Stranded Nurses on Mindanao

The twenty U. S. Army nurses on two seaplanes flying away from the besieged Island of Corregidor in the Philippines on the night of April 29, 1942 thought their luck had finally changed. Since the Japanese offensive in these islands began on December 8, 1941, the nurses had been part of a beleaguered military force cut-off from home and supplies by the Pearl Harbor tragedy. Without any formal military training, they evacuated Manila and endured months of fighting in the jungles of Bataan or the underground fortress of Malinta Tunnel on Corregidor Island. After Bataan fell on April 9, 1942, the women worked in the tunnel hospital caring for 1,000 patients while soldiers and marines made one final stand against an overwhelming enemy force. After months of hoping and waiting for reinforcements, the nurses, as one later stated, bowed to the inevitable as we acknowledged a losing race.

The Decision to Evacuate a Select Group Before Surrender

On April 29th, Commanding General Jonathan ÔSkinnyÔ Wainwright received word that two Navy seaplanes loaded with medical and military supplies were expected to land off Corregidor that night, empty their cargo, then take as many passengers as they could and fly to Australia. Following orders, Wainwright planned to send several officers who were indispensable to the Allied war effort. Included in this group was Colonel Stuart Wood, who spoke fluent Japanese. Wainwright also chose three civilian women who had missed earlier departure opportunities. Wainwright knew he had twenty seats left for the nurses, ten on each aircraft, and
he left the decision about who among the eight-five Army women would leave to his senior medical officer, Colonel Wibb Cooper. Colonel Cooper had Chief Nurse Maude Davison help him. Neither of them ever explained their decision or recorded their criteria for selection. It is possible, however, to infer from their final list and the testimonies of several nurses that Cooper and Davison primarily chose women who were unlikely to survive the rigors of surrender and captivity: older nurses and those who were very ill. However, a few women selected were young, healthy, and had high-ranking officers as beaus. As one of the nurses not chosen remarked, "Politics works no matter where you are and what the circumstances". Three women, Assistant Chief Nurses Josephine Nesbit, Ann Mealor and Ann Wurts, refused to accept an offer to leave. Both preferred to remain with their patients.

At six o’clock on the evening of April 29, 1942, the twenty nurses got word to report to Malinta Tunnel Hospital’s dining area at sundown. Sally Blaine, from Bible Grove, Missouri, was one of the twenty. Although she was only 24 years old she was very ill with dengue fever and malaria and her weight has dropped to less than 100 pounds. Sally and the others learned they had been relieved of duty in the Philippines and ordered to report to Australia. Chief Nurse Maude Davison told them not to discuss their departure and to pack a bag weighing less than ten pounds. Sally Blaine could hardly think as she left the dining area. Juanita Redmond, another nurse who was leaving, summed up Sally’s feelings. "I did not know how I felt...I wanted to go, and I
didn’t want to go...I felt like a deserter...but as an officer in the U. S. Army I was to obey orders."

Despite the command for silence, word about the departure quickly spread. A crowd was waiting at the tunnel entrance to hand over letters, money, and photographs to deliver when they got home. Between 9:30 and 10:00 p. m., cars pulled away from Malinta Tunnel and headed toward Corregidor’s docks.

General Wainwright and a senior Naval officer had chosen the sheltered water between Corregidor and another small island as the landing spot. Minesweeper crews cleared the area and placed two lighted buoys in the water. Fortunately, the Japanese had stopped their barrage that evening. The night sky was quiet as the pilots landed their aircraft on choppy waters. "Like messengers from another world," wrote General Wainwright. He helped the passengers into small boats around 11:45 p. m., and bid them goodbye.

The boats arrived at the landing site. Crews unloaded the bobbing seaplanes while the passengers climbed aboard. Soon, the two aircraft ascended. Cool, fresh air filled the cabin. Some people took a final look back at Bataan and Corregidor. Others closed their eyes or stared ahead.

[A few days later, a submarine evacuated eleven more women nurses, leaving sixty-five Army nurses behind on Corregidor]

Refueling on Mindanao Island

The pilots planned to stop at Lake Lanao on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao to refuel their seaplanes before
completing the 7,300 mile journey to Australia. Sally Blaine was a passenger on Lieutenant (jg) Pollack's aircraft. He struggled to guide his plane through the fog, but landed on the lake shortly before the other seaplane. American and Filipino troops stationed on Mindanao had been alerted to their schedule and were waiting on the shoreline.

At 5:00 a.m. on April 30th, the passengers disembarked and climbed into buses for the short trip to the village of Dansalan and breakfast at a local hotel. After enduring four months of war, the weary group relaxed. Sally Blaine recalled seeing only a few Japanese reconnaissance planes that day.

While the nurses and other travelers rested, the air crews, aided by the local Allied servicemen, refueled the crafts and camouflaged them. In the late afternoon, the passengers returned and Filipinos began to ferry them in small boats back to the planes. The wind had increased, causing whitecaps on the lake's surface. Soon, however, everyone was inside, waiting for darkness and the final departure in their long voyage.

The pilots in one seaplane revved their engines. The plane skimmed the lake waters but did not lift off. They turned and tried again. Nothing happened. On the third take-off attempt, the seaplane glided the whole length of the lake before lifting into the air. The craft began to circle overhead in a holding pattern to wait for the other aircraft. [Hours later, crewman discovered two stowaways who caused the increased weight and difficulty on getting airborne. The nurses heard the two were later returned to active duty.]
Meanwhile, the gusts and waves blew the other seaplane towards the shoreline. Inside, Sally Blaine and her friends remained eerily calm. Nobody talked about their fears. Lieutenant Pollack tried to guide the plane toward a takeoff position but it kept drifting into shallow water.

A Filipino watching the struggle offered to help and soon attached a tow line from his motorized outrigger to try to steer it into deeper water, but his small boat could not lead the large plane. The crew cut the line and pushed away overhead tree limbs as the craft drifted closer to the shore.

After what seemed to her to be a long time, Sally heard a crunching sound. The plane shuddered violently. A submerged rock was tearing a hole in the seaplane. To Rita Palmer, another Army nurse on board, it looked as though a can opener was slicing through the hull. Water began to gush inside.

Sally Blaine prayed for a miracle and another nurse, Rosemary Hogan, tried to give her one. Although she had shrapnel wounds in her nose, arms and legs and a punctured left eardrum from a Japanese bombing of her Bataan hospital, Rosemary took off her terry cloth jacket and shoved the coat into the gaping opening. Other passengers gave her their sweaters and clothes. Sally watched the scene which reminded her of Hans Brinker’s tale about the boy who stuck his finger in a leaking dike.

Lieutenant Pollack turned the seaplane into the wind. He planned to taxi into the deep part of the lake for take off. This action only caused a stronger rush of water. A quickly rising water level forced Rosemary Hogan to give up her effort.
The pilot now realized he was not going to succeed on that windy, black night. He signaled the other seaplane to leave. Sally and the others on board sadly heard the sound of the motors from the airborne seacraft grow fainter.

An Unfortunate Decision

Pollack and his co-pilot maneuvered the damaged seaplane next to a makeshift wharf. With water ankle deep inside the cabin, Sally stood on her seat and waited her turn to exit. The passengers hurried outside without their belongings.

The officers, ten military nurses, and three civilian women walked up a long, narrow, winding trail to a bus which took them back to Dansalan. About 2:30 a.m. on May 1 (26 1/2 hours after leaving Corregidor), they walked into the same hotel where they had spent the previous day. Only this time they were wet, tired, hungry, and discouraged.

The group dried their clothes, ate, and drank hot coffee, then looked for floor space or a bed to rest. Sally slept poorly that night wondering about her uncertain future. Neither she nor any other army nurse panicked or cried over their predicament. They were too emotionally and physically exhausted to react with much fervor, and, calamity was nothing new to them. From the beginning days of the Japanese offensive the previous December, they had witnessed a series of disasters, including the unexpected destruction and evacuation of their military bases, and the collapse of Allied resistance in the Bataan jungle. Every time these nurses had faced a debacle, they had managed to adjust and
survive. As unnerving as the night on Lake Lanao in the damaged seaplane had been, it was another setback. They were confident that somehow a plan would emerge.

Colonel Stuart Wood, the senior officer, assisted by two other officers, assumed command in the stranded group. Although the nurses and the men were from different military units, protocol determined that the highest ranking officer would take the leadership position. [The nurses held the relative ranks of first and second lieutenants]. Wood told the women he believed that the seaplane was unsafe. He did not want to send anyone into the hills where Filipino and American guerrillas operated. Instead, he intended to find a place where they could hide together until General MacArthur sent a rescue plane or boat from his headquarters in Australia. Everyone agreed. They soon left the hotel in their bus and headed toward a nearby Del Monte pineapple plantation. The manager there had heard about their plight and offered them temporary refuge.

Meanwhile, back on Lake Lanao, Lieutenant Pollack believed he could repair his damaged plane. A Navy boat crew and a Navy salvage expert appeared on the scene to help. Together they covered the gaping hole, baled the water, and removed all luggage and possessions to lighten the aircraft. By 4 p.m. the aircraft was ready for takeoff, however, Pollack could not find his passengers. The sailors informed him that the Japanese were less than twenty miles away. They had no time to look or wait. Pollack, his crew, and the Navy men lifted off Lake Lanao. Hours
later they safely landed in Australia near the other seaplane which also had successfully made the flight. The ten Army nurses on that craft were unharmed and resting in a hospital.

Looking back on that fateful day and the decision that had sealed her destiny, Sally Blaine said, "There was never any criticism...I think Colonel Wood was right. If we had gone on it [the seaplane] and been killed, they probably would have court-martialed the poor man". To this day, however, Pollack has regrets about leaving the nurses behind.

On Corregidor, General Wainwright received word about the stranded passengers. In his memoirs, he recorded his reaction, "A tragic farewell...[to] a number of nurses who richly deserved a better fate".

An Odyssey on Mindanao Island

Although the Del Monte pineapple plantation had served as a stopover for General MacArthur on his escape to Australia two months earlier in March 1942, and the plantation had provided a temporary headquarters for Allied forces on Mindanao, tensions between the passengers and the plantation manager became so great that the group spent only one day at the plush site. Sally Blaine remembered the manager as a nasty man who did not want to take care of so many people. Another possible reason for the friction was that the civilian businessman knew how near the Japanese were to his plantation and he did not want military officers in his midst.

The Americans returned to their vintage bus at dusk and left the pineapple groves. The vehicle did not have the engine power
to climb Mindanao's hills, so when the driver reached the bottom of an incline, he stopped and everyone got off. The weaker and sicker women, like Sally Blaine, walked alongside while the men and stronger women helped push the bus uphill. The work of getting themselves and the vehicle up the hills seemed to boost morale. Sally watched the injured nurse Rosemary Hogan nudge the bus, and thought that if her friend was not going to give up, neither would she.

In the six months since the war began, Sally and the other women had formed a solid group similar in spirit to the dynamics that occur among men in fighting units. The long distance from home and the intensity of the Japanese strikes had forced them to turn to one another for physical and emotional support.

The nurses on Mindanao: Earleen Allen, Louise Anschinks, Agnes Barre, Sally Blaine, Helen Gardner, Rosemary Hogan, Geneva Jenkins, Rita Palmer, Eleanor "Peg" O'Neill, and Evelyn Whitlow, continued to help one another.

The stranded women and men continued to push their bus until they arrived at a small military hospital shielded by the jungle. Most likely, an officer with them who knew Mindanao, led them to the hospital. The group again slept in their clothes on cots or the wooden floor. Colonel Wood realized that the jungle canopy might be too thick for Allied pilots to spot them. He moved his charges to the nearby Valencia airstrip. It was now May 2nd, three days after they had left Corregidor.

Each morning, as they used pineapple juice to brush their teeth, a few joked that they would never eat or drink the fruit
again. During the cool mountain evenings, they discussed which sleeping positions would provide them with the most warmth before huddling under shared blankets.

The group spent their days at the airstrip hiding in gullies to avoid detection from enemy pilots. The airfield, however, was a natural target. On May 4th, enemy airman bombed the area. On May 5th, the Americans returned to the small military hospital. On May 6th, the Japanese attacked the hospital and surrounding area.

Colonel Wood realized that they would have to find another shelter. On May 7, 1942, they fled to the nearby Fortech Ranch, home of a former government official. Unlike the pineapple plantation manager, the Fortechs made everyone feel welcome. They offered them food and rearranged their furniture to make a sleeping area.

Over the next four days, Colonel Wood and another officer left the ranch to search for news or look for a rescue plane or boat. At 12:15 a. m. on May 11th, the men returned to the ranch. Sally Blaine, still awake, whispered to them, "Is there a plane coming for us?" She remembered them saying, "No, no yet." Four hours later, the sound of an airplane motor woke her. She roused the two men and the three of them went outside.

Before Sally could say a word, she recalled they turned to her and said, "We’ll tell you something if you promise not to tell anyone yet and don’t cry." She agreed. They told her the plane she heard was the last U. S. P-40 aircraft on Mindanao. A
Filipino pilot was flying to his Leyte Island home 250 miles away. Colonel Wood said there was no possible way to get a plane or boat to Mindanao for them. Then, she heard Wood finally say, "We are to be captured today. Corregidor fell May 6th and General Sharp is surrendering Mindanao today".

Sally Blaine kept her word. She quietly went back to the sleeping area. At 10 a.m. Colonel Wood called everyone together and told them the news. Sally saw tears in some of her friends' eyes, but no one sobbed. The Colonel said he would take the nurses back to the military hospital from the Fortech ranch, but before they left, he wanted them to destroy the letters and mementos they had carried from Corregidor. He offered to give money to anyone who had none.

Sally Blaine had several pounds of mail a priest had handed her as she left Corregidor. A silk handkerchief with scenes of Paris held the letters together. She walked over the fireplace in the living room and untied the beautiful cloth. The women stood around opening up letters, tearing them into pieces, and tossing them into the flames. Sally looked at the photographs of the smiling officers and soldiers, and happy family portraits before she destroyed them. The women said very little, in part, because they had no precedent to use as a guideline for what was going to happen to them. They had faced unknown situations before, but they had large numbers of troops, staff officers, and senior nurses to turn to for help. Now there were only a handful of Americans about to surrender to an enemy force.
Sally Blaine finished burning her mail. She stuffed the money that people had given her and the silk handkerchief into her pockets. About 11 a.m., the Colonel and the women boarded the bus for one final trip.

**Surrender**

Japanese soldiers ordered the ten nurses and three civilian women to line up outside the hospital. Colonel Wood used his fluency in Japanese to inform their captors about the nurses' military status. He answered questions and translated for both sides. Wood told the women that they had been ordered to remain at the hospital and to work with the staff. Then, he said goodbye; he had to report to the assembly spot designated for male Allied prisoners. The nurses did not see him again, but learned later that the Colonel survived the war.

The next three months were uneventful. Enemy soldiers stood guard over the hospital, but they usually left their prisoners alone. Only the sounds of their boots and swords echoing off the hospital walls reminded the women of their prisoner status. The ten nurses worked and shared quarters with the Filipino nurses. On August 21, 1942 nine months after the war began and a little more than 3 months after they were stranded on Mindinao, Japanese officers announced they were moving the American nurses and three civilian women to Cagayan, a town sixty miles away to join a group of American missionaries for a boat trip to an internment camp in Davao City on the southern coast.

The five day sea voyage on a filthy freighter had its unpleasant moments. A Japanese soldier kissed Sally Blaine and
several other Army nurses while they slept on the ship’s deck. After three days at sea, soldiers shifted all the captives into the ship’s hold and closed the hatch. There was no ventilation below deck; rats and cockroaches shared the tight space with the American prisoners-of-war.

On September 5, 1942 almost five months after they surrendered, the Army nurses learned they were among twenty-five women the Japanese had chosen to leave Davao for Manila. A rumor spread that they were going to be repatriated in a prisoner exchange. However, when they saw soldiers with guns standing on the deck, they realized they were boarding a prison ship.

The sea voyage from Davao over the Sulu and the South China Seas to Luzon Island and Manila was dangerous. American submarines were patrolling the waters looking for targets. Nine of the ten nurses decided to put on life preservers in case they had to abandon ship. Sally Blaine refused to wear one. She was suffering the excruciating aches and high temperatures of dengue fever. Later, she explained her decision.

"I was so sick, I knew if the ship was bombed or torpedoed or we struck a mine and I was out in the ocean, I couldn’t hold my head up. Who wants to bob up and down in the ocean for a day and a half and then die. I didn’t really want to die, but at the same time, if I was going to die I was going to do it fast. I was very rational when I made this decision".

Another Army nurse, Evelyn Whitlow, took care of Sally who lay on a blanket on deck. After Sally became delirious, Whitlow was
able to get her friend an ice cap and a pill from a concerned enlisted Japanese soldier. Slowly, Sally regained consciousness and drank a clear broth that Whitlow got from the same enlisted man. "It was good for us to see a Japanese soldier with a heart," said Sally. The nurses on board ship felt a glimmer of hope that they might survive in the custody of such captors.

On September 9, 1942, the freighter pulled into Manila's docks. Ironically, the ten army nurses' journey that was supposed to end in Australia came to a conclusion a few miles from Corregidor, in Santo Tomas Internment Camp, the same prison that held the Army nurses who surrendered on Corregidor. For the next three years, the nurses, along with their colleagues who had surrendered on Corregidor and in another Army camp, remained prisoners.

On February 24, 1945, Sally Blaine, the nine nurses who shared her Mindanao ordeal, and the rest of the fifty-six Army nurse-prisoners finally saw the scene that they had dreamed about for so long, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

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