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Journey to & from an Unknown Island

10/8/99, Tom Crown

My stint with the 7ASO began, like many other musicians, at Fort Dix, NJ.

I was scheduled to go on a troop ship, then to my disappointment I was taken off the list. The next day I was told I would go by plane. Great, I thought, I'll be there in a day or two.

The flight seemed normal, on a MATS 4 engine propeller plane, seats facing backwards. I think it was scheduled as an 18 hour flight, with one stop at Lajos Field in the Azores for refueling. We landed at Lajos Field, as scheduled, on Terciera Island. We were then told we would stay overnight at the Air Force transient billets as the weather wasn't good. This seemed fine too. A little rest in the middle of a long flight.

We were driven to the barracks and told to pick our own bunks. Our group was about 40 strong, a mixture of Army and Air Force personnel. First, the weather was bad for a few more days, then rumor had it that the plane needed a new engine which had to be flown in from Europe, then several weeks of no news at all. During this time I paid a visit every day to the airfield to look at our plane. After several weeks it was gone. I didn't know whether this was a good or bad omen. Later I figured out (I think) that they flew the plane empty to Europe to get the new engine instead of flying the new engine to Lajos.

My schedule at Lajos was to get up at about 10 a.m., then have a leisurely breakfast of whatever I fancied that morning, afterwards a little nap, then lunch. After lunch I practiced the trumpet for a couple of hours, visited the airfield to check on our plane, then read and played a little ping pong until dinner. After dinner there was a movie and a few beers. Not a bad life, if a little boring. Air Force mess hall food was excellent and snacks or breakfast were available 24 hours a day.

Life in the barracks was calm at first until the social differences between the Lowlifes and the rest of us came to the fore. The Lowlifes were mostly RAs, many Hawaiian, (left over from "From Here to Eternity"?) who enjoyed playing cards until 3 in the morning, accompanied by much drinking and an occasional knife fight. The rest of us lay cowering (speaking for myself) in our bunks. Finally one night the Lowlifes decided we were cramping their style and moved into the next barracks, which was empty. This was a big improvement until a couple of nights later when they returned, pounding on our barracks door for us to come out and fight. They were loaded and sour. None of us seemed ready to do battle except for an RA Cpl., a little old man (probably about 45). He got up, went to the door in his underwear and punched the first Lowlife available in the nose. This was a BIG Hawaiian. He fell to the ground and the others all ran. We locked the door and went back to sleep and never saw our friends from hell again until our flight continued to Europe. By then everything seemed to be forgotten. Maybe the fact that the Cpl. was RA helped the Lowlifes to adjust to defeat. This nameless Cpl. has been a hero to me ever since. He represented some moral principle that I haven't quite figured out yet..

After a month of this dolce far niente I went to the airfield one day and a new plane was in place, ready, I guessed, to continue our flight. We left the next day, flying to Frankfurt. I was well rested and also in good shape, having practiced every day for several hours. In the month I spent at Lajos I had no contact with military "authority" except for the cooks in the mess hall who were rightly proud of their cuisine. During all this time the 7ASO was waiting for their new trumpet player, lost somewhere en route from Fort Dix to Vaihingen. [will continue]