

MIDWAY - THE NORTH PACIFIC'S TINY PET.

by

HOMER C. VOTAW.

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About 1,200 miles northwest of Honolulu lies Midway — western key to Hawaii, and focal point in America's projected North Pacific defenses.

Although officially known as the *Midway Islands*, the group is really a single atoll, consisting of two low sand patches within an unclosed reef 6 miles in diameter. This little "dot on the map" is the scene of a commercial and federal development large enough to more than delight any mainland seaport. Moreover, it possesses a little known past literally packed with adventure: shipwrecks, bitter political controversy, murders, conflicts with nature, engineering feats, and American naval tradition at its best.

The fact that discovery was not made until 80 years ago is in itself unusual, as scores of ships were known to have roamed the general vicinity long before. The honour fell to an adventurous young American, Captain N.C. BROOKS, of the Hawaiian registered bark *Gambia*, on July 9, 1859, during a fishing and guano exploration voyage along the chain of islets and reefs stretching northwest from the Hawaiian Islands.

Possibly he was first attracted by the commonly observed blue-green reflection of the lagoon upon the above, for the encircling reef is only 5 feet high and cannot be seen from any great distance. At any rate, he soon found the shallow entrance and sailed boldly in to anchor off the largest sand patch. This is now called Sand Island, and although only a square mile and a half in area, it is the centre of to-day's feverish activity. Fish and turtles were plentiful throughout the lagoon, while myriads of sea birds nested ashore. The remains of a raft were found upon the beach, but there was no other indication of previous visitors. Drinkable water, however, was secured at a depth of 10 feet.

A visit to the smaller sand patch (now Eastern Island) disclosed a shallow deposit of guano under the existing low vegetation. As this fulfilled the new island acquirement conditions of the *Guano Act* of 1856, Captain BROOKS erected a pole on Sand Island, posted a notice that "Brooks Island and Shoal" was a United States possession, and proudly raised his country's flag. He carefully mapped the place, but shifting sands have changed the island's contours considerably. Instead of the two islets now existing, he sketched in three, naming them Upper, Lower, and Middle Brooks.

Upon his return Brooks enthusiastically pointed out the advantages of the "new domain" as a coaling station whenever American steamers entered the transpacific trade. Such a possibility was still in the future, and Hawaiian merchants objected to future competition. Hence the general public gradually forgot that the atoll ever existed, and when Brooks' carefully preserved map, description and suggestion for a government survey were given to the Pacific Mail service, they were greeted with surprise and skepticism. However, when the pioneering S.S. *Colorado* sailed close enough to confirm its existence and value, the company immediately requested federal action. Rather than run any risk of delay, the company organized an expedition of its own, under the command of Captain BURDETT, of Boston, which left San Francisco in March, 1867, aboard the small schooner *Milton Badger*, arriving at the atoll in July. Two small frame houses were erected on Sand Island, and chart and meteorological work undertaken. The expedition stayed for some time and, gambling upon future development, transferred 600 tons of coal (a lifesaver to future castaways) to Sand Island at considerable labour and expense.

The Government also quickly realised the ultimate value of the island, and dispatched the 7-gun U.S.S. *Lackawanna* to take formal possession and conduct a survey. Captain REYNOLDS, in his picturesque report states that on August 28, 1867 :

"Having previously erected a suitable flagstaff, I landed accompanied by all the officers who could be spared from the ship, with six boats armed and equipped, and under a salute of twenty-one guns, and with three cheers, hoisted the national ensign and called all hands to witness the act of taking possession in the name of the United States. I sincerely hope that this instance will by no means be the last of our insular annexations".

Despite precedence, the island was renamed in order to encourage international recognition of the Government's action. The designation Midway was chosen, describing almost literally the atoll's location between America and the Orient. The little anchorage inside the reef was called Welles Harbour, in honour of the Secretary of the Navy; and its entrance, Seward Roads, for our expansion-minded Secretary of State, W.H. SEWARD.

The *Lackawanna* completed its survey in about 3 weeks and departed. Although no bad weather had been experienced, she lost one anchor and the flukes of another in the jagged formations of the coral bottom.

The *Lackawanna's* report concluded that with proper development, Midway could be used as a port of refuge for both naval and merchant vessels, and would in time of war "play a most important part". Congress was favourably impressed and, in 1869, appropriated \$ 50,000 to start dredging operations. A contract for this work was awarded a Boston firm, and the small Navy auxiliary side-wheeler *Saginaw* left San Francisco with supplies and workmen on Washington's Birthday, 1870. She anchored in Welles Harbour the evening of March 24, and the next day welcomed the arrival of the schooner *Kate Piper* with more materials and blasting powder. A fair-sized house and powder magazine were quickly erected on Sand Island where the cable buildings are now located.

The *Saginaw* left an officer and four men to oversee the work, and departed on the first of four sailing trips to Honolulu for mail and supplies. The journey down was slow and tedious as the craft was a notoriously poor sailer against the wind. In fact during one trip she made good only 20 miles in 2 days.

The work continued for 6 months despite the difficulties encountered. The scow was frequently over two miles from Sand Island. Fall gales made conditions more disagreeable, and all hands were glad when the last of the appropriation was expended and the home-ward bound pennant finally raised on October 29, 1870.

The vessel headed west, to call at nearby Kure Island (then Ocean Island) to check its position and to rescue any castaways. At three the next morning Kure was located — so abruptly that all aboard the *Saginaw* were themselves castaways !

The adventures of the group is an interesting story, culminating in its rescue two months later after the harrowing 31-day journey of 5 volunteers in a small gig to Kauai, in the Hawaiians. The gig is now treasured at the Naval Academy. Only one man, Coxswain Halford, managed to get through the heavy surf alive, and his message dispatched the Hawaiian steamer *Kiluaea* to Kure at the King's command.

Further hearings in regard to the channel project were held in Congress, but the estimated additional cost of \$ 187,000 was discouraging. In addition, the American annexationists in Hawaii started a strong adverse lobby fearing that a port at Midway might ruin their present business and hopes for the future. Midway was again forgotten, and the wondering birds once more regained their solitude.

For 17 years the atoll remained out of the news. A few roving vessels called, but of them and of what they found we have only an occasional hint. In December, 1887, the bark *Lilian* arrived in the Hawaiians with a stirring tale of shipwreck that once more gave Midway a place in the annals of sea adventure. It concerned the long missing schooner *General Seigel*, as related by two of her surviving crew.

The unfortunate 39-ton craft had left Honolulu in 1886 on a co-operative shark-fishing voyage. Shortly after reaching Midway one of the eight crew members lost a hand fishing with dynamite, and subsequently died. He was buried in the sand, and a cross with a copper plate was erected to mark Midway's first grave. During the morning of November

16, 1886, a fierce gale broke both anchor chains and the vessel grounded. By feverish work some clothing and supplies were taken off before she broke up.

The *Saginaw* expedition's redwood house was still in good condition, providing shelter for the seven remaining men. They lived principally upon fish and eggs. For a while everything went well. Then the mate, a young Dane named JORGENSEN, began to show signs of breaking. He first voiced a murderous intent against the German consul at Honolulu for having him jailed as a deserter from the ship *Apollo*. When the others remonstrated, his rancour turned against them, especially the captain.

A 22-foot sampan hull left by a fishing schooner on a previous visit was judged the most seaworthy of the three small boats at hand, and the job of reconditioning her began. JORGENSEN was a carpenter and rendered valuable assistance here; but his mania increased steadily until one day he returned alone from Eastern Island where the captain and another had accompanied him that morning to gather eggs. He returned to remain 10 days, at the end of which he claimed that one had shot the other and then committed suicide. Convinced that he was guilty of both deaths, the others destroyed the two boats and left for the Marshall Islands — 1,500 miles to the south-leaving JORGENSEN marooned. They arrived safely after a 20-day voyage, a remarkable feat with a small vessel and no knowledge of navigation.

JORGENSEN lost his remaining reason for several days, but he gradually became reconciled to his fate. To combat idleness he took apart the beached coal lighters and built a veranda around the house. His need for companionship was partially answered by making friendship with and training a large rat. For 6 months he watched the surrounding horizon, and then suddenly discovered a vessel making for the reef — the luckless *Wandering Minstrel*. Contradictory accounts of various survivors of the *Wandering Minstrel* are still being republished and commented upon in the light of new data and interpretations, and the whole story is far from complete. Like the *Mary Celeste* mystery and the *Bounty* mutiny, her adventures will likely do service in imaginative sea novels for a long time to come. In fact the Midway location and a version of the closing incidents were used in Stevenson's *The Wrecker*.

The *Wandering Minstrel* was an old bark outfitted in Hongkong during the latter part of 1887 by Captain F.D. WALKER for a shark-fishing voyage he personally organized and promoted. After some financial difficulties the craft left the Orient carrying a polyglot crew. At Honolulu she anchored outside and reported a mutiny. The two mates were discharged, one of them later casting aspersions against the avowed purpose of the voyage. Captain John CAMERON, a blunt Scot and thorough seaman, was hired as first officer. He brought the crew up with a round turn and soon had the vessel on her way again. After fishing with varying degrees of success among the northwest island chain she anchored within the Midway reef and JORGENSEN was signed on as one of the crew.

A violent storm drove the bark upon a coral patch on February 3, 1888, and she began to pound apart. Despite much confusion all hands made shore safely in the small boats. WALKER, his wife and three children, moved into the redwood house; the officers lived on the veranda; a deposed second mate (temporarily insane), like Diogenes, occupied a hog-head; and the crew constructed shacks from whatever material they could find.

The detailed story of their stay is a compelling one, with Mrs. WALKER's courage standing out prominently. Spring came and with it several deaths. A small schooner was constructed, but neither CAMERON nor JORGENSEN would sail with WALKER, and he would not go without them for fear of the men. Before personal differences could be eliminated a storm destroyed the vessel. After a turbulent summer six men left in one of the small boats. They were never heard of again. CAMERON and JORGENSEN finally constructed a small seaworthy boat, and with a Chinese boy, left on October 13 for Marshalls. They arrived after a ghastly voyage of 43 days!

Things went badly at the atoll. Food became very scarce and scurvy common. There were several deaths from malnutrition, one from drowning, and at least one murder. The remaining foremast hands were driven over to Eastern Island — where they, surprisingly, escaped the scourge of scurvy. The cause of this immunity was unknown, but the answer probably lies in the obscure statement that the well water there was a dirty green colour evidently from vegetable matter containing needed vitamins. Finally on March 17, 1889,

the roving schooner *Norma*, an ex-opium smuggler, arrived to end the long exile. Only 16 survivors of the original company of from 29 to 37 souls (accounts differ), were landed at Honolulu 3 weeks later.

Except for occasional calls by naval vessels to chase away feather gatherers who were exterminating the birds, little else of interest happened at Midway for several years. Then suddenly the fates again called attention to their little Pacific pet. This was the time of ocean cable development, and Midway was considered as a possible relay point. The U.S.S. *Nero* made a cable route survey in 1889, and the *Iroquois* arrived to chart the harbour.

Public opinion was divided upon the merits of public and private ownership, outright grants, and subsidies for cable companies. However, acquirement of the Philippines made the cable project imperative. Then J.W. MACKAY announced that the Commercial Pacific Cable Company would put through a cable without *any* grant, subsidy, or exclusive franchise; would charge less than the anticipated rate per word; would use available American labour and materials; and in time of war would place the cable facilities at the Government's disposal. Only survey data and the usual navigational aids were requested. This surprising proposal was accepted, and on December 1, 1902, the ship *Silverton* began laying cable westward from San Francisco.

The Midway construction and technical crew were landed on Sand Island from the S.S. *Hanalei* April 29, 1903, and lived in the now traditional *Saginaw* house. On July 4 the last cable splice was made at Honolulu and President Theodore ROOSEVELT greeted Governor TAFT of the Philippines. Later a message was sent completely around the world.

The development at Midway had just begun. Permanent buildings must be erected in order to make the atoll comfortably habitable. The schooner *Julia E. Whalen* was chartered at Honolulu to carry building material and supplies. Old, leaky, and overloaded, she ran into bad weather that shifted her cargo, and the ship was in a precarious state when Midway was sighted on the evening of October 21. It was impossible to attempt the narrow channel after dark, and becoming even more helpless during the night, the vessel finally smashed into the eastern side of the reef. All hands reached shore safely, but the ship and cargo were a total loss.

News of the disaster was flashed over the cable with an urgent request for supplies. The Navy's valiant little *Iroquois* left Honolulu heavily laden with 20 tons of cargo plus a deck load of 2,000 feet of lumber. Four seamen deserted in terror before she sailed. She arrived safely, however, and left her largest light hoisted at the top of a 50-foot pole near the cable station for the guidance of future ships.

Such wide interest was aroused in the difficulties of the lonely group at Midway (including one woman — the wife of the cable superintendent) that a large Christmas mail was collected and dispatched from San Francisco aboard the transport *Logan*. Other government vessels also called, and one remained long enough to make a brief naval base survey.

Steel and concrete buildings were built at a cost of \$ 200,000, and Congress aided by passing an appropriation for channel buoys, a lighthouse, and other navigation aids. A marine officer, a resident naval officer, and 20 enlisted marines were stationed on the atoll until 1908, during which time a post office was maintained. (Make a note of that, you stamp and cover collectors!) Two quick-firing cannon were installed, but a magazine explosion shortly ended this first attempt at fortification.

After the completion of the permanent buildings the battle with nature began. The first problem was that of keeping the sand from drifting. This required extensive planting of trees, shrubs, and grass, demanding patient labour and experimentation.

While this development was getting under way, outside attention was twice again commanded. Although no one had ever met his death in a shipwreck at Midway, the spirit of the atoll now felt that her reputation might be enhanced by a shipwreck de luxe. Or it may be that she wished to test her power as a siren — for no ship was ever lured ashore more artfully than America's largest liner, the palatial *Mongolia*, on the evening of September 15, 1906. This ship later had the honour of firing the first American shot in the World War, a 1,000-yard bull's-eye that sank a submarine. She later became the *President Filmore*; and is now the *Panamanian*, under the flag of the Republic of Panama.

The big vessel with about 500 people aboard sighted Sand Island Light shortly after dark and slowly headed toward it in order to land a cable company official. Everyone was on deck looking ahead. The weather was perfect, the water smooth enough to clearly reflect the bright stars above — not a ripple, not a sound. Suddenly there was a slight scraping sound, a faint jar — and the *Mongolia's* bow was fast on the half submerged western reef!

In the morning the passengers were landed on Sand Island, and work to free the ship began. The Japanese training ship *Angawa* was the first aid to arrive. Uncharted shoals made the salvage work difficult and dangerous. After parting the only towing cable available there was little to do, but stand by. Three days later the *Angawa's* fuel began to run low, and as news came that other ships were steaming to the rescue she departed for Honolulu. Shortly thereafter the *Mongolia* was freed by jettisoning 1,200 tons of cargo.

Seldom had passengers been so delighted in being castaways. On a romance-laden isle, in communication with the world, well provisioned, and quite resourceful, they spent a memorable week. Concerts, a one-ringed circus, boating, fishing, bathing, and even a specially written play were enjoyed. An engraved cup at the cable station constantly recalls their memorable sojourn at Midway.

Another wreck occurred the following December 26. The American bark *Carrolton* left Australia October 17, bound for the Hawaiian Islands with a load of coal. A few days out she encountered consistently bad weather which started leaks and damaged her masts. Blown well off course, listing badly, and desperately in need of fresh water, she headed for Midway. She entered the channel safely, but was unable to come about sharply and grounded on Sand Island at two in the morning. Again all hands were saved — but the vessel was a total wreck.

Apparently fully convinced that man had come to stay, Midway forswore further wrecks and settled down to a long period of contented development. A type of wire grass from San Francisco's sand dunes finally solved the problem of flying sand. Ironwood trees from Honolulu, and some types of Australian eucalyptus with supporting soil were successfully transplanted. When once these hardy plants had gained a foothold it was less difficult for others to exist. The scaevola bush, known locally as magnolia, actually flourished and spread of its own accord. More earth and plants arrived on each trip of the supply ship, and gradually the atoll became attractive. This practice is still being followed, and the once bare sand dunes around the buildings abound in lawns, vines, flowers, palms, cedars, papayas, pines, and truck gardens. Pigs, cows, chickens, ducks, turkeys and geese also thrive. For transportation purposes two burros were imported in 1904, and when no longer needed were turned loose on lonely Eastern Island. There they found plenty of grass and quickly learned to paw shallow wells. At one time their offspring numbered over 20, but only 3 are now alive. Spreading growth has caused some decrease in the number of birds on Sand Island, but a recent estimate indicates that the year's breeding population is still well over a million.

For more than 25 years after the *Carrolton* wreck, Midway seemed satisfied, and then with typical, sudden restlessness she commanded more attention than ever.

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Another expanding activity was interested in Midway — commercial aviation. For some time the all-American Pacific route had been begging for some organization to insure itself a good portion of the rich trade by pioneer investment and work. Finally Pan American Airways came forward with its immense resources and long distance flying experience. Because of its location and natural advantages, Midway was selected as a way station. A vast amount of paper work was rushed through in a remarkably short time, and the heavily loaded freighter *North Haven* left San Francisco on the base construction expedition March 27, 1935. She anchored off Midway April 15 in a driving rain, the happy recipient of a wireless message of welcome from the 23 lonely cable station employees.

The atoll had witnessed feverish work when wrecks had occurred, and organized speed when the cable came, but never anything like this. In the 15 days before the ship left, 160,000 items totalling 2,000 tons were lightered through 4 miles of rough seas to the northwest section of Sand Island, where trained men put much of it into immediate use.

Surveyors marked off the "quadrangle" a short way inland, tractors began leveling the dunes and hauling up material, temporary tent quarters were set up, an electric plant assembled, and lights strung for night work. The plans called for 14 buildings and utilities, including such diversified construction as windmills, water storage tanks, a long pier and float, fuel tanks and lines, a well-appointed hotel, and landscaping. A sizable job — yet the essential part of it was accomplished in 45 days, 15 ahead of schedule.

On June 6, after a leisurely 9-hour flight from Honolulu, the first clipper arrived. Before the end of the year, Midway was known as a commercial airway station the world over. Its isolation was ended at last.

But did this satisfy the ambitious little atoll? Not a whit! It now clamoured to become a seaport as well. Its narrow channel and none too secure anchorage had long been a hazard to supply ships, and the airline now estimated that its steamer importations of gasoline, oil, maintenance materials, and sustenance supplies would grow to \$ 250,000 annually by 1945. Furthermore, as each of the three big planes arriving weekly would cost as much as a small ship and carry nearly a hundred people, they too required adequate storm protection.

Therefore, with an eye also on future naval needs, a survey was undertaken the following year. This resulted in a recommendation for a new channel through the southern part of the encircling reef leading up between the two islands, an anchorage and turning basin, piers, roadwork, and a 3,100-foot breakwater high enough to act as a wind shelter. A sizable project for even a mainland seaport. Yet the need was plain, especially with the rapidly increasing traffic due to Midway's growing reputation as a fishing and rest resort. In August 1938, the big dredge *Hell Gate* arrived with 120 engineers to begin work. The new entrance will be called "Brooks Channel", happily reassociating the discoverer's name with the place.

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The busy daily naval routine to be followed will not be the only additional activity gained. The resulting importation of supplies will necessitate frequent calls of cargo vessels. The transpacific air traffic and resort business should also be rapidly increasing.

Thus, although the present and past recipient of attention out of all proportion to its size, tiny Midway steadily acquires more than its share of the limelight. Because of its advantageous location, some old timers are offering extremely optimistic conjectures regarding its further possibilities. Yet it would be hard to imagine a future seeming any more far-fetched to us now than a prediction of its present development would have sounded back in 1859 — even to Captain Brooks, its enthusiastic discoverer.

