

# THE PANALĀ'AU:

## Colonists on the Equator



The young Hawaiian colonists on Howland Island took this photo of their spartan tent camp on April 1, 1935, the day after their arrival.

ON MARCH 20, 1935, six young Hawaiians, aged 19 to 24, were transported out of Honolulu under military escort, along with meteorological instruments, barrels of fresh water, medical supplies and other survival gear. Their destination: a trio of bleak, uninhabited atolls. Only after they were well out at sea would the young men learn that the supposed purpose of their journey—collecting specimens for the Bishop Museum—was not the true mission at all.

"My folks had no idea where I was going. I myself didn't know where I was going," recalls Abraham Piianaia, now 73 and an instructor in the geography department at the University of Hawaii. He was one of the first recruited for the voyage. "They told us, 'We have a project which is of top security and if you would like to join us, we would be happy to have you. We can't tell you about it until you get there.'"

**M**ore than 50 years ago, young men from Kamehameha Schools were sent to Jarvis, Howland and Baker to colonize and study the islands for the U.S. government. They were in for the adventure of their lives

By MIRKA KNASTER

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Piianaia and the other five, all students or recent graduates of the Kamehameha Schools, had been carefully handpicked. It was felt the Hawaiians would be physically and temperamentally suited for the rigorous conditions, and as Kam boys, they would be highly compatible because of their shared training and interests. They had to be able to fish native-style and handle a boat, as well as be excellent swimmers. They also had to be disciplined, friendly and ready to "take it," no matter what came up.

Army Lt. (later Capt.) Harold A. Meyer, who was in charge of coordinating the project, in no way glorified its circumstances when he interviewed the youths. Instead, he emphasized the hardships they might encounter, for the little information he had about their unnamed destination was not at all encouraging. The atolls hugged the equator, under merciless sunshine and heat. Each was

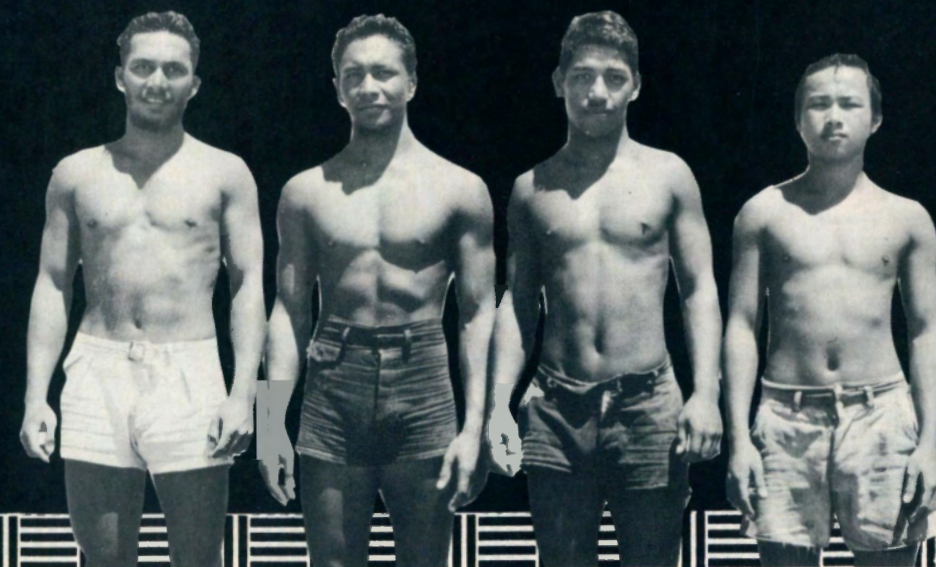


Above: The youths from Kamehameha Schools, on a mission to colonize and help establish claim to the three islands for future U.S. air bases, were briefly accompanied by military men.

Above, right: The Hawaiians recruited for the project were young, physically fit and shared a sense of adventure.

Right: Government House was the headquarters at Howland Island camp.

Below: A 1937 photo shows a quartet of the colonists: (l-r) Theodore Akana, Eugene Burke, Gabriel Victor and Ah Kin Leong.







Top row, left: In 1937 the men on Howland rigged a shower for Amelia Earhart, who was expected to make the island one of her last stops on her round-the-world flight.

Top row, right: The American flag flies over the camp at Jarvis Island in 1935.

Middle row, left: The barkentine Amaranth, shipwrecked on Jarvis in 1913, provided lumber for shacks, furniture, a raft and surfboards.

Middle row, right: At the Baker Island camp, conditions defied the colonists' attempts at farming.

Left: The Hawaiians on Jarvis constructed this house, which became the office, using lumber from the wrecked Amaranth.

barely 20 feet above sea level at its highest point and only a square mile in area. All were covered with coral, sand and scattered brush. There were no sources of food, except for the birds and fish, and no water fit for drinking. Landing could be extremely difficult in a calm ocean, and in rough weather, impossible. The young Hawaiians would be completely isolated, with neither the material pleasures nor many of the necessities they

crawl through a canvas tunnel, at the end of which they were barraged with fire hoses.

When the initiation was over, the young men were officially proclaimed shellbacks. Yet these high jinks at sea were but a prelude to the real rite of passage that lay ahead. Meyer finally revealed where the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* was taking the Hawaiians and why. "Boys, someday you're going to

be mighty proud that you made this trip. You're going to colonize and help establish claim to three islands," he told them, "islands which are going to be famous air bases in a route that will connect Australia with California. Your names will go down in history."

Meyer explained that trans-Pacific air travel was just beginning and strategic bases were needed. The United States had originally claimed most of the small

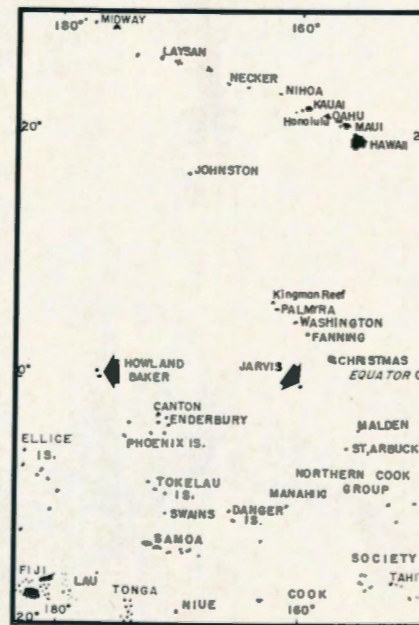


Three of the panalā'au who vividly recall the equatorial adventure of their youth are (l-r) Joseph Anakalea, George Kahanu and Jacob Haili.

had at home.

But nothing could dampen their enthusiasm. The strict confidentiality of the whole affair only served to heighten their eagerness. "It was a great adventure as far as I was concerned," says Piianaia. "I grew up in an era when every youngster wished he could get on a ship and go someplace."

Once they were out at sea, the young men were subjected to naval shenanigans. Crossing the equator required a polliwog initiation. First-timers were chased and hit with sandbags and paddles. Then they had to kiss a "Blarney Stone" covered with black grease, eat pie that had slices of rope mixed in with the fruit, down a drink that turned their urine blue, and swallow "medicine" that invariably made them hang over the side to throw up. They also got "haircuts" that left them with a Southern cross, "rat ears" or no hair at all. Then they got dunked in a tank of water. The final stroke was having to



The islands colonized by the young Hawaiians were the isolated atolls of Howland, Baker and Jarvis, hugging the equator.

central Pacific islands under the Guano Act passed by Congress in 1856. But when American companies abandoned them in 1877, after collecting guano (fertilizer from seabird droppings) for 20 years, the British took a turn at occupying the islands. The U.S. Department of Air Commerce wanted to get a jump on possible British competition by reasserting rights to the Line or Equatorial Islands of Baker, Jarvis and Howland.

The Kamehameha youths were to find out what the islands and seasonal weather conditions were like and where emergency landings could be made. They were also to clear a strip for an airfield. For this they would be paid \$3 a day, a decent wage in the height of the Depression and more than a sailor or plantation laborer earned.

*Itasca* made a brief stop at Palmyra Island to pick up sprouting coconut palms before completing the 1,600 miles

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## Panalā'au

Continued from page 97

to Jarvis Island, where it arrived on March 25. "The sight of it was disheartening," one of the *panalā'au* (colonists) would later write of his first glimpse of the island. "All I could see was a white sand bar glaring in the sun...[it was] scarcely visible above the surf."

With no place to anchor, the ship lay off the coral reef. Two of the Hawaiians said goodbye to their schoolmates and were lowered to a rowboat along with three soldiers, tents and provisions. When the five men reached shore and set up their camp, *Itasca* departed. It had to go another 1,000 miles west to drop off the other *panalā'au* on Howland (March 30) and Baker (April 2).

With not even a radio for communica-

Through experience the *panalā'au* would learn that helmets were necessary headgear to protect against "bombing" by squadrons of frigates—large seabirds. Still, along with a wide variety of fish and other seafood, including turtle and octopus, fowl would come to provide additional nourishment. Months later, despite their fishy taste, goony birds would also make Thanksgiving dinner possible.

The young men on Jarvis found themselves in a ghost town. The sign on a 25-foot-high wooden beacon read, "The Pacific Phosphate Company of London and Melbourne." Nearby was evidence of a long-gone community: foundations of former houses, a rusty windlass, a brick-lined cistern, a brick furnace, the wheels of a tram car, a tram line leading from the guano mounds to the beach front, and six graves.

cloud ceiling. At night they took readings every three hours and noted any unusual weather conditions. They kept a daily log on rainfall and anything important that occurred, such as the sighting of a ship. They mapped each island, and selected and prepared an area for a landing field.

They also attempted farming. On Baker the *panalā'au* cleared a trail from their camp to a well that had been dug by the old guano miners and lined it with worn stones from the beach. Once completed (it took a month), it enabled them to transport drums of brackish water to the numerous sprouting coconut palms that had been set out. But for all their hard work digging and conditioning the ground around the palms, carrying water and cleaning out the well from time to time, success was elusive.

A passage from Piianaia's diary reveals

able routine and easy relationship. Then, three months after its first arrival, *Itasca* made a second voyage to the atolls, bringing six more Kamehameha students. Like the first group, they knew nothing. The difference this time was that they came to replace the military. The Hawaiians—a team of four assigned to each island—were now left completely to their own devices.

During a period of seven years, it would take over 100 Hawaiians in a total of 26 voyages to complete the colonization on five islands. (Canton and Enderbury were added to the settlement program in 1938, but are currently under the sovereignty of the Republic of Kiribati.) Several of the young men, like Jacob Haili, now 73, and James Kamakaiwi, stayed for several years, returning to Hawaii for respites before resuming their

flight in 1931, and Dr. Francis Dana Coman, the medical director of Rear Adm. Byrd's 1929 Antarctic expedition, came to collect data with an eye toward turning the islands into way stations or emergency landing fields for aviators. Like everyone who visited the "colonies," they too were impressed with the *panalā'au*. The camps were consistently clean, tidy and in good condition, the young men in excellent health and spirits, and always willing to extend aloha to all who came.

Although visitors and radios cut down on the isolation, life in the Equatorial Islands continued to be an adventure, one that called for mutual cooperation and resourcefulness—something Kamehameha students were skilled in. It was also fun. Catching fish became much more than a specimen-collecting task. It sup-

would come out on a long reef on the eastern shore. All he had to do was walk out and pick them up. And whenever he wanted squid, he'd wait for the tide to come in and find them sticking halfway out of holes, where they'd been waiting for the water's return.

When the sea was calm, the Hawaiians sat and watched fish leap out of the smooth, glassy surface. Booby birds would soar high, nose-dive, scoop up the fish, then fly away. One incredible evening, the entire ocean was covered by porpoises—an estimated 800. At night, watching the birds and fish was replaced by gazing at constellations and the phases of the moon.

When they weren't being fascinated by spectacular sunsets, bright meteors and other natural wonders of their unspoiled environment, the young men spent their

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Franklin Gray is a noted Honolulu architect whose work in Hawaii includes a number of award-winning projects, one of which is the design of the Pauahi Tower, the recipient of the City and County 1986 Project of the Year Award.



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tion beyond the barren atolls, a sense of utter isolation set in. The first night in the "colonies" was harrowing. The tents were no barrier against hundreds of small, hungry Polynesian rats that scurried everywhere. As the young men lay in their camp cots trying to sleep, they could feel the rats crawl all over them, and sometimes even get between the blankets.

The next morning, the *panalā'au* began to explore and get used to their new environment. Even a lifetime spent outdoors wasn't enough for them to escape the initial sunburns. It would take about two weeks to adjust to the torrid heat and glare of the equatorial sun.

As the Hawaiians trekked across the desolate landscape, they encountered a scene that could have inspired Hitchcock's film *The Birds*. Hundreds of thousands of winged creatures called the atolls home.

The most exciting discovery, one that conjured up dramatic images of mutiny and castaways, was a shipwreck. One night in 1913, Jarvis's jagged shores had brought down a barkentine, *Amaranth* of San Francisco. The shipwreck became a playground for the Hawaiians. They rummaged for foreign coins and other souvenirs. They lounged on the poop deck, observing the antics of birds diving into schools of fish. The ship also supplied lumber for a fishing raft, shacks and furniture to upgrade their dwellings, surfboards, and a small outdoor gymnasium for body building.

The young men kept busy. First thing in the morning, they raised the American flag. Every hour during the day, they recorded the velocity and direction of the wind, changes in temperature and atmospheric pressure, and visibility and

their frustration. "The rats had a grand time last night chewing off the leaves of our coconut trees. They chewed the stalks off right near the coconut shells." Four mornings later, he wrote, "Last night the rats chewed off more of our coconut palms. This has riled me, so we are having a rat drive tonight." That night, they captured 22 rats, saturated them with kerosene, and burned them. On Jarvis, when rats didn't eat the garden seeds, the lack of rain dried the seeds up.

In addition to all their record keeping, the young men collected insect, marine and plant specimens for the Bishop Museum. They also became thoroughly familiar with the various types and habits of the birds and fish and preserved samples in formaldehyde.

The Hawaiians and the soldiers who accompanied them settled into a comfort-

role as colonists. Others did only a brief stint. A few would have their sojourn cut short by death.

After the initial four cruises, authority for the project was transferred to the Department of the Interior, but the colonists' activities continued as before, with some improvements. They constructed new buildings with the equipment, lumber and other supplies shipped in. Refrigeration and radio communication were added. No longer would the young Hawaiians be completely cut off from their families. And with the project out from under wraps after the first two voyages, ships brought journalists, scientists, high-ranking military officials, educators and others to see what they could learn about the Line Islands.

Harold Gatty, the Australian who navigated the Wiley Post around-the-world

plemented their diet of canned and dry food and gave them endless hours of enjoyment.

"It was a fisherman's paradise," recalls George Kahanu, now 71. "When you went in the water, it was just like being in an aquarium. The fish were so plentiful that when you let the spear go, you wouldn't get one, you'd get two or three on the same spear. We'd make a barricade with rocks, chase the fish into it and then go in with a gunny sack, one person on each side, and just drag it along the bottom, come up and dump the catch in a bag. We'd get bagfuls. You were only limited by what you could carry across the island. It was that easy." The young men dried hundreds of fish to bring home to their families.

Joseph Anakalea, now 74, remembers that on Howland at night the lobsters

free time in sports—shot-put, football, broad and high jump, swimming and surfing. They also read whatever magazines and books had been donated, clipping recipes for when it was their turn to cook. After dinner, they generally played cards or checkers, practiced chords on the 'ukulele and guitar, and talked story. Kahanu remembers nights on Jarvis spent telling ghost tales about 'aumakua (guardian deities) while the birds made strange sounds in the dark. Whoever was on weather duty would have to walk alone from camp to the anemometer and record its readings, his imagination running wild as he passed the six graves that remained as a testimony to the perils of living on this coral speck.

Because there was no church to attend, on Sundays the boys made up their own services.



A certain monotony was part of colonization, but no one was homesick for Hawai'i, though there were some amenities of civilization that they missed. Piianaia laughs when he recalls a dialogue he regularly had with William Kaina about how great it would be if they could go to a dance Saturday night. Kaina wished they could break out some cold beer. In commiseration, they'd open a can of peaches and offer, "Here, have some on me." In addition to girls and beer, everyone dreamed of poi.

In this stark and forbidding landscape, the Hawaiians demonstrated they could not only "take it," but enjoy it too, and with inventiveness. One morning on Jarvis, while breakfast was being prepared, the oil stove caught fire and was damaged beyond repair. The boys immediately began work on a fireplace a few feet from the kitchen tent. Before long they were chowing down. Inspired by success, Henry Ahia and Jacob Haili made an oven out of a five-gallon flour can and baked biscuits in it; Joseph Anakalea would later be remembered for his pies. They also made fishing torches out of corn cans, and a beacon out of coral.

In many respects, life in the Line Islands was idyllic for a group of un-

attached young men. They had great camaraderie, lots of fun, a feeling of adventure, and the satisfaction of having been chosen for an important mission. Yet life on the atolls was not without serious dangers. Except for the rats, there were no critters—neither mosquitoes, scorpions nor centipedes—to bother them. But the waters surrounding the islands were infested with potential killers. "We lived in mortal fear as to what might be the fate if any one of us should ever be bitten by a shark... a sudden heavy loss of blood and probably death," wrote George West almost three decades later.

On one occasion, the physician of *Itasca*, so engrossed in fishing that he was oblivious to the hazards of the reef, got knocked over by a wave. Fortunately, Ahia heard his cries for help and rescued him. Within minutes of their escape, the area was swarming with hungry hammerhead sharks. On another day, while West and Frank Cockett were fishing on the raft constructed with lumber from *Amaranth*, a school of stingrays surprised them. Swimming around them, the rays created huge whirlpools that violently rocked the raft and splashed water all over. The Hawaiians clung to the raft on their knees and shouted to their buddies for assistance. Fortunately, the raft was

attached to a rope and the young men on shore were able to haul them in.

Even such mundane matters as sufficient food and water could be a concern. Though the military left the young men with ample provisions, food could spoil, be invaded by bugs, or simply run out before a ship returned with fresh supplies. Often, lobster, fish, turtle steaks or soup, and bird eggs became the principal source of sustenance. To prepare for the worst scenario, some of the *panalā'au* even experimented with rats. On Howland, Haili and Anakalea fried the rodents' legs and found them edible. Their companions were repulsed, but at least they knew they would never starve.

Unable to rely on rainfall, the Hawaiians reserved their 50-gallon drums of Honolulu water for drinking. Their bathing habits depended on the heavens. When they thought they saw rain approaching, the youths would soap up and wait for a rain shower to rinse them off. If it didn't come, they'd be left standing nude on the beach, disappointed and sticky, having to wash off in salt water.

At other times, there was the danger of too much rain. A storm, arising suddenly, would knock down tents, make roofs leak, and leave a lake in the center of the island. With high ground only 20 feet or

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so above sea level, there was no place to  
run from big breakers. "Some nights we  
didn't go to sleep, afraid that we might be  
swept away by the lashing waves," Ahia  
later said. Rough seas also made it  
difficult or impossible to land men and  
supplies when a ship arrived. The rowboat  
would turn over in the high surf, losing  
food and other materials.

Despite all that could go wrong, for the  
most part the *panalā'au* stayed healthy,  
though there were the occasional ear in-  
fections and toothaches. But there was  
always the fearful vision of what could  
happen if someone became critically ill.  
Kahanu remembers when Freddie Lee  
dove off a ledge and came up bleeding.  
Kahanu and the others cleaned the wound,  
applied an ointment, and taped it. "We  
prayed for three days to make sure he  
didn't die," says Kahanu.

On Oct. 3, 1938, the group on Jarvis  
radioed the *Roger B. Taney* to report that  
one of them, Carl Kahelewai, was very  
sick. A doctor recognized the symptoms  
as appendicitis. Traveling 1,310 miles at  
full speed, the *Taney* reached Jarvis in the  
early morning of Oct. 7. By 9:20 a.m., the  
ship was under way with Kahelewai on  
board. But it was too late. The next day,  
his condition worsened and by evening he  
died of peritonitis. It was the first of  
several sorrows that would eventually  
befall the *panalā'au*.

In 1937, everyone on Howland worked  
day and night so that Amelia Earhart  
could make one of the last stops on her  
round-the-world flight. They cleared the  
runway site, using dynamite, and with  
shotguns scared off thousands of birds  
nesting on the landing strip. The youths  
even rigged a shower for Earhart: a raised  
50-gallon oil drum with a pipe leading to  
a tomato can with nail holes punched in  
the bottom. They built a wooden floor for  
the shower and hung curtains made from  
canvas. They also fixed up a bedroom for  
her in their "house," putting up curtains  
that had been sent by one of their  
mothers.

For two weeks they waited anxiously  
for the overdue plane. Battleships and  
aircraft carriers combed the ocean, but  
never found a clue. Heartbroken by the  
news, the Hawaiians built a 20-foot  
sandstone lighthouse as a monument to  
the aviatrix.

But probably the most momentous  
event in the "colonies" was the outbreak  
of World War II. The perils of living  
completely exposed in the middle of the  
Pacific escalated as the islands came  
under Japanese sea and air attacks. By the  
summer of 1941, the young men didn't  
even know when an American ship was  
coming, because all movements were

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On Dec. 18, Walter Burke got up at dawn and walked outside the wooden shack where he and his three Hawaiian companions lived on Baker Island. Before he had a chance to raise the American flag, he spotted a Japanese submarine about 100 yards off shore. A minute later, a shell blasted the top off his atoll home. He immediately raced back inside to get his buddies and the four scared young men high-tailed it across the island.

All that day they hid in the foxholes they'd dug, listening to bombs drop. That night they sneaked back to their camp and found the shack in ruins. They salvaged some tin from the roof, made gun shades with it for their foxholes, then covered the tin with brush so the bomber that flew over daily around noon wouldn't see them. Early morning and late evening they crawled out to catch lobster and squid to eat. That Christmas they dared to sing carols under the moon, and wondered if they'd ever get picked up. They expected the Japanese to land at any minute.

When a ship finally arrived at the end of January 1942, Burke assumed the worst and told the other young men to stay hidden. "The ship put a boat over and started rowing to the beach," he



George Kahanu (left) and Stewart Markham are pictured aboard the Coast Guard cutter Itasca in 1936.

recalls. "Oh boy, we've had it now," I thought. Then I saw blond hair and I knew they weren't Japanese." The USS *Helm*, a destroyer, took them home.

Burke and his cohorts, Blue Makua, James Coyle and James Pease, survived to tell about their harrowing experience. But two other Hawaiians didn't. On the same day that the Baker *panalā'au* had

run for cover from the bombs, Richard Whaley and Joe Keliiahānui were killed in the Japanese air raid on nearby Howland Island.

By Feb. 9, the "colonies" were evacuated, the islands left uninhabited once again. A project that had begun in quiet ended violently with World War II.

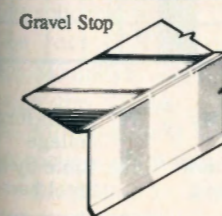
Yet the experience was one that would stay with the Hawaiian men always. It remains among the most exciting episodes of their lives. "Any time I get in the dumps, I start to think about the good old days on Baker Island," Piianaia recalls. "It gave me the ability to be in equilibrium in any kind of situation that might arise. I got into some very tight spots during the war and I'd think about when I was only 19, 20 years old and I was in another kind of tough spot and then, first thing you know, I'd settle down. Thinking about the Baker Island incident pulled me through.

"I think that at a young age, before your mind and future are settled in a specific direction, the opportunity to be left in nature is something youngsters don't have anymore," Piianaia reflects. "Our companions were the birds. All we had was the four of us and nothing else. Perhaps that's how Adam and Eve could have felt in the Garden of Eden. Everything was so pristine."

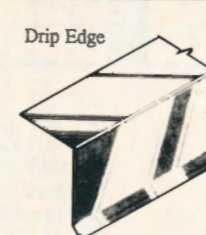
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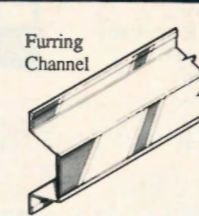
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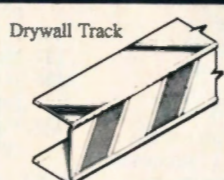
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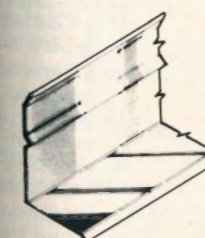
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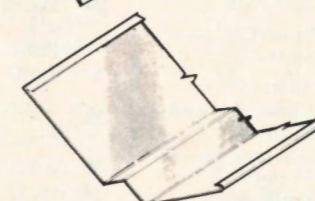
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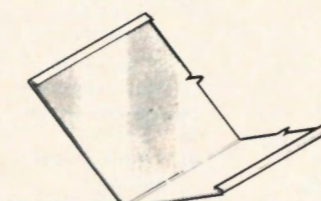
Drywall Track



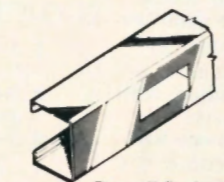
Tucker Flashing  
(various sizes)



W Valley  
(18" or 24")



Standard Valley  
(18" or 24")



Drywall Studs  
(25 to 16 Gage)



3" or 4" Pipe  
(24 or 26 Gage Galv.)  
Copper

**Precision Industries, Ltd.**

928 Kaamahu Place Honolulu, Hawaii 96817  
Telephone (808) 847-3902

Aluminum Lock Shingles And Accessories  
Dry Wall Metal Studs • Flashing  
Contract forming & punching up to 1/2" plate

WE WILL CUSTOM - MAKE  
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