

# Malden Atoll in Pacific Near H-Bomb Test Site

By ARCH BIRTWELL

When word was flashed on the week-end that the British had exploded an H-bomb in the air just off the coast of a Pacific atoll, Malden Island, a twinge of nostalgia was felt by a former Malden man now living in Medford.

Joseph E. English of 356 Salem street, Medford, raised on Emerald street, Malden, could almost feel the blast as the terse announcement was made.

It wasn't just the name "Malden Island" that affected Joe. The island is one of the phosphate atolls near Christmas Island, and it was on Christmas Island that he was marooned with two natives for 15 months back in 1918-1919.

A real live Robinson Crusoe, Joe has been telling his story for years, and his exploits as manager of a coconut plantation on the island filled pages of the Boston papers over 20 years ago.

Always an adventurer in his youth, Joe left Malden High after two years and joined the Navy. A few years later he signed up for a hitch in the Army, which sent him to the Philippines.

There his real adventure took shape. He met a French missionary, Rev. Father Emmanuel

Rougier. The missionary had taken a 99-year lease on Christmas Island from English Lord Leverhume, founder of the famed Lever Brothers industries.

The missionary wanted to start a coconut plantation on the island, and he wanted Joe to manage it. So, when his Army hitch was up, off he went for Christmas Island.

He was landed on the island in a small boat which fought through high surf, and set up his headquarters in the building which had been used by Lord Leverhume's men, who failed in an attempt to establish large beds of silver lip pearl oysters.

The island, a British possession shared with the U. S. was 35 miles wide, 40 miles long on the north, and 60 miles long on the south. Near the center of the Pacific, it was just above the Equator, over 4000 miles due West of Equador, and hundreds of miles almost due South of Hawaii.

Here, amongst thousands of palm trees, birds and animal life of infinite variety, was to be Joe's home for almost five years. Working for him were close to 500 Polynesian natives. Hired from the far-away islands such

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That's Joe English, standing in the center with dark suit and pith helmet, and Father Rougier at the right. The picture was taken as they conferred with Fanning Island cable station operator in the white suit. "short time later," Father Rougier accompanied Joe back to Christmas Island, promising to pick him up in 46 days, never to see him again.

# Malden Atoll in Pa

as Tahiti and the Gilberts, their job was to cultivate the coconut palms on the uninhabited island. The wives and children of the natives worked, just as the men, all for the great sum of one English pound a month.

As the first few years went by, the palms were cultivated by Joe and the natives. Trees were planted in even rows to assure sunlight reaching all of them, and fronds were pruned regularly to produce large harvests of coconuts.

## Joe Halts Mutiny A Daring Exploit

All was not serenity for Joe on the island, as he found out when the natives staged a mutiny.

The trouble started when Father Rougier sent a Dr. Ralph C. Morgan to the island to be Joe's assistant. Unknown to Father Rougier and Joe, Dr. Morgan had been kicked off another island as a trouble maker.

Dr. Morgan told Joe his duties were to try and get some pearl-bearing oyster beds going. Joe said the doctor spent most of his time "teasing the oysters," opening them, jabbing them with a needle, and inserting foreign matter to start pearls.

Joe was called to San Francisco by Father Rougier, and it was to be a six-month round trip. He returned in three months, however, and found all the natives living on one side of the island.

Dr. Morgan, who Joe said was afraid of the natives, told him

the natives refused to work. Joe set out without his guns to track down the rebelling natives and the ringleader. He went to different stations in his Ford, and at each, found the ringleader had talked more into leaving their work and going off for a vacation.

Joe caught up with the ringleaders at a coconut grove. When one threw a rock, he chased up the hill after them, only to have a large group of the natives come out from the trees and surround him with clubs. The wires had been pulled on the car, and he was stuck.

He made a dash, stumbled over a shovel, picked it up and started swatting back with it as the natives tried to club him.

Joe miraculously made it back to his headquarters two miles away. "I passed 40,000 trees without seeing one of them," he said.

When he armed himself with a shotgun and his two automatics, the natives soon gave in, and on bended knees, they acknowledged that Joe was still "Chief."

Dr. Morgan was shipped out on the next boat.

Life wasn't too bad in the Pacific paradise after the mutiny was over. Joe had the old Ford and plenty of gas to get around his island. Father Rougier, who operated his enterprise under the name of Central Pacific Plantation Co., had a small ship which kept supplies on hand.

## Tippling Captain Starts Trouble

The captain of the ship was an old Englishman named Jones, and he had a fond affection for tippling. Joe vividly recalls the chain of events which led up to his being marooned on the island for over a year.

The beginning, he pinpointed as July 23, 1918, at 2 P.M. That was when Captain Jones foundered the ship on a reef. He had been trying to navigate into the island's lagoon. Joe claims the captain, who had been hitting the bottle a little too much, didn't see the guiding beacon on the island, but the captain said he did.

At any rate, the ship was hard on the reef, and Joe ordered the captain to jettison his cargo and let it drift ashore. The captain, courageous after his tippling, refused, so Joe sent all boys out, and they did the job.

Joe gave the old salt a chance — take a 25-foot sailboat 140 miles to Fanning Island, where the British had a cable station, and cable Father Rougier on Tahiti about the mishap, or take a pistol with one bullet in it.

## Old Salt Makes Quick Choice

The captain made a quick choice, took several natives and provisions for a five-day trip. About 11 days later, men at the cable station on Fanning Island spotted a sailboat on the horizon. It was making no progress, so after waiting over night, they went out to the boat.

Captain Jones and his boys were about done. They were all lying on the bottom of the boat. Fortune was with them though, and the fact that they reached the horizon saved them.

Captain Jones got his cable off to Father Rougier on Tahiti. The missionary chartered a steamer which had been taking tourists through some of the islands, paying all expenses, and it steamed straight for Christmas Island. There they found the boat refloated from the reef and patched by native divers.

Joe got aboard the steamer with Father Rougier, and they were off to Fanning Island to see Captain Jones. Not one to mend his ways, Captain Jones had been offered some free whisky, and he didn't turn down the opportunity.

The old salt got so tanked, he fell down a long flight of stone steps at the cable station just as Father Rougier and Joe reached Fanning Island.

Lying at the foot of the steps with black eyes and cuts galore, he told Father Rougier and Joe that he got his injuries when the mast of the sailboat fell down and hit him.

## "We'll Be Back In 45 Days"

Back they went to Christmas Island, where Father Rougier loaded all but two of the natives on the steamer, since their working contracts had expired. Captain Jones' ship left, and so did Father Rougier, promising to be back for Joe in 45 days.

That was in September, and left with Joe and two natives were four bags of flour, some dried beef and 25 pounds of prunes. He decided to put the natives to work, and asked one if he knew how to cook flour.

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the flour in boiling water, which turned out hard as rocks.

The other native tried his hand, but the best he came up with were pasty pancakes, which Joe said snapped back into one piece as soon as you cut them.

October passed, and by then, the island's three inhabitants were feasting on bird's eggs, fish, coconuts, and other Pacific delicacies.

November passed, and still no ship. Then came 1919, and the months continued to pass. Fortunately, Joe had enough gas saved from Captain Jones' wreck so he could take the natives out for an occasional ride in the old Ford. He read every book on the island, including the works of Dickens, which he went through a dozen times.

#### Too Many Stewed Prunes

One day, Joe got a hankering for some of the prunes, which he had almost forgotten. He asked one of the natives, a dangerous mistake, to cook the prunes. The native had never seen prunes before, but he cooked them out on Joe's patio. When Joe came out for his meal, he found pots and containers everywhere. His never do well cook had stewed up the whole 25 pounds of prunes for the table set for three.

Joe was so mad, he picked up the batches of prunes and threw them all at the natives. They ran off and didn't show up until eight hours later, when they waltzed in with piles of bird's eggs — some new, some maybe a year old.

The months of 1919 continued to pass, and still no ship. Joe says he must have started to get a little "balmy." One day he got the natives into the Ford, and went out to pick some coconuts.

He sent the boys up to get five red coconuts. At another spot he sent them for five yellow ones, and again for five green ones. His idea was for each of them to have coconuts of the same color so he could tell if one of them was stealing from the other.

#### Natives Sense Ship Coming

Fifteen months had passed, when on a Sunday in 1913, the natives told him a ship was coming. He looked for hours with his spy glass, but saw not even a trace of smoke on the horizon. Calling them liars, he chased them off with rocks.

Four hours later, sure enough,

neer, and hero commander of Britain's greatest naval victory, the Battle of Jutland.

With the admiral, was a Commodore Dwyer, plus two captains and several other officers. They pronounced the island well managed, but in view of Joe's predicament, asked him if he wanted to leave.

Joe, whom they addressed as "commissioner," pointed to the scanty rags he had on, and said it wouldn't take him long to pack.

So, off he went with the two natives, his island exile at an end. He was treated royally on the admiral's flagship, complete with banquet, toasts to the king and all.

Some of the ship's recorders were put to work for hours copying down the data such as tides, winds, rainfall, and species of wildlife on the island which Joe had kept in detail during his years there.

An incident on the ship Joe remembers vividly occurred when he first came aboard. Every officer he met pinched his arm. After going through the strange ritual six times, he asked what the idea was.

Seems he had gotten so dark on the island, they were pinching him to see if his skin was actually white.

After the banquet, Joe was given the admiral's spare cabin, plush quarters used several times by England's King Edward. After ringing a gold bell and having a steward bring him a drink and take off his shoes, Joe decided to head for the bed.

#### "King Joe" Has Good Laugh

"I dove straight for the pillow," he said, "and hid my face in it so they wouldn't hear me while I laughed and laughed. I said to myself, 'What's good for King Eddie is good for King Joe.'"

When Joe got to a cable station, he wired Father Rougier, who returned a cable telling him he'd meet him in the United States. But, he never saw the old missionary again.

Joe stopped in Hawaii on his trip homeward, where he gave each of the two natives \$50 apiece. He recalls being furious when he found one had spent all for an alarm clock, a watch and rings for each finger.

The other native had spent his money on clothes, which he gave away to those who admired them, as was the Tahitian custom.

Well, that was the last of Christmas Island for Joe, who



**AFTER WORK** at Potter Drug Co., Joseph E. English relaxes in his Medford home with a biography of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, British Naval hero of the Battle of Jutland. It was the admiral who rescued Mr. English in 1919 after he was marooned on Christmas Island in the Pacific for 15 months. On page 413 of the book is a description of the admiral's encounter with the Malden native which wrote finis to a real-life Robinson Crusoe story.

he natives, who explained that the "manus," birds, had told them of the ship's approach.

As the ship came nearer, Joe saw cannons aimed right at his island. He feared it was the Russians. He didn't know World War I had ended, and remembered that German warships had blown up the cable station on Manning Island two years earlier. A small boat set out from the ship, and Joe, clothed only in red rags hanging from a belt, walked, shaking all over, out to the moon, with two automatics rapped to his side.

"Halt," he commanded to the more party, waving an automatic. "What ship are you from?" "From His Majesty's Ship New Zealand, making an official tour of all British possessions," came the answer.

Joe still didn't trust them after his 15-month ordeal, and he didn't let his gun away until a British officer with "gold up to his shoulders," told him to put the gun away.

**Famous Admiral  
rescues Joe**  
The officer  
John Jellicoe,

The father of four sons and three daughters, he thrilled them with his tales through the years. It was an extra thrill for the family when his son, Philip English, serving in the Navy during World War II, visited the island, then used as a Navy refueling station.

It's easy to see why Joe felt a little sad when the British dropped their H bombs, first on Christmas Island, and then on Malden Island.

"One of the things that bothers me," he said, "is the damage done to the fish. That place was the greatest fishing ground in the world. You could eat fish three meals a day all year, and never have to eat the same kind twice."

## Christmas Named by Explorer

Christmas Island was named by British explorer Captain James Cook, who discovered it on Christmas Day, 1776.

How Malden Island got its name is still lost in obscurity. It is an uninhabited 35 square mile atoll once worked by an Australian company which mined phosphate there. Foundations of old Polynesian dwellings were standing there, at least before the H-bomb blast, but wells on the island had all turned salty.

However, Lakes Margaret, Mary and Rosalie on Christmas Island were named by Joseph E. English of Medford in honor of his sisters.

Margaret and Mary English still reside in the English family homestead at 26 Emerald street, Malden.

One of the native boys who worked for Joe English, Hetoti, disappeared from the island after a moonshine trader and his boat paid a visit.

Years later, Joe met Walter Harrington, of Edgeworth, who said he had met Hetoti serving in the U. S. Navy.

Hetoti, Harrington said, described Joe as "a good chief."