

Pelican Place: Book One

Pointed Rock

The offshore rookery's real name is Pelican Place even though newcomers sometimes refer to the rocky island by its people-name, Anacapa.

"Humph and hogwash," grumbled TG after listening to the blithering of a Pismo Beach Brown, resting up before continuing his southward journey to Baja. Not only did the tourist have the temerity to compare favorably his fog-bound northern rookery with the Channel Island refuge, but he persisted in calling the central coast waypoint by its bogus name as well.

"It comes from when he was a baby," TG's mother would say when people giggled as TG paraded around the yard with his rollicking little strut. "He got greedy when I brought back a load of anchovies," she winked to the audience, obviously warming to the task. "He just grabbed a mouthful of the wriggly critters, lost his balance, and fell right out of the nest."

Mama P - that's what everyone on the island called her - loved to tell the story just as much as everyone else loved watching and hearing her tell it as she pantomimed baby TG's antics reaching for, getting a beak full, and then tipping over from the unexpectedly heavy load of fish in Mama P's ample gullet

"You'd think folks would get sick and tired of the story," TG shook his head wonderingly, but they didn't--and wouldn't--despite the fact that TG was now a grownup with a family of his own and head of the Island Senate, the most prestigious post in the pelican world.

Perhaps a word or two about pelican names is in order because they can be confusing ... even to pelicans. Young pelicans will call their own parents Mama and Papa, just as the big ones call their offspring, Baby, then Cadet after the youngsters begin flight training. During flight training, fledglings take on their social name which is often given by their hangar-mates to commemorate a deed or pronounced trait -- for instance, Tumble, Skinny, Fuzzy, or Coo Coo -- other times it may be a personal choice or a family name. Pelican Patty's mother's name is Patricia, her grandmother is Patty, and it goes that way, back-and-forth all the way up the line. Pelicans, you will learn, are partial to names beginning in "P" -- they like the alliteration -- but there's nothing in the rules that prohibits "Q"s or "X"s for that matter though there are no examples of either at the moment.

TG's name illustrates a final point worth discussing. In his case it stands for *The Great* because of a particularly fine thing he did several seasons back when the rookery faced extinction from all the DDT and pesticides that flowed into the coastal waters along the Santa Barbara Channel. Throwing caution and dignity to the wind, he went before the blinding lights and winking cameras on Channel Nine's Nightly News to plead for his species

survival. His appearance and impassioned plea so moved the audience that opposition to the use of DDT sprang up overnight ... but that's a story for another time. For the present it's important only for you to know what TG stands for, and the fact that his fame extends far beyond the local rookery.

Anyway, TG sighed and prepared to suffer yet another humiliation, as he permitted Mama P to launch into her story without protest. It began with baby TG tumbling beak-over-tail feathers down the windward slope of the island and out into space, 200 feet above the pounding surf and jagged rocks that bounded the exposed Pacific face. A look of concern still crosses Mama P's craggy face even after all the tellings as she relives once again her heart-stopping anguish as her first-born child plunged downward to his almost certain death.

"I guess the little bugger felt that it was do-or-die time," she proposes with a strong show of pride, "so he opened his downy wings and floated onto Pointed Rock, pretty as you please." The audience as usual looks out over the precipice to trace the epic flight to its precarious termination. "It was three weeks before TG's feathers grew in enough for him to fly off again to the island, so Papa P and I took turns going down there and feeding him."

Not altogether true, but it made for a good story. What she neglects to describe - for all the license she takes in the telling - is Baby TG's faster-than-floating arrival on the jagged pinnacle which gave the rock its name or the all-out efforts of the colony on his behalf.

"Whomp!" was what TG remembered. "Whomp!" and then a delicate crackle like popcorn in a covered pot as his left leg folded over from the impact. It stung at first, then vibrated lightly as chills ran up his downy spine. They turned to spasms and tiny tears formed in the corners of his eyes. The wind whipped and tugged at him, threatening to snatch him from his precarious roost. His life truly hung in the balance.

Frightened as he was that he might lose hold of the rock, he was even more terrified at being alone, so he stole a glance at the cliff and saw the row of stunned spectators peering down at him. Wind and spray and gathering dusk placed him beyond their help, he realized, but the sight of them was somehow cheering. For their part, they were shaken, fearing what might happen next, unable to help, certain that Baby TG must soon go to an early grave.

"You've got to hang on," he told himself, recognizing in his peril the chance to meet and conquer the challenge of a lifetime.

"If I lose," he told himself in a burst of insight, "it will be such a little loss."

"But if I win," determination blossoming in the thought, "what a victory it will be." So he fought the wind, and the cold, and the hurt, and the terror, and the loneliness with the only weapon he had ... a resolve to prevail.

It wasn't until first light the next morning that Papa P was able to sideslip in from the lee side of Pointed Rock to assess Baby TG's situation, offer him love and encouragement, and deliver the first in a long series of "meals-on-wheels" as the operation came to be known.

The first full day, with all its unknowns, was the worst for everyone. TG's leg was swollen and discolored and it ached. To make things worse, he dared not change positions even slightly for fear of tumbling into the roiling sea.

Pelinore Pelican, the general practitioner, visited him hourly, sculling rapidly to maintain a steady position close enough to study the leg. Pelinore was not a real doctor, but he had served as corpsman in two wars against the Vietnamese fishermen who battled the Pelican Place colony over rights to the channel fishing grounds. He had saved many lives in the process and was granted his title in recognition of his skills. By afternoon, following the last of his low-passes, he finally pronounced the leg broken but intact, and likely to mend

Meals-on-wheels ran with stunning precision for more than a fortnight without a single hitch. So adroit did the midshipmen who flew the bulk of the sorties become that even when the wind backed ominously one evening and roared out of the South for a day and a half, the operation was for all intents and purposes a ho-hummer.

Nor were the middies alone in the ministering efforts. In the morning and evening, when the wind and waves relented, all the members of the colony swooped and paraded, calling encouragement to Baby TG, filling him in on the latest gossip, and letting him know they were all behind him. Then each night, just before bedtime, Pastor Pelican assembled the parish choir to serenade TG with the Pelican Chant.

If you've ever heard it, you know its enchantment. It goes like this:

"Strong muscled wings lift me high in the sky.
"Soft strands of wind slip through their shrouds.
"Ten-thousand small feathers tickle the air
"Nuzzle the wave-tops and rub against clouds."

All yearling boy and girl pelicans serve as midshipmen - middies, they're called - and are required to demonstrate superior flying skills before Pernicious Pelican, chief flight instructor and acknowledged grand-master aviator of the colony, presents them with their flight stripes and releases them to venture out over the open seas. The process normally takes from four to six months, depending on the determination and dexterity of the cadet. But for this cadre because of its meals-on-wheels performance, the apprenticeship was over and done with, diplomas signed, sealed, and delivered in less than three months ... well before the meals-on-wheels project came to its conclusion.

The shimmering harmonies vaulted and swooped and wove their way into the evening mists, and lonely as he was, Baby TG took comfort in their caress and awaited each new dawn with hope.

On the eighteenth day all was in readiness for TG's grand return voyage. Only 60 feet forward and 200 feet up the trip hardly seems epic in the telling, but for TG and all the members of the colony, it was a flight they would remember for the rest of their lives.

During the final week, Paddles Pelican, the rookery's landing signal officer whose grade book bore the truth and consequences of every cadets' approaches and landings, spent hour upon hour drilling TG on the fundamentals of flight, making up for the limitations of the launch site compared with the advantages routinely enjoyed by colony fledglings on their Fam 1 (first familiarization) flights. Launching from the ridge line gave primary students 200 feet to get their act together, but TG would have less than 20 feet to find his wings, settle into flight and break his fall, a matter of about 1 second or four heart-beats as pelicans measure time.

"Feel the wind," he'd yell above the constant howl of zephyrs and thunder of waves pounding against the unsheltered bluff. Baby TG would carefully extend his wings knife-edge to the steady flow and rotate them until they began to rise, threatening to lever him clear of his perch. "Ease off," Paddles coached, watching carefully how well TG maintained control of his rapidly maturing airfoils. Again and again they went through the exercise taking it closer and closer to the point of flight until the master aviator was satisfied that his student was ready to make good his escape from Pointed Rock.

"Get a good rest tonight," he counseled. "As soon as the wind freshens tomorrow, we'll get you launched and back to where you belong."

Word of Baby TG's plight had spread to all the brown pelican colonies between San Luis Bay to the North and the Coronado's at the Mexican Border, so on the day of the flight, Pelican Place was overrun with sightseers come to bear witness to what could easily turn into a tragedy. There was a festive air among the strangers, strong contrast to the predominantly pensive mood of the colony. So powerful was the sense of anticipation, it was almost a living presence. Nowhere was it more real than on Pointed Rock where all the attention was riveted. It was like a magnet drawing TG upward. Only Paddles Pelican, taking last minute meteorological readings before the launch, seemed oblivious to the pressure.

"Slowly, now," Paddles cautioned. "Spread your wings and let the lift build." Baby TG did as he was told, concentrating on his lessons with all his might.

"Steady ... steady ... NOW!"

One moment, TG was part of the rock. The next, he was up and clear of the roost which had been home for what amounted to the major part of his young life.

"Work," came the call, breaking through reverie, overriding amazement. The command brought instant response from TG who began to row frantically, wrenching himself swiftly away from the searching fingers of the sea into the safety and quiet of the upper air.

Up ... up ... up he went. Up above the bluff. Up above the spiny ridge line. Up until the assembled throng of spectators had the appearance of a mottled carpet on the grassy knoll. Still he thrashed and paddled until he noticed Paddles flying smoothly and silently beside him with an amused expression on his weathered face.

"Ease off, son," he said gently. "Don't wear yourself out." They glided together for several seconds before the teacher described the landing procedure.

"We want to cross the ridge line at no more than two wingspans in height," he explained, indicating the direction with a jerk of his head. "Once you're over the knoll, draw your head up and kick your feet forward." Baby TG nodded, remembering how the grownups entered the landing phase.

"Don't get in a hurry," Paddles cautioned. "Hold your position and at the last minute, rock back a little. You'll touch down light as a feather."

TG rounded the knoll heading downwind, then turned putting the wind on his left shoulder as he had been told, increasing the camber in his wings to slow his speed and increase his rate of sink. He did these without thought, concentrating instead on the wind line and finding a good landing spot beyond the ridge.

"Good, son ... Keep your speed up ... ease'r down a little ... good ... OK, start your flare ... hold'r ... little more ...

Knots of grass tickled the bottoms of TG's feet as he skimmed along the fringe. He arched back and for just a second he hung motionless an inch above the thatch, then lowered softly onto the ground. Instinctively, he tucked his wings in, teetered for a moment from left foot to right foot and back, then tumbled over as the left leg gave way.

Pelinore was first to reach him, calling for him to lie still. Then Mama and Papa P, and Parson P and what seemed to be all the pelicans in the world, cheering, laughing, crying, shouting incoherently in their happiness that he was home again, safe. And there, right in the middle of them stood Paddles, hands on hips waiting for TG to pay him attention.

"Slightly high at the ridge," he intoned critically, grading the landing as he did for all middies. "Early flare ... settled a little at the ramp. Touchdown? ...umm ... OK." His face split into a thousand crinkles of delight as he

marked "ABOVE AVERAGE" in his landings book. "Not bad for a first landing," he nodded his head authoritatively. "Not bad at all."

TG's convalescence took the better part of another week during which time he had constant visitors. It was the beginning of Mama P's story, told time and again until she had it down pat. At last, Pelinore came to the rescue with orders for him to take short walks. He found it uncomfortable at first, but pretty soon he found that by rolling slightly sideways and rocking back and forth, he could make pretty good progress. While he worked to build up strength and speed, many of the other pelicans went along with him, imitating his syncopated walk. They found it great fun. Pretty soon, all the young pelicans could do TG's strut nearly as well as he. Parsimonious Pelican chided the youngsters, but Penelope - Mistress of Pelican Lore and Decorum who pronounced her name Penny-Lope so of course everyone else did, too - said there was nothing in the Pelican's Book of Rules that forbade it so it was all right as far as she was concerned. But the real turning point came when Paddles joined in the parade, announcing that he hadn't had as much fun in years, and after that there was no holding the colony back.

Parson-P gave the strut its proper name. It was during rehearsal for the Thanksgiving Festival, as Pastor was working with the dance band musicians helping to make their music selections. As one might suspect, most of the pieces on the chart were fast and jumpy to fit the taste of the youngsters, and something was bothering them all about this.

"What about TG?" Pelican Patty asked, remembering that his leg might not be up to the strain. All agreed something need to be done and began suggesting alternatives. Pedro Pelican, who was spending the Fall with relatives at the colony, began to whistle a syncopated tune mimicking TG's gait, and before long, everyone had joined in, rocking back and forth to the beat. It was an instantaneous hit.

"We'll call it ... ah ... the ... ah ... how about the Pelican Half-step?" Pastor Pelican decided with the help of divine guidance and a little strutting to the funky tempo on his own...and that's what is woven into the music you hear when you visit Pelican Place.