

THE PANAMA CANAL

14 January 1969—

As the John C. SPENCER chugged along, the temperature continued to climb higher and higher degree by degree all the while the latitude continued to drop degree by degree. As we whizzed by 20° N latitude at an astounding 17 knots, nobody could forget that wonderful place Guantanamo Bay, or at 18° N the peaceful island of Jamaica, which brought back memories to all. After another day and a half of steaming, according to an accurate guess by our navigator, we were located 9 degrees above the equator near the geographic center of the western hemisphere. This man made strait joining the Atlantic and Pacific oceans is known as the Panama Canal.

Begun as a survey in 1524 by Charles V of Spain and continued in 1880 by the French for 20 years and then abandoned, the Panama Canal was finally purchased in 1903 by the United States for a sum of 40 million dollars and was successfully completed in 10 years at an additional expenditure of 380 million dollars.

Although the Canal Zone only occupies a strip of land 5 miles on either side of the waterway and less than 1% of Panama's land area, "Through her portals pass the commerce of the world."

The canal is approximately 45 miles long spanning the Isthmus of Panama in a north-westerly-southeasterly direction. It connects Limon Bay on the Atlantic side with Panama Bay on the Pacific side, the Atlantic entrance lying 27 miles west of the Pacific entrance.

The Panama Canal's day by day operation in providing safe and expeditious transit for vessels of all nations on a basis of absolute equality is a fascinating spectacle, especially when viewed while at anchor for 7 hours waiting and watching 14 other ships go through first.

The Canal is largely made possible by the Gatun Lake watershed and the Chagres River, which lie about in the middle of the Isthmus of



Panama. The greater part of the canal channel, is at the level of Gatun Lake, the surface of which is 85 feet above sea level.

Our ship, beginning in Cristobal Harbor on the Atlantic side, passed through a 500 foot wide channel at sea level running through a mangrove swamp to the Gatun Locks 7 miles inland. Entering the locks with the help of mechanical mules on shore, we were raised 85 feet to the level of Gatun Lake in three steps, or locks. Our canal pilot coned the ship through Gatun Lake to Guillard Cut, over the continental divide, to Pedro Miguel, a distance of 31 miles.

There a single lock lowered us 31 feet to Miraflores Lake. A mile further south, the SPENCER entered Miraflores Locks and in two steps was lowered 54 feet to the Pacific level. We then sailed another 4 miles to Balboa, unfortunately too late for liberty that night.

Late the next afternoon, after a liberty that like all, just was not long enough, we sailed out of Rodman Naval Station under the Thatcher Ferry Bridge and into the calm awaiting Pacific Ocean, with two hours extra sleep coming to us because of the time change.

