrs The butter-yellow debut of the sun has turned rancid, the narrow red sunrise melding into purple where it bleeds into the expanding cloudbank.

0650 hrs The sun has popped out above the evil cloud fringe and the sky has lightened considerably all round, except of course for dead ahead on our course, which is a 30-degree arc of bruised cloud and lightly masked malevolence. But we are going to our racks in 10 minutes and it's the starboard watch that has to come up and fear the sky for the next six hours.

1308 hrs The clouds have whitened, fluffed and pulled in their low-pressure nastiness for another day.

1530 hrs The mainsail and mizzen sail, married to boom and mast, are the stolid oxen of the ship, while the spinnaker, angled out on the boom with only tenuous lines bonding them to the ship, is the thoroughbred; tempestuous, strong-willed and unpredictable. We lost control of a spinnaker sheet (line) for about three seconds and the spinnaker was away, warping and floating fifty feet up until we finally got it under control and dragged it in.

10/29 0700-1300 Once again, I thought I was only dreaming that I woke up in a dream and had to scramble through breakfast to get on watch on time. But I was only hallucinating, so it was okay. There are 1,000 nautical miles to go to Hawaii and we have a bit of a dilemma on hand. We have enough fuel to motor all the way (which may prove necessary in these doldrums); and its always good to have lots of go-juice in the middle of the oggie. But to do so, we can't burn any gas to make water. So, we either sail all over creation trying to find wind and get into Hawaii for Christmas, or we get a little stinky: strict water rationing. Cold coffee is the best substitute, and much better than ginger ale, which tickles the armpits, but oh those hidden coffee grounds in the groin... (actually we just used a lot of baby powder and Killer's mighty gold bond medicated powder).

0850 hrs We're in a clear blue sky dome today, with puffs of white cloud. The sun beats down but there is a cooling sea breeze. The base of the spinnaker is playing footsie with the oggie, furling and rolling in the sketchy breeze. The oggie is of course a stately deep blue. We are starting to miss the colour green: The swells have been smooth and vast over the past few days, slipping slowly and gradually under the keel almost beam on. Schools of close to 50 flying fish burst out of nearby swells, fly about 100 feet across the trough and imbed themselves into the following swell, plopping in like silver-winged, sardine-sized 50-calibre bullets.

1750 hrs Standing in the pulpit right at the tip of Oriole looking at the endless oggie. Our course lies just to the left of the gold-gleaming path of the setting sun. Far below us are the wrecks of the Japanese midget submarine *HA. 19*, the Civil War sloop USS Saginaw, and the American research ship MV Holoholo, lost with all hands in 1978. All victims of war and storm, sacrifices to an angry sea god.

10/31 0720 hrs (620 nautical miles to Hawaii) With the weather so much nicer, we wear just shorts and sandals most of the day. We are putting on some muscle what with hoisting and hauling down sails on this floating lat machine, pushups in the foc'sle while on forward lookout and balancing on the endlessly moving deck. We lick sea salt off our browning shoulders and arms and search for land. We shoot heavenly bodies with the sextant, known with affection as the sky wrench, and calculate moonset and moonrise and look for land. We watch spires of sunlight pierce broken cloud on the horizon and watch for land. We trace the passage of squalls sweeping like gray threatening curtains across our 360-degree dome world and yearn for land. We feel the wind crawl with its salt-breath across our bare backs and beg the oggie to yield up some land. We had our first contact in days on the last dog watch 0300-0700, a freighter, so we are assuming that there is something out there. We had been bizarrely concerned that some kind of Waterworld scenario was on the go here, and none of us like Kevin Costner. I voiced my concerns to the 'swain, that maybe we are sailing on and there's really nothing out there; no Hawaii, no green, no flat stable ground where kids accumulate land smegma between their fingers and where vegetables grow. The 'swain looked out across his oggie, said it (Hawaii) was there the last few times (nine) he had checked and reckoned it would still be there.

0900 hrs It's sort of overcast today, with clouds at mid-level all-round the skydome, and the sun is barely making it through the marshmallow topping somebody (God? Poseidon?)

Madonna?) has poured on top of the dome.

1810 hrs I used to bodysurf typhoon waves in Japan with my buddy Mud, a US naval officer now stationed in Pearl. We would get rolled and pummeled and washed around and finish the day tired and happy and punch-drunk but somewhat the worse for wear. One day as we staggered up the beach, Mud made a salient point about the dexterity of the oggie. Up close and personal, he said, the oggie is good with its hands. Every few waves it will scoff at your puny attempts at hydrodynamics by rolling you bum-over-teakettle as it thunders into shore, dragging you along like stupid kelp, hauling your board-shorts down, jamming a pound of sand up into your rectum, then jovially receding from the gasping, bruised wreck it has made of you, hugging terra firma. We see a variation of this theme on Oriole. On deck, the oggie dances in for a slap and tickle at odd moments. When the bow bites into a wave, the spray shoots straight up, hangs briefly in a white, bubbly column then vanishes, an elaborate head fake. The oggie goes guerilla when it's time for you to get wet, with whirling dervish whips of water that splat you from the wave crests running down the leeward side. Sometimes when working at the halyards and backstays on the rail, we become momentarily gulped by greenies, thin licks of man-high green oggie that give you a quick, cold body-hug, then are gone; a heartless one-wave stand.

1015 hrs The freight trains are always fun to listen to (at least that's how it seems now, at this desk, warm, dry and relatively motionless). This is the oggie at its most dexterous, whooshing in from an indeterminate direction, jackknifing across the deck, lifting up your wetskins, squeezing past your collar and scooting into your boot, snickering all the while. And sometimes it's just showtime, especially on bright-moon nights, when the oggie produces a silver curtain of froth that hangs suspended for a heartbeat then drops to the deck in a sheen of moonlit bubbles.

1915 hrs Cookie pulled off a bit of a coup tonight, with a delicious spicy spaghetti dish and rich chocolate cake, the smells of which had us drooling into our binoculars all day as the red and brown flavour smells wafted out of the galley. We had spent the day watching a slate-gray cloudbank dominate the starboard horizon, the upper edges tinted orange with the dying sun. Dead ahead, squalls crisscross to merge into a solid mass of rain; a world of hurt to sail through. On nights like this, when clouds obscure the moon, the dark ascends from the sea on all sides, easing and billowing upwards like black cardboard cutouts of storm clouds done at Halloween. The horizon is a thick, black HB pencil line: at the crown of the skydome directly overhead, the night lightens with the odd star-twinkle. To the east, the moon graces a patch of oggie with greasy, gray-silver light through a gap, then is gone. When we come off watch tonight, Billy will no doubt give us a time check similar to the one he always gives. "If we get to sleep within 20 seconds", Billy says, peering intently at his glowing watch, "we will have (by the time the other watch comes to shake us to go back up on deck) two hours and 52 minutes of sleep". We invariably break down into slightly hysterical slumber-party giggles every time. Last night, he postponed the time check until Andy finished putting a (position) fix on the chart and we actually stayed awake in anticipation. I suspect our exhausted hilarity is a function of the funny-bone release mechanism that we call into play to get us through the night watches. We have to find humour in leaning out over a thin wire guardrail at midnight looking into the black eyes of the oggie and hauling down a flapping canvas sail the size of a tennis court. Then hoisting a smaller version, say half a tennis court plus a few welcome mats, then hauling that down... and.... Billy: "If we get to sleep sometime in the next millenium ... hee-hee-hee." Though not a strictly linear halfway mark, today marks a turning-point: the water-rationing worked and we saved just enough fuel by the stubble of our chinny chin-chins and our smelly carcasses to motor to Pearl if necessary. Psychologically as well, the 600 miles to go is a distance we can fathom more easily, a

distinct track in the trackless expanse something at the end. We can easily picture driving 600 miles in a day (Nova Scotia end-to-end; Lahore to Karachi, Pakistan; Buenos Aires to Mendoza, Argentina; Saigon to Bangkok) with a quick stop for lunch. Finally we are steering 245 degrees - basically southwest - on a straight shot for Pearl Harbour, no more tacking south then west, praying for wind.

11/1 0550 hrs The sky is slowly drawing in the light, distinguishing the outside edges of the clouds with faint dayglow.

0617 hrs Pre-sunrise. Bowler-hat-shaped alien mothership clouds spawn replicas in miniature from the limits of vision until the whole horizon is covered: pink-edged bowlers to the east, sombre blue to the west and a vague morning-sky mauve in between.

0628 hrs Sunrise. Both watches are hanging around the quarterdeck, idly bullshitting and waiting for the watch turnover, but with a hint of purpose. The sun still under the horizon now has a rose backlighting scheme to the east; we're waiting for it to push its way through to light the day, keeping our eyes peeled for the first dynamic sunrise in many days of leaden-sky mornings. We sense, rather than see the initial pulse of the upper edge of the sun, racing across thousands of miles of unseen curved ocean to crest our clouds. There's a bit of a visceral gut-tug; the sperm impregnating the egg feel to the moment. Then it's through, an oddly shaped blast of gold just at the cloudbase that streams upwards in seconds, warming the dome and all its denizens at last.

1320 hrs Life doesn't necessarily recede from us here on the oggie, as I thought it would. Our dome travels with us, simply not acknowledging anything except that which is permanent for us right here: banzai porpoise pods, sardines with wings bouncing off swells, the luff of the mainsail, the lean, graceful black curve of an albatross dipping inches from the wavetops while flying into the wind without a beat of its wings.

1645 hrs We've run into a day-long squall with a good trade wind roaring around our ears and lots of green oggie slurping over the quarterdeck; a warm slosh for the ankles. The wind was too strong for the gennaker and we had to punch and tear the air out of its grasp and haul it inboard. The wash coming inboard is taking the lines laid out on deck overboard, so we go around tying them to cleats with twine, leaving the bundles of bound rope flopping around the cleats in the frothy sea wash like dead men's arms.

11/2 0700 hrs We came up through the morning-fuzzy hatch to find a heavy sea jockeying Oriole around 15-foot swells off the beam. The swells chug in in broken patterns, leaving the view to the edge of the horizon like a distant photo of small, dark Rocky Mountains; distant, jagged, granite-blue triangle waves flecked saliva-white with froth.

Midday We expected an onslaught of channel fever, what with Hawaii so near; giddy anticipation of landfall and the delights of our second port. But we're still taking heavy beam seas, the sails are straining from stem to stern, and walking the 40 feet from the quarterdeck to the mainmast, or rigging a preventer line on the mainsail, or eating a spoonful of cereal... all these actions must be carefully planned out evolutions. Hawaii has yet to pierce the dome, we've got more than enough of the wind we had been praying for, and the oggie as usual commands our utmost attention.

11/2 1831 hrs At supper before we go on watch, someone jokingly asks the 'swain for some words of wisdom before we go topside. He comes up with, "be careful up there, it's dark, just like the inside of a cow". Reassured, up we go. We notice with a sense of satisfaction that the chart has changed from very small scale, showing the 2,000+ miles from San Francisco to Hawaii, to one quite a bit larger showing splotches of beautiful mid-Pacific dirt that is the Hawaiian Islands. The Big Island actually looks like a big island, not a tiny chocolate-cake smudge.

11/3 0200 hrs Land is visible off the port bow; the long, low sea-monster shape of Molokai, a few sad yellow lights gleaming at the waterline of the former leper colony.

0430 hrs A few buoy lights far off to starboard announce Oahu. As the darkness softens, the shape gently becomes visible; a long, low headland, the half rugby-ball bulge of Diamondhead and the land rising to a series of hills and pimples and pinnacles.

0600:33 hrs The first puff of what I swear is warm land air wrapped around my bare legs as I stood forward lookout. The cloying, clothes-dryer warmth is the first we have felt in over 2,000 nautical miles.

0840 hrs We slide by a bored-looking, built-up Waikiki Beach and into one of the arms of octopus-shaped Pearl Harbour, past Hickam Air Force Base at the mouth, with its water's-edge playgrounds and palm trees and its warbirds arcing and roaring overhead. We pass along other octopus arms lined with dark gray; rows and rows of the most lethal warships on earth. We glide`` along in our tall ship until we came to the submarine pen and berthed in the southeast arm, 100 metres away from the nuclear submarine USS Los Angeles and eight of her sisters. All are sleek, black lethal-looking craft, except for one which must have just come back from a deployment, her sail draped with a huge lei; a toy gun that doesn't reduce cities to radioactive slag, it just shoots out a sign that says bang! There are beautiful, jagged, stark green hill ridges to the west and east. The ships seem to fit in well, girdled by the ridges, because Hawaii seems to just float improbably in the mid-Pacific. The USS Hawaii, forever underway on the oggie; I was surprised to actually find it here, and wouldn't have been fazed to have arrived at the right latitude and longitude only to find a buoy with a note in a bottle tied on, saying, "Sailing with the trade winds. Am somewhere south of you. Aloha, Hawaii".

11/4 1727 hrs On duty and listening to DJ Johnny Ozone on Honolulu's oldies station. Johnny just played what is likely to be my top song on the '97 Oriole soundtrack: "Papa

Was a Rolling Stone" last heard outside a T-shirt shop by San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. Johnny must be reading the tourist literature as well, because he talks to his listeners in 'paradise'. One unlikely Johnny Ozone listener in paradise is the 18-year old surfer who got out of hospital today after having his right foot bitten off by a tiger shark a week ago on the North Shore.

1755 hrs All the duty dogs on every ship in Pearl Harbour are getting ready for the naval ceremony of sunset, standing by to haul down their flags for the night. They are walking down the narrow torpedolike decks of the subs, the helo decks of the imposing missile cruisers and destroyers, and the multi football-field lengths of the floating airports they call aircraft carriers. The American anthem comes first of course, then 'O Canada' in our honour and then the sombre Japanese anthem for a visiting submarine. We stand on our teak deck and haul down the only Canadian flag in over 2,000 miles. Dusk comes quickly and the exterior lights of the ships soon float over the calm harbour-bound oggie. It's an emotional moment, far from home, but it is the five plain white concrete booms mid-harbour that produce a lump in the throat of visiting Navy types to Pearl Harbour. The battleship USS Arizona and over 1,000 of her men lies on the bottom of Pearl Harbour but she remains a commissioned ship in the US Navy, and we piped the salute and stood to attention at the guardrail as we passed her memorial and those of the USS Oklahoma, the USS California, the USS West Virginia and the USS Tennessee. Sailing into the harbour and looking west, the eye is drawn to the notch in the mountains that the Emperor's "glorious young eagles" vectored in on a hot Sunday morning in December to come in low to kill a fleet and start a fight.

2225hrs Tonight, we watch a nuclear submarine go to sleep. The taut, deadly grace of the USS Los Angeles runs smoothly from the curving snub-nosed bow to the square, looming sail just forward of midships, tapering like a moray eel's back to the stem, where the easy symmetry is utterly shattered by a square-bowed 10-foot rowboat sitting on whatever they call the arse end of a sub. The crew use the rowboat to paint the Los Angeles, paddling up and down with their rollers and brushes, keeping their ship as dark as the night. I mentally tell the boys that I'll keep a weather eye on their sub for them and slump down on the sailbags to wait out a four-hour duty shift to midnight. The Honolulu Star-Bulletin says that police are looking for Paris France, a Waialua man who apparently goes big at 6' 1" and 230 pounds. Also, the Tiffany Plant Co., is getting a jump on Christmas in paradise with a sale on ornaments at the Manoa Marketplace (next to the post office). Poor old James Michener has died and Hawaii's newspapers, like those in Texas, Poland, Alaska, Mexico and countless other places he has exhaustively chronicled, are leading their features on Michener with a blurb from his doorstep saga on " ... Havaiki of the manifold riches, Havaiki of the brave canoes, Havaiki of strong gods and brave men and beautiful women, Havaiki of the dreams that led across the endless oceans... ".

Hawaii shares with Vancouver the distinction of being a place where everyone is from somewhere else. But in the Star-Bulletin, a chatty, very local rag, the only place-of-origin references are made in the obituaries. Considering that the early settlers were Polynesians paddling huge outrigger canoes and steering by the stars, one would think that even the locals wouldn't tire of " ... where're you from and how'd you get here?" But there is Pinsoom Tenzing, coach of the U. of Hawaii Wahines ladies soccer team talking about the season past. A bullet point blurb at the end of the piece, 'Tenzing update', notes that he was "... drawn to Hawaii because of the weather... ". So where are the native Hawaiians? Maria Eugenia, the wife of my US Navy buddy Mud stationed in Pearl, says

that to her regret, the only interaction she has had with true locals was with the guys humping her furniture when she moved in. She did find out why their names were so long, though: the alphabet has the same vowels as English, but only h, k, l, m, n, p, and w for consonants. We went to change the battery in her jeep and started talking to George, the portly Sears garage manager, who turned out to be half Filipino and half-Japanese. He couldn't seem to recall ever working with any Hawaiians, then had a flash of recall and called over to a tough-cute young woman, attired, like her colleagues, in blue coveralls and a weightlifting support belt, "Eh Laila, you got any Hawaiian blood?" She seemed to bristle, picked her head up out of the radiator she was working on, smiled thinly and yapped back a "yeah", a mite too aggressively for old George, who backed down quickly, making appeasing motions with his hands. Besides, she was fingering a big wrench.

11/5 0330 hrs What shall we do with a drunken sailor? An Oriole crewman who shall remain nameless got hammered tonight. He got up at 0330 for a pee and went out the wrong (self-locking) door and ended up in the lobby of his hotel. "I tried the door; shit out of luck. I looked down; shit, I'm naked". He still had to pee too. He scooted to the pool to use the bog but couldn't find a towel. Still undetected, he found a couch, took the seat covers off and covered his balls and arse. This got him to another crewman's room where he was let in after some banging and a quick explanation. He spent the night on an armchair under a lot of towels trying to keep warm under the fierce air conditioning.

0910 hrs Driving into the city from Pearl, we took my favourite highway in the world, Likelike (leekay-leekay), which will take you right to Waikiki Beach, with its thin hotels stuck like dragon's teeth in the sand. On all sides of the highway, small, neat, white and pink-adobe houses lick up the ridge-spines of the low green mountains like waves lapping the edges of a deep lagoon. We're heading north to the famous North Shore. The poorer parts of town on the outskirts have a universal redneck quality to them; full living

rooms on the front lawn, cars on blocks and now and again scrawny chickens pecking and hunting. The countryside is acres of pineapple tops sitting spiky on the rainfed red earth. The mountains here have a crenellated quality that is unmistakably tropical and Pacific. Driving Kamehameha Highway, we pass smaller versions of the bungalows we saw in the city, except they're a bit more weatherworn and comfortable-looking, like old sneakers. Small dirt roads lead off the highway about 200 yards and slightly uphill, and then just stop. Full-stop dead-ends on every road, as if people wanted to keep going, but felt like surfing instead, or just watching the oggie as it rolled over small comma-shaped reefs offshore. We bodysurfed at Sunset Beach, home to countless world surfing championships. Offshore the roll-tongued pipeline curves and roars when the oggie gets riled up enough, but today it's just slopping three-footers at the coarse, beige coral sand. The nearest town is sleepy little Haleiwa, where you can "experience Jesus at the Haleiwa Assembly of God", cool off at Aoki Shave Ice, buy groceries at Fujioka supermarket and dine quickly at the carefully camouflaged "MacDonald's of Haleiwa", painted the red ochre of pineapple soil.

11/6 1555 hrs In Chinatown, Honolulu, announced by a martial arts supply store and the First Hawaiian Bank - Chinatown Branch on facing corners. There is no distinctive Chinese architecture here, few barbecued ducks hooked in windows, and it's a dingier, more rundown part of town with low concrete storefronts. China and things Chinese lie only on the surface here, not like in Frisco, where it seems you could dig down a mile and come up with nothing but pure Chinese dirt and possibly a terracotta warrior or two. There are the ubiquitous cluttered-jumble grocery stores, but the shops seem shallower; they don't stretch back into an endless, incense-scented gloom. In front of the China Sea Tattoo shop, an old man of undetermined heritage in a green golf shirt and polyester trousers sits legs akimbo on the sidewalk, asleep with his chin on his chest, unenthusiastically selling bags of seaweed laid out on a piece of newspaper between his

legs.

11/8 0750 hrs We slip today for Palmyra. There is a sense of ennui as we take off the sail covers and haul down the awning.

0940 hrs It could be the heat, it could be the long voyage that still remains ahead of us, but it's more than likely the slight hangover and the fact that I am watching Hawaii become small and dark-green off our stem that is causing my melancholic musing about the Polynesian goddess I saw last night at a funky open-air nightclub called the Pier Club. Onstage, a Jimi Hendrix-afroed hot funk trio did souped-up 70s hits. One table away, a group of yuppies and the goddess (a vision in a dark-green pantsuit.)

After making port in San Francisco and Pearl Harbor we sailed for almost 1,000 nautical miles southeast to what became the most adventurous port of call of the deployment. Palmyra Atoll is just a speck in the ocean between Hawaii and Western Samoa with a population of one: a manic Frenchman named Roger Lextrait. Roger had been an executive chef for Sheraton hotels until the urge to wander took him over completely. He found himself in the bar of the Sheraton Waikiki, where we met the owner of an island who was looking for a caretaker. The 4.6-square mile, horseshoe-shaped atoll is the rim of a volcano that nosed out of the water a zillion years ago and started adorning itself with coral that became 30 small islets. In the early 1800s, the American ship Palmyra came to grief on the coral, dumping the first westerners on the beach. There are still unexploded bombs and mines from when the US Navy occupied the island during World War II. We were the first Canadian sailors ever to set foot on Palmyra. A pod of five dolphins gave us our first welcome, cavorting gray and swift down our port side. To starboard, the rusting hulk of a WWII landing craft arched its broken back on a long fold of coral. As we entered the lagoon, we sensed a lightening as the dark blue gave way abruptly to frothy aquamarine shallows. A small blue-white sailboat with a plastic

awning shading the deck was muzzled to shore by long mooring lines. Crowding the shores were other remnants of war; hundreds of rusty-concrete bunkers and pyramid-shaped ammo dumps scattered like the disused war toys of the gods. The island is rife with palm trees. They thrust out of the thin soil at the very edge of the water and drape loopy, bushy fronds on the air.

When we dropped our hook in what we later learned was the West Lagoon, we heard an inflatable boat motor, and the island caretaker, Roger, exploded into our midst talking a mile a minute as you might expect from the lone occupant of a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific. His appearance was right out of central casting: long brown ponytail under a battered Jimmy Buffett straw hat, faded muscle shirt, crab-eaten shorts, mismatched rubber sandals and perfect tan on a fit, medium build. In a thick Parisian accent, Roger bid us “welcome to Pal-me-ra, guys. Welcome to paradise.” As soon as we secured ship and I got permission to leave, I was over the side swimming for the beach. I found Roger on the other side of a small aluminum building looking through his flip-flop collection. When I asked him where he had gotten them, he invited me for a walk to the windward side of the island. We came to a beach that looked like a lost and found bin for the whole ocean. Plastic bottles, flips flops, buoys and various odds and sods littered the beach. He explained that the atoll is at the crux of where southern and northern currents meet and that all the boat detritus wins up on this beach. He then showed me to where his resupply came in every month; the original WWII-era airstrip. Roger advised not to tiptoe around the island too much because there were things that can “go boom”. On the way back to the ramp, he pointed out a 100-foot column of goonie birds that was spiralling over an inner lagoon like a tight tornado of muscular sheets of paper. It was one of the most impressive natural sights I had ever seen. Roger told me he slept on his yacht floating at anchor in the lagoon and said, “I don’t wanna be crab shit so I sleep on my boat”. He was

referring to the hundreds of thousands of nocturnal coconut crabs that come out at night to feed.

After two days on Palmyra, we bade farewell to Roger, pulled up the hook and continued south. Crossing the equator, we made port at Kanton Island in the Kiribati chain and sailed past the island of Nikumaroro. The Kiribati chain has distinctively smooth flat coral reefs on which a small plane could conceivably be crash-landed. There is compelling evidence that famed aviator, Amelia Earhart, and her navigator, Fred Noonan, survived a crash landing in the Kiribati chain during their 1937 attempt to fly around the world at the equator. Nikumaroro is some 350 miles southeast of Howland Island, their destination. Analysis of Earhart's last radio transmission indicates that her aircraft was likely on land and on its wheels for several days following the disappearance. A British Colonial Service officer on Nikumaroro in 1940 found the human remains of an individual "more likely female than male, more likely white than Polynesian or other Pacific Islander, most likely between 5 feet 5 inches and 5 feet 9 inches in height." There were campfire sites nearby and signs that seabirds and shellfish had been eaten and rainwater collected. A woman's shoe, a jar of freckle cream (Earhart was very self-conscious about her freckles) and a sextant box whose serial numbers are consistent with a type known to have been carried by Noonan were also found. In May 2013, the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery took a sonar image in the reef off Nikumaroro that could be a wing or part of the fuselage from Earhart's aircraft. The object is estimated to be at least 34 feet long and arrow-straight, which indicates a man-made object. It was the tenth expedition of the tenacious US government-funded group to the island. Like Palmyra, Nikumaroro is overrun by nocturnal coconut crabs the size of small dogs. My [slightly grisly] theory is that the two adventurers — if it was Earhart and Noonan — survived the crash, made their way to shore and, at least for a few weeks, trapped birds, gathered shellfish and collected water to survive. Gradually, Earhart

and Noonan became so weakened by exposure to the elements and lack of food that one night they were unable to fight off the voracious crabs.

Time seemed to speed up after we made the time-honoured transition from slimy pollywogs to shellbacks shortly after getting underway from Kiribati. There was pho with conch in Apia, Western Samoa, pho with cow heart in Suva, Fiji and pho with smoked pig's head in Noumea, New Caledonia. We sailed into a white squall 350 nautical miles off the northeastern tip of New Caledonia, which knocked out the freezer compressors, so the fresh food was gone after a few weeks. So we were down to wraps with peanut butter and jam and red and green Kool-Aid, which quickly became port and starboard juice. Cookshack had a lisp and because we were masochists, we always asked what was for breakfast/lunch/supper and always got the same answer: 'wrapth and juith guys.' We'd been trailing two lines with bare hooks off the stern since Hawaii and when I stood lifebuoy sentry watch at the stern, would watch them skipping along the surface of the oggie wondering if we'd sail by the stupidest fish in the Pacific. Eventually we found them; a horse mackerel and a mahi mahi. Cookshack battered them with corn flakes, salt and pepper and Polynesian hot sauce and I ate the best meal of my life with my shipmates 300 nautical miles east of New Caledonia on the warm teak deck with the Southern Cross glowing off the port bow. Finally, the Sydney harbour headlands loomed. We secured the ship and after over 7,000 nautical miles, the mighty Oriole was still at last.