934th Chaplin Letter Summer 1957

This is a transcription of a report written by Chaplin Rev. Robert Jack, on a visit to H-4, 934th AC&W Sq., Straumnes AFS, Iceland, during the summer of 1957, provided by Kenneth Pickens, who was stationed there during this time. wlb

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My Visit to the NW Corner of Iceland

Latrabjarg
North Iceland

Here is an American Radar Site perched on a cliff 1,500 feet above the restless and surging waves which roll in from the overlooking vast expanses of the Arctic and crash with a thundering roar on the rugged shore below. He is No Man's Land, severe and merciless in climatic conditions. Here live a group of U. S. Military Personnel commanded by Captain William B. Smith, Lansford, North Dakota. All of them are men. Either they left their boyhood behind them or immediately grew up when they came here.

Anyway, this place is no place for boys. Those men who live here are rugged individuals. But they are more than that. They are heroes. Every one of them. I know that because I lived among them for a week. But before I came here I had myself lived for seven years on Iceland's only Arctic island, Grimsey, 50 miles North of this place.

But I had the advantage of coming to Iceland from the British Islands. I was brought up off the rugged West Coast of Scotland. These Americans on this site come from the large cities and farming districts of a vast continent, and they have adjusted themselves to the trying conditions as I never thought they could. Even Icelanders are amazed at their tenacity of spirit and physical fitness. Here are about 75 men with only one billiard table and ping pong for entertainment, a little PX which supplies them with a limited amount of merchandise, and a small library. Mail comes in at irregular intervals and a film hasn't been seen for nearly a month.

To get to this loneliest and certainly most rigorous American site in the world, Chaplain Edward C. Johnson, Staff Chaplin of the Iceland Defense Force, and I left Reykjavik, Iceland's capital town, in a Catalina flying boat. Our task was to conduct a Protestant Preaching Mission. However, the flying boat only took us part of the way. It could never land on the sea off the North coast of the country. At a small fishing town on the North West we changed into a fishing boat 25 tons heavy. This second stage of our journey was tough, primitive and dangerous.

To sail for five hours into the full blast of an Arctic storm on a little craft made of wood demands a certain amount of courage, tenacity, and a good stomach. Chaplain Johnson

showed the grit and fortitude of his forefathers from early Kentucky. Johnson is an old Norse name, and believe me, he showed the Viking spirit on this trip.

To get ashore we didn't tie up beside a pier, because there is none. We were taken ashore in a rowboat which tool nearly half an hour to maneuver along Side our fishing boat because of the heavy seas.

Then there was no rope ladder to help us keep our balance while we lowered ourselves into the shell. We had to wait out time, trust in God, and jump for all our lives. There was no turning back now, so we made it and only laughed at our experience when we eventually go safely ashore.

A few yards from the surf are a few barracks, and there a radio operator got us contact with the main cliff site. After warming up with hot coffee we drove off in a enlarged jeep to climb the six-mile road.

A flying boat suddenly dropping into a huge air pocked can get on your nerves. A forty-foot wooden boat washed incessantly for five hours with white foamed waves can both effect your heart and liver. But the road to Latrabjarg Radar Base is a real hair raiser. Its grade is thirty five percent and its width only eighteen feet. Truck and jeep tires must be smothered in heavy chains to make it. These skid chains only last a few weeks. But apart from that, American engineers have accomplished a miracle in cutting this road through the sheer face of a mountain precipice. They took chances, plenty of them, but emerged from their job without a scratch. A picked number of G. I. drivers are now riding this road. Some of them told me that they thought they could drive before they came here. Now they have had to relearn, revise, and change all they ever knew about driving a truck. But engineering can only accomplish its task on certain given premises.

The weather has the last word and controls the usefulness of the road. For nine months of the year it is covered with snow and during all that time there is a constant fight with nature to keep it clear of drifts 22 feet high. Last December it took eighteen hours to clear the road for transport. This is a High-Way. The toughest way to the stormiest American Site in the North This is a road which breaks all existing records for gas consumption. Six gallons for the round trip in good weather is the only way a jeep can make it. Trucks with a load in bad weather consume six times that amount. This is a road where you must drive with the upmost of care if you want to live. The rule for going down states, that one must not exceed five miles per hour.

Recently in a storm, Captain Smith was forced to sit in his jeep for eight hours without daring to attempt to move either himself or his vehicle. Luckily the jeep was pinned between rocks, otherwise, a tragedy would have been inevitable. Even a search party could not leave the Barracks to look for the Commander.

One night I sat in a room speaking to Radio Supervisor Sergeant O. W. Rich of Vincent, Alabama and Sergeant Marshall G. Randelmen of Weiser, Idaho, known to the men as "Pop". Suddenly, a wind reaching gale force in less than ten minutes hit the camp. I stood up, walked towards the window, and looked. It was ten o'clock and there was no darkness outside. All through May, June and July there is perpetual light in this part of the world. I saw a large packing case fly through the air and glide over the edge of the cliff.

Debris, boxes, and boarding mixed with the snow dashed through the frost air at seventy miles an hour. Some crashed against the walls of the barracks and boarded windows which had been previously broken in a storm. Other material disappeared high into the sky. I looked round and saw Pop laughing. "Why," he said when I saw is face in a broad grin. "Old friend Gus is back again."

"Old friend Gus" means "Gust" and he keeps those exiled Americans very busy. Every time he comes on a visit, and that's for almost three hundred days of the year, he leaves damage and confusion behind him.

Fifty miles an hour is his lapping pace, but when he comes in at full speed, he'll be going one hundred and thirty-five miles an hour.

I know him from past experience on Grimsey Island. I know him in all of his moods. I know he's crazy, always crazy, and he can make the strongest of us feel the same way. Friend Gus brings the best out of any men, or else he'll bolt and whip him into a mental case ready for shipment in a strait jacket.

But the personnel on this cliff site have learned to take him in their stride. Yes, these men under command of Captain William B. Smith, Lansford, Dakota are very gallant gentlemen!

Chaplain Johnson and I held services. This was a relaxation for the men. One night we sang the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers Marching as to War!" These men are at war, total war--- with the devastating, cruel, unrelentless and vicious weather. Their fight is not one with guns on a distant salient and commanded by the high techniques of modern soldiery. All of these men, nevertheless, fight, single-handed. When old friend Gus arrives it means every man for himself and let the devil take the hindermost. Self-preservation is the rule of the day up here. The life makes a man an individual. It makes him fitter for greater things in which lie ahead.

While we lived on the Base a boat came in with drums of oil. There were almost five hundred of them and they had to be unloaded by GIs on the open sea onto a large barge. This the men accomplished un the supervision of Sergeant Schaefer from Pennsylvania, in less than

four hours. The barge was then driven under her own power and partly beached on the narrow shore. The next job was to pull it further up the shore with a Caterpillar and then unload, by hand, the drums - each weighing three hundred and fifty-four pounds - onto trucks which were later driven up the steep incline to the Main Base. I saw Sergeant Schaefer and his men at this hard labor job. They worked swiftly like trojans. Some of them got we up to the waist while others, numb with the frosty cold air, drove themselves to a standstill to preserve the heat in their bodies.

All through a terrible winter the men have done this job. Friend Gus has shown them no mercy. The biting blast and the snow blizzards have seldom abated. These men have worked under primitive conditions, wet to the skin on many occasions, and never has anyone of them caught more than a slight cold. No case of pneumonia has ever been reported on this site.

Through it all something outstanding has happened. The personnel have become one big family and Captain Smith is their Dad. The men respect him, indeed, they worship him.

The story of these men is an epic one. They are the pioneers of the North. Chaplain Johnson and I came to the conclusion while staying with the men that many of them on this lonely spot, had found themselves; reached down into the depths of their souls and found more than they had ever expected. In the rigors around them they have found peace within, or if you like it better, Peace with God.

What a blessing of infinite joy it was to find that some of these young men on the High edge of the world had sought and at last found.

Much has been written about the seemingly “dry attitude" of the Icelanders towards the American Military Personnel based in Iceland and especially at Keflavik Air Base. It is not my purpose to enlarge on that matter here, but an experience can be a matter of personal approach or caused through some unfortunate misunderstanding.

But the GIs whom I spoke to at this northern base all told me of the friendliness of the Icelanders at the little fishing town, Isafiord, five hours by motorboat from the site. Some of them had gone there on a few leave from the monotony of Friend Gus. The people there, they told me, had done their best, through friendly gestures to show them hospitality in the spirit of human kindness and understanding.

This little place with only two thousand five hundred inhabitants has become a haven of peace and good will for the GIs who want a few days of change.

Not only have the personnel made friends at Isafiord, but now the meagre animal life around the site, foxes and ravens, feed at the waste heap on steak leavings with all the trimmings. The welcome the visitors and are growing tame in their new life of ease and plenty.

But nobody I spoke to wants to extend his tour of duty at this lonely outpost. One day, however, I observed Chaplin Johnson looking longingly through his Field glasses at a long ago derelict farm in the distance. "Thinking of buying it?" I asked seriously. He looked round at me with a glint in his eye. "Are you crazy" he replied. "Soon I'm going to cook in the heat of Washington with the wife and daughter. You can buy it all!" he concluded with a friendly smile.

Sergeant Stanick of Las Vegas said to me one night. "You know, Pastor Jack, this life up here is making men out of these boys"! "You bet!" I replied, "They've made it". The Sergeant laughed, "I believe you're right", he said offering me a cigarette. I was dead right.

Robert Jack
Pastor