CHAPTER FOUR

THE BANANA FLEET

Panama looked real romantic from the sea. The J. Fred anchored in Coco Solo for two weeks, during which time we did routine duties and got acquainted with Panama, with the help of the veterans aboard. I had made up my mind to learn to speak Spanish, but the first Panamanian who spoke to me in Coco Solo almost changed my mind. She said, "Hey, marine, I lof you--let's fock." What a shock for a clean-cut midwestern boy!

If I had drawn the Banana Fleet because I was on the Sea School shit list, whoever was responsible surely did me a great favor. I loved the tropical work schedule. You were up and working long before dawn, but the work day ended shortly after lunch. Liberty call sounded, and if you had no watch, you were free until reveille the next morning.

We put to sea for lengthy maneuvers with the submarine fleet, the old time "O" boats. This was very interesting. One destroyer towed a float, simulating the length of a carrier. The

rest of the destroyers tried to protect it from the subs. Special lookouts were posted all over the ships. The subs would fire torpedoes with dummy warheads. I heard they cost $20,000 each. They would surface but would stay afloat only a short time. We had to race out after them in a motor whaleboat, secure a line to the nose ring, and tow them to the ship. A contest was held to see who could tie a bowline knot the fastest. I had used this knot all my life and won hands down. I could tie it behind my back and still can. I got to ride in the bow of the whaleboat chasing the torpedoes. Easy, exciting duty for three weeks.

As a "get acquainted" move, the subs would send one or two men aboard the cans, while we did the same to the subs. I eagerly looked forward to my turn, and it finally came. About the only good thing I can say about sub duty is they have good chow. I'll never forget my claustrophobia while submerged and the smell of that sub. And crowded--our can was a Taj Mahal compared to a sub. My admiration to the special brave souls who man them, but, no thanks, not me. Fresh air and sunshine never looked so good as when I got back aboard the J. Fred.

One day we almost collided with a sub. We took off its antenna. This made everyone edgy. The next morning we hit a blackfish whale. We hit it behind its head, and it extended past midship. I was eating

supper and it upset in my lap. The collision signal sounded and everyone rushed topside. We thought we'd hit a sub. The water was red with blood. We had to back down to free the fish. Later, we could see the sharks and sea birds go to work on the whale. It heightened my respect for what the sea contains.

The head and showers were located on the fantail of the ship. There was a long trough that ran the length of the head, under little stalls with toilet seats over the trough in each stall. Salt water was continually pumped through the trough, and under the last seat it made a swirl before exiting out the side of the ship. In each stall was an open porthole, facing out to the deck.

Four of us had played a practical joke on an old sailor--I don't remember what. One day he caught all four of us in the stalls. He wadded up a huge ball of toilet paper, set it on fire and dropped it through the first porthole into the trough. As it floated down the line under us, we came off those seats like jacks-in-the-boxes. The guy on the last seat kept saying, "I smell something burning." When the torch reached him, he jumped up and cried, "Hell, it's me!" We thought twice before playing any more jokes on that old sailor.

We returned to Panama and went through the canal, an exciting experience. Into the locks--they lift you up into Gatun Lake. There

you had fresh water to hose down the decks, and showers with a lot pressure. Cruise across the lake to the Pacific locks. Lower you down and you slide out into the Pacific. We went through the canal many times during the next two years. I liked Balboa and Panama City much better than the east coast--less dirt and derelicts.

One of the drivers of an electric donkey that towed the ship into the locks always looked familiar to me. On one passage I called to him and asked him where he was from. "Ohio," he replied.

"What town?"

"Oh, you never heard of it," he said. "It's just a little burg called Willshire."

"The hell you say!" I shouted. "I'm from Willshire!" He was Earl Beinz, from an old Willshire family. Small world, huh?

Life at sea really agreed with me. I stood lookout in the crow's nest eight hours per day, split shifts, like from four to eight in the morning and four to eight in the evening. During the dark hours, the lookout was mostly on the bridge. The crow's nest was like a barrel stuck up on the mast. You climbed up a ladder and entered through a trap door in the bottom. I soon grew tired of standing up for four hours, so I smuggled up a coil of rope and strung it from the

reinforcement rails to make a perfectly comfortable hammock seat. Now I could sit and survey my world with just the right amount of me sticking out the top. I spent many comfortable hours up there, contemplating the wonders of nature in the sea, the schools of porpoise, whales, manta rays, sharks and the sea birds. At first I took the rope down when relieved of duty, but later the word spread and every lookout used it. No one ever inspected the crow's nest.

The ship was run on tradition. Whatever the old ways were, Captain "Pinky" Pike followed them to a tee. On Wednesday morning we had baked beans and figs for breakfast. On Saturday it was baked beans and prunes. When reveille sounded, there was always a big pot of coffee set out. Everyone had a cup of "mud," and then up on the deck, sweep and swab for two hours, and then down to breakfast. In those days the bosun blew his whistle at the hatch and then yelled down whatever was to take place. They could make that whistle talk, sing or say poetry. Their calls would reverberate through the compartment, such as, "All hands turn to!" or "Clean, sweep down, fore and aft!" "All hands, man your battle stations!" "Man overboard, portside!" We all had assigned stations to man for each activity.

One thing which never failed to send a thrill up my spine was when we were leaving port and the bosun was out on the fo'c's'le,

swinging a lead weight to measure the water's depth. He would call out the depth, "By the mark two!" and on up to where the water was too deep to reach the bottom. As he coiled up his line, he would give a long, drawn-out call, "It's a gree-e-e-n sheet that has no bottom!" By that time we were picking up speed and tossing in the swells and off to strange lands and new adventures.

I dreaded K. P., or mess duty, as it was called aboard ship. Assignments were made alphabetically. Many guys volunteered for more than one month, because of the custom of tipping a dollar or more, according to your rank, on payday. These tips amounted to more than a private's pay per month. There was a rumor afloat that we were slated for three months duty in the Pacific. The Pacific was usually calm, while the Caribbean and the Atlantic were rough and choppy. Much of a mess cook's time was spent going up and down vertical ladders, carrying tureens of hot food, water for dishes, slop to dispose of and preparing food for the next meal. Not a pleasant work in rough seas.

Sure enough, we started through the canal for the west side, and I beat it up to the first sergeant and volunteered for mess duty for one month. We went through the canal and anchored for the night at Balboa. The next morning we received a rush order to go back

through the Big Ditch for urgent duty in the rough old Caribbean. I spent the next month staggering about with hot stuff, mopping up spills and all the things I dreaded.

The chief cook was the only black C. P. O. I ever saw in the Navy and was the most knowledgeable cook I have ever seen. He had been recruited in the old days when a captain could sign up a man, if needed, in any port. His name was William Dooner Buffer and he was a native of the Virgin Islands. He was a brilliant man. We took a liking to one another and he taught me many tricks of the cooking business.

One morning towards the end of my mess tour, Buffer sent me to the chow locker in the afterhold to break out supplies for lunch. The chow locker was located next to the torpedo warhead magazine. The shafts that turn the ship's screws ran through the bulkhead between these compartments, encased in oil packed bearings. Lo and behold, when I entered the chow locker, the bulkhead around the shaft was smoking hot. The bearing had leaked out the oil. Damn! The warheads were just on the other side of that wall and they could blow up any moment! I flew up the ladder, beat it to the bridge and reported it. All engines were stopped and we wallowed about while the proper crew made repairs.

I was cited at a captain's mass for "saving a serious engineering casualty." Engineering casualty, hell--I was saving my ass. We limped back into port and had a few days liberty in Coco Solo. I finished my mess duty there, and to the day I left the J. Fred, they still had not reached the "Ms" on the mess duty list.

President Roosevelt was in the area a few times while I was aboard the J. Fred. One time he passed at sea aboard the Tuscaloosa, a cruiser he used for a fishing boat. We had a "man the rail" ceremony, where all hands get all shined up and stand at certain intervals around the perimeter of the ship. Danged if they didn't dress all the marines in sailor suits to fill out the rail with white figures. The Tuscaloosa was barely visible from our ship, but I wish F. D. R. could have seen the sloppy mess we marines presented in our ill-fitting sailor suits.

Another time the Tuscaloosa was anchored in the Periless Islands and we served as his mail ship. A sailor and I were assigned to carry the mail bags aboard. We got all shined up, stood inspection and all, and thought we'd get to see F. D. R. When we got aboard, two tough-looking gents took the bags from us. We did see him go up a ladder, using only his hands and swinging his

feet two steps at a time.

Later, on the beach at Balboa I was part of a huge honor guard for him. We lined the street for miles. We stood for hours in the hot sun. His motorcade passed us at forty or more miles an hour.

Many English ships came through the canal while I was there. Sometimes they docked for repairs or even went into dry dock. We engaged in a lot of kidding about our difference in customs, drills, etc. Once we were tied up close to a British cruiser in dry dock. We were watching a very snappy drill on the docks by a contingent of British marines. Some Yank hollered out something that we could do that the limeys couldn't. The British officer in charge wore a monacle. He turned to face us, took the monacle from his eye, tossed it into the air and caught it in his eye. Then he yelled, "Let's see you do that, you blinkin' bounders!"

Most of the crew aboard the J. Fred were professionals with years in the Navy. Most seemed to be of the loner type, and as I got acquainted with them and their life stories unfolded, they read like Foreign Legion novels. This was true of the old-time marines, also. One thing they all had in common was their complete dedication to the service. Esprit de corps was a hundred percent. It took time

to be accepted as one of them but it was a great feeling when it happened.

One was Greggs, a sailor of twenty years or more, who had joined the Navy to forget a woman, but never got it done. He always referred to his penis as "Old Herman." Old Herman had no head. Greggs swore it had fallen off and gone down the drain in one of his continuous bouts with V.D. He was a two-plus syphiletic, as were most of the older crew. The syphiletics could perform any duty except food handling. Also they could go ashore on liberty. The saying aboard was, "two hours with Venus, two years with Mercury," referring to the mercury shots that were used to combat the disease. We boots who witnessed the weekly shots were almost afraid to touch a doorknob, let alone fraternize with the ladies in port.

Tattoos were rampant. In the old tradition of the sea, you were entitled to certain tattoos for performing certain feats. Crossing the equator, rounding the horn or crossing the 180th meridian were some of the feats. For these you were entitled to a pig on the foot, a rooster on the calf and a dragon down your back. One old engineer, who never came topside or left the ship unless forced to, had spider webs and spiders on his elbows, big barn door hinges where his arms

bent, bluebirds on his chest, stars on his cheeks and the remainder of his body literally covered. The crowning glory was an English fox chase, starting on his left foot and extending up his body over his right shoulder and down his back. This was complete with hounds, horses, trees, countryside and riders. About two inches from his rectum was the fox striving to reach the safety of the foxhole. Sometimes tattoos caused a little trouble. One guy had "Good morning, Doc," on his penis. He was made to cover it with roses. Naked women were returned to have skirts tattooed on them. One sailor had a sinking battleship in the crack of his buttocks. Many of them were real works of art.

The old-timers were not the only flaky ones aboard the J. Fred. Private Nusbaum by accident found that the ship's whistle, mounted on one of the stacks, caused a great vibration of the stack. Thereafter, he always managed to know when the whistle was going to blow, such as when we were leaving the dock, and would rush up and press his pelvis to the stack. He was said to be queer for the ship's whistle.

At the bottom of the ladder that went to the marine compartment, there was room for one bunk. Here slept a sailor who had appropriated the bunk via his seniority on board. It was a cool place. He always slept naked and always had an erection. It was the first thing that

greeted you when you stepped off the ladder. Various methods were tried to remedy this situation. Soemone stuck a wad of chewing gum on it with a miniature American flag fluttering at the peak. Someone painted it black with shoe polish. Someone stuck gum and a country match on it and yelled, "Fire!"

And there was my good friend, Corporal Harker. Harker had a service family background. His dad was a retired colonel and two brothers were lieutenant colonel and colonel. Harker never rose above sergeant as long as I knew him because of his great love of booze. He was always pleasant and could talk anyone into or out of anything when drinking.

Instead of brass rails to prop your feet on, the Central American bars all had troughs filled with sawdust. The sawdust was for spitting. Harker was adept at standing at the bar and urinating into the sawdust while keeping up a conversation, complete with arm gestures. I never saw him detected.

One night in Panama City, Jim Ward, Harker, a civilian engineer and I were standing at a bar. Harker filled the engineer's boot. The guy got tough. Before it was over, Harker had convinced him he had done it himself. The engineer left with a worried look on his face. Ward and I about died laughing.

One time when we were all on liberty, the ship got a rush call to put to sea. The M. P.'s and shore patrols notified us to get to the ship. Harker was in a state of bliss, of course. I had to help him to the dock, continually warning him to keep quiet and I would slip him aboard.

When we reached the ship everyone was loading supplies and working frantically to get underway. It would have been easy to sneak Harker through. However, when we got to where the O. D. (officer of the day) was standing, Harker looked up at him and said, "Ha, ha, ha! We can't help! We're too goddamned drunk!" We were both restricted at the next liberty.

Another time he was so plastered I had to carry him fireman-style a mile down to the dock. When we got almost to the ship, he said, "Okay, put me down now. I'm well-rested."

We slipped him aboard once when he had passed out and put him in a cot on the galley deck house, adjacent or aft of the bridge. The ship got underway and immediately ran into a rain squall. Harker sat up and started yelling, "Turn it off! Turn it off, you sons of bitches!" He thought we had him in the shower.

One day none other than Otto Kemp came aboard our sister ship, the Tatnall, another destroyer. Thereafter, when the Tatnall was in port with us, Kemp was one of my drinking buddies.

Along with Harker, Jim Ward was a constant companion. He was a pipe-smoking poet at heart. It always tickled me when out of thin air he would muse something like, "It's the melancholy time of year--too damn hot for whiskey and most too cold for beer."

We pulled into Buenoventura, Colombia, one time on some business. Ward, Smiley Burnett, and I spent the afternoon and evening in a real nice open-air bar, drinking rum and coke. The best rum was a dollar a quart, including the mix, ice and limes. By evening we were in rather a jolly mood. The waitress was a shapely dark-skinned lass, with the biggest pair of pointed bubbies I ever saw. Every time she served the drinks, she leaned across the table, intentionally poking them in Smiley's face. Finally, he told us, "By god, if she does that again, I'm gonna bite one of those."

She did and he did. She caused a commotion, and due to the mean glares from the regular patrons, we decided to leave. At the door we were accosted by her boyfriend, who tackled Burnett. He aimed a karate kick at Smiley's chin. Smiley seized his leg, upended him, and swung him in a circle. When he let go, the poor guy flew into the street like a rag doll. We beat it for the ship and safety.

On one of our trips up the Pacific coast of Central America, we anchored in Montepenny anchorage, from which we visited Amapala, Honduras; La Union, El Salvador; and points in Nicaragua. One day we had been ashore in a wild part of Nicaragua and had just returned to the ship, when a locust storm started across the bay. They darkened the sky and covered the water. Suddenly, the water boiled and churned with saltwater catfish and other species, leaping up to feed on them. We dipped out a few catfish, but they were inedible, all head and little body. After the swarm passed, we cleaned locusts from every crack and crevice of the ship, and then found them for weeks afterward.

While crossing Panama on the canal once, we had the same thing with migrating monarch butterflies. They blackened the sky for hours. They would flutter into your face and all over your body.

On board was a sailor who showed signs that he was on the brink of insanity. The butterflies were the last straw. He started running and laughing, screaming and poking his finger at them as they fluttered by. He was seized, hospitalized, and we never saw him again. From that day forward, any strange action by any of the crew brought the admonishment, "Careful, boy, or you'll be goosing butterflies!"

We were anchored at Manzanillo, Mexico, and I found a beautiful Mexican sombrero in a store. I wanted to buy it and send it home. The man wanted a fortune for it and I started to leave. He reduced the price. After repeating this procedure several times, I bought it. Then I procured a crush-proof box and had it wrapped for shipping. Now I had an authentic Mexican hat to wear when I got home. A couple of years later, I did get home and broke out the sombrero. Under the hat band was a small tag I had failed to see in Manzanillo. It said, "Made in Idaho, U. S. A."

I first laid eyes on the big luxury liner, S. S. America, at sea. She hovered over the horizon while I was in the crow's nest and I was mighty impressed. She was on her maiden voyage in South America instead of Europe because of the unsettled conditions Little did I know that shortly she would cause me to wear pajamas.

We returned to Panama and docked. Sometimes alongside the docks, when you went to bed at night, the deck of the ship would be far below dock level. With the tropical awnings spread above the deck, you couldn't see down on the deck from the dock. Then the tide would come in and your deck would be even with the dock. This happened the morning the S. S. America docked in Panama. All the celebrities that go on cruises such as this came past our ship shortly

before reveille but it was daylight. It had been a hot night and sailors and marines were sleeping all over the deck. Among the sightseeing ladies was a prominent admiral's wife. What those ladies sighted must have shocked their poor Victorian sensibilities, because in a few days we were all issued two pair of pajamas. We used them to work in when we were at sea.

Puntarenas, Costa Rica, was a port that we visited often. Things were so friendly for the Yanks in those days that I regret what has happened in these ensuing years to stir up so much hatred. We first went to Punta Arenas to disarm three German ships that were bottled up there by the English. We were not at war yet. The German crews were working on the local coffee and banana plantations and subsisting any way they could. We had strict orders not to fraternize with them, which we ignored. They seemed a pretty nice bunch, and we had many a clandestine party and smuggled them booze, chow and cigarettes. For one thing they were well acquainted there and knew the ropes. Later, when the United States seized all German and Italian ships, we made a speed run to Punta Arenas for that purpose. When we arrived, the ships were burning merrily. We towed them from the harbor, pulled the sea cocks and sank them. They were later refloated and became American troop transports.

One of my J. Fred sailor friends told me that the barnacles were six inches thick on them when they were raised.

In Puntarenas we found a potent drink, quiro. It was a smooth drink and went down like soda pop, and you were stoned before you knew it. Rumor had it that at some bars they issued a box of birdseed, a pack of condoms and a pair of boxing gloves with each bottle, because they knew if you drank it you were either going to sing, fuck or fight.

I was approached there by an old grey-whiskered man who offered to act as a guide and protector against being cheated in the money exchange. He was invaluable and a very interesting man. He told me to have a good time in the tropics, but to remember that the women have no morals and the birds have no song. Well, others were short on morals, too. I later learned that he was a former big shot with the United Fruit Company. Booze, women and the tropics were his downfall.

It was in Puntarenas that I first tried to show off my knowledge of Spanish. I wanted to mail a letter home. I accosted a native and asked him in Spanish where I could find a post office. He smiled and said, "Si, amigo, conmigo." He led us to a building and knocked on

the door. Out came three women, obviously prostitutes.

"No, no, senor," I said. "I want to mail a letter." He smiled, shrugged and led us to another whorehouse. Amid the guffaws of my buddies, I decided to put the letter in the ship's mail and seek some formal tutoring when we got back to Panama. Although my Spanish was poor, I didn't realize that the dialect is a little different from country to country.

We had a Navy coxswain aboard who was a very hard worker and went at all jobs slam-bang. No open paint buckets or water pails could be left exposed, or he managed to step in them or kick them over. We called him "Bootfoot."

One fine day at sea, Bootfoot and I were painting the stanchions on which the snaking, a net of rope, was strung to keep people from falling overboard. The snaking was creosoted, so we took it down to avoid slopping it up. Of course Bootfoot kicked over the paint bucket, slid in the wet paint and zipped over the side. I beat it for the bridge, screaming, "Man overboard, starboard side!" The alarm sounded, all engines stopped and everyone manned their stations, with life preservers and all. We began backing down, with all hands scanning the water anxiously.

Someone behind me said, "Who was it?" I turned and there stood Bootfoot. The clumsy S. O. B. had plunged over the side, grabbed the screw guard as the ship went past and come back aboard.

We were summoned before the captain. He took one look at the wet, paint-smeared Bootfoot and said, "No explanation necessary, dismissed."

Sometimes when the ship was in top condition and at anchor, and the captain in a benevolent mood, he declared "rope-yarn Sunday." In the old days, it was used to sit around mending ropes and spinning yarns. We seldom mended ropes but the yarns went on. In the marine detachment Corporal Leach had an endless string of stories about his dirt-poor Georgia boyhood. The hills were so steep on his papa's farm it took two engines to pull up one freight car. The land was so poor the rabbits carried knapsacks when they crossed to keep from starving on the trip. He joined the Corps while on an errand to fetch his pa some tobacco. When he came home four years later, his pa said, "Did you bring me my tobacco?" And so on.

We made practice landings on every island and beach possible. We used the motor whaleboat and towed the pulling whaleboat. Our combat gear was all World War I stuff. I was always glad there was no enemy on the beaches we assaulted. We landed one time in the Periless Islands and camped overnight on a sandy beach between

two cliffs. I didn't like the looks of the place and placed my blankets on a flat cleft on the cliff about ten feet above the sand. That night we had a goose-drowning rain. Water came down that valley six feet deep. We climbed the cliffs to avoid being washed out to sea. We lost about everything except what we were sleeping in. I was glad I'd taken the hard bed instead of the sand. Boy, did the sailors give us the horse laugh when we returned aboard, like drowned rats, in mostly our skivvie drawers.

The first time we crossed the equator was quite a party. There were the "pollywogs," those of us who had never been across, and the "shellbacks," who had. The shellbacks issued printed summons, accusing us of all sorts of offenses against King Neptune, ranging from lollygagging about the decks, posing as shellbacks, to peeing over the side on mermaids. King Neptune's court was set up. There was the royal barber, who shaved all heads and, in some cases, the private parts. The royal painter, who painted your left side green and your right side red. The royal doctor, who poured some vile-tasting solution down your throat, while your nose was held by the royal corpsman and an electric shock applied to your neck to make you swallow. We were run through belt lines and finally placed in a torpedo tube and washed out the other end by a high-powered jet of salt water. Then we were made to clean everything up, while

being lashed by a fake cat-o'-nine-tails.

That night we pollywogs mutinied and captured the old shellbacks one by one and tied them up on the fo'c's'le. When we had most of them, we gave them a good hosing down with salt water.

The next morning our sister ship, the Tatnall, came alongside to transfer a messenger to our ship. Their marine top sergeant, a pollywog, was standing sideways on the deck. He still had hair. "Look, they didn't touch me," he said. Then he turned to face us, and we saw that they had shaved the other half of his head. He looked worse than us baldies.

Life went on and I was promoted to P.F.C. We were in the port of Corinto, Nicaragua, and my certificate stated that fact. Later, when handing a snow job to boots, I would tell them I was an old Nicaragua hand. When they doubted it because of my age, I would break out my certificate, cover the date with my thumb, and show where I was promoted to P.F.C. in Nicaragua.

The old-timers aboard couldn't believe I had made P.F.C. on my first cruise. In the old days one had to ship over for P.F.C. I was accused of brown-nosing and ear-banging. I was gaining some seniority aboard. Some of the older hands were leaving as

their time expired. I was standing messenger watches on the bridge. I had a perfectly good chance to learn navigation, but never did, which I've always regretted. I acquired an Army cot and stored it on the galley deckhouse, which had become my cleaning station. By covering the cot with a canvas cover, I could sleep topside, even in the rain. That was a luxury, since the Marine compartment was hot and smelly, with only four three-inch pipes to bring down fresh air. The bunks by the air vents were appropriated by the highest rank. On top of this, we had four Italians who kept garlic in their lockers. This they ate raw at every meal. And I never could stand garlic.

On the galley deckhouse were two four-inch guns and two water-cooled 50 caliber guns. The 50s were my babies and I learned them inside out. This was to have some bearing on my future in the Corps.

One day my buddy, "Wop" Gauletiere, and I were scrubbing the stack by my cleaning station. Wop never could learn to tie knots right. As you had to raise and lower yourselves on a plank to go up and down the stack, Wop was a dangerous partner. I forgot this and walked to his end and--kerplop! We fell ten feet to the steel deck. I lit standing up and was doused with a bucket of soapy water. The pain in my spine was terrible. I reported to the sick bay and spent the next two weeks in bed. This was the beginning

of a lifetime of back trouble. Years later when I looked at my medical record, that dang doctor had only noted, "Patient complains of low back pains." Not a damn word about how it happened. You can never convince anyone that your back hurts, for they always suspect malingering, so I always just kept my mouth shut and suffered. Captain Pinky Pike told me he had spent thirty years trying to convince the Navy that his back hurt, but to no avail.

We had a ship basketball team and a good one. We took all comers and seldom lost, and this was a source of great pleasure to me. However, my biggest thrill was winning the stroke oar on the ship's pulling whaleboat crew. We challenged every ship that came within range and never lost a race in two years. Betting on the J. Fred's team was a source of extra income for the crew. When the ocean was too rough for the motor whaleboat's screws to stay in the water, we lowered the old pulling boat and got the job done. We took emergency medical cases off subs in mid-ocean. How I could become enthralled with such a man-killing sport in the hot tropical sun I'll never know, but I loved it.

Sometimes on long ocean patrols, men become afflicted with "cabin fever." Boredom and close confinement can make you dislike your best friends. On one such cruise, one of my best friends, a big

good-natured Irish lad, and I got into a scrap. I was too fast for him but he was hard as iron and there was no give up to him. I cut his face and upper body to ribbons, but he still kept coming. Finally, under the blistering sun, I could barely lift my arms and was ready to give up, when an officer stopped it. The next morning Mac grinned at me through broken lips and asked, "Say, do you happen to remember what started that fracus?"

There was a sergeant aboard with nearly twelve years service. When his current cruise expired, he immediately re-enlisted. Asked why he didn't seize the chance to become a civilian, he replied, "Oh, hell no, not me. I tried that once and it's a mess out there. Hell, there's no one in charge. Besides, there's gonna be a war and what would you Arabs do without me?" He folded his "shipping over" leave papers and said, "Well, see you eight balls in thirty days."

Some of us were fishing over the side once when we were anchored at Manzanillo. Sharks were cruising about. We weren't fishing for them, but sometimes they took our catch and broke our lines. One guy fixed up a heavy rope line with a sharpened grappling hook and a chain for a leader. He hooked a big shark and we had an awful fight. With the aid of a chow davit we got him aboard and clubbed him to death. He was all chewed up by the other sharks. Then they

were really in a frenzy. Someone threw an orange crate over and it was splintered in seconds. The captain sent back orders to knock off the fishing.

An old sailor told me to gouge out the eyes and he would make us both a shark's-eye ring. He put them in a bucket of water, ran a steam hose in it to make it boil slowly and added some kind of solution to it. He let it simmer for days, skimming it occasionally. When finished, he had two of the prettiest red jewels, about the size of a pea. He set them in two monel rings. He gave me some crocus cloth and said I could polish the metal myself. Gee, I was proud of that ring. It was supposed to be a good luck piece, too. But as I sat on the deck polishing it, it flipped out of my fingers, took one bounce and went over the side. I beat the deck with my fists and screamed my frustration. I never had the heart to tell the sailor what happened, so I lied like a horse thief and told him I'd sent it to a guy. Well, I sent it to Davy Jones.

We made an emergency trip to the Galapagos Islands once, taking two doctors to a Congressman's or Senator's son, who had run off with a tuna fleet and had come down with double pneumonia. We had just returned from a month's patrol at sea and had taken on no supplies except fuel. We got orders to sail <u>now</u>. The only fresh stuff we had aboard were a few crates of lettuce.

We steamed full speed to Isabella Island and anchored in Tagus Cove. Tagus Cove was fraught with history. The old sailing ships rounding the Horn had all stopped there for water and sea turtles for fresh meat. They formed a tradition of carving their names and dates on the sheer rock cliffs. Nowadays ships just painted their names up there. Captain Pike sent up a party to add the J. Fred to these elite ghosts of the past.

We lived mostly on fish, which abounded. We got tuna from the tuna boats and an occasional meal of sea turtle. We piled fish around the lettuce and it too tasted fishy. We were supposed to receive some supplies via another ship, but never did, and we were there much longer than expected. William Dooner Buffer knew dozens of ways to fix fish and I didn't tire of it. In fact, this was the first time I'd ever had all the good fish I wanted.

Some of us spent a day on a tuna boat. It was hard work and I wouldn't care for the mess for more than a day.

Our Marine C. O., Lieutenant Durant, took two of us fishing in the ship's dinghy. We had a boatload of fish and were about to secure for the day, when Durant pulled a huge hook from the

pile of gear. It had a two-foot chain leader.

"I wonder what we'd catch on this," he said as he baited it with a large fish and attached it to a coil of one-inch rope.

Something took the bait. The rope paid out so rapidly that it flipped our hand ax over the side. Then the beast, whatever it was, started to sound and was pulling the bow under!

"Cut the line! Cut the goddamned line!" screamed the lieutenant. Being about three miles from the ship, he sure didn't want to go swimming with the sharks.

I pulled out my pocketknife and sawed the rope until it broke. We all heaved a sigh of relief.

I held up the knife and said, "You'll never see a Marbaugh without a sharp knife!"

Back to the Caribbean we sailed. I got the chance to buy the laundry job from a sailor leaving the ship. There were two electric washing machines aboard. They were run by someone approved by the captain. Crew members paid him a dollar a week to wash and dry whites and extra for anything else. Drying was done in the fire room, which was under forced draft and hotter than billy hell--

it took only minutes. Some guys did their own laundry in a bucket, but most paid the laundry man. The deal was approved and I paid the sailor $50 for the job. I ran the laundry for the rest of my time on board. Compared to my $36 P.F.C. pay, $150 to $200 looked real good. I also took care of the ship's library for $15 a month. Thus, I became the ship's bank and loaned money right and left to all hands, including officers. I was all set up, because you can get about any favor when you control the purse strings, and I milked it to the hilt. I never lost a dime from loans and never missed a liberty with all the extra work.

In my latter days on the J. Fred, millionaires were donating their yachts for what was called "insular patrol" around the Canal Zone. They were mostly staffed with naval reserves, who then were being called up. I had some pleasant duty and extra good chow when I was assigned to visit these yachts to teach the 50 caliber water-cooled machine gun.

We got some naval reserves aboard our ship, too. One was a stunted-looking little guy named Watson. His only love was weight-lifting. No booze, no women, heaven forbid. He was the strongest little man I ever saw. Every payday he gave me seventy-five cents, which he'd borrow for a Strength and Health magazine and his only

vice, a milkshake. We lifted weights together. On board was a big coxswain who was very proud of his strength. One day he had Watson in the paint locker in the bow of the ship, handing up supplies through a small round hatch, its only entrance. Paint came in twenty-five gallon drums. The coxswain said jokingly, "Hand me that drum of paint." Watson did, so easily that the coxswain thought it was an empty can, and when Watson let go, down the hatch went the coxswain, paint and all. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

We were lifting weights on deck one day when a big Panamanian came aboard delivering supplies. He seized a weight we had ready and hoisted it above his head. I said, "Watson, show him how to do that." That bandy-legged little runt picked it up with one arm and ran it up and down a dozen times. The bug-eyed Panamanian said, "Man, I ain't never gonna pick no fight with no sailor."

The J. Fred had become my home. No finer thing could have happened to an eighteen year-old who wanted to see the world. I never wanted to leave, but one day we got word that the Banana Fleet was being disbanded. I was sick about it but orders are orders. We had a farewell ceremony and bid the sailors goodbye, with a few moist eyes on both sides.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PANAMA KID

I was transferred to the Marine barracks at Coco Solo, and the rest of the J. Fred marines scattered to the four winds. Twenty-four months was the limit for tropical duty. Mine was about up.

I didn't like Coco Solo and was in constant trouble there, though nothing serious. For punishment they put you on a remote outpost in the jungle. I was on it so much they called me Jungle Jim. It was scary. You carried a sawed-off shotgun with your .45 pistol and a flashlight that never worked. There was an ocelot out there that some officer's wife had lost, big creatures we called honey bears, and a bull alligator in the creek behind the outpost that bellowed once in a while and made you jump out of your skin. Someone kept two cats around there that entertained themselves catching big spiders. Occasionally, they'd come running to me, scared to death, trying to climb my pantlegs. It made me wonder what they saw. Twelve-foot boa constrictors slithered across the road. There were plenty of snakes in that jungle, but we had no trouble with them. Nothing like some I've encountered in the States, and I'm not talking only about merchants and politicians.

Fortunately, I soon was transferred to the Balboa Radio Station, at the request of the sergeant in charge there, Rankin.

It pays to have buddies. Balboa was almost as good as the J. Fred. In the first place there were no officers. Sergeant Rankin was very sensible and relaxed. If you were over leave, someone stood your watch, as long as you made it up. We stood only four hours watch per day. Except maybe an hour's drill, the rest was free time. The chow was out of this world. We each received thirty dollars monthly allowance. We hired Chinese cooks, ate like kings and still got as much as eighteen dollars a month kickback that we didn't use.

When my twenty-four months were up, Sergeant Rankin filed a request for a six-month extension. He had a clerk friend in Coco Solo who slipped it through.

Behind the barracks lived Wong, a Chinese man married to a black woman. He had a huge garden, about three or four acres, and a huge family. He made his living out of the garden and he was wealthy. We became good friends and I soon was helping him in the garden. I also became good friends with his daughter (but that had no bearing on my sudden love of gardening). He was in that garden from four a.m. until nine p.m., seven days a week. He had a steady flow of beautiful vegetables the year around. Occasionally, we would hire him to cook chop suey and chow mein

and other Chinese dishes, and he was a master.

He told me once, "He who gets ten men to work is ten times better than he who does the work of ten men." That stuck with me. Another time he said, "Now listen carefully." I turned attentive, prepared for some serious bit of wisdom. He solemnly said, "Girl who fly airplane upside down bound to have crack up."

In the Balboa Radio Station detachment was a sergeant who was one of the funniest, if not the funniest, men I've ever seen. He was fiercely proud of hailing from some place called Monks Corner, somewhere in the South. We called him "Monks."

A wiry little guy, he had a talent that confounded a lot of people. He could be talking to you, take a step backwards, do a complete body flip, end up in his original position and never miss a word. This always caused some consternation from strangers in the street trying to give him directions.

When we went any place we rode a chiba, a miniature bus. For a nickel you rode as far as you wanted. Monks would take his seat and start one of his acts. Sometimes he would fish out an imaginary needle from a pocket, a "string" from another, and try to thread the needle. Soon passengers would be straining to

see the needle and thread or casting quizzical looks at Monks. Before he would get off, he'd make a disgusted sign of resignation and toss the whole thing out the window.

Another trick of his, on the street while getting directions, was pretending to lean against a lamp post. He could lean farther sideways without falling than anyone I've ever seen. I saw many a cop walk all the way around him and even test the imaginary pole with his night stick.

One of our guard posts was located on a busy thoroughfare. Monks wasn't allowed to man it because he was a traffic obstruction. There was a large locust-like creature that inhabited the bushes on the base. When captured and squeezed a little, they uttered an ear-splitting "scrack!" Monks would stick one in his khaki shirt pocket, and when a crowd of Panamanians came by, he'd tighten his shirt and--"scrack!" People would stand around looking at this crazy cuss standing there at parade rest and, without moving, uttering that unearthly sound.

A Navy commodore lived in the officers' quarters where we stood guard. He had two adopted Puerto Rican daughters and they were beauties. The commodore wanted them to have no truck

with the enlisted men. This didn't deter the girls or us. They slept on the second floor and many a night climbed down an ivy trellis, met us in Panama City, and we'd do the town. In the wee small hours of the morning, it was back up the trellis. Many hours were spent in the sentry booth talking to the girls on the phone. I heard later that Monks married one of them.

Another buddy was a square-cut, handsome, curly blonde lad named Murawski. One of the commodore's daughters fell in love with Murawski and vice versa. A sailor at the radio station was forever trying to cut in on Ski, to the annoyance of both Ski and his true love. He fancied himself a regular "God's gift to the ladies." There was no give up to the guy.

Ski had a knack of imitating a woman's voice. He began calling the obnoxious sailor on the phone, pretending he was a Zoneite woman who was taken with him, making dates. The situation developed, and Ski had the poor guy buying civilian wardrobes and so frustrated that he became hollow-eyed and haggard. He was about to go off the deep end, I swear. I told Ski I wouldn't stand by and see it happen and that I was going to tell the guy. Ski agreed. As all the guys knew about it and wouldn't let the sailor forget it, he put in for a transfer and got

it. Murawski later married the girl. That poor commodore, both of his daughters married to marines.

One night I was in Panama City with a friend who claimed to be an Orange Irishman. He hated the English, the Black Irish and most everyone else. There were several British ships in port, plus some Canadian and Aussies. It was payday for the Army, Navy, Marines and the foreigners. A volatile situation.

We were in a crowded bar and there was a gang of limeys whooping it up. Once in a while one would lift his glass and say, "God save the Queen!" This burned my buddy.

Finally, after many toasts to the Queen, my buddy lept to his feet and shouted, "Fuck the Queen!"

The Englishman asked, "I say old chap, what would you say if I said, 'Fuck the President?'"

"Ah, fuck him, too," said my belligerent friend.

And so they went at each other and it was catching. Pretty soon the bar was turned upside down, it wasn't safe to be in the streets and we had a major riot on our hands. Somehow, the Marines and Navy, Canadians and Aussies ended up on one side,

and the English, Army and Panamanians were on the other. I stayed clear of combat and grabbed a chiba back to camp.

One of the places where we had a sentry was a drive that veered off the main road, up past the officers quarters, and back down to the road. A few drunken English sailors mistakenly ran up this drive while trying to make it to their ship. The dang marine sentry left his post and sneaked up behind them and clouted the rearmost man with his billy. Then he ran along and got the next rear man and then the next. The ones in front were too smashed to notice. Guess he couldn't stand to miss the night's action.

We had ball teams at the Balboa station, a swimming pool and the whole ball of wax. I started a rigorous weight lifting program, with expert instruction at the Y. M. C. A. I got to where I thought I was pretty good. One day while walking post at the Quarantine Station, I met a skinny little Norwegian who had been hospitalized from an accident aboard ship that had torn loose one of his lungs. Quarantined people could leave the station only in the company of a Yank. As we became friends I asked him to go with me to the Y and then on to Panama City. He was delighted.

At the Y, I got my biggest two-hand press ready to lift and jokingly asked him if he'd like to try it. That skinny little duck

picked it up with one hand and ran it up and down four times. Then he modestly remarked, "I'm afraid to do more or I bane tear loose my lung."

Six months went by in a hurry. I had Sergeant Rankin try his trick again. Again it worked and I got another extension.

About this time I was being torn between two loves, the Corps and Panama. After long deliberation I finally decided that I wanted to stay in Panama.

And so I took a civil service exam for the Canal Zone Police. I passed with flying colors. I was elated. The job paid $600 per month, with forty-five days annual vacation. I had it made. Only one thing--I wasn't twenty-one years old, a requirement I had overlooked.

When all of this reached the C.O.'s desk in Coco Solo, I received orders to report to him. I hopped a train to Coco Solo and reported to his office.

"P.F.C. Marbaugh, how in hell did you get two extensions of duty here?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know, sir. You signed them, sir."

"Do you like these old barrooms with the sawdust on the floor?"

"Oh, yes sir."

"Do you like this knock-knock music?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you like these dark-skinned women?"

"Oh, yes sir."

"P.F.C. Marbaugh, you go back to Balboa and pack your bags," he said with a worried look. "You're going home." He figured I was turning "asiatic," the term applied to being sucked in by the tropics.

"Aye, aye, sir," I said. "Could I just finish this six months?" Of course I wasn't asiatic. Not me.

"P.F.C. Marbaugh, you get the hell out of here! You're going home!"

"But sir, I passed this exam for the Canal Zone Police and--"

"P.F.C. Marbaugh, get the hell out of here!"

When I left Panama, Wong brought his whole family to the dock to bid me farewell. I considered that a great honor, for the man hardly ever took time off from his garden.

I had one consolation--the police commissioner had told me that when I reached twenty-one he would see that I got the job, if I obtained a special order discharge.

Special order discharges were discontinued and I've never been back.