

# LIFE and DEATH at the

Kure Atoll, more than 1,300 miles northwest of Honolulu, is a refuge for endangered wildlife and a home for 23 Coast Guard men and women. But it has also been a deadly nemesis to decades of seafarers

**A**s the Coast Guard C-130 Hercules dips and banks into its final approach to Kure Atoll, one of the crewmen reaches into his pocket and pulls out a lacy, blue-and-white garter. He sniffs it, then slips it onto his right arm, over his sleeve and all the way up to his bicep. The plane continues its descent; the crewman peers out the large scanner window on the side of the fuselage. A few seconds later the wheels touch down with a bump, the entire plane vibrates, the propeller engines roar into reverse, straining to stop the rolling aircraft before the end of the 4,000-foot coral runway. The crewman turns toward the passengers, smiles and hollers, "No bird!" He then slips the garter down off his arm and tucks it back into his pocket.



*Above: view from the flight deck of a C-130.*



*Kure Atoll, with coral reef surrounding Green Island and the Coast Guard LORAN station.*

# END of the CHAIN

By Brian Nicol





**O**ur C-130 has landed at Kure without hitting a gooney bird. The short runway at the small atoll 1,367 statute miles northwest of Honolulu International Airport is difficult enough for a pilot and his aircraft, but the numerous goonies make touch down even more nerve-wracking. Many times C-130 propellers splatter the unfortunate birds, bending prop blades and, of course, risking the lives of crew and passengers. When a prop is bent, a replacement must be flown out from Barbers Point Naval Air Station, a five-hour flight away. The resulting wait and maintenance time usually strands an aircraft and crew for at least a day.

But there are worse places to be stranded.

Kure is an oval-shaped atoll 5 miles across at its widest. Within its coral reef, along the southern edge, sits Green Island, the only permanent land here at the farthest end of the chain of atolls, rocks, islands and shoals known as the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Green Island is the oldest Hawaiian Island; it is more than 1,500 miles northwest of the Big Island, the youngest Hawaiian Island. Sometimes called Ocean Island, Green Island is 1-1/2 miles long and a half-mile wide. Its highest point is a sand dune 26 feet above sea level. It is almost completely covered by green, waist-high vegetation called *Scaevola*. It is completely surrounded by a pristine lagoon teeming with ocean life. Its inhabitants include an assortment of birds, hundreds of small Polynesian rats, an occasional monk seal or sea turtle hauled up onto the sand and 23 men and women of the United States Coast Guard.

A C-130 lands at Kure every two weeks or so, bringing provisions, mail, replacement personnel, scientists and occasionally, like on this July afternoon, "VIPs." Honolulu City Council members Leigh-Wai Doo, Marilyn Bornhorst and Tony Narvaes, accompanied by council staffers, department heads, scientists and seven of us from the media, are here to stake Honolulu's claim for this tiny island in the middle of a lagoon in the middle of an ocean.

Kure is a fragile, austere place, under the protection of a variety of state and federal agencies and departments. But the city and county of Honolulu, because state law assigned to it "any island not included in any

other county," also has jurisdiction here. The city recently formalized its claim for Kure and the rest of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (except Midway, which remains federal territory) by including them in the city's general plan and development plans. The islands are zoned "conservation."

## GREATER LOVE

During the early morning darkness of Oct. 29, 1870, Capt. Montgomery Sicard steered USS *Saginaw* slowly and cautiously toward Kure. The atoll, named for a Russian navigator decades earlier, had already earned a reputation as a shipwreck isle. In July



Unloading a C-130 at Kure.

All these layers of government bureaucracy could prove to be a blessing. Although a destination resort is not about to sprout up on Kure or any other of these faraway islands, there have been plans for undersea exploration for manganese nodules and a proposal for a fishery at Tern Island in French Frigate Shoals. Such commercial projects could upset the delicate balance between the environment and the land and sea creatures.

Any development proposal must be cleared by the federal government, the state and, now, the city and county. "If a project passes through all that, it probably deserves to happen," says Councilman Doo. "The city is providing another overlay of protection."

The three council members and the rest of us have only a few hours to tour Kure's Coast Guard facilities, marvel at the island wildlife and take a refreshing swim in the lagoon. Our stay on Kure will be brief and according to schedule. But it has not always been that way for visitors to these shores.

1837, the British ship *Gledstanes* had smashed onto Kure's windward reef, and five years later a similar fate befell the American whaling ship *Parker*. In both cases, the crews swam ashore to Green Island and survived for months on seals, turtles and birds. And in both cases, rescue came only after a contingent of survivors challenged the open sea and sailed in small boats to Kauai to summon help.

So, in October 1870, Capt. Sicard approached Kure with care. He was sailing from Midway, 58 miles to the east, after having picked up an eight-man engineering party that had been working for months dredging a passage through Midway's reef. But now money for the project had run out and *Saginaw* was sent from California to bring the men home. But before sailing back to San Francisco, Capt. Sicard decided to steam west to Kure, circle the atoll once, looking for any shipwrecked sailors, and then turn toward home. It was the kind of gesture expected of seagoing men, no matter what flag they flew.

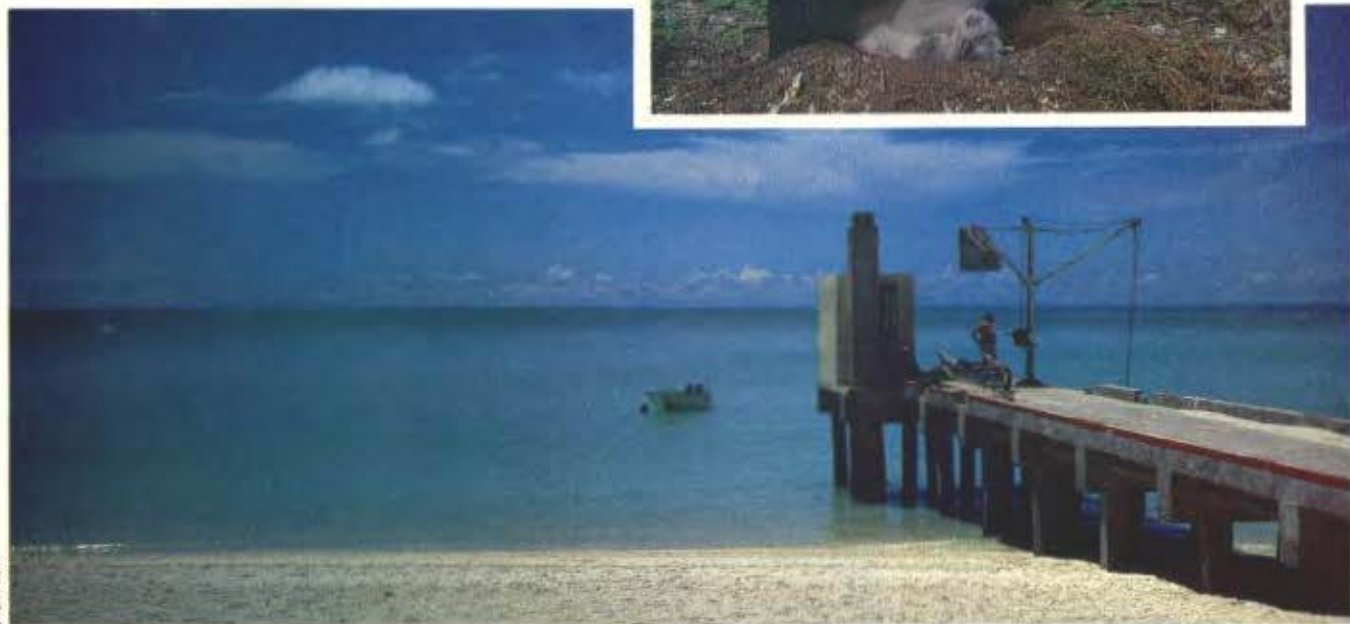
Sicard didn't want to be near Kure's



*Right: nesting gooney bird.*

*Below: on the beach at Kure.*

*Bottom: low-flying gooney and reclining monk seal.*





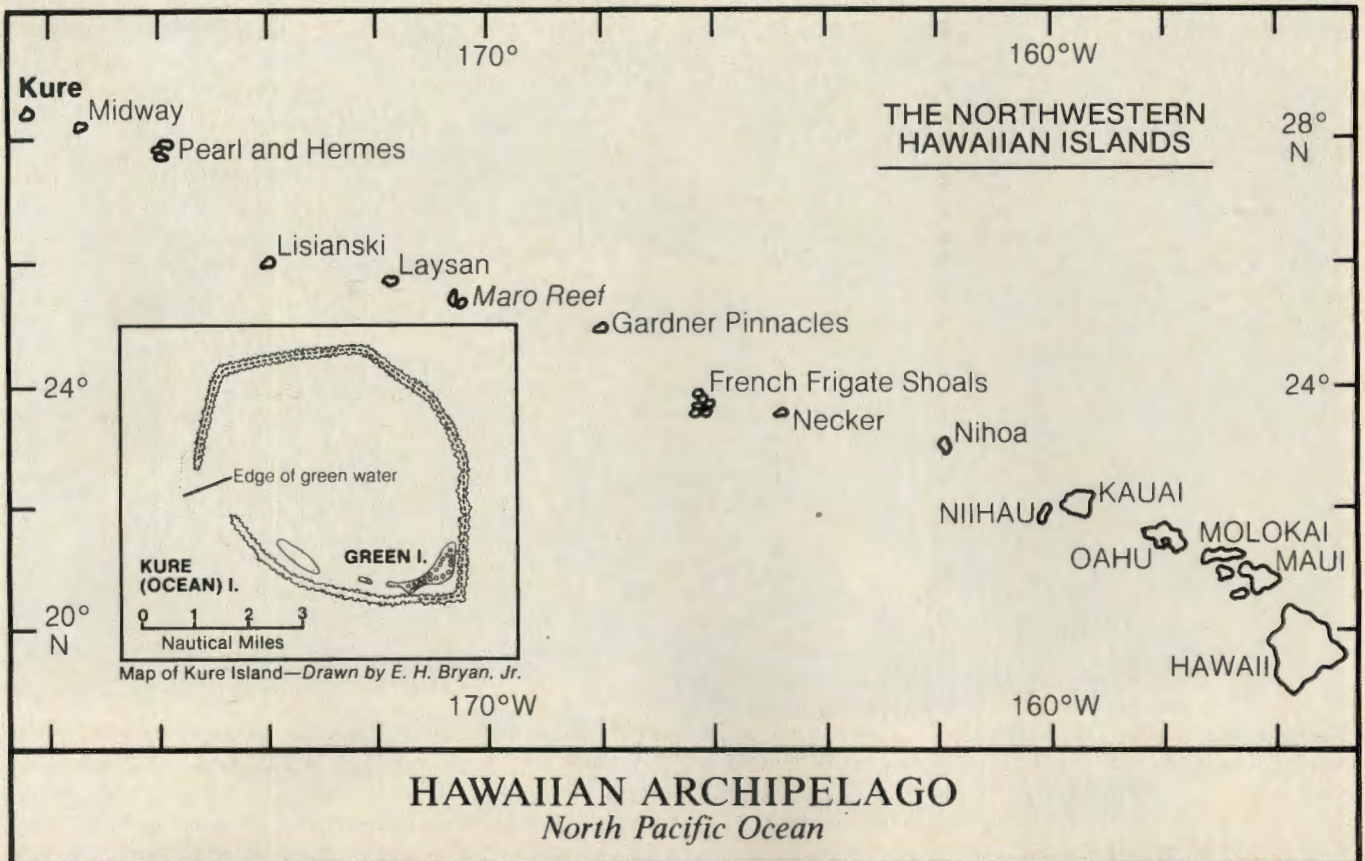
reef until well past dawn, when the sky would be bright and the dangerous coral visible. And so the ship steamed slowly. But apparently a quiet current caught the vessel and swept it too quickly toward the atoll.

Suddenly from the darkness, the lookout heard the ominous rumble of waves on a reef. Capt. Sicard ordered reverse engines, but a boiler blew and *Saginaw* was pushed to its fate. George Read, the ship's paymaster, writing in 1912 in *The Last Cruise of the Saginaw*, described the next few moments: "Just before I reached the top of the wardroom ladder, I felt the ship strike something and supposed we were in collision with another vessel. The shock was an easy one at first, but was followed immediately by others of increasing force, and, as my feet touched the deck, by two severe shocks that caused the ship to tremble in every timber. The long easy swell that had been lifting us gently along in the open sea was now transformed into heavy breakers as it reached and swept over the coral reef, each wave lifting and dropping the quaking ship with a frightful thud."

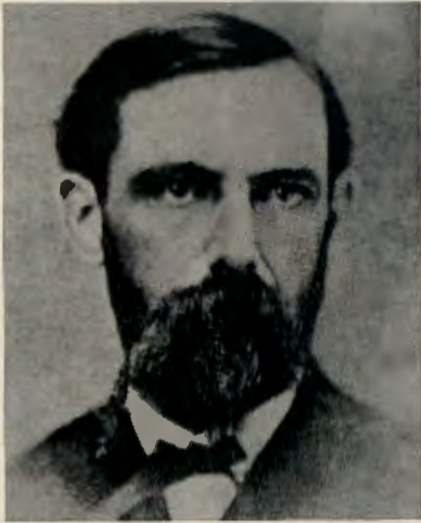
*Saginaw* was quickly breaking up, but no one panicked. Capt. Sicard directed a swift evacuation into the calmer waters on the lagoon side of the coral. All 93 men—crew and

*Below: USS Saginaw breaking up on the reef at Kure. Illustrations from The Last Cruise of the Saginaw.*

*Bottom: Map of the Hawaiian chain, with inset of Kure Atoll.*







Montgomery Sicard, Saginaw captain.

engineering personnel from Midway—reached Green Island safely. The men managed to salvage some of the ship's stores and a gig, a long, light boat equipped with oars and sails.

At dawn, the captain organized work details to construct a makeshift camp and to forage the island for food sources. The men also erected a small lookout tower and flagstaff on the island's highest dune. The 93 had soon settled in for a long wait, but they were not content to merely sit and hope a ship would pass and spot the flag. Someone must go for help.

From the many volunteers, the captain chose four of the most able-bodied of the men and one of his best officers. The five would sail the small gig to Kauai, more than a thousand miles away.

On Friday, Nov. 18, Peter Francis, John Andrews, James Muir, William Halford and Lt. John Talbot set sail on a voyage that, if successful, would take about a month and would sorely test their physical prowess and navigational skills. George Read described their sendoff: "The hour set for the boat's departure (four o'clock) arrived and we were all mustered upon the beach. Prayers were read by the captain, after which farewells were said and the brave men who were to peril their lives for us waded off to the gig and climbed on board. They quickly stepped the little masts, spread the miniature sails, raised their anchor, and slowly gaining headway stood off for the western channel through the reef. With full hearts and with many in tears, we gave them three rousing cheers and a tiger, which were responded to with spirit, and we watched them until the boat faded from sight on the horizon to the

northward."

Read and the others still on the island would learn later just how much the five needed those prayers. Along the way three different gales pounded the gig and blew much of the rigging and the oars overboard. Their food was spoiled by salt water; they lived off flying fish that flopped on



William Halford, lone survivor of the gig's crew.

board and a sea bird that Halford caught with his bare hands. Four of the five men suffered from extreme diarrhea throughout the voyage. The strong winds continually hampered their progress and blew them off course frequently. At one point, Peter Francis was swept overboard but managed to grab the trailing fishing line and was pulled back onto the deck.

Despite all that, they hit their mark. Exactly one month after setting sail from Kure, they spotted Kauai. The five of them, exhausted and weakened by sickness, tried to keep the gig outside the reef at Hanalei until the light of day when they could navigate safely into the bay. But high seas pushed their craft onto the coral. Breakers capsized the gig and spun it crazily over the reef. Francis, Andrews and Lt. Talbot were tossed overboard into the churning water. Halford and Muir managed to swim into the calmer bay and eventually made it to shore. Muir was babbling incoherently and died within a few minutes, his face turning immediately black. Lt. Talbot's body washed ashore that morning; John Andrews', the next day. Peter Francis was never found. William Halford, the lone survivor, informed the authorities of the wreck of *Saginaw*. King Kalakaua immediately dispatched the royal steamer *Kilauea* to Kure to rescue the remaining 88.

About 3:30 in the afternoon of Jan. 3, 1871, *Kilauea* was spotted on the horizon by the men on Green Island. "I witnessed such a scene as never will be forgotten," wrote George Read. "Rough-looking men—many of them having faced shocks of storm and battle—all of them having passed through our recent misfortunes without a murmur of complaint—were embracing each other with tears of joy running down their cheeks, while laughing, singing, and dancing."

The jubilation faded considerably when the *Kilauea* rescuers told the men of *Saginaw* about the ordeal and fate of those who had gone for help so many weeks before. Capt. Sicard and the rest of the crew vowed to never forget that sacrifice. When they returned to civilization, Sicard and the others paid for and designed a memorial tablet that still hangs on a wall in the chapel of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. The inscription on the tablet names the four dead men and briefly describes their deed. It ends with this simple line: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

## SPLENDID ISOLATION

Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer Jim Aschenbrenner has served 10 months of his one-year Kure tour of duty. He's the station's executive officer, the second in command under Lt.j.g. Lurilla Lee. Isolated duty is not new to him; he has served two other "isolated tours," in Alaska at other Coast Guard outposts. He knows the special problems of such duty and he knows the specialized mission of a Coast Guard LORAN station. He's the ideal guide for our tour of the station facilities.

The Coast Guard contingent here numbers 23—two officers (Lee and Aschenbrenner) and 21 enlisted personnel (nine of whom are female). Eight of the 23 are electronics technicians responsible for the functioning and maintenance of the LORAN equipment, and the rest are support personnel (engineers, cooks, a corpsman, etc.).

LORAN is an acronym for "long range aids to navigation." The system sends out an electronic signal from atop a red and white, 625-foot antenna at the center of Kure's Green Island. The station here is one-third of a three-station network used by planes and ships in the central Pacific to fix





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their position. Kure's sister stations are at Johnston Island and Upolo Point on the Big Island. A craft traveling over or on the sea receives signals from all three stations and, using simple triangulation, can determine exactly where it is. "LORAN tells *them* where *they* are," stresses Aschenbrenner. LORAN stations cannot tell what craft are out there and where they are. It's not some kind of Star Wars radar. And since the signals are sent out 24 hours a day, indiscriminately in all directions, the system can be used by any Pacific traveler, no matter what nationality.

At least one of the eight electronics technicians is on duty with the LORAN equipment at all times. Normal work day for station personnel is "tropical hours"—6 a.m. until 1 p.m. The tour of duty is one year, with a mid-tour leave granted anytime after the first six months. The enlisted men and women earn "foreign duty pay," from an extra \$8 a month for an E-2 to \$22 for an E-7. "They bring at least two weeks' worth of clothes when they first come here," says Aschenbrenner, "because if the water supply happens to be low, they might need that much." There is no underground water table; rain water is gathered by means of a rooftop catchment system and stored in holding tanks.

We visitors to Kure are curious about the LORAN equipment and the water system, but our questions soon turn to the social interactions within an isolated group of young males and females. "It's amazing how well people do get along here," says Aschenbrenner. The station SOP is to simply "keep 'em busy" during off duty hours. There are power boats and water skis, a 16-foot catamaran, two Sunfish sailboats, volleyball, tennis courts, piano, pool table, video games, computer, library, weight room, TV and movie room, dark room and hot tub (out back). "We have dances and beach bonfires," says Aschenbrenner. "And we do have beer and ale, but no hard stuff—although I wouldn't be surprised if there were one or two bottles of that floating around." What isn't floating around is dope, at least as far as Aschenbrenner knows. "I think it's kind of passe these days," he says.

Aschenbrenner then tells about his recent search for volunteers to paint the station's beach shack. "I couldn't get anybody until I announced there'd be free beer. Then we got a crowd. That's the way you get things done.

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#### VANISHED

The Kure LORAN station was constructed in 1960 and commissioned in March 1961. It was not the island's first permanent structure, however. Seventy-five years earlier, King Kalakaua ordered a wooden house built on Kure and stocked with water, food and other provisions that would assist any future castaways. The king, of course, had sent his steamer *Kilauea* to rescue the *Saginaw* crew in 1871, but now, in 1886, there had been another disaster.

The British ship *Dunnottar Castle* hit Kure's reef on July 15, 1886. The crew struggled to Green Island. Within a few days the men decided to take a page from *Saginaw's* book and attempt to reach Kauai by gig rather than wait for rescue. Again, the landing at Kauai proved treacherous and several crewmen drowned.

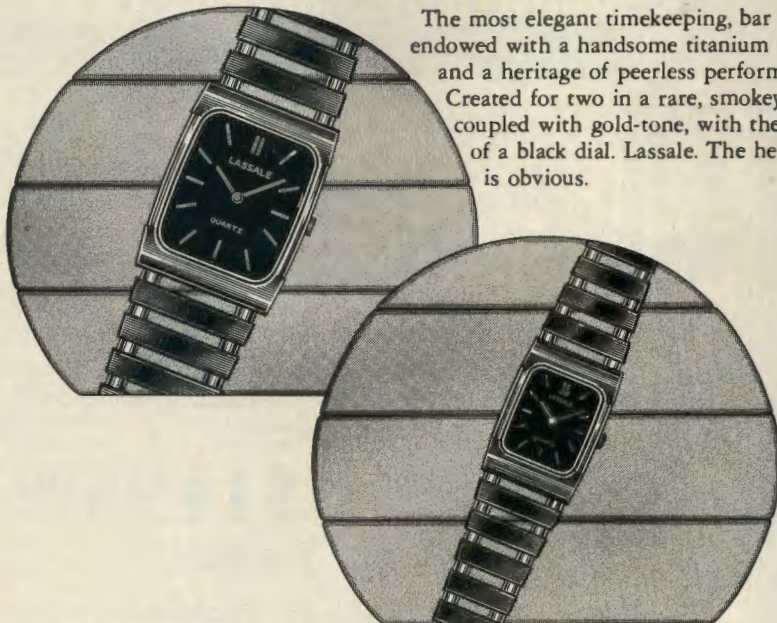
After the disaster, in September 1886, Kalakaua sent his special commissioner, Colonel J.H. Boyd, to Kure to take possession of the island for the Hawaiian Kingdom. Kalakaua also ordered the rude house built and amply stocked. But within a year, all the provisions were stolen and the house had crumbled.

Kure was acquired by the United States on July 7, 1898, when Hawaii became a U.S. territory. In April 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt, alarmed at the bird depletion due to poaching on Kure and the other Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, issued Executive Order 1019 declaring Kure part of the Hawaiian Islands Reservation, "a preserve and breeding ground for native birds." In 1940 President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed most of the Northwest chain the "Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge."

It continued to be a refuge for human life as well. On April 24, 1961, about a month after the Coast Guard station was commissioned, the 82-foot tug *Port of Bandon* ran aground on the southeast edge of the reef. Coast Guardsmen from the station rescued the five-man crew using motorboats. The remains of the tug's rusted hull are still on the reef, but its recovered nameplate hangs on a wall in the Coast Guard dining hall.

At times Kure's unexpected visitors have come from the air as well as from the sea. Twice during the 1960s pas-

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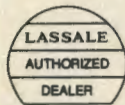


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senger planes made emergency landings on Kure's coral airstrip. Both times, station personnel fed and berthed scores of bewildered travelers. In neither case were there any injuries and the planes continued their journeys the next day.

But not every Kure tale has an ending.

The last communication from the Japanese fishing vessel *Houei Maru No. 5* came on Feb. 3, 1976. The captain reported he was leaving Midway waters for fishing grounds about 190 miles east northeast of Kure. *Houei Maru No. 5* had put in at the U.S. Naval Station at Midway to seek medical treatment for an injured crewman. But now it was back at work, chasing fish.

The next day, Wednesday, Feb. 4, 1976, the worst storm of the season hit the area. Two days later a Navy C-117 on a routine logistics flight from Midway spotted *Houei Maru* hard aground on Kure's north reef. The 17-man crew had disappeared. No one had come ashore on Green Island; no bodies were floating in the lagoon or on the ocean side of the reef. There was no sign of life—or death.

The search began and the mystery deepened. Despite the continuing foul weather, a sailor was lowered from a helicopter onto the rocking deck of the stuck vessel. He searched the darkness below but found no one. A few days later, search parties approached by sea and boarded the wreck. Again, there was no sign of the crew. But the searchers did find three sextants, charts and a logbook. The last log entry was dated Jan. 17, two weeks earlier. Among the crew's abandoned personal belongings were bottles of wine, sake and cognac and brand new underwear and shirts, still in cellophane bags, ready for use at the next port. The most significant find: a makeshift rope hanging over the bow, possibly the escape route of the terrified crew.

For six days Coast Guard and Navy search-and-rescue ships and planes crisscrossed the area around Kure. Meanwhile, *Houei Maru No. 5* was slowly breaking up on the reef. Finally, the search was abandoned. The only thing that had surfaced were theories:

■ Perhaps the hapless crew was picked up by another craft in the fishing fleet or by some passing vessel. But a rescuer would have made a report. There was none.



■ Perhaps *Houei Maru No.5* was scuttled deliberately in an insurance scam. But to make a phony insurance claim, you don't have to lose a crew. ■ Perhaps the 17 were still out there somewhere, men against the sea, drifting in a lifeboat. Maybe. The ship's life raft was also gone. But they surely would have been within the wide search area. Also, the prevailing current and weather patterns would have pushed a raft in a wide circle, back into the Kure region, not far into the vast Pacific.

The most likely scenario is probably the simplest. The violent storm pushed *Houei Maru* off course and onto the reef. The crew assumed the vessel would break up quickly. The men panicked. They scrambled down the rope into the pitching life raft or into the churning sea. In their haste, they left behind a sailor's most valuable tool on the open sea: a sextant. The crashing waves capsized the raft; the raging water pulled the 17 men under and out to sea.

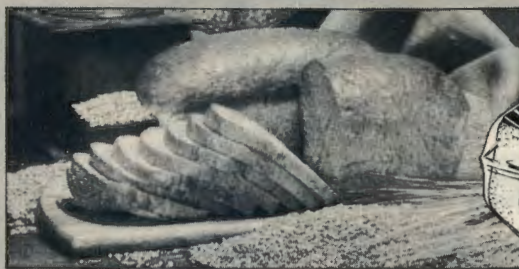
And during those dark, awful moments the Coast Guard men and women at the LORAN station, unaware of the disaster across the lagoon, stayed inside, out of the weather, watching a movie, drinking beer and writing letters home.

#### ONLY THE STRONG

The flat, blue water of the lagoon is as clear as a country creek, as warm as a midnight bath. We spend the last hour of our half-day stay enjoying the beach just steps from the Coast Guard buildings. A few hundred yards up the shoreline is a newborn monk seal in a cage-like enclosure, protected from bull seals who often attack the young, mistaking them for breeding females. The cage also protects the seal pup from curious homo sapiens like us. We have been reminded to keep our distance—at least 100 feet.

Hawaiian monk seals have remained virtually unchanged for 15 million years and are sometimes called living fossils. But what *is* changing is their numbers. They are an endangered marine mammal, with only about 1,000 individual seals still in existence, primarily in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Their troubles began in the 19th and early 20th centuries when sealers, shipwrecked crews, feather hunters and guano diggers killed many of them and disrupted their sensitive breeding cycles. More contact with humans in the 1950s and

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'60s further depleted their ranks. Protection of the seals now falls under the jurisdiction of the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, as well as the state Department of Land and Natural Resources. In addition, under terms of its lease with the Hawaii state government, the Coast Guard is obligated to protect monk seals, all species of sea turtles and all other animal, bird and plant life on the island, except rodents. A seal pup out here has no shortage of guardians.

While the monk seals are rare, the gooney birds are everywhere. Many other birds—tropic birds, frigate birds, booby birds, sooty terns, petrels and shearwaters—also inhabit the island, but goonies seem always under foot and over head. These Black-footed albatrosses and Laysan albatrosses are stately when airborne, their wingspans stretching six feet across. On land they are awkward, scruffy and noisy, creatures only a mother could love. They return to Kure and other Northwestern Hawaiian Islands every November to begin their eight-month breeding cycle. Their courtship ritual is an amazing sequence of posturing maneuvers and dance steps. The eggs hatch after two months, and the young remain on the island another five months, fed periodically by their parents. Then in July and early August, as the days of summer are shrinking, the fittest of the young and the adults leave the island. They'll roam the ocean for an incredible six or seven years, drifting on the air and feeding off the sea. Then they'll return to the island where they were born, to begin the breeding cycle again.

But many of the young and a few of the old—those too feeble to struggle up into the air—will be left behind. They will gradually starve. A few will get airborne for a short distance but will then plop down weakly into the sea. The sharks will do the rest.

**O**ur C-130 rumbles along the coral runway and lifts off gently. The garter does its magic; we do not hit a bird. We circle Kure several times for a last look, for a few final photos. We gaze down at the lonely buildings and the erector-set antenna. We marvel again at the crystalline lagoon, and we stare at the surrounding reef and the white water breaking across its coral heads. We look for pieces of hulls, broken masts, twisted metal—the traces of tragedy.