

Going to Adak by Transport

Several buses roll up onto the dock to unload cargo--and I do mean cargo...that's just what we are, no matter how you look at it...cargo going to Adak, and that's that. Some are old vest at the game; others are just boots, but all human and all, just cargo. It gives you a hell of a funny feeling to realize that that's what you are. Some of us have manned other transports but not until now do we realize how our "loads" felt. To us they were just another load. To the men of this ship we are just another load and so this old world goes...where and why I've often wondered...it all seems so futile, but then that's another story.

The ship we board is the Henry Failing, reputed to be one of the cleanest of the transports, even though it is a liberty ship of war-time vintage. Most of us have heard this line before, and we expect some old beat-up scow, Henry proves to be an exception to the rule, it is clean and the troop compartments are not half as bad as we figured on. This is a hell of a big load off our minds.

They muster us like mad for a little while (what would the service be without the good old muster, here, there and everywhere) and decide we're all here. The muster didn't prove a damn thing anyway, and then, like a bunch of cattle, we stampeded for the troop hold. The sacks are five high and, as usual, I get the top one. It takes me about twenty minutes to convince some boot that it's warmer up there, and then I find out that he's no boot, but has more time in than I do. Soon another muster is called. No, Joe Gustoon isn't still in the bus...he went out for a short soda, because he's still a minor. (Even I find that hard to believe.)

The muster over with, we all rush like mad to get our gear. Carrying it down the ladder is too much trouble so everyone throws it down. One sweet looking thing tosses his gear with a big grin. It makes a hell of a crash as it hits the steel deck, then the odor of Schenley's antifreeze gently wafts up the ladder, and sweet thing's grin is gone. So are his spirits, and half of his clothes are nearly ruined. OH WELL, HELL!

Pretty soon a kid comes down with two seabag, a laundry bag, and a suitcase, and it's plain to see he just got out of boot camp and is starting on a great new adventure. The dope has enough gear for four men. Several more come tumbling down and then a fellow with only one sea bag and that only half full. He's an old timer...and what he ain't got he'll borrow and that won't be much. Naturally hers got his liquor in him...he knows what he's getting in for and he's started to forget it before it starts, He ain't so dumb after all.

Naturally, after the guys get most of their junk stowed away. we get hold of a couple of rebels and give the Civil War a quick going over. This happens every time a bunch of men get together for the first time. Why? You've got me. But I can assure you that Lee's surrender didn't end it. In fact, there are some schools of thought that say it's ready for a comeback 'cause Lee didn't surrender after all. But we've got a lot of time to finish it in, so we give up the war and go to chow.

When we get in the chow hall we see a few familiar faces. God, how they get those men on mess detail in such a hurry is beyond me. It's the only thing in the service that isn't connected with organized chaos and regimented confusion.

For our first chow they let us have some beat-up hot dogs and sauerkraut...this goes to prove that if the next chow isn't better it could be as bad as this. Then we think of the days we ate C and K rations and throw most of it away anyhow. Well, at least the coffee is good, and that's important. A little later on some of us go up on deck to get some air and watch Port Angeles go out of sight. From the Sound it is a very pretty sight... all lit up and sparkling, with a faint moonlight on the snow-capped hills behind it. To me it represented the last of civilization that we'd see for a long, and a little lump of "I wanna go home" rose in my throat. Of course this had to be squelched right away and I just hoped to hell this trip wouldn't be as long as the last one was. At least the war is over now (but for how many years) and you can sleep without wondering if you're going to wake up the next morning in six or seven pieces. December in Puget Sound isn't like New Guinea, so I take a last look at the States and go below. Besides, after seeing Port Angeles slip over the horizon I'm ready to talk and think on other subjects.

So help me! It's remarkable how those little stories come out. You know the kind, anywhere from two to twenty-five pages of very crudely typed sex, and I do mean sex. "Me next"... "Kin I have it after you?" .."Who's got it next?", then, in an hour or so it's "Nah, I saw that one, and it stinks", or "Read this one..it's a honey", or maybe, "My wife ought to read that!" "God, I wish I had a set-up like that" "Can I borrow it? I wanna make a copy", and so it goes for hours. Then... lights out.

In the dark it's a different place altogether--quiet conversation and low voices. The mood has changed--only one or two wisecracks. "What day was it?" "The 15th? Gee, I haven't written the folks in two weeks" "How long does it take to get to Adak?" "What the hell's up there?" "How many points you got?" " Christ, you're gettin' screwed!", and so on until it's like a tomb. It's the first time you've noticed the throbbing engines. Someone snores...the guy above you gets up to go to the head and puts his feet in your face both coining down and going up. The boot across lies awake, thinking of home, no doubt. Oh well, he missed the war anyway. The guy above is awake, he lies very still...he's praying. Then he rolls over and goes to sleep. Sure...you've shipped out before but still you feel sorta funny, kinda like a boot again. Hell, go to sleep, willya?

"Hey Mac! What the hell you doing still in the sack. Don't you know? Muster on deck, right now." You rush like hell to get into your dungarees and run like mad to get there. What the hell...the muster's over, and they didn't even know you weren't there. "No, dammit, you can't go below again" "Why?" "Because their cleanin' the compartment." So you mill around on deck, and freeze because you left your peacoat below in the rush to get to muster. DAMN MUSTERS!

Finally they let you go below again. It's a new day and. already time is starting to drag. Yesterday's over, and all congeniality has started to break into groups. One bunch is having a bull-session on the girls in Seattle, another on whether New York is a better liberty town than L.A. The intellectuals are on nuclear physics now, one bunch is just about to hit Normandy as another strikes Leyte for the sixth time. The Salerno boys already have the beach under control.

They tell some tales of narrow escapes, ones that were too narrow, and of friends lost. All the blood and gore is there, the confusion and excitement, only as a witness can remember it — vivid as the day it happened. Yet, take these same men in the presence of their loved ones or in a public place and try to get a story; it's like pumping water out of a dry well. Buddies understand, ordinary people just can't. There's a hell of a racket in one corner--two Rebels and two Yanks. This time it's "the war between the states." One Rebel is about six four or it would be a Civil war.

Chow time again, the mess cooks go in and eat first as the rest form a rather chaotic and noisy line. This time the chow is pretty fair. I guess those hot dogs were just left over from the last trip. We all eat standing up. No chairs or benches, this is done to keep idle chatter to a minimum and eating to a maximum, so others can get in and too. Soon after we are to have a movie.

The movie is shown in one of the empty cargo holds. It's shown with only one projector, so we get an intermission after every reel. There aren't enough benches to go around so half the audience sits on the deck, this greatly aides in the stepping on of hands and faces as twenty or thirty guys blunder their way out to the ship's service store during the change of reels. Only to step on you again in the dark when they rush in after the next reel has started.

With the show over it's back to the bull sessions and card games. One fellow has gotten hold of a guitar somewhere and a mess of fellows gang around and try to sing. 'Tis a sad affair but it breaks the monotony for a while. Later on we find a boy that can play the piano, and they have a pretty good sing song. During the day about forty guys tried to play the piano, but this kid was really good.

The following days are all about the same, with each one a little more monotonous than the one before. All at once about six guys start yelling "Land in sight!" Half the bunch don't give a damn and the rest walk all over each other trying to get up on deck to see it. The land is there alright but you can't see it for the fog. Once in a long time you get a quick glimpse but that's all, and it sure is a sad, barren place. One says "It's Adak!" Another claims "Hell, bud, don't you know the mainland when you see it?" When the noise has died down we get the "straight dope" from one of the ship's company. We are entering Unimak Straights, and still have two days to go to get to Adak. Early in the evening the fog clears a little and with the help of the moon we can see some more of the Aleutian Islands. Soon we will have seen to damn much of them. By now it's dark and several of us take great pleasure in lighting up a cigarette, something strictly agin the law during war time, and have a short talk in the moonlight, ultimately ending up with women as the topic of conversation. Women seem to be an unfailing topic of conversation.

Tomorrow at 0900 we get to Adak, the news is out with the new day. And we still don't know what's there, but we guess and pool our knowledge 'til we have a slight idea, the idea is weak but the subject is no longer of interest.

At noon chow a guy grabs your arm and asks you your name. He has a list of names and checks yours off. "God, they got me on a work detail for sure." You say to yourself, "Why the hell didn't I tell him I was John Smith?" Then he rams a carton of cigarettes in your hand and you go in and eat, wondering what it's all about. When you open the carton you find that it's a gift from General Motors Corp. and they hope you'll buy a car when you get out. So do I. But when the hell am I gonna get out? The air is blue with smoke, the butts a foot deep, and they're using cigarettes for poker chips. Both the piano and guitar are going, the din is terrific, everybody is talking and yelling, it sounds like New Year's Eve in Hades. We'll be there in the morning. One guy starts to pack.