



TURMOIL ON TAWI-TAWI

The United States has a long history of dealing with the devil, especially if it suits its needs and if in return Satan will, for a price, play havoc with the enemies of the U.S.

I observed first hand some odd occurrences in and around the area of the Sulu Archipelago in the summer of 1945. Contact was made with members of the Philippine liberation groups to offer arms and advise them of our needs to dislodge the Japanese from the many islands in the Southern Philippines. Several cells of the Liberation groups were afraid that giving weapons to certain entities would give an unbalance of power to historically bitter rivals, based along religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

As an example, take a moderate size island where the people living along its shores rely on commerce, fishing, a stable lifestyle and communication with the outside world. Their counter-parts are the Highlanders, or mountain people.

For centuries Highlanders have come out of the hills to raid the Lowlanders for goods to promote their existence. They would kidnap young girls to propagate their realm, or village leaders to extract ransom. Also, the Highlanders were of a different faith than many found elsewhere in the region and had ties with the Moros, a bitter foe of the U.S. not so long ago.

If you could picture in your mind an island with six or seven villages dotted along its coast representing the Lowlanders, and a high mass in the center (the Highlanders) that comprises 70 to 80 percent of that island, you would have an example of what would apply to many of the islands in the Sulu Sea.

The Lowlanders could never assemble enough people in one place to defend their coastal settlements from the Highlanders. The Japanese, on the other hand, did set up camp, did intimidate the coastal people and with heavily armed patrols foraged into the interior preventing the Highlanders from organizing any form of mass resistance.

Enter the U.S. strategy; we would invade the larger islands and establish safe perimeters. Then we would make contact with the more aggressive local people on the smaller islands, arm them to create havoc with the Japanese and extract their promises to return the weapons after the enemy had been defeated....So much for strategy.

Basilan, Jolo, Tawi-Tawi...Stepping stones on the march south towards Borneo, one of the world's richest deposits of oil, lead, gold, silver, and coal. The Japanese still occupied many of these islands in May 1945. Even though the U.S. was knocking on the doors of Japan proper, this southern area had been bypassed and the territory still needed to be cleansed of the Japanese forces.

This story is not about combat or battles, but about the little hitches that develop when dealing with human beings.

Jolo was essentially secured and many nearby islands were on the list to be pacified, but first see if we can put strategy to work.

Our 112 foot wooden Australian-built Fairmile "B" designated by the Army Transportation Service as an FSA (fast supply auxiliary) was loaded with small arms and ammunition to be delivered to supposedly friendly people on a large island to the south. Our contacts assured us their people would be waiting; and to insure we were going into a safe area they were to create a ruckus some 20 miles away at the opposite side of the island to keep the Japanese occupied.

We approached the prearranged spot on the coast and several outriggers came out to meet us. With all the recognition's over, we off-loaded our cargo,

which included a couple of Filipino military advisers, and departed back to Jolo.

While in Jolo I started to have bouts of fever and shakes as if my Malaria might be acting up again. The Skipper put me ashore in the small Army medical unit, so they could load me up with Quinine and Atabrine before the symptoms became full blown episode.

I was flown to Zamboanga in a "Goose" seaplane for two weeks of observation, then I was allowed to fly back Jolo to wait for my ship to return from a voyage to other islands in the area.

Remember the arms delivery? Well, somehow the wrong group got hold of the arms....The Highlanders. The U.S. was now contacting the leaders of the Lowlanders and supplying them with arms for their own protection. In the meantime, units of the 41st Infantry Division had landed and secured several islands in the immediate area. So peace was near at hand....Or so we thought.

An island named Tawi-Tawi became a problem for everybody: the Highlanders, the Lowlanders, the Filipino government, and the U.S. Army. Looking back, we should have let the Japanese keep the island. At least they kept an iron-fist control between all factions. Anything the Americans did only seemed to offend all parties concerned.

Our ship came into a small harbor on Tawi-Tawi to deliver supplies to the Army garrison and we tied up to some small pilings driven into the bay about 150 feet out, with a rickety path of planks to the shore. The Army had a DUKW (alligator), a 2-1/2 ton amphibian truck, to ferry our cargo ashore and the off loading began. A short time later, volleys of shots could be heard off in the distance. The GI's from the duck said that it was just the islanders fighting each other (our "strategy" had armed both factions) and the U.S. Army was ordered not to get involved any deeper. The Filipino Military was to arrive in force to control the problem.

I rode the DUKW ashore to have a medic take a blood sample and renew my prescriptions. I strolled to the perimeter line to view the town but a sentry stopped me saying that only armed personnel were allowed beyond that point. I teased him saying that we were winning the war and this was supposed to be a secured island.

He pointed out a group of five or six Filipinos with Thompson sub-machine guns strutting up the dirt road towards where the earlier sounds of shooting came from. "It's been like this ever since we secured the island. We could probably go in and wipe them all out but you'd take out the good guys along with the baddies, and maybe a bunch of us would get hurt doing it."

I returned to the ship by way of the rickety path of planks, expecting to fall in the drink at every step, clambered aboard ship and went below. The crew had "liberated" some beer and was having a fantail party. The medic had given me some pills and I began feel a little groggy so I decided to forgo the party in favor of a little shut-eye. I was lying in my bunk almost asleep when I felt the sheets being pulled very slowly off my body. I looked around and could see no one.....but the sheets were going out the porthole. I saw a hand, then an arm come in through the porthole just forward of mine. I climbed to the other bunk and slammed the porthole and dead light as hard as I could, captivating the whole arm. You have never heard so much screaming in your life. It brought the crew down into the fo'c'sle. I wouldn't let go, so some of the crew went topside to capture the thieves. A shot rang out on deck. One of the remaining crewmen came over to where I had my sheet stealer captured, grabbed hold of the man's arm and pulled it backwards until it broke, then let go. The screaming intensified.

In the meantime spotlights were illuminating the whole area and the DUKW came along side. I went on deck just in time to see several natives in an outrigger trying to paddle away. One of the culprits started firing his weapon again, but the GI's in the DUKW unloaded their .30 caliber swivel mount machine gun, along with several automatic weapons that soon made short work of the group of pirates. These pirates, given an hour with the ship left unguarded, would have stripped her of anything of value and left an empty hull bobbing in the water.

Of course all the noise stirred up the town and the villagers thought that the Moros were coming in force. So, the first thing they did was charge the sentry to try to get into the security of the Army perimeter for protection. The DUKW ran right up on the beach and started firing above their heads until they stopped and dropped to the ground....then every thing was quiet. The DUKW returned to the outrigger, towed it ashore, and the excitement was over.

Some time later at a service club in Zamboanga I mentioned the troubles on Tawi-Tawi over a few beers. Did it ever light a fuse! Some of the officers were still involved with the situation and were quite concerned as to the reasoning of placing weapons in the hands of bitter enemies. The delivery of weapons to the Highlanders had been deliberate and not a mistake as we believed earlier. My drinking partners said that it was judged by the top brass that the Highlanders possessed the knowledge of the island and Jap encampments. Also, they were ruthless enough, with the will to kill, as opposed to the pacifist nature of the Christian Lowlanders.

The Highlanders had convinced the brass that the coastal people were cooperating with the enemy for protection from the hill people. Once the arms were in the hands of the Highlanders and the Japanese were wiped out it was "business as usual".....attack the Lowland Coastal people. The idea of returning the arms was a joke. Thus, the U.S. had to arm the Coastal people so they could protect themselves.

Over the years I occasionally hear little blurbs of news from the Sulu Archipelago area, it's usually concerning a kidnapping or pirates boarding heavily laden tankers and demanding ransom. Recently the neighboring countries were considering a tariff surcharge to pay for wiping out the pirates in the South Sulu Seas, so things really haven't changed much in the past 50-60 years. But why should it? This has been going on for century's.