

MONKEYS, BATS, JUNGLES AND HUMIDITY

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In the Spring of 1975, shortly after the monsoon season ended in the Philippines, the USS Sacramento and I entered the coastal waters off the Subik Bay Philippine Naval Base. We had come down from Hong Kong through the warm, tropical oceans enjoying fresh, dry, salty breezes for the past three weeks. However, approximately five miles out from the coast line of the Philippines, the hot, humid, pungent air of the Philippine jungles enveloped all the sailors above deck. A blanket of humidity and the smell of steaming vegetation clung to us. We knew we were soon going ashore.

We bypassed the main Subik Bay harbor and docked at what was called "the banger" ammunition storage area. The dock was longer than our 900-plus foot long ship. Attached to the dock were over 100 acres of asphalt and a lighted storage area. It looked like an over-sized stadium parking lot covered with pallets of tarped and strapped-down munitions with a huge security fence; a detachment of armed Marines stood guard.

As I was looking out over the area, OS2 A. W. told me "You are in for an education, Dawson." He explained to me that, rather than get us hooked up with the comings and goings on the quarter deck, he had volunteered us for more interesting duty. We would run one of the four transportation buses, which hauled off-duty sailors from the dock to the main Subik Bay Base. From there, they could go to the base PX or EM Club, use other base amenities, or cross the bridge to blow off steam in Olongapo City. The bus trip was about one hour each way through the jungle.

As A. W. and I went down the dock to grab our assigned bus to begin our transportation duties, I noticed how all the tarped pallets and tarmac area was covered in a white dried substance. I asked A.W. what had been sprayed on the pallets and the entire tarmac area. A. W. said that nothing had been sprayed there. "You are looking at bat shit," he said. I, of course, called bullshit on that. He said, "you'll see."

We decided that A. W. would drive the bus, and I would ride shotgun. The bus was unique. It was a cross between a school bus and a prisoner transportation van. Wire screens covered the outside of the side and back windows. Our bus, filled with eager sailors, quickly found its way along the winding jungle road. I soon realized that the screens on the windows protected the windows from the foliage that grew out from both sides of the road, extending into the roadway. A.W. explained that, even though buses go up this road all the time, and even though civilian Philippino workers cut back the dense foliage frequently, the growth rate of the jungle overwhelmed the efforts of the workers and the cutting force of the screens on the buses.

Once we reached the base, departing sailors regaled us with hearty, sarcastic goodbyes and wished us luck with our duties during our tour while they enjoyed their liberty. It really was not bad duty, though. We were scheduled to turn around, go back to the dock, and repeat the trip. The worst part was that, at the end of the night when the midnight curfew hit, we would bring back the last load of inebriated sailors, and we would have to wash out the bus. A.W. had developed an ingenious and efficient method for cleaning out trash, bottles, clothing, vomit and anything else left behind. He would back up the bus up on a slope, aiming down, with the passenger door at the lowest point. We would open the passenger door, bring a water hose into the bus and run the water "from the overhead to the deck" and everything in between, letting the cascading water mixed with "sailor-on-liberty" debris flow downhill out the door into a nearby drainage ditch. (OS 2 A.W.'s method allowed us to clean the bus in approximately fifteen minutes, rather than the two or so hours it took the drivers of the other buses. Pure genius!)

Rounding a turn on our second trip from the ammo depot to the base, we came upon a small troop of monkeys. A.W. did his best to avoid hitting the monkeys, but we unfortunately clipped a large monkey in the rear of the troop. We looked back; it did not look good. Surprisingly, however, the downed monkey was not at the turn on our return trip. But, as we slowed to round the same turn, an angry troop of monkeys barraged our bus with sticks, stones, and other jungle debris. During our subsequent trips around that turn, the monkeys laid in wait for us. We were repeatedly assaulted. On two trips, we followed behind two other buses. The monkeys harbored no grudge with those two buses and let them pass. However, recognizing us as the predatory bus, the monkeys assaulted only us on each of those two trips. Keep this story in mind the next time you watch a "Planet of the Apes" movie. Those monkeys are pretty bright!

The "banger" ammunition depot lights came on just before dusk. To a casual observer, the lighting initially seemed excessive. Picture the best lit parking lot you have ever experienced; now, double the number of light poles and lights. That's how bright the area was. Clearly, the Marine detachment wanted nothing to come up missing during the night. By 10:00 p.m., however, the insect swarm from the jungle darkened the lights over the depot area to the point that it appeared someone hit a dimmer switch. When the lights first came on, one could sit on a pallet and easily read a book with extremely small print. After the insect swarm invaded, a large print book would have been a challenge. As we were cleaning out the bus around midnight, it got even darker despite the fact that the lights were still on. The lights seemed to be covered in sheets of black clouds that came and went, periodically allowing a dim glow to filter down over the pallets.

Around 5:30 a.m., A.W. woke me and told me to look at the show now out on the tarmac. I went above deck and could make out what looked like 3-5 feet wide, black or brown sheets covering the tarmac and pallets. As the sun began to rise, I could see that what had looked like dark sheets were actually thousands of huge, fat-bellied jungle bats who had eaten their fill of insects during the night. As they fed at night, they would become so full that you could hear them "plop" as they landed on the pallets and the tarmac. They were so full that they could barely take flight in the morning. And before they took flight, they left a pile of white bat shit behind. It is my guess that the jungle has neither run out of insects or bats in the 35 years since I was stationed in the Philippines. As in the Field of Dreams, if you turn on the lights, they will come.

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