Chapter Eighteen

Who Killed the Iguanas?

… boredom … we really cannot blame them for what they did.

Dr. Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt

July 1, 1946. The war was over, the Canal was safe, the Ecuadorians wanted their islands back. And so, with Galápagos goats looking on as observers, the Stars and Stripes came down for the last time over the "Beachhead on the Moon"—as Contributing Editor Carl Solberg from *Time* put it in his cabled report. With the brief ceremony over and the lunar landscape again in the hands of its owners, the Americans were happy to return to earth—perhaps even happier than their hosts were to have them gone. The last of the bombers disappeared into the clouds, bound for Panama and points north.

But the Americans would return. Not right away of course, and at first it would be just the occasional yachtsman looking for a brief stopover on the way to somewhere else. Later, a few tourists would catch the weekly flight from the mainland out to the same island and the same airstrip that served during the war. The visitors would return home and spread the word. Now there are two flights a day and tourists enough to fill them both.

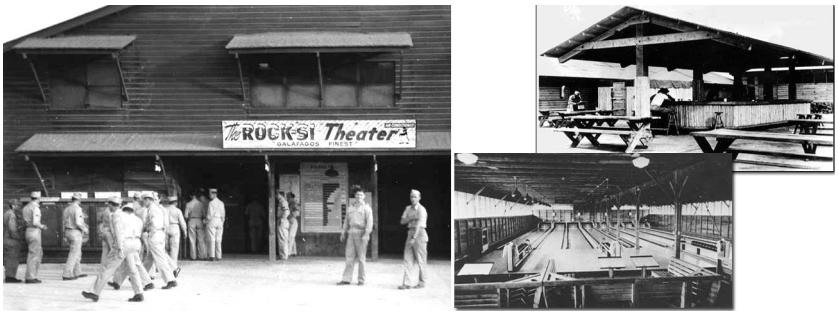
On disembarking, one's first impression may be that one has been had. The land is flat, featureless, and the cactus (if that is what that sorry-looking stuff really is) could only be called "vegetation" by one with superior imagination—perhaps the very one who sold you this trip in the first place. The second impression is not much better. There is a line. In fact, there is a very *long* line, and you're at the wrong end of it. At the right end stands an inspector, who is there for a reason of course: passports will need to be stamped, papers will need to be issued, and of course there will need to be a "little something" to take care of all this. At the moment, the little something works out to US $100, cash only if you please. Eventually, the first few people are stamped, papered and taxed. The line moves. It moves slowly, but it moves. Each and every tourist personally validates Darwinian theory by evolving to the head of the line to complete the formalities of entrance to the Galápagos National Park. Now all that remains is one small step—out into the sun to partake of an old Ecuadorian tradition; the wait. Sooner or later a bus will show up to take the tourists to the dock and the awaiting ships. With little else on this rock but you, your fellow travellers, and the bus, it may not be immediately clear what delayed it. It's probably best not to ask.

While waiting, spend a few moments imagining what it might be like to live here. Not here, as in the Enchanted Isles, but here as on this dismal rock that doesn't seem capable of supporting much of anything beyond itself and an occasional slithering lizard. Yet this was home for several thousand Americans during the Second World War, and that is why we're on this rock today, waiting for that bus. America believed—and so did Ecuador—that the Galápagos Islands would be of use in the defense of the Panama Canal. In the unhappy days following December 7th, 1941, there was damned good reason to believe the Japs would follow up their visit to Pearl Harbor with a similar

call on the Canal. They had in fact already announced their plan to destroy it before invading the American west coast. These nearby islands seemed a likely spot to place a reception committee, and the Americans were given permission to build a landing strip and send out an aircraft squadron to sit around and wait upon events.

A wartime flyover of Aeolian Cove. The seaplanes are gone now, replaced by yachts awaiting tourists from the mainland.

At that time, the island—code-named Base Beta—offered its temporary tenants the very worst aspects of war and peace. There was absolutely nothing here to get the adrenalin flowing: the Japanese were preoccupied elsewhere in the Pacific and had little time to even think about the Canal and its Galápagos defenses. The Germans were simply too busy destroying their own continent to be very effective elsewhere. They did make a few attempts in the Caribbean, sinking whatever their U-boats could find, before the 6th Air Force found their U-boats. But they didn't have much luck striking Panama or reaching its protectors in the Pacific, whch meant the enemy here was neither bombs nor bullets. Here, the enemy was good old-fashioned boredom.



The Rock-Si Theater, Galápagos Beer Garden and a bowling alley provided some diversion for the servicemen marooned on "The Rock" during WWII.

With no inviting town just down the road for a bit of R & R, the military did what it could to provide the troops with onsite activities to fill their off-duty hours. There were sport fields, a boxing ring—later on, even a bowling alley—plus the base movie theater and the Galápagos Beer Garden. Later on, the men built a service club out of rocks, *La Casa de Piedra* (the Stone House), featuring what was claimed to be the longest bar in the world.

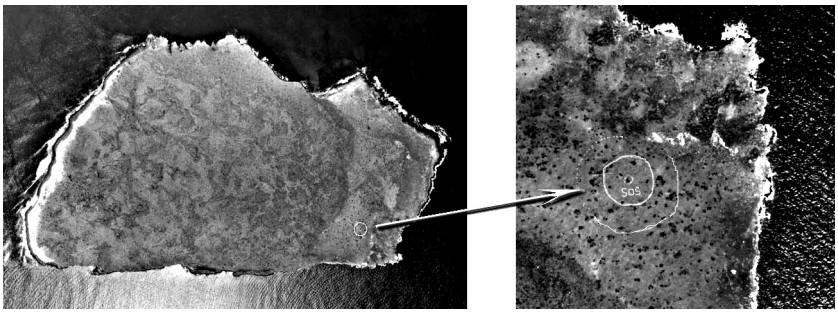
And then there were the accidents. The wreckage of a fighter plane crashed on "Little Seymour." No records have been found in the miltary archives, and the fate of the pilot is unknown.

And there was fishing. A few small boats were pressed into service for expeditions around the nearby islands, and the catch was always a welcome break from the usual menu at the mess hall, which was not celebrated for its haute cuisine.

A 1944 fishing expedtion off Isla Seymour Norte, with Daphne Major barely visible in the right background (just beyond the fishing rod).

One such expedition provided a bit more diversion than had been anticipated, and it left its mark on the nearby island of "Little Seymour," known today as Isla Seymour Norte. Years after war's end, the U. S. Air Force was engaged in a Galápagos Islands mapping mission. With photo reconnaissance planes flying overhead at 6,000 to 25,000 feet, many smaller islands were captured on a single exposure. The one of Base Beta itself introduced this chapter, and there was another one of "Little Seymour." This photo showed the terrain and a little something else—a series of white concentric circles in the southeast section of the island. On close examination, an "S. O. S" could be seen within the circles on an aerial photograph taken in 1959.

There was no record of any plane or ship going down in the area, and so no reason to suspect that some survivors had made it to the island to fashion a distress signal that might be seen from the air. How then, did the message appear?



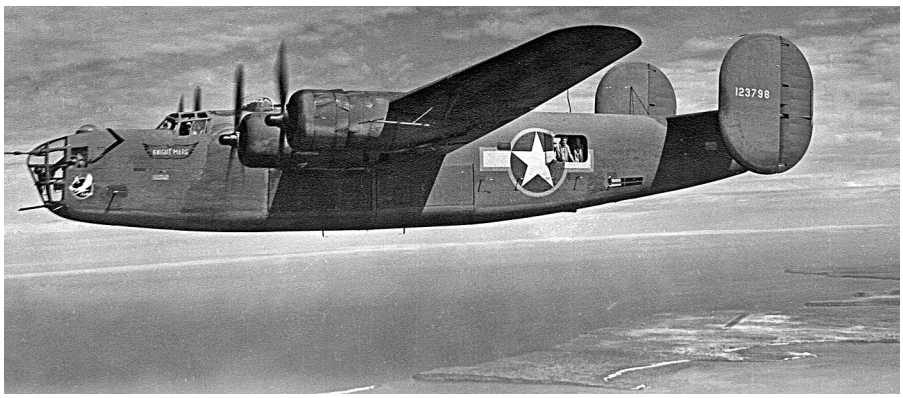
"Little Seymour" Island and an enlargement (rotated 90°) showing an "S. O. S." signal. How did it get there?

The answer did not come until years after the war. Dr. William G. Kennon, Jr. was stationed at the Base Hospital on Isla Baltra. He recorded his recollections in 1981.

> On Christmas day, 1943, we were out fishing in a little inboard-motor Chriscraft, about 16 feet long. We shipped a little water, swamped our engine and couldn't get it started again. We started drifting up towards North Seymour Island. We had no oars, only a small paddle and we couldn't direct the boat very well. It drifted to the island and got battered up pretty badly, but we climbed up onto the rocks and made our way to the top of the island. The squadron commanding officer was part of our fishing party. He said "One of my flights is due here in about 30 minutes. I think they're going to drop some bombs right here."
>
> Well, there weren't a lot of places to hide, but we found two or three old sandbags that had been left up there. We cut holes in the bags and wrote out a big "S. O. S." right across the area where they usually drop their bombs. Next, we set fire to the sacks and added some dead wood to the blaze. We made quite a bit of smoke with our little fire, and pretty soon one of the infantry outposts on Baltra

> saw it. Somebody flew over in a small liason plane; he was a friend of ours and recognized us. He flew very low, cut his engine and leaned out and laughed. Needless to say, we weren't in a laughing mood, and we made it known to him that we wanted off. They finally sent somebody out and got us off in time to get back to Baltra for a big Christmas dinner at the officer's mess.

It is not known if any fish survived the day's activities, but chances are the men had to make due with turkey.



Captain Bill Knight and his "Knight Mare" on patrol over Base Beta on Isla Baltra.

Given the facts of life on "The Rock," there was no opportunity for the type of non-serious action that might appeal to a young and healthy American male. The nearest available females were about 600 miles due East, and there was no ferry service. Some troops stationed at a radar outpost on Isla Isabela amused themselves by carving socially-unacceptable statues of reclining figures in the rock—not quite the same as the real thing though. Others would get to fly to the mainland while looking for enemy vessels that never cut a wake through the water below. Then after a few hours sleep they would fly back, again searching in vain for trouble which never showed up, and with little or no

chance to get themselves into more-interesting trouble on the continent.

How then to fight the only enemy in sight: boredom? Popular wisdom has it that the American troops turned on the local land iguanas for target practice. It's a believable legend: imagine being barely 20 years old, newly drafted and sent to a place that could very well be the next Pearl Harbor—a place the Japs would need to wipe out before they could take on the Canal. You have nothing to do but stand around and wait for something terrible to happen. But of course, nothing terrible does happen. In fact, nothing happens, period. The birth of the Charles Darwin Research Station is still some 20 years in the future, and it will take almost as many more years until the world of tourism wakes up to the possibility that this God-forsaken place might actually be a "destination." But in the meantime, this home so very far away from home is just "The Rock," a term of endearment formerly reserved for Alcatraz, another prison watched over by gun-toting guards. But on this little rock in the Pacific, the guards are also the prisoners. At the end of a boring day they take their amusement firing shots at some stupid lizards. So the story goes.

Eventually the war ends and everyone goes home. Some years later the scientists arrive and note the absence of land iguanas. They recall the island was occupied by Americans during the big one and set down the following observations:

1. Iguanas were here before the war,
2. Americans were here during the war,
3. Iguanas are missing after the war. Therefore, ...
4. Americans killed the iguanas.

In due time hypothesis becomes theorem, and today there's hardly a wildlife study that does not include the obligatory "senseless slaughter" reference. Despite the absence of a single reliable first-hand account, the hypothesis is so believable that few challenge it. It's almost as though we *expect* young men to do such things. The troops are judged guilty, in absentia and without trial.

Perhaps this harsh judgment should be appealed, if not on the basis of newly-found evidence, then at least on re-examination of the old. By studying World War II documents it's possible to reconstruct—at least partially—an account of what did, and what did not, happen here during the war.

Construction of an airstrip began just after Pearl Harbor, and it was ready for the first landing in April, 1942. A month or so later, the American Smithsonian Institution sent Dr. Waldo Schmitt out to Galápagos to investigate the possibility of establishing a small laboratory adjacent to the military facilities. Schmitt was of course no stranger to the islands; he had been a part of the Hancock expeditions of the early 1930s and later on accompanied President Franklin Delano Roosevelt here in 1938, aboard the U. S. S. *Houston*. Then he was back a few years later with Captain Picking and the submarines. But you already know about that from previous chapters.

This time there was no yacht for Waldo, and no cruiser either—not even a submarine. This time his vessel was the Tuna Clipper *Liberty,* which after a five-day voyage from Panama dropped him off at Base Beta. He made notes about the iguana situation in his diary:

> Some sections much favored by [the iguanas] have been completely denuded of all vegetation in the course of land leveling operations. The goats and remaining iguanas have been driven into, or concentrated in, perhaps half the

> range that they formerly occupied. Thus, the animals come into closer competition for food. Due to the indiscriminate use of pistols during the early phases of the military occupation, so many iguanas were killed that a severe epidemic of carrion flies resulted. [But] this, of itself, brought about some degree of protection, in order to eliminate the pest of flies.

Unfortunately, Schmitt did not elaborate on this, but we do know the remark about the pistols was not based on personal observation. For in his diary he wrote "Army killed iguanas with pistols, & let carcasses die … I guess [this] made a bad flie (*sic*) pest." However, this entry was made ten days *before* he arrived in Galápagos. He apparently heard about it from someone else, but he doesn't say from whom. By the time he actually got there he was able to jot down a cheerier note: "Killing of animals [is] out," perhaps by order of the base commander who had distributed a memorandum on the status of the islands as a game preserve. It stated that "The killing of all animals and birds is prohibited."

Left: Dr. Schmitt at work, perhaps in Galápagos.

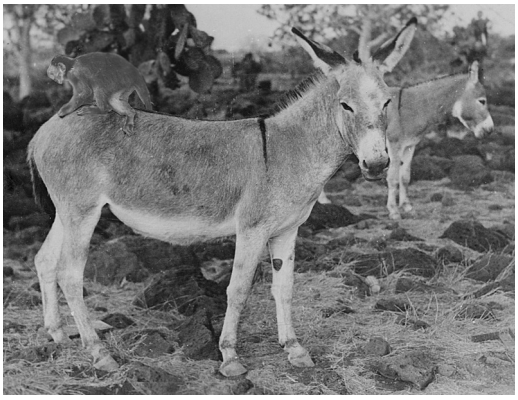
But assuming Schmitt's earlier second-hand account to be reliable, it would appear that these regrettable actions were of brief duration and had ceased prior to his arrival. In any case, the Smithsonian didn't want to take any chances on the future, and a memorandum was sent off to the State Department to warn of the potential for diplomatic embarrassment.

> It is recognized that disturbances through construction and actual occupancy are unavoidable, but it is important and necessary that all hunting for game or sport, and all

> other unnecessary molestation of the wild life be controlled and prohibited by the military authorities. … Should any [animals] be destroyed needlessly, much resentment inevitably will arise.

Accordingly, the Secretary of War instructed the Commanding General, Caribbean Defense Command that

> … you take appropriate action to prevent any unnecessary molestation of the wild life in the Galápagos Archipelago and to prohibit the introduction of domestic animals that may prey on the native fauna.

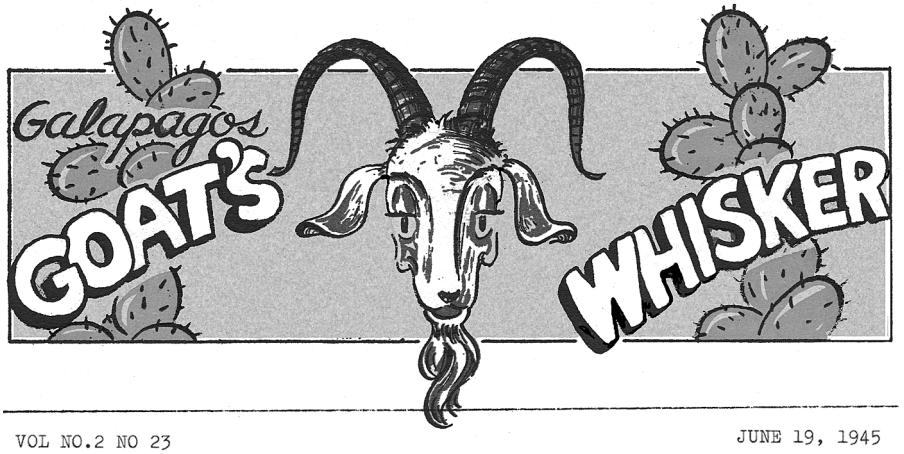


"Franklin" and "Eleanor" (last name unknown) with a young friend of unknown origin.

The orders were issued to all military units, for both the State Department and the Smithsonian were aware that interested foreign agencies were monitoring the situation and could be expected to take action if the United States permitted the Galápagos habitat to deteriorate needlessly. In short, the protection of flora and fauna was taken very seriously.

But could the servicemen themselves be expected to take their orders as seriously as did their government and the Smithsonian? In retrospect, perhaps they took them a bit

too seriously. The orders made no distinction between endemic and feral animals—an unfortunate loophole that the resident goats used to their advantage, much to the annoyance of some other (human) residents at Base Beta. The June 19, 1945 edition of the base newspaper *Goat's Whisker* published a report on the situation.



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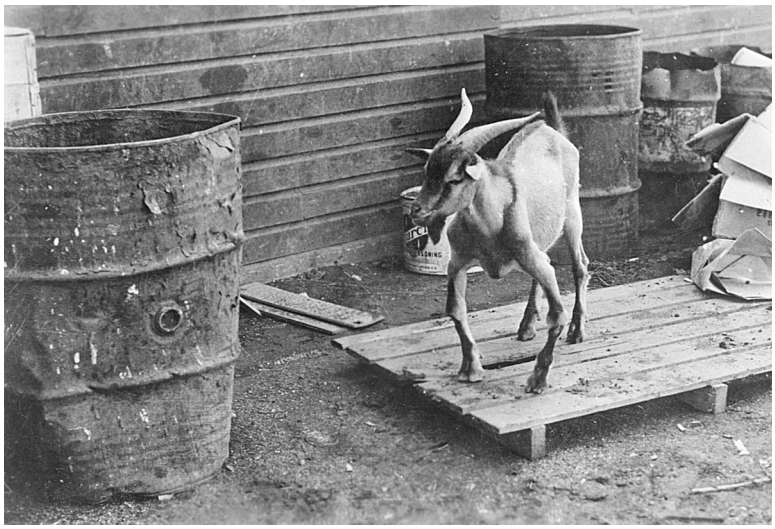
"THE GOAT'S WHISKER HAS THE LARGEST CIRCULATION AND BEST READER AUDIENCE OF ANY PAPER IN THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS"

GOATS MAY BE BANNED FROM PX BEER GARDEN

It turns out that some recent arrivals had complained to the PX officer about the presence of the beasts, much to the disgust of the old-timers, who regarded the goats as fixtures. No action was taken, pending further study of the matter. And so, along with their PX privileges, the animals prospered under a well-intentioned but misguided Uncle Sam.

When not raiding the trash cans or drinking with their army buddies down at the PX, the goats had the unsettling habit of wandering (staggering?) across the runway at the most inconvenient moments, and at least a few landings had to be aborted on their account. But such close calls notwithstanding, it would seem that troops and herds lived in more-or-less peaceful coexistence.

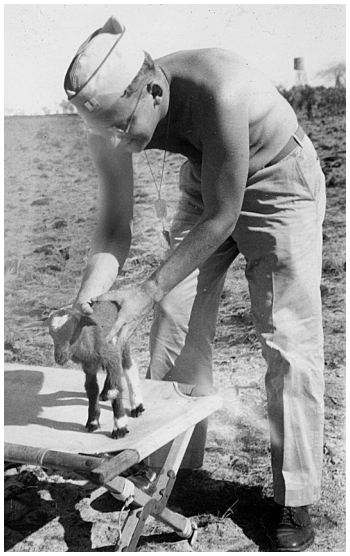


Military mascot "Billy Bender" in residence at Base Beta.

But what of the iguanas? Is it likely that the troops would cheerfully spare the goats yet systematically risk official displeasure by taking on the iguanas? The evidence, such as it is, suggests not. For whatever else the airmen did to pass their leisure time, they took pictures. They photographed the planes they flew in, the buddies they flew with, their baseball games, the goats, and of course, the ubiquitous iguanas. The pictures have one thing in common; the iguanas are reasonably plentiful, and all are quite large. Although there's no shortage of baby goat pictures, there's not one juvenile iguana to be seen in all the photos in all the albums. Not one. Over the war years, several thousand military personnel called Galápagos home. Not one of them saw a baby iguana. One medic attached to the base hospital recalled that

> Someone who acted as though he spoke with authority said, "You know, you only see large iguanas here on The Rock. You never see any small ones." After that I specifically noticed the size of the iguanas that we had, and all of them were fairly large.

Now, who (or what) was killing off all the young iguanas while sparing their elders? It could hardly be the work of bored humans, who if so inclined would surely find the faster-moving (when sober, of course) goats were far more attractive targets. And whatever the cause of the missing young, the effect had been observed long before World War II. William Beebe noted it in 1923. Some ten years later the members of the Hancock Expedition observed that the iguanas were not thriving on this island and they transported some of them to nearby North Seymour Island. Still later, Dr. Loren P. Woods from Chicago's Natural History Museum recalled that "when he visited Seymour in 1940, prior to the establishment of the military base, he found only a very few Land Iguanas—*all of them large adults.*" Seymour—actually, *South* Seymour—was the former name for this island, and the italics are in a report of his trip.



Dr. Edwin Rowe and a young patient.

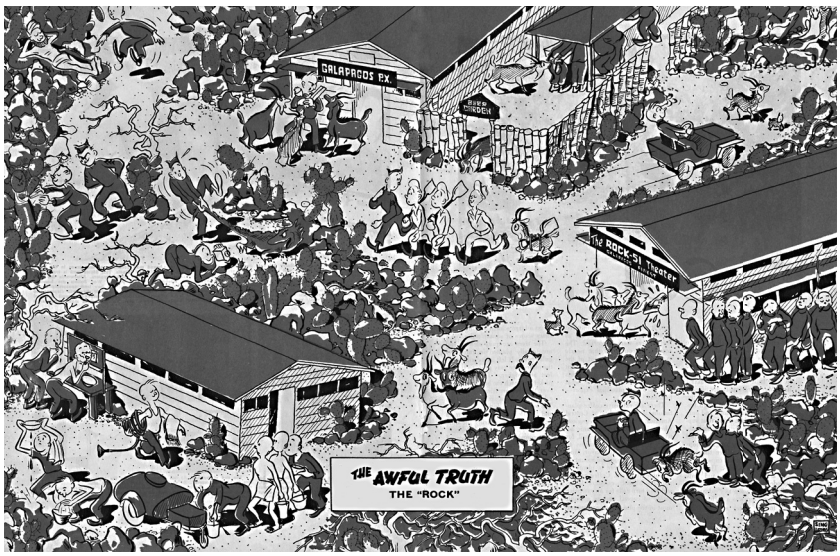
With all of this offered for consideration, it would seem grossly unfair to continue blaming the American troops for a phenomenon that had begun long before their arrival. To be sure, the heavy construction work, with subsequent air and road traffic, took its toll on the surviving adults. But even this did not totally finish them off. For in January 1954, Dr. Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt reported finding an iguana carcass here. He writes "The sun had shriveled up the creature's body but still I could make out from the bullet holes that the lizard had been shot." After noting that the island had made life miserable for so many bored troops, he adds that " … we really cannot blame them for what they did." And in so writing, he blames them.

But how long had this unfortunate creature baked in the sun before it was discovered? A few months? A year at best? Presumably, Dr. Eibl-Eibesfeldt's skills lie elsewhere than in forensic science, for at risk of stating the obvious, the very existence of an iguana carcass in 1954 should have convinced the German scientist that the American serviceman could not possibly be blamed for, as he put it, "senseless devastation" in Galápagos.

The legend lingers on. In the year 2002, author Michael D'Orso told his readers how the Americans spent their time on The Rock. They " … wound up with little to do but drink beer and shoot iguanas."

By now the bus should have arrived.

Lieutenant Lewis Nelson and friend.



Above: Life on "The Rock" depicted in the November 1944 issue of *The Caribbean Breeze*.

Below: A wartime ad featured the emblem of the 51st Fighter Squadron stationed at Base Beta.