

A MOGMOG LIBERTY

Ensign M. Dick Van Orden, U.S.N. (October, 1944)

To Navy men and Marines who served aboard ships in the western Pacific during the later stages of World War II, the name Ulithi brings back memories of an unusual, exotic wartime hideaway—a remote Pacific lagoon that provided a respite from battle and a place to replenish, re-arm, and repair our ships. It was also a place to relax our people and give them a modest, Spartan version of R&R—the best then available in the war-torn tropic islands of the western Pacific. It was not the tropical paradise frequently shown in the movies, but only a reasonable approximation, and as a practical substitute it served its purpose. Ulithi was a liberty port—the only one available to thousands of battle-weary sailors and Marines who were carrying the war to the Japanese. The real gem of the island chain, and that most beloved by the Fleet, was the island of MogMog, the designated recreation center for the Fleet. It had sandy, coral-encrusted beaches, coconut palms, and a large palm-tree grove suitable for picnics. Most of the area was set aside for enlisted liberty parties, and a smaller portion was partitioned off as an officer's club.

The enlisted recreation area was daily a scene of exuberant activity. Groups of sea-weary sailors and Marines from ships in the anchorage were ferried ashore in landing boats (LCVPs and LCMs) to enjoy ships' parties and picnics on solid ground, with a limited supply of 3.2% beer distributed to the long dry and wildly enthusiastic liberty parties. There was swimming from the beach (usually soon terminated by exposure to the sharp coral), softball and baseball pitch-and-catch among the palm trees, and the inevitable touch-football games that soon became a rough form of tackle. But the most enjoyed—and most prohibited—sport was climbing the coconut palms in an attempt to acquire—and later to open—the ripe coconuts temptingly displayed high above. There were many fallen coconuts on the ground, but the challenge of a climb to dislodge the seemingly fresher and cleaner ones just could not be resisted by the adventuresome young sailors and marines.

We junior officers aboard the U.S.S. *Independence* (CVL 22) were periodically pressed into escort duty in charge of each day's liberty party with our primary duties being that of dispensing the beer equitably, keeping the men from engaging in dangerous activities—like climbing coconut trees—and seeing that all hands in each day's party were safely returned to the ship. My turn came early in the R&R week, and I found myself provided with a Shore Patrol (SP) brassard, a nightstick (as a badge of office rather than a weapon), and led a liberty party of 50

eager sailors and Marines, ready to drink beer and conquer the jungle.

The Supply Officer of the *Independence* turned over to me several large boxes of ham and cheese sandwiches and ten (repeat, 10) cases of warm beer, with instructions to see that each sailor received four—and only four—cans of the weak 3.2% alcohol brew. And then I was on my own.

The first puzzle: How to limit the sailors to their four cans each, knowing that a wily salt could easily slip back into the line for multiple collections before starting to consume his collected hoard. I solved that problem by drawing from the ship's office exactly 50 3x5 cards, which I passed out, one to each man, telling the liberty party it was their "beer ticket" for the day, and that each time I issued each person a can of beer, I would tear off one corner. In addition, I required them to sign their name to their "beer ticket." They understood the deal: no card with at least one intact corner and one signature, no beer. Since it was the first time this rationing system was employed, it worked to perfection. Of course, there was out-of-sight trading and gambling, allowing some to acquire and consume more than their quotas, but there was no cheating on the draw, primarily because of the corner tearing routine. Undoubtedly later liberties would find our enterprising sailors—now alerted to the system—with multiple 3x5 cards stowed in dungaree pockets, ready for the rationing, but this first time I made an easily understood system that was hard to cheat. I had calculated that 50 sailors times 4 cans each, equaled 200 cans of beer, so with 10 cases of 24 cans each, I would have 40 cans for myself and for rewarding those who assisted with various activities. But I failed to reckon with the wily Chiefs.

Navy Chief Petty Officers are experienced in the ways of the world and in dealing with Navy Ensigns. Before we left the ship, one of them approached me and said that six Chiefs were going ashore with my party (all Chiefs had "open gangway") and would like to have a case of beer, in return for which they would carry the beer and get it safely from ship to picnic area. This seemed to be a reasonable idea, I thought, and since I had two extra cases (48 cans), I agreed, knowing that Navy Chiefs are always reliable and dependable. But what I failed to recognize is that where beer is concerned, they are also very cunning. The six CPOs took all 10 cases down to the liberty LCM, and from the boat landing on Mog Mog they headed toward the recreation area. However, when I looked back to where they had fallen to the rear of the liberty party, I discovered that they had left the trail and headed for the underbrush—with all ten cases of beer. I quickly intercepted them and got them back on track, resulting in safe delivery of our precious beer to our assigned picnic area.

With sheepish smiles and an attitude of “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” the Chiefs requested, and received, their case of beer and retreated to their underbrush “Chief’s Quarters.” I had no hard feelings toward them, but acquired a healthy respect for their ingenuity, and learned a good lesson about dealing with Chief Petty Officers that stood me in good stead in future years. Thus a beer crisis was averted and we had an orderly distribution of beer to everyone. To the sailors who had carried the boxes of sandwiches (ham and cheese slabs between slices of ship’s bakery bread from the galley) I awarded an extra can of beer each, and members of the boat crew got two cans apiece (leaving six for me). Thus beer was all equitably doled out and my day’s activity was finished except for a period of pulling sailors down from palm trees and stopping a fight or two. Finally, after a period of boisterous activity, all hands settled down for quiet, peaceful naps in the shade from palm trees. Abundant food, warm beer, hot sun, fresh air, and tired sailors all made for a sleepy afternoon. Soon the boat was ready to depart for the ship, a muster was taken, and all boarded and arrived back aboard safely. My duty was done for that day. One can always wonder what the next day ashore would bring.