

French Frigate Awash

BAD DAY AT TERN



Save me O God: For the waters are come into my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. (Psalm 69:1-2)

FRENCH FRIGATE SHOALS IS SHOWN awash a few hours after the first rescue plane arrived on scene. The runway is covered with coral and debris and the crew is huddled on the roof of the signal power building.

Ever wonder what a fifty-foot wave looks like close up? It's scary, even if you're on a mountain top looking down at the surf a mile away.

Ever been stationed on a mere slip of an island in the middle of the Pac-



HUGE WAVES roll in and the station (top left) absorbs the blows.

ific...say 500 miles northeast of Honolulu? It's quite an experience, especially if you stay on this 3000 by 300 foot rock for a year.

Now take this island, add the fifty foot waves crashing on the reef and you get a slim idea how 19 Coast Guard men felt during the first week of December when the Loran Station at French Frigate Shoals went awash and was battered out of operation.

The story really began nearly a week earlier when huge walls of water were kicked up by a storm over a thousand miles north of French Frigate Shoals. On the evening of November 30, the waves began pounding the barrier reef around the tiny island, and the men on watch began to notice water on the island's runway and around the buildings.

By early morning, waves of up to four feet were sweeping the station, and the Commanding Officer, Ltjg H.J. Kofron, ordered the men to take refuge on

Pacific Shield



QUITE A MESS greeted the crews that were sent to begin cleanup of the station and to restore it to full operational status. Coral and debris were much in evidence over the runway and across the tiny island.

top of the signal power building.

The Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Center in Honolulu first got word of the situation at 6:30 a.m. on December 1 when the station radioed that they were awash. At 7 a.m., they radioed they were going to stop operating their Loran equipment because of flooding.

At 7:30, communications were lost with the station.

A C-130 from Barbers Point was loaded up with experts, observers, news media and rescue equipment and began the 2 1/2 hour flight northward from Honolulu.



SANDBAGS ARE PILED high in an effort to keep destructive sea water out of a building.

First reports from the aircraft were pretty grim. The men were huddled on top of the building; the waves were still hitting at 50 feet and battering the reef; and the island was awash under 2-3 feet of churning water.

The C-130, piloted by Lcdr H. U. Wilson, Jr., dropped survival gear including life rafts, food and blankets.

The cutter Mellon, with an HH52A amphibious helicopter strapped aboard, departed for the remote island. The U.S. Naval Ship Sunnyvale left Pearl Harbor to assist in the evacuation of the 19 men.

But the ace-in-the-hole as far as the stranded Coast Guardsmen were concerned was the 372-foot New Zealand Frigate Waikato. The Waikato was returning from Pearl Harbor after underway training and she notified the



AN UNAPPETIZING chowhall was one of the results of the mishap. The dining hall was completely inundated by mud.

Coast Guard that she would be off French Frigate late that night and would rescue the men at first light.

On December 2, the evacuation took place. Helicopters from the Waikato began lifting the men, two at a time from their perch on the high, dry building to the decks of the man o' war. All 19 men and two dogs - the station's mascots - were aboard by 7:30 a.m. and on their way to Midway Island.

The men - the CO and 18 enlisted - arrived in Midway weary but in good shape and high spirits on the 4th. They were flown out the same day via MAC flight to Honolulu for a little well-deserved R&R.

But their vacation was short-lived. In the first joint helicopter-cutter operation from the deck of a cutter in the 14th district, the Mellon moved within range and the helicopter lifted repair crews to the island to begin clean-up work.

Meanwhile, the cutter Planetree had arrived and put men and equipment ashore for repair and evaluation. On December 5th, less than 24 hours after the arrival of the Planetree, the station was back on the air.

On Monday, December 8th, the French Frigate Shoals crew, additional equipment and more repair personnel were



FORCE OF THE WAVES is demonstrated by the shifting of the trailer-type living quarters.

put aboard the cutter Buttonwood in Honolulu and began the return trip to their island.

At last report, the island is once again suitable for habitation, although there remained considerable debris strewn about and the runway won't be useable for a few months due to a heavy layer of loose coral.

The Kukui, with bulldozers and land clearing equipment aboard departed for the island the first of January.



THEIR BEARDS A MARK of their isolated duties, part of the crew relaxes at Hickam AFB shortly after their return from Midway Island. The Enlisted Men's Wives Club greeted the evacuees and presented them with leis. Most of the men arrived with just the clothes they were wearing.