

New Information on French Frigate Shoals.

By Steve Pendleton.

In the January and April 2001 editions of *Pacifica* Cy Kitching and I reported on one of the most obscure Pacific islets, namely French Frigate Shoals. Some new information has come to light since these earlier reports.

The "Shoals" are actually a group of tiny islets (total land area about 67 acres – more or less – dependant upon the scourging activity of Pacific storms). Today they form part of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Wildlife Refuge, and are located between Midway and Kauai Islands.

This location is the source of whatever historical importance they might have had, that is, other than the fact that the tiny amount of land provides nesting and resting areas for numerous birds and seals. In the 1930's the area, which is protected by a fringing reef, provided a landing area for aircraft flying between Midway and Hawaii. During World War II the Japanese used it as a place from which they prepare submarine attacks on Hawaii, resulting in the occupation of East Island and construction of an airstrip and garrison (later moved to Tern Island). In the 1950's the U.S Coast Guard took over occupation and built a better airstrip on Tern Island. This unit, of about 20 men, became notorious as a "Siberia" for 'coasties'.

A number of U.S warships are known to have visited French Frigate Shoals and have marked their visits with the name of the "Shoals" superimposed between the killer bars of the ships cancellers. Those known so far are as follows:-

U.S.S Gamble	- 25 April 1933.	"French Frigate Shoals/Plane Guard—"
U.S.S Lark	- 10 May 1935.	"French/Frigate Shoal"
U.S.S Swan	- 11 November, 12 November 1935	"French Frigate Shoal"
U.S.S Avocet	- 11 November 1935,	"French Frigate Shoal".
U.S.S Wright	- 13 November 1935	"French Frigate Shoal T.H"
U.S.S Wright	- Oct/Nov 1936.	"??"
U.S.S Medusa	- 1937.	"??"
U.S.S Richmond	- 16 May 1937	"French Frigate Shoals"



Any additions to this list would be welcomed.

During the 1930's there were several flights recorded through covers.

One, which is believed to be very rare, took place on 2/3 February 1934 by a "massed flight" of Squadron 8F of the U.S Navy. This flight left Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, stopped briefly at French Frigate Shoals and landed at Midway the following day. Covers commemorating this flight were cancelled at Pearl Harbor on 2 February 1934.

Between 9-12 May 1935 U.S Navy Patrol Squadrons 1, 4, 6, 8 and 10 carried out a 4,650 mile flight from Pearl Harbor to Midway and return. Covers commemorating this event were given a 10 May backstamp from U.S.S Lark, noting its station at the Shoal.

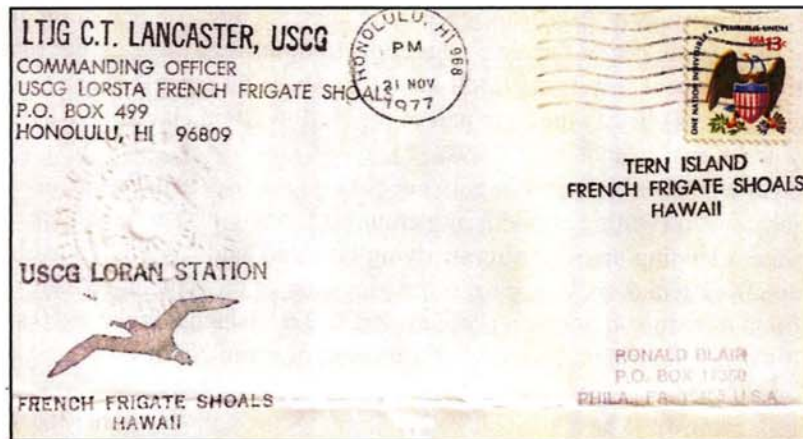
From 9-17 May 1935 Squadron VP-6-F flew from Pearl Harbor to French Frigate Shoals and return. Covers from this flight carried a printed cachet and were cancelled at Pearl Harbor on the two dates. They were also backstamped at the Shoals by U.S.S Avocet on 11 November and by U.S.S Wright on 13 November.

There are probably other, so far unrecorded, flights between Hawaii and Midway which used the Shoals as a stop-over/emergency landing site. Details of any such flights would be welcomed.

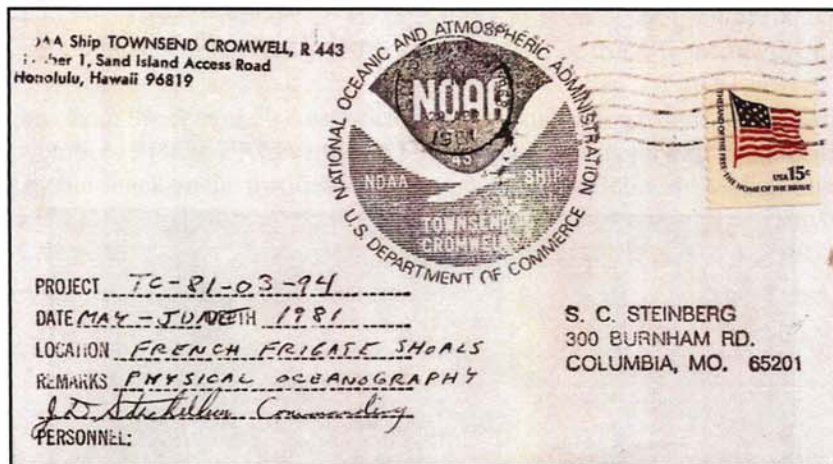
During World War II at least two mailing addresses were used by construction units in 1942 and 1943. A LORAN (Long Range Aid to Navigation) station was opened on 21 July 1944, and remained active until 1 July 1979. It had an FPO number of 80, San Francisco, which was used until it closed as a military unit in 1947.

The LORAN station was placed under the control of the U.S Coast Guard, which as previously stated, moved it from East Island to Tern Island. This Island was expanded in size from 24 to 36 acres, and a 3,300ft runway was bulldozed, which took up over half of the land space. The station which was built in a "U" shape was placed on one side of the runway. The remaining area was mostly sandy beach given over to birds nests. This station did not have its own postal facilities – its

mailing address was Box 499, Honolulu. However several cachets were used on collector mail, one of which was the silhouette of a Frigate Bird. (see illustration).



After the closure of the station, the island usually had two permanent residents, plus a varying group of volunteers, many of whom were students in various scientific disciplines.



The island was also visited many times by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's vessel "Townsend Cromwell". From 1974 until it was decommissioned in 2002 it made many voyages from Hawaii to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Also illustrated is a 1981 cover carried to the "shoals" on an oceanography research venture.