

TRAVELING NORTH

Story / Photos by JOC Bill Wedertz

When a recent opportunity came up to make a four-day junket to the Northern Marianas islands of Alamagan, Pagan and Agrihan, I jumped at the once-in-a-lifetime chance to see these infrequently visited, exotic, volcanic islands.

The trip, aboard the Guam-based patrol gunboat USS Welch in company of another PG, USS Tacoma, was billed as combination goodwill/training cruise. When not visiting islands, a hefty schedule of military training exercises were to be held.

Having been a "carrier man" for a number of years, one of the most striking features of the PGs is their size; they're small.

While you can easily run a full-scale football game (several, in fact) on a carrier flightdeck, with another dozen or so basketball contests underway on the hangar decks, you'd be hard-pressed to play a decent game of snooker on a gunboat. Besides that, the table, players, cues, etc., would probably be tossed into the briny deep.

Going to sea on a gunboat which is 23 feet wide and 165 feet long, can be likened to going to sea on a ping pong ball. The boat only weighs 270 tons (soaking wet!). Don't think the ocean doesn't know that. After the first day out, I was convinced that the sea has "this thing" for PGs.

First day out wasn't exactly a tourist's delight. I saw the hazy maze of piping above my bunk, the water rushing by as I leaned over the side, the blurred images of people moving out of my way as I bounced from side to side down the passageway, and the piping above my bunk. Nice day!

Second day dawns bright and spectacular. Sealegs having returned, "The Old Salt" casually saunters (less-bounce) down a somewhat familiar passageway to breakfast. Later, out on the fantail, "Salt" relates tales of old to spell-bound (?) audience while clutching tightly to stanchion to keep from being-tossed-overboard by the sea who knows the truth.

Also on the second day around noontime we visited the first island, Alamagan, which is located approximately 260 miles north of Guam. Later that afternoon we visited the island of Pagan where both gunboats anchored for the night before making our way still further north to Agrihan, the last island visited.

Naturally, I was in the first raft to be put into the water for each trip ashore. Had I not been in the first boat load, it is certain that I would have been the lead swimmer in a wild dash for shore. One thing I had not counted on, however, is that once you've become accustomed (if that's possible) to riding the waves on a PG, the feeling of being tossed about constantly remains with you for some time. During our brief visits to all three islands, I had the distinct impression that the entire land mass was about to get underway.

Because of their extreme remoteness and lack of regularly scheduled transportation, the islands of Northern Marianas have few visitors. As a result, we found ourselves a bit of a curiosity, particularly to the children, who, at first, maintained a respectable distance, peering shyly from behind their parents or around trees at us.

However, it didn't take them long to warm up to us, especially when you introduce two friendly, outgoing individuals like HMI Bill (Doc) Belgard, Welch's corpsman, and GMGSN Ken (Lew) Llewellyn, to them. As we walked along a palm-tree-lined jungle pathway leading to a small cluster of houses on a hill overlooking the beach, the smiling, happy children rushed about in a game of tag, caught up in the spirit of our visit.

Both Doc and Lew immediately set about the task of winning the favor of the children. Lew, dressed in bermudas and island shirt, dug down into his mail bag filled with candy and began distributing it to the children as they inched within reaching distance.

Meanwhile, Doc chatted with the village leader to determine if there were any special medical problems which needed his attention. Although there were no specific problems, he later held an impromptu "sick call" for the villagers. Doc's "gimmick" for the children was to offer them an opportunity to listen to their own heartbeats; however, he maintained a "Me first" policy which gave him the chance of checking each child before they could hear their own hearts.

While Lew continued to hand out candy and Doc held the informal medical exams, other Welch and Tacoma crewmen delivered items of used clothing and community relations materials such as household items, including pots, pans, etc., tools and school supplies, to the village center. Other sailors set up a volleyball set and began playing, later to be joined by some of the village children.

On each island visited one of the senior PG officers, usually the commanding officer or executive officer, would come ashore to talk to the chief about the needs and to determine if there was anything that he or his crew could do for the islanders during their brief stay. Also during this time, an informal census, which revealed less than 130 residents on the three islands, was conducted.

Within a very short time after departure from Alamagan the island of Pagan became visible on the horizon. As we neared the island the stark contrast between Mt. Pagan, an 1,850-foot active volcano, and the lush, green mountains and black sand beaches became apparent. Once ashore Doc was immediately alerted to a medical emergency.

He set about examining a 45-year-old man, but was unable to come up with a firm diagnosis, although he knew the situation was serious. After consulting with his skipper and holding a radio consultation with Tacoma's corpsman, HM2 Dave Doyle, it was decided to notify the district medical officer on Saipan. The following day, while we were on the island of Agrihan, it was learned that the man had been air-evacuated from the island. Still later, Doc learned that the man had a gall stone operation.

Since the ships were to remain at overnight anchorage near Pagan, the two crews teamed up to provide the island residents with some special entertainment in the form of a movie.

Welch contributed the film, while Tacoma added the projector. Although there was only a handful of people visible when we first reached the island, according to Lt. James R. Tinsley, III, Welch skipper, all but three of the island's residents turned out for the special screening.

The following day on Agrihan—another richly green island which boasts a huge black sand beach—things began as usual. After our gear was delivered by a carabao-powered cart to the village Doc again held his medical exams, Lew distributed candy and gifts and other PG crewmen handed out the community relations articles and clothing.

But the day had in store several treats, which brought a fitting end to a now-pleasurable journey north. For the islanders, there was five gallons of ice cream, donated by Tacoma. And for the visitors there was a tuba toast by the village men and, later, a chance to swim with some of the children before returning to the ship and turning homeward.

One thing you learn about PG sailors is that they're a special breed of cat. They're a fiercely proud, tightly-knit group of men who really pull together and will go out of their way to help their fellow man. They may talk about the rough-riding characteristics of PGs as a whole or life at sea and chicken regs in general, but they all exhibit a special pride in that 23x165-foot ship they call home.



THERE IS LITTLE doubt about the abundant pride this grandfather has for the child he is holding on his knee. Both are residents of Agrihan, a tiny island located approximately 330 miles north of Guam in the Northern Marianas District.



A LONE SAILOR aboard the patrol gunboat USS Welch scans the horizon during a four-day goodwill/training junket to the Northern Marianas islands of Alamagan, Pagan and Agrihan. The two-ship unit, headed by USS Tacoma, distributed used clothing, medical and recreational supplies among the small populations on the islands.

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