

A LOOK BACK

DICK WILHELM IS A RETIRED ELECTRICAL ENGINEER, now living in Port Angeles, Washington. Joining the USAF in 1963, he worked for several years as an electronics instructor in an organization using various technologies to monitor and analyze atmospheric and below-ground nuclear bomb testing. In mid-1966, he and fifty others were assigned to Easter Island, with orders to establish and operate a monitoring station. The island offered an ideal location because there was little man-made interference, plus its proximity to the French nuclear testing being done in the Pacific. In exchange for providing materials, equipment, and some expertise to the Chileans for the construction of a runway on the island, they were allowed to build and operate the station.

At that time, and for many years afterwards, the existence of this mission was highly classified by the US government. USAF personnel were all posing as civilians with no uniforms or military IDs although, ironically, they drove around in blue pickups with USAF stenciled on the side. These activities have now been declassified and replaced with other technologies not requiring a presence.

While on island for an eleven-month stay, Dick met and made friends with many locals and Chileans. After his return to the United States in August 1967, he wished that there were some easy way to remain in touch with his island friends, but marriage and family took precedence.

The members of the U.S. Air Force team brought vehicles, scientific equipment, machinery, fuel, housing, diesel generators, a fresh water system, a hospital, and food supplies. They changed the economy from barter to cash. Before that, money was useless on the island because there were no stores and nothing to buy.

Before the landing strip became operational, supplies were dropped via parachutes from airplanes. The planes picked up packages and mail by means of a balloon attached to a long line tied to the packages. The planes flew under the balloon and a device in the nose of the plane caught the rope, lifting the package up as it trailed behind the plane. The line was then released and the loose end winched up and the package reeled into the plane. After one plane landed safely on the basic airstrip, the first Air Force plane touched down on 20 April 1967 (A photo of this event was published in *RNJ* for Fall 2009).

The outsiders changed other things on the island: bars and discos opened in the village and many liaisons were formed with local *vahine*. Some resulted in children who, years later – in the early 1980s – still longed for their missing fathers. One young US Airman was flown back to the states when he “took up” with a pretty local girl and moved into a cave with her. In the eyes of the Air Force, he clearly must have lost his mind; he was sedated and put on an outgoing plane, and woke up back in the States. (This, and other stories about Rapa Nui can be found in Georgia Lee’s book, *Rapa Nui, Island of Memory* 2006:152-154)



WE ARRIVED ON THE USNS *Sgt. Jonah E. Kelley*, a converted WWII Liberty ship in October, 1966, after a 12-day cruise from Valparaíso, Chile. This picture was taken from the bridge. The people below were playing horseshoes (made of rubber). This gives a bit of a new meaning to “a pitching deck.” Our group consisted of fifty USAF personnel, each with unique capabilities. We had mechanics, cooks, doctors, plumbers, etc. The idea was to establish a self-supporting operation from which we could operate our high-tech equipment. Yes, we were monitoring the nuclear tests taking place in the Pacific. At the time, it was highly classified but this project has been declassified some time ago.

For four months we lived on the *Kelley* and commuted to work on the island via 3 old WWII marine landing crafts (LCMs). During that time, we worked to build living quarters near the runway and the operations buildings near the top of Rano Kau. We brought prefab buildings which could be easily assembled. I wonder if any of these are still in use on the island. I have looked on Google Earth but cannot be sure as the island population has spread out so much.



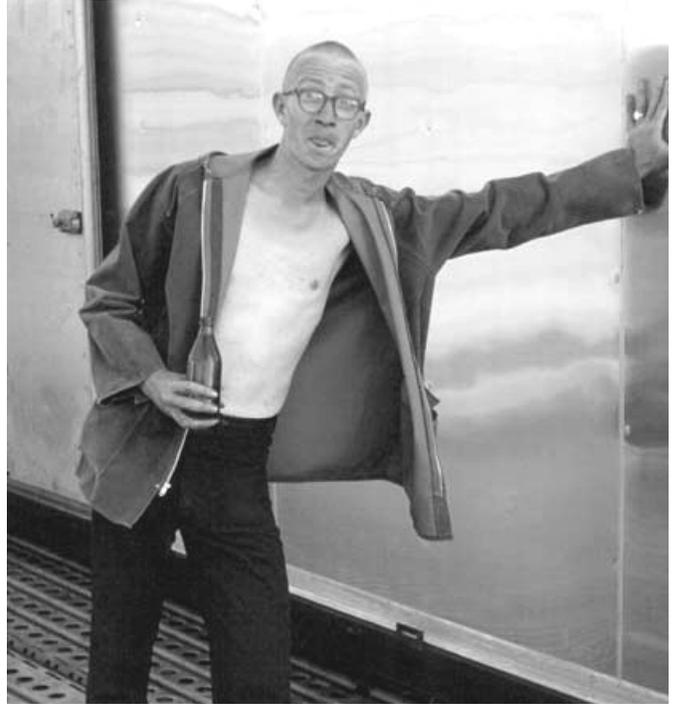
Here is a picture of the USAF going to work. Hardly conjures up the Thunderbirds does it?



The first structure we build on the island. The second was a horseshoe pit. I still don't know why horseshoes were so important back then.



Although we didn't officially endure the Wog Up-Rising ceremony, possibly because we crossed the equator in an airplane, several of us voluntarily submitted to the minimal treatment of a close shave.



Yours truly as well. This might explain why the local population affectionately (I think) nick-named me *kavakava*.



In addition to my Air Force duties, I used spare AF equipment to operate an amateur radio station (K0OXV/CE0A) and was able to provide frequent contact with our families back home. The best thing about this is that I was able to court my girlfriend in Colorado via radio and she (Jackie) is now my wife of 41 years. Ham radio is not just a hobby!



Approximately every 30 to 40 days, weather permitting, the postal service in the form of a US Air-Sea-Rescue C130 would arrive and parachute our mail from home and small supplies such as medical and electronics items. The first item dropped was a package containing a large balloon and a container of compressed helium. While the rest of the drop was taking place, we inflated the balloon and attached a long nylon cord, one end to the balloon and the other to a bag containing up to 200 lbs of outgoing mail and other items. On the last pass of the aircraft the cord was captured by the aircraft, the balloon cut loose, and the bag of mail reeled inside. Although the runway was adequate for this type of aircraft to land and take off, we were not allowed to do this until the Chilean government had made the first official landing.



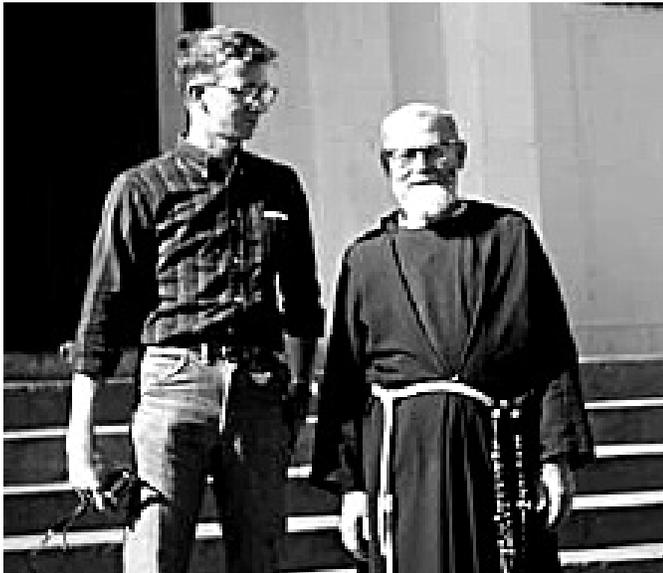
A couple of typical dwellings at the time. The piled-up stone walls (*pirca*) have not changed over the years, and buildings featured corrugated metal roofs. The house shown on the bottom appears to be a government-subsidized structure.



A small plaza was very near the church and was the scene of some serious partying every Saturday night. *Sausau* anyone? And, of course, we were all welcome to atone for Saturday night by attending Mass on Sunday morning.



Some of the island kids all dressed up, probably for Church. Probably the island's entire vehicle population is shown in this picture.



Father Sebastián Englert came to our recreation/mess hall every week and gave lectures on the island and its history. Most of his lectures are published in his book *Island at the Center of the World*. Here I am with Father Sebastian in front of his church.



This is what the electric power plant looked like when we were building it. I don't know if it is still in operation or even still there. I think I saw it on Google Earth but things in the village have changed so much that I cannot be sure.



During the visit from the Norwegian cruise ship *Sagefjord*, an impromptu shopping center shaded by palm fronds was created for that event, with locals hoping to sell curios to the incoming tourists.