

EXCERPTS FROM JOHN SLATER'S LETTERS FROM THE SHIP IN 1962 & 1963

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN'S LETTERS

My mother was a pack rat. Since her death in 2009, Gracia and I have been slowly wading through boxes and boxes of her stuff. We recently discovered a box containing all the letters I wrote her from the ship. I'm attaching excerpts that you might find interesting, together with a three-page Plan of the Day that I also sent home. In my first letter, I failed to mention Rex Rambo, who was serving as ASW Officer, I believe.

Stanzas five and six of the poem on page two of the POD are hard to make out (who else remembers spirit duplicators?) They read:

El Jocko, Rookie-of-the-Year,
Was anchored at the plate;
His throws to put out runners
Reached the infield much too late.

Correia, King of Spectators,
Displayed your team's true spirit.
He tried to bribe the umpire
And let everybody hear it.

John Slater on 22 March 2013

EXCERPTS FROM JOHN'S LETTERS

9 AUG 1962

I reported aboard as planned, and all the watchstanders were delighted to see me. My primary duty (billet) is EMO (Electronics Maintenance Officer) for EWO (Electronics Warfare Officer). Whatever you call it, I'm responsible for all the electronic gear in the operations department. I have three collateral duties: 1.) member of a special court-martial, 2.) technical alcohol custodian (we have none aboard), and 3.) member of the advancement and promotion board.

Collett is a fine ship, with an unusually fine wardroom. For purposes of future reference, the wardroom consists of

- 1.) CDR W.W. Bischof, the captain
- 2.) LCDR J.G. Palmer, the XO (Executive Officer)
- 3.) LT Bill Wardell, the Gunnery Officer ("Gun boss")
- 4.) LTJG John Hollis, Second Division Officer
- 5.) LTJG Chick Mommsen, First Lieutenant
- 6.) ENS Dale [sic] Duffy, Supply Officer

- 7.) LTJG Art Horsch, Engineering Officer
- 8.) ENS Ken Albers, Damage Control Assistant
- 9.) LTJG Bill Brooks, Ship's Secretary
- 10.) LT Lloyd Rice, Operations Officer
- 11.) ENS Mike Spahn, Communications Officer
- 12.) ENS Hal Harden, CIC Officer
- 13.) ENS John Slater, Electronic Warfare Officer

My boss is Lloyd Rice; my roommate is Hal Harden. Hal and I live in a very small, non-air-conditioned room in the forward Officers' Country (where it gets very rough.) I have seven ET's (Electronics Technicians) working for me. I also run the movie projector in the wardroom after dinner every night.

Since I reported aboard, I've spent more time off the ship than on – the XO was very kind to give me a free two-day vacation. I'll stand my first watch Saturday – I have the duty all weekend, and will have to stay aboard. It's about time.

6 OCT 1962

I'm not sure just when I wrote you last, but it was sometime in Kao-Hsiung. When we finally left there to come back, we ran into some rough weather (typhoon Diane was closing us from astern) and had not nearly as pleasant a time at sea. Yes, I've now been seasick, and have learned to go for days at a time without cigarettes and with a minimum of food. (I lost six pounds on the trip, but have since gained back half of that.)

So much has happened that I'm sure to leave something out. When we got in here Tuesday, ENS Rich Gregory was waiting on the pier. He's our new MPA (main propulsion assistant) and George. Though he went to Stanford, he seems to be a nice guy. ENS Hank Morgan was waiting, too. He was EMO until he went to school in the States last spring—he's now assistant communications officer. His wife and brand new baby are coming over in November. You knew that our old XO left? His relief, LCDR Patton, is one fine fella. Very much by the book, but everyone loves him for it. We've all been busy trying to revive Collett's paperwork and ship organization (the XO's responsibility), something which had deteriorated to a remarkable degree. Much work, but the Commander (that's the traditional title for an executive officer—we use it for Mr. Patton) is getting it done. You also knew, I think, that Bill Wardell left the ship for duty ashore in Yoko.

I was looking forward to a nice, quiet weekend (I have the duty), but it didn't work out. Neal Duffy was taken off the ship very unexpectedly yesterday. Some sort of scandal is involved, but even I don't know why he was taken or by whom. Ken Albers gathered up his things today and sent them over to him (he's under shore patrol guard at the BOQ), and I was appointed to an inventory board to take stock of the disbursing accounts, and the stocks of the ship's store and commissary. My afternoon today, during which I had planned to catch up on all my delinquent correspondence, was spent counting \$55,000 while verifying our books. It'll take another two or three days to complete our inventory, and we'll have a new supply officer in about a week.

Oh, yes—I've moved again. I now live on the main deck, just forward of the wardroom, starboard side. It should be a promotion (on Shelton, the exec lives in the corresponding room), and, indeed, I do have a porthole in my room, but in fact, the room

is still half of the operations dept. office, and I have filing cabinets and safes to contend with. I got it for two reasons—I haven't very much gear and can put up with the crowded conditions, and Lloyd Rice lives right across the passageway from me and wanted to have someone handy to ping on. Oh, well. I like it.

22 OCT 1962

Why would I be transferred by high line? To act as an observer for a competitive exercise on another ship, that's why. In the absence of any real wars to fight in, we play war games instead, and run a prescribed number of "competes" in different departments each year. On this basis, a ship's battle efficiency can be estimated. Competes must be scored by officers and men from another ship, to eliminate cheating (or almost, anyway).

No, it's not too easy to find hiding places on a destroyer. Even I have trouble hiding at times.

Still no idea of what happened to Duffy. He's still living at the BOQ here (they've removed the guard). His relief, Bill Robinson from Philadelphia, is on board and doing pretty well.

Our new underway watchbill came out, and I'm finally going to stand my watches in CIC. Think of it—no more freezing on the midwatch, roasting on the 12-16, and standing on the bridge (32 feet above sea level) with green water pouring down on me from the signal bridge (one level higher).

Bill Tarver and wife are here. He's in engineering. Everybody in the wardroom is still a "good head" (Navy slang for nice guy). Now we have enough officers to stand four watch sections underway, instead of three. Two full nights' sleep out of every four. Paradise!

Wednesday we're having an electronics material and admin inspection by the flotilla staff EMO. Lloyd and the Captain were nice enough to permit me to go into it just the way we are now. Ray and Chuck [Carlson and Berry, my counterparts on the USS Blue and USS Shelton, respectively] are having to "gun-deck" a lot of their reports and records to make them look better than they are. ("Gun-decking" is the process of catching up, overnight, on records that should have been kept daily. It's a subtle form of cheating, but much practiced prior to inspections of this nature.)

I have finally been awarded a life raft station. (Reassuring?) When we abandon ship, I proceed to life raft #10, taking a sextant with me. (What would I have done if we'd had to bail out during the last couple of months?)

By direction of the Commodore, Collett has set up a general in-port emergency bill. This gem is devised to meet any situation that could arise in port—fire, sabotage, boarding parties, air attack—utilizing only the duty section on board. My station is the quarterdeck (it was felt that an officer should be present to give the order to open fire, if need be), and it's mighty lonely out there (the ship is all buttoned up) with my .45 caliber service pistol. Even the three troops I have with me (two 30 caliber M-1's and a Thompson sub-machine gun) don't help much—we have no place to hide.

25 OCT 1962

The Cuban quarantine is affecting even the Pacific Fleet, and Collett is leaving tomorrow on a secret mission.

Wow! A secret mission! But it's not going to be nearly as much fun as secret missions always are in the movies. Tomorrow morning we very undramatically get underway with the rest of the division. Shortly after leaving Tokyo Bay we detach ourselves from the formation, and no one hears anything about us for a while. We haven't even told the crew yet where we're going, but we're taking on as much fuel and stores as we can carry. Mail will be something of a problem. It'll be spasmodic in both directions, since our only opportunity for sending or receiving mail will be when we unrep, which probably won't be too often. As far as I know, they'll have to send an oiler out just for us—I don't think any other ships will be in our area.

I'll try to get a greeting off to Freddy [my cousin] on the anniversary of his nativity. (If I don't make it, just tell him that cousin John is a secret agent, or something.)

2 NOV 1962

Yes, it's an exciting life we've been leading, though not because of our mission. Things've just been happening to us.

Like on our way out of Tokyo Bay coming up here. We had just sat down to lunch, when we lost the load (had a power failure). The emergency generators came on (losing the load is no big thing) and the engineers excused themselves hastily to see what the matter was. We were just starting soup when Rich Gregory poked his head in the wardroom door and yelled "Fire in the after switchboard!" Still no one did anything (nothing to get excited about, because the fire may well have been put out already). Then the general alarm sounded without the preface "This is a drill," and everybody ran for the door at once. It was just like in the movies, when they call the ship to GQ (general quarters)—people were running, not walking, on the decks, up the ladders, everywhere. It took us three and a half minutes for all stations to report manned and ready (the best time we've managed in any drill is seven minutes). It later developed that there never had been a fire—some electrician had seen smoke and blew the whistle prematurely, but no one minded. It was all very exciting.

Shortly after we got to our destination this week we got a call on the radio from our oiler. (I told you we'd be operating away from other ships—we even had our own private oiler, whose sole mission was to keep us refueled.) They wanted to know if we had a doctor on board, perchance. (I was amused to hear them use that word over the radio.) We naturally did not, but our airplane (that's right, Collett had her own private airplane, too) overheard the conversation and offered to send a helo with a doctor to the oiler. An oiler is a crowded ship, with masts and booms sticking up everywhere. They had no room for a helo to hover over them, so we offered our assistance, too. Making a longish story shorter (while retaining, naturally, every vestige of the drama inherent in the situation), Collett went alongside the oiler and received (by highline) an appendicitis victim from the oiler. We then steamed to a pre-determined helicopter rendezvous, met the helo on schedule, and, while the chopper hovered over our fantail, transferred the patient to him for transportation to a nearby Air Force hospital. Lloyd and I had the morning watch during which all this happened, and it was a ball. I, of course, had never

seen Collett go to flight quarters before, though it was nearly a daily occurrence when they were hugging.

We even had a little excitement today, and I was at the bottom of it. Each noon, underway, we test the ship's whistle. First the word is passed, "Now the following is a test of the ship's whistle." Then the quartermaster blows one short blast (1-3 seconds' duration), and says "Test complete." Today (I was on watch at noon) we had a contact on our starboard bow and so we couldn't test the whistle on time for fear of confusing him. (Under International Rules of the Road one short blast means "My rudder is right.") A few minutes later, though, we wanted to turn left, and we got the Captain's permission to test the whistle on the turn. I pulled it myself (my Naval career is now complete), blowing two short blasts to indicate a turn to the left. Only trouble was, we didn't pass the word first. Man, you should have seen the bedlam—people came up on deck from everywhere to see what the trouble was (we don't normally use the whistle except when we're testing it). Half a dozen stations called the bridge to inquire. Even the officers (again, at lunch) started for the door when they heard the second blast. (They were anticipating a third blast, which would have meant "My engines are backing full," and which would be indicative of trouble ahead.) More fun!

Anyway, we're back from our secret mission.

8 MAR 1963

Well, thank goodness we made it back to Yoko, where I can (allegedly) get something done. I haven't yet, of course—been very busy, mostly with a farewell party for COMDESRON 9. I wrote a song commemorating the occasion (aided by CDR Work, Captain of the Swenson, who was host ship) and the Collett wardroom singers performed it at the party last night (we're famous). Lots of fun.

Nothing is drastically new here. We're having an admin inspection for two days next week. COMCRUDESPAC, RADM Virden, came aboard the day we got here (we'd been preparing for weeks) for an informal inspection. I had the deck when he got here—it was pretty hectic. He came up on the 1MC (general announcing system) when he was done, and told the crew that he'd been aboard every ship in the Cruiser Destroyer Force, Pacific (150 some-odd ships), with the exception of four, and that Collett was the best-looking one he'd seen. He was a good friend of John Austin Collett and his family, and he told us that John would be proud of the way we're caring for the dirty 30. Desdiv 92 and Desron 9 (our commodores) just stood there turning green and white and purple. (They don't think much of the Collett. They're screwed up.)

16 MAR 1963

We pulled into dry dock yesterday, and I'm not looking forward to the noise of chipping hammers and the like that will begin tomorrow. Luckily, I have a project that will take me above it all, if it stops raining/snowing. (We saw Yokosuka's first snow in six years last Wednesday, and it wasn't much fun at all—there were winds of up to 50 knots blowing across the fantail. That's a full gale—it takes 65 knots to make a typhoon—and the snow was coming down sideways.) My project is painting out the foremast (that's the taller of our two) from top to bottom. I think the nicest place on the ship is up on the 29

platform, where our big radar antenna is, but the only time I've been there was in Kao-Hsiung, when it was unpleasantly muggy down on the main deck. We'll see.

We've been going through a personnel shake-up: Rex has left for Engineering school, and Bill Tarver has taken over as first lieutenant. (Is that meaningful to you?) We'll be getting two new officers in June, and Lloyd, Mike, and Ken will be leaving the ship. The XO will be relieved while I'm gone.

RADM Brockett (Bill's father) has been nominated by JFK as head of BUSHIPS. We're hoping that now he'll get a chance to come visit us.

9 DEC 1962 POD