My Parents’ Mindanao Mission

The Philippine archipelago stretches over one thousand miles and has seven thousand islands that extend from Namuao on the north shore of Luzon to Davao on Mindanao’s southern coast. Many of the islets are uninhabited but stunningly beautiful beacons of splendor. The entire archipelago, commonly known throughout Asia as the “Pearls of the Orient,” retains that title today, despite the long, bitter war with Japan, destructive volcanic eruptions, catastrophic earthquakes, and vicious typhoons.

After its victory in the Spanish-American War at the turn of the twentieth century, the United States assumed territorial rights in the Philippines. There America inherited a population of assorted Asian peoples; most had migrated from Malaysia to the archipelago centuries earlier and settled in regions accessible by sea. Following the war, the many American soldiers who remained integrated themselves into island life. Most married Filipinas. For decades after the American takeover, aborigine settlements in the mountains and along the coasts went largely unbothered.

One exception to this rule, the Davao region, had attracted American, Asian, and European executives and investment as early as the 1930s. The Great Depression in the United States prompted many Americans from the U.S. to seek jobs on plantations or with companies like General Motors, General Electric, and Colgate-Palmolive, which had come to the Philippines, drawn by the fertile soil and ore-rich mountains. The natural
harbor made Davao easily accessible, and the puppet Philippine government supported and even encouraged foreign business ventures of all kinds.

The largest populations of newcomers, the Japanese and Chinese, led the migration, and they created great wealth in the agricultural mecca of southern Mindanao. They also became commercially active, founding banks, clothing outlets, and large-scale plantations. The primary export was the highly valuable coconut oil, a derivative of copra.

Foreign investors profited from these economic pursuits, but their takeover of aboriginal lands unsettled the Atas, Bagobos, and Moros, native tribes that had occupied the area for centuries. Some aborigines eventually took on the project of getting rid of the intruders. Over a three-decade
period, approximately two thousand Japanese and Chinese land barons were beheaded.

This politically unstable but beautifully lush land became our home. My sisters and I were born in the Davao Mission Hospital in the years following the arrival of our young, vigorous, and adventuresome parents, Walter and Margaret (Peg) Tong, in 1931. They came to the Philippines at the invitation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in Boston, an organization which had its informal beginning in 1806, when a group of Williams College students dedicated their lives to serving the world at the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Initially, my parents were assigned to the Davao mission and hospital. The board could not have sent a more perfect duo to Davao. Soon afterward, the board encouraged Dad’s explorations into the mountainous aborigine regions, where he introduced more productive farming practices. Indeed, his athleticism, handsome features, broad smile, and warm persona opened many doors across southern Mindanao.

The entry of my sisters and me into multicultural Mindanao took place in the Davao Mission Hospital over a six-year span. Dr. Herbert Brokenshire delivered both Eloise (Wezer), my older sister, and Annarae (Rae), my younger sister. In the late summer of 1934, Doctora Baldomera Esteban Sexon, a diminutive and lovable Filipina surgeon, with the assistance of visiting Dr. Walter White, brought me into this world.

My mother enjoyed telling me about how in the nursery two Filipina babies and I were decked out in matching blue diapers in adjoining woven bamboo baskets. She called us the “Cosmopolitan Choir” as we sang out “praises of joy” to our excited fathers.

Our family home on Modapo Hill in Davao was my paradise. The hillside, a natural botanical garden, featured flowering trees, wild orchids, and bougainvillea vines of varying shades. My Filipino playmates lived on the bank of the hill in squatter shelters constructed with any available materials. We spoke either the common dialect of the province, Visayan, or Pidgin English and regularly gathered assorted fruits from the surrounding hillsides: mangos, papayas, guavas, durians, and so on.

Around the time of my third birthday, Matsumoto Katsuji, a devoted family friend, brought to my parents’ attention a leaflet from the marketplace with the heading, “The Orient for Orientals.” A supporter of aborigine interests, Matsumoto was an active Japanese Christian in Dad’s mission church, a fifteen-year resident of Davao, and head of the huge
Philippine-sponsored Ohta Plantation. His croplands differed from most others in that they had been legally purchased and were located within the greater Davao boundaries. Matsumoto had seen a number of these leaflets in Manila. Noting that identical leaflets had been distributed to Filipino business people in Davao in recent days, he cautioned my parents that the leaflet had a menacing “war gods” smell to it. “Let’s keep our eyes open,” he said.

Soon after Matsumoto’s warning, I accompanied Dad to a missionary meeting in Zamboanga on Mindanao’s western peninsula. There Reverend Henry Mattocks, an Anglican missionary from Great Britain, handed Dad a leaflet identical to the one Matsumoto had shared with him and informed Dad that Japanese residents of the province were circulating them. At breakfast, I was startled to hear Mrs. Mattocks challenge her daughter Cecily to clean her plate. “You’ll be glad to have it when the Japanese come,” she said. Dad learned in that exchange and subsequent conversations during the meetings that the foreign community in Zamboanga expected a Japanese takeover of the peninsula.

Throughout the early years of my childhood, persistent rumors of a coming war filtered into Mindanao. Threatening words in the form of radiocasts and leaflets out of Tokyo lent credence to the rumors and interrupted the peaceful routine of life in the Davao community. War conversations were as common as flies in the Davao City marketplace.

Still, correspondence from the Whitfield family in America only gave a hint of concern in Washington, D.C. about events in Europe and imparted no sense of threat about a possible war in America’s Pacific territories.

**Furlough to America: 1937–1938**

In the fall of 1937, my parents prepared for their ABCFM-required furlough to the United States, a respite from mission work for them and an occasion for my sisters and me to meet our American family and experience snow.

We departed from Manila on the German liner, *Hamburg*, stopping in Singapore and Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the Indian Ocean prior to passage through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea to Genoa, Italy. There, Dad and I temporarily separated from “the girls.” Mom was suffering from an inflammation of bone marrow in her left leg and continued the journey with Wezer and Rae on the *Hamburg* to Rotterdam, Netherlands.
“The boys” (Dad and I—then a curious three-year-old) boarded a train in Genoa and chugged through the Simplon Pass, the famed cut through and beneath the majestic Alps, to Basel, Switzerland. There, we boarded an inland ferry cruising northward on the Rhine River through Germany. I remember being scared when a pair of military customs officials at the German border harshly interrogated Dad. Fear made me attach myself like a barnacle to my dad’s sleeve throughout the remainder of our European passage.

During those days on the Rhine, I heard incessant martial music, especially the “Horst Wessel” (the Nazi anthem) whenever the boat approached a village stopover. In Mannheim, huge portraits of Adolf Hitler were displayed throughout the city. Swastika symbols appeared on the entryways of commercial buildings. Throughout the river voyage, the mesmerizing “Horst Wessel” so obsessed me that I began humming it in idle moments. Dad fully understood, but encouraged me to “keep it at a soft hum.”

At the German–Dutch border station in Köln, we were again held up for hours as troopers grilled Dad on his credentials. They insisted that he admit his real business in Germany. Their treatment so outraged my exasperated father that he, momentarily, put aside his pastoral vows and delivered a tongue-lashing of the two troopers in Visayan all the while maintaining a calm countenance. After much debate, the lead officer categorized him as an American tourist and waved us through the gate. I felt relief only when we reunited with the girls in Rotterdam.

For my sisters and me, the passage across the Atlantic was marred by boredom. Mom curbed our impatience by reciting the names of her sisters and brothers, as well as Dad’s siblings. She woke us early on the day of our arrival in New York so we would see the famed Statue of Liberty. Mom had told us the story of Miss Liberty many times during the voyage. As the sun rose over the Atlantic, Lady Liberty stood beautifully silhouetted against the New York skyline. The scene brought tears to Mom’s eyes, as did the dockside introductions of her three children to grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins.

From New York City, we traveled to Hackettstown, New Jersey, to stay with our grandparents, Richard and Mercy Whitfield. We met more Whitfields and Tongs days later in New Haven, Connecticut. I especially enjoyed my rides in Uncle Nathan Whitfield’s Lincoln car. Only his constant discourses about the economic failings of former President Herbert Hoover dampened the fun of those rides around New Haven.
Grandpa Tong made corrections to my grammar during our walks to the Yale baseball field, which helped my broken English considerably. Sadly, Grandpa died suddenly just a couple of months before our scheduled return to the Philippines. Contemplating what to do after losing her husband, my grandmother, Evelyn (Nana), volunteered to assist our family in any way she could. My parents considered Nana’s offer and invited her to accompany us back to the Philippines. She eagerly accepted.

A major question facing my parents and the American Board, though, was whether it would be safe for us to return. The board wired the State Department in Washington, asking for news of Japan’s intentions in the Pacific. The Philippine emissary in Washington responded, “Japan has no designs on American territories in the Pacific.” My parents were relieved at the good news, for they very much wished to return “home,” but not at the price of being caught in a war zone with three children and an aging grandmother.

In the spring of 1938, my parents acquired a second-hand Chevy. They planned to drive across the country to the Port of Vancouver in Canada and board the Empress of Russia. Ever the disciplinarian, sharp-tongued Nana kept order in the back seat as we drove through America’s “amber waves of grain” and “purple mountain majesties,” which awed all of us. Dad, much impressed with the condition of the highways, jokingly shared his wish to bring the road crews to Mindanao for a furlough.

For me, the highlight of the trip was seeing bears, moose, and elk in Yellowstone National Park. According to Dad, my sisters and I hollered “Stop!” every time we saw one of those animals. Nana was so taken by the hourly eruption of the Old Faithful geyser that it filled several pages of her diary and picture album. Yellowstone was a magnificent experience for all of us, and stories about the park became a prominent part of our family lore.

The Empress was dockside awaiting us in Vancouver. Memories of that sea voyage have brought me many bad dreams over the years. A storm in the North Pacific rocked the Empress, rolling waves over the deck. The crew ordered all passengers to go below deck and hang on to the safety hatches in the cabins. As I ran toward the stairwell, I looked back to see an elderly passenger swept overboard. Those on the bridge saw it, too, but it was too late to attempt a rescue. My childhood memories of a man being swept overboard have kept me from choosing travel by sea as an adult.

Following the custom of ocean voyages in the Pacific, the Empress dropped anchor at each major port in Southeast Asia. We stopped for
several days in Yokohama, Japan, a peaceful place where the Japanese were extremely gracious in their offers of rickshaw rides and other pleasures. The ambiance so impressed Mom and Dad that they forgot any thought of war with Japan. It seemed to them that Japan had no malicious intentions to intervene with the American protectorates, Hawai‘i and the Philippines. Nana and Mom became so taken with the lovely Japanese china that they made purchases to adorn our dining room table in Davao. (Within three years, a turn of fate would put that prized china back in Japanese hands.)

Only in Shanghai, China, where Japan had taken full control of economic interests and the Japanese Navy had “accidentally” sent the USS Panay to the bottom of the harbor, did my parents’ earlier concerns about Japan’s ambitions in East Asia come into focus again. Several American missionary families from Nanking boarded the Empress with us, hoping to find safe haven in the Philippines. They related how Japanese troops had slaughtered and raped thousands of Chinese women and children. Those conversations were my introduction to a world where people, when driven by forces of instinct, emotion, and greed will resort to killing innocents, even children. Once again, doubts about the safety of the Philippines crept into my parents’ thoughts.

Return to the Philippines

All of us were thankful when the Empress finally dropped anchor in Manila harbor. The following morning, before departing our hotel for a stroll, Dad gave his petite mother strict instructions about how to protect her valuables on Manila streets. Yet within seconds of stepping out of the hotel, Nana lost her handbag to a purse-snatcher. Mom, directly behind her, witnessed the theft and immediately gave chase, tackling the thief in an empty lot of canna plants, severely gashing her leg in the process.

An American soldier who witnessed Mom’s chase and reclamation of the purse, followed in a military two-seater. He apprehended the purse-snatcher and turned him over to a city police officer called to the scene. The soldier paged Dad at the hotel and then drove Mom to the hospital where she received multiple stitches. The attending police officer informed Dad and me that the thief would remain in jail for a two-week period. The next morning, however, Nana spotted the same thief on the sidewalk across the street from the hotel looking for new prey. It was a reminder of the rampant corruption in the islands’ urban areas.
Nana got a broader taste of life in the Philippines during our four-day journey on the *Mactan*, an inter-island freighter that took us from Manila to Davao. Bedding down at night in the extreme heat of the *Mactan*'s lower bowels was a nightmarish experience for her, but she bravely maintained her composure in the company of cockroaches, fleas, lice, and rats—our nightly bedmates. Each of the four nights aboard was the same. During our voyage, we ate only food and beverages purchased in Manila, Mom’s formula for survival aboard ferries. Her plan saved us from the dreaded dysentery. Almost all other passengers were stricken with diarrhea and worse. Inter-island vessels also had poor safety records. Sinkings due to overloading, unpredictable currents, and stormy seas were commonplace.

The loyal and loving Dr. Herbert Brokenshire stood tall as he met us at the Davao pier. He was the lead surgeon at the Mission Hospital and Dad’s strong ally in serving Davao. Doctora Sexon and Mr. Matsumoto also greeted us upon our arrival. In our newly assigned home on the hospital grounds, our “house girl” Leonie and amah Sixta had prepared a bountiful supper for us all. Afterward, the adult guests updated us on changes in the area during our absence.

They also told us about the large numbers of Japanese civilians who had swept into Davao during our absence. Most were officially tied to local plantations or commercial enterprises in the city. Especially worrisome to Mr. Matsumoto was the fact that a similar swelling of Japanese ranks was occurring in Manila, Baguio, Cebu, Iloilo, and Zamboanga. He found the sudden growth of the Japanese presence in the region suspicious. Matsumoto reported that almost every ship anchoring in Davao Harbor was unloading Japanese nationals by the hundreds; almost all of these were young men with no prearranged employment. He guessed that most were émigrés, not immigrants, and his conversations with various groups of the newcomers supported his suspicions.

Both doctors, Brokenshire and Sexon, spoke of the increase of Japanese patients in the hospital. Numbers had more than doubled during a six-month period. Sexon, in particular, worried aloud about the safety of our family should Japanese military incursions in nearby Asian countries spread to the Philippines.

The following day, with increasing concern for our safety, Dad forwarded a wire to the emissary of the U.S. Diplomatic Mission in Manila. He cited the immense growth of Japanese presence in Davao and other observations shared by Brokenshire, Sexon, and Matsumoto. He was very
curious as to the emissary’s current position on the topic of a Japanese threat. The wire in response was immediate, simple, and reassuring: “Reverend Tong: There is no cause for concern. We have been assured that Japan respects American territories in the Pacific.”

With that official pronouncement, Dad began preparations to reacquaint himself with the several Bagobo tribes with whom he had developed a warm relationship prior to our furlough in the States. Mom worked on matters related to the Davao church, and Nana became involved with Filipina women’s groups in the city and started a knitting club, which within months had a hundred women knitting socks and gloves for shipment to the needy in China and England.

Nana also agreed to oversee my energetic and curious play. As I looked for ways to amuse myself, I often ended up getting into trouble. One escapade involved chasing some newborn chicks. Unfortunately, I stepped on one chick and killed it, resulting in my first severe scolding by Nana—but it would not be the last.

Wezer assisted in my next adventure. We placed a praying mantis we wanted to keep as a pet in a jar with jacaranda blossoms on the dining room table. The next morning we discovered a multitude of hatchlings praying all over the house. Nana was furious!

Finally, one morning while Nana was leading a crochet class at the Davao Community Church, Leonie had granted permission for a neighbor boy and me to look for frogs in a shallow marsh behind the hospital. The first frog we came upon was noisily attempting to escape the jaws of a baby boa. Together, we carried the boa to the house to show Leonie. (It truly was only a grass snake, but to a couple of five-year-olds, all snakes on Mindanao were “boas.”) After hearing our dog Army barking, the serpent escaped my grasp and slithered into Nana’s bedroom. Our frantic efforts to retrieve the snake failed. My dad eventually located and captured the snake, but I still felt Nana’s wrath.

That evening, Dad informed me that soon I would be traveling north with him for a week of visits to aboriginal barrios in the mountains of Mindanao. In part, he made this decision to free Nana from watching over me. I was excited that Dad had decided to rekindle our Rhine River partnership and take me on an adventure.

Mom was less keen about the plan. Only after Dad had pledged that our trip would not exceed a week did she agree. For all Nana’s desire that her son spend more time with me, the idea of my going with Dad to
Bagobo country did not sit well with her either. She had never seen a Bagobo, but the name sounded sufficiently frightening to prompt a nay vote from her. Nevertheless, Dad took me with him.

Adventure in Bagobo Country

We set out toward Cotabato in the Chevy that had arrived with us from America. The drive on deeply pockmarked roads took more than five hours. I noticed as we neared a village that many of the wooded foothills were afire. Dad explained that the fires were set by Filipinos to make room for constructing huts and planting crops. The scene was a reminder to Dad to discuss the impact of such burns with leaders in Cotabato on his next visit there. He felt strongly that continued burning of the forest would cause massive hillside erosion and could be catastrophic to the area over time.

We reached the Cotabato River in mid-afternoon only to discover the wooden bridge had been washed away. The two young Bagobo men who would be our guides waved at us from the trail on the other side of the river. They were clad in the traditional knee-length pants of woven hemp, and they signaled for us to wait. Then, using their sharp bolos, they cut logs to size and bound them together with vines. Their construction took several hours, but thanks to their genius with the forest materials at hand, a raft was born. During our wait on the opposite shore, Dad secured the Chevy at the nearby home of a Filipino pastor. Using two huge “paddle pokers” (a long wooden pole with a broad flattened edge on one end and a dulled point at the other), the men overcame the strong current and pulled the raft to where we could jump aboard.

The Bagobo crew helped load our two burlap bags onto the raft, then pushed off into the swollen waters, angling toward the opposite bank about fifty yards away. The river was not rocky, so Dad was not worried about my safety. But as we neared midstream, two crocodiles, common to the rivers in central Mindanao, took an interest in our raft and its cargo. “Jumping Jehosaphat!” muttered Dad, using his favorite expression of surprise. He nudged me toward the middle of the floating platform. With the pokers, the Bagobos splashed water in front of the curious crocs to slow their advance. When the raft stopped abruptly against a large tree root at the edge of the opposite bank, we waded quickly ashore.

On shore, Dad and I realized we had dozens of leeches clinging to our legs. We quickly picked them off each other. As the two Bagobos dragged
the raft up the embankment, I could see that neither of them had any leeches on their bodies. I curiously stared at their leech-free bodies. They smiled broadly at me, and I noticed that their four front teeth were like v-shaped saw blades. One had black teeth, the other red. Dad explained to me that the coloration depended on whether they chewed black or red betel nut. Bagobo men chewed betel nut like children on Coney Island chewed gum. Over time, the betel nut juice permanently stained the tooth enamel. Upon our arrival at the barrio (village) late that afternoon, I was amazed to watch two women filing their own teeth into the traditional v-shape.

Hiking with our guides over bolo-cleared paths was arduous. The narrow trails were damp, overgrown, and like the river’s edge, home to leeches. It was near sunset when we entered a small clearing. The whole village, anticipating our arrival, met us at the trail’s end. I was astonished by the excitement Dad caused among the Bagobos, the women especially. They wore broad smiles and made wild welcoming gestures when they saw his rugged figure and warm smile again. Dad had told me what to expect, so I was not alarmed when the giggling women and children took turns touching my hair, which was bleached almost white from the Davao sun. My white hair was as much a novelty to them as their red v-shaped teeth were to me. Their curiosity and friendly fondling eased my dad’s earlier anxieties about their reception to a strange-looking child in their midst.

I was surprised to see that the young boys wore no clothing and that the girls wore only a triangular pubic shield held in place by a string around the waist. The women were fully dressed in brightly decorated hemp cloth, and huge ivory earrings about the size of a tin can lid hung from their earlobes. Like the men, they wore beaded necklaces. Our late arrival in the barrio had put us behind schedule at the very outset of our trip. Dad, therefore, readily accepted their invitation to stay overnight. They fed us supper, a sticky gumbo soup with hard bread made of cassava flour, which I found filling but not tasty. Then we joined one of the families in their hut for the night.

The village’s seven nipa huts with their banana-leaf roofs stood elevated eight to ten feet above the ground on bamboo poles buried in the baked soil. We climbed a bamboo ladder to an open room, the sleeping quarters for the entire family—altogether fourteen people, counting Dad and me. Dad and I slept on a mat of woven hemp. Most others slept directly on the tightly woven, stripped bamboo floor. Even though we filled the room to overflowing, I heard no conversation, giggling, or human movement until
the roosters below the hut crowed in the new day. The roosters below us seemed in cahoots with their cousins under the other huts as all the birds chimed together in a morning chorus. Dogs, cats, chickens, and a noisy pig joined in the choir.

As we prepared to depart the village, I followed Dad to the toilet, a shallow pit in the ground at the clearing’s edge. Then we had an early breakfast of a sort of bacon and porridge. Before we left, an elderly man showed me his family treasures: two human skulls displayed as decorative items on a shelf near the stove. Dad, having seen the skullsPreviously, had forewarned me that they would be proudly pointed out to me. Although he had not asked, Dad surmised that the skulls had once been attached to Japanese or Chinese necks, since years before, settlers from Japan had taken over large tracts of fertile Bagobo land with the support of the Philippine government, which shared in the profits from copra and sugar. It took twenty years and the accumulation of about four hundred such skulls displayed on Bagobo shelves before the theft of aboriginal lands came to a halt.

Narrow paths through the forest connected the small Bagobo barrios, which sat five to eight kilometers apart. We walked about forty kilometers during our journey, stopping at five barrios. I found the hikes more difficult with each passing day. The extreme heat, unforgiving terrain, and unusually heavy undergrowth infested with leeches had me counting the days until we would return to Davao. At one hamlet, our guides obtained a potion of some kind which, when applied to our skin, thankfully lessened the number of leeches that attached themselves to our bodies.

It was late afternoon when we trudged into our next-to-last hamlet. As darkness fell, Dad lifted me onto a high-hanging outdoor hammock for the night. After spending some time demonstrating to several Bagobo men how to dry pig manure before applying it to the soil, Dad climbed onto a high stool and joined me in hammock heaven.

Our guides rose early, carrying hardened bread for our travels. Foremost on Dad’s mind was completing the visits on schedule, so as not to worry our family in Davao. The guides led us on a long walk to a hamlet near the river we had crossed by raft a week earlier. At noontime, the red-toothed Bagobo, stick in hand, drew a circular path in the dirt for me, which mapped the river’s location and where we had been. I realized then that our eight-day venture had simply taken us on a long circuitous route.

Several hours later, as we approached a cluster of huts in a clearing, strange wailing sounds coming from a group of women and children
standing under one of the huts startled us. One of our guides translated an elderly woman’s frenzied explanation into Visayan. Between loud sobs and pointing toward a hut where a group of women were standing, she related that shortly before our arrival a huge python swallowed a week-old infant lying unattended on a mat under the hut. The baby’s older sister had seen the final moments of the attack and the python slithering away, but her shouts came too late. The young girl pointed to where the snake had reentered the forest and the men of the barrio gathered their bolos and within minutes disappeared into the heavy foliage in search of the snake.

Long hours passed and Dad decided to remain in the barrio overnight to help console the stricken mother and family until the return of her mate and the hunters. Well past sundown, the search party returned carrying a headless twenty-foot python stretched over their shoulders; the meat would feed the barrio for several days.

I spent that night in a hut with other restless children. The thought of a baby in a snake’s belly shook me. Sleep came only intermittently as I replayed over and over again thoughts of a baby inside a python. Dad stayed up until nearly midnight trying to comfort the group of men and women who sat around a fire in the clearing. Morning could not come soon enough for me! Shortly after daybreak, our guides led us from the bereaved Bagobos, and together we walked in sad silence to the river.

At the river’s edge, we noted that the water level was down considerably. No crocodiles were visible, and the guides easily poled the raft across to where our Chevy was waiting. Dad opened the trunk and handed the two men a large box of shirts for distribution in the barrios. Lightweight shirts were very popular among the Bagobo men.

The six girls of our Davao household were noticeably relieved at the sight of the Chevy pulling up beside the house near suppertime. I was happy to be home, too.

Growing Fears of War

Soon after our return, Mom alerted Dad to growing war concerns Mr. Matsumoto had shared with her. Dad agreed to meet with him the following morning. Matsumoto spoke of Japanese “businessmen” who had recently arrived in Davao gathering “valuable tactical information about the area for use by Japanese generals.” He advised Dad to send his mother and family back to the States “before it is too late.”
Dad asked Matsumoto to explore travel options for Nana on one of the ships transporting Japanese nationals to Davao. Matsumoto was repeatedly denied a booking. Months passed. Then, in the spring of 1940, he informed my parents that the Japanese freighter Kitano Maru would soon arrive in Davao and could take on two additional passengers. Five days later, Nana was on her way to Australia. She arrived in the States almost six weeks later on a Swedish vessel out of Brisbane.

It was a difficult good-bye for Nana because she had come to love Davao and her Filipina friends. But she had also concluded that she should return to America. For the first time, she offered no challenge to Dad’s strong recommendation. In the days following Nana’s departure, I had an empty feeling when I awoke each morning.

Shortly after she left, Dr. Brokenshire told our family that he had received orders to report immediately to the United States Subic Bay Naval Base in Manila. He was given the rank of lieutenant commander and assigned the role of chief surgeon. His was yet another sad farewell that foreshadowed difficult days ahead in the Philippines.

Following Nana’s counsel to spend more time with the family, Dad arranged for several outings with my sisters and me. I became his right-hand man on our first venture to an aborigine village north of the city, where Dad had frequently dug for artifacts with several Bagobo friends. There we gathered broken pieces of ancient earthenware, which Dad enjoyed piecing together into their original shapes.

Soon afterward, Dad, Wezer, and I boarded a small fishing boat to Kiamba in southern Mindanao along the Celebes Sea. Kiamba is a mountainous area known for its colorful birds. While Dad attended meetings, a young Filipino couple he knew well took us on a hike to a site where we might see large monkeys. We enjoyed chattering back and forth with the monkeys as they showed off their acrobatic talents in the treetops. The monkeys seemed far more noisy and inquisitive than those at home on Modapo Hill. We also spotted a few brightly colored birds called “peenees.” I was thrilled to watch wild creatures cavorting in their natural habitats. Unfortunately, Dad’s meetings kept him from sharing in the excitement.

A few weeks later on a sparkling clear day, Mom and Dad drove my sisters and me to the village of Calinan along the Davao River. From there the view of the Philippines’ highest mountain, Mt. Apo, was breathtaking. Dad spoke often of his wish to climb the conical shaped volcano one day. That dream was realized when, with his young handyman pal, Bob
Crytsor, he managed the steep and rugged climb to the summit in the spring of 1941. At the nearby Philippine Eagle Conservation Area, we saw two eagles perched atop a tree overlooking the river. One performed a graceful dive into the smooth waters, emerging with a fish firmly held in its beak. On our ride home, Dad’s reflections on our eagle sighting stimulated his nagging worry about war, “I hope that the American eagle is as attentive to movement in the Pacific as that Philippine eagle is to the fish in the river.”

In March 1941, Dad drove to Midsayap to meet Alvin and Marilee Scaff. Both were young and adventuresome missionaries stationed in Dansalan on the north shore of Lake Lanao in northern Mindanao. The Scaffs returned with him to Davao to acquaint themselves with the mission programs in the southern regions. They immediately noticed the large Japanese presence in the city, and it stunned them. Marilee, noting the abundance of natural resources in the area, wrote in a letter to her mother: “If the United States should get into a war with Japan, Mindanao . . . with no single army base on it . . . would be juicy meat. I think Japan could have it at the taking.” The Scaffs would later be captured and imprisoned in the Los Baños prison camp after hiding out for months with other missionary friends in the hills of Negros Island, which lies north of Mindanao and is home of the American Board’s Silliman University. One family was more fortunate and managed to rendezvous with an American submarine after a late-night escape by banca (a wide rowboat) from Negros.

In the summer of 1941, my parents decided that my sisters and I needed a change from the school and social scene in Davao. The peculiar behavior of Wezer’s lone playmate and neighbor, Arcella Zamora, encouraged their decision. Dad described Arcella as “emotionally unstable and as full of superstitions and fears as Army (our dog) has fleas.” To my parents’ further annoyance, Wezer was regularly urged to join the Zamora children’s ritual of “plucking gray hair from their father’s head,” a common practice in many Filipino homes because gray hair was considered unattractive. I, too, was called upon to pluck Mr. Zamora’s hair, but I refused. My parents, having learned that Brent School in Baguio served many missionary children in the islands and had a reputation as a challenging educational institution, decided to enroll us there.

To my delight, only days prior to our planned departure from Davao, the USS Langley, a small aircraft carrier, dropped anchor in the harbor. We watched excitedly from the pier as twelve fighter-bombers took off from
Langley's deck in a display I had never before seen. Wezer wondered aloud if that flyover was a message to Japan to stay away from the Philippines.

Matsumoto informed Dad the following day that Tokyo's public radio response to the Langley's aggressiveness was a warning to the United States. The very presence of the carrier in Davao represents a “violation of American rights in the Orient,” said the announcer. This was a clear indication that Japan held no respect for America's claim to possession of the Philippines.

With enrollment at Brent School arranged, my parents decided that Mom would accompany us to Baguio in August and remain with us through the school year. This decision was extremely difficult for both of my parents. Having to leave my father in Davao, eleven days distant from Baguio, created stress and anxiety in all of us.

I was pained at the mere idea of leaving Dad. Our adventures together had forged a strong and binding love. Even knowing that he planned to join us in Baguio for Thanksgiving, I struggled to hold back tears as we waved farewell from the boat deck. We left Dad on the pier standing with our devoted house girls, Sixta and Leonie, and our dog Army.