

Chapter Nine

Philippines: March-April, 1938

“Gee, you know that it has been a week since I last wrote to you sweetheart; although it really makes no difference since no ship has left with mail since the last time I wrote. The next one leaves on March 9” (*March 5, 1938*).

In early spring, the USS Canopus spent most of its time between Manila, Marivales and Olongapo.¹ The local harbors were filled with many ships: ten British (“Limey”) ships plus three “state-side cruisers” which would remain for a couple of weeks. “So, all in all there is quite an Anglo-American fleet here; just asking for Japan to start something” (*March 5*).

Early Saturday afternoon, Herb has time to write a nice, long letter to Louise. First he describes the ship’s maintenance in drydock.

Last Monday we went up to Olongapo and entered the dry dock there. It’s a floating dry dock, and a very interesting “gadget.” It consists of two sides and a bottom all made of huge buoyant tanks. It is anchored in fairly deep water. The ship is slowly towed between the sides and held steady while they start pumping out the tanks of the drydock which then rises slowly under the ship. The tanks are pumped out until every bit of the ship and the surface of the deck on the bottom of the drydock are above water. The barnacles are scraped off the bottom by men on stages as the water goes down, or rather as the ship rises. After the bottom is scraped and dry, they put about four or five coats of paint on it during the course of three days. (March 5)

Herb enjoys writing letters to Louise, because it was as if they were having a conversation face to face.

Hello again honey! I left you rather suddenly as there was a small matter of supper to attend to. But now the day’s work is over and I can peacefully sit on my cot and write to my heart’s content without fear of interruption. However, in an hour I think that I’ll go up on deck and see the show. I’m not sure what the picture is but maybe it’s a good one. Anyhow I’ve all day tomorrow to write honey.

Did I ever tell you that I love you Louise? How do I know? My heart tells me I love you; my soul tells me so; my body; my memories; your letters; and your pictures! Everything tells me I love you and it’s a happy realization. It means that I’m the luckiest fellow in the world and I try to appreciate it as much as I possibly can.

¹ Manila is on the eastern shore of a large bay on the western side of the Philippine Islands. Across the bay, on the southern tip of the peninsula, is the city of Marivales. Further up the peninsula on the western side, on the South China Sea, inside Subic Bay, is the city of Olongapo.

And I know how much you love me. Its so wonderful. Whenever I realize this so strongly it means that I miss you and long for you all the more. Louise dear, someday we will make up for this. Every day will be filled with happiness and worth these long years of waiting. (March 5).

Herb writes about his plans to save up \$500 by the time they get married.

I feel that \$500 isn't very much to start out on, but since you say it is; that is all that matters. Now, as bits of that \$500 collect, I was wondering where it would be best for us to keep it. I wouldn't want to cart it around when I go back and possibly lost it, would I. Here is what I'd like to do. I'd like to send it to you in a safe way, about \$100 at a time; and you could deposit it in a bank in one of your nearby cities, or wherever you thought best. ... Now I've given you something to think about. ... Then in all the rush and excitement of my trip home I wouldn't have to worry about losing money. Then when I arrive there, before our marriage or honeymoon; we could draw the money as we needed it. You wouldn't mind a little responsibility darling, would you. (March 6).

This spring, quite innocently, Herb and Louise each began using nicknames that neither of them liked. Today Herb writes:

Just to show you how much power you have over me, I won't ever call you Lulu again. This is a truce. In return you must not call me little Herbie, or else! You know I don't think I'd have much trouble in spanking you. Let that be a warning to you, miss!"

(March 9)

In Louise's letter of December 13, she told Herb about one of her old high school friends, Milton. Now, Herb finally responds to what she shared.

So you think Milton won't come back? And if he does? Really, I wouldn't mind if you just went out with him. What is his fatal charm? Is he good looking? He must be a pretty good fellow since you once did go out with him. (March 9)

In the same letter he also obliges one of Louise's requests that he tell her more about some of the young ladies he referred to in his earlier letters.

Those girls who I told you about that I used to write to, or still write to occasionally are: Roberta in Wilmington; Barbara, in Tacoma; and Ann, in NYC. Three nice girls (not half as nice as you though, sweet). I never was a Casanova. I always seemed to meet good girls and just make a friend out of them. I used to admit that to my chagrin; now it's a rather contenting thought. I don't like these fellows who like to see how many young girls they can ruin by starting them out on the wrong track. (March 9).

Herb again tells Louise about the work he is doing, and what life is like on his ship.

I was painting again today. This ship is a madhouse if ever there was one. All account of that semi-annual inspection next Monday. It's enough to run a guy away. Fresh paint all over the ship; too much work to do; the chow is awful lately. Listen to me "singing the blues;" of course it really isn't quite that bad, but it's bad enough. Whew! But we will all be glad when next Monday is over. (March 9).

So ends another day between me and the end of mess-cooking on April 1st. Boy will I be glad when that time comes. I'd rather paint or shine brightwork all day long than mess cook. You must forgive me darling when my letters sound a little gloomy; it's the effect of this world's worst warship I'm on, the Canopus. I wish the darn thing would sink! (close to shore of course) (March 10).

The inspection they were all expecting was postponed for two weeks, which had the effect of increasing their anxiety levels. He tells Louise that "everyone's on edge" and he even got into an argument with a first class cook (but thought that he was in "the right"). "Tonight, I almost wrapped a plate over another mess cook's ears, I was so angry" (March 14).

Later that week he writes "The Canopus madhouse rolls crazily onward and another erratic day is completed" (March 18).

While at Olongapo, Herb and two others went ashore with cameras to the beach, and they trekked into the wilderness, following a river upstream. He writes with detail about this adventure.



I rated liberty today all day so this morning three of us put our dungarees on and brought our cameras along and went ashore at Olongapo and trekked into the wilderness. We started at the mouth of a small river and followed its banks inland. Everything was interesting, and if all the pictures we took turn out, we will have some good ones.

We had something of a trail to follow but the darn thing kept jumping from one side of the river to the other. The first time we crossed, we took off our shoes and rolled up our trousers and waded across. No sooner had we got across and gone on a little way, we had to cross back, so we just walked across regardless of anything but our cameras which we didn't want to get wet.

[At left is Herb's buddy Frank, alongside this river]

At intervals along the river banks there were bamboo huts, all looking the same, and always with a flock of chickens and half-wild dogs under them.

And down along the river, or lolling in it, would be the owner's water buffalo.



We'd be walking along quietly when there would be a loud crash and bellow in the brush and a water buffalo would run away.

Just so they didn't run at us, it was all right. A water buffalo or as they are called here, caribou, is a big animal about the size of a cow but their horns are more like an oxen's.

Gosh it was hot and after walking a mile or so we came to a small native farm. The owner had some cool watermelons in his shack and we bought two and ran into the nearest shady tree where we had a feast. You see that was around noon and we were hungry. Boy did they taste good! After making quick work of the melons, we reluctantly parted with our shady tree and continued our march.

[At right, Herb eating watermelon]



We surprised lots of natives who were in swimming. I guess that bathing suits haven't yet gotten this far yet. Here and there we would see an old woman walk down to the river with a basket of clothes on her head. She would pound them with a board while washing them. I guess it helped loosen up the dirt a bit, but it must be hard on their clothes.

Once we were going to take pictures of a couple of men riding caribous but they said "no like" so we didn't argue with them. They each wore a knife about two feet long, called a bolo. Huh, why argue with them?



We came upon a Filipino going our way, and for a while we walked and talked with him until we came to his shack. It looked as if it was about to fall down. He said soon he will build another.

He offered us some drinking water in a coconut shell. One fellow drank some but I wouldn't. We have been advised to drink no water ashore that has not been boiled. Its an easy way to pick up a tropical fever. We stood in the shade of his banana trees for a while, and decided to go on a little farther.

We came to a Filipino leaning over a fire. He was tempering his bolo. They put sharp edges on things so that they can cut trees, or anything else with them. We talked to him a while too. He roasted some nuts for us which tasted like chestnuts. The people here are usually quite friendly that way.

Well, we went on for another mile and after a rest, decided it was time to start back. With sand and mud in our shoes, and the sun beating down on our necks, it was getting uncomfortable. We came back the same way and there was that man still working on his knife. These people are a patient lot of mankind.

We asked him if he'd sell us some coconuts so he scampered to his grove and like a monkey was up a tree in a flash. He went zip, zip with his bolo and down came some coconuts. He also gave us some fruit that tasted like cotton. We asked him if we could take some pictures of his shack and he nodded his head. We took the pictures and his wife stuck her head out the window and got in them too.

When we got back to where we bought the watermelons on our way up, we naturally couldn't resist getting a couple more. The farmer let us climb up the bamboo ladder into his shack, where we rested a while. I guess that he was a bachelor. His shack was empty and deserted looking. He showed us a short cut back to Olongapo through a big wheat field and we were glad to take it. We saw a woman sweeping up wheat that she had beaten by hand. It must be pretty tiresome work.

We finally arrived back on the seashore; hot, dusty and weary, and we just about made it down to the Marine canteen, down by the rifle range. A Marine sergeant and his wife run it. There is a small marine station at Olongapo, you see. If ever a can of beer tasted good, it did then. A little later we caught a boat back to the ship. A shower felt mighty good, too! (March 20)

A few days later the Canopus heads back to Manila. By now Herb has grown tired of his work as a mess cook; he can't wait for a new assignment at the start of the next quarter. He is tense about his work and he writes "Tonight I almost wrapped a plate over another mess cook's ears, I was so angry" (March 24).

He writes that several of his buddies and he are looking forward to their "southern cruise" that begins next month. It will take them to several islands in the Dutch East Indies², purportedly some of the most beautiful in the world. These included Celebes, Bali, Java and Borneo. (March 30)

Herb got word that soon his assignment would change. To him, this means that his career with the Navy is finally getting off to the start that he had hoped for.

You know it sure seems good now to be able to eat breakfast, dinner or supper and then get up and leave the table instead of having to clean it up. Yep, I sure hated mess cooking. Now I'm looking forward to when I will be transferred to the 4th Division. That is the store-keepers division. Then I won't be a deck hand anymore and I'll be on my way to the best rate in this Navy. (April 3).

Responding to one of Louise's questions, Herb describes how he will be able to buy many interesting things for her while he is stationed here, such as exotic oriental perfume, dishes made from quaint pottery or chinaware, or vividly colored pajamas with dragons.

Thanks for sending me the sizes and some of the things that I should get while I'm out here. You see I'll get them as I go along during the next two years. I'll bring everything back with me when I come home.

Yesterday in Manila, I was walking down a narrow street lined with Chinese and Indian stores where they sold all kinds of cloth in every color and design under the sun, by the yard. I was wondering how many yards of cloth it takes to make a dress. I could pick up a few yards of different pretty material and bring it back with me. I'm also thinking of picking up some English woollens sometime, to get a suit made out of. (April 3).

² Now known as Indonesia.

Herb daydreams about a time that they might have a home large enough for a “real Oriental room in it; with everything in it from the Far East. Persian rugs and tapestries, Chinese furniture, ivory elephants, opium pipes, statues of Buddha and Confucius, cymbals, and what not” (April 3).

Herb fills his next letter with details of the target practice for the submarines assigned to the USS Canopus.

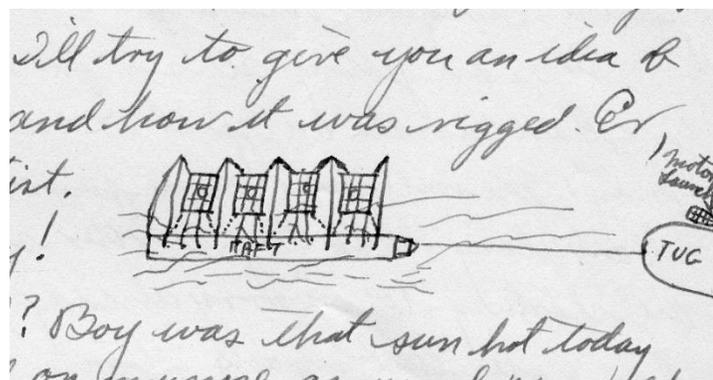
Tomorrow is going to be a busy day for me. The subs are going to fire their 4-inch guns at targets in what is known as short range battle practice. The targets, on a raft towed by a tug will be about 1500 yards away from the subs. The subs will fire shells at the targets which will probably tear them apart a lot and a bunch of us called a target repair party, will be in a motor launch towed behind the tug. During intervals between firing runs, we will run back to the raft and make hasty repairs on the targets. It will be lots of fun and exciting if the sea is a little rough. (April 6)

Next Herb writes about the different sizes of guns, shells, and gunpowder – and how they fired them. He tells Louise what it was like firing the 14-inch guns and the 5-inch guns on his former ship the USS Tennessee (a battleship). He actually had practice with the 5-inch guns.

Ugh! What a day! On the go steadily from 6 in the morning to 8 at night. All day long we were over on the Pigeon. The tug boat, towing the target raft, and at intervals between firing runs we would dash back to the raft in the motor launch, set up new targets, and repair the damage that the shells did. The raft was almost even with the water, so we waded around on it in water knee deep with big waves coming over and soaking us now and then. The raft was slippery too, and in places where shells would hit the raft and the framework on it instead of the targets, it would be all smashed up. We had to work fast too! We would patch up the splinters, hand down the used targets, and hoist up the new ones, all in a few minutes.

The raft had four targets on it, each 15 ft by 15 ft. I'll try to give you an idea of what the raft looks like and how it was rigged.

Boy was that sun hot today too. I got slightly sunburned, on my nose, as usual. We would just about get dried out after each trip, when it would be time to go back to the raft, for another dunking. But it's all in a day's work! (April 7).



Herb's sketch of the targets for submarine target practice

Herb still is trying to adjust to the tropical climate of the Philippines, and he writes:

It rained at least once a day for the last week now. It will rain every day at least for a few hours, for the next six months. When it isn't raining it will be suffocatingly hot. Maybe we will get a change of weather on our southern cruise but boy it's going to be plenty hot down around the equator in May. Will continue like that for the next six months. (April 8)

Herb reminisces about the last night he and Louise were together, last September 6. "I'll always love you for the clear thinking that you did that night, and it was the only thing that saved us." He recalls how they "proudly tramped up to Bernard's room and burst in on him" (April 8). They had wanted to tell Herb's brother of their decision to become engaged.

A few days later Herb again writes about that night. "How easily we might have satisfied our emotions to the limit. However, it was nice to know that we possessed the sense and will power not to do what most lovers would have done. And for that, I couldn't help but love and respect you all the more" (April 14).

On Easter Sunday, Herb tells Louise how he celebrated the day.

Well today is Easter but it means darn little in a place like this. It's just another dull Sunday and aside from writing to you I don't know what to do. Don't feel like reading, or studying, or playing cards, or sitting down, or walking around. Go to my locker and poke around and rummage through things a while; wonder whether to go ashore or not. Rate liberty, but what's ashore? Could see a show; but there are also movies aboard. Could walk around over there or sit in a park; but its too darn dusty and hot. Nothing over there for me at night; I'd only stay over a few hours; so, I'll stay aboard. (April 17)

A couple of days later, Herb fills a letter with descriptions of his daily routines.

Today I believe was the hottest it has ever been since I've been out here. Whew! Yeah, and next Tuesday we are going south; won't that be fun?

Just about now the sun is setting. A Manila sunset is very pretty, but it still doesn't make up for all the things that aren't so nice about these islands. I'd rather be seeing a Halcyon sunset right now.

This can be a very clean life for a fellow to lead, providing that you don't foul up ashore. Clean sea air, good old plain but solid Navy chow, lots of sleep at the proper hours; yep, it's very good for a fellow.

It doesn't take much Geneva gin to undo all that though, from what I've seen of some of the fellows on here. But I'm happy darling, and I don't need to envy the fun they do have. If they had what I have, they probably would be different too.

I'm really luckier than you sweet; I haven't much time usually to stop to think about things that hurt. Here's an average day; and it explains why: 6 A.M. reveille. Sweep the deck, get a face wash, read the morning press, and it's 7:30, time for breakfast. Turn-to goes at 8 A.M. and we are kept fairly busy until 11:30 when we knock off for dinner, at noon.

From noon to 1 P.M. we usually catch a nap on deck or lay around taking. Turn-to goes again at 1 P.M. We work until about 3:30, knock off, take a shower, shift into the clean uniform of the day, spread our cots, and it isn't long then until supper which is at 5:30 P.M. After supper we can lay around until movies which start at 7:45 P.M. Or we can turn in any time. Movies are over about 10:00 P.M. and then "lights out" goes. Usually we have a night watch, about three or four times a week. That hurts! It isn't much fun to work hard all day long and then stand a 12-4 watch. (April 19)

The following Sunday, late in the afternoon, Herb gets a chance to respond to several of Louise's letters.

Darling you are so far ahead of me now; I'll never catch up with you before our cruise starts. I was just about to answer the third of your five letters which I got day before yesterday and someone said there was mail over in the mail box, which arrived on an Empress liner this morning. Well, the result is your two postcards and two more letters from you of Mar. 27 and 31. Seven letters and two cards from you in three days! Whew!

My buddies get a kick out of seeing me writing all the time. Because they know that I never go ashore and raise h---, and because I am always getting so many letters from you; I've finally convinced most of them that our love is the real thing. And they appreciate it for what it is.

Life makes so much more sense to me now than it did before I met you, in a thousand ways. Honest, Louise, I never used to take anything seriously. I was entirely too light-hearted for my own good. (April 24)

This was Herb's last letter to Louise before embarking upon their southern cruise. After responding to four of her letters, he closes:

Twilight has fallen, so since I'm writing this on topside, it's getting dark. Tomorrow is a busy day. The Henderson arrives, we get our men from it. We take on fresh fruit and vegetables for the cruise all day long. Tuesday morning we fuel, and we shove off, southward bound, Tuesday afternoon.

Darling I'll be thinking of you all the time. I'll tell the southern cross and tropical breezes how much I love you, and they will waft my messages to you. (April 24)

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