

The Colonizing "Itasca"

By LIEUTENANT COMMANDER FRANK T. KENNER, U. S. Coast Guard

THERE probably has never been anything in the history of the United States, from one point of view, that parallels the project of "colonizing" the Line or Equatorial Islands of Jarvis, Howland and Baker.

A few years ago nobody knew of, or cared about, the Midway or Wake Islands. They came to life when the Pan-American Airways started their trans-Pacific air service. Similarly, Jarvis, Howland and Baker Islands are diamonds in the rough today; whereas a few years ago they were just another three coral-islands of little value—worthless, and to be forgotten. Aviation lines to the Antipodes supply the explanation.

Plans were formulated in the spring of 1935 to send personnel to these Little Three Islands, to secure air data. They also provided that American personnel would constantly "occupy" the Islands. The Coast Guard cutter *Itasca* was selected to transport the personnel and material. The Coast Guard personnel, of course, also would be invaluable in the working operations of the expeditions.

Commander Wilfrid N. Derby commanded the *Itasca* on the three first expeditions, Commander Fletcher W. Brown on the fourth expedition, and Lieutenant Commander Frank T. Kenner on the fifth and sixth.



House Built by Kamehameha Boys on Jarvis Island

Difficulties that do not exist in other localities are encountered when working the Line or Equatorial Islands of Jarvis, Howland and Baker. There are no anchorages at any of the Islands. The *Itasca* had to drift to the leeward of the island being visited. Peculiarities of the reefs that surround the islands required particular care in landing the personnel and materials. The small boats had to pass through the surf on every island.

The first cruise furnished illustrations of certain conditions that had to be overcome in order to bring success to the mission. The *Itasca* crossed The Line at 8:00 a.m., March 25, stopping briefly to receive *Neptunus Rex* and his retinue of Shellbacks, who initiated all landlubbers with traditional ceremonies. That condition was favorable, however, because it raised morale and all enjoyed the affair, even the initiates. At Jarvis Island the *Itasca* "drifted to the westward during the night," there being no anchorage. At this island the Commanding Officer "granted liberty to enable all personnel to land on the Island."

At Howland Island the Commanding Officer landed in a surfboat to investigate conditions. He found out that the landing of stores would be impracticable at low-water, when the surf broke heavily on a hard shelf of coral rock which was just awash. The surfboat was launched with difficulty. Finally, at 1:00 p.m., the tide having risen so as to cover the rock-shelf with four or five feet of water, the personnel began boating stores ashore. During this day the *Itasca* rode stern-to at the end of a two-hundred fathom, six-inch line, secured ashore. By means of a line from the shore to a boat anchored just outside the surf seventeen drums of water were hauled ashore. In a similar manner a small dory was hauled back and forth to remove personnel from the shore, leaving only the regularly detailed five-man party on the Island. All that gives an idea of the problems that had to be solved on the first expedition. The following expeditions produced many others, but solutions were found for all.

An interesting experience occurred on the Fourth Expedition. On January 24, 1936, the *Itasca* sighted Swain's Island. She hove-to off the Island at 7:55 a.m., and liberty was granted to the men. Several officers also went ashore. It was learned that the hurricane that blew across the Island on January 15th had caused considerable damage, and had created a shortage of food. So the *Itasca* landed approximately 1,100 pounds of staple food supplies for the relief of the inhabitants. Two Hawaiian Boys were left on the Island to collect specimens and scientific data. The Coast Guard Patrol Boat *Tiger* sailed from Honolulu for Jarvis Island on June 13, 1936, as part of the Fifth Expedition, arriving there June 19th. Personnel and supplies were landed and the *Tiger* returned to Honolulu, arriving at that port on June 25th.

While the Coast Guard probably did not meet "anything new" in the way of actual conditions, in these expeditions, the carrying of American citizens of Hawaiian birth as "colonists" was rather unique. The Hawaiian boys of Kamehameha School were all of a very fine type. They fitted into the plan very exactly. They were very willing workers, on all the expeditions, and assisted cheerfully in all of the operations. They were quick to learn what was expected of them, and familiarized themselves efficiently with the expeditionary duties. The boys proved themselves very industrious in establishing their camps, policing them, and making them habitable. Many of them have displayed great ingenuity, in making their camps comfortable—they were under canvas until recently. For instance, they built a two-story house on Howland Island. Moreover, the boys kept themselves in excellent health. This, you might say, is a product of their previous training and home life.

These expeditions will continue on an average of about four a year. Some day the great air-liners will streamline their way through the Pacific air southward, lighting at these dry spots of land, and then into the air again to complete their journey. That all this will come to pass will have been made possible, to some extent, by the intelligence, patience, endurance and cooperation of these Hawaiian boys of the Kamehameha School.