HONOIUIU

BOMBS, BIRDS AND WHALES:

The Little-Known Story of Kaula

By Victor Lipman

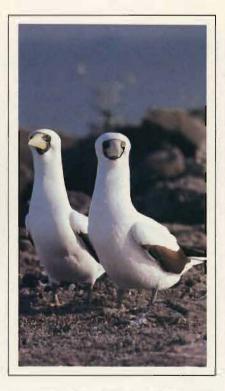
I t was a sunny February afternoon two years ago and Skip Naftel of the Easy Rider had just observed three humpback whales and a school of spinner dolphins and was pulling away from the island when the planes came.

On government contract doing a humpback whale survey, Naftel watched as the planes made one pass over the island and then began to bomb. The bombing lasted about a half-hour. Bombs were hitting all over the island; many were missing the island and landing in the water. Naftel could feel the reverberations in his boat, several miles away.

The island was Kaula. A commercial fisherman, Naftel knew Kaula and the waters around it well, and was aware of its use as a military target. What upset him was the haphazard nature of the bombing, in theory confined to one tip of rocky wasteland but in practice endangering bird colonies and the whales and dolphins he had just observed.

"They were bombing it and they weren't bombing where they were supposed to be bombing," Naftel recalls. Back in Honolulu he filed formal complaints with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The image of "little brown-eyed birds with Marine jets screaming in on them" has more than a little



potential for sensationalism, says Navy spokesman Lt. Jamie Davidson. Yet the fact Kaula has been bombed by the Navy (and occasionally by Marines and Air Force) for nearly 30 years and few people outside Hawaii's environmentalist community know about it is testimony to the island's obscurity.

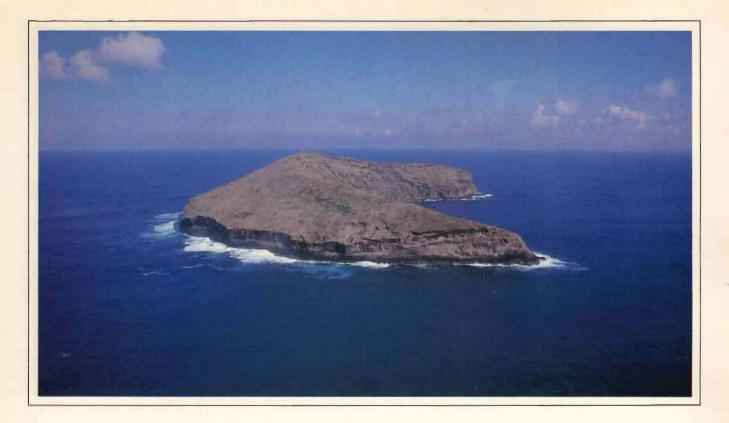
Located 23 miles southwest of Niihau, Kaula is little more than a dot on a map, covering 280 acres. It is crescent-shaped, and the curving top of the crestline is about a mile long. Lacking fresh water, Kaula is uninhabited by humans. It is, however, a nesting ground for approximately 25 species of seabirds, including shearwaters, boobies, and noddy and sooty terns.

It seems an odd battleground, desolate and remote. Yet competition for this unlikely prize has sparked a controversy that has spread to the highest bureaucratic levels in Washington, D.C.

The Kaula story is not an easy one to unravel. In simplest terms, the military, for reasons they claim to be of national security, is bombing the island, and a loose coalition of conservationists and commercial fishermen is angry at what they feel is a needless destruction of valuable animal habitat.

But on closer inspection Hawaii's environmental community itself is divided. Some scientists feel the dangers posed by the bombing are exaggerated and unproven. Others even praise the Navy for its responsiveness, for pioneering high-technology projects potentially beneficial to researchers.

Associate editor Victor Lipman wrote about endangered wildlife in the leeward islands in the 1978 Holiday Annual.



Masked boobies (left) are one of approximately 25 seabird species found on Kaula. An aerial view of Kaula (above): Nearest land is Niihau, more than 20 miles away.

Perhaps most curious is the treatment accorded Kaula by the news media. While the bombing of Kahoolawe has in recent years been nothing short of a media feast, the bombing of Kaula has been ignored. As one biologist put it, "Kaula? Who the hell has heard of Kaula?"

"It's an extremely rich area," says Ed Shallenberger, a commercial fisherman and vice president of Sea Life Park, "not just for humpback whales—for two species of porpoise, many species of fish. It's a good place for fishermen to make their livelihood. I've done pretty well there. Certainly others have. It's really a rich area. It's a shame to see them bomb the thing."

The events that led eventually to the bombing of Kaula were set in motion in 1909, when, for reasons that may never be entirely clear, Kaula was omitted from Theodore Roosevelt's Executive Order establishing nearly all of the leeward islands as a seabird sanctuary. In 1924, Territorial Governor Wallace Farrington made Kaula a U.S. Lighthouse Reservation, under control of the Department of Commerce; eight years later a lighthouse was actually built. In 1939, the lighthouse service

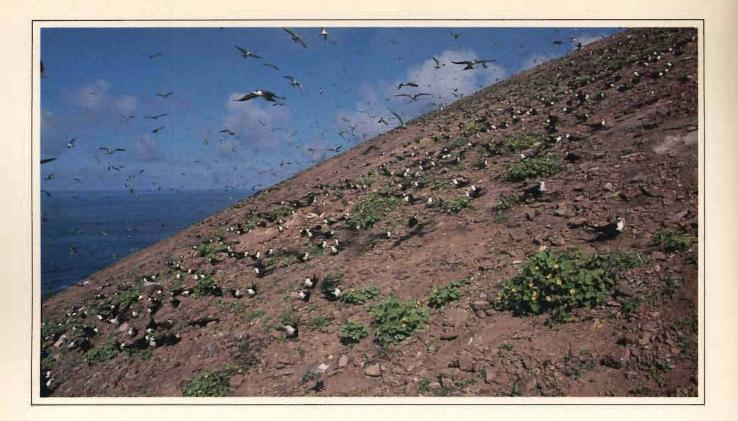
was transferred from the Department of Commerce to the U.S. Coast Guard. In 1947 the lighthouse was closed, and in 1952 the bombing began.

For years the bombing went virtually unnoticed. Scattered protests came in the early '60s from Kauai, where commercial fishermen were upset at the disturbance to birds, which are valuable in helping to locate schools of fish. In 1965 Rep. Patsy Mink brought complaints to the attention of the Department of the Interior, which was subsequently convinced by the Navy that Kaula was a vital training ground for the war effort in Vietnam.

Also in 1965, jurisdiction over Kaula once again was transferred, this time from the Coast Guard to the Navy. And in October of that year, two pilots from the aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga*, en route to Vietnam, missed Kaula by more than 20 miles and dropped eight 250-pound bombs on Niihau—a blunder which killed no one but earned a reprimand from Sen. Hiram Fong for "gross carelessness"

Throughout the '70s an occasional lone voice of protest might surface in a newspaper op-ed page, but little more. Then in 1978 Skip Naftel filed his complaints with the Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service, and bureaucratic wheels were once again set

"In 1965, two pilots from the aircraft carrier Ticonderoga missed Kaula and dropped eight 250-pound bombs on Niihau"



in motion.

"That's initially what started the action off," Naftel recalls. "Then it sort of quieted down and I screamed and hollered and everybody said it was being negotiated on upper levels. Next year I brought it up again, and Ed Shallenberger also brought it up.

"They scream national defense every time I bring it up. And when they're screaming national defense, there's absolutely nothing you can do."

A ccording to Lt. Jamie Davidson, Kaula normally serves as a target area from Monday through Thursday and is open to fishermen on weekends. It is not the island itself fishermen use, but the waters around it—productive fishing grounds for ahi, aku and deep water snapper, among others.

According to Lt. Davidson, there are two main reasons why Kaula is a valuable target. First, the island is far enough removed from civilization to be a suitable site for large ordnance (often 500-pound bombs)—a role Kahoolawe can't fill because of noise disturbances to residents of Maui. Second, because of its shape (a sharp point of land) Kaula makes a good radar target—a role Kahoolawe can't fill because its targets are inland ("mostly rings and barrels") and not identifiable on radar. "Also," Davidson adds, "a plane can go down to

Kahoolawe, and if the weather is bad we can divert it out to Kaula to complete its mission. That's important because when a plane loads up, you really don't like to come back with a bomb underneath you in landing. It's a dangerous situation, especially for planes based on a carrier."

Implicit in all this is the notion debated by some—that practice bombing is necessary in the first place. The standard military argument is that it makes no sense to have weapons unless men are trained to use them. "Whatever a plane does," Davidson explains, "a pilot has to be able to demonstrate he can do before he goes over there to the action area, so to speak, the western Pacific and Indian Ocean. If we lost Kaula, those two types of skills—the ability to use 500-pound and larger bombs, and the ability to use radar bombing well, a man wouldn't have those skills when he deployed.

"Now when I say he wouldn't have them, what would be done is a decision would have to be made whether to get them. It comes down to dollars and cents. Is it practicable to send a man back to California to use San Clemente Island bombing range? Or China Lake, a land-based range over there? Is it practicable to send him back there, and then back here, and then out there [the western Pacific or Indian Ocean]? That's

about a month process. We're gonna send him away for eight or nine months as it is. As you know, people are bailing out of the military right and left. And it doesn't help with our retention if we tell a guy he's gonna go for eight months and then send him away longer."

In short, the military's need for Kaula is a textbook example illustrating the kinds of behind-thescenes factors which influence policy:

In other words, losing Kaula would mean a logistical problem?

Davidson: Cash. Cash and time away from home. We will say Kahoolawe is essential. We will say that because of the type of mission it does. Kaula we will say is essential, it's very important, because of those two important skills.

Are you saying that Kaula is as essential as Kahoolawe?

Davidson: No, no. No. No, I wouldn't say that.

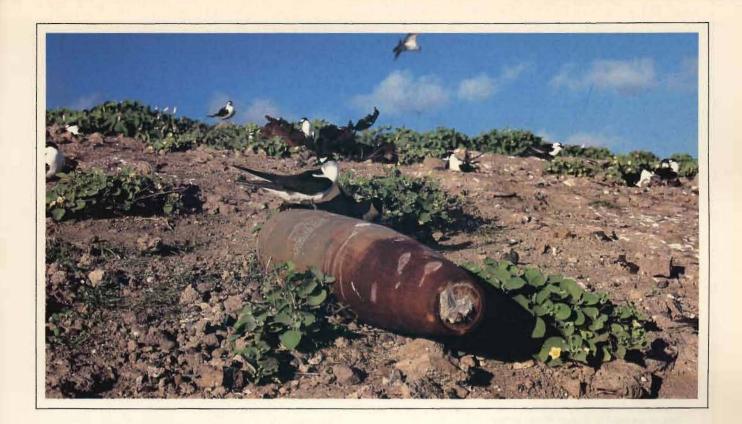
Then it's less essential?

Davidson: Less essential than Kahoolawe.

But still . . .

Davidson: Still very important. For those two aspects of training. If we're gonna give pilots that equipment, we should at least show them how to use it.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act says it is unlawful to "take" any migratory bird. There are roughly 25



A sooty tern colony (above left): Despite the bombing, Kaula's bird population has at times exceeded 100,000.

An odd landscape (above): Bombs, birds and shrubbery share Kaula's rocky soil.

Although bombing is supposed to be restricted to Kaula's southeast tip, bombs occasionally miss their mark (right), as this February 1978 photo shows.

species of migratory birds on Kaula. In the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the term "take" is defined as "pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect, or attempt to." Although bombing is not specifically included in the definition, it requires little imagination to see that dropping explosives on or near birds is contrary to the spirit of the law. Violators face a maximum fine of \$500 and/or six months in jail—a punishment that in Hawaii has rarely, if ever, been invoked.

Strictly speaking, there has never been a doubt that bombing Kaula violates the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Bombs are dropped. Some birds are killed. The Navy does not deny this. But how widespread is the destruction? How many birds are being killed?

According to Ron Walker, the state wildlife chief who heads the seabird survey team on Kaula, the number of birds killed by the bombing is difficult to assess. Even with the bombing, Kaula's seabird population has been known to exceed



100,000 at certain times of the year. Says Walker, "On any island—whether it's being bombed or not—you'll find dead seabirds. It's hard to show cause and effect because, of course, when you're on Kaula there's no bombing. You have to look at circumstantial evidence. We found very little of that, really. It's difficult to determine what a dead bird died of unless you do an autopsy on it.

"All I can say is that the number of dead birds we've seen on the island is not to be unexpected for an island where there's no bombing going on."

Encouraged perhaps by such fa-

"'In environmental law,'" says Lt. Davidson, 'you're guilty until you prove yourself innocent'"

On Kaula

(In June, Victor Lipman accompanied a team of state, federal and military wildlife researchers on a twoday trip to Kaula. The island is reachable only by helicopter, except in extremely calm weather.)

Seen from the distance, Kaula rises steeply out of the ocean like a single gigantic slab of rock, something like Rabbit Island but twice as large. One end of the island has a flat area, the only spot suitable for a helicopter landing. As we touch down, clouds of birds, cawing wildly, scatter like confetti.

The helicopter leaves and we are left among birds. Not a few birds, not a few hundred, but thousands, thousands upon thousands of terns, boobies, shearwaters, frigate birds: in the air, on the ground, flying, swooping, nesting, cawing, screeching, flapping their wings, guarding their young, sitting quietly.

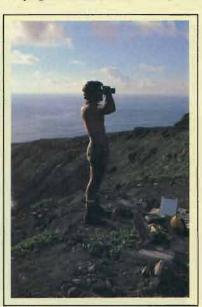
After setting up a makeshift camp at the island's one sheltered spot, the party (there are 10 of us) disperses. Bird specialists Ron Walker, Tom Telfer and Robert Shallenberger hike off to observe and count birds, fisheries specialist Gene Nitta watches for whales and other marine life, geologist Michael Garcia gathers rock samples, Navy demolitions specialist Mark Montgomery inspects unexploded ordnance, and so on. For my part, I wander around, doing my best to look purposeful, trying not to get in anybody's way.

This is not the first Navy-organized trip to Kaula. Since 1976, it has been more or less an annual venture for wildlife officials. The purpose? To observe the birds and marine life on and around the island, to see first-hand the impact of the military's bombing, and to make sure, as Navy wildlife biologist Gerry Swedberg puts it, nothing is "drastically wrong." If, for instance, one year this prime nesting spot were suddenly abandoned, it would be safe to say something was seriously ecologically amiss.

My first hike from one end of the island to the other, at a leisurely pace, takes about 45 minutes. The day is hot and sunny, with a stiff, constant wind. Vegetation on Kaula is sparse—a little grass, a few flowers, no trees. Much of



Camping on Kaula: The site is dusty, but offers shelter from the wind.



Whale-watching on a previous trip, near the remains of Kaula's lighthouse.

the ground is discolored by bird droppings. The droppings are dry and scentless; the rocks look as though they've been spattered by vast quantities of white paint.

Birds abound: mostly masked and brown and red-footed boobies along the crestline, and colonies of common noddies and gray-backed and sooty terns on the slopes. The boobies are my favorites. They are relatively unafraid, standing in groups of two, parent with chick, allowing you to approach within two or three feet of them, watching your every move

carefully through pale yellow eyes. But the second you draw too close they warn you away—males with a peculiar, high-pitched whistle and females with a squawk. Terns, on the other hand, are much more skittish. Any abrupt human movement, even from a distance, can cause a whole colony to take flight. Indeed, fishermen who have witnessed bombing runs have said that many of Kaula's birds, responding perhaps to some sort of instinctive early warning system, evacuate the island long before any plane appears on the horizon, long before human ears can detect an engine's far-off hum.

Scattered about the island are eggs, which we have been instructed not to step on. Also scattered about are bombs and bomb fragments (some rusted, some newer), which we have been instructed not to step on. But actually, you would have to go out of your way to get yourself exploded. Since Kaula has no tall grass or shrubbery, the bombs are easy to see. Only once in the seven trips to Kaula has anyone been hurt—and that when a person slipped on a pile of loose rocks and fell, breaking a rib and puncturing a lung.

Two things are immediately apparent. First, bombs do hit all sections of the island. Although they are most abundant in the designated target area (and the ground is most deeply cratered there), metal fragments can be found all over, even around our campsite at the island's opposite end.

And second, virtually no dead birds are lying around. I personally see only one dead bird, a gray-backed tern nestled among rocks, part of its body blown away. Of course, this does not prove conclusively more birds are not killed. Kaula's sides are steep and the wind is strong. Most birds—no matter what they die of—would quickly be swept off the rock into the ocean.

One might think an isolated island would be a quiet place, but this isn't so at all. Such a concentration of birds is noisy, to put it mildly, and the wind is a constant, whistling presence. As the afternoon passes, the wind picks up even more; by evening it is nearly a gale. Apparently, this is the usual pattern.

After dinner a fire is going, and the bird-counters are comparing notes. Ron Walker, the state wildlife chief, organizes a contest in which each person guesses how many birds he thinks are on the island. Walker offers to buy the person who comes closest to the official estimate a bottle of apricot brandy.

In past years, the bird population has ranged from 3,500 in January 76 to 139,000 in March 78. The huge fluctuations can be accounted for by the fact the birds are migratory. Different species breed at different times of the year. Tonight, most of the guesses are middle-of-the-road (50,000 . . . 60,000 . . . 75,000) until the Navy's Gerry Swedberg says 150,000. ("A patriotic guess," he jokes, meaning that birds are thriving despite the bombing.) I say 82,000 and have a totally unfounded hunch I will be right. Tom Telfer, with scientific precision, guesses 69,103. In the end, despite my confidence, I am off by 35,000 birds. Kaula's official bird population for June 1980 is tabulated as 46,579 (29,000 of which are sooty terns), and the apricot brandy winner is Ralph Daehler, a state forester from Kauai.

It is an interesting night. The sky is full of stars and shadowy flying forms, and we are treated to a concert of mournful bird-cries. Setting up camp earlier in the day, we had moved some wedge-tailed shearwaters' eggs. Now, in the dark, the shearwaters have returned home. As I drift off to sleep, a shearwater, probably searching for its egg, waddles across my pillow. In the middle of the night I am awakened by another bird, this time walking across my sleeping bag. Feeling webbed feet on my stomach, I wake with a start, but by the time I look up the bird is gone. _V.L. vorable assessments, and anxious—after the mountain of negative publicity over Kahoolawe—to square their operations with the letter of the law, the Navy applied in May 1979 for a special permit that would authorize the occasional taking of birds on Kaula during training operations. If approved, the permit would have given the military's bombing of Kaula an official Fish & Wildlife stamp of approval—and effectively defused the issue.

The Navy's request went to the regional Fish & Wildlife lawenforcement office in Portland, Oregon, to a man named Jack Downs. In January of this year, Downs replied:

"We are unable to reconcile our commitment to protect migratory birds," he wrote, "with a proposed activity that has such a potential for mass destruction of these birds. . . . A 'practice bomb' does not lend itself to a disciplined controlled take of birds, nests, or eggs.

"Accordingly, we are denying your request."

The Navy was surprised by this terse answer that apparently made no allowances for national security considerations. "The reasoning was the two activities were incompatible at face value," comments Lt. Davidson. "It didn't get much farther than that."

Downs explains his decision this way: "It just seemed to me my first obligation is protection of these critters, and dropping bombs on them isn't protecting them too well.

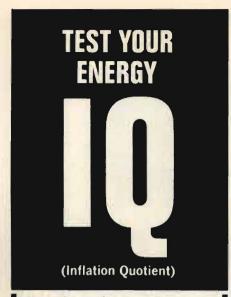
"For scientific and educational purposes we can issue permits for the taking of otherwise protected birds, but this certainly couldn't be construed as scientific or educational. And usually when we issue a permit we have some sort of control on the method of taking. There's just no way you could drop a bomb and control what it kills after it hits.

"I think if you reviewed all the modern techniques that are available now, you'd find the bombs they use to practice there might be antiquated. I'm not at all an expert on ordnance, but I think anyone who follows armament strategies of today might question whether that method isn't antiquated.

"But that didn't enter into my decision."

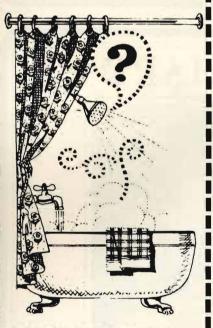
The Endangered Species Act says it is unlawful to take an endangered species, and from December to Continued on page 84

"Kaula has always been out of sight, out of mind"



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Kaula

Continued from page 55

May the humpback whale, an endangered species, is present in waters around Kaula.* A large bank running west of the island makes a good habitat for humpbacks, who prefer depths shallower than 100 fathoms in Hawaiian waters. No danger to whales would exist if all the bombs landed on Kaula, but they don't.

Kaula is not exactly a massive target. The Navy admits that perhaps 10 percent of its bombs miss the island and land in the ocean. Ed Shallenberger, who has witnessed "about eight or 10" bombing runs from a distance, claims the miss ratio is as high as one in three. "It depends on the pilot," he says. "Some pilots are really hot, they never miss. Other pilots miss all the time."

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) was concerned not only with direct hits on whaleswhich obviously would be deadly but with explosions in the general vicinity. "We're not sure-and the Navy's not sure either," says NMFS fishery biologist John Naughton, "exactly what the effects would be, distance-wise, of an underwater explosion on a large marine mammal." Despite the lack of hard data, the assumption was that bombing certainly wouldn't help the already endangered whales and possibly could prove disturbing or disruptive. Accordingly, the NMFS recommended that the Navy not use live bombs from December to May.

The result of all this was that in February 1979 the Navy agreed to use only inert ordnance on Kaula during humpback whale season. In other words, from December to May they would still bomb the island, but the weapons would be dummies and would not explode. Thus, pilots would still get their practice and humpbacks would be safe from all but direct hits—a prospect considered too remote to worry about.

In fact, the Navy went so far as to design a \$15,000 sonar-buoy network which would detect when humpbacks were in the area by picking up their haunting song on a delicate underwater sound system. "There was quite a lot of work in setting this system up," Naughton says, "and in April they put the first test buoys out and they worked very well. We anticipate their putting them in prior to the whale season next year, so that in case the whales are picked up before December 1—the whales are very vocal—then the Navy will stop [using live bombs] even earlier."

"In all fairness," concludes NMFS administrator Doyle Gates, "we think the Navy has been responsive to our recommendations. We're very pleased at that."

The trouble with using inert The trouble will bombs, says Lt. Davidson, is that they're not quite the real thingespecially for the mechanics and ordnance handlers who actually fuse and load the bombs.

"A person's interest level seems to grow," says Davidson, "when he's working with the real thing, rather than one that will just give out a poof. He has to be able to fuse and load a 500-pound bomb—a real 500-pound bomb—as opposed to a practice bomb. It's the final exam, the same thing he would have to do in combat. You don't use practice bombs in

"For all these claims about endangering the whales, nobody's produced any bodies yet. In environmental law," he says with mild sarcasm, "you're guilty until you prove yourself innocent.

"Especially if you're military."

The trouble with using inert bombs, says Ed Shallenberger, is that they still do a lot of damage. Whether explosive or inert, a bomb that lands on a bird will do more than singe a few feathers.

"I've seen bombs hit right in the middle of bird colonies," he says. "Imagine a 500-pound projectile coming at you at 500 miles an hour, or something like that.

"Inert bombs are bad enough."

ollowing Jack Downs's refusal to grant the Navy a special permit to take birds, the Navy took its case to Washington. There, Navy representatives met with representatives from the Department of the Interior. The question: Would the head Fish & Wildlife office overrule its regional branch and give the Navy the permit?

At this writing, the issue is unresolved.* When first contacted by

^{*}During the rest of the year humpbacks move to colder northern waters.

^{*}Until the issue is settled in Washington, the Navy has decided to refrain from using live ordnance on Kaula. Thus, only inert bombs are being used at present. With a favorable ruling from Washington, the Navy presumably would resume using live bombs from June to December.

HONOLULU, George Brakhage of the Office of Migratory Bird Management said the permit question would probably be decided in a matter of weeks. That was months

One of the points Navy spokesmen made at the meetings was that, to put the matter in perspective, the American military has more than 100 target areas around the world, and every one of them, in some way, at some time, has been controversial. Apparently the search for a target area is somewhat like Oahu's search for a reliever airport: Many people recognize the need for one, but no one wants it in his own backyard.

At last check, Brakhage said bureaucratic wheels were still "grinding away." Once the data on Kaula has circulated throughout the bureaucratic maze, the final permit decision will come from the Division of Fish & Wildlife's director, Lynn Greenwalt. But even if a permit is granted, civilian groups may take legal action to try to stop the bombing. The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, for example, has already made inquiries in this regard.

The controversy is unlikely to be settled soon. "What we're finding at this stage," says Brakhage, "is that there are a lot of unknowns about the whole darn issue!"

This, unfortunately, is true. Conclusive evidence about Kaula is scarce.* What constitutes "disruption" to an animal's habitat, and how does one measure it? Occasional Navy-organized research trips (see accompanying story) show plenty of birds are on Kaula, but who can say for certain the island would not support more birds if the bombing were stopped? Opponents of the bombing say an important issue is not just how many animals are killed, but what is the island's potential?

"It strikes me," says George Balazs of the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, "that it's unfair to survey an area even if you're bombing it with dud bombs. You lay off the place for six months, a year, maybe ideally even two years. Then you do a survey and see what the potential of the place is in a relatively undisturbed condition. For instance, nobody's



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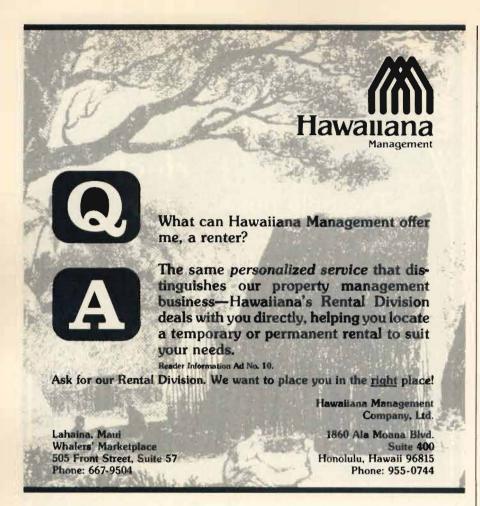
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^{*}This extends even to such basic facts as Kaula's size. According to the Geography Division of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Kaula covers .438 square miles, or 280 acres but nearly all the literature on the subject lists Kaula as 108 or 136 acres.





ever seen any monk seals out there. But what the hell kind of a monk seal would want to haul up in an area that's being bombed?"

So what does it all mean? You have an island that most people have never heard of being bombed for national security reasons that are not particularly clear, and that bombing is opposed by people who are concerned about dangers that as yet are not well documented.

At the very least, it would seem a good idea to find out more about Kaula. After visiting the island in June, U.S. Fish & Wildlife refuge manager Robert Shallenberger made the point that if the bombing continues, it should be monitored much more closely than it has been in the past. Have researchers visit Kaula more frequently than once a year, he suggests, so they can get a clearer sense, on a month-to-month basis, say, of how the birds and whales are doing, of what happens when the bombs miss their mark.

Unlike Kahoolawe, Kaula has never been a big story. There has never been anything remotely resembling a Protect Kaula Ohana. The island has only the remains of two stone structures which may or may not have been heiaus, the foundation of a lighthouse, and birds.

The bottom line, perhaps, is that Kaula has always been out of sight, out of mind. It is a small island in the middle of nowhere. Standing atop Kaula, you can see the hazy blue outline of a good-sized island to the northeast. Compared to Kaula, it is easy to imagine that distant island as a large and impressive place: with many people, many plush hotels, a hub of activity.

That island is Niihau.

July's Puzzle Answer

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