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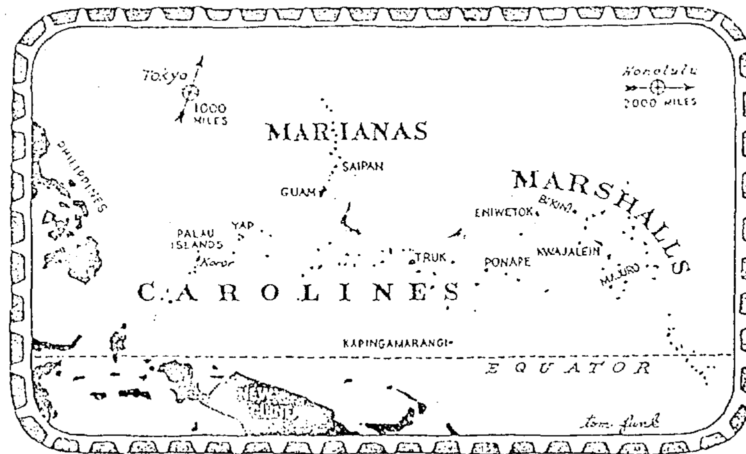
A REPORTER AT LARGE

MICRONESIA REVISITED



UPON my return, after an absence of more than five years, to the vast, alluring, troubling, and politically complex stretch of Pacific islands just north of the equator commonly called Micronesia, I stopped in at the high school in Koror, the principal municipality of the Administrative District of Palau, in the West Carolines. Although it was mid-morning, the hands of an electric clock on a classroom wall stood at two-fifteen. "It's running, all right," the teacher said. "But in the last three months it's gone forward only three hours. Oh, well, things may still move slowly out here, but at least, for a change, they're moving." During the last quarter of a century, Micronesia has given the United States a rare opportunity to practice enlightened colonialism, but many of the region's people think that the American record has been disappointing—much promise, little performance. I had come back to get some idea of the changes since my last visit, in 1965, and I found certain aspects of Micronesia discouragingly static. On Yap, I ran into the bishop-designate of the Vicariate of the Caroline and Marshall Islands. He had just come from Majuro, the administrative hub of the Marshalls, where there had perennially been, and still was, a grievous water shortage. In order to wash at the hotel there, he told me, he and the other guests had had to form a bucket brigade. At Truk, I ran into the retiring bishop, and he said that the dirt road from the district center to his diocesan headquarters was as bad as I remembered it. "A woman drove out to visit me a few weeks ago and complained that she'd had a terribly jolting ride, and I was delighted to learn that her husband was in Public Works," he said. "Maybe that means the road will get fixed one of these years." (Several months later, I heard that some work had been done on it—a tribute, perhaps, to the efficacy of prayer.) In all the two thousand-odd islands of Micronesia, there are not much more than five hundred miles of roads of any kind, and outside Saipan, the administrative seat of the whole area, there have been very few roads paved since the Second World War. Nonetheless, one of the most visible marks of Americanization is the automobile, which, in this largely watery expanse, has proliferated as wildly as the tangantangan bush. In 1965, there were a thousand cars in Micronesia. Now the number has more than quadrupled. The tiny island of Ebeye, part of the Kwajalein Atoll, in the Marshalls, has only two miles of roads and can easily be traversed on foot, but at a recent count there were two hundred cars there, for twenty-seven hundred residents. On some of the islands, car owners, having no paved roads on which to test their vehicles, use airstrips. Micronesia, in many respects a backwater of the globe, may rank first in head-on crashes on airport runways.

UNDER the formal name of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, three million square miles of Micronesia have been the responsibility of the United States, acting on behalf of the United Nations, since 1947. The U.N. directive for the area instructs the United States to "promote the development of the inhabitants of the Trust Territory toward self-government or independence." Among the steps that the United States has taken to carry out its mission in recent years has been the injection into Micronesia of massive doses of Peace Corps volunteers. Since 1966, the hundred thousand inhabitants of the Trust Territory's six Administrative Districts have played host to almost three thousand Peace Corps volunteers, of whom nearly three hundred are there today. Nowhere else has the Peace Corps been deployed in greater concentration with relation to the host population. If over the last five years Peace Corpsmen had gone to India in the same proportion to that country's population, they would have been seventeen and a half million strong.

Not since Magellan's day has Micronesia been ruled by any of its permanent inhabitants—mostly Chamorros, Palauans, Yapese, Trukese, Ponapeans, and Marshallese. Between 1521 and 1944, the area was occupied, successively, by Spain, Germany, and Japan, which took over by force in 1914 and was evicted the same way thirty years later. Guam, which lies within the geographical bounds of Micronesia but has been a United States territory since the Spanish-American War, is in the Mariana Islands, as is Saipan, thirty minutes away by air. Just after takeoff from Saipan, one usually flies over Tinian, from which were launched the B-29s that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The first B-52s to bomb North Vietnam were launched from Guam. Since the Second World War, our Department of Defense has looked upon Micronesia as an area that, regardless of what the United States might aspire to use it for, should under no preventable circumstances again be fortified by any other nation. In deference to that concern, the United Nations, at the outset, conferred on the Trust Territory a peculiar status: it is a Strategic Trust Territory—the only one in history. What this means, in effect, is that until the trust is terminated the United States has the right to use the islands for military purposes. Except in the Marshalls—at Kwajalein, Bikini, and Eniwetok—there has been no consequential American military presence, but still we retain our options. Some of the natives, most notably some of the fifty thousand who live on small islands outside the Territory's district centers, find it hard to grasp the strategic implications of the trusteeship. For one thing, in several of their ten or so distinctive languages there is no word for "strategic." Interpreters who try to render it into Palauan or Yapese come up with something nearly synonymous with "sly." Sophisticated Micronesians who do understand the nature of a strategic trust derive no comfort from their com-

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prehension, however. "I can see how our land might be important to your Defense people in the case of actual war," one Ponapean politician told me. "But I don't see why you should have unlimited access to it just because something might happen." In the fall of 1969, General Lewis Walt, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited Micronesia, hoping to select some acreage that, if its proprietors concurred, could be used as a training area; because United States relations with Okinawa and the Philippines, already somewhat frayed, might unravel further, the General knew such an area might be needed. A large and thinly settled Palauan island called Babelthuap looked promising, and for a while negotiations to lease a portion of it seemed to be proceeding nicely. But just as the General thought everything was almost arranged, the district legislature of Palau passed a resolution declaring that the Marines would not be welcome. The blame for the turndown was at first wrongly assigned to a Peace Corps lawyer then in residence; a colonel in Walt's entourage had heard the lawyer denounce the war in Vietnam, and that made him suspect in Marine eyes. The actual reason was that the Palauans whose land would have been taken weren't satisfied with the proposed rental terms. Above all else, Micronesians prize what little soil they have, and when it comes to the disposition of it, as one recent Trust Territory report has stated, "controversy is rife and ubiquitous." Americans in Micronesia—who are not permitted to own land, but who, in a few instances, have wangled a foothold there by adopting Micronesian children and buying property in their names—have been trying for nearly twenty-five years to determine just who has title to what. Not long ago, the administration of the Trust Territory embarked on a land survey. It was a formidable undertaking; there are, in all the Trust Territory, just four hundred and forty-eight thousand acres, and even though sixty per cent of that total has been proclaimed public land, an estimated four hundred thousand small private parcels remain, many of them belonging communally to families or clans. The whole Yap District has only twenty-nine thousand four hundred acres and seven thousand inhabitants, but its knowledgeable old chiefs have estimated that it has two hundred thousand parcels of land. Most of the claims that Micronesians have lodged against their occupiers in this century have dealt with the use, or misuse, of their land. Inasmuch as the United States and Japan fought each other in Micronesia on land and for land that neither nation owned, Micronesians understandably hold both countries accountable for damage to it. Only the year before last, after interminable negotiations, the two countries finally consented to make an *ex-gratia* payment—a payment, that is, involving no admission of guilt about anything—of ten million dollars. Japan seemingly had the better of the bargain: The United States promised to pay the entire sum in cash, and to collect Japan's share at some unspecified date in the vague form of goods and services. (The United States Congress authorized an additional twenty million dollars to pay Micronesians for damage done *after* the American takeover, but just how and when and to whom this money is to be paid remains uncertain.) Japan was also granted a concession: Theretofore, ships flying its flag were forbidden to put into Trust Territory ports except in emergencies; when their share has been paid they will be able to sail into the harbors of Palau and Truk for provisioning. Some Japanese had already availed themselves of other Micronesian harbors as used-ship dumps. Some months back, a decrepit Japanese fishing boat, after deftly snaking its way through the tricky channel that leads into Kolonia, the capital of Ponape, ran hard aground a short distance from the airstrip. The crew nonchalantly stepped ashore and, a few minutes later, boarded an accompanying boat and steamed away. No attempt was made to salvage the abandoned ship, and around Kolonia the guess is that while the Ponapeans are holding the broken vessel some Japanese insurance company is holding the bag.

WHEN I was first in Micronesia, people who were supposed to know told me that the islanders might be ready to exercise their right of self-determination in 1969. Now the most optimistic date one hears is 1972, but hardly anyone considers it realistic. Despite our Defense Department's interest in the Trust Territory, it comes under the legal jurisdiction of our Department of the Interior, and in the spring of 1969 Secretary Walter Hickel, in the course of a visit, proposed that Micronesia enter into "a permanent partnership" with the United States. That upset those Micronesians who favor independence, and who like to draw what they regard as meaningful parallels between two kinds of dogs—one fat and sleek but on a leash, the other mangy and scrawny but free. Micronesians are fond of such analogies. "If we got independence in the foreseeable future," a much travelled one told me, "it would be like sending a six-year-old child to New York alone." But when it comes to the future there are complications within complications. Many Saipanese, for example, want to pull out of the Trust Territory completely so that they may join their Chamorro cousins on Guam in an expanded United States Territory. In March, 1971, the Marianas District legislature voted unanimously to secede from the Trust Territory, "by force of arms, if necessary," but nobody has yet tried to implement the resolution. Earlier, Saipan had held a referendum and voted to affiliate with Guam. The only trouble was that Guam, which cherishes its distinctiveness in the region, forthwith held a referendum of its own and voted against union. In 1969, the Congress of Micronesia, a bicameral legislature embracing the entire Trust Territory, which began functioning in 1965, chose from its ranks a Future Political Status Commission to look into the question of Micronesia's political destiny. After inspecting, among other areas, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, the commission recommended that Micronesia eventually become "a self-governing state in free association with the United States." No one spelled out exactly what that meant. There followed several lengthy meetings between the commission and representatives of the Nixon Administration, the upshot of which was that in the summer of 1970 the United States urged Micronesia to adopt the status of a commonwealth. The Congress of Micronesia rejected this as unacceptable, and there has been a stalemate ever since. The upshot of the most recent round of talks, held in Hawaii this past October, was to decide to hold more talks. The United States is certainly in no hurry to rock this particular boat, and Washington has too many other things on its mind to give a high priority to the problems of Saipan. Walter Hickel has quoted Henry Kissinger as saying, slightly inaccurately, "There are only ninety thousand people out there. Who gives a damn?" So life drifts along out there, and the dog strains at the leash.

The Congress of Micronesia normally meets every summer. It is a legislature notably different from the United States Congress in that among its members there was until this last session not a single lawyer. (There are only three Micronesian lawyers anywhere.) Made up of businessmen and tribal

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Americans to underdeveloped areas to provide American skills and to demonstrate America's compassion for the less favored peoples of the earth. Micronesia is the only place in the world *run* by Americans to which the Peace Corps has been dispatched. The Corpsmen, then, are part of the government by background and culture, but at the same time they are detached from it and—in keeping with the present attitude of young Americans toward vested authority—often disenchanted with it. When a Micronesian high-school student wrote, "We find that the United States leads us in the right way," his Peace Corps teacher scribbled on the margin, "Are you sure?" When another student wrote, "Palau has beautiful things and big trucks and cars," *his* Peace Corps teacher queried, "Why are trucks and cars beautiful?" Before the Peace Corps arrived, most Micronesian youngsters attending a Western movie tended to root for the cowboys; Corpsmen have been trying to convince them that their sympathies should more logically belong with the Indians. The majority of the volunteers have had a decidedly beneficial effect on the region. Some of them, perhaps slightly misled by recruiting literature, thought they were going to a tranquil, palmy paradise and brought surfboards along. They have all had one indisputable edge on the other Americans in the region: it is part of their training to acquire a working knowledge of the language of the area to which they are assigned, so each of them speaks Palauan, Yapese, or whatever. More of them have been stationed on remote outer islands—where provisions and mail may arrive only every few months—than any other Americans have ever been. Wherever the volunteers have stayed, they have lived—far from idyllically, by Western standards—as the Micronesians live, often sharing native homes and subsisting largely on rice and fish; among many of the Corpsmen it is considered a badge of honor to have intestinal parasites. Several volunteers have married Micronesians and have gone native to an extent undreamed of by much of the local population. With the combined advent of the Peace Corps and the Congress of Micronesia, there has come to the area what one American who has been there a long time calls "the era of criticism and challenge." This may be the greatest recent change in Micronesia. One finds indications of it everywhere. The traditional native rulers of the Marshall Islands, for instance, are highborn chiefs called *iroij*. The Trust Territory administration has always courted the good will of the *iroij*, who can be stubborn but can also serve as useful middlemen between the government and the people. The Peace Corpsmen, though, have been openly questioning whether an autocratic leadership system can coexist with democracy, and the effect of their skepticism was evident in a Majuro bar one night recently when a young Marshallese said something that would have been publicly unutterable five years ago. He said, "The hell with the *iroij!*"

Some of the most diligent Peace Corpsmen find their own success unsettling. "The trouble with our being here under an American administration is that the more we're accepted the more palatable *all* Americans become," one of them told me. "So the better a volunteer one is the more one does to lay the groundwork for a less admirable American presence." The virtual vow of poverty that the volunteers take when they sign up doesn't bother them much in most countries where the Corps has operated. In Micronesia, though, Corpsmen sometimes find themselves working alongside Americans who are doing the same jobs for comparatively princely pay. Moreover, the Trust Territory administration, which is constantly squeezed for funds, has on a few occasions simply used Peace Corps volunteers to fill job openings that were budgeted at a high salary, and spent the savings elsewhere. It is a situation that puts altruism to a severe test.

There have been Peace Corpsmen of all sorts in Micronesia: lawyers, doctors, architects, business specialists, botanists—one of the last making a survey of medicinal plants, another studying the ecology of mangrove swamps. In the Marshalls, where many of the women are stout, especially those who have had seven or eight children, women volunteers have conducted reducing classes; the shy natives insist that these be held behind drawn curtains, lest the men scoff at them while they grunt and strain in pursuit of the svelte American dream. In 1969, on the initiative of Peace Corpsmen, the first MicrOlympic Games were held, on Saipan. It was an event that did as much to bind the diffuse area together as anything since the inception of the Congress of Micronesia. The individual star was a Ponapean distance runner, who won four gold medals, including one for the 6.2-mile race, despite casual pauses between laps for puffs on spectators' cigarettes. His proud compatriots sent him to a winter marathon in

Japan, but his redoubtable lungs could not cope with the cold there; trying to race after a brief hospitalization for a respiratory ailment, he collapsed after two hundred yards. One of the featured competitions of the MicrOlympics was the Micronesian All-Around, a local variation on the decathlon, with contests in spearfishing, underwater swimming, and coconut-tree climbing. The cancellation of the next MicrOlympics, which had been set for the summer of 1971, on Koror, was a bitter disappointment to the prospective Palauan hosts, who had hoped to add to the roster of events blowgun-shooting and war-canoe racing.

Some of the things that the Peace Corpsmen have been doing in Micronesia are what any Americans could have done twenty-five years ago. The Japanese built a seventy-mile road all the way around Ponape, but the island gets heavy rains—there is an average annual fall of three hundred inches in the interior—and by 1945 the bridges and culverts were in such disrepair that the Ponapeans had to use boats to get from one part of the island to another. This situation continued for twenty-two years. In 1967, a handful of Corpsmen, among them a scientist named Wayne Judd, who had had some experience in construction, persuaded the Ponape District legislature to appropriate sixteen hundred and five dollars for road repairs. In three months, the Corpsmen, employing local labor, built three bridges and seven culverts. When Judd finished his Peace Corps stint, he went to Hawaii for a year, and then returned to become head of an organization called the Ponape Transportation Board. Now known simply as P.T.B., it is a contracting agency controlled by Micronesians. It has a staff of twenty-five, and half a million dollars' worth of construction projects under way or recently completed—among the latter a post office that after hours serves as a social center for young people. Most of the P.T.B.'s energies have been concentrated, however, on undertakings outside the district center, where the majority of the Americans live. "Our work is for the people, and not to support the American base of operations," Judd told me.

Most of the Peace Corps volunteers in Micronesia have been engaged in teaching, often in a program called Teaching English as a Second Language. In an area with so many different tongues, it will make sense to have a lingua franca if self-government is attained. Some of the Americans, though, have apparently tended to think

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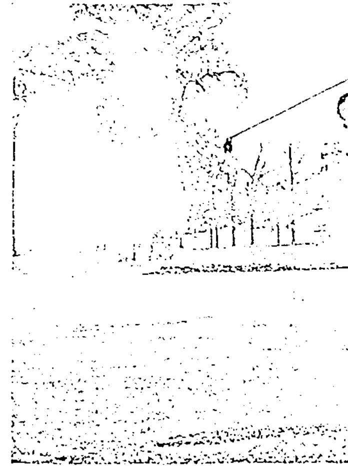

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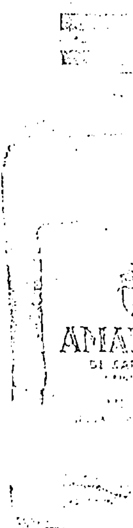

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that I know anyone—but I'll still be hauling water by the bucket."

The judges in Micronesia arrange their court sittings to tie in with air schedules. The judges have to make the most of their time; in Micronesia, as on any American turf these days, crime is rampant. After assisting at his third autopsy in four weeks on a person either shot or speared to death, a Peace Corps doctor wrote to the *Didil a Chais*, "Why does the society condone these acts of violence? . . . Is there any movement afoot to change this aspect of your society, or is the free use of violence so essential to your culture that it cannot be controlled without destroying the culture?" (He also wrote that he thought it unfair to the local hospitals for Palauans to come to short-staffed emergency rooms after holidays to have hangovers treated.) The most celebrated act of violence to date was a murder committed by an American—the first ever to stand trial for a major crime in a Trust Territory court. He was a tourist of sorts, the twenty-two-year-old scapegrace owner of a powerboat, which is still roosting on a reef of the unpopulated Oroluk Atoll, in the Truk District. The young man had set off on a cruise *à trois* with an older American man and an amiable seventeen-year-old Filipino girl. After the boat ran aground and the two younger people were rescued, the body of their companion was found aboard, with a bullet in his head. The case had political significance. When word of the crime got around Truk, the natives assumed that since the alleged killer was an American, he would not be arrested, that if arrested he would not be charged, that if charged he would not be tried, if tried not convicted, and if convicted certainly not locked up in the Truk jail. (Micronesian prisons are so miserable that judges sometimes let miscreants go free just to spare them a stay behind bars.) The young American was arrested, charged, tried, found guilty of second-degree murder, and sentenced (by three judges, the two senior ones American) to twenty years in the Truk jail. His warders made one concession to his nationality: he was allowed a mattress to sleep on instead of a mat.

WHY bother, it is sometimes asked, in these days when there are so many pressing problems on earth, with people who for centuries have got along fairly well in a balmy climate with plenty of fish and taro and breadfruit and coconuts to eat—especially since there are only a hundred thousand of them? (Until recently, there were more people in jail in Indonesia than out of jail in Micronesia.) Well, the United States has both a legal and a moral obligation to bother; one cannot treat an adopted child like a statistic. For a long time, the administrators of Micronesia had to make do with what was, by American standards, a pittance. Even the current robust appropriation of sixty million dollars (six hundred dollars per Micronesian per annum) does not tell the whole financial story, for in addition to the Peace Corps, which has its own budget, Micronesia, thanks to an avuncular interest on the part of Hawaii's congressmen in Washington, has benefitted from several federal programs set up to help the sovereign states—Head Start, for instance, and the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Library Construction and Service Act, and the Manpower Development Act. Furthermore, as a result of a personal request that Secretary Hickel made of Secretary of Defense Laird, the Trust Territory recently enjoyed a high priority in obtaining millions of dollars' worth of Defense Department goods—jeeps, typewriters, rock crushers, diapers, and so on—that had been declared surplus and were on sale, in Okinawa, for about seven and a half per cent of their value. In the last couple of years, moreover, the Defense Department (with the Trust Territory in this instance footing most of the bill) has sent small contingents of Seabees and other military construction men to Micronesia. Calling themselves "civic-action teams," they have been doing their bit to spruce up the frequently dowdy area. On the island of Rota, which is one of the Marianas, some Seabees built a slaughterhouse, a merry-go-round, a schoolyard flagpole, and a community barbecue pit. Most Micronesians have welcomed and appreciated these gestures; a few, though, have wondered whether their benefactors may not be public-relations emissaries calculated to make the natives look kindly upon any subsequent Defense Department units that show up.

Over the years, there have been repeated complaints that, no matter how much money comes into Micronesia, too little of it is used to bolster the Trust Territory's limping economy. Micronesia may never become industrialized, but it has potentialities in agriculture and in fishing that have never been tapped. The Trust Territory could easily produce all the rice that its inhabitants consume, but, as things stand, it produces only eleven thousand dollars' worth and imports two million dollars' worth. High Commissioner Johnston, who at twelve was raising vegetables and selling them to the Piggly Wiggly chain in Honolulu, has been talking about starting up gardening projects in the elementary schools. "I'm not interested in high-level economic projection curves through 1980," he told me. "I'm interested in whether Mr. Billings' store succeeds, and in whether, as more and more tourists come here, there will be adequate dry-cleaning services. We've got to start at the bottom and do the little things first." Start, start, start—that is the eternal American chant in Micronesia. The Americans in charge five years ago were talking like that, too, and they had especially high hopes of inaugurating a boom in produce by means of a Farm Institute then functioning on Ponape, where prospective agriculturists were to be indoctrinated. The Institute was shut down in 1969, because eighty per cent of its graduates had taken office jobs.

In the matter of fishing, the story has been much the same. The waters of Micronesia teem with fish and shellfish; the people of Micronesia spend much of what little cash they have on canned fish. Mr. Johnston attended a conference in Hawaii in 1970 out of which evolved a new nonprofit corporation for the development of commercial fishing in all of America's Pacific islands. But will anything come of it? In 1964, the Van Camp Sea Food Company, of California, brought to Koror a small fleet of tuna boats manned by Okinawans. They were to be replaced by Palauans, it was said, as soon as enough of them could be trained. It is not hard to teach a man to fish for tuna, yet by late 1970 only thirty Palauans were thus employed. (A freezing plant ashore was manned by fifty-five Palauans.) Most Micronesians, when push comes to shove, would rather do anything than fish. A few years ago, a motion picture, "Hell in the Pacific," was shot on Koror. The production provided jobs for many Micronesians. That year, the value of the Trust Territory's fish exports—not counting Van Camp's catch—dropped from ninety-three thousand dollars to twenty-one thousand.

Around Micronesia today, nearly everyone, from the High Commissioner on down, looks upon tourism as the magic potion most likely to revitalize the economy. One local agent of a tiny organization grandly called Micronesia Tours, on being asked what bait he thought the area should dangle bef

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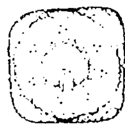
main street and replied that since the Trust Territory already condoned *sakau* drinking and betel-nut chewing, perhaps it could most dramatically appeal to tourists if the Congress of Micronesia passed a law legalizing marijuana. The Congress has not even considered that possibility, but tourists have been drifting in, drawn by wartime memories or by a belief, not without foundation, that, despite the presence of so many Americans for so many years, parts of Micronesia remain strikingly beautiful and comparatively unspoiled. In 1968, thirteen thousand tourists visited the Trust Territory, and in 1969 twenty thousand. Currently, they are coming at the rate of three thousand a month. Many of them are Japanese, and most of these go to Saipan after taking advantage of bargain air fares between Tokyo and Guam. (The nature of the recent transformation of Guam, once a cloistered enclave of the United States Navy, may be adduced from the names of two recently built hotels: the Fujita and the Tokyu. The career of a nisei American living on Guam, who a decade ago served as interpreter for two Japanese soldier stragglers captured in the jungle, has now come full circle: on behalf of the Guam Tourist Commission, he mans an airport information counter established as a convenience for Japanese visitors.) One of Saipan's fancier hotels, the fifty-four-room Royal Taga, which boasts air-conditioning and a swimming pool, is booked months in advance by Japanese businessmen and Japanese honeymooners. (There are now four hundred and thirty hotel rooms in all of the Trust Territory, with still more under construction.) On Saipan, there are few sights for tourists to see other than crumbling remnants of the war. The souvenir postcards on sale feature photographs not of beaches or palm trees or sunsets but of a ruined Japanese hospital, a rusty tank, and the Japanese jail where Amelia Earhart was said to have been held captive before she disappeared. Within the past couple of years, Japanese delegations to Saipan have unveiled two memorials to their war dead, one of them in a mountainous area called Marpi, which wasn't declared clear of live ammunition and opened to the public until October, 1968—twenty-four years after the last of thousands of Japanese soldiers and civilians, in despair over the United States conquest of their island, leaped to death from two promontories, which the Americans Banzai Cliff. Veterans of the Twentieth Air Force, which dropped the atomic bombs, have also been coming back for nostalgic reunions.

Many tourists are attracted to Micronesia by its coral reefs, which are of unexcelled variety and beauty. Recently, though, these have come under attack from a seaborne enemy—*Acanthaster planci*, the crown-of-thorns starfish. This predator is grisly in both looks and behavior. It can grow to two feet in diameter and can develop as many as twenty-one arms. Its back is coated with sharp, poisonous spines a couple of inches long, and to step on it is to risk infection and fever. The best first aid is to turn the creature on its back, place the affected part upon it, and let its own malign white stomach suck out the poison. With this stomach the starfish also engorges the living polyps that give coral its bright colors; where a herd of acanthasters has grazed, the devastated coral left behind is dead white. These starfish travel along the floor of the ocean, and they move almost three-quarters of a mile a month. They can stay alive for six months without eating, but when they eat they eat heartily: a big acanthaster can kill fifty years of coral growth in a night. A female can lay twenty-four million eggs at a clip. In normal times, most of these eggs are gobbled up as larvae by the very coral polyps they would consume if they lived to become adults, or they are kept in bounds by several species of shellfish—principally the triton. But something has happened, all the way from Australia to Hawaii, to upset the ecological balance—perhaps the blasting of coral in dredging operations, creating patches of dead coral, where larvae can safely settle; perhaps too much triton-hunting; perhaps the pollution by man of atoll lagoons, which has eliminated natural predators. In any event, the proliferation of acanthasters has caused one marine biologist who has studied the animal in Micronesia to say that it is "as potentially disastrous for the coral island as continuous forest fires are to a watershed," adding, "And the corals probably will require a longer time to recover than does a forest." The ugly creatures cannot be chopped to death: if you cut one into four pieces, you end up with four starfish. Short of assaulting them with hordes of shrimp or tritons—which might themselves get out of hand and cause further ecological mischief—the best method devised so far for coping with them is to have underwater divers inject them, one by one, with Formalin. In the last couple of years, this laborious hypodermic war has been waged throughout Micronesia. "People scoff at our worries about the acanthaster, but who has ever seen a phenomenon of this sort before?" Peter Wilson, the Trust Territory's chief fisheries man, said to me. "We may be witnessing a unique biological catastrophe. I don't think the reefs will collapse—which, of course, would mean the end of the atolls—but as long as the starfish multiply so fantastically we've got to try to stop them, if you assume a living reef to be preferable to a dead one." The island of Tinian has offered a ten-cent bounty per starfish, and the United States Congress has appropriated four and a half million dollars to fight the battle.



Many Micronesians, disagreeable as they consider the crown-of-thorns starfish to be, have been taking this new tribulation philosophically. They have survived frightful typhoons and frightening pestilences and occupation by four foreign nations; they suspect that they can also survive whatever the acanthaster may be up to at the moment. They point out that the creature itself isn't new; it was known to be in existence before the United States was. (Linnaeus described it in 1758.) Indeed, some Micronesians even profess to know how the puzzling acanthaster first came to their area. Once upon a time, it seems, in what are now the Marshall Islands, an *iroij* of Arno agreed to swap some of his fishing secrets for some of the navigational secrets of an *iroij* of Wotje. The Wotje man was deceitful and literally gave the Arno man a bum steer; he passed along some false navigational lore. Whereupon the enraged Arno *iroij*, pretending to teach his fellow-chief how to catch edible fish by calling them into his nets, taught him instead how to summon the crown-of-thorns. Thus the Wotje reef went dead. There are some older Micronesians today who believe that if discussions between the United States government and the Future Political Status Commission remain at an impasse, the traditional chiefs can get together and, provided they forswear such duplicity, use their unique powers to work out a suitable and sensible destiny for their people.

—E. J. Kahn, Jr.

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