

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"The Canteen" by Lieutenant Bill Holbrook

Morotai is the northwest island of the Halmahera archipelago, forty miles north of the Equator, between New Guinea and the Philippines. The Halmaheras were the fabled Spice Island of the medieval times. Ternate is a small volcanic island cone on the west side of the chain and the most famous of the islands. Columbus carried a letter from Ferdinand and Isabella to the Sultan of Ternate.

Morotai does not waft back to my memory the aroma of romantic spices. It was a dark mountainous steaming jungle island smelling strongly of wet mold. We lived in a damp tent erected over a log frame with a rough wood floor raised two steps out of black mud. Our Squadron area was a rat infested bulldozed opening in a jungle of giant trees and impenetrable green undergrowth. I never saw a single island native, male or female, mammal or reptile in the months I lived there. The rats were immigrant stowaways from our supply ships.

Our forces had landed on Morotai the 15th of September 1944, and established a major air base. The island was the last stepping stone on MacArthur's return to the Philippines. I moved into a clearing in the musty jungle with unit of our Squadron as soon as the base was operational. Our mission was to provide emergency rescue service to our bombers and fighters who could finally reach targets in western Borneo and the central Philippines. This dark green jungle island was where I was destined to be based until I returned to the United States.

A large Japanese force occupied the big island across a five mile channel from our airstrips. Our planes bombed and strafed anything that moved on the Jap-infested islands near the base. Australian P-40's and Marine Corsairs harassed the nearby ships constantly. B-24 heavy bombers dumped their bombs on them when mechanical trouble forced a cancellation of their original mission.

Despite this effort, the Japs attacked us nearly every night with high altitude bombers and low flying fighter bombers. The fighters bombed and strafed the base as the high altitude ships made their bombing runs. The Japanese considered our bomber strips on Morotai as a major threat. They held back their fleet for a future battle and used all the bombers they had in the theater to attack our new base. Our forces only occupied a small peninsula on the southern tip of the island. The Japs had a small, well marked target. We were lucky. Our squadron's squalor was hidden under the jungle foliage. The Bomber group's areas were set neatly on clean white freshly grated coral that stood out even on a pitch dark night. The raids concentrated on our B-24 bombers parked near the two parallel runways a mile from our squadron area.

The air raid warning was any series of three loud sounds. Our radar often didn't detect the enemy until shortly before the bombs began to drop. The alert usually came suddenly when the anti-aircraft fired their first shots at the enemy. We treated this noisy violence as a nuisance that interrupted our sleep. Three shots and we grabbed our shoes and pants and ran to our mud-filled foxholes. The discomfort reminded us of our own laziness. We hunkered down in the slimy shallow shelters that we had grubbed out of the ground

and covered with logs. The logs were no protection from the bombs. They served to absorb the rain of deadly falling debris from the exploding anti-aircraft shell. What goes up comes down with most of the energy that drove it three thousand feet into the night sky. This shrapnel sprinkled our squadron area sufficiently to force off duty flying officers to get out of their bunks and dig during the steaming day when they were more inclined to lie around in the shade.

The bombing raids were a nightly routine that grew in intensity. The quality of the bomb shelters improved as we had to spend more time huddled under the logs. The squadron engineering officer and the finance officer got tired of having their evenings interrupted so they dug themselves a real air raid shelter. It was a deep square room, large enough for a table and chairs, covered with a substantial log roof. It had a light proof entrance so they could have light during air raids. Exposed lights were a forbidden hazard during the raids. I was granted leave in Australia in late November 1944. Doc Hunter and his navigator, Pete Naylor, moved into our tent while my navigator, Bob Booth, and I were on leave in Sydney.

Doc moved into my bunk and Pete moved into Bob's. I stuffed all my personal things that would fit into my foot locker and hung the rest around the bunk to make room for Doc's things. I did not consider my canteen as particularly valuable asset. Everyone had their own and there were plenty available from supply if one was needed. I hung mine high on the tent corner post. Within a few days of our departure the only bomb to ever hit our squadron area landed directly on the fancy air raid shelter. The two non-flying officers and the squadron's youngest pilot were killed instantly. My tent

was blown apart and shredded with shrapnel. Doc suffered a severe head wound when a piece of shrapnel tore into his cheek and jaw. Pete had a large chunk of one of his buttocks removed. The 265 pound bomb had exploded without warning. A Jap light bomber had made a low-level attack that had not been detected until the bomb went off.

A remnant of the bomb welded itself into my canteen. It was no longer just a canteen. It hangs as a reminder of Morotai and the bomb that killed my comrades; of Doc and Pete's wounds, and the fortunate timing of my Australian leave."