EARLY EXPERIENCES IN THE PHILIPPINES

With mixed emotions I boarded the ship that would take me to the thick of the fighting during World War II. With all my heart I wanted to do something tangible for my country, but I had left not only my family, but my pregnant wife, not knowing if I would live to see my child or any of those I loved again. Yet I was anxious to be on active duty where the Japanese seemed to be winning the war.

We were replacements for men who had either been wounded in action or killed. As second lieutenants, we'd been told time and again, that in battle we would last an average of one minute. But each of us was sure that we would beat the odds.

The month-long voyage took us first to the Hawaiian Islands, then Eniwetok, where there were hundreds of ships in the bay, probably like ours, carrying replacements. From the ship we could see a bar on the beach dispensing all kinds of liquor. It must have been a thousand feet long.

After Eniwetok, we stopped in New Guinea. Some of us debarked, interested to see what the natives looked like. What a surprise we got! Once we were within ten feet of native New Guinean men, who were stark naked except for a rag that covered their private parts, we were assailed by an odor that I can only describe as a combination of rotten eggs and sulphur water. An American sailor who was nearby explained that New Guinea men use a balm or cream made from the roots of several plants and animals, which they spread on their bodies to attract the female sex. It must work, because we saw little naked children scampering around not far away.

"After a while you get used to it, and it doesn't bother you anymore." he said..

Nobody wanted to stick around until that happened, and we quickly boarded the tender and got back to our ship. Through a steady rainfall we could see a ship of replacements just ahead of us as we caught sight of the Manilla harbor. It was a hot, wet day, typical of the kind of weather we would encounter during the rest of our stay in the Philippines. Most of us were drenched to the skin, miserable in our wet clothes. Suddenly, we heard a tremendous blast. Looking toward land, we saw the ship in front of ours was engulfed in flames and was already sinking. Almost everyone on board was lost. Not an encouraging sight for a twenty-two year old "ninety-day-wonder"(which is what they called those of us who had gone through Officers' Candidate School in three months). All I could think of was, "*That could have been us!*" and I had my first taste of raw fear.

My arrival in Manila was nothing like I had imagined it would be. The many really tough exercises we had practiced at Officers' Candidate School in the dry Georgia countryside, had not prepared me to climb down the side of the ship on a slippery rope ladder in blinding rain, to the tender that would take us ashore. I could hear the sounds of battle coming from the forests that surrounded the city. *This is really it*, I thought, and I shivered in spite of the heat.

Once ashore, we were assigned to our quarters: a bombed out three-story building in what had been downtown Manilla. Most of the ceiling and walls were gone, and in some places, the floors were gone too. Everything was wet, and in many places the water was a foot deep with burnt wood, ashes, and all kinds of debris floating in it . The building was littered with dead Japanese soldiers whose bodies had been there for several days. To get rid of them as fast as possible, we unthinkingly shoved them all down the elevator shaft, not realizing that in a few days, the noxious stench of the rotting bodies would be intolerable.

The Americans, under General MacArthur, had just taken Manila back from the Japanese, so at that point our army was totally disorganized. As a result, we were expected to fend for ourselves as best we could. Some fellows found loose boards, and stretched them across parts of walls as beds. I went outside the building to explore the area, hoping to find something that would make my living quarters more comfortable. Walking through the streets, I got a culture shock different from what we saw in New Guinea. Children, barely dressed in rags were scavenging for food, adults begging for cigarettes or food, and both men and women using the gutters as toilets. It became commonplace to see a woman pull up her dress and squat, urinate, and continue on her way. Unsettling? That's putting it mildly!

As I walked through the neighborhood of our building, I spied a truck parked loaded with cots. Without hesitation, I pulled a cot off the truck and ran. If I'd been caught, I could have been court marshaled for stealing. But thankfully no one seemed to notice. I carried that cot like the precious commodity it was, to a fairly dry spot in our bombed-out building. Then I stacked all my belongings–my gun, my rations, my magic kit, and whatever else I owned, on one end of the cot, and lay down to sleep, my feet resting on top of all my equipment. I would worry about sanitary facilities later.

Days and then weeks went by before we received any orders. I don't know whose engineering skill was responsible, but there actually was running water coming from a pipe on a lower floor of our building. We had been supplied with special tablets which would purify even the muddiest water, and we used them every time we took a drink. In the meantime, the

continuous rainfall had pretty well soaked through everything we owned and the stench coming from the elevator shaft was almost unbearable.

I spent most of my time writing letters, sleeping, and exploring the city, and I quickly learned that most Filipinos speak both Tagalog and English. One day, I was walking along a busy street with little narrow shops of all kinds, when I heard a baby wailing pitifully. The cry came from a small laundry next to a cigar store.

I went into the laundry and a middle-aged Chinese gentleman behind the counter greeted me. "Welcome, Amelican soldier!"

"Thank you, sir," I replied. "I don't have any laundry right now, but I heard a baby crying. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh," he sighed. "Baby velly, velly sick. You come see."

I followed him into a small room behind the shop, where a tiny Chinese woman sat rocking her baby. I could see that the child's stomach was distended. Evidently her mother's milk was deficient in the nutrients her baby needed. I felt the child's head, and I could tell she had a high fever.

"Your baby has a fever. But don't worry. I'll get a doctor," I told them, though I didn't know how to accomplish what I had promised. I left the little shop, and made my way to headquarters, where we had checked in when we debarked the ship. Somehow, I was able to reach an army doctor who came with me to the laundry. He checked the baby carefully and said, "The child has an infection, and she's undernourished." He told the parents to wash the child with cool water and gave them medication for the fever with directions as to how and when to administer it.

I went to the supply depot and brought back several cases of Pet evaporated milk for the baby. When I stopped by a week or so later, the baby had completely recovered, and the parents were deeply grateful for my help. They wanted to give me gold coins, but I refused. I had enough to carry around without worrying about that. But I had an idea.

"Would you let me sleep here?" I asked.

They were glad to comply, so I had a nice dry place to sleep, the woman insisted on doing my laundry, and they always invited me to eat with them. My stay with this Chinese family was memorable, but it only lasted a few weeks because during that time, the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Soon after that, the war with Japan ended and I was assigned to work in General MacArthur's headquarters.

Years later, back in Toledo, Ohio, I remembered some of the special dishes my hostess had cooked (hundred-year-old eggs, cucumbers stuffed with fish, eels in a succulent sauce and more) and arranged with the chef in a local Chinese restaurant to duplicate one of the meals I had with that wonderful Chinese family.

The end of the war did not end hostilities in the Philippines. A few months after I began working under General MacArthur, I was elevated to first lieutenant and assigned to head a company of men into the jungle, where we would seek out any Japanese combatants, and take them prisoner, or kill them.

These Japanese combatants didn't know the war was over, and they had plenty of guns and ammunition. Our job was painfully slow, tough and nerve wracking. The Japanese were hard to find because they hid in the dense overgrowth alone or with one or two others. They watched and waited patiently for us to make a noise or a foolish move. Carrying heavy equipment and dressed in helmets and camouflage uniforms, sweaty and tired, we were constantly besieged by mosquitos, ants and all kinds of other bugs while, with long machetes, we cut our way through the thick under growth. At the same time, we had to be alert for any human movement around us.

The jungle was teeming with all kinds of living things that made noises none of us were used to. It was easy to imagine that a strange bird screeching in the trees could be an enemy ready to attack, and it wasn't surprising that after a while, some of my men became edgy and fired into the forest at nothing, giving our position away. In less than a week, we covered the territory assigned to us, found quite a few Japanese soldiers, met enemy fire, and gave as good as, or better than we got. We didn't bring back prisoners. Few other companies did. Luckily, I didn't lose one man, but somehow, afterward I felt older, or perhaps more wary.