



Mactan
By
Edward J. McNeill

www.edwardjmcneill.com

CHAPTER 1

Corregidor “The Rock”, The Philippines
26 December 1941

Edward Forbisher heard the drone of aircraft overhead and ran like hell for the tunnel. He waited just inside, listening. No explosions this time. Could be too dark yet for them to hit anything. Possibly they’d passed over their favorite bomb-run objective looking for more accessible targets on Luzon. They’d be back, if not later this morning, sometime that day.

2 MACTAN

He had made the rank of corporal shortly before arriving only two days earlier. He'd spent both days since struggling to decide between two equally nasty alternatives. Should he stay put at this job in Command Headquarters--smack in the middle of Manila Bay--or request a transfer back to his old unit now actually fighting in Bataan?

He could no longer stomach scurrying like a rat into the tunnel every time the Japanese pilots used The Rock for target practice. But combat? He didn't know about that. After wrestling with those choices from the time of his first air raid experience, he'd decided to request a transfer to his former company.

With General Wainwright, at least he wouldn't be wearing a bull's-eye for Japanese pilots. And, maybe he'd even have a chance to pick up a few medals before reinforcements arrived from the States. When he went home he wanted to say he'd helped kick the Japs' asses back to Tokyo--a boast he wouldn't have, stuck at Command Headquarters.

General Douglas MacArthur didn't need an errand-boy corporal butt-to-butt with him to fight the pipsqueak Japs. If he did, maybe the U.S. should be thinking about running up the white flag. Unthinkable.

"Too much thinking." Forbisher crashed his big fist into his palm. "If I'm going to do it, I better do it before the Japs surrender."

At 0500 hours, Forbisher walked deeper into the Malinta Tunnel, heading toward the communications lateral where General MacArthur shared a desk with Major General Richard Sutherland, his chief of staff.

"Eddie, the general's looking for you--on the double," an aide called out to Forbisher.

3 MACTAN

The sergeant didn't mention MacArthur. He didn't have to. If he had meant any other general, he would have attached a name to the title. MacArthur was *the* general.

Forbisher jogged to the lateral.

MacArthur wore a spotless uniform that appeared freshly pressed. General Sutherland stood studying a map. His uniform looked like he'd slept in it.

Forbisher saluted.

MacArthur gripped Forbisher's shoulder. "Son, I want you to hitch a ride on one of Buckaroo's Q-boats and go into Manila for me."

"Manila, General?" Forbisher recoiled a bit, for the Japanese would soon occupy the city.

"It's perfectly safe. Sid Huff ran in yesterday to pick up some things for me."

"Yes, sir. What would the General like me to do?" Forbisher tried not to let his voice betray anxiety.

"I want you to find a ship to take our wounded to Australia," MacArthur said. "Can't let the Japs get them."

"A ship, General?"

The Manila pier area still belched black smoke from the previous day's late afternoon air raid. Forbisher didn't bother to mention the improbability of finding an intact ship nor the danger of the trip because, without doubt, the general recognized it and had disregarded it.

"A big ship," MacArthur continued. "There are a lot of wounded. When you find it, I want you to contact the Red Cross fellow." The general paused a moment, snapping his fingers at Sutherland. "What's the Red Cross fellow's name, Dick?"

4 MACTAN

Sutherland pushed aside the map he'd been studying. "The man I've spoken with on the phone is named Williams--Irving Williams, General. He's the Red Cross field director."

"Got that, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Williams should be at the Manila Army Hospital. After you see him, contact Colonel Carroll. He's the doctor in charge of the hospital. Tell them you've found a ship, and to get ready. They'll know what to do. Then call me from Percy's office."

"Percy, General? Who's Percy, sir?"

"Colonel Carroll, the doctor, his first name's Percy." Sutherland answered.

General MacArthur turned to his Filipino orderly, a staff sergeant. "Domingo, got any loose staff sergeant chevrons?"

"No, General."

"Get one of your shirts."

"Yes, Sir." The sergeant left immediately.

"Corporal, I'm promoting you to staff sergeant to give you a little more clout. General Sutherland will give you a letter of authorization to act in my name.

Domingo returned a few minutes later, breathing heavily

Now, take Domingo's shirt to the hospital lateral, have one of the aides cut the stripes off and sew them onto yours. Then come back here."

In twenty minutes the new sergeant arrived back at lateral three, and handed the stripeless shirt to Domingo. "Thanks, I'll pay you back when I get my own stripes." He then stood at attention waiting for the general to finish a phone conversation.

5 MACTAN

MacArthur slammed down the receiver. He turned and said, "Sergeant, I'm sending you on this mission because I have faith in you. You're an intelligent man. Use your brain. Get this job done. Our wounded depend on you for survival. What the Japanese did to the Chinese wounded must not happen here. That's why I'm getting the Red Cross involved. They'll respect the Red Cross...maybe. Don't fail me. More importantly, don't fail those men."

The general rose and left the lateral. Domingo followed.

Forbisher snapped a salute and held it until the general disappeared. All the while, though, he bit his lip and repeated over and over in his mind, "Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. I'm expendable."

He immediately gave up his idea of asking for a transfer. Staying with the general, if he survived this mission, would provide all the action he'd need. Besides, who better than General MacArthur to recommend him for medals?

"Sit down, Eddie," General Sutherland said. "I've got a lot to tell you and not much time."

"Yes, sir." Forbisher tried to appear calm but remained standing. The only vacant chair in the room was the general's. The chief of staff impatiently motioned to General MacArthur's chair. "Sit."

He did so, reluctantly.

"Eddie, the general thinks you're the best man for the job. I do too. He's not sending an officer because, if you hadn't noticed, we're all a little busy."

Forbisher forced a chuckle.

"It's obvious to us, you're a bright young man. You're also, because you look like

6 MACTAN

a football fullback, an imposing man." His face grew somber as he handed over an envelope. "With this letter no one will refuse you anything, if it's available. You have the authority you need to get that ship. In effect, you are the general. Don't take shit from anyone. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." Forbisher hesitated momentarily, and then asked, "Sir, what if whoever I ask for the ship, refuses?"

"Shoot them. We're under martial law. They can't refuse. And check out a .45 from the armory."

"Yes, sir."

"The job will take more than a day, so pack a few things. Then go see Lieutenant Bulkeley at North Dock. He's waiting there with a PT-boat—the general calls them Q-boats." Sutherland paused and shrugged. "It'll run you over to the Manila piers. If you don't find anything by the thirtieth, it'll be too late. In that case, get on the horn and I'll send the boat for you. The general figures the Japs will reach Manila by the first, maybe sooner. Happy New Year, Eddie."

"Happy New Year, sir."

"Do your damnedest, Sergeant."

"I will, General." Forbisher clutched the envelope in his left hand while saluting with the other. He left-faced and stepped off in the direction of the main tunnel.

A dozen thoughts about what could go wrong crowded his mind as he gathered toilet gear, pistol, and his wits. He shoved his personal notebook about the war into his belt before leaving for North Dock.

A Navy petty officer, armed with a rifle, stood on the path to the dock. "Come on,

7 MACTAN

Sarge, we ain't got all day." He flashed a good-natured grin.

For a brief moment, Forbisher didn't realize the sailor meant him. Then remembering his promotion, he tried to act like other sergeants he'd observed. Slowly scanning the dock and seeing no boat, he said, "Whadda'ya mean? I don't see yer tub nowhere."

Forbisher set his gear on the dock. "Whereja hide it? Whassa matter, you swabbies scared of a few scrawny Japs?"

The sailor didn't answer, but turned and gestured toward a cove. A diesel engine revved and, a minute later, a sleek PT-boat eased up to the dock. "Hop aboard, Sarge," the sailor said, straining to hold a line cast from the PT.

As Forbisher bent to pick up his gear, his journal slid upward from his belt and dangled at a precarious angle. With his hands full and the sailor looking like he was losing his grip, he didn't have time to shove it back. When he leaped from dock to deck the journal fell into the water. It hit the water and sunk. "Aw, nuts."

After Forbisher landed on the deck, the sailor shouted, "Sarge, if it gets too rough for you, be sure you do your heaving over the side. We're sick of cleaning up after Army guys with delicate stomachs." Laughing, he jumped catlike onto the boat.

"Don't mind Boats, Sarge," said the sailor who had cast the line. "He's like that with all the Army guys. He don't mean nothing by it. Thinks he's funny is all."

The sailor pointed toward the center of the boat. "Lieutenant wants to see you in the cockpit."

"Where?"

"That's where we drive the boat, Sarge. It's called a cockpit on PT's."

8 MACTAN

The boat rocked gently on undulating swells. Forbisher worked his way unsteadily from the bow along the narrow strip of deck to the cockpit. The craft's movement combined with diesel exhaust fumes gave him a queasy feeling.

He couldn't heave in front of this audience. And, when he reached the cockpit hatch and stepped inside, his nausea got worse.

The big, bearded lieutenant, dressed in soiled khaki, took his arm and guided him to a steel chair. "Your face is white as chalk. You'll be all right once we're underway, Sergeant. It's when the face turns green, we worry." He issued a series of orders to the man at the wheel, ending with, "Head for the guard shack, if it's still there."

"Aye, aye, sir," The helmsman swung the PT from the dock. Once he had cleared the small Corregidor port facility and the obstructions put there to deter a Japanese landing, he opened to full throttle. The craft sped in a zigzag course, at flank speed, toward the still-smoldering Manila port area.

The lieutenant stood forward gazing at the distant piers.

"I feel a lot better, sir." Forbisher said. "I didn't feel anything when we came to The Rock on that ferry. But on this, I really felt--"

"Like crap," the lieutenant said. "Don't feel bad, Sergeant, you don't have sea legs yet. Slight movement on a small boat affects the gut worse than a raging storm on a ship. It's the mind and sense of balance. Once in awhile my stomach does flips when we're tied up. If the men would admit it, so do theirs." The lieutenant laughed when he heard the man at the wheel chuckling.

Both Navy men fell silent, eyes fixed forward.

After a few minutes, an uneasy Forbisher said, "These PT boats sure are fast."

9 MACTAN

He'd listened for airplanes, and their silence made him nervous.

"Gotta be fast," Bulkeley said. "Or the Japs have their way with us."

"We been playing tag with the Japs, Sarge," the helmsman added.

"Tag?" Forbisher said.

"Yeah, every day. We been frustratin' the hell outta the Jap pilots. Right, Lieutenant? They can't hit us," he said laughing.

The sailor's words smashed fist-like into Forbisher's gut. "What about machine guns?"

"Can't hurt us--"

"Crissake, Tim, shut up and watch the road. While you're gabbing, one of those Japs will get lucky," Bulkeley said.

"Aye, aye, Skipper."

Bulkeley turned to Forbisher. "Don't worry, sergeant. They've tried strafing before, and couldn't hit us. They gotta worry about our guns. Got great gun crews, fore and aft, and a top-notch driver. You're safer on PT-41 than in Malinta Tunnel."

"That's very reassuring, sir, but what happens when I get to--"

"The Navy's responsibility ends, once we drop you off. But we'll get you back across this duck pond when you're done."

Forbisher fell silent.

Midway, an excited voice came over the intercom: "Bandit, one o'clock."

"How many, Lenny?" Bulkeley jumped up and peered skyward through the front windshield.

"One, sir. He's circling over the port."

"Probably a spotter looking for targets. He won't engage. But if he does, blast away. Scare him off. If he hangs around near the dock, do some serious shooting,"

Bulkeley took a seat next to Forbisher.

"Okay, Sergeant, we'll be docking in a few minutes. Well, not exactly docking. We can't stay in one place long. My Shore Patrol guys will drop a rope ladder from the pier. You grab on and we take off. Better tie your bag to your cartridge belt, unless you can climb with one hand."

He looked at Forbisher, who nodded, then glanced at the pier area through the windshield.

"Word of advice, when you get there, take charge. Give orders like you mean business. Those guys in the shack are pretty salty. They gotta be kept in line. They're good, though. Two Navy, two Army, and two Filipino Scouts. They're the law up there till the Japs show up." Bulkeley paused. "Just hope I can get 'em to The Rock before that." He gave a longer pause.

"I've spoken to General Sutherland and I've instructed my guys to cooperate. Whatever you want. There are two jeeps. You can use one to get around. Utilize Enrique, one of the scouts, to drive. He's from Manila and drove a taxi there. And you'd better take one of my guys with you when you're operating on the piers. The port is a big place. Murphy is the senior Shore Patrol man there and knows the area as well as anyone. He's a petty officer third class--equal to a corporal--so you outrank him. But he's been busted from first class, coupla times. He'll try to take over if you let him. Don't let him. Any questions?"

"No, sir," Forbisher said with what he hoped sounded like confidence. He found it

11 MACTAN

difficult to concentrate on the lieutenant's instructions with one eye on the Japanese plane circling overhead.

The intercom squawked. "Bandit headed out to sea, Skipper. Don't wanna get his ass nailed."

"Good, Lenny. He's heading to his carrier to report on the job the Mitsubishis did last time. Although I don't see how the Jap can see anything with all that smoke."

He picked up the horn and barked, "Make ready to land the passenger."

Acrid smoke from the smoldering port stung Forbisher's eyes and nostrils as they approached. Forbisher squinted at the flurry of activity on the bow.

The craft slowed, swung wide, and nosed in parallel to a pier. Again Forbisher felt that queasy sensation. This time, he couldn't blame the swaying boat.

"Get your ass up that ladder as fast as you can, Sergeant," Bulkeley said. The boat eased up to the heavy wooden pilings on its starboard side. "Once you've got both feet on a rung, don't try to get back on the boat. We'll be gone."

"Got it," Forbisher said, about to step through the hatch.

Bulkeley caught Forbisher's arm and extended a hand, "Good luck, Sergeant."

Tim echoed his lieutenant's words.

Forbisher grasped the lieutenant's hand. "Thanks," he mumbled and then reluctantly released the temporary tether to sanctuary. He stepped on deck.

Boats and another sailor motioned him toward the bow. They held the bottom rung of a rope ladder. Forbisher glanced up, estimating a climb of between twenty and thirty feet to the top.

"Sarge, don't look up or down when ya get on the ladder, just climb. You'll know

12 MACTAN

when ya reach the top," Boats said.

Forbisher figured he'd better heed that advice. He stretched to grab the highest rung he could reach and planted both feet on the rung the sailors held fast to the seesawing deck.

"Okay, Sarge, it's hand-over-hand ta the top."

He felt the bow suddenly jerk away, leaving him dangling in mid-air.

Forbisher climbed for what seemed like hours. His thoughts focused on the Jap airplane and what he would do if it returned with guns blazing. Suddenly, a powerful grip encircled his highest wrist and pulled. Someone grabbed the other wrist. Two men hoisted Forbisher to his knees on the dock.

"Gotcha, Sarge," said a gravelly voice. The two men, one in a white uniform, the other in khaki, released his arms.

"Thanks guys," Forbisher said, rising and brushing off his knees.

Remembering Bulkeley's counsel to assert himself and take charge immediately, he said, "Let's get inside the shack. I want to tell you what I need you to do." Looking at the sailor, he asked, "Are you Murphy?"

"No, Murph's crapped out. He just came off duty."

The guard shack sat at the entrance to the piers. Two jeeps, one Army and one Navy, with machine guns affixed stood outside. Both vehicles had camouflage nets draped over them for some unknown reason. Forbisher shook his head. The Japanese pilots wouldn't be fooled into thinking foliage had suddenly sprouted on the dock

The shack, a small, corrugated-metal, free-standing building, contained one large room and a small bathroom with shower and toilet. A Filipino Scout, one of four

occupants and the only one awake, greeted them with a wave.

Forbisher gave a quick glance around. He saw three occupied cots near one wall, a table with holstered .45 caliber pistols in the center, four chairs and a desk holding a ship-to-shore radio. Several Springfield '03 rifles and ammo boxes lined another wall.

Forbisher knew he would be less than popular if he woke the sleeping men. But he also knew he had much to do and very little time. "What's your name, corporal?" he asked.

"Spilvak, Andy Spilvak, Sarge."

My name's Eddie Forbisher, Andy." Forbisher elected to use first names with his military police hosts. "And yours?" he asked the sailor and Filipino who helped him up the ladder.

"Bill Furtenski and Ruben Yabut, Sarge," the sailor said answering for both.

"That's Enrique and--"

Before Furtenski could say the names of the three in bed, Forbisher said, "Andy, I hate to do this. Wake them. We have to talk."

"Murph ain't gonna like it, Sarge," the corporal said. The other two men nodded their heads in agreement.

Forbisher didn't want a confrontation with the senior sailor but figured if one had to come, it had better be sooner than later. "I don't give a damn what he likes," he said in the nastiest tone he could muster, "I said, get him up. Get them all up, now."

Forbisher surprised himself with his intensity and how quickly the others obeyed his order. He watched the three men shake their counterparts awake. Hey, this command business isn't half bad, he thought.

"Crissakes you asshole. You better have a damn good reason for waking me," one of the men on the cots shouted.

"Murph, the sergeant wants to talk to us," Corporal Spilvak said apologetically.

"A friggin' sergeant. Would take an admiral or the whole Jap army to get my ass outta here. Tell the asshole to go hump himself," Murphy said, never raising his head from the pillow or opening his eyes.

Corporal Spilvak turned to Forbisher and shrugged.

Forbisher tried to imagine what Sergeant Ruplemeister from his old outfit would've done in this situation. Then, taking hold of the foot of Murphy's cot with two hands, Forbisher turned it on edge, spilling its occupant onto the floor.

Murphy, dressed only in under shorts, fully awake now, hurled obscenities. "When I get up, the son-of-a-bitch who done it better be long gone or I'll beat the shit outta 'im." He took a sitting position.

"On your feet, Murphy. I ain't got time for crap. Up," Forbisher shouted. The other two off-duty military police stood and eyed the scene with great interest.

Murphy put one hand on the floor. He sprung to his feet on muscular legs with fists at the ready. Although much shorter than Forbisher, he had a wide, muscular frame. His thirtyish face showed the scars of numerous brawls.

"What gives you the fuggin' right to toss me outta the sack?" he snarled, advancing menacingly.

"Hold it, bastard," Forbisher roared, trying to hide his apprehension, "Or I'll put one right between your eyes." He tapped his holster, letting his hand rest on it.

The angry sailor stopped short. The sergeant continued, "I'm authorized to arrest

anyone who impedes my mission. Order of the commanding general, General MacArthur. I won't hesitate. I represent the general and I got a letter to prove it. So when you look at me, all of you," he paused and glanced around the room, "You better be seeing four stars."

"Aw, Sarge, I was only jokin' with ya," Murphy said. "Seems I got up on the wrong side of the bed." He forced a laugh.

Wow, thought Forbisher, that's how to handle bullies--a little taste of their own stuff.

"Sit down. I'll make this fast," Forbisher said. "The general expects the Japs to take Manila shortly after New Year's." He watched the men exchange anxious glances.

"Don't worry, you guys, Lieutenant Bulkeley is gonna have you outta here and safe on The Rock before it happens. He told me on the way over."

"If he's so worried about us, why don't he do it now?" asked Furtenski, the other sailor.

"Yeah, Sarge, there's nothin' over here worth stealin' anymore," Corporal Spilvak said. "The Japs bombed everything the Navy ain't scuttled. What's the use of us bein' here?"

"I really don't know why, but I'm glad you're here. I need you guys to help me do something important."

"What, Sarge?" Spilvak asked.

"General MacArthur needs a ship to get the wounded outta the Army hospital and away from here. He's giving me a few days to find it and get it ready. If I don't find one, we gotta leave 'em to the Japs. The general says the Japs bayonet the wounded. That's

what they're doing in China. That's why there's no time for playin' around. Men's lives depend on us."

The men leaned forward, listening. Murphy nodded, looking grave. Spilvak furrowed his brow.

Forbisher showed them the letter, saying, "This gives me the authority to do what I have to do, and have you guys help me. Even officers will obey this."

"How come they sent you, Sarge? Why not an officer?" Furtenski asked.

"For a very simple reason, Bill. The general needs the officers to help plan how to handle the Japs.

"O.K. Murphy and Enrique, I'm giving you two hours to get your beauty rest, then you're coming with me." He watched Murphy hesitate a moment, shake his head and flop on his cot. Enrique and the soldier from their crew climbed back on their cots.

"Got any coffee?" Forbisher asked the men on duty.

After downing a quick cup, Forbisher had Corporal Spilvak and Ruben Yabut drive him around the port, picking their way through the wreckage and bomb craters. They drove for ninety minutes, covering just a small portion of the area. In that time, Forbisher did not see one ship that looked even remotely seaworthy. The sunken hulks tied alongside the piers still smoldered.

Neither Spilvak nor Ruben could recall seeing an intact ship during their rounds. "To tell the truth, Sarge, I ain't really looked. Too busy watching the sky and looking out for the crap flying around. Besides, the Navy towed all the merchant ships out into the bay and sank them to keep the Japs from using em," Spilvak said. Ruben shook his head, looking grave.

"So what are you telling me? There are no ships left?"

"I ain't saying that, Sarge. Maybe Murphy knows. If anybody knows it'd be him. He knows the docks. Me and Ruben are new here."

"We'll go ask Murphy. Ruben, shoot back to the shack," Forbisher said.

When they arrived, Murphy and Enrique were up and dressing.

"Good," Forbisher said, "let's get goin'. We've got a couple more hours of daylight. Maybe I'm kiddin' myself, but we gotta look."

"Whaddaya mean, Sarge?" Murphy said, following Forbisher out the door.

Enrique removed the camouflage net, and then cranked the engine of the battleship-gray Navy jeep. Forbisher leapt into the front seat. Murphy took the rear seat, behind the machine gun.

"I spent the last two hours with Andy and Ruben searching the port for a ship for those wounded. It's lookin' pretty bad," Forbisher said.

"Hell. Why didn't you say that's what you were gonna be doin'?" Murphy said. "I coulda saved you time."

"You mean, you know where there might be a ship, Murph?"

"I mean, I know where there is a ship."

"Let's go," Forbisher shouted. He decided not to ask Murphy why he hadn't said so before when he'd said he needed to find a ship for the wounded.

"Rick, shoot over to the auxiliary passenger pier," Murphy ordered. "It's a little ways, Sarge, so hang onto your ass. There's a crazy son-of-a-bitch behind the wheel."

Enrique wove expertly around litter and bomb craters. When he swung out of the dock area and sped down a street paralleling the port, Forbisher said, "We're outside the

port. Where you goin'?"

"I sent a Dutch freighter with a load of rubber from the Dutch East Indies over here. It's covered and outta the way. The Japs would have a helluva time spottin it. The captain gave me a few bucks to let him berth there," Murphy confessed. "He's gonna try to sneak out tonight. Wants to save his cargo. Hell with his cargo. We gotta get those wounded guys out before the Japs get here," Murphy said.

"Now you're talkin, Murph--"Forbisher felt the two wheels on the left side of the jeep momentarily leave the ground as Enrique made a right turn without reducing speed. They sped on a road behind a relatively unscathed fenced area. Forbisher thought, how lucky to find a ship so fast, when he spotted the dilapidated steamer they headed for.

"Jeez--us, Murph, you don't mean this hunk of crap," Forbisher said.

"Relax, Sarge, that's an inter-island ferry ready for the scrap heap. Been sittin here since the Japs started bombing. They ain't dumb. Don't wanna waste a round on a rust bucket that's gonna sink anyway," Murphy said, laughing.

Enrique drove past the old steamer and skidded onto a vast, covered dock. Underneath bobbed a freighter, a big beautiful freighter.

