

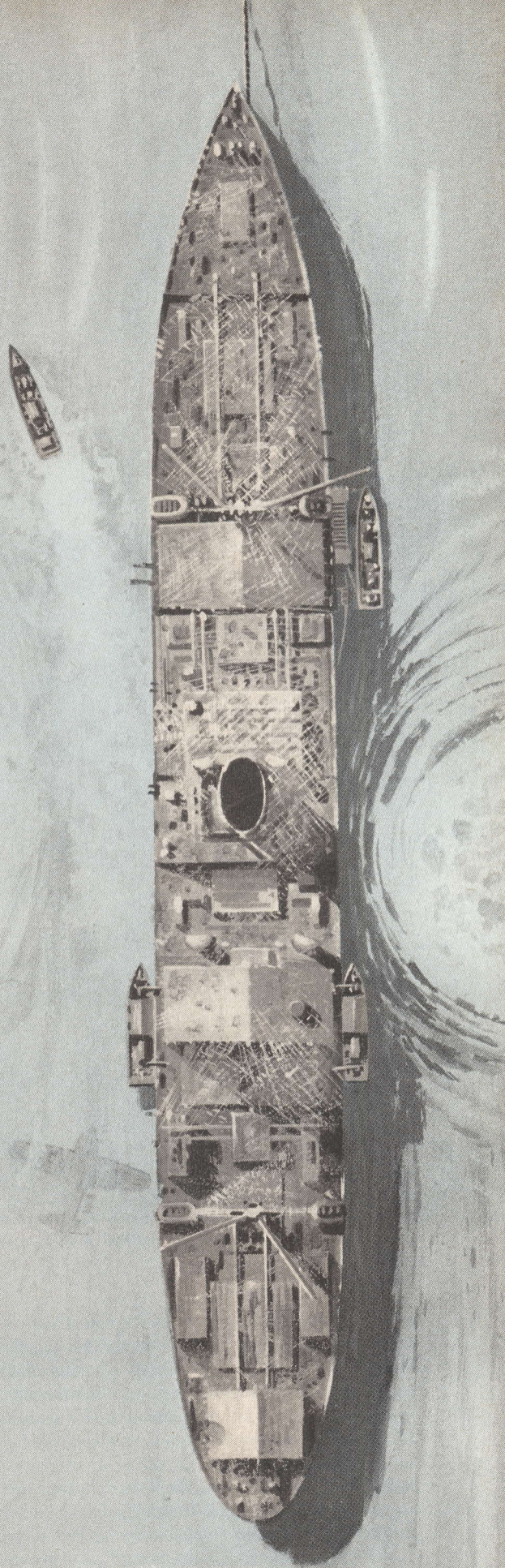
BATAAN'S FIGHTING LADY

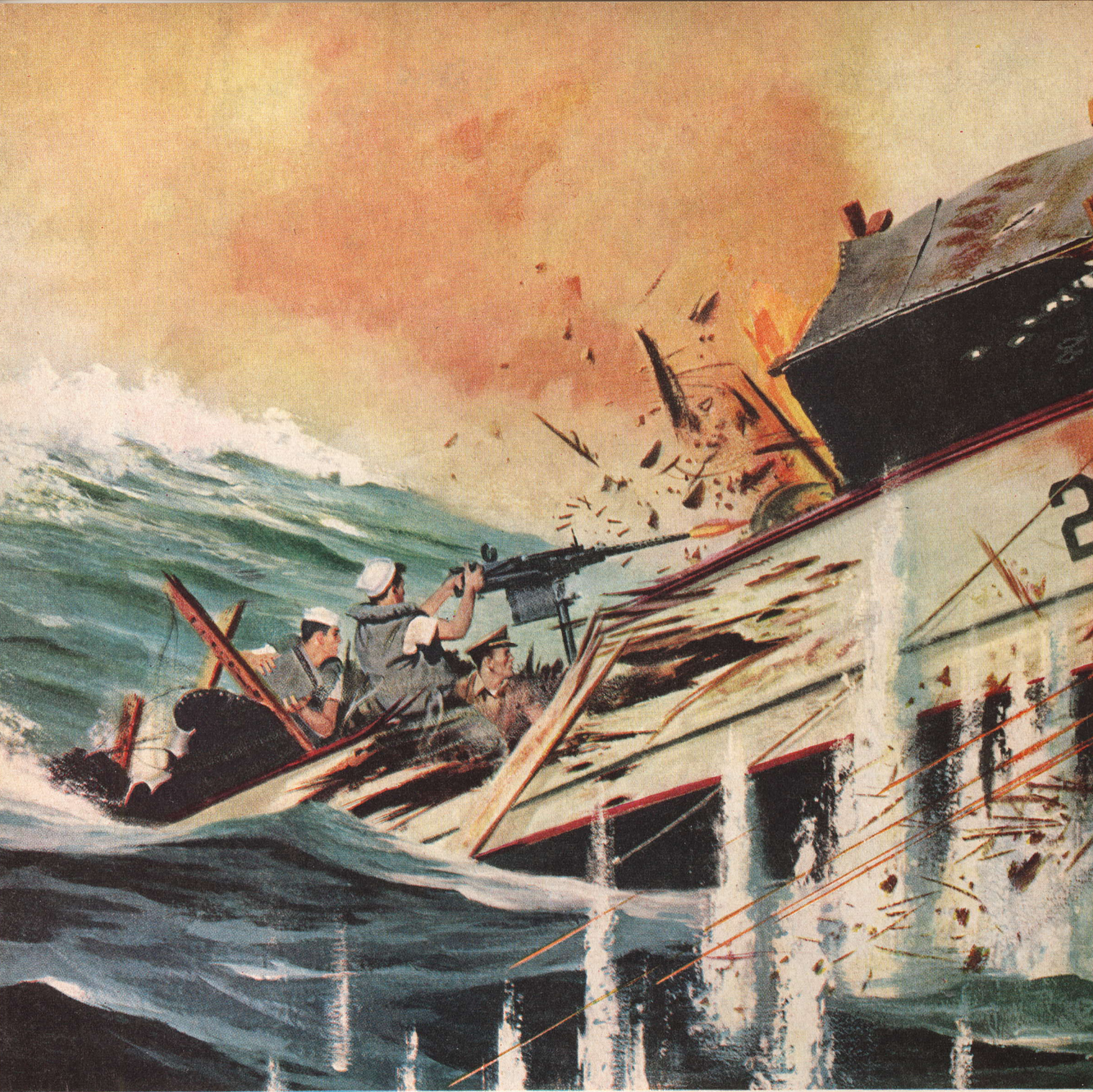
She was pockmarked from shrapnel and greasy with shell holes—an ugly, tired old sub tender. She was also all we had to hold off a skyful of Jap bombers...

IF YOU HOLD ME to the strict truth, I'd say the *USS Canopus* was never a great threat to our country's enemies in wartime. She was an old, fat submarine tender who waddled with woozy indifference through her tasks. We called her *Mama-San*, and ask anyone in the Asiatic Fleet submarine squads if things didn't look brighter when the old gal came tipping over the horizon toward them, listing under a full cargo of fuel and food.

What a sorry sight! God, but she had fallen far from her birthright! Once she'd been the pride of the Grace

**by REAR ADMIRAL EARL L. SACKETT
as told to PETER ORDWAY**





ILLUSTRATED BY ED VALIGURSKY

Line—*Santa Leonora* was her name then—but she fell on bad days when the Navy commissioned her. They loaded her with a wild tangle of machinery, installed shop, foundry and flak-gun sponsons and messed around until she looked like a tenement building minus clothes-lines. Still, she might have meandered along peacefully in Pacific waters with the slovenly dignity befitting a lady of her years, if the Japs hadn't sent their bombers out of the sun to attack Pearl Harbor. . . .

This is that story—the story of the day *Mama-San* dropped that meek-as-a-lamb stuff and became a raging lion. It was a brief moment of glory for the old lady,

but a blazing one. Ask anyone who was there. Ask me. I was there.

Most of her crew were a motley lot. They were specialists, qualified to load torpedoes, forge propellers and repair dental plates or hearing aids. Like the ship they manned, these men were prepared to service, not to fight. But during *Mama-San's* heroic hours, she became the only unit in United States military history to field both a private army and navy while her officers and men—all noncombatants—earned six Navy crosses, seven Silver Stars, forty Purple Hearts. *Mama-San's* great comeback as a fighting lady came at a grim time, when our forces



The Jakes came in low, out of the sun and attacked, ripping the bottom out of the lead boat, killing her crew under a hail of shells.

on Bataan were being pushed into the sea at the blackest hour of the Philippine campaign.

For the first three weeks after Pearl Harbor, we were completely ignored by both sides. *Canopus* was sent to an anchorage in Mariveles Bay, off the southern tip of the Bataan peninsula, in the hope that the big guns of Corregidor would protect her. Her orders were simple: Anchor in water shallow enough so that *when sunk*, your upper decks, cargo booms and superstructure will remain surfaced and can continue to operate. *When sunk*—not *if* sunk! The Navy called them the way they saw them in those days.

Tied up in the center of the Corregidor flyway, it was only a matter of time before the Jap bombers ran out of real targets and got around to us. But we weren't absolutely deserted. The brass handed us the latest technical manual on camouflage, a do-it-yourself kit that guaranteed invisibility. Our sailmakers, tailors and painters worked around the clock to weave ropes and canvas into a magic cloak; then work parties strung the nets to blend in with the jungle foliage on shore.

According to the manual, nobody could tell *Mama-San* from a jungle swamp, but on the chance that some minor detail could be improved, (Continued on page 68)

Commander Hap Goodall, our exec, asked friends in a PBY Squadron to fly over the old gal and see how she looked. The report came back: "Congratulations, Camouflage perfect. From any altitude, you are now a heavy cruiser trying to hide under twenty-six tennis nets!"

The Japs thought so, too.

On December twenty-ninth, an armor-piercing bomb sliced through all five decks, exploded on the propeller shaft and blew open the powder magazines. We tried to block the fire from reaching the ammunition. Except for Lieutenant Commander Al Hede's damage-control party, everyone was ordered top side to wait for the final blast before abandoning ship. But the seconds ticked off—and nothing happened.

Finally Hede's voice came over the intercom. You could feel him grinning. "The wonderful old gal, she put it out herself with some punctured water pipes!"

That was our first tip-off that *Mama-San* was a fighting lady at heart.

Three days later, a Jap squadron commander held a high-level bombing class right in our lap. Our flak batteries—four hand-fired and hand-operated three-inch guns—boomed vicious bursts roughly 10,000 feet under the target. When this inaccuracy was brought to his attention, Lieutenant "Red" Otter, the gunnery officer, drawled, "That's maximum range. We can't come very close, but it sure sounds loud, sir."

Sticks of fragmentation bombs ringed us, punching holes in the towering stack, knocking off ventilators and raining steel on the upper decks. *Mama-San*, pockmarked and ugly, sulked and floundered, but didn't give up. It could have been much worse. Nobody was killed and, although the damage was heavy, it wasn't enough to sink the old gal. But, with *Mama-San* tied like a decoy in the Corregidor flyway, we knew there'd be other raids.

When the crew was mustered, I gave it to them straight: "Our orders are to stay

put. Unless we can sell the enemy that this last raid hit the jackpot, we won't be around much any more. On the other hand, nobody's going to waste bombs on a deserted hulk, so we'll turn into a Class A derelict. It's up to you specialists to—uh—make the old girl look like a wreck. Use your imaginations."

The next morning, a sub skipper who was sneaking in for final provisioning, took a look at *Mama-San* through his periscope and choked up. I think he said he sobbed in memory of a dead friend. *Mama-San's* blinker light suggested he stop stalling around and make fast. Nothing ever looked more beat-up. Paint-shop artists ringed real and fake shrapnel holes with jagged black scars. Empty, flapping davits gave an illusion of desolation—an illusion aided by the ship's angle, for, every dawn, the port-side bilges and tanks were pumped full of seawater to heel her the thirty-four degrees necessary to lay part of the hull on sandy bottom. Smudge pots, fired at the approach of Jap planes, added the final touch. The over-all effect was so convincing that the enemy ignored us until the last days of the campaign, when fifth columnists reported activity aboard. But even then, the dive bombers made only faint-hearted, slightly unbelieving passes.

Although we were now relatively safe, the Japs tightened their naval blockade, and the last of our submarines were ordered from the area, leaving *Mama-San* with nothing to do. Some small ships had recently managed to get through, which indicated that retreat was still possible, especially with full fuel bunkers. Obviously, the time had come to talk turkey with Naval Headquarters. Subject: reassignment of *Mama-San* to Australia. My request for immediate detachment was completely logical and convincing. Naturally, it was turned down.

"While her appearance may not be impressive," ran high-rank reasoning, "*Canopus* is currently the largest naval unit at

hand, and her disappearance might have a bad effect on the morale of our land forces."

"If it would help, we can mount loud-speakers on the quarterdeck and play canned patriotic music 'round the clock," I offered helpfully. "Any other suggestions?"

Which was a mistake. After a hurried, whispered conference, they said, "One more. Turn in all your fuel oil except what might be required for short-range anchorage shift. Make yourself useful, if you can. And, Sackett, we're awfully busy, so if you have troubles, tell the chaplain."

I did. Chaplain McManus was a recognized expert in the winnowing of chaff. "Hmmm, they wanted our fuel oil?" he asked thoughtfully. "Isn't it lucky there was no mention of the diesel oil?"

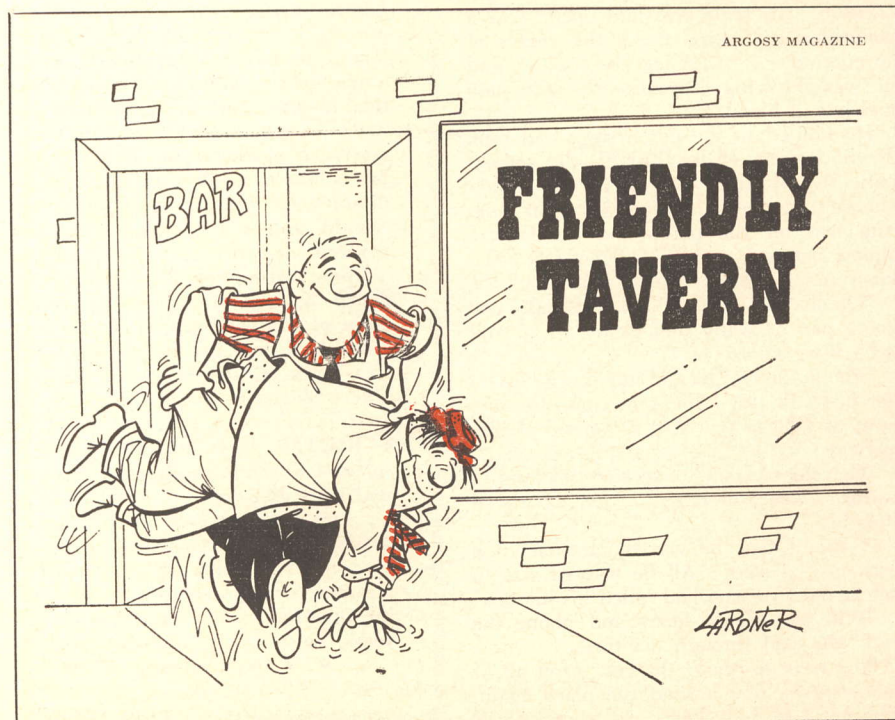
That was my boy. We could follow orders and still have wings, provided Engineering could adapt the burners in our ancient boilers to burn the lifeblood of the long-gone submarines. For added insurance, I had them start experimenting with special grates to handle cord wood; if Australia was overrun by the time we arrived, there was always Little America.

That all lay in the future, and our current problem hadn't been solved. *Mama-San* was there to help, but how? It was a matter of collective wounded pride, especially since the enemy and our own team didn't give a damn what we did. We decided to start a private USO. The lockers were still crammed with frozen food; there were stores of minor luxuries—toilet articles, candy, cigarettes—useless now to our submariners; we had recreation rooms, empty cabins with clean-sheeted bunks and showers. We were in business. Show biz.

Those final weeks have an unreal quality in my memory, something like a nightmare. During the daylight hours, *USS Canopus* just lay there, one more deserted, battered hulk; but with the setting sun, she came alive with a roar.

Below, at dusk, the wardrooms began to fill. There was no time limit. Those off-duty could stay for three or four hours, drinking, shooting the breeze and unwinding. Among the faithful were Commander Bulkeley and his PT boys—Wermuth, the "One-Man Army of Bataan," Major Wade Cochrane and General Casey. Then there were Les Girls. They came regularly, on doctors' orders. Overworked and exhausted Army and Navy nurses, they tried so hard to forget blood and tears and to remember they were women. The mess officer was attacked by fierce herds of cows every time he set foot ashore and, being dead set against waste, always turned over choice bits of his kill to the galley. Fresh fish came from natives, via short-fused dynamite sticks. But entertainment covered a lot more than the groaning board. Our chief draw into this bedlam was *Novia*.

Novia was a forty-five foot sloop we'd dragged off the rocks near Bataan. Patched up, fitted with a new set of sails and an auxiliary engine scrounged from a wrecked Dodge, the little yacht was slated to be our entry in the Dunkirk Sweepstakes if *Canopus* couldn't make the final break for freedom. But, until the chips went down for the final play, *Novia* stood at the disposal of visitors, the ladies having first call on



her. Our channel cruises were always overbooked; there was a crazy, dreamlike quality that blotted out the war—almost.

One day, we thought it might be nice to have an army of our own. Among the regular visitors was a dedicated, amateur military strategist named Francis Bridget, who commanded the remnants of Naval Aviation still left in the Philippines. Just before the last plane had been flown out, Frank had spotted an uncharted jungle road leading down from the north to Mariveles Harbor, and the vital approaches of Corregidor. He thought it was only a matter of time before Jap landing parties came in from the sea to outflank our loosely held front, twenty miles up the peninsula. They could then cut straight down and engulf the static defense points which guard the Rock from the mainland. We on *Canopus* accepted Bridget's analysis, but Navy brass suggested that he devote his full attention to granny knots and hornpipes.

Which left it, by default, up to *Mama-San*. We'd been detached from any known authority who could object to forming a volunteer bucket brigade. We activated the First—and only—Naval Battalion under Bridget with Commander Hap Goodall of *Canopus* as executive officer. Everyone aboard tried to volunteer, but only 135 could be released from essential shipboard duties. Stragglers from Bridget's own orphaned ground crews, eighty men from the now defunct Ammunition Depot, a few refugees from the blasted Cavite Navy Yard, and ninety-eight mislaid Marines also joined. Four hundred strong, we set out to plug the expected hole in the dike.

The Army brass was notified. They were not impressed. A colonel on MacArthur's staff spelled it out during a wardroom forum: "To begin with, not one of you idiots knows the butt end of a rifle from the muzzle—except for the Marines, of course. You're totally lacking equipment and supplies. And, finally, the jungle up there's so thick even the natives stick to main trails to keep from getting lost. But go ahead and have your fun. You won't see a Japanese, but there's nothing like marching for the morale."

The two Marine officers, Lieutenants Hogaboom and Holdridge, drew up a crash-training program, concentrating on jungle warfare and guerrilla tactics, while Tom Bowers, Cavite's ex-ammunition detail officer, beat the countryside for weapons. What he got was plenty of nothing—World War I Springfield rifles, two ancient Lewis machine guns, a few Enfield rifles, three boxes of pre-1917 grenades, and some .50 guns scavenged from wrecked P40 Army fighters. He also had a small crate of tear gas bombs until Army Headquarters sent an armed guard to commandeer the find on the grounds that "the weapon is entirely too dangerous to be in the hands of untrained personnel."

The situation on Bataan was getting tense. Bridget's team began to work against time. Drill and military trappings were junked in favor of hand-to-hand combat and concealment training. The last brought the uniform problem into sudden focus. After the first session ashore, one of the Marine master-sergeants reported, "The whistle blew. The platoons flopped on their bellies just right. There was one trouble. It was those weird white monkey suits.

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They looked like damned sugar cubes."

A quick check showed every Marine and Army warehouse had been gutted, making it mandatory for seventy per cent of the Naval Battalion to march off to war in GI whites, not a color likely to succeed in jungle warfare. It was a bad moment—until a petty officer from Engineering came up with a simple solution. Cloth steeped in coffee grounds for twelve hours, he said, would take on a rich chocolate color. Armed with this scientific breakthrough, we percolated 200-odd pants with matching blouses or skivvy shirts.

With all available uniforms in the stewpot, the Naval Battalion was turned into a nudist colony which huddled around the flickering fires to await the miracle of alchemy. The stewing went on all the following day, and minutes after we'd made the evening shift back aboard from caves ashore, the first pair of pants were forked out—with color, as advertised.

Two hours later, the rich chocolate dried into a bright and sickly yellow.

The officers had to move fast to prevent a complete collapse of morale. The Naval Battalion was ashore in full field equipment, and Goodall passed the word: combat-training operations would begin as of now, starting with a five-hour march. To make them feel better, *Canopus* dipped her colors as the yellow uniforms marched off, carrying makeshift tin-can canteens and an incredible variety of weapons.

Ninety minutes later, the column braked to an abrupt halt. Near the base of towering Mount Picot, the few survivors of an Army lookout station, taken when the enemy landed in force a few miles to the north,

came out of the jungle. Even if it was nothing more serious than a large-scale probing action, the discovery of an undefended coast road leading to the Corregidor approaches would automatically bring immediate reinforcements and armor. The Naval Battalion officers thumbed through the one copy of "Field Manual Recommendations," threw out a skirmish line, and attacked.

From the opening shot, the Naval Battalion broke every rule of jungle warfare. Without a communications system, orders were relayed in shouted slang. At night, the veteran Jap patrols would infiltrate the Americans' erratic lines, threatening fixed positions with encirclement. Basic strategy demanded immediate withdrawal for consolidation, and the enemy crouched expectantly, ready to close the trap. Nothing happened. The battalion just sat placidly and, at dawn, wiped out the Japs. When supplies and ammunition began to run low, a runner reached *Mama-San* with the laconic message: "We're fighting. Send plenty of everything." Eight hours after the initial skirmish, we had the shuttle service in operation; supplies and food up to the front, and wounded down. The battle lasted five days.

Enemy landing barges brought in a continuing flow of reinforcements, but they met a knotty psychological problem. Entries in a war diary found on the body of a staff major showed how mixed-up the Japs were: "We are now engaging a new type of American suicide squad. They blunder around in the heavy jungle wearing bright-colored uniforms and make a lot of noise. Whenever they reach an open space, they attempt to draw Japanese fire by sitting in groups,

talking loudly and lighting cigarettes. Naturally, we don't fall into their trap."

They were also convinced that in spite of the Battalion's strange tactics, there were strong reserve forces waiting to spring and held off a major offensive until this unknown force could be evaluated. Their frantic probes became decidedly expensive when sixty borrowed Marines arrived with some heavy mortars.

At sundown of the fifth day, silent and very tough little men arrived on the scene and said, "We take over now, Joe. Good job."

They were the Fifty-seventh Regiment of the famous Filipino Scouts. The begrimed, tattered yellow uniforms formed ranks and marched down Bridget's road—exhausted, out of step, ridiculous, except for the pride in their eyes and the set of their shoulders—a screwball army which knew that by buying previous time, Bataan had been saved from early collapse.

Although the initial enemy beachhead was wiped out, the long, vulnerable coastline remained. Bulkeley PT boats continued to slash at destroyer-escorted barge flotillas, but many commando units and supplies got through and, once ashore, became invulnerable—thanks to the deep caves that riddled Longoskawan Point. Shoals kept the PTs too far offshore for effective gunnery, and the topography made land-based artillery useless. But in spite of the danger, the situation wouldn't become really serious until the scattered units fused. Combined headquarters was either busy with more important problems or didn't have a handy solution.

We had a dandy. After successfully organizing our own army, we spread the word that *Mama-San* was now prepared to lend-lease a private navy, composed of four forty-foot motor launches. The glad tidings didn't excite anyone.

In spite of this cold-shoulder treatment, work on the Mickey Mouse battleships was started.

The finished result was a crazy blend of Viking dragon ship and the *Merrimac* with welded boiler plate armor, a king-sized steel can to provide the helmsman with limited protection, and a riveted cracker box housing for the exposed engine. We scrounged one-pound mountain pack guns from the Army to serve as main turrets, and hung them between the port and starboard .50 machine guns. When an Army Intelligence colonel complained that he'd never even seen a legitimate Jap prisoner

in his life, the crews of the Mickey Mouse flotilla decided to add a landing party. *Mama-San* tried to please.

In the gray light of dawn, Goodall took the first "battleship" across eight miles of enemy-controlled open sea. Fortunately, Bulkeley's charts had each major enemy concentration accurately spotted. "Otherwise," Goodall admitted, "we probably would never have found them until mortar shells began dropping like rain. Since we came zeroing straight in, they must have thought Admiral Yamamoto had dropped by for an inspection, and they came pouring out, practically standing at attention. It was good target practice, of course."

When their ammunition was almost gone, they shot up one last likely-looking cave, then the landing party hit the beach with fixed bayonets. All twelve of them. They netted one Japanese major in a state of shock, one snivelling sergeant, and three wounded privates. When word got around about the Mickey Mouse triumph, feelers came from official sources; they wanted "in." That night there was another celebration.

The Japs continued to build up the critical area. Finally, Combined Intelligence warned that its dispersed units were scheduled to join up for the break-out within twenty-four hours. The Supreme Command tossed in a monkey wrench, and in the first combined operation of the war, the few remaining P40s, the Filipino Scouts and Bulkeley's PTs hit. Strafing planes came in at treetop level, followed by the Scouts, and the PTs blasted Jap relief convoys. The enemy broke and ran down the steep cliffs to their cave hide-outs. Two of our "battleships" were there, ready and waiting. By late afternoon, we were in control, but before Task Force One cleared the Point, four avenging Jake dive bombers came out of the sun to attack.

They concentrated on Goodall's lead boat. Glancing hits and near misses ripped her bottom, killed three of her crew and wounded four, including the skipper, who took steel splinters through both ankles.

She fought back savagely. In spite of the little boat's growing list, Gunner's Mate Kramb wedged himself against the gunwale. He kept firing until he blew apart the section leader and died under a hail of shells. Mickey Mouse Two took over. Slugging it out, toe to toe, she damaged two of the attackers and forced them to run. Casualties came ashore on makeshift litters and, after a tortured march through the

jungle, they reached the coast road where a battered truck took them back to *Mama-San*.

By the middle of March, we knew we'd had it on Bataan. Bulkeley took General MacArthur to Australia, and the PT squadrons were sent out of the area. Outnumbered and pushed day and night, the central front finally cracked. With manpower at a premium, we turned the Naval Battalion over to the Army, after promising them that *Mama-San* wouldn't sail away without them. Satisfied, they marched toward the sound of the guns.

They were the lucky ones. They had a part in something important. The rest of us aboard now ranked with isolated Army units and the hordes of displaced civilians. Enemy air superiority pinned us down and kept any ship from slipping anchor undetected, even if we had permission to scam the hell out of there. Even the Rock which, theoretically, could hold up under a Jap siege, was closed to us; official dispatches made it clear that the Corregidor population had reached its supportable maximum. The dreaded orders—scuttle—came almost as an anticlimax.

Just as the last mooring lines were about to be cast off, the command phone shrilled. The exploits of the First Naval Battalion and the Mickey Mouses had been brought to his attention, and General Wainwright had made a command decision: Corregidor would welcome aboard the ingenious fighting men of USS *Canopus*!

With the launches serving as tugs to hold the hull in position, loving hands opened the seacocks. The Old Lady settled slowly, almost gratefully, as though she knew what was expected and approved. We waited in charged silence until she'd gone—each one feeling something of himself vanishing with that battered, ugly, beloved hulk. It seems to us that our Old Lady's departure marked the end of an era—like twilight of the Gods.

It was strange: as we chugged off to the Rock, the moment should have been one of stark tragedy. Instead, there were grins. Gradually I began to understand. The fact that we could no longer actually see her meant nothing, because *Mama-San* wasn't going to be written off—that easily. Sooner or later, some Kishi-class destroyer would come boiling up the channel, cut it too close and have her bottom ripped out. It seemed inevitable. Hadn't the Old Lady always fought it strictly on her own, in her own woolly way? I began to smile, too. ● ●