

EAGLE & QUILL
OCT. 25, 1940
JOHN

Earl Baker Relates of Travels on China Clipper

October 14, 1940

My dear Henry :-

We started from San Francisco Tuesday. Today is Monday and we have still two days to go before reaching Hongkong. But we lost one day crossing the meridian and another yesterday waiting for a typhoon to pass. We are up 10,000 feet looking down into the sky -- or so it seems, for the clouds are below us in a field of blue.

Our plane is the original China Clipper. We started from San Francisco with only nine passengers -- but with a heavy load of gasoline to cover the 2402 mile hop to Honolulu. We got in at the top and walked down a ladder stairway thru a series of three rooms, two of them about 8" by 10" and the other about 10" by 10". The latter is a drawing room with card tables and chairs and serves as a dining room at meal time. The others are much like a double compartment in a Pullman sleeper. The seats are converted into berths at night.

As soon as we got aboard the steward offered us iced cider and cookies. Every day since, a pitcher of iced fruit juice and a plate of fresh fruit sits on the table to which we help ourselves. Just before the plane starts, the steward passes around chewing gum; it relieves the pressure on the ear-drums to chew as the plane ascends or descends.

In a forward compartment the steward has a kitchen with a chemical stove. The exhaust from the plane heats these chemicals which serve to boil or roast vegetables or meats, and the first nite out he served us a sumptuous meal that went further than from "soup to nuts", for it began with "ors d 'ourves" (how do you spell it and ended with mints. But the coffee was not very hot -- the water boils at too low a temperature at this altitude.

We all suffered a little from the headache, shortness of breath and distension of stomach the first nite out. And so, altho we had all day for sight-seeing at Honolulu, most of us went to bed until noon. We stayed at the Moana hotel on Waikiki beach. In the afternoon we paid calls of ceremony on the Chinese Consul-General and the local Red Cross officers and by the latter were driven about the island. In the evening we were invited to dinner by the Chinese Consul General and served most sumptuously. Of course, I ate too much -- as I always do on such occasions -- and had colic most of the nite and the next day.

We started from Honolulu Thursday morning about 7:30 with twenty passengers -- the largest load a Martin plane has ever carried. There was a little difficulty in getting the plane into the air, and after we were a half-hour out we had to turn back because of trouble with a feed line. However, it was fixed in the air and we lost only an hour; but this loss, the late start and the heavy load forced the pilots to use a slower speed to conserve fuel reserves, and it was dark by the time we arrived at Midway, 1304 miles from Honolulu. This was a disappointment for I wanted to see what progress is being made in fortifying it. However, I had a card of introduction to the supervising engineers, who came over to our hotel and told me what they could without betraying military secrets. Sufficient, that the harbor can now be used by ships and that the place is armed against both surface and air attacks.

The trip from Midway to Wake, 1185 miles, was the shortest of the trip and we arrived by 3:30 in the afternoon. We had to stay there an extra day because of a typhoon between Wake and Guam -- which had forced the eastbound plane to turn back to Guam. (This made apparent to us the desirability of always arriving with a large reserve of fuel still unconsumed -- you never know when you may need it -- altho radio weather reports at frequent intervals give the navigators a maximum of information. A lot of folks went fishing. I felt that it was a bit too hot for that and so laid around until late afternoon, when I went with a few lazy people like myself on an exploring expedition around the island.

These islands are coral formation built on the rims of old volcanos. Ages of weather, waves and wind have ground up enough coral into a fine sand to make something of soil, upon which dwarf trees grow which have a bloom like forget-me-nots. There is no grass and these trees are of such a recent growth that they have not yet made any humus even where they are thick. Animal life is confined to millions of small rats, hermit crabs, (which carry their shells around on their backs), rails and terns. Later in the season, they say that goonies return -- birds that burrow in the ground. The principal interest on our excursion was to find pretty specimens of coral and odd kinds of wreckage. One of us found a silver spoon

and a silver fork. But when we got back and saw the 60 lb. pig-fish (blue in day light and green by electric light) which the other crowd had brought in among about 200 lbs. of other fish, we rather wished we had gone fishing.

At Wake, Midway and Guam the Pan-American Airways have erected their own hotels where passengers are the guests of the management. These hotels are modest but very comfortable and attractive and fitted with every modern convenience. Radio news comes from Treasure Island. Tennis, hiking and fishing equipment is offered those who wish it. Movies are shown each nite. During the day on the plane, we read, nap, play cards or just sit. Conversation is not easy because of the roar of the motors. Yet, I have had a good visit with a deaf young man who reads lips very well. He is going to Persia as a geologist for an oil company.

Guam is a much bigger island than Wake or Midway. It stands up out of the water like a piece of continent which got detached and floated away. There are over 200 square miles of it with a good soil and a population of 21,000, all except about 300 whites being natives of a stock much like the Siamese or Burmese or Filipinos. It's tropical here, no mistake. Coconut palms, mangos, rice and such are the products.

We start out every morning at day-break, so have to be up at 4:15. That means early to bed, which in turn means right now.

There is much more to this letter than can appear in the Quill, so when you have made a digest of it, will you please let Alice and Aurel have it. They will pass it on to Lenna, who will probably let Bob Coe have it in turn. Thus, I will get a Scotchman's satisfaction out of my airmail postage.

With best wishes
Sincerely yours,
J. EARL BAKER