

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"A Birthday Blast" by Colonel Bill Helmantoler

If you were to ask me which of my seventy-seven birthdays was the most memorable, I would answer straight away: the twenty-fourth. It was celebrated during World War II when I was stationed in the southern Philippines.

At the time (early August 1945) I was commanding officer of an air/sea rescue outfit comprised of both airplanes and crash-boats. Altogether, I had under my command more than a hundred officers and men. In accordance with military custom, they referred to me as "the old man."

We had seen a lot of combat action during the largest combat rescue of the war just prior to our invasion of the island on which we were now stationed. We had picked up three B-25 bomber crews during two-and-one half hours under fire in Zamboanga harbor. That harbor was but a few miles from the palm grove in which we now lived. But that had occurred several months ago, and now the action was up north on Okinawa. We were waiting anxiously to move north to cover the invasion of the Japanese home islands. The word was around that our supreme leaders were expecting a million casualties in that operation.

After eighteen months of being shot at and bombed, I confess that I did not expect my luck to hold through the invasion of Japan. On the eve of my twenty-fourth natal day, I was feeling quite depressed: I didn't believe I would live to see my twenty-fifth.

"So," I said to myself, "let's have a real birthday bash!" We weren't scheduled to fly a mission the day after my birthday, so we wouldn't miss anything if we stayed up late and drank a lot of booze. And, fortunately, I had a lot of rye whiskey, which had been issued to dole out to aircrews when they returned from combat missions. Due to a technicality, I had accumulated a sizeable surplus, which I decided to share with all the men in the organization that night.

It should be noted here that the only two items that the military guarded in those days were booze and women. Both were in very short supply, and both were highly prized by the troops. There wasn't an American woman within hundreds of miles, but that night my troops would have all the whiskey they could drink.

After evening chow, everyone gathered in our nipa-thatched dining hall with canteen cups in hand. We had cola syrup, lime juice, and water to mix with the whiskey. Each man could have all he wanted to drink. The servers asked them to say "when." Most of the men didn't speak until their cups "runneth over."

Let the record show that everybody toasted the "old man's"

twenty-fourth anniversary, and most of the officers and men got falling-down drunk - including the "old man." For one night, at least, he didn't worry about the upcoming invasion of Japan.

As dawn crept in over the palm grove in which we lived, I was sitting across a table from a sergeant who had boasted that he could "drink me under that table." I had upheld my honor by remaining upright, even as he was listing badly by the dawn's early light.

At that moment our orderly room clerk handed me a several-page message saying, "I think you had better read this, Captain."

It was with great effort that I focused on the words before me. The message described a bombing mission that had struck Hiroshima the day before. It told of an atomic bomb that had destroyed the city and killed thousands of Japanese.

It occurred to me that I must be hallucinating. I vowed never to drink that much again, not even on my birthday.