

The Moluccas
22 January 1944

Dear Kids,

I have two letters each to answer for Carolyn and Nancy, but I'm sure you wouldn't mind if I address this to Sue and Gene, also. I enjoyed your letters very much, and am so glad you had a nice Christmas. Perhaps next Christmas I, too, can have a nice Christmas--with you.

How would you like for me to tell you about the native girls throwing water on me to wash away evil spirits--and how the native "adopted" us when we camped on the beach near his village--and offered to go to America with me after the war--and how we traded two spools of thread for a dog--two dogs, in fact?

It all happened on a reconnaissance trip we took in a small inboard motor boat. There were only five of us and with our duffle and rations the tiny craft was well loaded. We chugged up the coast quite peacefully, despite the fact that we knew Jans lay somewhere in the jungle across the sand beach from us. But, on the return trip, things started happening.

It ~~ma~~ all began when our motor conked out. "Out of gas," said Trout. "Nah, water in the gas," said Semus. We yanked the hood off the motor and quickly saw that the trouble was ~~neither~~—the gasoline filter bowl had cracked and the fuel was leaking out. Trout said, oh that's all right, we have a spare in the tool box. But Semus said, no we haven't either. So both of them began digging into boxes and cabinets—but no carburetor bowl.

About this time, I looked around—and noticed that the boat was drifting close—far too close—to a reef. The surf was breaking five feet high over the coral. I yelled to Johnson and we grabbed paddles and started threshing the water, trying to keep the boat from drifting further in. Shear grabbed another paddle and Trout and Semus tried frantically to patch the broken bowl with adhesive tape. The gasoline wet the tape and it wouldn't hold. Things looked pretty well done for and I kicked off my sneakers and prepared ~~for~~ to hit the water before we hit the reef.

Then, I ~~had~~ found the thing that proved our salvation—an empty mustard jar was lying hidden away in an under-the-seat drawer. I tossed ~~it~~ to Semus and said, "Try that." He tried it. "Won't fit," he said. "it's too deep—the clamp won't go around the bottom."

"Well, hold it on with your hands!" And he did, and Trout pushed the starter button—and the motor came alive. We pulled quickly away from that reef!

We knew there was a native village a couple of miles down the coast, so we decided to head for it—in the protection of a tiny cove we knew to be there, we could anchor and try to repair the motor. So, Semus held onto the bowl, first with one hand and then the other.

"Might as well fish—we're going about the right speed now," said Johnson, and he tossed a red and white feather lure over the stern. Within a mile he yelled, "Strike," and began reeling in—then the fish plunged into the depths and another hundred feet of line soon out. "Stop the boat—back her up—turn it around!" Johnson was yelling as he hung onto the bending rod. "He's getting tired now," he said as the pressure eased up and he began reeling the fish in. "Get the camera quick!" So, as Johnson dragged in a 12-pound king mackerel, we snapped his picture, then took turns having our pictures made with it. The prospect of fresh fried mackerel ~~improved~~ improved our frame of mind considerably, and Semus took a new hold on the gasoline bowl. We chugged right on into the cove and anchored 25 yards from the beach.

A dozen native children—boys about 8 or 10 years old—were swimming in the ~~wave~~ and when we tossed our rubber landing boat ~~into~~ the water, they all scrambled into it. We shooed them off, but they kept circling around like playful seals as we paddled, two at a time, into the beach. They scampered around us, feeling the boat, ~~and~~ mashing the rubber in and jabbering in wonder when the rubber bounced back ~~out~~ as they removed their hands. So we gave up and told the kids they could paddle back out and ferry our equipment ashore. I acted as interpreter (you should hear me jabber Malay now) and told the boys to carry Semus back out to the boat and bring in our bedding and rations. As many as could climbed into the boat and they started their "ship to shore" amphibious operations. In a few minutes they had made three trips with the little rubber "doughnut" and had brought our blankets, rations and our small gasoline stove up on the beach. One of the boys grabbed the fish and started scaling it, and the rest of them squatted around in our way while we sorted out our equipment. By this time the crowd of children had increased to thirty, with several little girls in the circle of staring wide eyes. As we were cutting up the fish, an Indonesian family came walking up on the beach—man and wife and three tiny boys, with the mother carrying a monkey-looking baby. They stopped to watch, the old man giving us a salute and the usual "Tabe" greetings of the Indonesians. The little boys hung back and sucked their fingers as they watched us, while the woman stood off at a distance, cautioning the boys as they sidled closer. The old man squatted down on his hunkers and looked at our preparations for supper.

The fish had drawn hundreds of flies and we were waving our hands around frantically in hopes they wouldn't eat the fish up before we could get it cooked. The Indonesian saw our dilemma and beckoned to his three small boys. They solved the problem by pulling a couple of large leaves off a shrub and fanning the flies off the food. They stood there and waved their fans while we finished cooking and eating the fish—stomping every now and then to pop a Life Saver into their mouths. I said we finished the fish—and we did, almost. There were several large steaks left, however, and we gave them to the children. Their mother immediately chased them off toward the village. The old man still sat hunched over his knees, eating some cheese and "C" biscuits we had left from supper. Then he gathered up our messkits and washed them in the sea and afterwards swept our camp area with a brush. As it was getting dark, we unrolled our blanket rolls. "Pete" was watching us intently. We called him Pete because his real name had too many rolling R's and whishing sounds in it for us to pronounce. I blew up my air mattress. Pete grabbed Trout's air mattress and, aping my actions, blew it up.

There is little dusk in the tropics, and night quickly enclosed us. Pete lighted up one of our cigarettes and settled down to visit a spell. He told us how the Japs had treated the natives before the Americans came to this island, explained to us in great detail why it wouldn't rain that night, and told us about the two schools—Mohammedan and Christian—in his village. I was getting into pretty deep water in the conversation on account of my scant knowledge of Malayo. Suddenly, Pete pointed out to sea. "Prau mari sini," he said. We strained our eyes and sure enough there was a boat heading for our beach.

"Hai!" he yelled out. "Japanese?" Immediately a voice called back, "Tida Japanese! Japanese no! Indonesian (name of Jan-held island)!" Pete grunted and said, "Ito bagoes. Hokay!" With that he dismissed the matter of the refugees who were coming to our shore ~~from across the straits~~.

We asked Pete if there were any Japanese in our vicinity and he said, "Tida ada." We were glad, of course, of his assurances that they "no be." He sat awhile in thought then said, "Mati hari saya sini. Iya." Literally translated that meant, "Day dead I here. Yes," But we understood that he was volunteering to stay with us that night. And there he stayed, sitting on the beach with his big bolo knife across his knees. I was very tired but slept uneasily all night. The surf was pounding in my ear and sometime during the night I heard several rifle shots as native sentries about the village fired at sounds in the jungle.

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The sun awakened me next morning and I sat up trying to decide whether to go swimming or dig out something to eat. Pete was nowhere to be seen. But at that moment he came ambling down the beach with his pockets full of mangoes and a bunch of ripe "lady finger" bananas in his hand. With canned bacon and eggs, "C" biscuits and jam, coffee and the fresh fruit we managed a mighty fine breakfast.

After breakfast we decided to take a swim, but as we started into the water, Pete said, "Tida! Ini air tida bagoose." Well, we couldn't see anything wrong with that water, but he motioned us to follow him. He led us around ~~the~~ a point up the beach and there was a fresh water river. So, we had a nice swim--along with a dozen small Indonesian boys.

After packing up our duffle we decided we might as well take some pictures in the village, so with Pete left behind to guard our gear, we walked up the one street of the "kampong." On both sides of the roadway were small houses, the bamboo-fenced yards swept as clean as my tent floor back here in camp. The children flocked around us, asking us for "candy," and the women ~~were~~ pounding rice flour behind the houses stopped to stare at us. We heard a bell tolling then--sounded just like a church bell at home. Then we came upon the combination church and schoolhouse. Several men and women already were gathering in the yard, dressed in their cleanest and best clothing. One young man was dressed in a sparkling ~~white~~ starched ~~white~~ white suit. Under his arm was a book and with the other hand he was ringing the bell. We asked him what kind of church this was, and he replied, "Chreestyan" and showed us his Bible. It was printed in Malay, of course, but it had the familiar Biblical scenes pictured in color plates. There was "Jesu Cristo" and "Setan", and "Satue Orang Adam" eating the forbidden fruit.

Johnson and I indicated ~~we~~ would like to attend the service and the minister invited us to come in. So, we sat on a school bench, behind a crude slanting ~~table~~ desk ~~and~~ as the building filled to capacity with men, women and children--the men on one side of the room, the women on the other. With us on our bench sat two old men with straggly beards down to their chests. The service began with a prayer and a hymn, and following the reading of the Text by the minister, two ~~men~~ elders took the offering. ~~They used small black silk bags tied to the ends of sticks.~~ Each passed a small black silken bag, tied to the end of a long pole in front of everybody. The tiny Dutch dimes tinkled very faintly as most of the congregation dropped in ~~in~~ their offerings. ~~After~~ The sermon, lasting about twenty minutes held the ~~close~~ attention of the adults, but some of the children squirmed and twisted and giggled at each other--much the same as children do at home. I understood very little ~~about~~ of the address, for the pastor's words tumbled out at a terrific rate of speed. But the word "Ammereekan" figured prominently in his discourse. ~~After~~ The minister closed his Bible and sang the first line of a hymn, The congregation picked up the words then, and to our amazement, the elders again passed their collection bags. Apparently the congregation had expected this for again they nearly all dug up a dime to drop in the little pouches.

After the benediction, the pastor and the elders stood at the doorway and shook hands with the congregation filing out. As he told us goodbye, the pastor said, "Selamat Djalem. Hati Mingoe kembali!"--Go in peace and return next Sunday.

Meanwhile, Trout and Shear had gone on through the village and we found them in the dispensary of Dr. Rubiano's "Eugenie Hositaal"--the island's hospital operated by a little Javanese physician for the native population. Two Indonesian medical assistants were dressing a youth's hand, which he apparently had slashed with a machete, and two young girls--student nurses--were rolling gauze bandages on ~~an~~ a crude hand windlass. The bandages had been used and then laundered for use again, with true oriental thriftiness. The medical assistants and nurses wore neatly dressed clothing--GI trousers and undershirts for the boys, and ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~girls~~ ~~wearing~~ knee-length dresses of flowered calico. All were scrubbed until their brown skins glistened, and the girls' straight black hair hung down to their shoulders.

Dr. Rubiano took much pride in showing us through his tiny hospital. Beds were army litters resting on bamboo racks in the two palmetto thatched wards. A medical assistant was taking temperatures in the men's ward, and in the women's ward

another student nurse was "changing" a tiny brown baby. The doctor explained this was the first child born in his hospital and he pointed out the mother, who ~~was~~ stood closely watching the nurse handle the infant.

In the men's ward I talked to a fifteen year old boy who wore a cast on his leg. "Japanese boom-boom," he said, pointing to his foot and to two bandaged wounds in his abdomen. As I was studying the temperature charts hung behind each patient, the medical assistant passed out atabrine tablets to all the patients. Each one made a face as he swallowed the little yellow pills, but none objected to the treatment.

As we were leaving the hospital I took a picture of Dr. Rubiana and the mother and child he had previously shown us. The little doctor insisted that the picture be made in front of the hospital so its sign would be seen. "I named the hospital for my fiancee in Chava," he explained. And he showed us a picture of a very beautiful half-caste Javanese girl.

Returning through the village, we ~~were~~ passed by a house around which a large crowd of people was gathered. On the dirt-floored gallery was a bed hidden by a white lace curtain. We paused a moment and to our speechless amazement, two girls ran out and showered us with water from cocoanut shell cups. Dr. Rubiana quickly ~~reassured~~ reassured us and said, "Terima Kasih!" --thank you--to the girls, and quickly led us away. Then he explained that the apparently playful gesture was a serious part of the ritual practiced by heathen natives upon death of a member of their family. One of the Indonesian men had died and his relatives had gathered for the burial rites. The tossing of water on everybody that passed was done to prevent evil spirits from entering the bodies of the passersby.

A short way down the road we came upon another school-church building. This one was surmounted by the star and crescent of the Mohammedan religion, and there were thirty or forty children squatting on the head-high floor scratching on slate placed flat between their feet. Each wore a hat of some kind, as required by their religion. Some were of blue ~~mm~~ or brown velvet, but most were GI overseas caps. The teacher, hardly older than the children, walked about inspecting ~~the~~ his pupils' work, a slender switch in his hand.

The Mohammedans, Dr. Rubiana explained, observe Saturday as their Holy day, and Sunday was a school day for the children.

An occasional goat ambled along the road ahead of us, and several dogs sniffed at us as we passed. In one yard we saw three tiny puppies ~~running~~ playfully nipping at a woman's skirts as she pounded rice in a hollowed log with a heavy wooden pestle. We stopped to pet the dogs, and asked the woman if she wanted to sell them. She laughed and told us little puppies were "tida bagoose." --no good for anything. I decided I had to have one of the puppies and Johnson said he must have one, too. But the woman shook her head. Then I remembered I had a few spools of thread in my pocket which I had intended to use for fishing line. I held out two spools of white thread and the woman's eyes opened wide. Quickly she grabbed the thread and shoved the puppies at us before we could change our minds.

So, that's how "Laki-Laki" and "Saki-Saki" came to ride with us back to camp and are ~~now~~ lapping up powdered milk right here beside me now. My dog's name, "Laki-Laki", means little boy in Malay, and he is white with brown spots. Johnson's "two bottles of Japanese brandy" --for that is what its name means-- is brown except for white socks and a white tip on his tail. Both of them are about the size of my pair of shoes, but already they know their names--call one and both come tumbling all over themselves yipping and grunting and wagging their tiny un-curved tails.

I've already gotten a few of the pictures we made on this trip ^{and I am enclosing them.} I'll send you some more in a few days--including a snapshot of the Indonesian "ahnjings"-- Laki-Laki and Saki-Saki.

Write to me--all of you--and give mother a big hug and kiss for me.

Loads of love,
Your Pop,
Mac