

Saipan

Oral Histories of the Pacific War

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The Sailor from Angaur

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Manuel S. Sablan was born on the island of Angaur in Palau in the year 1917. His father, Benino St. Nicholas Sablan, moved to Angaur to work in the phosphate mines during the German occupation of those islands. The surviving members of the family did not return to Saipan until 1946.

I was born in Angaur* and did not see Saipan until I was fourteen years old. My father worked in the phosphate mines for the Germans. Before I was born my family returned to Saipan, but after the Japanese took over in 1914 they returned to Angaur. My father continued to work in the phosphate mines on Angaur for awhile, then moved to the big island of Babeldaop where he worked in a bauxite mine.

I wanted to visit my family in Saipan — my grandparents. I lived with my aunt in Tanapag, and while I was there I worked for a paper company, not a newspaper company but something like that. After four years I returned to Angaur and worked for the Yamada Company. It was a private store owned by a Japanese. I worked there for almost two years. The pay was very low, maybe fifteen yen a month. Then I worked for a Palauan by the name of Era Dbemel. He was a wealthy man from Peleliu. He built a boat that went around to the different islands in Palau to buy dried coconuts— you know, copra. When we had enough copra we sold it to the Nambo Company and they sent it to Japan. That is where I learned how to work on engines. I did that for about five years, then went to work for the Nanyo Aluminum Company on Babeldaop with my older brother. They paid good money, maybe 300 yen a month, but even with money you couldn't buy anything, not even clothes. I was single then; food was not a problem, but it was local food.

As the war got closer we were forced to work from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, seven days a week. That is when I decided to work for the Japanese Navy. I thought the work would be easier and I had training as a mechanic. There was a Japanese lieutenant who came from New Guinea. His name was Kuwada. He was looking for people to work on these wood dive boats to take supplies to New Guinea. Eight of us volunteered, five Chamorros and three Yapese. Lieutenant Kuwada gave us all Japanese names because for him they were easier to remember. The name he gave me was Minami Tetsutaro.

I boarded my boat just before the Americans bombed Palau the first time. They bombed for two days [March 1944]. We hid from the bombing at different places, then about four days after the bombing stopped we left Palau and headed for Tobi Island, which was to the southeast. It took four days and four nights to get there.

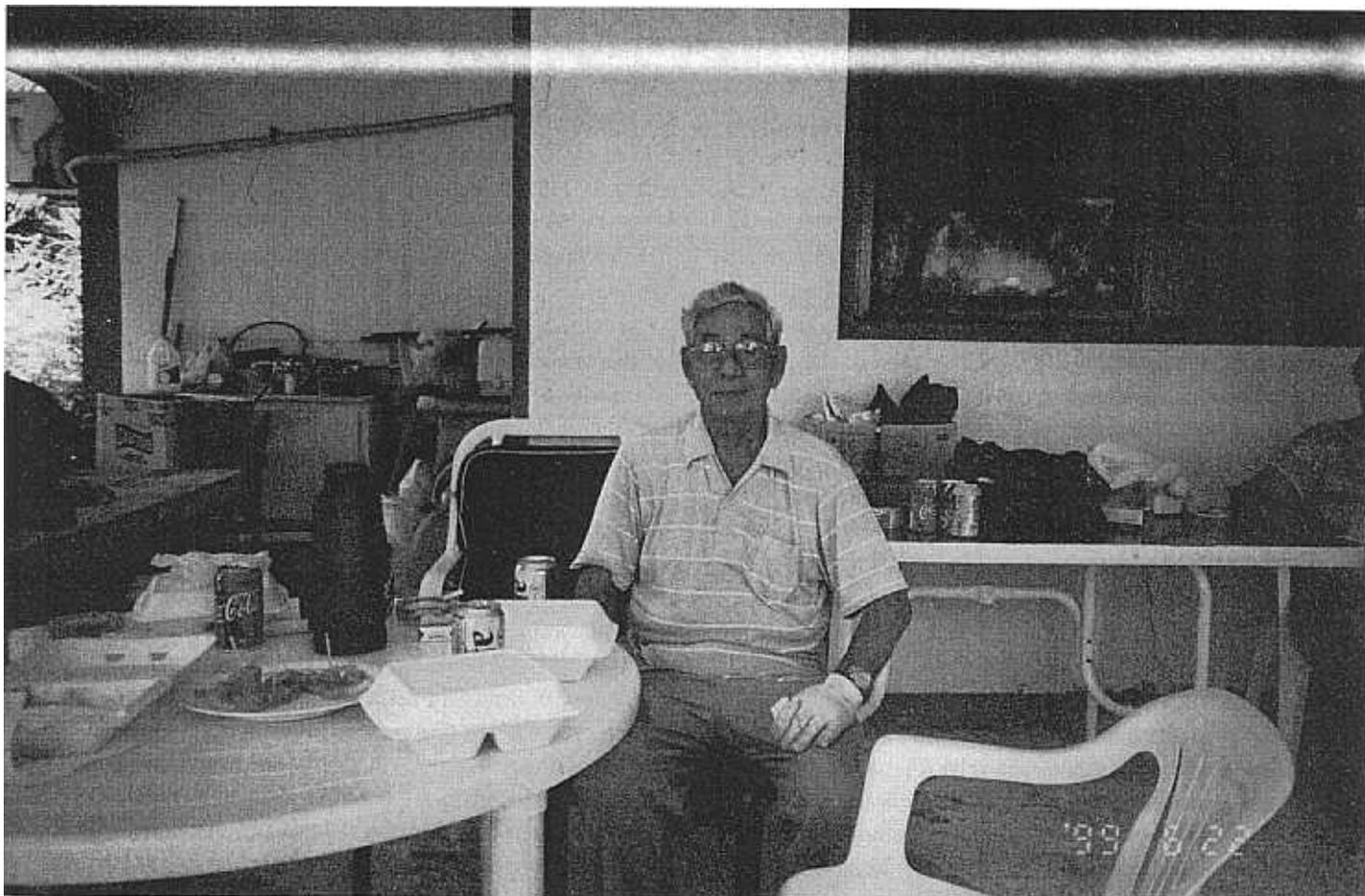
Tobi is a small island and the Japanese only had a few soldiers there. Just before we reached Tobi Island an American submarine sank us with its deck gun. They hit my boat twice. The first shell went through the hull without exploding and hit just in front of one of the other boats. The engine on our boat died when the engineer tried to make it go faster. I could see the submarine getting closer. There were two Yapese on the boat and I told them to throw two pieces of wood into the water. Then we jumped in. We were in the water between the submarine and our boat when they fired the second shot. I could see the American sailors on the submarine. I heard them say things like, "God damn Japanese!"

Lieutenant Kuwada was on the same boat with me, but he didn't survive. The captains of each boat had their wives with them. They were supposed to go with us to Papua New Guinea, then take a ship back to Japan, but they didn't survive either. Only one boat survived, but it was damaged. We spent eighteen hours in the water. The submarine sank us in the early evening. The next morning we could see the surviving boat, but it was very far from us. We only had a piece of wood to keep us afloat. There were ten of us in a group. Altogether there were fifty people on the four boats, but only twenty-five survived.

We started swimming towards the one surviving boat. It was not moving because the engine was damaged when it was hit by the submarine. When we started swimming toward the boat sharks started coming to us but nobody was bitten. They just circled us.

We reached the boat in the afternoon. The engineer on that boat was killed when one of the shells hit inside the engine room. We wrapped him up in a blanket, put weights around his legs, and dropped him in

*Palau group of islands, approximately 500 miles east of Mindanao.



Manuel S. Sablan, the Sailor from Angaur, as he looks today.

the sea. Then I was the one who worked on the engine to make it run. The air compressor was damaged so I used two guys to turn the flywheel to get the engine running. It took me four hours to get it going. Then we waited for more survivors to reach us. Two Chamorros were among the men we picked up, David and Enrici Borja. We had twenty-four people on board that one boat out of a total of fifty who started out. The twenty-fifth survivor, a Korean, was found after forty days when he washed up on Halmahera Island. He spent almost three months in the hospital.

We had six months' supply of food on each boat when we started out, so that was no problem, but the water tank was full of holes from the shelling. We had only about ten inches of water in the tank to last us until we found land. Our compass was broken, but the captain pointed us in the right direction by looking at the stars. Once he thought he knew which was the correct direction we started up the engine and two hours later we found Tobi Island. We stayed there for twenty-seven days.

From Tobi Island we returned to Palau on a tuna

boat that was used to bring supplies to the soldiers. From Palau we took a destroyer to Sorong in western Papua New Guinea. The next day we went to Kasim Island off the coast of New Guinea. From Kasim we watched Japanese planes take off to bomb the Solomon Islands. At least somebody told us that. We would always count the number of planes that took off. The Japanese were lucky if one or two came back out of fifty.

We were in Sorong for three months. After that we were sent to Ambon Island. After seven days on Ambon we went to the Celebes—Makassar Island. After two days and two nights there we went to Balikpapan in Borneo. The next day they sent us to Sangasanga, and stayed there for several months. It was while in Sangasanga that I learned that Saipan had been invaded.

Samarinda was the Japanese naval headquarters on Borneo, and that is where they sent us next. So from there they sent two of us who were from Palau to Tarakan Island—Ben Benito Reyes and me. Tarakan is a small island off the coast of Borneo and there were oil

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wells there.* We were there for ten months with no bombing. Then the Australians took Halmahera Island. From then on we got bombed every day. If they didn't bomb us during the day, they bombed that night. Then the Japanese started to make an air base there on Tarakan. When the Japanese started making the air base the Australians didn't bomb it. They waited until the air base was finished, then they started to bomb it. I only saw one plane get shot down while I was on Tarakan Island. It had two engines. The pilot died — everyone died.

One day the Australians dropped leaflets on the island. The leaflets said what month, what day, what time they were going to make landings on Tarakan. The Japanese tried to hide the leaflets from us. They didn't want anyone to know what they said. Then one morning I started to work. There was an air raid warning so I jumped into a foxhole. One plane passed over but he didn't drop any bombs. Then a Japanese officer came by and he told me that the Australians were already landing and that I should stand by to go into the jungle. After that I went back to my room to get everything I needed and headed for the jungle. I didn't have a gun, but I was given a hand grenade and told that if I see the enemy I should throw it. I never threw it. I hid in the jungle for three months.

There was one group of us. We were eight people and at one point decided to go see where the enemy was. When we came to a jungle road we divided up into groups of three, two, and three and made sure that there was a large gap between each group as we walked down the road in case something happened. I was in the second group. When the first three reached a crossroads, there were some Australians there. They fired their machine gun. My group and the group behind me laid down in the road. The ones in the first group were all killed. When we got up to run the Australians started to shoot again, so we had to lie down again. After that we went back to where we came from and hid in the jungle some more.

The day I was captured was in the evening after we had cooked some rice over a fire. Some Australians saw the smoke and came in looking for us. They just started shooting and we all ran away. I jumped onto a road and two Australians stopped me. They said, "Come over here. Are you Japanese?" I said, "No! I'm Chamorro." They said, "What is a Chamorro?" I said, "I'm from Saipan," but they had never heard of Saipan.

When we got back to their base they gave me two packs of cigarettes and some matches. Then they put me with fifteen Japanese they had recently captured. They gave us Australian khakis and some new shoes. Our first meal was one loaf of bread cut in half, and one can of corned beef for each man. One Japanese said, "What they gonna do with us?" I said, "We lost the fight; what can we do. If they are going to kill us, what can we do?"

We had to hold hands as they marched us to their headquarters. There they interrogated us one by one. When it came my turn they gave me the number 227. Of all the prisoners on Tarakan at that time I was number 227. More surrendered later. I guess it was about five days after they captured me that the war was over.

From Tarakan they sent us to the island of Morotai (north of Halmahera). I was there about ten months. While I was there the Australians brought in around 100 Taiwanese and their Japanese officer. These Taiwanese and their Japanese officer had had 600 Indian POWs that they marched across Borneo in forty days. They called it the "Bloody Walking," because if the prisoners got sick, or couldn't walk anymore during the march they cut their heads off. Only 60 of the 600 survived. The Australians held an investigation, then took the Taiwanese and their Japanese officer and executed them. I was working in the galley then, and we prepared a last meal for them, and some beer.

After ten months in the POW camp one ship was sent to take all the Japanese from my camp back to Japan. They took the Japanese from Halmahera and those of us who were held on Morotai — 4,000 people — and put us on that one ship. It took us five days to get to Japan. Only one person died on the way. He had malaria. The ship took us to Tanabe. That's a town in Wakayama Prefecture. I think it is south of Yokohama. The next day they gave us 300 yen each and a train ticket home.

When it came my turn I said I want to go to Saipan. They told me there was no ship to Saipan. They had to call Gen. MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo to get instructions, so I had to stay there another week while they waited for instructions. After that they sent me by train to Kurihama. I had to wait there another three months. I didn't have any money because the Japanese never paid me for the work I did for them.

When I got back to Saipan it was no longer a green island — no trees. I had to wait on that ship for eleven days off of Garapan because there were so many ships. They were all lined up to get into the harbor. When I finally got off the ship I found my brother, Jose Sablan. He was on the police force. He was a policeman under

*The Japanese Navy started importing oil from Tarakan in 1915, a few years after they switched from coal to oil.

the Japanese and he was still a policeman. My sister, Soledad Cepeda, had come back to Saipan from Yap and she had a house in Susupe already, so I stayed with her. Her husband was killed in Yap by a bomb. I got a job with the U.S. Navy as a mechanic — Jeeps and things like that. After one or two months my mother and father returned from Palau. They were surprised when they found me on Saipan.

While my family was on Palau some Chamorros and some Palauans escaped to the American ships offshore, and the American ships took them to Angaur. After that the Japanese watched the other Chamorros day and night to make sure they didn't contact the Americans. My mother and father were interrogated many times.

In 1951 there were still some Japanese hiding on Anatahan, an island north of Saipan. Commander Johnson, who was the naval administrator of Saipan, wanted to take them off Anatahan. He sent a fishing boat that had a two cylinder engine on it and I was asked to go along. For two days and two nights I didn't sleep. We

circled the island. That is when we saw five Japanese. We put up a Japanese flag and called to them, but they ran away. We had some of the Japanese from Saipan with us and we put them ashore with some food and drink. Then we circled the island one more time. When we got back to the beach where we had left the Japanese from Saipan there was one of the Japanese from Anatahan with them. That was Kazuko Higa, the only woman in the group. When they brought Kazuko back to the ship they told the captain that there was a machine gun set up near the beach. So the captain told me to get the engine going and we left without the other Japanese.

The other Japanese surrendered sometime later, but I wasn't there when that happened. Kazuko told me that the others were afraid to come out because they thought the war was still going. They saw planes fly over, and when old bombs were destroyed on Saipan they could hear the explosions. They thought the war was still going on and that the Japanese were still fighting on Saipan.