Yap Islands and Ulithi Lagoon, 2003

Yellow Canoe and Foster, Too

Don Foster and I made our fourth tropical wilderness kayaking trip, as usual, in the nick of time. Despite our shared reputation as competitive, compulsive, control freaks, we had returned closer friends each previous time, confounding our friends' dire predictions of inevitable homicide. Like the first trip, we went to a place I never knew existed until Don brought out the maps with a broad grin.

Neither of us had ever previously "experienced" an atoll at all, and that seemed worthy, if for no other reason, for the rich potential of puns, et al. Considering also that Yap was our most civilized landmark, that linguistic richness approached dimensions of Croesian plunder.

Yap is a tiny Eastern Pacific Island complex, one of the Federated States of Micronesia and a loyal friend to the United States since our armed forces liberated the Island in 1944. Unlike so many Pacific Islands which have succumbed to Spam-and-Budweiser cultural pollution over the last 60 years, Yap's durable people have shrugged off predatory occupations and disease infestations from Spain, England, Germany, Japan, and, with continued fortitude, America, too.

Ulithi, while only 100 blue miles distant, has a different language and a distinct culture from Yap. Ulithi's huge lagoon—200 square miles—protected a massive United States naval fleet in the late stages of World War II. We were privileged to witness the removal of one of the scars of that experience while we were visiting. Of the dozens of tiny islands fringing the lagoon, four are inhabited. Each village preserves a traditional governance in which the Chief exercises remarkable power. In several villages, the Chief has forbidden Western garb and alcohol. Don and I were, however, granted permission to land, dive, fish, camp, and harvest coconuts on the uninhabited islands.

I'm going to relate a series of memorable anecdotes, interlaced with some of the lessons I learned and messages I hope to share.

Lizards: Truth in Advertising

I felt honored to encounter so many smiling, even jovial, responses from new people we met. I imagined that this friendly welcome derived from my radiant cultural curiosity, or perhaps my peaceful countenance, or conceivably my graying good looks contrasted with the bright yellow kayak. Maybe it was just my brimming natural humility. It turns out, however, that there was another reason.

Unlike continental Americans, the Yapese have insufficient population diversity to create an adequate reservoir of ethnic slurs. They resort to the animal kingdom for insults. In Yap, lizards are considered to be innately dumb, since they climb coconut trees for no apparent reason. People with certain behavior traits may be called: "lizards." I didn't learn this until rather late.

For most of the time we spent on Yap, I wore my winery singlet, emblazoned across the chest with a large image of a salamander.

Dogs on the Runway

Our original plans called for loading our inflatable, two-man yellow kayak onto a plane to the remote outer island complex of Woleai (pronounced: woolly eye). The pilot indicated, however, that we couldn't go to Woleai because there was a problem with dogs on the runway. Bemused, Don and I chose the alternative destination of Ulithi.

Pacific Missionary Airways flies from Yap to Ulithi twice a week, landing on the refurbished WWII runway on the islet of Falalop. This flight is the only practical link for adventure tourists, medical help, perishable goods, engine parts, assorted technicians, politicians, betel nut and cigarettes. Without the flights, Ulithi would retreat quickly not just to the 20th, but the 19th century in many aspects of life.

When a single engine prop plane lands at 100+ miles an hour and bowls over a dog, the experience can easily prove as disastrous for the people as the puppy. Think VW beetle versus Bessie the cow.

When wandering dogs became a problem on the Falalop airstrip, the airplane pilots made a simple proposition to the Chief. Solve the problem, please, or else we won't land. The problem was solved in a somewhat accelerated Darwinian process involving a baseball bat.

Don and I have since used a code with each other. "Uh, Wells, you're getting a little close to the runway…."

The USS Mississinewa

The USS Mississinewa carried a full tanker load of crude oil to support the armada of ships massing in the Ulithi Lagoon for the final push toward the Japanese Mainland.

In 1944, at a point in the war when US air fighter defenses were gaining an upper hand against visible enemies, Japan launched 6 "suicide torpedoes," two-man stealth submarines packed with explosives. Only one succeeded, piercing the USS Mississinewa's ¾ inch steel hull in the black of night while she lay at anchor in the Ulithi Lagoon. The manned torpedo fortuitously struck the one tank compartment containing volatile aviation gas, triggering a lethal explosion amidships and sending the ship upside down to the sandy bottom in a matter of minutes.

For nearly 60 years, 65 sailors of the US Navy and two courageous Japanese submariners rested in the wreckage, adjacent to intact tanks containing 2 million gallons of Navy Special Fuel Oil. Two years ago, after a typhoon raked the lagoon and rocked the wreck, a trickle of oil created a telltale shimmer on the surface.

The US Navy pledged to remove the oil, in a gesture of respect and responsibility to the 1000 native people drawing their living from the waters of the lagoon. The salvage effort did not wait for the calm summer weather, and Captain Rick Groen was recruited to empty the tanks with zero environmental impact. *More about Rick later.*

While we were there, the project pumped the last cupfuls of oil onto barges. The sailors were honored by both parent countries in a somber ceremony. The water will now run clear, but the history remains as dark as the oil in hold of that ship.

All 65 American sailors killed on the Mississinewa were African American men, systematically stationed by white officers to the most vulnerable duties in the Navy. So were all of the dock workers loading munitions in the Port Chicago cataclysm. They died 2 years before I was born. These sailors volunteered to defend our country and liberate people all over Asia from the brutal oppression of a military

dictatorship. These American servicemen never had the chance to return to an American society where their brothers and sisters, sons and daughters would continue to be systematically deprived and brutalized for another generation in their home communities. Without their sacrifice, and the sacrifice of many of their countrymen, our country might not have survived long enough to achieve redress of these grievous American injustices. We have much to finish if we are to honor their memories.

I am deeply and personally grateful to these men.

We find ourselves at the beginning of another war, rife with the righteous demonization of people of different appearance and culture, conspicuously invoking God's favored view of our cause. Paddling over a war grave gives one a different take on the fevered welter of patriotic platitudes and selective history-telling.

The Sokehs Rebellion

While we were visiting Ulithi, we met Joseph Johnny, a technician installing the new cellular phone service on the remote atoll. Joe was born to the descendants of the Warrior Tribe on the Island of Sokehs in Pohnpei, but was raised on Saipan. During his 4 years of service in the US Air Force, he was stationed in Nebraska. While that's just about as far from an ocean as a person can be, he became a computer communications whiz and returned to Micronesia with his skills.

Over my first glass of *tuba*, a fermented beverage made daily from the sap of young coconut fruiting stems, Joe told me the story of the Sokehs rebellion.

Sokehs is a hat shaped island—a tall peaked volcanic central highland, flanked with steep, dense jungle, with a broad, flat brim along the shore. In 1910, the occupying Germans decided to build a circumferential road around the flat coastal ground, and they "recruited" the indigenous people to do the hard work. The people of Sokehs agreed to help. Certainly, the Germans wouldn't have lasted long in that heat.

At this point, Joe related a tradition that was lethally disregarded 100 years ago. Sokehs has a matrilineal society, in which each village has one elder woman who commands supreme reverence. Men must either bow down to walk in front of this woman, or preferably walk

behind. This woman volunteered to bring water and food to the workers and their European supervisors.

One day, she arrived late. Showing the cultural sensitivity renowned among spike-head imperialist sausage gobblers, the construction superintendent struck the woman fiercely…in front of the men of Pohnpei's fiercest warrior lineage.

That night, those men met. The next morning, the German governor was dead, along with any other Germans in the way.

Bristling with firepower and fury, the Kaiser's Finest marched into the village to retaliate. Finding the village empty, they barged headlong into the jungle, where they couldn't see much. A considerably smaller force returned to the barracks. After many repetitions of this experience, the Germans accepted that Huns in the Jungle were just not going to bring the Warriors of Sokehs to their knees. The Germans decided to use modern technology, and started nightly naval bombardment of the jungle. Many trees died. The Warriors watched the arboricide from a safe perch atop the central highlands, then periodically crept down to remove a few more intruders from their soil.

Eventually, the Germans recruited Melanesian troops who were capable of making inroads in jungle combat. Relentless pressure on other native people eventually succeeded, and the Warriors' hideouts and communications were betrayed. Seventeen Warriors were executed, and the rest of the residents of Sokehs were exiled to the faraway island of Angaur, near Palau.

Of course, the Germans were kicked out of the Pacific a few years later, but the Warriors remained in self-imposed exile on Angaur.

Joe says that he would be honored if he ever went there. I hope he does. He won't need the cell phone.

Container Pollution

Don and I were stunned by the mounds of debris littering the shores of some of the most remote islands on the planet. The most common item was plastic water bottles—you can find one every 10 yards. On the more cosmopolitan island of Yap, 12-pack Bud Lite boxes and their scattered contents practically paved several areas.

On Falalop in Ulithi, empty 50 gallon Mobil oil drums lie akilter near practically every dwelling. They form mounds in the jungle.

We spoke with one gentleman from the Asia Development Bank to see if these could be flattened and recycled for at least a break-even economy. It's cheaper to leave them where they are, but Falalop is starting to look like a dump.

Interestingly, the Chiefs in some villages have made cleanliness not only a virtue but a mandate. These areas preserve the traditional artistry of woven sago and pandanus shelters, the beauty of hibiscus and croton and plumeria, the freedom from mosquitoes and flies, and the safety for barefoot children to play.

Kaday and Mogmog

Two villages illustrate the contrasts mentioned above. Kaday is a traditional village on the west coast of Yap, until recently accessible only by the sea or a very difficult dirt road. Over centuries, the Yap Islanders constructed shaded stone pathways and elaborate, elevated, airy meeting halls where both social and religious activities centered. When the Japanese occupied Yap, soldiers ripped up these structures to build their own fortifications.

In Kaday, the Chief has directed the painstaking reconstruction of the traditional buildings and pathways. The traditional stone carving, weaving, painting, farming, and canoe building crafts have been revitalized. Every square foot of earth was clean. While the glimpse of the past along these shaded paths and lush gardens was breathtaking, I was overtaken by the glowing essence of contemporary community pride.

Mogmog is one of 4 villages on the Ulithi Lagoon. While equally respectful of tradition, in fact quite averse to Western cultural intrusions, the Chief has not chosen to forbid or remove Western garbage. The environment could not be more diametrically contrasted from Kaday.

Leadership matters when it comes to pollution. Americans can learn from this, too.

Betel Nut

Betel Nut is not native to Yap, but the habit has proliferated in the last 50 years of motorized commerce, to the point that virtually every teenager chews. The habit cannot be ditched, which is a familiar theme.

Betel nut grows on a palm tree. The user bites the green shell to liberate the fibrous nut. He then shakes white lime—made from baked, crushed coral—onto a leaf, tucks it into the cheek along with the nut, and starts chewing the mass. The acidic juice, partially neutralized by the abrasive lime, stains the teeth a bright red. When the pharmacological effect has been extracted, the user spits the wad onto the ground. Red splats are ubiquitous, and the new airport terminal decided simply to paint the floor red rather than try to keep it clean.

Betel affords the user a mild high, which does not appear to interfere with intellect or most activities of daily living. It was rare, however, to find an athletic physique in a betel user. Most users carry a kit with them—a purse or sometimes a fanny pack. Just like cigarettes, it's easy to recognize a user by the paraphernalia they carry. Just like cigarettes, it's hard to speak clearly with something stuck in your mouth. Just as cigarettes accelerate the ravages of age, personal beauty is one of the early sacrifices of betel.

Don openly wondered whether preventive dentistry would make much sense in the face of this ubiquitous habit.

Wind

Don and I camped on the island of Pitores, one of the uninhabited islands of Ulithi, governed by the Chief of Mogmog. We had been specifically invited to stay by Stanley, an experienced, multilingual teacher who ran the Head Start program in Mogmog. In addition to standard tropical beauty of swaying palms and white sand and turquoise shallows, we found rusting relics of bulldozers and weapons in the water and in the bush. The women of Mogmog occasionally visit Pitores to tend a small clearing planted with breadfruit, papaya, banana, and taro. We also found a concentration of tall trees which served as a massive nesting colony of Black Noddy shorebirds and fruit bats. The diving was interesting, although not awe-provoking, but the

seashells were magnificent. At night, the jungle floor came alive with coconut crabs (native Ulithian) and Norway rats (probably American).

Don knows the wind and the sea. On our departure day, we got into about as much of those as you safely can handle in a two-man kayak. We left Pitores in a fresh breeze which immediately kicked up to a 30 knot wind with gusts to 40, laced with needles of driven rain. We needed to head directly into the teeth of the wind, compounded by seas of 4-6 feet which regularly buckled our kayak. High tide surge flowing over the fringing reef added another quartering swell and intermittent excitement. We paddled 4 hours without the luxury of a pause, covering the same distance we made in an hour several days earlier. On the same morning, the huge tugs and the two salvage barges were slowly moving out of the lagoon, less than a mile to the South. We considered moving off to their lee just to get a rest, but after the USS Cole incident with inflatable boats, we figured we would not be welcomed.

Later, on Falalop, we were greeted by Rick the salvage captain, who inquired: "Are you the two guys I was watching in the yellow canoe? You should have come over and run in behind us." Oh.

Rick

Rick Groen is a sixth generation Dutch-born salvage captain, and the Captain of the Mississinewa tanker oil reclamation operation. His earlier salvage activities read like a modern naval history book. He's done the Whitbread race (around the world in the southern oceans in 126 days), countless sailing races, and can operate any vessel that moves through water and a fair number that fly, too. From his physique, I think he could pull most of them himself. He has a rather lengthy military resume, as well, about which he was very modest. Suffice to say that he has an honored role in the US Navy, and he will likely be called upon for additional service in the next 30 years.

Rick watched Don's and my curious "Against the Wind" paddling epic through binoculars from the bridge of the salvage tug. He greeted us cheerfully several days later the day before we were to fly back to Yap. We all wanted a beer, which was not to be found on Falalop. In our shared condition of malt deprivation, if a beer had been stashed anywhere within 50 fathoms of the surface, I think Rick would have retrieved it. I think we can say that we succeeded later, using more conventional methods in Yap. His preferred? Heinekens, of course.

John

Don and I visited the far flung beach of Wanyaan, on the East Coast of Yap. We read that good manners would require leaving a financial gesture of respect at a little store nearby. We nearly rolled by the unsigned, one room store, but when we stopped, we were greeted by a smiling gentleman sitting on the stoop, wearing only shorts, sporting a fine beard, and cradling a cold beer. John introduced himself, and as the conversation progressed, we learned several surprising things. John has spent years doing slow virus research on the East Coast of the US, and has lived as long in Washington DC as in Yap. By the time Don and I finished the first of several beers, it was no longer surprising to be discussing prion research and the politics of the Nobel Prize in the shade of mango tree on Yap.

John has become increasingly engaged with international agencies seeking cultural awareness of Micronesia. We discussed the potential of eco-tourism and healthy, clean visitation, all of which was well known to John. Noting that Don and I were ambitious paddlers, he revealed his fascination for the ancient art of celestial navigation, supported by an analysis of currents, temperatures, and sensory indicators of land masses hundreds of miles distant. These arts have been practiced in Micronesia to a degree never achieved anywhere in history in the world, but they are fast disappearing in the era of GPS and satellite internet access.

Don and I exposed our shallow knowledge of the great master navigator from Satawal (a tiny outer Island east of Yap), and the feat of sailing a traditional Yapese sailing canoe (the Hoku'lea) from Tahiti to Hawaii without a single navigational instrument other than one man, Mau Piailug.

At that point, John asked, "Do you want to see the Hoku'lea?" Puzzled, we replied, "Well, sure." John took us behind the store, pulled back a large orange tarp, and there she was. I wouldn't be surprised if John knows where Amelia Earhart's plane lies, too.

I asked John what he imagined himself doing at age 70. After a pause, he replied: "By that time, I would like to be dispensing advice." I'll listen to it.

After a while, you realize that you can learn something valuable anywhere, at any time, if you go beyond your prejudices, abandon your presumptions, and listen. I plan to do more of that, too.

Petrus Moon

Sitting on John's store step, we met John's cousin, Petrus Moon. Petrus, who must communicate only with sign language, shared a great deal of information with us, too. One remaining regret is that I was unable to communicate to him that he has, probably, the coolest spoken name in the world.

Yesterday Tomorrow

On our last day on Yap, Don and I figured we needed some exercise. We were facing an ordeal of 40 hours of flying in sardine seats, waiting in airless security lines, eating questionable victuals and breathing bad vapors. We rented bicycles and hammered around the island, through airy fields of grass and pandanus, through fetid thickets of mangrove, along sandy beaches. We found clutches of carnivorous plants, extravagant arrays of red and yellow flowers, and a single banyan tree that occupied at least 2 acres. While the highest hill we climbed was only 1300 feet, the steepness of the rutted, muddy tracks exhausted our water and humbled our quadriceps.

The Continental/Micronesia Air (now there's an oxymoron) 737 took us away at night. After island hopping from Yap to Palau to Guam, we took off eastward toward Honolulu, eventually crossing the International Date Line.

I couldn't resist noting to Don that: "Tomorrow at this same time, we were really hot and sweaty."

To steal from Bob Dylan, when we returned to California, I can claim that "We were so much older then. We're younger than that now." It's time to start living that way.

Never-Never Land

A family friend asked Sandie where I was for 2 weeks. She answered: "Never-Never Land. That's where boys go when they don't want to grow up."

She's possibly right. She usually is. However, I see it differently. In my view, we went to a place where Men go to keep from growing old.

Wells Shoemaker, March 9, 2003