



Hayward Ca. 94544

Nov. 15, 1941\*

Dear F.L. & Alice,

Many thanks for the letter and all the dope. Very glad to learn that Alice is doing so well. I hope she continues to improve and can do more and continue active.

The last ship I had was the S/S MAUNA LOA K.I.F.P. I believe her original name was "GOLDEN EAGLE", 8800 tons, but I'm not sure. I had been on her for over 3 years on the S.F.- Seattle/Portland Area to the Islands. This last trip they loaded her with Army Cargo. We left S.F. latter part of Nov. 1941. The deck cargo of trucks, gas tanks & trailers shifted during heavy weather and we had to put into Honolulu to get it reloaded & locked down better. We left Hu late in the evening of Dec 5th.

Ships leaving "HU" for the East ordered to maintain radio silence. 500 KC was dead and I couldn't pick up Hu until the evening of Dec 7th. Only station on was Navy repeating over & over "Japs bombed Pearl Harbor." We were bound for Manila & Singapore so now what do we do?

Couldn't hear KFS or KPH until early the next morning. KFS broadcast a coded msg to all American ships. If I remember correctly it was a "WGBC" Navy Msg. Copied the msg and we couldn't decode the damned thing. 5 letter code groups. Switched to KPH and next broadcast they send the same msg as KFS. You know what KFS did? They had left off the first 5 letter code group of the msg. Hell, no wonder we couldn't decode it (me & the skipper). Now with msg from KPH we could decode it.

The msg named quite a few ships in the Pacific including the Mauna Loa and instructed us to seek a "neutral or friendly port." Well, Suva was the nearest port so Capt. Trask headed for there. The next morning at exactly 4 A.M. as the watch was changing we lost a blade of the prop. Four knots was all the ship could do without shaking to pieces. So we continued on towards Pago Pago.

Couple of days later 500 KC was shattered by a ship close by saying unidentified ship approaching. It was a French ship named the "Polynesian" & the dumb op told the whole world his latitude and longitude. I ran to the skipper with the news. He said to maintain course. The Navy had instructed him that should such a situation arise to turn tail & run. The vessel was approaching head on when the "Polynesian" stopped & turned her tain towards us. She had a big stern gun. We approached within a mile of her & everyone dashed for the opposite side of the ship just in case she turned loose. She kept her stern to us until we were well astern of her, then the damned fool op came on the air again and said unidentified vessel was friendly. Had Japs been in that area we were sitting ducks, especially us.

Pago Pago wanted no part of us and closed us out. They were scared to death & the Navy had ordered all women & kids as well as non-military into the hills. Arrived at Sydney Dec. 24th. During Xmas holidays no work done in the shipyards, war or no war.

After "New Years" we went to the drydocks and the spare blade we carried was put on the prop. From Sidney to Brisbane discharged cargo & then reloaded cargo for Darwin. We sailed from Brisbane inside the "Great Barrier Reef" and was to pick up "escort" at Thursday Island before proceeding to Darwin. We dropped anchor someplace in a small harbor. First vessel there at "Rendezvous". Here we were ship dark & lights blacked out. You know, Capt. Trask ordered anchor lights fore & aft. The Mates were wild as well as the Chief Engineer to think a skipper would be so dumb. Here we were, outlined beautifully for any enemy vessel or plane. About an hour or so later, a dark shadow slipped into the harbor and we heard anchor chains when they dropped the hook, but didn't show any lights. Capt. Trask finally said to take down the anchor lights even though the "shipping Rules" said anchor lights should be up when vessel at anchor.

From his actions now and later on, it took a long time for Capt. Trask to realize there was a war on and he guided us accordingly. Following day, Naval vessels escorted several merchant ships into Darwin. Only one small dock & ships had to wait their turn. Finally got discharged & then was reloaded with war supplies - food, ammo, Bren gun carriers, etc., and then 500 Aussie troops were put aboard down a couple of holds. Four ships, all freighters, were so loaded - a total of 2000 troops. So we started out. I think we were headed for Dutch Timor.

For escort we had the U.S.S. Houston, the cruiser that had been F.D.R.'s favorite yacht, a 4 stack destroyer "Dewey" a relic of WW I, and a couple of Aussie corvettes with a single gun.

Beautiful Sunday afternoon until the "Houston" let fire with AA at a Jap "Recon" plane. Now the Japs knew where we were. And it was only a matter of hours before trouble happened. The next day - Sunday - we waited & wondered when the Japs would appear. Next morning here they came - 27 planes and 9 of them were 4-motor jobs. The 9 big ones went after the "Houston" and the other 23 motor planes fought aft the big planes without getting hit. Capt Trask sent down a message to me to send "when ordered by telephone" to do so. I still have the msg: "12° 55' S 125°48' E attacked by 27 Jap planes." So I sent an SOS/AAAA at 0225 GMT - Feb 16, 1942. A stick of bombs just missed the ship. Knocked me out of the chair, broke my glasses. I looked up & saw I still had the Xmtr still running. Antenna was still up so I repeated the SOS at 0230 GMT. It was 11:30 AM ship Time. By orders, I let the world know that we were under bomb attack when the Navy was just outside fighting off the planes. On my ship several Aussies were injured, several badly, and one of our crew members from Honolulu was hit by bomb fragments. We were the last ship to be bombed, then the planes disappeared. Later that day we transferred the wounded crewman to the "Houston" for surgery, but he died shortly after. The "Houston" was ordered to return with convoy to Darwin. Events of the war going badly and if I remember correctly Singapore had just fallen. At Darwin we discharged the troops then went to anchorage. Other freighters did the same

On the 19th the Japs came. First the bombers at about 8000 feet. First the airport and then the dock. Then the dive bombers came in. They got the "Dewey" bombed the aft end of the ship and the depth charges stored on the after deck blew up. 95% casualties we learned later. The "Houston" had departed earlier but was later sunk at sea when that crazy Dutch Admiral commanding a fleet of ships led the ships into a Jap trap and the slaughter was terrible.

Well, the "Mauna Loa" had been painted an Aussie gray so the Japs dive bombed the after end thinking, no doubt, that depth charges were stored there. When it was all over, the ship was going down by the stern. Only one lifeboat was able to float. The other 3 were full of machine gun holes. The lifeboat was so full it was impossible to use the oars. Fortunately we got a tow from an army motor boat, otherwise we would have gone out to sea with the tide.

The Navy was in control ashore but until late that day, had to spend time in the "Bush" until things quieted down. Spent several hours with a fighter pilot whose plane had gone up in smoke in the hangar.

Well, except for a couple of cameras, I had lost everything I possessed. After we got in the lifeboat I discovered I didn't have any film for my 2-1/4 x 3-1/4 Speed Graflex and only a couple of rolls, 8 shots each for my 828 size camera (828 is slightly larger than 35 mm).

Well, the Army gave me shoes, pants, shirt, raincoat, & "tin hat." The clothes I had on were old & had fallen to pieces, but no time to change on ship before getting into lifeboat. So that's the "saga" of the Mauna Loa. Am enclosing a shot of her from the lifeboat. Also one of the Army transport "Meigs" as she was burning. † We went by truck - flat bed only & no seats from Darwin to Alice Springs then by railroad to Adelaide. By rail again to Melbourne. We had to wait a couple of weeks for transportation back to the U.S.A. Finally we were put aboard the "Tasker H. Bliss" which had been the S/S President Cleveland. Then a short stop at Sydney. Next day adjusted compasses then headed for S.F. Sailed far south into the "Horse latitudes," then past Easter Island to the 120th parallel, and right up the 120 to S.F. We arrived April 8, 1942.

Of all the ships crews from Darwin, we were the only ships crew that stayed together from the Mauna Loa to S.F. Capt. Trask became a bar pilot at S.F. and a few years later Eugene Babb, who had been 3rd mate also became a bar pilot. Rest of the officers became shippers or Chief Engineers. I saw several of them and they were still with Matson.

After all these years, remembering the events still conjures up how scared we all were, believe it or not. Oh yes, another little item: the shippers had been ordered to beach their vessels, if necessary, in order to get the Aussies & their supplies ashore had we been able to get to Timor. How expendable the ships crews were to the Military Brass.

Oh yes, about the time we almost got it at sea quite a few American ships were either captured or sunk by the Japs. We had word that several ships almost made it, including the old "S/S RUTH ALEXANDER" W.A.D.W but the Japs finally got them although they tried to hide during the day and sail at night. That was the way the "DEWEY" got out of Manila.

Hope you have been able to decipher my shaking writing. Can't see the keyboard of a "mill" well enough to type. Have a good Thanksgiving and enjoy yourselves. Be seeing you.

73,

Bram & Jean

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\* Year of letter couldn't have been 1941. With zip code used, maybe 1971?

† Unfortunately, these photos have not been found.

*Note: The author's identity is unknown. No last name was given. The original handwritten 12-page letter is in the files of the Society of Wireless Pioneers, Alameda, California. Transcribed by deputy archivist R. Rydzewski.*