

2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"Humanitarian Mission" by Al Chafetz

I was assigned to the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron based on the Island of Palawan in the Philippine Islands, and my first humanitarian mission involved transporting our flight surgeon and medical personnel to a leper colony that was in desperate straits on the northern tip of the island. Upon arriving, we saw that the situation was indeed horrific. Even our medical personnel were astounded by what we saw. These people needed much more than the food and medical supplies we were equipped to give. Leprosy, I soon learned, is an infectious disease in which those afflicted routinely lose limbs, fingers, ears, and any other body part that was infected. In addition to being gravely ill, the afflicted people were ostracized not only by the Japanese who had invaded the island, but also their own Filipino people.

We were just kids and, of course, we had heard of leper colonies, but to actually see the suffering in person was almost more than you could bear at the time. We immediately made arrangements to get medical supplies and food transported by ship and soon left the island, but to see the lepers and their families and the suffering they endured was an experience that would stay with me always. This mission came within a month of being stationed at Palawan.

After graduating from the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) Advanced Flight school in 1944, I proceeded with others in my class to Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida where we qualified in the Consolidated PBY Catalina and graduated as naval aviators. To my knowledge, the USAAF air/sea rescue crews flying Catalinas were the only dual rated (USAAF and Navy) pilots at the time. From there we went to Keesler Field, Mississippi for crew training and to pick up our aircraft, a Vickers OA-10A Catalina, the Canadian-built version of the Consolidated PBY-5A. Soon we received our orders to depart for the South Pacific, where we were assigned to the USAAF's 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron. Our 82 flight our route took us to Honolulu, Christmas Island, Tarawa, and Guadalcanal, among other stops, before finally reaching our destination at Palawan.

The mission to the leper colony was but the first of many humanitarian assignments that I would complete in the year I spent in the Philippine Islands. We were informed that

the population on a small island in the Sulu Sea, between the island of Luzon and Palawan, wanted us to visit the island to see how we could help them improve their food supply. These people had moved from Manila to escape the Japanese. We found that they were largely self sufficient with fresh chicken, fish, and rice but had little else. They told us that if we brought them fresh beef, we could exchange it for eggs, which they had in abundance.

We were happy to comply as we hadn't seen eggs in almost a year. When we arrive, the islanders greeted us with eggs as well as an invitation for lunch. This is where I learned to eat fried rice and fried chicken. It was remarkable that with all that was going on around them, they always said "Stay for lunch," when Americans showed up. Lunch would be a common theme on several of our missions. Once, on an assignment to the northern tip of Borneo to a guerilla camp, we went ashore to visit the commander who wished to meet the Americans. We weren't sure what to expect as they dispatched a group armed with rifles into the jungle. As gunfire erupted, we wondered if we were in danger, but the next thing we knew they returned with wild chickens they had killed. We then had another sumptuous lunch of fried chicken and friend rice!

Prior to the Japanese surrender in August 1945, our unit was enroute to Okinawa. Our mission was to cover the invasion of the island of Kuyusha and we were told to remain at our base. Shortly thereafter, we were told to go to the city of Balikpapan on the island of Borneo and were directed to Celebes city in the Celebes Islands to evacuate the sick and the POW's who were survivors of the battle of the Java Sea. They had been on the British cruiser "Exeter" and were interned in the POW camp on the island. Upon arrival, the British officers took us on a tour of the POW camp. They had appropriated a large mansion in the middle of the city and had se themselves up as if there had never been a war. And once again, of course, there was an invitation to lunch-complete with full china service and stewards. As we departed, they had one request: next time we came, could we please bring some fresh bread? We made two trips, delivering the sickest of their POW's, probably thirty people in all, to the US Navy at Balikpapan for medical attention and transport. This would turn out to be one of the most memorable of my trips-to see the style in which the British officers always seemed to live.