
TWELVE**An Hour In Paradise**

Shortly after we'd departed McChord, my weariness caught up and I'd dozed off. Suddenly, I was awakened by the sound of the pilot's voice over the intercom.

"Gentlemen, in just a few minutes we'll be landing on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. We'll only be spending about an hour for refueling and preparations for the next leg of our flight, so please remain within the airport area. Thank you."

I'd seen Hawaii in movies and on post cards, and my father had often mentioned being there during World War II, when he was in the Navy, but I must admit that I was totally unprepared for the real beauty of the place.

Even though we had to stay within the confines of the airport, it was easy to see why Hawaii was considered a paradise. Just a short distance away, down a gorgeous, white sandy beach, rose majestic Diamond Head. Its sheer cliffs looked as if an artist had painted them against the deep blue of the clear sky.

Even the airport itself was incredible. There were walks that ran all through it. Every so often, they crossed over small, oriental foot bridges with pools of water under them. In those pools swam all varieties of brightly colored tropical fish.

And then there was the climate. Only hours ago we'd stood shivering in the dawn at McChord in Washington State. Now we were basking in the glow of a clear Hawaiian morning. The temperature

would have been uncomfortably hot but for the fact that it was balanced by a cool breeze coming in off the Pacific. You couldn't ask for a more pleasant atmosphere. If there was ever a place where I'd like to spend a lot of time, this was it.

Strolling through the terminal building and its connecting walkways, I was amazed by the number of military people passing through this airport. They were either coming for or leaving from R & R (Rest & Relaxation).

R & R was the military's way of providing the soldier with a break from the war. It was operated as a certain number of allotments that came down monthly for each of a dozen or so different locations. Once a man had spent at least eight months in-country, he could put in for one of the allotments.

Most of the places were in the Far East, like Tokyo and Yokohama in Japan, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, and Manila in the Philippines. But there were two that far outstripped all the others in popularity. They were Australia and Hawaii.

Both had something in common. The women were Caucasian rather than Asian and spoke unbroken English. It must be remembered that the majority of unmarried nineteen and twenty-year-olds had grown up and socially interacted with American girls for their entire lives, short as that might be. Having spent nearly a year among an Asian people, most of whom spoke little or no English, they craved the sight of a round-eyed girl. Personally, I think it had more to do with the lack of verbal communication than physical appearance, simply because there were so many extraordinarily beautiful Asian women.

When I was in-country for some time, I'd hear the same stories we all got from men who'd come back from Australia. They said that the average Australian male made a relatively modest income, at

least in comparison to the horse-choking wad that American GIs were ready to party away in a week. What this meant was that a lot of the young, available women gravitated toward the visiting Americans for a big-bucks good time. Naturally, that didn't always make for the greatest of relations between American and Australian men, especially since we often heard that the American could have two beautiful blondes, one on each arm, for an entire week. Need more be said for its incredible popularity as an R & R location?

Hawaii, on the other hand, had more appeal to married men because it was financially easier to have their wives join them there. Because of that, they were given priority over single guys when the Hawaiian allotments came down.

Thus the necessity for the allotment system. If everyone was allowed to choose wherever they wanted to go, those two places would have been swamped with American soldiers.

When they filled out the application for R & R, each man had to choose a first, second and third preference, subject to availability. If there were no allotments for his first two choices, usually Australia and Hawaii, he'd be sent to his third pick.

Unhappily, the hour seemed over before it had begun and we boarded the plane again.

As we lifted off, we were given a final spectacular look at this beautiful island. Our plane wasn't more than a thousand feet up when it passed over the beach and headed out toward the ocean. I could see hundreds of bathers and sun worshippers spread out on the pure white sand and was amazed at the color and clarity of the ocean for a good distance off shore.

Looking down into the various greens and aquamarines of that crystal-clear water and seeing where the browns and tans of the ocean floor eventually faded into the depths farther out, was like looking into a giant aquarium with all its glorious colors.

In no time at all the island was far below and behind us. Hour after hour our jet raced along, yet there was never anything for as far as anyone could see, to any horizon, but greenish-gray ocean.

Occasionally, I'd spot the wake of a ship down there, looking like a tiny white brush stroke on an immense artist's canvas. Staring down at one of those lonely, floating outposts of humanity made me realize something that I had never fully comprehended before.

From my days back in grammar school, I could recall reading how ships sailing the Pacific during World War II would occasionally lose their way. It had mystified me how anything as large as an ocean going ship could possibly get lost anywhere. Now I could clearly see that the mystification was due to my own misconception about relative sizes. The only times I'd ever seen the Pacific Ocean were on globes or maps of the world, where I could span the entire width of the Pacific between the tips of my thumb and little finger. Of course, I knew that any ocean is big, but what is "big" when you haven't really seen it? The plane I was on now would race across the sky at around 400 miles an hour for more than sixteen hours, and yet there wouldn't be anything below for all that time but water. That's *big!*

I felt that if nothing else good came out of this experience, I'd be thankful to have had the opportunity to see this awesome spectacle first hand, even if the circumstances left something to be desired.

Around noon the stewardesses served lunch, after which there wasn't much to do but sit back and relax. Still not having caught up on the sleep I'd missed from the tension of the past couple of days, I dozed off once more.