

Excerpt (pages 32-37)
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Interview of Henry Clinton Reed
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In 1940 we knew our entry into the war was drawing near. The Commander of the Special Service Squadron in Panama, Admiral Henry Kent Hewitt, was ordered to make a survey of the Galapagos Islands to find where a base could be established for the protection of the Panama Canal. The entire Ecuadorean General Staff was invited to go on the cruise. The State Department named me to act as the Admiral's Liaison Officer. We made the voyage on his Flagship, the Cruiser USS Erie.

I bunked in the Admiral's quarters which were independent of the rest of the ship. An Admiral's life at sea is a lonely one. He had his personal kitchen and staff and ate alone in a dining space at one side of his quarters overlooking the deck. An orchestra played chamber music near his window during lunch and dinner. No wonder he was pleased to have my company. I was the one person on board with whom he could indulge in small talk. His relations with the Captain and officers of the ship were cordial, distant and formal. During the evening movies on deck, he and I sat in the front row alone. The ship's officers and Ecuadorean General Staff sat behind. We were on the Equator, but the Humboldt current keeps the temperature cool at night. The Admiral wrapped in his great red-lined Navy cape, was an imposing figure. I had brought no warm clothing so he had me fitted with a Navy cape. I confess I felt strange, the two of us taking a stroll after the movies in deep conversation, two bundles of blue ignoring the officers on deck with whom I had been exploring the islands during the day, as if they were metal fixtures on the wall.

One morning while we were having breakfast, the Captain's aide came in and delivered two envelopes. It was a formal, engraved invitation to dinner from the Captain. The Admiral said, "How very good of him. We must reply before going ashore." The Captain had our acceptances in less than half an hour. The Captain's quarters were not more than fifty feet away.

The Admiral gave a cocktail party for the Ecuadorean General Staff and the senior officers of the ship. I wondered what it would be like since alcoholic drinks are forbidden on American Navy ships. Cocktails and canapes were passed around, and awhile later the Admiral went around personally refilling glasses as if he were pouring the best stirred martinis instead of fruit juice.

I'll not forget the sight of the Admiral in a broad-brimmed hat and rubber poncho flying in the wind and rain as we galloped on wild Galapagos horses up and down the mountain

sides and for miles on the beaches of San Cristobal Island. Riding on rough hewn wooden saddles is the most sore making exercise I ever had.

After the first two days on an American Man-Of-War, I noticed that officers with whom I had not spoken to the day before knew every word I had said the previous day to other officers. I had to exercise extreme caution since I was the only person on board who had normal social relations with the Admiral and the only person who could communicate with the Ecuadorean General Staff. When I knew some of the officers better it was evident that there was curiosity about my conversations with the Admiral and to a lesser degree what I talked and joked about with the Ecuadoreans.

During the visits to the islands, I made a census of the total population. With the Ecuadorean military detachments and few colonists and stray foreigners, the total population of the entire archipelago hardly exceeded two hundred people.

William Beebe's book Galapagos: World's End, published in 1924 - just about the time the ill-fated Norwegians experiment of colonization began - attracted the world's attention to this fantastic archipelago. The Germans, especially, seemed to have a mania for the Robinson Crusoe tradition of a desert island paradise.

The tragic events that took place among these paradise-islanders before I visited the Galapagos has best been told by John Treherne in his book The Galapagos Affair, 1983. As background for the few things I have to say about my conversations with the survivors of the German paradise-islanders, I will quote part of the blurb on the jacket of Treherne's book.

"The strange calamities that took place on the Galapagos island of Floreana half a century ago have teased and mystified investigators ever since. In their various ways, the surviving actors in this bizarre drama have thrown the facts into confusion. He John Treherne vividly reveals, the dramatis personae Were deeply eccentric in the first place,

It was a dark, Nietzschean romanticism which inspired the German doctor Friedrich Ritter to enact his role as philosopher-superman in the remote Pacific haunts of Charles Darwin. Ritter's fellow pilgrim on the way to final, wisdom, Dore Strauch, wasn't to learn of his orthodox Nietzschean contempt for women until the couple were already scrabbling over the volcanic slopes in search of a dwelling amidst the wild boars. Even Dore's lyrical accounts of their grand experiment cannot conceal the fact that Friedrich was a fierce and selfish bully.

What was Olympian in theory turned out more ramshackle in fact, but romantic magazine articles filtered back to Germany about the Ritters' 'idyll' and enticed the comparatively prosaic Heinz Wittmer, his wife Margret and their ailing son. As if this wasn't intrusion enough for the Ritters, next to arrive (brandishing a pearl-handled pistol) was a platinum-blonde, sex-mad 'Baroness' with a retinue of adoring young men. Having

washed her feet in Margret's drinking water, the Baroness announced that the island was hers and she planned to transform it into something like Miami, though her luxury hotel for American millionaires, the Hacienda Paradiso, conspicuously remained a corrugated-iron hut. The scene was set for trouble."

In its review of this book, the London Times Literary Supplement stated "The 'Galapagos affair', when it erupted, was both short and shabby. Within the space of a year, 1934, the Baroness and one of her lovers disappeared without trace; the other man was found dead of exposure on a neighbouring island; Friedrich Ritter was also dead, of food poisoning. Two of the three competing idylls were indubitably over. Dore Strauch returned to Hitler's Germany, but the Wittmers stayed on. Half a century later Margret is still there - and refusing to talk. Mysteries remain."

Two years before we explored the islands, the Cruiser SS Houston anchored off Black Beach with President Roosevelt on board. The 8th August issue of Time magazine said that "the official news report from the Houston announced that the landing parties tried to pump the settlers about the Baroness, the queer German woman who, wearing silk panties, sought to rule the island several years ago until she and her retinue of young men came to mysterious ends. The settlers would not tell, and the whereabouts of the Baroness have been unknown for four years." But she still stole the news, for dominating the President's column of Time magazine was a picture of the Baroness showing the familiar buck teeth and sagging bosom.

"My Diary

"Off the Coast of Hood Island, August 22, 1940

"We arrived at Post Office Bay last evening at six o'clock. A sergeant who had ten soldiers in his garrison came aboard, and we discussed the plans for today. We wanted to visit the pirate caves in the interior of the island and see the houses of the 'Baroness', the Ritters, the Wittmers and Conways, later American arrivals, but unfortunately it is a five to six hour roundtrip walk to the interior and since our schedule only permitted us to stay at Post Office Bay until 1 p.m., we gave up the idea of going to the interior. We sent word, however, by courier that we would like to see the Conways and Wittmers.

"At 8 a.m., we went ashore and deposited a few letters in the barrel at the Bay. This barrel had been put up as a post office box at the end of the eighteenth century by sailors of whaling vessels. Letters deposited in the barrel are picked up by the following ship bound for the mainland. The barrel is always kept in repair by visiting ships and has a little roof on it at present. A window is cut into the side of the barrel for putting in the mail.

"Lt. Fields and I decided to start right away towards the pirate caves to see how far we could go in the time at our disposal. At a clearing where a delapidated government house stands about twenty yards back of the barrel post office, there are two large iron tanks, rusted and abandoned, that must have belonged to some wrecked ships. On one of the

tanks to the right facing the house, there was a sign in red paint pointing to a road which read 'Hacienda Paradiso'. Then there was a sign on the crude road which read 'To the Conways and Wittmers - 2 1/2 hours walk from Post Office Bay - Follow the red marks - 1 1/2 hour from Black Beach'.

"Fields and I walked for about an hour and a half through a good road to start with, then there was a terrible section that seemed to follow the course of a rainy season watercourse over a lava flow, then we came on to a higher region where the vegetation was sparse and the land perfectly flat and smooth - a landing field could be easily made by clearing a few trees. We were walking glibly along the trail when we heard voices and soon came on to the Conways and Wittmers who were on their way down to Post Office Bay to visit the ship.

"Elmer Ainsworth Conway and his wife came to the Galapagos in 1937 to live and settle on one of the islands. They first went to James and planned to stay there, but the Ecuadorean territorial chief found it necessary to take the one Ecuadorean family living on the island away and insisted that the Conways leave also. They then came to Charles or Floreana where they have lived ever since. They have a farm close to the Wittmers and are importing many seeds and plants to grow on their plot. They told me that they had twenty-four varieties of fruits and that every kind of fruit, vegetable and flower planted had grown successfully with the exception of onions which sprout but do not produce onions. They carry on a correspondence throughout the world asking for, trading, and buying seeds from Brazil to India. It takes anywhere from eight months to a year to receive a reply, but they say that a surprisingly high percentage of people answer their letters.

"Mrs. Conway is a woman about 5'5" tall and very strongly built; she has stringy light brown hair, blue eyes, pug nose and is very plain in appearance. She was a school teacher in California. She impressed me as being bitter about something. She was upset because we had sent word for them to come down to Post Office Bay instead of to Black Beach which is a one-hour shorter walk. (I don't blame her.) When I introduced myself to the Conways and Wittmers, I walked along ahead with Mrs. Conway.

"From the start I noticed she was afraid I would start asking personal questions the way most people probably do, so I avoided bringing up any subject that might cause offense. I tried to keep the conversation going and hoped to learn something from what she volunteered to say. She was dressed in a plain navy blue jersey woolen dress with a red and white checkered tie of the same material. She carried a handbag wrapped in a piece of newspaper, and when we got on the ship, she threw the newspaper away. She looked healthy and tanned. Her bobbed hair was cut just about normal except that on the back of her head she had a bunch of hair tied into a sort of pigtail which stuck up but hung down no further than the rest of her bobbed hair.

"When I told Mrs. Conway that I was the American Consul in Quito, she almost hugged me and repeated several times how glad she was to meet me and stopped until her husband caught up to tell him who I was. He then said, 'We certainly are glad to know you', which made me think that they had some trouble or needed help of some kind.

"Mr. Conway is a clean-cut, tall, strong man. He was burned to a dark brown and has powerful arms and legs. He wore a yellow jersey polo shirt and yellow shorts, white socks and sneakers. When he took off the sneakers to wade to the whale boat (on our way to the ship), I saw that his feet had been accustomed to go without shoes. He seemed to be a well-bred, educated, well-balanced person - in fact, he was in every respect more prepossessing than his wife and did not have her sarcastic attitude. Both the Conways smoked their cigarettes until their fingers burned. This was quite pitiful.

"We then met the Admiral and a few of his officers who had started to walk inland shortly after we did. I introduced him to the various people, and we all continued back towards Post Office Bay. Mrs. Wittmer speaks fair English, her husband only poor Spanish.

"Heinz Wittmer is a man of about fifty years of age - uncouth and gruff in manner, sloppily dressed, and appears to be a man of scant education. He wore the crudest shoes - probably made by himself. One could see the hair on the dried leather.

"He gave me a long dissertation on how a person, to live on the island, must work and how Dr. Ritter had lived close to the sea so that no passing ship would escape his eye. He literally lived off the gifts of visiting ships. Mr. Wittmer said that he had heard I was the Consul in Quito and would I do him a favor. A Mrs. G. S. Johnson, a German, naturalized American, came to Ecuador and took the Government boat for the Galapagos Islands with her Pekinese dog. She turned up at Black Beach and walked up with her dog to the Wittmer and Conway farms and told them she had come to live there. They told her that it was impossible since one must clear the land and do extremely strenuous work to eke out a living from the soil. She of course was unable to do anything and just stayed on with the Wittmers. He said she was a great burden and crazy.

"The woman will probably remain with the Wittmers until they can bear it no more and Wittmer will kill her. There are serious suspicions that he has killed other people before. On a desert island, life is such a struggle the easiest way to get rid of a useless, insane, old woman is to kill her.

"Mrs. Wittmer is very white with blue eyes - not even slightly tanned after eight years on Floreana. She is rather good looking. I did not like her - she seemed to be petty, fussy - I suppose it would be difficult to be otherwise under the circumstances. She carried a large red bag and wore a white sailor's cap turned down all around. She had on a white and blue blouse and a pair of shorts - she brought a white knit silk skirt which she pulled on over her shorts after she got on the ship. While she was walking along in front of the Admiral, the party came to section of the trail where a large tree had fallen across the path. The Admiral offered to help her over the fallen tree, but her husband hastened to tell the Admiral in halting Spanish that he needn't bother because she was not used to such attentions since there were no gentlemen on the island.

"The Admiral invited them to have buffet luncheon. Later they went down to the ship's store and were given cigarettes, candy, matches and other odds and ends, but Mrs. Wittmer bought \$1.88 worth of goods. I wondered where she got the money since they do

no trading outside the island, but shortly afterwards Mr. Wittmer told me that some months ago, Liberty magazine sent a man out to interview him and 'paid him \$1,000 for his story'. Since an American Man-Of-War does not visit the Galapagos more than once a year and private yachts would probably give them all they take ashore, that money will last many years.

"Before they left, we took them on the Erie from Post Office Bay to Black Beach point."
