

Maracaibo,
December 26th 1935.

Dear Mother and Dad,

I told you that President Gomez died on the 17th after being dictator of Venezuela for 25 years. On the 18th and 19th things were quiet with the people bewildered. The President of the State and other high Government officials left for parts unknown and Colonel Pinto for some unknown reason left for Encontrados taking all the regular soldiers with him leaving Colonel X (I forget his name for the moment) in command of the recently conscripted civilian soldiers. On the afternoon of the 20th there was a students demonstration and a crowd of them marched to see Colonel Mayo who is Governor of Maracaibo and in command of the police and who was apparently the only high Government official left in Maracaibo. A cordon of police stopped the marchers and while both sides were facing each other a student sprang forward and was immediately shot dead by the police. The other demonstrators fled. The next morning the town was placarded announcing the student's funeral for 5 p.m. the 21st and until that hour the town was absolutely quiet and orderly with the police and civilian soldiers in complete command. It was so quiet that Rewcastle (Dad will remember him) went to the dentist. ~~Worked~~ The work done he strolled out of the dentist's door and had'nt taken two paces when shots whizzed by his ears. He immediately dived back into the doorway and peeping round the corner he saw a crowd of men at each end of the street firing at each other. Rewcastle went into the dentist's front room and peeked through the shutters until a couple of bullets came through the window when he immediately dropped onto the floor and stayed there. That fight lasted about half an hour and then Rewcastle made a dash for it passing five dead bodies on his way. Murphy was strolling about the town at that time and happened to be walking behind a mob of men who suddenly threw some stones at a number of soldiers who fixed bayonets and charged the mob which turned and ran. So the situation was the Murphy was running like a hare while about 10 yards behind came the mob and another 10 yards behind came the soldiers charging with fixed bayonets. They kept that order for several hundred yards until Murphy was able to dive down side street and back lanes and he did'nt stop until he got back to camp.

The trouble started about 5 p.m. and fighting lasted for about two hours and then the soldiers and police got into an argument and started firing at each other with the result that every policeman and soldier was withdrawn from the streets and the mobs found themselves in undisputed control. The result was obvious. First they burst into the saloons, took all the liquor and wrecked the places. Then being full of Dutch courage they started on the shops which were full of Christmas goods. They tell me ~~it~~ was a wonderful sight. There was no fighting and the people were having a wonderful time. Scores were playing in the streets with toys taken from the looted shops while hundreds were hurrying home staggering under their loads. Cars were driving up, men would load up the car with whatever they could lay their hands on then the cars would drive away. Shops owned by Government officials were set on fire after they had been looted. A big store on the water front was entered by the mob because the shop always had a big stock of machetes. However, the Government had got there first and taken the lot so in disgust the mob set fire to the place and the whole building was absolutely razed to the ground. Looting and incendiarism went on until about 2 a.m. when the soldiers came out and cleared the streets. As soon as the news of the fighting came through JOW put me on

the 22nd duty and I was standing by until 1 a.m. when I went to bed. Next morning/I was up, had breakfast, wakened the boarding officer, saw that the launch was ready and when I finally got to my desk it was still only 7 a.m. It was rumoured that anything up to 150 had been killed in the previous 24 hours of whom about 22 were policemen. The people were after Colonel Mayo who had gone into hiding somewhere while all the police were concentrated in the central police station and the soldiers were in charge of the town. Reports were so bad that when the PAEZ and CARONI arrived from Las Piedras the CARONI was anchored in Maracaibo, her tanks were steamed and steam hoses were fitted on deck in case of trouble. The PAEZ went to Cabimas and gave steam to the ARAGUA and the CALVERT both of which were manned, stored and ready for sea by 7:30 p.m. which was splendid work as the ARAGUA was laid up and the CALVERT was undergoing repairs. As soon as those two ships were ready the PAEZ and CARONI proceeded to Lagunillas to load, stayed there all night and sailed on schedule the following morning, the 23rd. Sunday the 22nd I was on duty from 5:45 a.m. until 1 a.m. the following morning except for an hour in the morning when I slipped away for a swim. On Monday, the 23rd things were bad. The news of the looting and killing in Maracaibo had spread to the fields which had hitherto been quiet. The police had to open fire on the crowd at Ambrosio. At Cabimas and Lagunillas the people took control and the police went into hiding. Looting and incendiarism took place and murders were frequent. At Lagunillas the people built an incinerator. Two policemen were rooted out, paraded around the place and then immediately in front of the gates of the Gulf camp they were cut into pieces with machetes. Two more policemen were found, one was beheaded and thrown into the incinerator with the pieces of the previous two while the fourth policeman was thrown in alive and burnt to death. That morning, the 23rd, the CALVERT was ordered to Lagunillas and when the CATATUMBO arrived from Las Piedras she was ordered there also, Her tanks were steamed and she was got ready to evacuate the Gulf people. The ARAGUA was meantime standing by at Cabimas all ready to leave with our people if necessary. It was then decided to bring in to Maracaibo all the women and children from Cabimas and Lagunillas and the outlying camps. Our guest houses soon were full and a bunkhouse ~~was~~ was turned over to them. I never thought I'd see women and children living amongst us in the bunkhouses. The women were brought in by launch our ships standing by to take away the men if necessary.

At 11 a.m. that morning the 23rd Colonel Mayo appeared in the office to the consternation of the Executive as half Maracaibo was searching for him and if the news got out that he was in the Gulf office the Executive expected several thousand enraged Maracaiboites to come out to get him. He has guts, that man, as he was the only high official who had'nt beat it. He was attended by a bodyguard of six, five with rifles and pistols and the sixth man had a sub-machine gun. All work stopped whilst everyone discussed the prospects of our getting our throats cut for harbouring the most hated man in Maracaibo. While the discussion was going on six large launch^s suddenly appeared and drew up at the dock in front of our office and we were petrified to see about 300 armed men pour ashore and form up outside the office. We recognized the man in command as Leon Jurado, President of the State of Falcon (the Peninsular of Paraguana), and the toughest hombre in Venezuela. Mayo had been expecting him because they all marched off together and on reaching the town Jurado named himself Provisional President of this State and the trouble, as far as this place was concerned, was over as what Jurado says goes.

In the meantime we were carrying on with our schedule except for the two ships standing by and we were making up our own Customs papers as the Customs men were either dead or in hiding. The people at Cabimas were very polite about things. The only Customs man working in Cabimas, practically a boy, was in

Adams office checking overtime accounts when a gang of fifty men all armed with machetes came along the dock. About fifty yards from the office the gang stopped and six men advanced and politely asked Captain Adams if they could have the Customs man. Adams said that the matter had nothing to do with him so they took the Customs man away with ~~him~~ them. However, they just marched him around the town, gave him an awful fright and then let him go. The Cabimas people are a much better class than those at Lagunillas. At Lagunillas they killed and burnt every policeman and Customs man they could catch. Our Berthing Master there hid the Chief Customs man and was able to get him away safely.

Jurado arrived on the morning of the 23rd and the same afternoon he had got things so much in control here that he told the oil companies he would send soldiers to Cabimas and Lagunillas if the oil companies would provide transportation. With/practically a few minutes our mailboat LA RITA was packed with soldiers who landed at Cabimas and the trouble ended there. Then a Shell tanker arrived in Maracaibo and was immediately packed with soldiers after which she made full speed for Lagunillas. They soon had control there, and only just in time as the mobs had broken into the Gulf camp and were howling around the houses though no-one was injured as the people were given all the food they demanded.

By the morning of the 24th Jurado had military control of the Lake while a Venezuelan gunboat arrived, anchored off Lagunillas and clinched things by landing marines with machine guns. That day the Lagunillas men declared a strike demanding the formation of a union, increase of pay, free water, light and houses, free hospitalization for themselves and their families, etc, etc. We could'nt load our ships and they had to anchor off.

I was on duty from 5 p.m. on the 21st until 1 a.m. on the 22nd. From 5:45 a.m. on the 22nd to 1 a.m. on the 23rd except for an hour off for a swim. I went on again at 7 a.m. on the 23rd and at 4 p.m. I asked JOW if I could go and get my hair cut and he said "No, its too far from a telephone, your hair will have to wait" so I was standing by until midnight.

On the 24th I started at 7:30 and by 4 p.m. I was absolutely fagged out. The pressure on the telephone lines was so great that only Departmental Heads and Chief Clerks were allowed to use them and I was just about driven crazy. At 4 p.m. I went to my room and had a quiet cup of tea and a rest and the phone never rang once. At 5:15 the news came on from London and he had just said a few words when the phone rang and in the next 16 minutes I had five telephone conversations so what news I got was just a few words between calls. Then came the Christmas Eve party when I got to bed at 2:45 a.m. and back in the office at 8 a.m. on Christmas morning, worked until 11 a.m. then worked from 1:30 p.m. to 3:15 and lost my afternoon's sleep.

Midday the 25th the military authorities said that they would protect any man who wanted to work so we started loading our ships immediately. At night a number of strikers broke into the camp and stopped the pumps for about 45 minutes when they were driven out by the soldiers and the ringleader arrested. The leader of the strike was also arrested and sent in to Maracaibo from Lagunillas. It does not appear that there will be any more trouble in the Lake and the men are returning to work. The CATATUMBO, which had been standing by at Lagunillas, loaded on the 25th. All the women and children are still here but they will be returning to their home camps any moment now.

One American has been fired. At the Club at about 10 p.m. on Christmas Eve he started a rumour that three Americans had been killed. Naturally the women got into a panic and he was kicked out of the Club. At 6 o'clock the next morning he was fired.

Several of the shore staff have resigned through funk. So far as I know not a single foreigner was injured. Mayer, an Englishman at Lagunillas, was nearly killed. He is in charge of our Claims and Legal Division there and he had had to prosecute a man for stealing. This man found Mayer and made a slash at him with a machete but another Venezuelan knocked it aside and Mayer got away unhurt. Many Venezuelans took the opportunity to settle private feuds and any foreigners who were in the natives black books were ordered into Maracaibo.

One hears all kinds of stories. I heard that one man was driving a car around the streets with a body lying over his radiator. A gang marched along with a policeman's head stuck on a spike. They are a blood thirsty lot when they get started.

One of our fellows, Smithson, was in Maracaibo last Saturday night and when things got too bad he looked for a car and found one and then wished he had'nt because the other two passengers were ruffians with machetes and the driver had a nasty looking dagger close to his hand. The three of them had bottles of all kinds of looted liquor but they welcomed Smithson cordially and insisted that he help himself to the liquor. The driver was very drunk and he just missed everything on the road by an inch. Smithy was so glad to get back to camp alive that he gave the driver a bolivar, which was twice the fare, but Smithy was still up, on the deal as he had drunk about three bolivares worth of whisky on the journey.

I forgot to mention that last Sunday afternoon, the 22nd, three of us got a car and drove around Maracaibo. We had a look at all the looted shops and the fires. In the doorway of one burnt-out shop there were six charred bodies piled in a heap and then we saw a body just lying in the middle of the pavement. It must also have been inside a fire as the legs were missing and the trunk was charred. We drove around the Plaza Bolivar and were the only civilians in that big square. There were soldiers at each corner and the verandah of the Presidential Palace was packed with them. No one said anything to us and the cordons parted to let us through. We were never stopped anywhere and were treated with the greatest courtesy though native cars were stopped, the passengers made to get out and they and the cars were thoroughly searched and ^{the passengers} questioned. While I was having a look at the bodies I saw a big peon making for me. If he had looked the least bit annoyed I should have disappeared but he had a big grin on his ugly face. He came straight up to me, shook hands, said something about liberty, patted me on the shoulder and walked away.

CHEERIO,

Bill.

P.S. Now that I've finished this letter I dont know quite what to do with it. All letters are censored so I'll have to try and get it posted at Aruba or Curacao.