

ELIZABETH DRUMWRIGHT

I'll Have to Go Down to Hell First''

A Saipanese World War II Veteran Recalls the War

Captain Cristino S. Dela Cruz is one of only two Saipan native islanders decorated for military service on Saipan during WWII by the United States Marine Corps. Fighting alongside U.S. Marines, Dela Cruz was twice wounded. Dela Cruz returned to fight each time—in fact, fought through to the end of the island campaign until Saipan was secured.

Retired after 43 years as an island policeman, Captain Dela Cruz now has time for interviews. We are seated on his patio, and in the air of tropical Micronesia, water forms, then slides down the sides of our cans of 7-Up. Dela Cruz fingers WWII-era photographs of Saipan, then drums on the glass protecting his framed Certificate of Commendation from the U.S. Marine Corps. His native Chamorro wife sits in a corner of the patio and watches the road.

Captain Dela Cruz' Spanish house perches atop Saipan's Capitol Hill, former headquarters of the United Nations-mandated U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. In the days of the Trust Territory government, Captain Dela Cruz supervised the Northern Marianas Police for the High Commissioner. Today the very same buildings which housed those headquarters now house the executive and legislative offices of an internally self-governing U.S. commonwealth: the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. All C.N.M.I. leaders are natives, Chamorros and Caroline islanders born in the Northern Marianas. In addition to his work for the island police forces, Captain Dela Cruz served for 17 years as a District Commissioner for Saipan's Municipal Council. He considers himself a long-time Democrat, but will

cross party lines if necessary. "I vote for the good people, no matter what they are," he says.

Seventeen years old in 1944, young Cristino Dela Cruz survived the U.S. invasion of Saipan. Saipan bears the distinction of suffering the worst devastation of any Pacific island in WWII. "Operation Forager," the capture of the Mariana Islands, cost one tenth of the native population of Saipan. Three in Cristino's immediate family did not survive the invasion. Even at the time, Cristino did not blame the invading American soldiers for his family's losses. Instead he vented his anger on the Japanese. Only hours after his "liberation," he joined the 4th Marine Division in their fight against the Japanese.

Now 64, Dela Cruz wonders if he'll go to Hell when he dies. Like most native Chamorros of his generation, he is a devout Roman Catholic. "My mother believed that once you kill someone, you are never forgiven. You pay for your sins after you die." When I ask the Captain if he believes he'll go to Purgatory, that less formidable mid-station between Heaven and Hell, he shakes his head. "I'll have to go down to Hell first."

Cristino Dela Cruz was born on Saipan in 1926, during the beginning of the island's heyday as a new Japanese colony. Copra, tapioca, and sugar cane plantations, cultivated by workers imported from Okinawa, studded the island's landscape. The rural villages of Garapan in the north and Chalan Kanoa in the south quickly swelled into cities with advanced infrastructures. A railway network ran from one end of the island to the other. Most of the island's inhabitants travelled by bull cart, the few available cars and trucks reserved for the Japanese military and Japanese sugar refineries. Houses of prostitution, staffed with women from Japan, Okinawa and Korea, catered to the growing number of Japanese men on island.

The culture of the Northern Mariana Islands is a grand hybrid: its origins, the ancient native Chamorro and Carolinian cultures; its influences, the colonial Spanish, German, Japanese, and now American cultures. Cristino Dela Cruz himself is a complex blend, the result of several intermarriages of his native Chamorro ancestors with Spanish, then German colonists. As a boy, Cristino heard members of his family speak four languages—Chamorro,

Spanish, German, and Japanese. During the war, this facility with languages proved to be both an asset and a liability for Dela Cruz and his family.

Three islands to the south of Saipan lies the island of Guam, governed by the United States since the Spanish-American War. Many members of the Dela Cruz extended family lived on Guam. Before Pearl Harbor and the 1941 invasion of Guam halted inter-island travel, these Guamanian relatives often visited Saipan. They discussed the American governance of Guam. "The Americans are good people," Dela Cruz remembers them saying. "It's a democratic nation. Everything's O.K."

In school, the young Cristino learned what most boys growing up in a rural community would learn—mathematics, agriculture, and home economics. Then when Cristino was in 5th grade, Japan invaded China and southeast Asia, and everything changed. The Japanese military ordered the Mayor of Saipan to organize all graduating students—"volunteers"—for the war effort. Cristino and the other boys in his class found themselves forced into manual labor by the Japanese military for the next five years.

"I don't like Japanese," says Dela Cruz. "During that time the Japanese, the military, were very mean to our people." Simply, Chamorros had to do anything they were ordered. But obeying orders wasn't enough to satisfy the Japanese soldiers. "You always had to show a happy face," Dela Cruz says, his face now forcing a smile like a grimace.

Cristino's father and uncles owned a construction business. Soon the Japanese military forced the Dela Cruz family to join with other natives and imported Korean workers to construct—without pay—an airport. "We worked from 4 o'clock in the morning until 9 o'clock at night," Dela Cruz recalls. "The Japanese gave us only minimum food to eat." If the natives didn't work, they faced harsh consequences. "The Japanese would punish us. They would slap us. They would put us into prison," he says. Those forced to work were men ranging in age from 16 to 50, but the Japanese didn't hesitate to use native children who were 14 or 15 and strong enough to handle the heavy work.

At 17, Dela Cruz was selected for training in the Japanese Navy. At night he attended classes, wearing a naval cadet uniform. By

day, he worked with other natives at forced labor. "Some of us would have to transfer war materials to other stations, load and unload bombs and gasoline drums," Dela Cruz says. "Sometimes we hid these things in places where the Allied planes couldn't see them when they bombed from the air. We dug in the ground and put them in bunkers."

Most of the work the native men were forced to do was secret. "We were monitored, told not to look around. We couldn't talk to each other while we worked. We were advised not to tell anyone what we were doing. We were told to say we were volunteering." But the young Dela Cruz prepared to tell all to the Americans if he ever got the chance. "When I worked I pretended I didn't see anything, but I *did*, so when the Americans came I could show them where things were. I was like a spy."

Dela Cruz was also forced to construct bombs in a Saipan bomb factory. "I wished I could turn the bombs I made into duds," he remarks ruefully. His Japanese superior told him the bombs were destined for Australia.

As the war progressed, food became scarce. Japanese and Okinawans were served first. Because Okinawans fought side by side with the Japanese, they were treated well. They were encouraged to save their energy for the war, and didn't have to work as hard on the plantations as before. Next in the pecking order came the Chamorros, then the Koreans, and finally the Carolinians. "We could buy only the minimum amount of rice," Dela Cruz recalls. "We could buy other things too, but only under the ration amount."

The Japanese military permanently disrupted church services—a loss and a shock to the fiercely religious native Chamorros—when they took over the church in Garapan and used it to store food and war materials. They ordered the Spanish priests and nuns out of the rectory and convent. Native Chamorro families welcomed the displaced clergy, sheltering them on their farms.

Two days before D-Day, battleships with U.S. Task Force 58 bombarded Saipan with 16-inch shells. Planes raided and strafed the airport the Dela Cruz family had helped to build. Japanese naval officers alerted the local population that the island was surrounded by the American Forces. Dela Cruz discarded his

Japanese naval cadet uniform. The Dela Cruz extended family—totaling 19—hid in a bunker near the village of Fina Sisu. Although the main Japanese force moved on, a few Japanese soldiers hid nearby.

The family remained in the bunker one week. I ask if there had been enough to eat. “We ate fresh coconut. We drank the juice, sliced the shell and chewed on the meat. We also had cans of Japanese crabmeat and biscuits that the Japanese provided for us before they ran away. They wanted us to be fit to fight the Americans on Fina Sisu hill. We told them we would join them later, but we stayed and waited for the Americans.” The family had no weapons in the bunker, only knives, sticks, and farming tools.

Space in the bunker was cramped, and there was no privacy. The family threw the contents of their communal chamber pot out the main door. Only once did Cristino leave the bunker. “My cousin and I were outside for fifteen minutes,” he remembers. “We were lucky we didn’t get hit. There were plenty of bullets, for the Americans were now nearby. We went to get water from the well near our ranch house. My cousin carried a container and I carried a bucket. We filled them up. When we got back to the bunker I saw there was no water in my bucket! The water had leaked out through bullet holes! I was ashamed and felt I had cheated my family.”

In the bunker, the Dela Cruz family prayed for their personal safety, and for the war’s end. “We prayed to God, to Jesus, Mary, St. Joseph, Mary’s father San Joaquin, and to the father of St. Joseph, I forget his name.” He laughs, embarrassed.

The air in the bunker was very bad. At the far end of the bunker was a small hole. The entrance on the other end was opened periodically for air. “We choked. Not enough air. It was very hot.” His face darkens. “That’s why my two sisters died. The first one died on June 17, one day before our liberation. The other one died on the 18th, only two hours before our rescue. We wept at how unfortunate we were. If the Americans had come one day earlier, maybe my two sisters would have survived. That’s my feeling.”

Captain Dela Cruz’ wife disappears into the house, only to reappear with a tray holding two fresh cans of cold 7-Up. She smiles at me as she places the cans on the table. Then she sits in her

chair in the corner of the patio to resume her watch of the road. The bells of a nearby church ring.

Dela Cruz relates his wife's experience of the invasion. "She hid near Oleai village, where she lived before the war. She hid in the basement of someone's house. Her father died from shrapnel. He was inside the basement and the projectile from a battleship exploded and hit him. The shrapnel made it all the way into the basement!" he says, still amazed.

Dela Cruz gets back to the story of his family. When American soldiers with the 4th Marine Division arrived at the Dela Cruz bunker, they shouted in Spanish and Japanese for everyone to come out. Cristino and his family walked out of the bunker with their hands raised. To everyone's surprise, shots rang out from behind the bunker. The Japanese soldiers who had been hiding nearby sprayed the Dela Cruz family and the Marines with bullets. Dela Cruz' brother fell to the ground, fatally wounded. "The Japanese tried to kill us because they knew we could talk to the American soldiers," Dela Cruz explains. "We knew Spanish and German."

Dela Cruz and his remaining family surrendered as his brother lay dying on the ground. The American soldiers helped to lift his brother onto a personnel carrier. Together they all climbed aboard and the carrier drove to the nearest safety zone.

"When the Americans saw that my brother was dying, they signalled to let us proceed to the 4th Marine Division cemetery. My brother died on the way. At the cemetery, dead Marines were lined up for burial. We were allowed to bury my brother only after the Marines had been buried. A Marine standing next to us gave us a blanket to wrap around my brother. My brother is buried next to American Marines."

Two Japanese prisoners assisted with the burials at the Marine cemetery. When the prisoners lowered the body of Dela Cruz' brother into his grave, they carelessly dumped him so that he landed on his head. "I became very angry," recalls Dela Cruz, pounding his fist on the table. His framed Certificate of Commendation moves an inch toward me. "I looked around for a branch, a big stick. I had looked after these Japanese for years. But did they look after me or my brother? No! You sonofabitch, I thought." He grabbed a big stick and hit the Japanese prisoners. "I

yelled at them in Japanese, 'Damn you! You don't dump my brother! I'm going to kill you!' " A Marine grabbed Dela Cruz and stopped him. This Marine reported Dela Cruz' anti-Japanese behavior to his superior officer.

Devastated by his brother's death, and his grief compounded by the treatment of his brother's body, Dela Cruz walked to the internment camp and brooded. "I was very upset and shaking. I was so sad. My mother came by. 'You've got to be peaceful,' she told me. 'No. I've got to kill them,' I told her. I sat alone until 9 o'clock that night. No light was permitted in Camp Susupe because fighting was still going on from the ocean side. At 9 o'clock an American translator looked for me, using a cigarette lighter to see. When he found me, he took me outside the gate of the camp to the commanding general's post."

The commanding officer was Marine General Holland M. Smith, commander of the V Amphibious Corps, the ground troops involved in the invasion of Saipan. Because of his explosive temper, the general was nicknamed, "Howlin' Mad Smith." He interviewed Dela Cruz with the help of a Spanish-speaking interpreter. Dela Cruz remembers their exchange well.

"What did you do?" asked the general.

"Nothing," said Dela Cruz. "I just wanted to kill those Japanese."

"You hit those men because you don't like Japanese? Are you sure you don't like Japanese?" asked the general.

Dela Cruz took out a map he'd been hiding in his clothes, a map on which he'd marked where the Japanese had hidden supplies. He compared maps with General Smith.

"Do you want to help the Americans who are fighting?" asked the general. "You can if you want to."

Dela Cruz returned to Camp Susupe to tell his family the news. "I received my mother's blessing," he recalls. "I was very happy, but I was worried too because fighting is not the same thing as hiding in a bunker." The following day, the 4th Marine Division outfitted him. "They gave me a Marine uniform, camouflage. Everything," he says proudly. "Except a weapon. For that first week I wasn't allowed to carry a weapon because I was a civilian

and wasn't trained to fight." The Marines first assigned Dela Cruz to Burial Detail, then sent him to the battle front on a tank.

The Marines headed for Papago, just southeast of "Death Valley," a valley in central Saipan known for its dense jungle and hidden limestone caverns housing Japanese emplacements. Dela Cruz helped the Marines locate many of these caves. "We did the caves, many caves," he says. "The Japanese would pretend to surrender. When you got them to come with you, then they'd try to kill you. I didn't like this."

His second week with the Marines, Dela Cruz was wounded. "We were in face to face combat. I had no weapon! I tried to hide, but it was too late. The Japanese were coming in such numbers. The Marine next to me was fighting off five Japanese at once. They killed the Marine, and one of the Japanese came after me with a bayonet on his gun. He sank his bayonet into my arm. I'm lucky I wasn't killed." The Japanese soldier didn't try to finish Dela Cruz off, and Dela Cruz eventually was transported to a Marine hospital.

There is a large scar on one of Dela Cruz' hands, and I ask if the scar is from that bayonet. He looks at his hand. "No. This scar's from Typhoon Kim, when it hit Saipan four years ago. I was driving with my wife to the store. A falling electrical wire hit me and sparked."

The Marines decided Dela Cruz should carry a weapon for protection, even if he hadn't been trained to use it. "I was really happy about that! I wanted a bazooka!" His face lights up. "I was trying to decide what kind of bazooka to get when a Mexican-American Marine told me in Spanish, 'You need three to four men to shoot a bazooka.' So I got a tommy gun instead. And two carbines."

Dela Cruz returned to Papago. He proudly carried his new hardware. Marines beside him sometimes used a flamethrower. Dela Cruz couldn't operate a flamethrower because of his lame arm. "Flamethrowers weighed too much, 120 lbs. You had to carry two parts, the air tank and the flamethrower. It took two husky people to carry this thing. When they assigned people to incinerate, they assigned one man to the front, one to the back of this thing—a flamethrower team."

Because of the high risk of taking Japanese prisoners, Dela Cruz sometimes ended up killing a soldier as he appeared to surrender. "Even when their hands were up I made their souls go to Hell," he says.

I ask Dela Cruz if he felt anything inside when he killed someone. "I felt very good. But afterwards, I would have tears." Whenever he came upon a Marine Chaplain, he would confess and pray for forgiveness.

Some of the Papago caves held Japanese civilians, which complicated things. "Civilians got mixed in with soldiers inside. The soldiers gave the civilians hand grenades to kill themselves. If they didn't have a chance to attack the Americans, it was better, they thought, to kill themselves." When I ask Captain Dela Cruz if he killed civilians, he nods his head. "Some—the ones who detonated hand grenades."

Captain Dela Cruz blames Japanese military propaganda for the unnecessary deaths of many Japanese civilians on Saipan. During his days as a Japanese Navy cadet he recalls the military telling civilians, "When the Americans capture you, or convince you to be captured, it is better for you to commit suicide. If you are a woman, the soldiers will rape you. If you are a man, they will kill you anyway."

While fighting in Papago, Dela Cruz was wounded a second time. "A grenade caused my tank to collapse. I fell and got hurt," he says. But after quick treatment, he joined up with another platoon going east to Kagman Point.

In the closing days of the Battle of Saipan, Dela Cruz moved north to Marpi Point, the location of the Japanese Forces' last command post. Squeezed into a bottleneck by U.S. Forces, the Japanese had nowhere to go. Thousands of Japanese soldiers refused to surrender and chose to jump off an 800-foot sheer rock cliff—now named Suicide Cliff—to their deaths. Hundreds of Japanese civilians jumped off another cliff—now named Banzai Cliff—into the rough waves below. "They knew the fighting was almost over, and the Japanese would be defeated. That's why they killed themselves." Dela Cruz says he saw Japanese civilians jump off Banzai Cliff. "I was unable to stop them. I didn't have enough time to get to them. I was too far away from where they were."

After the capture of Saipan, Dela Cruz and the Marines of the 4th Division didn't celebrate much. The nearby islands of Tinian and Guam to the south still had to be secured. Then there were Iwo Jima and Okinawa to the north. Navy "Seabee" engineers were all set to turn the Marianas into air bases. The new B-29 Superfortress bombers could fly the 1200 miles from the Marianas to Tokyo and back without refueling. Dela Cruz left the Marines to return to his family and to help rebuild the island.

Dela Cruz lost touch with his U.S. Marine buddies. "I had so many American friends here right after the battle, but I don't know where they went and died. Maybe Tinian, Guam, Iwo Jima. If some are still alive, I hope they come to see me." He still holds faith, that after 46 years, some Marine friend will show up one day.

For a year after the invasion of Saipan, Dela Cruz suffered from what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder. "For a year I had nightmares. In the dreams someone would come up behind me and kill me with a bayonet."

After the war, Dela Cruz sought U.S. citizenship. "Once I got to help the Marines, I wanted to be an American, to be the real thing. I requested to become an American, but I couldn't then." Natives of the Northern Mariana Islands didn't get full United States citizenship until 1986. The 42-year wait to get citizenship angered Dela Cruz. "When you help someone fight, you should get benefits, someone should take care of you." In 1983, through the lobbying efforts of U.S. Marine hero and Navy Cross-decorated Guy Gabaldon—the Japanese-speaking Marine who single-handedly captured over 1,000 Japanese soldiers on Saipan—the U.S. Marine Corps finally recognized Dela Cruz' service with a Certificate of Commendation.

Now living in retirement, and receiving benefits from both the U.S. Veterans Administration and the Northern Mariana Islands Retirement Fund, Captain Dela Cruz plans to build a new house for his family on his land in Capitol Hill. But he must be careful about the bombs he'll find as he digs, he says. Forty-seven years after the U.S. invasion, unexploded U.S. bombs remain. "We've found three tons' worth of bombs on my property. On three hectares! I'm really concerned about the bombs. I know how to remove bombs. I know how to detonate them. Remember, when I

worked with the Japanese I made bombs! During the bombardment, many bombs didn't explode. After the war, they were covered up with soil. But they are still there." □

—*Saipan, 1991*