

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"Sitting Duck" by Lieutenant Bill Holbrook

Our war expanded and intensified when all the forces we had in the vast Pacific concentrated for the first time on the invasion of the Philippines. The initial action was our invasion of Leyte in late October 1944. The Japanese brought in all the air power they had and based many of their fighters on the airfields of Cebu Island. Leyte lies along the eastern side of the archipelago. Cebu is a long narrow island just west of Leyte. Japanese fighters had been hard to find during the past six months, so our fighter pilots were eager to have a chance to paint some rising suns on the side of their planes. On November 7th, the day before the mission, there was a major dogfight over Cebu. One of our pilots had been shot down over the strait west of the island, and the other pilots of his squadron had seen him parachute into the sea. They had watched helplessly as he swam to the enemy infested shore, stood on the beach and ran into the palms.

We didn't have a plane in the area close enough to help that day. So early the next morning we took off with one of the P-38 pilots aboard to show us exactly where the pilot was last seen. Our call was "Daylight 22". Sixteen P-38's picked us up as we neared the Philippines. They were beautiful as they wove their formations above us while we lumbered along at half their speed. When we crossed Mindanao, the Philippines' southern-most island, a second flight of sixteen P-38's joined up. As we let down to search the coast, our fighter cover had climbed almost out of sight to be in the best position for a fight. While we were searching the beach area he pointed out, our guest was nervously searching the

sky for the Japs he was certain were about to pounce on us. We didn't see anything on the beach or in the sky though we searched the area thoroughly. The sixteen P-38's that had joined us first requested out permission to leave. We told them to go ahead, we were sorry but we couldn't see any signs of their downed squadron mate. "Daylight 22" was discontinuing the search and heading home. The second half of our escort stayed over us until we were within sight of the north shore of Mindanao.

We maintained our normal low search altitude cruising along the beach looking for people or things of interest. The Japs were withdrawing from the countryside to the fortified strategic areas. Philippine guerilla forces reoccupied the land as the Japs withdrew. When we flew over these friendly areas we would occasionally see people waving. No one stood on the beach and waved in Japanese held territory!

We made a gentle turn into a broad bay and a mile ahead saw a large number of people on the beach. We could see them waving frantically when we let down and moved in for a closer look. There were several men in neat sun tan uniforms among the crowd and a number of large canoes pulled up on the beach. We decided it was worth the chance to risk a landing to investigate. The ship bounced a couple of times as we touched down in the off shore swells.

It was a normal landing in that kind of sea, but it frightened the fighter pilot severely. He was opposed to landing in what he considered dangerous enemy waters in the first place. Then he was sure we had crashed when the hull hit the waves at seventy knots and spray flew clear over the top of the boat. It sailed into the air to hit violently

again and again as we bounced over and through the swells to a stop. He was not at all favorably impressed by our judgment or skill. We were now a great white and blue sitting duck rolling gently in the off shore swells. The gunners unlimbered the fifty calibers in the blisters, just in case, as the canoes left the shore when we cut the engines. The canoes were full. One of the men in clean and starched sun tans identified himself as Lt. Taylor, the pilot of a B-24 that had made a forced landing on an old pre-war strip at Dipolog. One of the older Filipinos announced that they were Christian's and he was the Mayor of the town.

About that time we heard an airplane flying toward us down the beach. The crew all jumped back to their stations. We broke out the Aldis light, a powerful spotlight with a shutter that we could use to send a code. I asked the Navigator if he knew the identification code for the day and he said he never bothered to ask for it, since we never needed it. A Navy Ventura passed over us. We weren't sure what to do. He circled and made a second pass. We just stood there waiting as he flashed over and disappeared down the coast. Everyone heaved a sigh and continued their conversations. The Mayor asked if we had a Time magazine or a newspaper. We told him that we were sorry but we hadn't seen a newspaper in six months. He told us they controlled the whole province of Misamis Orientale and the nearest Japanese were at least fifty miles away.

The B-24 crew had been in town for about a week, enjoying fried chicken, fresh eggs and clean laundry. We were rescuing them from a vacation holiday! When they said their goodbyes and we had finished gathering our intelligence we bade the canoes of smiling faces to stand well clear while we

started our engines to taxi out for take-off. Our fighter pilot guest proceeded to act as host to the new passengers. His pre-takeoff briefing was a white knuckle, hair raising description of our crash landing. It was a routine take-off. A few rivets in the bottom were pounded free as our bounces became skips. The landing must have loosened them. Salt water sprayed through the holes creating an upside down shower. The crew chief noted they were in the usual areas. The ground crew would replace them tonight as routine maintenance on the old goose.

Our radioman sent Morotai a message of good fortune. Two generals were among the crowd that met us when we taxied in. One of them was the Commanding General of the 13th Air Force, General St. Clair Street. The other one was is operations chief, one of the youngest Generals in the U.S. Army Air Force. They gave us all a warm welcome. I reported our disappointment in not finding the fighter pilot, and the intelligence data on Dipolog. Our fighter pilot guest thanked us for our effort and the seaplane experience. He said his group would be proud to cover us whenever we needed to go. The laundered uniforms spoke for the B-24 crew. The next day's combat intelligence report gave Dipolog as a safe haven. Ten days later so many aircraft had landed there an order was issued making it a court martial offense to land at Dipolog. A permanent maintenance detachment was based on the strip to inspect, report, and salvage the remains of ships using the emergency strip. Our squadron started regular runs to pick up the downed crews and fresh eggs for our mess. "Daylight 22" had made November 8, 1944 a day full of memories for the whole island.