



Coy D. Ham
13th Air Force, U.S. Air Force
World War II

Most of my service was in the South Pacific with the attachment of 13th Air Force, the most active air force in the South Pacific. It was all over those islands. I served with the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron in the Netherlands, East Indies, and the Philippine Islands. I supervised inspections and maintenance on B17's, PB4Y aircraft and made out work orders concerning different problems of maintenance. At Chanute Field, Illinois, my class was rushed through an aircraft school course in one year, rather than three. I had a lot of aircraft experience and had taken care of different types of aircraft.

I didn't think I'd have to go overseas because I'd been stateside for three years, but about eight months after Sue and I married, I was shipped out. Three ships started out. They had to zigzag because we were in enemy waters. Near Hawaii, two ships dropped off, and we wound up being one little old ship with no protection...no escorts. Just a sitting duck. I was relieved when we landed in New Guinea.

I started out at a place called Mortai, a little island that we'd just taken a landing strip off of. We had bombers and fighter planes and operated off this little strip of land. We had a perimeter set up, and the army held the enemy back from us. We stayed there about a year and a half and then moved up into the Philippine Islands. Instead of attacking Mortai, the Japanese redirected about 30,000 troops for the invasion in Leyte.

For a while, we were bombed at regular intervals four times a night on this little island. We didn't know it at the time, but the Japanese were on an island just sixty miles from us. Some guys came over from Australia and, as my buddy said, they talked funny, but they were good pilots. When Japanese planes would come over to bomb us, the Australians would start right after them even though they were told, "Don't fly over the island because our aircraft is shooting up into the sky and you can get hit." It didn't make those Aussies any difference. They just took off and when they got after a bomber, they stayed right on it until they took him out of the sky.

We were sent to a little once-beautiful seashore town that had been bombed so many times only one building was left standing. After trying to take this little town three or four times, the Navy finally went in there and annihilated the Japanese or ran them up into the hills. We set up our bases and camped in a coconut grove. Bulldozers pushed coconuts up into piles two stories high. We'd take a machete, cut a coconut in the morning and drink that fresh juice. You know that was quite a deal since we didn't have any fresh food. We were a little outfit of seventy, not a big man-sized army, and the highest-ranking officer we had was a captain. I was a Tech Sergeant.

One incident was rather interesting. Somebody in Washington got this idea that instead of the PBY landing in the water, we would tie a boat to a B17 and drop it. In theory, the guys who got the plane shot from under them could get into that boat and sail off, and we wouldn't fly out to get them and run the risk of getting

shot up. I had the blueprints of this 15 or 16-foot boat that I was to tie on the bottom of this B-17. I'd never seen such a boat and didn't know how it worked, but after three days I finally got the thing sealed up under the 17.

The pilot carried us up into a rain cloud! We had to start from scratch again, but we finally got it where it was sealed and the pilot carried it on a mission. Two pilots got shot down in the Seabees Islands and they dropped that boat. It had three parachutes in it. One had opened when they dropped it. It fell a little farther and another parachute opened. Before it hit the water, the third one opened. Inside the little boat were a motor, food, and medical supplies. It was outfitted to the teeth, but the pilots wouldn't get in it. They just let it bob on the water. They wanted a Catalina to come in there and pick them up and come back to the base in thirty minutes. It proved to be another thing that Washington had to eat because the boys wouldn't get in it. Anyway, that was fun to attach that boat under the belly of a B17.

We went in on a raid and airlifted some American guys who were behind the lines. We went down in combat and picked them up. We also picked up three B25 crews, about 21 guys. We got a Presidential Unit Citation for the whole outfit, not for individuals. I treasure that very much because it told what we did and a whole bunch of stuff.

The flyers got to the point that if they were going on a strike, they would wait for us to come with that big old PBY and hang around. It took us twice as long to get to a destination as the fighter planes. That big old plane, with 104-foot wide wingspan, could fly only 110 miles an hour. Oftentimes when we'd come in, if the runway had been bombarded, we'd just set down in the water. The next morning after the guys had filled up the holes in the runway, we'd bring the plane on in.

A lot of fierce winds blew on those islands. The wind would blow so hard that we had to tie the planes down or they'd hit flying speed. But the worst part was that when those storms hit, fighter pilots who were out on a mission would get lost. One morning the Line Chief said, "Get this B-25 ready to go. We had three fliers who didn't make it in through the storm last night, and they are lost somewhere. They're probably down in the ocean." The Colonel took me to engineer the plane. We cranked up and took off, searching for those guys. After about an hour, we were flying above the coconut trees and saw a guy down there in the water in a little rubber raft, and he was waving. We got a fix on him and called a ship to pick him up. Then we went another thirty or forty minutes and found another one, but we never did find the third guy. Obviously, he drowned. We felt

good about saving two, still we hated to lose that one.

The Philippine natives were very sweet, religious people. D.A., a native who had two boys fighting for us, invited some of us for dinner one day. The family had very little food but they shared it with us. He told us how the Japanese came in, took the cattle and carried them up in the mountains. He told that they also carried away his daughters and how brutal they were. I realized that we were fighting a different war.

We captured a very plush plane when we landed there (where?). The Japanese had been in the process of changing the engine. It was one of our C47's that a general had had refurnished and was going to fly it back to Japanese territory. The enemy had to leave in a hurry so the plane was left there with the engine half out. The bomb squad checked it to see if bombs had been planted in it, and sure enough they had. We changed the engine in it. Boy! It was a dandy plane. The boys flew it, but they had to paint over the rising sun to keep from getting shot at.

We did strange things to keep the pressures of war from getting the best of us. Now, some kids could handle it and some couldn't. I never had foxhole religion. I was saved before I went over there and I certainly wanted to get back home.

The Japanese kept telling their officers that that they could win this war. When the Japanese saw the atomic bomb hit, they said, "Say, these people have got something going we don't know anything about. We better get our act together." Then the second one was dropped. There was a lot of debate as to whether the bomb should be dropped, but I say that it should have been because it saved millions of lives. We were ready to go into Japan, and American and Japanese lives would have been lost during an extended war. It was bad for the cities that the bombs dropped on, but the war was stopped.

At the time that the war ended, I was at Zamboanga, on the lower tip of Mindanao, in the Philippine Islands, and didn't get home for 60 to 90 days. We flew to Manila and caught a ship to San Francisco. I don't know whether the military was a good experience or not. It was certainly different from what I was used to.

A lot of people hated MacArthur because he waded ashore and told the Philippine people, "I'm coming back" and all that, you know. They said that was a bunch of bull. He ran off and left them. You know you can get all kinds of opinions on his actions. Well, I'll have to give MacArthur credit for the way that he

fought in the South Pacific. His war strategy started back in New Guinea. There were thousands of little islands out there with thousands of Japanese dug into them. Instead of losing American lives by going in and trying to take the whole island, MacArthur's strategy was to take a little strip, put somebody up on the perimeter, and operate off that air force strip. The island I was on, Mordecai, had Japanese that you could hear firing day and night, but we had a bomber strip and a fighter strip right down next to the coast. We operated that thing right on through. We just hedged off from one island to another right on into the Philippines.

I have a picture that shows the Japanese and MacArthur at the surrender. I wouldn't take anything for it now. It was done by a commercial photographer, but it shows the Japanese officials standing there and old MacArthur looked like a giant standing beside them. But you know, I don't have any hard feelings against those people.

I had a few exciting experiences in the military. One was when we were landing at the Twin Engine BAS Training School in Altus, Oklahoma, and we couldn't get the landing gear down. We kept flying over the tower saying "Is it down? Is it down?" The light wasn't on and I was over there pumping like crazy, trying to get it down. At long last, the gear went down and held enough for us to land so we got out of that deal.

After the war, I came to Tyler and went to work as a journeyman for Sue's uncle in his monument shop. It was located where Stein-Mart on S. Broadway now stands. Later I became a salesman, but always dealing with someone who had lost a loved one got the best of me. I left there and worked as an inspector of planes for General Dynamics in Fort Worth for a couple of years.

I started moonlighting for a furniture company, and the owner invited me to be help with a store that he was going to open in Tyler. Although Sue and I loved Fort Worth, we decided to move to Tyler and have been here ever since. I worked with the furniture company, Pope and Turner, for _____ years.

Sue and I came to GABC about six years ago. We had help start Colonial Hills and belonged there. We kept listening to ya'll's (How about that?) pastor and visiting some. We decided that was the place for us to worship. We've never been sorry.

My family consists of my wife Sue, our son, David, daughter-in-law, Lisa, and their son, Luke-- Big Luke--, he's eight years old. I'm going on eighty-four and the

Lord has been good to us. We haven't had everything we wanted, and everything didn't happen like we wanted, but I consider that life. I guess if we'd had it too easy, we wouldn't appreciate what we have.