Guam became the first inhabited island in the Pacific Ocean known to Europeans when Ferdinand Magellan, sailing under the flag of Spain, stepped ashore there in the year 1521. Magellan’s fateful landfall not only opened the Pacific to European exploration, it also led to foreign domination of every traditional island society throughout that immense third of the earth’s surface the Europeans called Oceania. During the historical transformation of the Pacific world in the centuries since Magellan, little Guam—only thirty miles long by about ten miles wide and 214 square miles in area—has played a strategic role far more significant than islands much larger, much less isolated, and much better known.

Beyond its importance to those who live there, Guam is significant for the rest of the world due primarily to its topography and the value of its location to major powers in the Pacific. In other words, Guam is important internationally because of the enduring imperatives of geopolitics, an enormous force in the histories of small, strategically located islands, straits, and canals.

Guam is the largest and the most populated of the Mariana Islands. The Marianas are fifteen high volcanic islands that form a north-south archipelago nearly 500 miles long in the tropics about 1,500 miles east of the Philippine Islands. The main islands—Guam, Rota, Tinian, and Saipan—lie in the southern end of the chain and have two climatic seasons: one dry from January to about June, the other wet from June to January. Guam receives nearly 100 inches of rain annually. The wet season produces a high incidence of tropical cyclonic storms, the most powerful of which are typhoons (called hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean and Eastern Pacific) with sustained winds higher than 74 miles per hour. Every few years Guam also experiences the cruel impacts of supertyphoons with sustained winds of 150 miles per hour or higher.

The Marianas are a natural geographic entity with a distinctive cultural and ethnic heritage from the indigenous Chamorro people. Today, the Marianas are divided into two partially self-governing colonies with differing political statuses under the sovereignty of the United States of America: the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (abbreviated as the CNMI and composed of Saipan, Tinian, Rota, and nearby islands), and the U.S. Territory of Guam. How they came to be separated by recurring foreign conquests is a subject of this history.

As the southernmost island, Guam sits almost dead center in the huge expanse of the western Pacific north of the equator. About half of that area is the politically distinct region of Micronesia, for which Guam serves as the commercial and military
hub. Micronesia is one of the three great insular regions—along with Polynesia and Melanesia—of Oceania, which in the past was at times included by Europeans and Americans in the “South Seas” or the “South Pacific.” In 1817, the Russian explorer Otto von Kotzebue appropriately called Micronesia the “First Province of the Great Ocean.”

Within that province on the great circle axis that crosses 5,000 miles of the Pacific between Hawai‘i and the Philippines, Guam is the largest island with a protected major harbor and sufficient land for several airports. Similarly, on the nearly 3,000-mile north-south axis from Japan to Papua New Guinea, Guam again is the largest and most useful landfall for communications, shipping, and military bases.

The Marianas also lie astride the northeast trade winds and the north equatorial ocean current that flows westward across the Pacific above the doldrums of the intertropical convergence zone along the equator. It was Ferdinand Magellan’s genius in the sixteenth century to follow the northeast trades when they blow strongest from January through March. The winds and the current carried him straight to the Marianas after he had rounded South America and turned westward. Ever since then, ships have used the same winds, the same current, and the same islands to cross the Pacific from east to west above the equator.

The history of Guam since European contact has been—and continues to be—determined primarily by outside colonial factors such as religion, commerce, and strategic politico-military considerations beyond the control of the Chamorro people. Guam, in short, was destined after Magellan to be a pawn in the realpolitik of foreign powers. As a consequence, alien military forces repeatedly invaded the island, and it has been occupied by outsiders for the incredible span of over 330 years. Yet the impact was not fatal, as it was for many other island peoples, notably in the Caribbean. The Chamorro people of Guam, small in numbers and vulnerable geographically, adapted to the harsh new conditions imposed by each tidal wave of conquerors. They were not just passive victims of their colonizers. In a remarkable feat of cultural endurance, they changed themselves and maintained their language, their integrity, and their pride under the often harsh colonial domination of three of history’s most powerful nation-states: Spain, Japan, and the United States of America. The indigenous identity—much changed but still distinct—survives, and the Chamorros have even regained a large measure of local political control of their island though Guam remains a colony in a postcolonial world. That survival against enormous adversity makes Guam and the Chamorro people special.

Now, in the twenty-first century, Americanized, modern, multiethnic, and still one of the world’s last colonies, Guam continues to fulfill the geopolitical role imposed on it by outsiders centuries ago. In place of Spanish galleons, Guam now serves international airlines, nuclear-powered submarines, space satellites, and all the other creations of modern humans that have followed for good or bad in Magellan’s momentous wake.

All this, however, was in the future as Magellan approached Guam in the month of March in the year 1521. This resourceful Portuguese captain, frustrated in service to his own king, had been sent in 1519 by Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain (as Charles I), to find the five Spice Islands of the Moluccas by sailing south around and then west beyond the still-mysterious New World found by Columbus only twenty-seven years earlier. Charles V wanted the sources of precious cloves and other spices for Spain before Portugal could claim them in the two kingdoms’ violent rivalry for empire. By 1519, the Portuguese were sailing around Africa and across the Indian Ocean to reach the Moluccas by sailing south around and then west beyond the still-mysterious New World found by Columbus only twenty-seven years earlier. Charles V wanted the sources of precious cloves and other spices for Spain before Portugal could claim them in the two kingdoms’ violent rivalry for empire. By 1519, the Portuguese were sailing around Africa and across the Indian Ocean to reach the Moluccas by sailing eastward.

Magellan successfully dodged Portuguese fleets hunting him in the Atlantic, and in late 1520 he threaded the dangerous straits that would bear his name on the southern tip of the New World. Then he struck out boldly into the Pacific Ocean with three sun-cracked and poorly provisioned ships: the Trinidad, the Concepción, and the Victoria. The flotilla first sailed northwestward into the Pacific from South America, sailing hundreds of miles south of and then westward beyond the Hawaiian Islands,
which were unknown to the Spaniards and other Europeans until the eighteenth century.

Magellan knew from experience in the Atlantic Ocean that oceanic trade winds blow steadily out of the northeast in a band above the 12º N latitude. He may have sought similar winds above the equator in order to traverse the Pacific above the southern latitudes, where the hostile Portuguese lurked in the East Indies. Magellan and some of his crew had served earlier under the Portuguese flag in the Moluccas and in the southern Philippines.

The route taken by Magellan across the Pacific was therefore not entirely an accident, but a calculated gamble. His general track was deliberate (he sought the equinoctial line of the celestial equator) even though the distances and the islands along the route were unknown to him and his pilots.

When the Spanish vessels were above the equator in the Pacific and into the trade winds, Magellan turned west and sailed downwind on a fairly steady course. By March 5 they had been sailing for over three months since departing South America. No inhabited islands were found, only a few silent palm-studded islets in an otherwise empty and endless ocean. It was the dry season in the tropics, and rain rarely fell to replenish the near-empty water casks. The crews had not yet learned to troll for the easily caught dolphin fish (dorado in Spanish and Coryphaena hippurus to marine biologists). These delicious gilded fish are plentiful in the Pacific in that season. Instead, Magellan and his crews ate rats, sawdust, and ox-hide rigging. Men began to sicken and die from a combination of thirst, semistarvation, and scurvy.

Nevertheless, the tattered little flotilla groped resolutely on across the great mother ocean of the world into longitudes beyond any known to Europeans at the time. These longitudes would soon unveil to them the Philippines. Before reaching the Philippines, however, Magellan’s flotilla would first land on Guam. If fate is preordained but destiny is not, then much of humankind’s loss of innocence on this island called earth is mirrored in the often tragic but inspiring history of the island of Guam since Magellan’s landfall.

This is the story of that special island, a small green oasis in the vast blue reaches of the Pacific Ocean. My purpose in telling this story is to reconcile the politics of human culture with historical event in an account of a specific colonial experience, an experience not yet ended.