

## 2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

### "A Birthday Present" by Colonel Bill Helmantoler

It was my 24th birthday: August 6, 1945. Even though I was 8,000 miles from home and deeply involved in the biggest war in history, I decided that I needed a birthday party.

I had been flying in combat for a year and a half, and there was no end in sight. As the commanding officer of an air/sea rescue outfit I had accumulated a considerable stash of booze enough for all of my officers and men to have as much as they wanted to drink for one night. I decided that they also needed a party.

So the word went out: "The old man's having a birthday party." Even though most of the men in the organization were older than I was, they referred to me as the "old man" because I was the commanding officer.

One of the first things I did that morning was to visit my crash boats that were stationed along the docks in Zamboanga Harbor. As I stood on the bridge of the lead boat and looked across the strait to Basilan Island, I thought back to the morning five months ago when I had participated in the largest air/sea rescue of the war. Our Catalina flying boat had landed in this harbor and picked up three B-25 crews 17 aircrew men in all. We had been under fire from Japanese guns for more than two hours. Some of the men that were with me on that mission would be at the party tonight.

Overhead four Marine Corps fighter planes turned onto their landing approach. They were among the few planes flying today. Air operations here in the Philippines were winding down as the war moved ever closer to Japan. One of the crash boat skippers had been asking me when we would be moving north for the final assault on Japan. We knew it would come in a few weeks or months, and we knew that a lot of us wouldn't survive the battle.

With that thought in mind, we had one hell of a birthday party that night. Every one drank his fill and toasted my health. As the evening wore on, some of the men talked of

home and whether or not they would ever see it again. One of the men who had been with me on the rescue in Zamboanga Harbor expressed serious doubts that our luck could hold out through the assault on the Japanese homeland.

An emboldened sergeant challenged me to match him drink for drink. He claimed he could drink any officer under the table. Obviously, I had to uphold my honor and preserve my pride. At dawn, we were still lifting our glasses to each other when the clerk from the orderly room brought me a long Teletype message. He said: "Captain, I hate to spoil your party, but I think you'd better read this message, now!"

I thought I must have been hallucinating from the booze when I read that one of our B-29s had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan and had killed tens of thousands of people. I said to the sergeant, "The party's over."

As I lay on my canvas cot, thoughts of the war and thoughts of home swirled through my head. It seemed to me in that gray dawn that the Japanese would have to surrender and the fighting would be over. That would be the best birthday present I could ever have.

