

The Rongelap Traders

I joined my new ship, the USS Plum County (LST 1083), shortly after the New Year in 1958. Several days later, we sailed for Hawaii to pick up a twelve ton lead-lined room to be used to check the radiation levels of people who had been exposed to radiation. It seems that during atomic bomb tests on March 1, 1954, sixty-four people living on Rongelap, a thirty-six acre island in the Rongelap Atoll, in the Marshall Islands, had been accidentally exposed to atomic fallout because of an unexpected wind shift during the tests.

We loaded the space age looking room and affixed it to our main deck. In Hawaii and Kwajalein, we were joined by twenty scientists (most from the University of Washington) who would be conducting tests on the fish, fowl, soil, water and people. The sixty-four natives had been living on Ejit and Kwajalein Islands for the past four years and had just returned to their homes on Rongelap six months before our arrival.

We beached our LST on the island and invited the island leader (Chief?) to join us for dinner. He had learned English while on Kwajalein and could communicate quite comfortably with us. We made arrangements to play softball games each day with them (We went 15-15! Although we had more skilled players, our team could never master playing balls caroming off of palm trees with the proficiency of their players... and many games were decided by balls being lost among the trees!) Our captain mentioned that he had his eye on a giant clam shell resting on the beach and asked if it

were for sale. The “Chief” said it was very valuable and he would think about how much to charge for it.

The currency of the islands was cigarettes...we never talked about something being worth dollars, but rather, cartons/cases of cigarettes. Cigarettes were very inexpensive in those years and while underway at sea we could buy them for seven cents a pack...except for Phillip Morris which cost five cents because they were so loosely packed that one cigarette could be smoked in several puffs (We always thought we were given seconds!) No one would buy Phillip Morris cigarettes at any price but the supply officer had to take several cases each time we were resupplied and those cases piled up.

Several days after the original dinner meeting, the Chief said he decided on a price for the giant clam and when he walked up the bow ramp, many of us were there to hear the bargaining session which was about to occur. It was a funny occasion...all of us standing around in shorts, hats and sandals, as we had very limited fresh drinking water, no laundry service and thirty second showers.

The Chief was dressed in his ceremonial dress and was ready to bargain. We were actually rooting for the Chief as our supply officer was always taking advantage of shipyard workers and others with whom he dealt. The Chief told about this rare clam, this one-in-a-million specimen, and if one was to believe him, this was the only clam of this size to ever have been brought ashore. Our supply officer countered with us having limited supplies and his concern that our crew

would suffer if he bargained away too many cigarettes. Finally, the Chief said, "Three cases of cigarettes!" Our supply officer looked shocked and shook his head. There was a long pause and finally our supply officer said, "I will give you two cases of cigarettes." The Chief stepped forward and held out his hand and said, "OK, deal, but no damned Phillip Morris!" The officers and crew erupted in laughter and applause. The evil supply officer had been defeated.

We were beached on Rongelap for over a month and no more clam negotiations took place. We became friends with our softball playing opponents and shared many gifts and good times with them over that month long period. As we retracted our LST off of the island for the last time, we were all standing by the lifelines and the entire Rongelap Island population was standing by the giant clam...each group waving a tearful goodbye to the other.

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