

Chapter 9

## LEYTE IS WET IN JANUARY



THERE WAS NO QUESTION that January was the rainy season on Leyte. It often was raining when we got up for breakfast, and it would sprinkle, drip, or pour for the rest of the day. The ceiling varied from zero in low fog to a solid layer resting on the ridges in the center of the island with lower clouds scudding across the bay toward Samar. When the ceiling lifted and missions could get off, the weather would usually remain decent until ten o'clock or so and then marginal for flying thereafter. The weather briefing regularly included a warning that the field would be closed for varying periods after 1 P.M. The few days when no rain fell and clouds remained fluffy and high were exceptional. My memory, however, has perhaps accentuated Tanauan's wet weather, for we flew missions practically every day.

Ernie Koch and the people from the sheet metal and radio shops had 958 back in service for the mission on January 9, the day following my return from Mindoro. Colonel Wells may have been aware of my questionable performance at Clark Field, for on this day I was assigned to fly on his right wing while Danny Whalen, one of the old-timers, was on the left. The twelve ships assigned to fly this strafing and bombing mission were to destroy rolling stock and warehouses on the railroad leading south from Manila to Legaspi, which was at Luzon's southeastern tip.

The plan was to pick up the railroad near San Pablo, south of a big lake named Laguna de Bay, and follow it to Legaspi. The distance was well over two hundred miles, but it was difficult to estimate exactly how much what with all the twists and turns. The intelligence briefing

warned us that the people around Laguna de Bay were reported to be pro-Japanese and we probably would not last long if forced down in that area. The warning not to trust the natives defined Laguna de Bay for me thereafter. Four days later, Francis Vedo—another member of La Junta Class 44-A—and his gunner were forced to ditch in the lake. They were seen in the water but then disappeared. Later reports confirmed that the crew had ditched successfully only to be machine-gunned by Japanese in a patrol boat.

The 389th provided five planes and crews for the first section, with Colonel Wells flying the sixth. The second six-plane section came from another squadron. The weather was marginal when we left Tanauan and, as usual, the group meteorologist predicted the field would be closed-in by early afternoon. We knew that it would be a long mission, so as soon as we were en route I adjusted the cowl flaps to hold the optimum head temperature of 205 degrees Celsius, pulled the throttles back until the engines were running at sixteen hundred rpm, and set the mixture controls to auto-lean. Flying on Colonel Wells's wing was easy and I aimed to save as much fuel as possible until more lively performance was needed at the railroad. Dan Whalen flashed a big grin as he noticed my props slow and motioned that we should open up the formation a bit and relax.

Colonel Wells picked up the railroad within sight of Laguna de Bay and the formation then broke down into three-ship flights. The colonel, who was an aggressive pilot, took us down on the deck to make several passes at the first group of boxcars he saw as if there would be no more targets. We made firing passes in formation whenever our leader saw anything that looked worthwhile. Our targets included a convoy of trucks sheltering in a grove of trees, boxcars on sidings, some bridges, and a country station. Most bridges had a pillbox protecting them and we sprayed these with .50-caliber fire if we had enough time to line up on them. There was little chance of knocking out a bridge itself with the 250-pound demolition bombs we carried.

The A-20's engines backfired whenever the manifold pressure got too high in the auto-lean setting, so I had to raise the rpm to two thousand and go back to auto-rich on the mixtures in order to stay with the leader. I usually ran at twenty-one hundred rpm when making a low-level pass over airfields, but this railroad was going to be a long target and there was no need to maintain close formation. Roaring down the twisting narrow-gauge railroad with trees on either side, strafing and occasionally dropping a bomb when there was something worthwhile was exhilarating. Employing this low-level, follow-the-leader style also burned fuel at a rapid rate, so I checked my gauges frequently.

Several objects caused Colonel Wells to wheel around and make another pass, somewhat to the consternation of the six-ship section behind us. Whalen and I would fall in single file behind the colonel whenever he pulled these didoes.

At some point along the way, about four hours into the mission, the leader of the second section called and said he was running low on fuel. He was also worried about the weather and wanted to pull out and return to Leyte. Wells released him without comment. Within another fifteen minutes the leader of our section's second flight called and said that he also needed to return because of low fuel. Wells looked over at me and I gave him the okay sign with thumb and forefinger; Danny Whalen shook his head negatively and left to join the returning flight.

Now it was just the two of us. Mindful of being on one of Colonel Wells's infamous lists but also enjoying the challenge of flying his wing, I was determined to hang with him, no matter what. By trailing the colonel and keeping my rpm somewhat reduced I could save a little fuel. There was no doubt in my mind that Wells would get us back safely. However, it was up to me to have enough gas to stick with him. He showed no sign of cutting the mission short. We continued following the rails as they twisted around the hills and through the villages along the rugged peninsula. I was a little disappointed that we found no trains operating or locomotives with steam up.

The clouds were down on the ridge tops when we finally roared low over the end of the railroad line, out over the Legaspi harbor, and continued to the gulf beyond. We encountered rainsqualls here and there over the water as the colonel led around the tip of Luzon and through the San Bernardino Strait. We still had 150 miles to go to reach our base.

When we reached the beginning of the narrow strait between Leyte and Samar the red lights on my fuel gauges still had not lit up. Soon the ship anchorage I had seen close-up the previous day came into view. Our two A-20s zipped by the ships, knowing they carried a number of trigger-happy navy gunners, but were not fired upon. We landed at Tanauan without incident shortly afterward. It had been an even six hours in the air, much of the time having been spent in an extended, low-level rat race. I landed with very little fuel showing on the gauges, but the needles still wiggled a bit on the inboard wing tanks and the engines had not quit, so there obviously was something left.

It was then that I lost my chance to redeem my standing somewhat with the colonel. He came by the hardstand in his jeep, a big smile on his face, and greeted me with, "Well Rutter, that wasn't so bad was it? I have about fifty gallons left, how about you?"

"I'm not sure, Colonel," I answered. "About seventy-five gallons." It was probably a truthful reply, but it was clear I had made a mistake by coming up with a number that topped my leader.

"Get in Rutter," he said curtly. The smile vanished. I should have known better, been a little more diplomatic, but such is youth.

We were back strafing railroads and roads on the following day, January 10. The landings at Lingayen on the ninth had been successful and our troops would soon be pushing south, so the enemy's transportation facilities had to be restricted as much as possible. The plan again called for two sections of six ships each to sweep along the railroad but this time we would come from north of Manila and work our way back toward the city. Another squadron led this mission and I was flying as a wingman in the second section, which was made up of 389th Squadron aircraft.

As we traveled along at about a thousand feet over the central plain north of Manila toward the designated starting point for our sweep, someone spotted an unfortunate 1939 Plymouth sedan coming along the highway toward us. Any vehicle seen moving in the area was assumed to be Japanese, although there were reports that some of the guerrillas also had cars. Whoever was leading the mission immediately decided to attack this important rolling target with his flight while the remaining three flights circled overhead and observed.

The Plymouth was making good speed as it headed south, but the driver went even faster as the three A-20s peeled off and went after him. We spectators continued to circle as the strafers made pass after pass at that lone car until it finally went off the road into a rice paddy. Did the ferocious attacks with .50-caliber machine-gun fire from the air cause the driver to leave the road, or was it just the distraction of watching the air show? It seemed to me a waste of taxpayers' money to run a single 1939 Plymouth off of the Manila highway when we had a more important target to hit.

We eventually reached the place near Tarlac where our low-level work was supposed to begin and started back south along the railroad. However, there was less rail traffic in evidence on this line compared to what we had found on the Legaspi line. Moreover, the challenge of staying with Colonel Wells was lacking. I suppose the effort was worthwhile, but to me it was just another six-hour mission.

The look of our camp area near Tanauan improved slowly, but the road into it from the coast highway remained a muddy bog. The day that the shower building was completed and we could give up washing from a

helmet was also noteworthy. Everybody planned improvements for their tents to get them out of the mud, with most opting to build raised floors made from fragmentation bomb boxes or other scrap lumber. Owen, Rutledge, and I had agreed to share a tent at Leyte, but then Owen had conveniently gone on leave to Sydney just before we left Hollandia. Since he would not be present to enjoy the satisfaction of contributing physical labor toward improving the tent setup, Owen offered to provide the wherewithal (booze from Sydney) for the materials. Liquor had even more value as trading material in the Philippines than it had in New Guinea, so when Owen ordered, "Build us a goddam good house!" Rutledge and I attempted to comply.

With the blank check from Owen, Rutledge and I thought big. We envisioned a concrete floor, screened walls, and the space divided up for a sitting room, a bedroom, and a darkroom in one corner so Rutledge and I could pursue our hobby of photography. One of my purchases in Sydney had been photographic chemicals, printing paper, and several printing frames to process the rolls of exposed but undeveloped film I was accumulating, stored in condoms. We ventured forth in search of materials with several bottles of gin and whiskey in hand, borrowed against Owen's return. At that time whiskey was valued at \$35 a bottle while gin brought \$20 and only booze would get us the scarce materials we needed.

Rutledge acquired ten bags of cement for two bottles of gin from some navy Seabees who were working on the Seventh Fleet headquarters. Neither of us knew much about mixing cement, but several sages who claimed to have construction experience assured us that one part cement to six of sand was a plenty strong mix for a tent floor. It sounded like a lopsided proportion to me, remembering a few concrete projects I had witnessed back on the farm, but we built a mixing box and got to work. According to the information on the bags, the cement was a couple of years old and had been made near Manila during the Japanese occupation. Either this cement did not conform to the stateside product familiar to our advisers or our experts were not the experts they had led us to believe they were. In any event, after hauling sand from the beach, water from a nearby creek, and mixing by hand enough concrete to form a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot square slab four inches thick, we had only a semicoagulated layer of sand that crumbled when touched.

Was it the saltwater entrapped in the damp sand, or were our advisers misleading us? Whatever the case, it had been a lot of hard work for nothing. We started over. We took out another loan of two bottles of gin (I have long since forgotten who our banker was and the interest rate he

charged) and acquired ten more bags of cement from the willing Seabees. This time we used a mixture of one part cement to two of sand and threw in a goodly amount of gravel and rocks to boot. The resulting floor met our expectations: it was hard and smooth and well above the surrounding mud. Those who had scoffed or laughed as we sweated over the mixing box came to admire the result and inquire about the source of the cement.

Getting the wood with which to frame the tent was our next challenge. Lumber was hard to come by since there were a number of outfits in the vicinity and all were trying to improve their facilities. Walking by one of the group headquarters tents one day, Rutledge and I noticed a flooring project under way and an attractive pile of boards nearby. With a great amount of cunning and luck we were able to liberate some of the boards by picking them up in broad daylight and carrying them home as if we had been ordered to do so. We made two or three trips to that pile and were never challenged. The noise of sawing and hammering coming from under the limp canvas of our tent was followed by the sudden development of straight eaves and square corners, but somehow this transformation occasioned no questions.

We knocked together a few chairs, a table, and stacked ammunition cases beside the three cots to use for chests. The work had taken us most of two weeks in between flying missions about every other day. Owen, meanwhile, enjoyed an extended leave in Sydney because there was a shortage of planes coming north.

The Japanese army resisted strongly on Luzon and Leyte was not yet completely secure. Meanwhile, the heavy rain continued to upset the planners' schedules. At Tanauan, the 389th Squadron officially received Maj. Theodore Suiter as its new commanding officer and Major Graber moved back to group headquarters as operations officer. Major Suiter, you will recall, had come overseas directly from Training Command. He had no background in combat aircraft and joined us at Hollandia just before the move north. After checking out in the A-20 at Hollandia he had flown some missions, but we pilots looked upon his assumption of command with some skepticism. We judged Major Suiter to be an old man—perhaps as old as forty, we supposed—and with his recent background of instructing cadets, he did not seem to be the type to quickly win our trust as a leader.

Suiter was pleasant enough and approachable, but his bearing was that of an instructor and he frequently lectured us about our nonconforming flying procedures. There was almost universal doubt about how this old instructor would perform in our world. Major Graber had led

the squadron on the Clark Field raid, but afterward Major Suiter started to lead us on missions despite not getting much time flying as a wingman or even leading a flight. He thus had not become entirely familiar with our proven procedures before taking over. I suppose that Suiter's long flying experience and instructor background gave him a degree of self-assurance that we could not appreciate. Two things were obvious: he could fly an A-20 and he never shrank from flying missions.

One event over Tanauan airstrip gained my respect for the major's dedication. Just after we had formed up to go on a mission, as the formation circled over the field, gas could be seen streaming from the right wing tank on Suiter's plane. One of his wingmen called the loose fuel cap to his attention. The major ordered us to continue circling as he requested clearance to land. He stopped at the far end of the airstrip after landing, jumped out on the wing without shutting down the engines, secured the gas cap, and immediately took off to rejoin and lead the squadron. Whether it was good judgment or not to delay the departure of the mission for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes is hard to say, but it was a unique performance and clearly demonstrated his resourcefulness and sense of duty.

Major Suiter attempted to initiate some changes in the way formation flying and landing procedures were conducted, but achieved only limited success. His signals for preparing to land or echeloning to the left or right involved exaggerated dives and pull-ups or dropping a wing as if beginning a barrel roll rather than a barely noticeable dip by the flight leader. When first demonstrated, these unexpected gyrations caused his wingmen to decamp for safer territory, which displeased our leader even more. Anyone who had flown in formation for even a mission or two needed no more than a subtle dip of the nose or wing—perhaps only a hand signal—to indicate what the leader intended. The major, however, did not approve of our practical methods and instead sought to reeducate us with lectures.

The weather was fair for a change on the morning of January 15 when the squadron dispatched a six-ship formation to attack the airfield at Puerto Princesa on the island of Palawan. The mission leader was Colonel Strauss, with either Slade or Valentine leading the second flight in which I was flying right wing. Palawan is a long, narrow island on the far west side of the Philippines, southwest of Mindoro, and our target was about one-third of the way down from Palawan's northern tip.

As had become my habit after my earlier experience with sloppy navigating, the chart folder was open on my lap and I closely watched our

course and checkpoints as the flight progressed. After settling down on the course to the west there was time to enjoy the calm beauty of the islands spread out below, the changing colors of the sea, and the white cumulus clouds floating here and there in the deep blue sky. Probably because I had never experienced an actual interception by enemy fighters, the possibility of attack from the air was not of great concern to me as I watched the unfolding panorama. The gunner was, hopefully, alert and watching the sky behind while we cruised along at the customary one thousand feet to minimize the possibility of a fighter sneaking up underneath where there was no protection. What could be better than flying an A-20 on such a perfect day with the confidence that Colonel Strauss was handling the navigation?

We crossed the Visayan Sea and stayed north of Panay, which had been my Lorelei on January 8. Our westerly heading would take us over the north end of Palawan and then we would turn to the southwest along the western side of the island. The mountain range that formed Palawan's spine had peaks of up to five thousand feet elevation. Colonel Strauss's navigation was right on the money as he swung to the east and headed toward land after passing a distinctive mountain. We began to climb to cross over the ridge behind what had to be Puerto Princesa.

Our two flights were each to make three-ship passes flying line abreast across the airfield close to the town and then make our getaway out over the open water of the Sulu Sea. Preparations for low-level attacks involved the following routine: fuel selectors switched to full tanks; fuel mixtures to auto-rich; props at twenty-one hundred rpm; gun switches, "ON"; gun sight, "ON"; bomb-bay doors open; bombs armed; shoulder harness locked; and so forth. After clearing the ridge we pitched down and followed the contours of the terrain, picking up speed as we followed the flight ahead of us. The town was a bit off to the right and the airfield straight ahead—a perfect approach for our purpose of sweeping the length of the strip with .50-caliber fire and parafrags.

The lead flight's guns kicked up dust in wide tracks in front of each ship and then the parafrags began to blossom out over revetments and some trees where the enemy planes were likely hidden. Our approach was in line with the length of the runway and our airspeed about 275 miles per hour as we descended in a shallow dive. When we were about three hundred feet over the ground and still descending we were within range to begin strafing the few planes in evidence and some suspicious looking lumps and buildings. The six nose guns barked in unison when I squeezed the trigger on the wheel and the instrument panel vibrated with their recoil.

Suddenly there was nothing. *Nothing!* Just total darkness and complete silence—no roaring engines, no barking guns, no wind whistling past the cockpit's open side windows. My brain was still working, though, for with the silence my instant thought in reaction to this strange event was: So this is how it is. I've been hit and I never even felt it. No pain. No noise. Just like turning off a switch. I'll be damned!

As suddenly as it had stopped, the roaring of the engines was back and I could feel the wheel trembling in my right hand. However, I could still see nothing. Now, my brain said: I must be blind! But we're still flying; pull up before we hit the ground. I eased back on the wheel and the pitch of the engines changed as the plane began to climb. Still unable to see, I held the wheel steady and then relaxed the pressure somewhat to avoid a stall when the controls began to feel slack but I felt we were still climbing a bit. I had not changed the throttle positions and, not being able to see, left them where they were. Since we were still flying my next thought was: Maybe we can somehow get out of this mess yet. There was some hope but how?

About three or four minutes after the incident began I started to squirm in the seat. There was a faint glimmer of light on each side, but nothing identifiable. Straight ahead remained very black indeed. The engines were still turning smoothly at high rpm, so I concluded we could not have been too seriously damaged. Now, however, I could feel a sharp pain across the bridge of my nose. Whenever the controls began to feel sloppy some forward pressure on the wheel would change the engine pitch and should avoid a stall, but there was no way of telling how high we might be above the ground or water. I cautiously tried to let the plane fly itself back to level or whatever attitude the trim and power settings settled into. I was confused and could not fathom just what had happened.

Several minutes and several erratic oscillations must have passed before I began to get an idea of what might have taken place, unlikely as it might have seemed. The thick armor glass panel on top of the cowl above the instrument panel was hinged at the bottom and had two sliding latches holding it into fittings at the top. This arrangement permitted the glass to be easily lowered for cleaning. Somehow, the framed glass panel had fallen and caught me squarely on the nose, wedging the wide, black metal frame against my eyes. I could not see ahead and it had pinned my head in place after jamming my sunglasses down into my cheeks. The glass probably weighed twenty to twenty-five pounds and the black metal frame around it was two and one-half to three inches wide.

That was it! The sliding pins at the top of the frame had somehow worked loose and the vibration of the nose guns beginning to fire had released them. The armor glass panel, which measured about twenty-four inches by eighteen inches, had swung through an arc of about sixty degrees before striking my forehead and nose with stunning effect. With my hand I felt the glass lying horizontally across my nose and, with an upward push, pulled my head back away from the wide black frame so I could see ahead somewhat. It took several tries before I was able to push the glass up far enough for me to see to get the plane leveled out. Showing it back into place and latching it took still more effort while the plane, on its own, was not flying exactly straight and level.

Wilfred Boyd was not flying with me as gunner that day or he might have concluded that this latest antic was just too much. Hoping that the gunner had not already bailed out, I called, "Sergeant, are you okay back there? I'm having a little trouble up here, but all is under control. Will get back to you shortly." I was relieved to hear a laconic, "Roger, Lieutenant" in response.

My Ray-Ban sunglasses had not broken, which was a wonder as the frames were firmly pinched over the bridge of my nose and gouging into my cheeks on either side. The other planes were a thousand or more feet below and far ahead of us—little wonder, considering that I had been wandering blindly all over the sky. I called the flight leader and advised him we were having a bit of trouble but would catch up shortly. I then told the gunner what I was doing and dropped the parafrags over the sea before closing the bomb-bay doors. It was standard practice to dump the parafrags (which had instantaneous fuses) once the automatic racks had been armed as it was too dangerous to unload them back on the ground.

My nose felt as if it might be broken and a large goose egg was rising on my forehead. Afraid to chance breaking the glasses by attempting to pry them off, I left them pinching my cheeks and nose and peered over the frames. The flight leader, of course, had seen nothing of my abrupt, erratic climb as we approached the target. The left wingman had noticed and assumed that we had been hit someplace. How low we might have been before I regained enough presence to pull back on the wheel is an unknown, but at the angle and speed we were going it must have been a near thing.

We landed after five hours and forty-five minutes in the air and there was time to pry the glasses carefully loose (the lenses were not even cracked) and relate the story of the problems to the gunner and Ernie Koch. Strangely, the sliding pins on the armor glass panel's latches had no holes for safety wires, yet one should have expected that vibration

would cause them to work them loose over time. Ernie drilled holes in the pins and thereafter I always checked the catches as part of the routine before starting the engines.

The dropping armor glass panel could easily have been fatal and in my view it could also have been the cause of some accidents. On several occasions planes had flown straight into the ground while firing at targets and the assumption was that enemy fire must have brought them down. Then, there were cases where a plane had seemingly made a perfect ditching in the sea but the pilot was lost—never made it out of the cockpit. The jolt of a water landing would be much greater than the vibration from the nose guns. A falling armor glass panel thus became a prime suspect in my mind when deaths caused by ditchings could not be explained.

There was another unusual incident while we were based at Tanauan, although I was not directly involved in it. We were just leaving the target after a low-level mission one day when a garbled call came over the radio. It sounded as though someone was hurt, but the call was not directed to any of our flight leaders and it was not repeated. None of the planes seemed to be in any difficulty as far as I could tell and we proceeded back to Tanauan. The brief call that had broken the usual radio silence was all but forgotten.

After we landed, however, one of the gunners in a plane ahead of us on the taxiway had his head and shoulders up out of the escape hatch behind the turret and was waving and yelling, pointing toward another plane to attract the attention of the ground crews. After we had parked on our hardstands, the excited gunner was finally able to make his message understood. Soon an ambulance was pulling up next to a plane parked nearby. Doc Walsh and one of the medics were there and an obviously injured man was soon removed from the rear compartment. The ambulance pulled away headed for the hospital while those of us watching from a distance wondered what had caused all the excitement.

We later learned that the short, unclear radio call had been an unsuccessful attempt by the injured gunner to call his pilot while the communications control box was set for the command radio rather than the intercom. A gunner in another plane had recognized the man's voice and understood enough to know the man was in serious trouble. Only after we had landed did the pilot learn from the gesturing gunner that something was amiss in the back end of his plane. The injured gunner had a .45-caliber bullet wound through one of his hands and had lost considerable blood before we got back to Tanauan.

As the story was told, the victim was always apprehensive on missions, particularly at the prospect of being captured by the Japanese. He had

adopted the practice of dropping out of his turret just before a run on a target, bracing himself on the floor, and holding his .45-caliber automatic pistol at the ready. In the event the plane went down he was prepared to commit suicide rather than face capture. On this particular mission the gun had mistakenly discharged and shattered his hand. It is the only such case of extreme torment that I can recall.

One of the pilot additions to the 389th Squadron shortly before we left Hollandia, it may be recalled, was Second Lieutenant Osborn. His first name now escapes me, but Osborn was an interesting fellow, small in stature and with a rather disheveled look about him. His expressive black eyes opened wide to express surprise, amusement, or for emphasis, and this caused Owen, always with an apt name at hand, to dub Osborn "Popeye."

Popeye Osborn had been a flying sergeant early in his career, the enlisted rank being available for pilots before and early in the war. These men were rated as "service pilots" and normally were assigned to fly transports or tow targets for aerial gunnery practice and perform other tasks short of combat. Flying sergeants became flight officers (equivalent to a warrant officer) when that grade was introduced for flying personnel. Shortly before reporting to the 389th, Osborn had been promoted to second lieutenant.

Popeye had many tales to tell about flying P-36s and P-40s while towing targets at gunnery school, although he was rather quiet on other subjects. I enjoyed his stories and occasional recitations of ribald poetry. He had a strong affection for the P-40, which he had flown most recently in a fighter group. His background in the A-20 escapes me and perhaps Ed Valentine had checked him out after he joined us. Osborn was a good pilot, notwithstanding his harum-scarum stories about flying this or that plane at some unspecified time in his career.

One afternoon while we were on Leyte, Osborn and I were flying a mission as Cal Slade's wingmen. We were coming over the Samar Strait returning to Tanauan when Popeye's right engine quit without apparent warning. He was flying Slade's right wing and I saw the prop slow down and start to windmill. He quickly feathered it. Popeye then adjusted the trim and power for single-engine flying while practically holding his position on Slade's wing, an expert performance. Popeye looked over at me and flashed a wide grin as he pointed to the stationary prop and then at Slade in anticipation of the double take our leader would do when he noticed only one fan turning on Osborn's aircraft.

As we passed opposite Tacloban approaching the Tanauan strip, Slade

checked his wingmen and gave the hand signal to go into right echelon before we peeled off to land. Much to Popeye's disappointment, Cal failed to notice the stopped prop on his right wingman before signaling the formation change. Popeye shrugged as I prepared to cross over to the right, pointed down, and flashed me another grin as he dropped out of formation for a straight-in approach to the airstrip. I then crossed over and took up position on Slade's right wing.

Cal, who apparently did not hear Osborn's radio call to the Tanauan tower declaring an emergency or his being cleared to land, was properly startled when he turned and saw me sitting in Popeye's place and the other plane nowhere in sight. I pointed down and made a motion like a plane peeling off; Cal looked mystified and shook his head. After landing without incident, Osborn had pulled off of the runway into the parking area on the side toward the water to await the other planes. It was impossible to taxi an A-20 any distance with only one engine because the nosewheel was not steerable and the brakes would soon overheat.

Popeye was waiting for us at the end of the taxiway as we started back to camp after we had landed and parked. Without comment, he climbed into the back of the jeep. Cal, who was driving, was very obviously perturbed. Before moving the jeep he said, "Osborn, don't you know enough to stay in formation until we peel off?" Popeye's smile faded. He looked hurt and his eyes opened wide as he replied loudly, "Jesus Christ, Captain, I only had one engine. What in hell did you expect?" My laughter did not help, but we finally convinced Cal that Osborn's story was true, that he had indeed been flying in formation on a single engine for ten or fifteen minutes. Popeye Osborn remained an enigma as long as he was with us, but in my book he was an amusing one.

Only occasionally did we meet up with pilots of the RAAF, although they were very much a part of the effort on New Guinea and other islands in that area. The RAAF's responsibilities remained generally south of the equator after the Philippines invasion. We did, however, see their Beaufighters on Morotai as noted earlier. We had worked with a squadron of RAAF Beauforts once or twice when bombing Atape east of Hollandia the previous summer, but we had had no direct contact with our Aussie counterparts. The general impression seemed to be that the Aussies were uninhibited flyers and inclined to exercise less caution than our leaders demanded. The flight south from Hollandia Mel Kapson and I had made in the rainstorm in that tired C-47 is a good example. An incident at Tanauan confirmed the Aussies' reputation for relaxed and understated behavior.

Each day, an officer from the group was assigned to serve as "air-

drome officer” at the airstrip, acting as liaison between the control tower and flight operations. It was usually a boring assignment, because the officer assigned the duty had to remain at the airstrip constantly while the field was open. I drew the assignment one day, but aside from being in the tower when the 312th’s mission went out in the morning and again later when it returned, there was little to do. Doc Walsh was also on duty with one of our ambulances, parked near the crash crew’s truck in front of the control tower. It had been a typical overcast day with periods of rain and, after checking with the tower operator about traffic expected, I joined Doc, who was keeping dry in the ambulance.

The Australians had two squadrons equipped with A-20s, but as far as we knew they were both operating down in New Guinea. It thus was unusual to see an RAAF A-20 approaching Tanauan from the north that afternoon. The pilot touched down on the wet strip and rolled down the runway past us—a bit fast perhaps, but nothing unusual. Doc and I watched the landing and then continued our conversation, but only for a moment before the crash alarm sounded and the tower operator yelled down from above, “He crashed on the end of the runway!”

The ambulance followed after the crash truck. When we arrived on the scene we found the A-20 and three navy F4U Corsair fighters tangled up in the parking area at the end of the airstrip. The A-20 pilot, realizing that the end of the runway was fast approaching, had clamped down hard on the brakes, which caused the plane to slide on the wet pierced-steel matting. It wound up in the parking area used by the navy F4U fighters.

In the resulting smashup, the A-20 first lost its nose section with six guns mounted in it. It continued sliding into a second F4U, losing most of its right wing before slamming into a third fighter, the right wing of which stabbed through the A-20’s cockpit area and out the opposite side of the fuselage. There was fuel, wreckage, and ammunition scattered everywhere. By the time we arrived, several navy crew chiefs were already up beside the cockpit trying to rescue the Aussie. The F4U’s wing had sliced through the fuselage like a knife, just missing the pilot’s legs and torso, trapping him in his seat.

After a few minutes, the stunned Aussie began to move. When he finally was able to speak, he reported that no bones seemed to be broken. He did, however, have a large, bleeding gash on his forehead. Doc Walsh looked him over briefly before pronouncing that the bleeding was not serious. Doc reassured the pilot that help was at hand and reassurance was very much needed in view of the yells and strings of curses coming from the would-be rescuers:

“Christ! There’s gas everywhere!”

“Watch that ammo!”

“Put out the light! *No* goddam cigarettes!”

“Get a cable around this fucking wing and bring a truck.”

“Give me an axe; I’ll chop the bastard off!”

The crash crew worked furiously to cut the wing tip from the F4U before the spilled fuel caught fire. I was not sure they were going to win the race. Eventually, with much profanity accompanying their efforts, they managed to cut through the wing and pull it out of the way. The pilot, at last able to climb out of the remains of the cockpit more or less on his own, was helped down and over to the ambulance. Doc Walsh pulled the edges of the wound on his forehead together with tape before wrapping a turban of gauze around the pilot’s head. He was badly shaken, but the cut on his forehead was the only outward injury.

After retrieving his blue uniform cap and a briefcase from the mangled cockpit and surveying the wreckage of the four destroyed planes, the Aussie rendered his assessment: “Bloody poor show. Thanks, mates.” The ambulance driver gave him a ride over to the operations shack to close his flight plan while the dejected navy men looked at the remains of their F4Us. The engineers soon arrived to gather up the several pieces of the destroyed A-20.

The exalted airdrome officer was neither consulted nor seemingly needed. I do not even recall having to fill out a formal report on the incident during my tour of duty.

Maury Owen returned from his extended stay in Sydney toward the end of the month, well after Jim Rutledge and I had finished the major work on the house. Mosquito netting was in short supply and we had not been able to screen all around the tent frame as Owen had directed, so we had mosquito bars over our cots like everybody else. Owen approved of our work in general and did not kick about the cost in booze, but he objected to the mosquito bars. He no doubt had been spoiled by his life in the fleshpots of Sydney. Drawing on his ample liquor stocks, Owen donated another bottle of genuine bourbon to pay for all-around screening. He begged off going out and trying to buy or scrounge the netting himself, however.

The compound for the Seventh Fleet headquarters was still under construction down the coast toward Dulag. We figured they surely would have screening there—and better than any the army might have. The navy always lived well. I wrapped the bourbon in a GI towel and placed it in the jeep’s glove compartment, then drove down the coast to

the construction site. After locating the Seventh Fleet headquarters, I drove up to a substantial looking building with a raised concrete floor, clapboard siding, and screened windows where work was in progress.

A petty officer of some description watched me pull up and then sauntered over to inform me that they were building the admiral's galley. I looked around and noted for future reference that there was an ice cream machine. The petty officer looked blank when I inquired about the possibility of getting a roll of that beautiful nylon screen the navy used for its tents. As we continued exchanging pleasantries with a hint or two as to what items I could use. The chief soon got the picture that there was whiskey someplace about and that it might be exchanged for say, a sixty-four-foot roll of canvas and nylon screening, a bundle of lath, and a keg of nails.

"Lieutenant," he offered, "why don't you take a walk around and look at the other side of the galley."

"Sounds like a good idea, Chief," I replied. "There's a towel in the glove compartment in case you want to dry your hands." We thus obtained full screening for our house, plus nails for trading to others who were working at making their living conditions more civilized. The nylon screening in one big roll could easily be wrapped around the sixteen-by-sixteen-foot pyramidal tent and just as easily taken down again. It was far superior to the usual practice of cutting up mosquito bars and piecing them together over the tent frame.

We completed our improvements on January 25 and, before the evening meal, Owen, Rutledge, and I relaxed to enjoy our handiwork. It was worth all the labor and Owen's booze we had expended. We had a solid floor, screen all around, and the darkroom cubbyhole in the corner for future photo projects. Owen blew cigarette smoke toward the ceiling as he rested on the cot in his usual horizontal position and observed, "Wouldn't it be hell if we had to move?"

"Christ!" replied Rutledge with feeling as he sprawled in a chair he had fabricated out of bomb crates. He took a deep drag on his cigarette and shook his head at the thought.

No sooner had the idea been uttered than Tom Jones came through the door, beaming like a cherub. "Hey you guys, did you hear the news? We're moving to Mindoro day after tomorrow." He continued to beam and prattle as the three of us profaned everybody connected with such a decision, from the commanding general down to Jones himself—who obviously enjoyed being the messenger and seeing our reactions. Owen became furious as Jones continued to profess amusement that our building efforts were about to be nullified and finally erupted: "Sweet Ass,

you are one miserable sonofabitch. Get out!” The pious and somewhat artistic interests that Jones displayed at times had earlier earned Owen’s nickname of “Sweet Ass,” but this may have been the first time he called him so to his face. Tom looked hurt, but he was still giggling as he exited our palace. Meanwhile, we continued to rant and rave. After all that work making a livable situation in the midst of the Leyte rainy season and we would get to enjoy it for such a short time. Our profanity was justified, absolutely.

Our language in this incident was not uncommon. Profanity of various degrees of invention seemed to be natural with the average GI, whether for emphasis or in ordinary conversation. Officers, most of them at least, showed a little restraint in their choice of profane words and eschewed the most foul—at least most of the time. Owen’s outburst on this occasion was unusual in that his delivery was vehement, not just idle chitchat, and evidenced his low opinion of Jones and his idea of a humorous situation.

There was a sense of serious business in the mess hall the following morning, January 26, when the briefing officer started talking to the assembled crews before the day’s mission. The 388th and 389th Squadrons were assigned to make a low-level attack on the coastal defense batteries located on Grande Island at the entrance to Subic Bay. Subic Bay was a well-protected harbor on Luzon’s west coast north of the Bataan Peninsula. It had been a U.S. Navy base before the outbreak of the war, although apparently not of the same scale as Cavite on the eastern shore of much larger Manila Bay.

The mission briefing outlined a desperate effort against a heavily fortified target, but the coastal guns blocking this strategic harbor simply had to be neutralized. Subic Bay had to be opened for navy use and to bring in supplies by transport ships since Manila Bay would not be available until Corregidor and other harbor defenses could be taken, which might take months. The war would be held up pending the taking of Grande Island. Everything rested with the valiant crews of the 312th Bomb Group—or so it sounded. The briefing officer did not quite end by shouting, “It’s do or die, men!” but the importance and danger of this operation was evident in his tone and we took him at his word.

Each squadron would send six planes with the 388th leading. The target’s small size dictated that the attack could only be made by successive three-ship flights. Our approach was from the sea and, after overflying the island, the survivors would make a sharp turn to the right toward the hills on Bataan to avoid the antiaircraft batteries lining the inner harbor.

The bomb loads would be five-hundred-pound parachute demolition bombs (parademos) with two parachutes each to give us time to escape the bomb blast. Several times the briefing officer said, "And stay low!" That admonition was hardly necessary, however. My flight would be the last across the target. By then either all the opposition would have been eliminated or it would be a hornet's nest. Oh well, "Ours not to reason why. . . ."

Rutledge was on my right wing but before we had gotten far from Tanauan he reported engine trouble and turned back. Gordon Gerould was flying the spare ship that day, so he moved in to fill the space that had been vacated. A spare ship was dispatched on most missions. It would follow along for the first half-hour and fill in if a plane developed mechanical problems and had to return to base. After crossing Manila Bay and the Bataan Peninsula, our leader took us down to about five hundred feet just south of the mouth of Subic Bay and then circled back north to launch the valiant attack on Grande Island. The navy was depending on us.

The flights circled low over the water and we waited our turn as flight after flight went after that stopper in the mouth of Subic Bay. Grande Island was a rocky protrusion rising out of the water perhaps a hundred feet. It had a few trees on top and concrete parapets all around, masking the coastal defense guns. We had been told what to expect and, although the gun emplacements we could see dated back almost fifty years, the island did look potentially lethal.

Finally, it was our turn. We headed for the fort where smoke and dust from the bombs dropped by the other flights smothered the few trees. We were just over the water and, hopefully, below the depression angle of the heavy anti-aircraft batteries as we approached. Our airspeed was well up so as to minimize our exposure time. Our trio of A-20s flew on in close formation, bomb doors open and nose guns blazing to keep the Japanese gunners down. Nevertheless, we all expected to feel some heavy hits at any moment. Like the famed charge of the Light Brigade, we continued on toward the Valley of Death—but we were only three, not six hundred.

At the last minute we pulled up over the island's shore, skimmed across with just enough altitude to dump the parademo bombs, and then plunged back down over the water for our getaway, turning toward the east. My ship had seemingly not been hit and the formation ahead was reforming as I cut inside the 389th's leader to slide into position. Both wingmen also seemed to have survived that boiling caldron of smoke and wreckage on Grande Island. Our escape had been a miracle, no doubt about it.

As we climbed away I looked back at the scene and laughed out loud. All of the big guns that appeared in the reconnaissance photos looked like leftovers from the Spanish-American War. Several of them were not even mounted in emplacements or on carriages. The splashes on the water that had looked so ominous as we approached the island must have been bomb shorts from the flights ahead. Photos of the strike provided fine views of the outmoded ordnance on Grande Island—and there was not a soldier in sight. We had done our job, desperate though it had been. The way was clear for the U.S. Navy to take Subic Bay.

Years later, Gordon “Gerry” Gerould sent me a copy of his personal listing of missions flown with this note: “Mission #51. On my last A-20 mission I finally flew on your wing. I’m grateful you brought me back.” After the attack on the deserted fortress of Grande Island, Gerry took over flying the group’s C-47 from Don Dyer, who returned to flying A-20s. The flying time was five hours on our heroic, fearless, and successful attack on Grande Island.

On January 27, 1945, the 389th Squadron left Tanauan, its rain and mud, and our plush house to fly to San Jose on Mindoro. The stay there would be only temporary, until a new airstrip and bivouac area could be made ready for us at Mangaldan, Luzon, on the Lingayen Gulf.