

The Marianas: America's Tiniest Minority

BY WORTH GATEWOOD

THE UNITED STATES is soon to acquire its first new territory in half a century, a chain of Pacific islands so remote that they lie 8,867 miles, 24 hours in flying time and \$1,100 in air fare, round trip, from New York City.

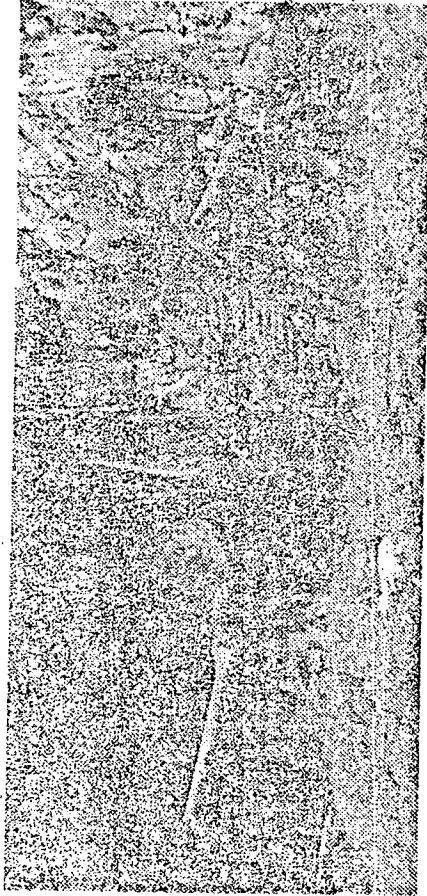
These are the northern Marianas, 4,000 miles of open ocean west from Hawaii, whose 14,000 people voted overwhelmingly last week for commonwealth status with the U.S., a relationship identical to that of Puerto Rico's. The approval of Congress is required, but this seems a certainty.

A New Minority

With the islands, the U.S. also will acquire a new and rather exotic minority: the Chamorros, as the natives are called, a brown, wiry and unflappable band of Micronesians who have survived the overlordship of the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese and the Americans, in that order, with only surface damage to their way of life.

Like other peoples of the vast Pacific, the Chamorros are remarkable for their good-humored indifference to all things in life, good or bad. One of them, the genial proprietor of an open-air restaurant, explained to a visitor why the french fries had been scratched from the establishment's one-meal menu:

"I went down to the boat today," he said, "but no potatoes got off."



Rusting guns still guard a Japanese fort on Saipan

The principal island of the Marianas is Guam, a U.S. territory since the Spanish-American War. Now a bustling Pacific crossroads and the Miami Beach (and far lovelier) of Japanese honeymooners, Guam will remain a territory, and not a part of the commonwealth, unless the Guamanians clamor for similar status.

The rest of the chain has been dozing in the seasonless sun — largely neglected, some Chamorros say — since the U.S. took over its stewardship 30 years ago as a part of the United Nations-mandated Trust Territory of the Pacific. Its headquarters is Saipan, where in

June-July, 1944, marines of the 2d and 4th divisions and soldiers of the 27th Infantry Division prevailed in a savage 30-day battle that cost them 3,144 dead and 10,952 wounded. All but a handful of the 30,000 Japanese were killed.

Under the Japanese, who took it in World War I from Germany, which had bought it from Spain in 1899, Saipan and its neighboring island, Tinian, were energetically cultivated (sugar cane, pineapple, bananas, copra) and became a profitable outpost of empire.

(About all that remains of the Japanese presence today is the bullet-holed statue of an early-day tycoon who de-

veloped Saipan, and a bunch of rusting guns and tanks.)

Economically, the northern Marianas will be of little or no value to the U.S. Their importance is military. With the U.S. under pressure to vacate Okinawa and the Philippines, the Marianas offer a secure base, likely on Tinian, from where the Enola Gay took off to bomb Hiroshima in August, 1945.

For the Chamorros, commonwealth status provides U. S. citizenship and the bounty of the Federal Treasury from aid to education through welfare. Plus taxes and, of course, progress, which has already brought the South Seas of Joseph Conrad and Jack London such blessings as littered beaches, the din of motor bikes, and pollution.

Nonetheless, not even progress can totally destroy the breathtaking beauty of the Pacific islands, and the thrice-weekly Air Micronesia (Air Mike, it is called) flight westward from Honolulu is an unforgettable experience.

An island-hopping journey of 4,000 miles in 18 hours, all in daylight (the landing strips are rather primitive even today), Air Mike carries the traveler to such romantically beguiling places as Majuro, Kwajalein, Ponape and Truk, with, perhaps, a Singapore gin sling, served with a swizzle stick of fresh pineapple, at the end.

And where else in the world, thanks to the international dateline, can you leave one day and get there the day before?

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