

1965

## PAPEETE, TAHITI

**T**here are many prophets of doom in Tahiti these days, especially among the *fetii*, the old-time settlers from America and Europe. A big new shadow hangs over this once-far-off South Pacific Eden — the biggest of all shadows, the famed mushroom cloud.

Celebrated all over the world as a Polynesian Arcadia, Tahiti has been struggling since 1930 against powerful onslaughts of what might possibly be called Western culture.

First there was the opening of the island to the hordes of jet tourists in 1960 and the inundation of masses of cinematic *popaas* (whites) including Marlon Brando, who arrived with an M-G-M troupe to shoot "Mutiny on the Bounty" in 1960.

The old-time settlers groaned about both infiltrations as apt to ruin Tahiti's greatest asset, the sunny, music-and-dance-loving, generous Polynesians who lived there.

Besides being fearful that tourists and M-G-Mers would somehow corrupt the Tahitians, the *fetii* felt more than a little alarm that the low wages and rents they had enjoyed for years would disappear in an inflationary spiral.

The latest and most grievous assault of Culture is French President deGaulle's determination to detonate his new H-Bomb in the Tahiti vicinity.

It was clear in the announcement that the Big Blast would be in Mururoa, an uninhabited island about 700 miles to the southeast of Tahiti. Unspecified numbers of construction troops, nuclear technicians and the inevitable *fonctionnaires* would come in to build half a dozen island bases and carry out a military and naval building program which would change the face of Tahiti. The date of detonation was a military secret, but rumor had it the test was to be in July of 1966, at the height of Tahiti's carnival (and tourist season), Le Quatorze Juillet.

The *fetii* old-timers began having visions of a locust plague of thousands of troops arriving, other thousands of *fonctionnaires*, engineers and technicians coming by the shipload. Prices would really go up, the lovable and loving Polynesian people would be spoiled — and the lovely *rahines* would be monopolized by the French Foreign Legion.

Since then, thousands of new government-employed Frenchmen have indeed come to Tahiti. Many have gone on to build the bases on Mururoa and nearby atolls, which will be observation posts, and two new airfields are being erected especially for the tests on nearby islands. But the main base of operations is Papeete, the capital of the islands and the largest town in French Polynesia.

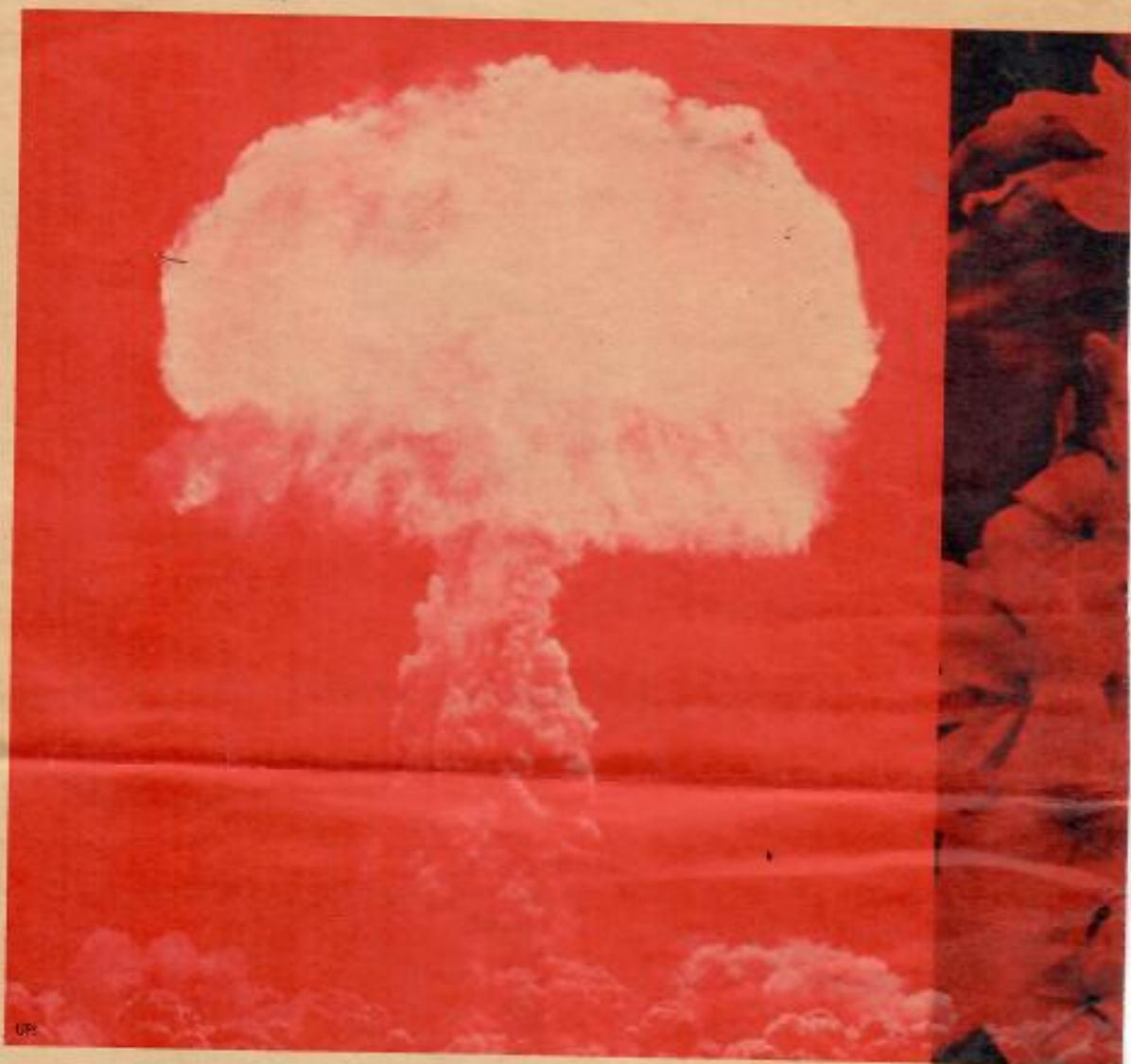
*Airborne invasion*

I arrived in Tahiti a few weeks ago with my wife Moana, a member of the Tahitian *fetii*, at Faaa jet airfield in the black of night. At that hour, the change in Papeete's face was not visible.

It was four a.m. local time, and the tropical night was the rich deep black you would expect in Tahiti. We had flown in from Acapulco, on a new jet route put on by Qantas, the Australian airline.

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# Cloud



## *The H-Bomb is the latest jet-age threat*

This so-called Fiesta service is typical of the kind of airline flights which are still increasing into Tahiti, despite the menace of the mushroom H-cloud. Thus far, Tahiti tourism has continued to increase. The number of jet visitors for 1965 will probably top 15,000. In 1959, before the jet strip opened, 1,472 came in by seaplane.

My wife, Moana, hadn't been back to Tahiti for 12 years, so she had missed the recent changes wrought by deGaulle as well as the previous ones.

I had last visited Tahiti in 1960 when the jet age began there. Subsequently, I had missed the intriguing times when Tahitian wags (probably enraged American and French *fetii*) scrawled, "M-G-M GO HOME" on walls and sidewalks of Papeete. I had been away for the beginnings of Tahiti's nuclear age, and the havoc wrought by Big Charlie's advance elements of the C.E.P. (Centre

d'Experimentation du Pacifique) and the C.E.A. (Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique). My American *fetii* friends, whom I had seen in Hawaii during the last year, had been full of dire warnings that deGaulle's H-bomb organization had ruined Tahiti. Military camps and traffic were everywhere, they said, and the place was finished.

At any rate, my wife and I were curious to see what had happened. When we debarked at the jet terminal in Faaa, Moana nudged me and pointed to a sign saying "Please Do Not Tip," and she said: "You see, Tahiti hasn't changed."

I thought she might be a little hasty with her conclusions, but when two tawny-skinned *vahines* in pareu prints draped us in *tiare* leis, smiled, giggled and kissed us on the cheek, and brawny, freshly-scrubbed Tahitian *tanés* manhandled our baggage into a cab, and smiled and didn't even

# Over Paradi



*to lovely, no longer languorous Tahiti*

wait for a tip — then I tended to agree with her.

But only tentatively. We would have to see the evidence by daylight. However, whisking in the soft night to the Hotel Tahiti, talking to the smiling half-Chinese cab driver and the pleasant *sahines* and *tanes* in the hotel (and still no tips), I was sliding towards my wife's point of view. In the morning, we saw the sordid facts. For one thing, the look of Tahiti has been changed.

### **"The broken muzzles"**

First of all, the face of beautiful Papeete Harbor has been smashed, literally. This lovely tropical lagoon has been worked into a kind of military development area — with all the grievous complications you might expect. It could easily be identified, now, by the name which the French have applied to their most seriously wounded war vet-

erans: *les queules cassés*, "the broken muzzles."

"It's gone!" my wife said, looking across the still waters inside the reef.

I saw immediately. Opposite the Papeete waterfront, the Hotel Tahiti and the Faaa airdrome, there had been an islet with gentle shores and a strand of graceful trees. It was called "Quarantine Island" because Germans were interned there during World War II by the French government.

Now it was no longer an island. It was connected by a new sand spit to the mainland, the sand dredged up from the harbor bottom as engineers had deepened the ship channels. Along the rough line of sand, shacks of tin and board had been thrown up. A couple of French naval ships and landing craft lay at anchor; several substantial derricks with iron frames angled against the sky. Many of the trees were gone. There were supply dumps

surrounded by barbed wire fences where military items of mysterious character — connected with the Big Bomb — were stored.

We got into the rumbling traffic of Tahiti's one and only road that goes around the edge of the island. There were French army vehicles in profusion, heavy civilian traffic — probably more annoying than the military, because of the noise — but the push-pedal bicycles are gone. The successive inflations of the jet age, the M-G-M incursion, and now Charlie's Bomb, had given the Tahitians extra spending money. There are 15,000 motorbikes and motorcycles in Tahiti — and 8,000 cars.

#### *Traffic — even in Tahiti!*

The traffic moved at an alarming rate, as you might expect among locals being introduced to the internal combustion engine as means of power on the road. We could easily believe the statistics — 165 people injured in Papeete traffic in 1960, 715 in 1964, and more than 1,000 expected in 1965.

And the narrow town streets of Papeete were being forcibly transformed. Instead of guitars plunking out "Tiare Tahiti" or the Hinano Beer song, one heard the grinding of cement mixers and smelled the dank air of building dust. New buildings were being thrust upward — still, however, within the prescribed height limit of two-thirds of a coconut tree.

Men in the white uniforms of the French Navy, in the dark blue trousers of the Pioneer (like U.S. Seabees) battalions, and the picturesque *képis* of the French Foreign Legion were visible everywhere. And the old Chinese variety stores, for so many years things of broad fronts and padlocks against night prowlers, were now fair imitations of American supermarkets.

We drove on towards Pirae, a section to the east of Papeete where several of the long-term American *fetii* (like Lala Hall, widow of the co-author of "Mutiny on the Bounty") have homes. We kept stumbling into new French military installations: supply dumps surrounded by barbed wire, new housing tracts for French officers and non-coms, two cottage-type hotels recently taken over by the French as officers' billets and clubs, truck, earthmover and Jeep parks with sentries, a hospital with large Red Crosses and sentry boxes.

As the days went on, we were able to pass judgment on the latest and greatest threat to the Tahitian traditions — at least the traditions which have been so intriguing to the old-time *fetii*.

One pertinent item: the Tahitian *vahines* seem to have taken kindly — after an initial period of deep freeze — to the Foreign Legion (TO PAGE 8)

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