

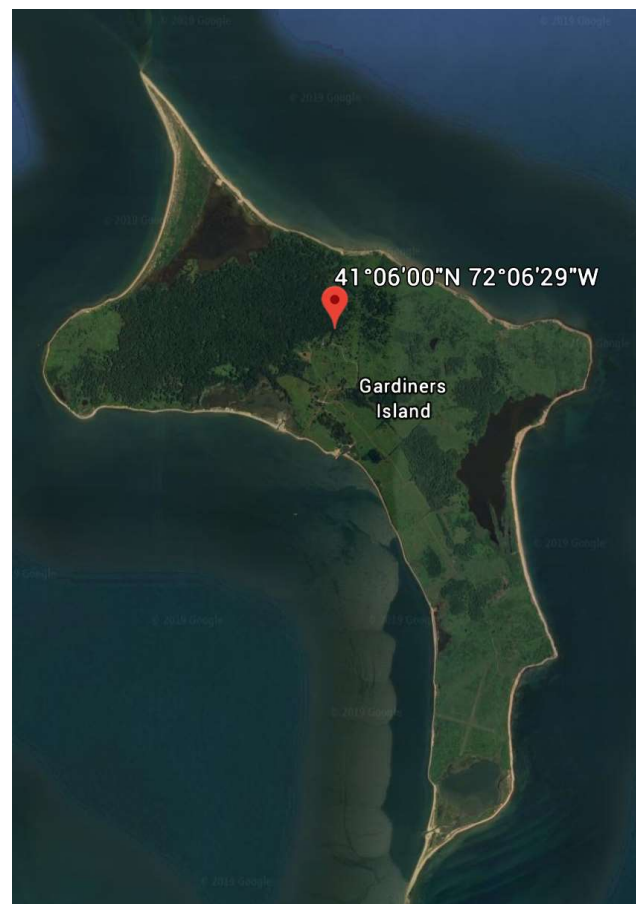
No Man's an Island...

...and Sometimes an Island is

No Man's Land?

Dave Moore

I've always had a genuine curiosity about islands. I started out on one, as I was born in Wellington, NZ. My Dad was a career Marine and was training troops for Guadalcanal & Tarawa during WWII, when he met my Mom. We all left NZ after the war ended, but my folks added a certain wanderlust to my island-born start. I followed Dad's footsteps in joining the Marine Corps, but a transfer to the Coast Guard better suited my education options as well as my interest in saving lives. It also brought to my curiosity a literal smorgasbord of island exposures, including returning to the islands of the Pacific. Some of which my Dad had been to, including Iwo Jima, Okinawa and Saipan. I even spent a year on the southern-most island of Palau, Angaur. I was in charge of a LORAN station for the Coast Guard there. The island was in just the right geographic location for the hyperbolic array of navigation signals that were paired with other island-based LORAN transmissions, including one on Guam, where our monthly logistic flights originated. Those C-130's made the most of our 7,000 foot crushed coral runway on Angaur. That is, when they had time to stop. Sometimes, they just dropped our supplies on cargo pallets via streams of parachutes (you can see some of those aspects of "island life" here: (<https://goo.gl/photos/keYAoRmb3AkGdxFLA>)). I loved watching those flights land & take off, or even fly over dropping those parachutes and gifts of supplies. What a wonderful memory! They also reminded me of one time, when I landed on another island. Only this time, if a woman had not intervened, I might have left an airplane behind and been escorted off by authorities. It was only a couple years prior and the memory was still vivid...



When I transitioned from the Marine Corps to the Coast Guard (you never really “leave” the Marine Corps), I ended up at the Coast Guard’s Academy in Connecticut. It was a perfect spot to further my training as a budding navigation systems engineer. I also desperately wanted to know how to fly airplanes. In the Corps, I was working on A-4’s headed for Vietnam & flying as a crew member on Beech 18’s. Working on aircraft was a wonderful experience for me, but actually flying them was what I really wanted. A chance encounter with some dedicated, mission weary Coast Guard pilots gave me pause. Did I really want to risk my life flying in threatening conditions to save a yacht skipper who hadn’t prepared for stormy weather? Maybe I should get a civilian flying license and test the waters first, no pun intended?

So, despite the sobering tone those CG pilots sounded, and the constrained environment of the service academy (I was often restricted to school grounds, usually for questionable conduct), I signed up for lessons at the local Groton airport (KGON). I had a superb instructor who always tempered my youthful curiosity with a focus on safety and planning for potential challenges. He was concerned I might end up in remote areas in the service and wanted my training to prepare me for more than casual weekend flying exposures. Though not required for my final check ride, he wanted me to add some landings & take offs from “unimproved” locations, especially since an emergency might require putting down in a field or unpaved area. I felt his advice was at least as sincere as that from the CG pilots.

While adding to my “solo” hours away from the Academy, I was still required to exit school grounds and stay in school ‘uniform of the day’ attire. The summer khaki uniforms were my favorite but they had just given way to the heavier, wool, winter blue uniforms. And on a cool fall day, perfect for flying, I was proud and comfortable to be wearing my tailored uniform suit coat, white shirt & tie. I had no idea how helpful my uniform would be. Especially in the heat of the moment.

Off the coast of Connecticut are a number of small islands. I had flown over some of them in my training flights. I even visited one, Fisher’s Island, because it sported a challenging short runway, often with significant cross winds. However, I never really paid much attention to another, unimproved or unpaved strip on another island, as it wasn’t well defined and was often covered by flocks of birds. Gardiner’s Island has no natural predators, so even gulls & osprey’s build nests on the grounds there. The 3,300 acre island also had one of the largest remaining stands of white oak trees in New England. It was quite the pristine, private environment. Perfect for the privateer (pirate?) Captain Kidd to have buried some of his ‘booty’ there in the late 1600’s (a sizable cache of silver & jewels in 24 chests!). The treasures were later recovered, and presented at his trial in Boston. The island has a unique history, most of which I hadn’t

even considered. Nor was I aware it had been privately owned by the same Gardiner family for over 300 years.

As I flew over Gardiner's Island and let Captain Kidd's fortunes fade, I focused more on my need to experience a "soft field" for landings & take-offs. I hoped a short run of "stop & go's" wouldn't really bother anyone on this isolated spot, so I buzzed low over the field to clear off the birds, executed a nautically correct Williamson turn, and circled back to land. Fortunately, the ground was solid and I landed safe & sound. I couldn't wait to fill out my logbook with the details of my success!

Except, as I taxied back to turn around into the wind for takeoff, my path was blocked by a Jeep. The driver had jumped out & headed toward me brandishing a double-barrel shotgun, leveled directly at me! He was yelling for me to put my hands up and keep them there until the authorities arrived. As the caretaker of the estate, he wasn't particularly interested in my student pilot status or my suit-and-tie outfit, but I kept my hands well overhead as I tried to explain. His companion then jumped out of the Jeep, and she was duly impressed with my uniformed arrival & willing compliance. Thankfully, his wife added just the right touch of motherly concern for my well being and noted I was obviously not there to rob or harm them. She winked at me, softly admonished both of us for not thinking clearly, and the caretaker eventually relented...provided I took off immediately and never came back. I really wanted to give her a big hug, but as I lowered my aching arms, I blew her a kiss instead. How else could I say a proper goodbye to my aviation fairy Godmother?

