

BEING BETTER AMERICANS AND DOING IT FOR THEM:
THE PEACE CORPS IN MICRONESIA

by

Craig J. Severance

There is a tired but potentially historic adage about the successive colonial powers in Micronesia which states: The Spanish came for God, the Germans for gold, the Japanese for glory, and the Americans for good. Each power, of course, had multiple and conflicting motives, as did the individuals involved. To go to Micronesia "for good" in the American period includes being good and doing good, and is thus an expression of the basic American values Kiste refers to in this volume. To go to Micronesia "for good" also includes or has at least resulted in America being in Micronesia for good, meaning permanently.

My argument perpetuates this ambiguity of American motives by suggesting that a number, but by no means all, of the Peace Corps Volunteers who came to Micronesia were able to be good in the humanitarian sense and were able to do good in the educational, political, social, and economic development arenas. In the process, their activities supported the expanded programs and raised expectations, particularly in the outer islands, which have helped keep the U.S. in Micronesia for good.

Peace Corps burst on the Micronesian scene in October of 1966 with a promotional effort that set a contrast between the volunteers as the "better Americans" who were going to do good things for the Micronesians, and the civil service and Trust Territory personnel who were subtly characterized as being somewhat aloof and segregated in their subsidized government housing. There is suggestive evidence that the Peace Corps - Washington staff finally agreed to institute programs for Micronesia (originally perceived as a domestic responsibility) under political pressure from the State Department and the White House because they perceived an opportunity to make a dramatic impact in Micronesia. Such an impact would improve the organization's ability to justify its annual appropriation requests before Congress.

A full history of the political decisions to send in the Peace Corps and an assessment of the actual impact of the Peace Corps in the different districts of the Trust Territory is a practically impossible task because of the uniqueness of the personnel and the communities involved, and the lack of detailed statistical data on the number of volunteers and projects operating at any time. This preliminary overview will hopefully encourage further research into this massive and "crash" program of social change.

The paper first briefly sketches the history of the Peace Corps as an organization, and then looks at the political decision to send Peace Corps Volunteers to a "domestic area." This is followed by a more detailed sketch of the initial thrust of the Peace Corps in Micronesia

and of significant changes from early programming to the present. A critical look at the Truk Program under its first two directors (1966-1970) will show a sample of the types of projects that volunteers attempted. The paper ends with a preliminary assessment of the overall Peace Corps impact.

THE PEACE CORPS IDEA

In its initial conception, the Peace Corps idea embodied an inherent conflict between perceived national needs and international humanitarian deeds. The Peace Corps was to be an apolitical organization that would promote international understanding and demonstrate the goodness and effectiveness of volunteers, thus countering the "Ugly American" image. Humanitarian deeds and success of the Peace Corps were expected to have a positive and thus, ultimately political, impact on the American image abroad.

The Peace Corps idea captured the imagination of the New Frontier personnel that came to Washington with the Kennedy administration. The concept was sold to John F. Kennedy by Hubert Humphrey, Sargent Shriver and other close advisors, and it was sold to Congress at least partly on the grounds that it would be an inexpensive solution to a major international image problem. It also would provide a cadre of returned volunteers with foreign language skills, knowledge, and cultural sensitivity.

The initial intent of the Peace Corps idea to use pilot programs and cautious experimentation abroad was countered by the confidence "that almost any right-spirited American could accomplish some good overseas" (Lowther and Lucas, 1978). The Wiggins memo, "The Towering Task," which was originally written for the International Cooperation Administration, convinced Shriver that the Peace Corps could only establish itself in the Washington competitive hierarchy if it committed enough manpower to meet the real need abroad. In the words of a pair of friendly critics, "the numbers game" substituted for careful programming and developed a momentum of its own as country directors competed for funds and for the better "volunteers" (Lowther and Lucas, 1978). Volunteers for whom jobs had not been adequately planned or programmed were simply assumed to be self-starting enough to create their own placements.

Shriver's personal enthusiasm and charisma appears to have been a substantial factor in initially convincing many host countries to accept volunteers. Peace Corps staff were recruited for their youth and enthusiasm and soon projected an image opposite to that of the staid career bureaucrat in Washington and abroad. This image was epitomized by Shriver's "in-up-out" principle (1964-1970), whereby staff members could hold positions for no longer than five years, lest they put more energy into keeping their jobs than doing them. Such a staff image and style couldn't help but ruffle the feathers of experienced administrators in competing Washington agencies and eventually in the Trust Territory as well.

In 1966, Shriver was replaced by Jack Vaughn, a quieter but overseas-experienced administrator, who began slowly to institute more careful programming and evaluation. He also gave more autonomy to area directors to reduce internal competition for funds and volunteers. During this period, the concept of "community action" and "community development" had evolved from the idea of "aided self help" to an almost mystical act of faith that when challenged or stimulated, communities would take action to help themselves. Volunteers without carefully programmed or necessary jobs could thus easily shift to "doing" community development.

The national experience of the later 1960s included a reassessment of what it means to be involved in doing "good" overseas, especially among the AB generalists (liberal arts graduates) who formed the bulk of the pool of potential volunteers. The Nixon administration replaced Vaughn with Blatchford, whose partisan style led to a massive resignation of experienced Washington and country Peace Corps staff. The period of the seventies under Blatchford and Balzano witnessed a shift from playing the "numbers game" to an emphasis on host country defined needs, appropriate numbers of technically experienced older volunteers, and a careful weeding out of political idealists.

PEACE CORPS-MICRONESIA

Peace Corps-Micronesia was a unique program, and in the 1960s, it may well have become the extreme case of the numbers game. The idea of sending Peace Corps Volunteers to Micronesia appears to have been considered as early as 1962, when the Trust Territory budget ceilings were increased to accommodate the accelerated educational programs. These were at least partly a result of criticism by the 1961 United Nations Visiting Mission and Kennedy's personal anger about the polio epidemic in the Marshalls. High Commissioner Goding's administration ushered in a major shift in educational and language programming from that of the Gibson years. A modest initial proposal of 60 volunteers in education and community development was opposed by at least one congressman on fiscal grounds in 1962 (Ballendorf and Seay, 1976). Postponement of this proposal may have been partly the result of Peace Corps Washington's concern with its relations with Congress, because as an independent agency it had to annually justify appropriations requests.

A modest proposal for volunteers was also incorporated in the Solomon Report, and additional legal problems about the definition of "domestic area" caused by OEO legislation were sorted out by 1965. It appears from the public sources that a variety of continuing criticism of the Trust Territory administration, particularly over health conditions, and fear of an adverse report from the forthcoming 1967 U.N. Visiting Mission led to a resurrection of the planned Peace Corps-Micronesia

program. The administration approached the Congress of Micronesia and the district legislatures and received an immediate endorsement of the Peace Corps idea in spring of 1966 (Nufer, 1978).

In May, the program was announced, and a massive and successful recruitment campaign was begun. The incoming country director brought some experienced volunteers from elsewhere, but most trainees responded to a brochure mailed to graduating college seniors' home addresses just before summer vacation. The brochure: "Peace Corps Goes to Paradise" admitted that there were serious problems in Micronesia, but also made it easy to apply with an abbreviated application form and no required test. The Pritchard Memo appears to have set the stage for Micronesia programming: "The Peace Corps intends to alter substantially in a relatively short period of time, say three to five years, the twenty year record of neglect and dismal achievement." Pritchard seems to have recognized the potential program impact of large numbers of volunteers on small islands and to have justified the proposed program size by saying that program guidelines developed from the Micronesian experience would be useful elsewhere (Ballendorf and Seay, 1976).

This preliminary sketch of a history of decision-making in a geographically dispersed bureaucracy assumes that more general phases and program goals are reinterpreted as they trickle down to the levels of action. It is clear that some staff members and some volunteers perceived themselves as a different kind of American who would do more "good" for the Micronesians, and that they consciously and publicly

projected the image to the Micronesians. The initial promotional efforts within Micronesia sought to get community acceptance of volunteers and community support for the housing and feeding of volunteers. The promotional effort gained initial community support (or at least it was interpreted that way) and succeeded in raising the level of expectations about what the volunteers could do to an impossibly high level. It also placed heavy psychological pressure on individual volunteers to accomplish something with visible impact before the end of their tour. Volunteers were not only competing with T.T. personnel for the respect of the Micronesians, they were competing with each other for extremely scarce resources, including teaching manuals, building materials, etc., to support their activities.

I have the impression, primarily from the Truk experience, that Micronesian communities were also occasionally caught up in this competition, so that volunteers with language skills or visibly successful projects were sources of community pride, and volunteers who had difficulty adjusting or simply wanted to go slow enough to develop appropriate projects with full community participation were sources of community shame and disappointment.

The sheer number of volunteers in the early period, 1967-1969, was bound to have substantial impact. More than 3,000 responded to the initial recruiting effort to send the Peace Corps to Paradise. There was a high rate of no-shows at the Florida training sites and, possibly because of Vaughn's emphasis on quality, a high rate of de-selection of

trainees by training staff. In spite of the attrition of recruits (only a very few were drafted out of training for military service), nearly 400 volunteers arrived in Micronesia in October 1966. One hundred of these were partially trained, but not skilled in public health. Some of the health volunteers were rapidly transferred to an elementary level of teaching English as a second language (TESL), partly because few health-related jobs existed and some volunteers recognized that they lacked the skills to be effective in health. The second contingent arrived in January/February 1967, and by the Summer of 1967, there were more than 600 active volunteers in the Trust Territory.

The "numbers game" peaked in 1968 with approximately 940 volunteers, a ratio of nearly one volunteer to every 100 Micronesians. A widely cited claim is that it would have taken five million volunteers to achieve the same ratio in a country like India, which after assessing volunteer impacts, imposed a ceiling of fifty volunteers for the whole country in 1974 (Gale, 1979).

The great bulk of volunteers in this early period were in education related placements, having been trained in TESL/CD (Teaching English as a Second Language/Community Development), since they were usually AB generalists by prior academic training. Of this group, nearly 30 percent terminated early, and another 10 percent transferred to other countries. A number of volunteers, however, liked Micronesia well enough to stay on for second tours, or to become Trust Territory personnel. By 1973, one-sixth of the expatriate T.T. personnel were former volunteers.

A much smaller percentage of the early volunteers had specialized skills in engineering, architecture, agriculture, fisheries and law. The Peace Corps lawyers probably had the most far-reaching impact. They became immediately involved in suggesting and drafting legislation for the Congress of Micronesia and the various district legislatures, and in preparing court briefs. In Yap, for example, the primary impact of the Peace Corps lawyers was getting the political system to function or work properly on the U.S. model by training Yap district legislators. In the process, the Yap Council was substantially weakened (Lingenfelter, 1974).

The education (TESL) volunteers arrived at a time when the Public Works departments had been stretched to their limits building classrooms and individual houses for regular U.S. contract teachers under the Accelerated Elementary School Program (AESP) that had begun in 1962-1963. The volunteer teachers filled a critical manpower need, because the T.T. administration had continuing difficulty in recruiting and retaining contract teachers. There were attempts to place volunteers in every school, and a significant departure from T.T. practice was the placement of volunteers in practically every outer island community.

Peace Corps staff fears about volunteer isolation and safety on outer islands were lessened through the purchase of Peace Corps radios to be run by generators provided through PL 89-10 funds for audiovisual equipment for schools. The value of the Peace Corps radio net to Micronesians soon became apparent and the rate of expensive Medivacs (including a few false alarms) dramatically increased. Magistrates soon

began to rely on "their" volunteer to transmit messages, order supplies, and write grant-in-aid proposals.

For many of the outer island communities, "their" volunteer was also their first resident American. The volunteers who adapted well to outer island living tended to have some language proficiency and to live local style, eating local food and treating Micronesians with open, friendly respect. I believe that a great deal of the successful personal adjustment, when it occurred, (there is no objective way to measure this) must be attributed to the resiliency and the cultural pattern of hospitality of the Micronesians towards visiting strangers. This is especially the case with those communities where volunteers continued to be accepted, housed and fed after their predecessors had been severe disappointments.

The saturation of volunteers and relatively free shifting of placements made careful programming impossible. Peace Corps staff also simply lacked the detailed knowledge of dispersed island sites. The unrealistic promotion of an image of the volunteers as "better Americans" and the volunteers' increasing demands on Trust Territory services for "their people" led to tensions between volunteers, staff, and the T.T. personnel. Volunteers had the freedom to be critical and to assert their political idealism, and on occasion, political activism. This activism triggered a sense of unease at headquarters and in Washington, and the perception grew that some volunteers were acting in ways that might be

detrimental to the trend, created by the Kennedy administration, toward permanent incorporation of Micronesia.

Increasing criticism of the T.T. administration by Micronesians, petitions to the U.N., etc., were sometimes attributed to the encouragement of activist volunteers. There are examples of volunteers who helped draft petitions to various bodies, including the United Nations, or who provided information on legal rights, etc. These volunteers were a convenient target for those in Saipan and Washington who feared increasing Micronesian political expression, although I believe that it is unrealistic and quite unfair to the Micronesians to assume that they would have remained quiescent without stimulus by volunteers. Articulate and overt Micronesian political expression was increasing before the volunteers arrived.

This fear about the independent agents of the Peace Corps reached its high point with the 1969 visit by Marine Lieutenant-General Walt, who used the White House to try to pressure the Peace Corps into terminating the lawyers program. He was reacting to a resolution by the Palau District Legislature expressing opposition to a military training base, a position that he seems to have assumed was the pet idea of a particular volunteer. The lawyers stayed, but they were warned to remain strictly non-political (Stern, 1969; Fite, 1970).

By the early 1970s, the changing programming thrust in Washington, increasing Micronesian complaints and disillusionment about ineffective volunteers, and a growing sense of boredom among the TESL volunteers

themselves, led to a greatly reduced Peace Corps presence. Responsibility for teaching English as a Second Language was passed to partly-trained Micronesians, and a programming emphasis on teacher training and curriculum development in the post-elementary schools prevailed. Limited numbers of volunteers in health, agriculture and fisheries also served (Mason, 1975). The number of volunteers ranged between 200-300 through the late 1970s, and dropped to approximately 80 in 1980-81. The programming thrust since 1980 appears to have re-emphasized rural development by placing small numbers of skilled volunteers in outer communities and the private sector (U.S. Department of State, 1981).

PEACE CORPS - TRUK 1966-1969

The more detailed and critical overview of Peace Corps programming presented below is based largely on personal experience and is admittedly impressionistic. It is meant to give a sample of programming thrust and ideology at the height of the "numbers game." Peace Corps - Truk under the first director may be the extreme case of shock tactics in community development and "doing it for them" in Micronesia. Recent informal conversations with returned volunteers from Palau and Yap suggest that there was also a similar emphasis on getting things done for the people, but I have no way of judging if the Truk case was at all typical.

The Truk director, having observed Trukese hospitality first hand, relied on it as a way of providing housing and feeding support for volunteers, thus freeing a portion of the volunteers' \$80 a month living allowance to be matched by unpublicized Peace Corps - Truk program funds and invested in material for projects. Renting of volunteer housing was possible and a figure of \$20 a month was suggested, but there was an implicit understanding that communities that were willing to house and feed a volunteer rent-free should benefit in terms of a monetary investment in projects with visible material impact. This director publicly projected an image of volunteers as "the better Americans", who would accomplish great things and would be unlike the aloof and overpaid T.T. personnel. TESL volunteers were therefore not allowed to live in the empty contract teacher houses adjacent to their schools in some lagoon communities. Volunteers visiting Moen were not allowed to sleep or even shower in contract housing, even if invited by sympathetic T.T. personnel. The "good" volunteers were those who spent their time with their people, rather than with other Americans. There were so many volunteers that this was sometimes difficult. For example, in 1967 Moen had 29 assigned volunteers. Etal, an atoll in the Mortlocks, had three volunteers for 300 people. In order to avoid conflict, these three quickly agreed not to start any projects without checking first with each other.

The initial community development emphasis was on water projects of various scale, including pumps, catchments, tanks, showers, and waterseal toilets. The first major project was on Toloas (Dublon) in Truk Lagoon, where an old Japanese water catchment was to be resurrected by digging it out, covering it and extending piping to the village below. The volunteer folklore surrounding the Dublon water project is extensive, but the version I'm familiar with is as follows.

The first group of volunteers for Truk and Ponape were simply taken off the plane and put on the M boat to Toloas so they could start on the water project. Although a staff member had been scouting the project, there was little advance notice of the volunteers' arrival and no formal housing and feeding arrangements had been made. The people of Toloas responded graciously by housing and feeding on the second and third days after their arrival, but did not simply pick up shovels to join the volunteers in digging. There simply weren't enough shovels in Public Works or the Truk Trading Company! Meanwhile, the Ponape PC director was so incensed at this use of his volunteers, that he had them pulled off Toloas and placed on emergency ship transportation to Ponape.

The volunteer who inherited this project did obtain a \$30,000 Trust Territory Grant-in-Aid for pipe and cement on the grounds that the people of Toloas would match the contribution with labor. Problems over land use, rights-of-way for the pipes, placement of the spigots and labor commitment soon became apparent. The volunteer finally made an agonizing decision to cancel the project and return the money to Saipan. By this

time, some Truk volunteers had begun to argue for more of a felt needs approach where community support was evident, although the need to accomplish something visible was still felt by most volunteers.

The second Truk contingent of new volunteers was sent from the plane to Fefan Island to install a variety of wells and pumps, and again the Trukese generously responded with free housing and food, and stood by as the volunteers tried to find labor and material for their projects. Problems with land and water rights arose again. One volunteer finally became exasperated enough when his villagers didn't show up to install the pump where he wanted it, that he dug the well himself. He inadvertently installed "his" pump just over the boundary of the next village.

The third major project disaster in the eyes of the more critical Truk volunteers was the Udot Peace Corps training program in August 1967. The Peace Corps provided materials to families who would build the houses, feed and work with the trainees and then inherit the houses in exchange at the end of the training program. A series of miscommunications and an unrealistic deadline for completion of the houses led the Udot people to expel a volunteer involved with the project. Unprepared recruits were greeted with hostility rather than hospitality and another crash program "to do it for them" simply crashed. Score: 46 houses, 2 outboard boats, more children speaking English phrases, and a residue of community hostility and disillusionment (Molinsky, 1968).

Lest I paint too dismal a picture, there were many projects which received the backing of the community and a tremendous amount of volunteer labor and donated materials. These kinds of projects have been described by Ballendorf and Seay (who was the second director of Peace Corps Truk) as social brick and mortar projects. They were more in line with the original conception of aided self-help and they often made ingenious use of local materials. The famous Onei school was built with T.T. grant-in-aid funded labor, but locally contributed material in the form of coral blocks that were hand hewn. Architecturally, the open air buildings were a dramatic contrast to the dilapidated concrete block AESP schools (Kluge, 1968).

The Peace Corps School Partnership Program provided limited funds (up to \$2,000) for matched labor and materials whenever aggressive volunteers could obtain cooperation or interest from their magistrates and communities. Smaller grants-in-aid from T.T. and district legislature sources were also obtained for dispensaries, water tanks, etc. Here, the more successful volunteers cooperated relatively closely with their island or village councils and performed the role of writing the grant proposals with, rather than for, "their" magistrate. Some magistrates learned enough from this process so that subsequent small scale grants-in-aid for municipal public works continued to be successfully obtained without the aid of a resident volunteer. This visible contribution was relatively small in comparison with the much larger scale construction activities in the administrative center,

especially the Truk hospital and courthouse. These small scale grants-in-aid for schools, dispensaries, catchments, etc., occurred primarily in the outer islands. They may have succeeded in giving some of the poorer and politically less powerful outer island communities a sense of participation in the overall construction growth of the period. These smaller scale municipally sponsored projects were subsequently overshadowed by T.T. sponsored school and dispensary construction in the seventies that included payment for island labor.

Other kinds of projects more in keeping with the notion of training the people to help themselves were also attempted. The Fefan farmers' co-op struggled along while trying to establish a market on Moen as a volunteer kept the books. The co-op continues to provide some fresh produce for Moen even today. Two of at least three salt fish producing cooperatives on the outer islands failed as soon as the sponsoring volunteer left.

Volunteers in teaching English as a second language had a less visible and perhaps unmeasurable impact. They gave repetitive drills using the oral-aural method and used a variety of materials that had both patterned practices and dialogues. There was no apparent consistency in the language materials available to the TESL volunteers at this time. Some outer island volunteers adapted the Tate South Pacific Commission materials, and combined them with Crouch's adult education dialogues that had been adapted to the sound contrasts of Lagoon Trukese. Much of the English language learning probably took place outside of the classroom.

Paradoxically, volunteers who lacked Trukese language skills may have had a somewhat greater teaching impact because they constantly spoke in English.

I lack detailed information on volunteer activities after 1968, although my impression from participating in a training program in Truk in 1972 is that the overall quality of the recruits, with some exceptions, had significantly declined. By this time, the super saturation of Moen with resident and visiting volunteers and the accompanying inflated expectations had generated disillusionment, hostility and some verbal harassment on the part of the Trukese youth. A much lower volunteer profile was in evidence.

OVERALL IMPACTS

In sketching the early Truk experience, I do not mean to imply that the Peace Corps in other districts was either as defective or effective. Individual volunteers in Micronesia sometimes established close personal friendships with Micronesian individuals and host families. Many of these friendships have continued and have occasionally included educational sponsorship of Micronesian youth. This represents the person-to-person communication and understanding that was a major part of the original Peace Corps idea. I believe that most of the infrastructural developments that have been concentrated in the urban

centers would have occurred without the presence of the Peace Corps. On the other hand, I suspect that the remoter outer island communities would have received less of the overall development funds if they had lacked resident volunteers. There appears to be a greater reservoir of good feelings towards Americans in outer communities.

There is a very mixed assessment of Peace Corps impacts by Micronesians and returned volunteers, depending on whom you talk to and what their expectations of the Peace Corps may have been (see Nufer, 1978). Lawyers may have helped the legislatures and courts to begin functioning more smoothly. TESL teachers may have given more exposure to standard English, both inside and outside the schools. Individual volunteers may have shared their political convictions - about freedom and independence and the American military - in the local language with close Micronesian friends. They may also have encouraged Micronesians to demand and expect more from the Americans.

The most significant overall impact may well be, as Ballendorf and Seay suggest, in the area of education, since Micronesia now seems to have a higher percentage of educated inhabitants than almost any other colonial area in the world. For Americans, education is such a self-evident good that it is rarely questioned. In retrospect, I have come to agree with Fran Hezel's conclusion that "the major adverse effects of education are economic rather than socio-cultural—that is, the expensive system, with a goal of almost universal education, costs so much and leads to such further costs that it makes the hope of any partial self-reliance all the more distant." (Hezel, 1984)

Perhaps because there were so many volunteers who came to Micronesia to do good, enough stayed to help foster the rapidly expanding programs and the Micronesian belief that education equals success in the form of a government job. Since such jobs come from American fundings, it appears that the ultimate, if individually unintentional, impact on Micronesian expectations and demands has supported the ambiguous American goal of a U.S. presence in Micronesia for good!

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