



# FAMILY GRAM

A NEWSLETTER HOME

## USS KEARSARGE CVS-33



October 1962

Dear Folks:

We have completed our assigned tasks for the present in the Mid-Pacific area and are en route home to Long Beach. I would like to take this opportunity to contact all of you and to bring you up-to-date with regard to what we have been doing. Since relieving Captain DeCamp as Commanding Officer of the "Mighty Kay" I have had very little opportunity to meet many of you because of our operating schedule which has kept us at sea a good deal of the time. I do expect, however, to be able to keep in touch with you by way of the Kearsarge Family-Gram from time to time.

As you may know, we departed Long Beach on August 1st, stopped briefly in San Diego to embark Anti-Submarine Air Group 53 personnel and aircraft, and sailed the same afternoon for Hawaii. On August 7th Kearsarge arrived at Pearl Harbor where we remained for nearly a month preparing for our role as Recovery Ship for the Project Mercury Six-Lap Orbital Shot. During this period we had the very complex communication equipment installed which was to play a very vital role in the recovery operation and made Kearsarge a household word throughout the Free World. While the preparations for our forthcoming tasks required many long hours of hard work by all hands, we continued scrubbing, painting, paper work, and the thousand other important jobs necessary to keep the ship in top condition.

This period also afforded all of us many pleasant liberty hours which were spent in varying types of recreation. The Hawaiian Islands are very beautiful, and all of us devoted time to admiring their beauty. The ship's Chaplains made this more convenient by hiring buses, which made day-long tours of the Island of Oahu. The many magnificent scenic wonders of the Island were a special joy to our photography enthusiasts.

In addition to the scenic wonderland of the Island, those who had not been here previously found it as outstanding as advertised for sports including surfing, skin-diving, swimming, sunbathing, and general relaxation on the beaches.



Unfortunately, some of us also discovered how deceptive the tropical sun can be, and found ourselves with uncomfortable sunburns the first few days. We soon overcame this handicap and realized that in these subtropical areas it is necessary to be more careful of the amount of time spent in the sun.

Another event which many of us found very interesting was the tour of Pearl Harbor which is sponsored by the Special Services, department of the Naval Station. For those who had not previously visited Pearl Harbor, it was interesting, if sobering, to see the places where the Japanese attack occurred more than twenty years ago. The high point of the harbor tour was a visit to the memorial constructed over the sunken USS Arizona, where we paused for a moment in remembrance of American Navy men who lost their lives during the attack. The memorial is situated across the sunken ship (which contains the bodies of 1086 of her crew) and is a modernistic white masonry structure. The Arizona remains by tradition a commissioned ship of the United States Navy, and each day at 8:00 A.M. the national colors are raised over the memorial and then lowered at sunset, always with the traditional colors ceremony. The American Flag silhouetted against this gleaming white memorial toward the evening is indeed an inspiring sight. Every ship passing the Arizona upon entering or leaving the port of Pearl Harbor sounds attention and salutes this gallant ship and all her crew who gave their lives for their country.

We had completed our work in the shipyard by the end of the first week in September and after enjoying one last long liberty ashore during the Labor Day weekend headed out to sea on Tuesday, 7 September. We had enjoyed the long month in port, but it was good to be able to test our sealegs again. We always need a few days to get sharpened up in our various specialties, as time in port tends to slow the quick reactions which are essential to maintain the precise teamwork which makes the Kearsarge the fine ship she is.

During the next three weeks we exercised extensively at sea, but returned to port frequently enough to afford us free time for relaxation. The time at sea was spent in conducting air operations, general drills, gunfire exercises, and simulated engineering casualties.

In addition to our normal operations, we continued to prepare for the basic mission which brought us to this area of the Pacific -- Project Mercury. We weren't sure exactly when the test would occur, but it was mandatory that we be at our best for our very important part when the time came. There were some delays in the preparation for the test, but we waited as patiently as possible because we knew how precisely everything had to be readied for such an important event to become a reality. The extra time was utilized to check and double check our plans for the coming event. We had been given the honor and trust of being the only aircraft carrier in the primary recovery area where Commander Schirra was scheduled to descend after his historic flight. We wanted to be in prime condition so that we could do a perfect job.

There were hundreds of details to be monitored right to the very last minute. Many drills were conducted using a practice Mercury capsule to insure that everyone concerned would be ready in all respects to perform the job under any and all conditions. Necessity dictated that all electronic equipment be thoroughly tested. Continued briefings were conducted for the many crew members who would be required to perform the unique jobs required.

We had to make many adjustments in our daily living habits, for we knew we would have as many as 200 extra people on board during the period which would crowd



our living spaces. We were cautioned concerning fresh water conservation. In these areas of continued warm weather, it is necessary to be always watchful of our fresh water consumption rate, lest our usage exceed the ability of the ship's evaporators to provide fresh water.

All was in readiness for the big event. We entered Pearl Harbor on Thursday, 27 September after our last big rehearsal, embarked the various specialists who would accompany us for the test, and departed late on the afternoon of Friday, the 28th. With us went a screen of six sleek destroyers who would also participate in the recovery.

Among our passengers were eleven newsmen including writers, commentators, photographers, and television technicians. We carried four U.S. Marine Corps helicopters and crews, plus members of our own air group. Other personnel on board were recovery experts from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Navy frogmen who would jump from the helicopters to give the astronaut any required aid, and civilian experts in specialized fields of the operation. The launching of the Atlas rocket which was to boost the astronaut's capsule aloft was to occur at 7:00 A.M., Cape Canaveral time. Due to the difference in time zones this would be at 1:00 A.M. at our location--some 280 miles northeast of Midway Island. An interesting coincidence was that our location was practically the same as that where the U.S. aircraft carriers launched their planes for the great sea and air battle of Midway, fought just over 20 years ago.

Two nights prior to the scheduled launching of test MA-8, a ship's "smoker" was held. This smoker was unique for several reasons. First, smoking was not allowed because of the regulations which forbid smoking in the vicinity of aircraft and fuel systems. Secondly, it is probably one of the few of its kind since it was held several hundred miles at sea.

The smoker featured boxing, wrestling, and varied groups of musical performers. The high point of the evening was provided by a singing group called "The Voyagers". This group closely resembles the Kingston trio in their presentation and provided a fitting finale when they performed their rendition of an original calypso song titled "The Astronaut".

The big event was now scheduled for the morning of 3 October. We had arrived on station in the recovery area the previous day. We made last minute tests prior to the commencement of the countdown. The six destroyers had departed two days earlier to take their assigned stations in the surrounding area to act as auxiliary recovery ships should the spacecraft land off-target.

Since the launch was scheduled for 1:00 A.M. our time, few of us slept much that night. Most remained awake in hopes of receiving reports of the launching. The count-down was "held" for about 15 minutes at T -45, and we held our breath for about an equal time, or at least it seemed that way. At last the count-down continued, and the missile was launched. There was little noise around the ship, but looking about me on the flag bridge where I was talking with Captain King, commander of the recovery forces, I noted that although everyone looked tired, there were pleasant smiles on the faces of all the crew members working there.

The next big test we had to await was the decision of whether or not the capsule would complete the full six orbits. We knew that the aircraft carrier, USS Lake Champlain was waiting in the Atlantic Ocean where the astronaut would



land should he be forced to end his flight after only three orbits. We knew that the "Champ" was capable of the job, but we had trained hard and the shot could not be a total success unless it continued for the full six orbits to be recovered by Kearsarge. Most of us were awake at 5:30 A.M. when the decision was made to continue for more than three orbits, insuring that the landing would be in the Pacific. Cape Canaveral informed us that the capsule would land in our area at 10:28 A.M. The final preparations began in earnest. There was no apparent haste by the crew as they went to their assigned tasks--just the feeling that a well-oiled team was getting ready to start the "big game". The only unusual thing that a stranger might have noted was that many of us could be seen carrying cameras under our arms as we went about our duties.

The exact position where we were to be at impact had been carefully plotted by the navigator, and as the re-entry approached we headed into the wind to be ready to launch our aircraft and helicopters. As we continued on course we were informed that the combat information center had detected the space craft on radar some 150 miles away, and closing very rapidly. Shortly after the radar report, there was a general cheer throughout the ship as members of the crew sighted the long white vapor trail directly overhead which formed as the capsule descended.

About two minutes later the mammoth red and white parachute which eased the craft to the water was spotted five miles ahead of us. We increased speed and neared the anticipated position of the landing which occurred about four miles ahead of the ship. Our helicopters were quickly launched with frogmen and medical teams on board, and they sped to the scene of the landing while I maneuvered the ship into position for a pickup of the Sigma Seven--so named by Commander Schirra. The frogmen jumped into the water and attached a large yellow raft-like flotation device to the capsule. This float is designed to insure that the capsule cannot sink in the event of an unexpected leak.

Communications between Kearsarge and the astronaut had been established, and he was asked whether he desired to leave the spacecraft and be picked up by helicopter or to board the ship via the ship's motor whale boat already on its way to the capsule. Commander Schirra answered, "It's dry in here now and I prefer to keep it that way." He further expressed a desire to remain inside the craft until both he and the capsule had been recovered by the ship.

The crew of the whaleboat carried a line from the ship and secured it to the capsule which was floating gently some 500 feet off the starboard (right) beam of the ship. The line was quickly attached and the capsule was pulled alongside and lifted to the deck of the after starboard elevator where a specially constructed platform was positioned. As soon as the capsule was safely on deck the area was cleared of all personnel and Commander Schirra actuated his explosive hatch cover.

I arrived from the bridge in time to be on hand to welcome the astronaut. After the hatch cover was opened, we first saw a white space helmet being handed out through the hatch--closely followed by a widely smiling Commander Walter M. Schirra. He climbed from his capsule, greeted the assembled group, and then carefully inspected the Sigma Seven in which he had made his historic ride.

After the brief greetings the astronaut was escorted to the ship's sick bay to undergo preliminary medical debriefing. While in sick bay he received telephone calls from President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, and Mrs. Schirra.



The ship departed station after the recovery to arrive at Midway Island by first light the next morning. There, the now famous Sigma Seven capsule was delivered to a tug for transfer to Midway enroute to be taken to Houston, Texas by jet where inspections and tests will continue for several months. There was an added event of great interest coming, however, for in the Midway area a team of 20 NASA personnel were scheduled to board the Kearsarge after flying directly from their several recovery stations. This group included five other members of the astronaut team. In the afternoon three TF type carrier aircraft arrived with the members of the NASA party. Included in the group were Lieutenant Colonel John Glenn, Lieutenant Commander Scott Carpenter, Major Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Major Donald "Deke" Slayton, and Major Gordon Cooper. Many of the crew were on the flight deck to greet the astronauts, and after the welcome the newly arrived astronauts joined Commander Schirra in a very happy reunion.

During their stay on board Kearsarge, our distinguished guests' time was devoted to the arduous task of debriefing the flight while the details remained fresh in their minds. They did, however, spend as much time as possible meeting the crew, signing numerous autographs, and visiting throughout the ship. The group had dinner in the wardroom on their first night aboard, and had lunch with the chief petty officers on the following day. The high point for many of us was on Friday night when Commander Schirra and his fellow astronauts appeared at the crew's movie to thank them for their hospitality. Commander Schirra expressed the feeling that it was a great pleasure for him to again be aboard a navy carrier, as he had been on many previous occasions as a Navy pilot. He jokingly told the crew that in the tradition of a Navy carrier pilot his flight had not been a complete success since he had landed in the water rather than "catching a wire" on the flight deck.

By Saturday morning, October 6, we were nearing the coast of Oahu in Hawaii and final preparations were made for Commander Schirra and his party to depart for Hickam Air Force Base in our carrier aircraft and from there by jet back to Houston, Texas, where another welcome was being prepared.

The group departed the ship at 9:00 A.M. on Saturday, and we arrived back in Pearl Harbor shortly after their departure. From our yardarm flew the astronaut's flag which was designed by the Kearsarge Navigation Department. There was also a mammoth orange banner about 500 feet long which hung from the starboard side of the ship bearing the inscription, "Canaveral to Kearsarge." A Navy band was waiting on the pier for our arrival as were numerous spectators and well-wishers.

Our last few days of operating out of Hawaii were devoted to carrier qualifications for a U.S. Marine Corps air group flying from Marine Corps Air Station at Kaneohe. This air group flew A4D jet aircraft, and although we are not normally accustomed to conducting jet operations, all the crew did their usual professional job. The prevailing opinion of the crew seemed to be that it was time to finish the job in good order and head for home.

On the afternoon of October 11th we bid aloha to the beautiful Hawaiian Islands and departed Pearl Harbor en route to Long Beach for some well-earned leave and liberty.

It is expected that Kearsarge will be operating in the vicinity of Long Beach for the next several months prior to departing for our Far East cruise next Spring.

I have enjoyed recounting the highlights of our eleven-week Mid-Pacific assignment and will endeavor to keep you advised from time to time of what we on board the "Mighty Kay" are doing, and to provide you with an account of future interesting events. Meanwhile, I would be pleased to have those of you who may be in the Long Beach area visit the Kearsarge, and I would be happy to hear from those of you who reside at greater distances.

Best wishes from all of us,



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Commanding Officer

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