



**Larry Cashman, the
Irredeemable Coward**

Chapter 7

The Philippines

It didn't take long for the next terrorist attack on the US Embassy in Jakarta to occur. The perpetrator, a graduate of the infamous Al Qaeda School for Bomb Making, tried to throw a bomb over the Embassy wall. Fortunately for the Embassy, the bomber was a truant who chronically cut classes to watch salacious pornographic videos; and missed the lecture that described needing a fuse long enough to allow sufficient time to light the fuse and then toss the bomb over a wall. Charred pictures of Connie Lingus, Cherry Poppins, and a very young Stormy Daniels were later found among the bomber's incinerated remains. As a future US President would attest, "...at least he had good taste....".

So there I was, in Jakarta, mulling over the fact that the immediate future did not bode well. There were bound to be more terrorist attacks, while at the same time I was unhappily engaged in a contentious relationship with the self-righteous assholes at the Jakarta Embassy, not to mention my run-ins with Javanese evil spirits and black magic. The writing seemed to be on the proverbial wall; namely it was high time for me to leave town and as soon as possible. My family and I had been in Indonesia for more than 10 years. It was time for a change.

As I've always said, I'd rather be lucky than smart or competent, and once again serendipity came to the rescue. Out of the blue, while pondering my fate, I received a call from Dr. P, who was now working at the US Embassy in the Philippines. He was calling from Manila.

"Cashman, I want you to come to the Philippines and work with me. I want to reprise our 'Special Arrangement' because I need your help to develop new projects. The people that I work with here are fantastic. Our counterparts in the Philippine Government are some of the nicest and most competent people I ever met. And, you will be happy to learn, the US Embassy in Manila has a 'No Assholes Allowed' policy; and I know how much you hate dealing with assholes. I have a strange feeling that you and Sabrina would like it here."

Dr. P had earlier departed from Indonesia to become the Director of the Health and Population Program at the US Embassy in Manila, Philippines. In our correspondence since his departure, he had waxed fantastic about his counterparts in the Philippine government; and how much help was needed

after the mess left by the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Dr. P had considerable resources at his disposal and he needed help to deploy them productively.

I didn't know much about the Philippines when Dr. P called me in 1991. What I soon learned was that the dictator and kleptomaniac, Ferdinand Marcos, spent the years from 1972 until his ouster in a People's Power revolution in 1986, turning a vibrant Philippine democracy into his own personal fiefdom and cash register. During that time he silenced all dissent, imprisoned or exiled the political opposition, destroyed the Philippine institutions of democracy, and expropriated the country's wealth for himself, his family, and his cronies. Marcos was a first class scumbag, but I had to give him some credit. When it came time to rape, pillage, and plunder his country, he was one of the best. Bashar Assad and Nicholas Maduro are amateurs compared to Marcos.

After Marcos' ouster, Corazon Aquino, the wife of the prominent opposition politician Benigno Aquino¹ who was assassinated in 1983, was elected president in 1986. Because of the devastation left by 14 years of Marcos' misrule, financial recklessness, and his kleptomania, the Aquino administration faced serious fiscal, economic and governance challenges. There were nine coup-d'état attempts to overthrow the Aquino government between 1986 and 1990; all unsuccessful.

Sometimes it's best not to know too much, so I welcomed Dr. P's invitation to join him in the Philippines. Sabrina, Carmencita, Katerina and I moved our entire household to Manila², the capital of the Philippines, in June 1991.



The old walled city of Intramuros in Manila

Manila was the quintessential Southeast Asian megalopolis, and similar to Jakarta in many ways. Both were old cities. Manila was founded in 1571 while Jakarta was established in 1619. Both cities had tropical climates and were densely populated with horrendous traffic jams. Both were a veritable mélange of culture and history. The Philippine archipelago contained more than 7,000 islands while Indonesia was made up of 14,000 islands. Both countries had numerous ethnic and linguistic groups.

¹ Benigno (Ninoy) Aquino was a senator and longtime political opponent of Ferdinand Marcos. He was shot on the tarmac of Manila airport upon returning to the Philippines after a three-year self-imposed exile in the US. Although it was never definitively proved, it was widely believed that Marcos ordered his assassination.

² The city of Manila is one of 16 cities in Metro-Manila, which comprises the Manila metropolitan area and is also referred to as the National Capital Region. Other cities in Metro-Manila are Makati, Mandaluyong, Quezon City and Pasay City. In 2020 Metro-Manila's population was 12.8 million people; the City of Manila's population was 1.8 million people. When referring to "Manila" in this chapter, I am referring to "Metro-Manila."

Our first order of business was finding a house to rent. Unlike Jakarta, the US Embassy in Manila didn't provide housing for its employees. Instead, it provided a special "living allowance," and employees were expected to make their own arrangements for housing. This was convenient, as it allowed Sabrina to explore the neighborhoods and homes she liked rather than accept what was provided by the Embassy. She struck gold in Manila. We rented a beautiful Spanish colonial style hacienda in the residential neighborhood of Das Mariñas Village in Makati, Manila's central business district.

The house was owned by Alexia Faustino. This name initially meant nothing to me. When I mentioned it to my Filipino friends, however, every one of them knew who she was. Alexia Faustino was commonly known as the "Marilyn Monroe of the Philippines," the most beautiful woman in 1960s Philippine cinema. She dominated movie dramas and romantic comedies in the sixties, and played opposite the most dashing Filipino leading men, many of whom later went on to become politicians.

It had been 25 long years and about 50 lbs. since Alexia Faustino's heyday in Philippine cinema, and the years had not been kind to her. She no longer resembled a movie queen and national sex symbol. Now she looked more like an aging hippopotamus. During our negotiations for the house, she would occasionally take short breaks to graze on the lawn or munch on a large box of imported chocolates. But I must admit, she was a really nice hippopotamus, so we quickly concluded our negotiations. We lived in her Spanish hacienda in Makati for the next four years.

On June 15, 1991, exactly two weeks after our arrival, Mt. Pinatubo erupted. It was the second largest volcanic eruption of the 20th century, sending a cloud of volcanic ash 22 miles into the atmosphere which eventually landed hundreds of miles in the radius of Pinatubo. Since Mt. Pinatubo was situated only 55 miles northwest of Manila, an enormous amount of volcanic ash rained down on the nation's capital for what seemed like an endless number of days.



The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo

At exactly the same time that this was occurring, Typhoon Yunya struck the area surrounding Pinatubo, mixing rain with the ash. This gooey mass soon blanketed the entire countryside; and created pyroclastic flows called *lahar* that rumbled down Pinatubo's slopes, buried towns and villages, and filled once deep valleys with volcanic deposits 200 meters thick. More than 700 people were killed from the eruption and its aftermath. The economic cost was estimated to be \$750 million.

During my insulated life I had never been this close to a volcanic eruption or a typhoon; never mind both calamities occurring at the same time. This double whammy took place only two weeks after our arrival, so I excitedly asked Dr. P, during one of early morning tete-a-tetes, if these types of natural catastrophes happened frequently.



Baguio City Earthquake 1990

“Well there was the earthquake last year that destroyed Baguio City, causing many casualties.³ It destroyed quite a few buildings in Manila as well, causing panic and even stampedes. On the other hand the earthquakes in Bohol and Panay⁴ last year were not quite as bad. However, there have been reports of some scary tremors this year, but nothing major yet.”

I gagged when I heard this. “Wait a minute!! Earthquakes, casualties, stampedes, panic? What are you talking about?”

But Dr. P wasn’t finished. “I should add that last year was a rather bad year for typhoons The Philippines lies in the path of many tropical storms and you can be sure that at least one massive typhoon will strike somewhere each year and inflict severe damage and casualties.”

“Dr. P, are you shitting me? Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Oh, I guess I forgot.” Dr. P was almost apologetic. “By the way Cashman, did I mention the communist insurrection and the Muslim insurgency plaguing the Philippines? Several staff from other embassies have already been kidnapped this year. We have to be careful when traveling.”

Dr. P took this opportunity to explain some things I didn’t know. The Philippines lies right in the middle of the world’s most active typhoon belt and is the most exposed country in the world to tropical storms. On average approximately 20 tropical cyclones slam into the Philippines every year. Ten of these will be classified as typhoons, and five will have enough strength to cause major destruction. To make matters worse, the Philippine Islands sit right along the Pacific Ring of Fire⁵, a geologic region where most of the world’s earthquakes occur and where most volcanoes can be found. In fact the Philippines was home to 20 active volcanoes!

What I also didn’t know was that, in addition to the political instability plaguing the Philippines following the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos, there was also an ongoing communist rebellion, and a Muslim insurgency in the southern island of Mindanao.⁶ As the Philippines approached its first democratic

³ Baguio City is located in mountains 124 miles north of Manila. A magnitude 7.5 earthquake rattled the city in 1990, causing massive damage and killing 2,412 people.

⁴ Panay and Bohol are islands in the central, or Visayan, region of the Philippines.

⁵ The Pacific Ring of Fire is an arc around the Pacific Ocean containing many active volcanoes and is a region where earthquakes frequently occur. The Ring of Fire includes New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Alaska, and nearly the entire west coast of North and South America. It is the site of around 90 percent of the world’s earthquakes and is home to 75 percent of the world’s active and dormant volcanoes.

⁶ The communist New People’s Army (NPA) had been fighting to establish a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist state in the Philippines since 1969. The Muslim separatist movements represented by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and a breakaway faction, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), had been fighting for sovereignty in the southern island of Mindanao since 1973.

presidential election in 1992 since the end of the Marcos dictatorship, the country's internal stability was in a very precarious situation.

I nearly vomited when I heard this litany of dangers that I could easily encounter over the next couple of years. Communist insurrections!! Muslim insurgencies!! Typhoons, earthquakes, and volcanoes!! Kidnappings!! These are not occasions for the faint of heart, much less for a coward who is afraid of clowns and ghosts.

Usually it was Dr. P who was impatient with me. Now the tables were turned. I didn't need to hear any more. I know when it's time to cut and run, and this was the time. "This sounds extremely dangerous," I exclaimed irritably. "If I had known about all of these hazards, I would never have agreed to come. I'm getting out of here."

"Calm down Cashman. I know what a candy-ass you are. If I mentioned even one of these 'hazards,' as you call them, you would never come here. Yes, I agree, there are the occasional volcanoes and typhoons and insurgencies. But the working environment here is phenomenal. I have never worked with such competent and friendly people, both in the government and in the Embassy. If we reprise our 'Special Arrangement,' I will make sure no one bothers you."

Dr. P had a point there. The cultural clash between those white, Anglo-Saxon, religious fundamentalists at the Embassy and my crude New York City demeanor had caused me untold misery in Jakarta. In my two weeks in Manila, our colleagues at the Embassy had been nothing but helpful. I had met several of our counterparts at the Philippine Department of Health — Mariano Tanglaw, the Undersecretary of Health; Raphael Gatmaitan, the Undersecretary for Management; Miguel Dalidig, the Undersecretary for Infectious Diseases — and they were all brilliant and great guys to boot. The work situation in Manila was indeed excellent and something I would not easily find elsewhere.

But I was nevertheless petrified that somehow I would get kidnapped by Muslim insurgents. Dr. P could see that I wasn't convinced so he added, "And don't forget the scuba diving. The Philippines has some of the best diving in the world. I know how you like to boast about your diving adventures. You can be diving every weekend here."

The diving certainly made a difference. Suddenly I began daydreaming about the great diving I had heard about in the Philippines. Interrupting my reverie, Dr. P was now the one who was losing his patience.

"By the way, Cashman, should I also remind you that you have already signed a contract for the next four years? You're not going anywhere and, for now at least, I'm finished humoring you. So kindly gather up your things. We have to go to work."

Dr. P was right. Living and working in the Philippines was phenomenal. He and I got right down to business developing new projects — HIV/AIDS prevention and control, health financing, early childhood development, primary health care. Our colleagues at the Department of Health were the best. No one from the Embassy ever bothered us. The Filipino people were wonderful. And the diving was out of this world.

Several months after our arrival in Manila Andrew Jackson Poole,⁷ my old buddy from the University of Hawaii, came to town. He worked for a shady global telecommunications company selling the latest communications technology to any government or insurgent group that could pay the price. He was a wheeler dealer and scam artist extraordinaire, two characteristics I admired.

In recent years he began selling light arms and explosives as a sideline – some M-16s and AK 47s here, some nitroglycerin and TNT there, and the occasional grenade launcher and landmine. Many of his communications technology customers needed both, so he did package deals. His clients read like a Who's Who of nefarious characters — Saudi Arabian princes, Afghan warlords, South African white supremacists, Angolan rebels, Cambodian psychopaths, Libyan dictators, and Russian oligarchs. If there was a deal in the air, Andrew Jackson could smell it. He visited us in Bangkok and Jakarta, so I was not surprised when one day, from out of the blue, he showed up in Manila.

Since we lived in a villa with staff, a swimming pool, and lavish guest quarters, Andrew Jackson moved right in with us when he visited Manila. During daytime hours he would slink around town, furtively meeting his clients (communist rebels and Islamic insurgents among them), then take us out to dinner at Manila's finest restaurants on his expense account. We had a great time whenever Andrew Jackson came to town.

It was the second week of Andrew Jackson's visit when Alexia Faustino invited us to a dinner party at her mansion in Forbes Park.⁸ It would be a gala affair, with attendees from Manila's political and entertainment community. For a minor leaguer like me this was a chance to see how Manila's high society lived. Sabrina had other engagements that night so I asked Andrew Jackson to tag along. For him it was a business opportunity.

Alexia's mansion was breathtaking. It was huge, built in the Spanish colonial style, and had a massive outdoor area encircling the pool, where 30-40 tables were adorned with lavish place settings. Alexia greeted us as we entered, and after exchanging pleasantries, escorted us to our table. By chance, I was assigned a seat next to Senator Ricardo Santiago, one of the country's leading Senators.⁹ He had also been Alexia's leading man in many movies that they starred in together during the 1960s. Alexia introduced us.



Alexia Faustino's mansion in Forbes Park

"This is Dr. Cashman. He is renting my home in Das Mariñas village."

⁷ I had met Andrew Jackson Poole at the University of Hawaii in 1978, where he and I smoked weed, went to the beach, drank whiskey, and engaged in assorted nefarious activities while our wives worked full time and supported us. See Volume 1, Chapter 10 for a description of Andrew Jackson Poole's antics.

⁸ Forbes Park is the most elite residential community in Metro-Manila, home to the rich and famous.

⁹ There are 24 Senators in the Philippines, each elected for a six year term. Unlike the US, where Senators represent a state and are elected by voters in that state only, Senators in the Philippines are elected at-large, which means that each senator must obtain a plurality of nationwide votes. Because of the limited number of senators and their national recognition, Senators in the Philippines wield substantial political power.

“Just call me Cashman. Everyone does,” I quickly added.

The Senator responded with monumental disinterest, obviously peeved that he had to sit next to an inconsequential lightweight. He nodded to me perfunctorily as he inhaled his cigarette. His aide, however, was more congenial and engaged us in conversation, while the Senator gazed off into the distance.

When the conversation got around to employment, and I told the aide that I worked at the US Embassy, Senator Santiago stopped short. “You work at the US Embassy? Do you know anything about the negotiations on the Clark and Subic Bases Agreement?”

Clark Air Force Base and Subic Naval Base were prominent US military facilities in the Philippines. Both had played critical roles as forward support bases during the Vietnam War. Within the Philippines, however, they were widely viewed as a vestige of colonialism, an infringement on Philippine sovereignty, and a source of interference in the country's internal affairs.

From 1988 to 1991 the US and Philippine governments tried to renegotiate an extension of the lease agreement for the military bases at Clark and Subic. It was a contentious negotiation. Any agreement had to be ratified by the Philippine Senate. A group of senators was fiercely opposed to any agreement to renew the leases because the bases violated Philippine sovereignty. Ricardo Santiago was chief among the antagonists.

The US, on the other hand, was less interested in Clark and Subic after both were heavily damaged by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. Both sites were situated within 15 km. of the eruption. In fact Clark Air Force Base had been so heavily damaged that it had to be abandoned.

I knew absolutely nothing about these negotiations. It was light years above my pay grade, which is what I told the Senator. All of a sudden Andrew Jackson, who had been silent up to this time, interjected, “Don’t be so modest Cashman. You sure knew a lot about it when you described the negotiations to me last week. You even met with Richard Armitage to discuss it.” The Senator’s eyes lit up when he heard that.

Richard Armitage was the senior US diplomat negotiating the Base Lease Renewal Agreement with the Philippine government. He was currently in Manila engaged in tense negotiations. People like Richard Armitage didn’t waste their time with flunkies like me. But it sure got the Senator’s attention when he heard Armitage’s name.

Andrew Jackson pushed me aside so he could confer directly with the Senator. “Why did you ask Senator?” After that Andrew Jackson Poole, Senator Ricardo Santiago, and his aide huddled in intense conversation, and eventually stole away to get some privacy.

When Andrew Jackson returned to the table, I grabbed him by his shirt collar and asked excitedly, “What have you been up to?” Knowing Andrew Jackson as I did, I was certain that he was up to no good. “Be quiet. I’ll tell you everything when we get home.”

When we arrived home, Andrew Jackson recounted the results of his discussion. He had made a deal with Senator Santiago. He would provide the Senator with secret details of the US negotiating position and strategy on the Base Lease Renewal Agreement. In return, the Senator would give him the

inside track on a large telecommunications contract that would soon be tendered by the Philippine government.

Andrew Jackson was elated. "This is a fantastic opportunity. And I thought I would be going home empty handed, except for that piddling arms deal I signed with those cheapskates in the Communist New People's Army. Now I may obtain this new and substantial telecommunications deal. That was great work, Cashman." As you can see, Andrew Jackson was an equal opportunity scalawag.

"I know nothing about the U.S. military base negotiations. Where will you find out about the US negotiating position?"

"Do you mean that, if you knew something, you'd like to get a piece of this action? Cashman, you're still a degenerate at heart. I'm glad some things don't change."

"Hey, I have to get by on a government salary."

"Have no fears, Cashman. I would never rely on a slacker like you for information this important. My company has people at the highest levels who can provide me with what I need. However, because of you I was able to get my foot in the door."

"That must be worth something," I retorted.

It's definitely worth dinner at the Manila Hotel tomorrow night. After that, let's see what happens."

"Dinner at the Manila Hotel!! Are you kidding me? I just gave you the opportunity for the deal of a lifetime and that's the best you can do? When did you become such a tightwad?"

Andrew Jackson Poole was anything but a tightwad. Before I knew it, he provided me with three bottles of 21 year old single malt scotch and several boxes of Cuban Cohiba cigars. "There will be more of everything when the deal is consummated," he assured me.

I was pretty pleased with this outcome. Andrew Jackson was generous, so I expected a handsome remuneration. Before I could even start imagining what I would buy with this windfall, a huge typhoon hit the area around Mt. Pinatubo and *lahar* from the eruption slid down the mountain and buried Subic Bay naval base in 10 feet of mud. Since rehabilitating the base would cost billions, the US offered a paltry lease fee for the base, the Philippine Senate rejected it out of hand, and in a flash Andrew Jackson's deal fell through; leaving me with some scotch and cigars but no cash. To add insult to injury, someone stole my wallet at Alexia Faustino's party, and used my credit card to buy a new stereo system. What is that old saying about "What goes around comes around?"

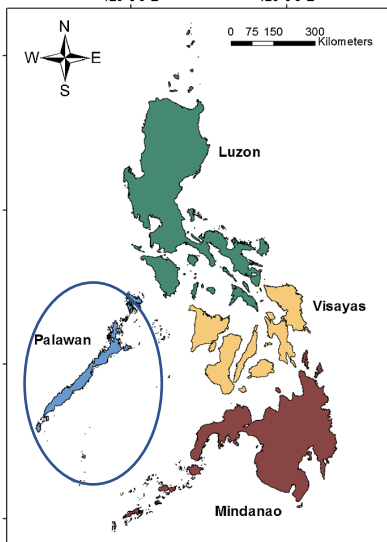
Living and working in the Philippines was a most pleasant experience. The Filipino people were friendly, warm, engaged and above all, capable. Everyone spoke English – from taxi cab drivers and house staff to clerical staff and our professional counterparts in the government. In fact most of the professionals in the Philippine government spoke perfect English. I like speaking foreign languages so I tried to learn the local language, Tagalog. When I tried using my basic Tagalog with my colleagues, their reaction betrayed their disbelief, as if to say, "Why are you speaking with me in Tagalog? My English is better than yours." Tagalog was the only foreign language I never learned to speak in all my years living and working overseas.

After more than 10 years working together, Dr. P and I had become an effortless team. He was the idea man, conceiving new project ideas and conceptualizing project designs with our government counterparts. I then fleshed out these ideas and transformed them into workable initiatives for our

Philippine counterparts to review, modify, and implement. One day I received a call from Dr. P and I could immediately tell by the tone of his voice that something was up.

“Cashman, there has been a malaria outbreak on the island of Palawan. Miguel Dalidig, the Undersecretary for Infectious Diseases, is leading a team to Palawan to investigate. From what I have been told, the outbreak is severe. I want you to join him. Find out what is going on and what needs to be done. We will need to mobilize resources quickly to help out.”

Such requests from Dr. P were not unusual while we worked together in either Indonesia or the Philippines. Whenever there was a disease outbreak, a natural disaster, or an emergency, he would send me to investigate. Based upon my findings, Dr. P would obtain the resources needed to help the government. These trips frequently took me to many out-of-the-way places that were extremely remote and/or had been neglected; a perfect recipe for a severe epidemic or a natural as well as man-made disaster to cause havoc among the local population.



Map of the Philippines. Palawan Island is in the southwest

Palawan Island was one of those places. It is a long thin island situated in the Southwest region of the Philippine archipelago – 280 miles long and 31 miles wide with a mountain range running down its center. It was an extremely underdeveloped place when we went there in 1994. There were few paved roads, and those were usually only found on the southern side of the island, branching out from Puerto Princesa, the capital city of Palawan province. One generally got around on Palawan primarily by boat.

This, however, was slated to be an easy trip — a briefing with provincial health officials to find out the severity of the outbreak and learn what was needed to contain it. What excited me was the potential for some scuba diving. Palawan had some of the most pristine, undiscovered dive sites in the Philippines. Miguel Dalidig, the Undersecretary, was an avid diver. We had shared diving stories and talked about adding a dive trip to one of our field visits. This would be the perfect time.

There was one slight problem. Palawan was remote and the Communist New People’s Army (NPA) was active there. Not to worry, I thought, as Puerto Princesa was supposedly secure and it was unlikely that we would venture far from the town. I had never been to Palawan and accordingly was looking forward to this trip.

We left Manila early in the morning for the flight to Puerto Princesa. When we arrived there, provincial dignitaries were lined up to meet us at the airport— a not unusual occurrence when traveling with a high level official like Miguel — who whisked us off to the Governor’s Office for a briefing by the Province’s Chief Medical Officer. That was easy, I thought. There might even be time to get some diving in today. Suddenly a military officer entered the office and whispered something into the Governor’s ear.

“OK. The vehicles are here to take you to the helicopter,” the Governor announced. “Please report your findings to me when you return.” For good measure, he added, “And good luck.”

“Helicopter! What the heck is he talking about?” I wondered. After leaving the Governor's office I caught up with Miguel and asked him why we were being taken to a helicopter.

“Didn’t Dr. P tell you? The sites where the outbreak is worst are so remote that it takes health officials many days to get there overland. The affected communities are on the north and south side of the island. Because of the mountains the only way to reach them is by helicopter. The Air Force has provided a Huey helicopter to take us to the outbreak sites.”

“But isn’t the NPA still active in Palawan? Are the sites we plan to visit secure?”

“Cashman, don't worry so much. The Army will provide us with an armed escort.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. This was my worst nightmare. In general I hate flying in airplanes, never mind helicopters, which are infinitely more dangerous. But flying over steep mountains into areas controlled by communist guerillas and with an armed guard!! I definitely didn’t sign up for any of this!!!

I’ve been in tight spots before. A crazed, drunken Moroccan with a knife accosted us when we arrived in Marrakech.¹⁰ I had been captured and imprisoned by Cambodian guerrillas with Tim O’Riordan.¹¹ Only this time I was staring into the abyss — a helicopter ride over rough terrain into areas controlled by communist guerillas with an armed escort of soldiers. This was insanity.

So I did what I have done every time I have been in a tough spot. I immediately started making excuses why I couldn’t go, and when this stratagem failed, I decided to cut and run. Only this time, I literally started running. One of the soldiers at the airfield, who was 20 years younger than me, chased me down and dragged me back to the helicopter pad.

The chopper that would transport us was a Huey of Vietnam War vintage. There was a pilot and co-pilot in the front and two bench seats holding three people each behind them. Most terrifying was the fact that this flying machine did not have any doors. Instead it contained a wide open space beside our seats, just like you see in Vietnam War movies. I was seated on the first bench, right behind the pilot with nothing between me and a free fall but an old tattered seat belt. To the rear of the Huey, on each side, was a compartment with a mounted machine gun and three soldiers ready, and probably eager, to fire on any uninvited guests. I was terrified as the helicopter lifted off the tarmac.



The Huey helicopter that transported Cashman to the malaria outbreak sites

We flew along the southern coastline of Palawan for 40 minutes to the first site. The scenery was stunning....crystal clear, azure blue water with coral reefs that would be excellent dive sites; juxtaposed with white sand beaches fringed by palm tree-studded foliage. The flight was uneventful. Once we landed,

¹⁰ See Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles, Chapter 4 “The Marrakech Express” for a description of Cashman’s encounter with the crazed, knife-wielding Moroccan.

¹¹ See Volume 2 of the Cashman Chronicles, Chapter 1 “Nong Samet” for the account of Cashman’s capture by Cambodian rebels.

the soldiers in the rear compartments fanned out with their M-16s at the ready to establish a perimeter. This wasn't so bad, I thought. The ride was actually quite pleasant.

The malaria situation was bad. The health center was treating 150 new malaria cases every week. They needed diagnostic test kits, bed nets, and malaria medicines. That's all I really needed to know in order to report to Dr. P. I told Miguel he could drop me off in Puerto Princesa before proceeding to the next site, if it was no trouble.

"Sorry Cashman, we can't do that. In order to reach the next site we have to fly over the mountains to the north side of the island. Reports indicate that the situation there is even worse than here. Then we have three more sites to visit. You'll have to come along for the ride; so sit back and enjoy the trip"

I thought as much but at least I could comfort myself by mumbling, "...hey I tried to abscond in a dignified manner, but no luck....". I braced myself for the next ride.

This time we headed straight inland toward the mountain range situated in the center of the island. The mountain slopes were rugged and steep, and the chopper climbed in altitude to get over them. It was windy that day and the helicopter soon began to vibrate like we were in a washing machine. As we approached the summit, a strong gust of wind lifted the helicopter vertically. All of a sudden the wind changed direction and slammed us straight down toward the mountain. It felt like the chopper was in a free-fall. I began to sweat profusely, hyperventilating, while my bowels were rumbling and by this time I undoubtedly had brown stains on my underwear. The pilot somehow got control of the chopper, and we seemed to slowly regain altitude. We made another run at the mountains, and the same thing happened. It was only on the pilot's third attempt that we were scarcely able to clear the mountain top

By the time we landed, and the soldiers had established a secure perimeter, I was trembling so badly that I was unable to walk on my own. I actually had to ask one of the health center staff to give me an EKG. I was certain I had suffered a heart attack at the worst or paroxysmal atrial tachycardia at the least. There was no EKG at the health center. In fact the facility had no electricity.

This scene was repeated three more times that day. By the time we embarked on our flight home, it just felt like a roller coaster ride. When we cleared the mountains for the last time and were heading back towards Puerto Princesa, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. I was proud of myself for surviving the day.

But all of a sudden, while I was finally relaxing, I heard what sounded like a *pop!* Then another *pop-pop!* Before I realized what was happening, the soldiers in the back of the chopper started firing their machine guns into the forest canopy below. We were under attack by communist guerillas.

When I heard the shots, I freaked out. I jumped out of my seat and flailed my arms in horror. As my fellow passengers tried to restrain me, I knocked a spare oxygen canister off the ceiling of the Huey. When it fell, it hit the pilot on the head and knocked him unconscious. The chopper jerked and heaved, and then went into a tail spin. The co-pilot struggled to gain control of the chopper as it hurtled toward the ground. The co-pilot stabilized the helicopter a bit, then frantically searched for a clearing to set it down. It was moving fast when it hit the ground with a loud thud.

Like everyone else on that chopper, I passed out from the impact when it hit the ground. When I regained consciousness, all I could see was rubble and unconscious bodies slouched in their seats. I

staggered out of the wide open space next to my seat and assessed the situation. The chopper had gone down in NPA territory. The communists were probably closing in on the crash site right now, I thought. When the co-pilot landed the chopper, there was no explosion. I didn't see much blood so maybe the passengers had only been stunned like me.



The helicopter crash site in the Palawan Jungle

The way I saw the situation, I had only two choices. I could help my fellow passengers, in which case the NPA might reach the crash site and take me captive. Or I could cut and run and save my ass. As the reader knows, Larry Cashman is no hero. And I never had much of a conscience. So I started running away from the crash site as fast as my legs would carry me.

As I was about to take off, I noticed a substantial amount of cash strewn on the ground amongst bags of marijuana near the soldiers in the rear compartment. Those

rascals! The soldiers were making marijuana deliveries while we checked out the malaria situation. No sense leaving all that cash for the NPA, I thought. And no one would report it missing, that's for sure. So I gathered up the cash and stuffed it into my pockets. I dispersed the bags of weed so there would be no suspicion on the soldiers. This little windfall would make up for my loss when Andrew Jackson's deal fell through.

When the chopper went down, we had passed the mountains in the center of the island and were headed southeast towards Puerto Princesa. Palawan is a narrow island so it couldn't be that far away. If I kept walking away from the setting sun, I would probably reach the coast soon and be safe.

As the reader knows by now, Larry Cashman was born with few skills and even fewer redeeming qualities. I have a line of bullshit that stretches to infinity. I can speak foreign languages pretty well. And I am extremely skilled at resting and relaxing. In that jungle in Palawan, I discovered that I had another skill. When I was being chased by communist guerrillas, and my neck was on the line, I could move through the jungle as quietly and stealthily as a Navy Seal. Or more accurately, when I'm scared shitless, I can do what needs to be done to save my ass.

I slithered through the jungle for an hour, looking over my shoulder constantly for the NPA. After a while I saw movement in the jungle ahead. This was it. My luck had run out. I crouched down in a crevice to conceal myself from the NPA. But it wasn't the NPA. It was soldiers in Philippine army fatigues. It was a search and rescue mission looking for the crash site. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was saved.

But what would I tell them? That I had abandoned all of my colleagues to save my ass? When the soldiers reached me, I did the next best thing.

"I'm so glad I found you. I left the crash site to look for help. I was the only one who could walk. Some of the passengers are injured. I'll take you back there."

"Are you Mr. Cashman?" the squadron leader asked.

“Just call me Cashman. Everyone does.”

“That was a courageous thing to do, Cashman. This area is crawling with NPA.”

“I wasn’t thinking of myself. I was only thinking of the others,” I lied.

The co-pilot had radioed the base about the impending crash, so the search party had a vague idea where the chopper went down. Every one of the soldiers congratulated me for my bravery. This was working out nicely. Then reality hit me. Now I had to go back to the crash site. There might be NPA there already. There might be a firefight. I needed to think fast. I approached the squadron leader.

“Maybe I should go back to Puerto Princesa with some of the soldiers so I can report this incident directly to the Governor? If you head northwest for an hour, you’ll find the crash site.”

“You’ve done more than enough already, Cashman. Can I ask you to do one more thing? If you lead us to the crash site, it will save time.”

Just my luck to meet a sanctimonious soldier with a conscience. There was obviously no way that I could weasel out of this horror show anymore. There were at least 30 soldiers in the squadron. They would have to do the shooting if we met up with the NPA. Against my better judgment, I led them back to the crash site.

The articles in the newspapers reporting this story were effusive with praise for my courage in the face of danger. The governor of Palawan gave me a medal for bravery and a key to Puerto Princesa city. As it turned out, when we returned to the crash site, the NPA had not yet arrived and none of the passengers or soldiers were seriously injured; except for a few broken bones here, a few contusions there. The pilot had a skull fracture from the oxygen canister I dislodged onto his head, but he healed up just fine. The soldiers looked pissed about their drug deal gone awry, but that was no concern of mine. The real hero was the co-pilot who regained enough control of the chopper to set it down without serious injury.

And by the way, the helicopter had not come under attack. The *pop-pop* sound that I heard was a piston misfiring. Our armed guards returned fire reflexively. If I hadn’t panicked, nothing would have happened. But no one remembered that. The trauma from the crash apparently caused a contagion of amnesia that erased my earlier actions from everyone’s memory.

This entire incident was caused by my cravenness, but I came out of it smelling like roses, not to mention the nice chunk of cash I had expropriated from the soldiers. The Ambassador even held a special ceremony at the Embassy to recognize my valor. The Secretary of Health conducted a similar ceremony at the Department of Health to thank me. I, of course, did nothing to abuse anyone of their misguided notions. I liked being a hero and, like the whale shark stories, I exaggerated the entire incident in the retelling.

After the ceremony at the Embassy, people lined up to congratulate me.

“Good show, Cashman old boy. We need more Embassy staff like you.”

“Cashman, you’re the man.”

“You really stepped up to the plate, Cashman.”

“You’ve got brass cojones, Cashman.”

Then someone surprised me from behind, and whispered in my ear, "Meet me in my office in 15 minutes. We need to talk." It was Dr. P.

This was a problem. Dr. P knew me better than anyone. Above all he knew what a coward I am. He'd seen it for himself many times, and he had little patience for my shenanigans. I didn't know quite how to play this.

"Well, if it isn't the conquering hero himself," Dr. P greeted me when I reached his office. "Come in and sit down."

That was a pleasant enough welcome. Maybe Dr. P believed the story. "Yeah, I did what had to be done," I retorted.

"And trekking through the NPA-infested jungle to bring help to your fellow passengers! That was not only brave, it was selfless."

And then the neural connection between my brain and my mouth misfired again. I should have downplayed the whole thing and ended the conversation. Not me. I couldn't help bragging a bit.

"You know me...only thinking of others. I was blind to the danger. That wild jungle crawling with communist guerillas was just an impediment to be overcome in my effort to get help for my compadres."

"*ALL RIGHT, CUT THE CRAP, CASHMAN!!!*" he screamed. "I've heard enough of your bullshit. You don't have a selfless strand of DNA in your genome. And courage? You're a gutless wimp and pussy. I saw you knock that old lady down in your haste to leave the Embassy compound in Jakarta after the first terrorist attack. You hide from the kids trick-or-treating at Halloween. You're afraid of clowns. Now come clean. Tell me what really happened out there!"

Well, you can't shit the shitter, so I told him exactly what happened, except for the cash windfall, of course. No need to go into that.

"You panicked and dislodged an oxygen canister that fell on the pilot's head!! Dr. P gasped in disbelief. "Are you fucking kidding me? And you ran away from the crash site to save your own ass!! Did anyone see this?"

"Everyone saw me panic, but no one seems to remember it after the shock of the crash. And everyone was unconscious when I ran," I assured him.

"Well, the die is cast so that is the story we go with. You're the golden boy for now. If anyone ever learns the truth, you're a dead man walking."

Dr. P had a way of putting things in stark terms, and I couldn't argue with him. But I could see that something was still bothering him. Finally he blurted it out.

"I can't believe you ran away from the crash site to save your ass without helping anyone. Then you had the audacity to tell the search party that you braved an NPA-infested jungle to try to get help? Cashman, you are an irredeemable coward."

Dr. P was right. I was feeling a bit guilty so I said, "Dr. P, be honest with me....do you think I'm a bad person?"

"Cashman, that ship sailed a long time ago."

Somewhere I'd heard that sentiment before.

Dr. P was right about one thing. If anyone remembered how I panicked when the soldiers started shooting and caused the crash, I was in big trouble. While I basked in the adulation for my bravery, I knew it was only a matter of time until the truth emerged. Plus, during the many gatherings I hosted regaling my admirers with my feats of bravery, I was liberally sharing the expensive whiskey and Cuban cigars I purchased with my cash bonanza, and that might eventually bring some unwanted scrutiny. I've been in enough tight spots to know when it's time to exit, stage left. And this was the ideal time.

Then serendipity came to the rescue again. The Asian Development Bank¹² (ADB) was looking for an advisor for its new health project in Laos, a small, isolated country bordering Thailand and Vietnam. Most of the Lao government officials spoke Thai and very few spoke English, so ADB wanted an advisor who could speak Thai. And guess who is fluent in Thai? Once again, Dr. P's advice to me when I was a student in Hawaii — learn the local language — was coming in handy. Next stop.....Laos.

¹² The **Asian Development Bank (ADB)** is a regional development bank with headquarters in Manila and field offices in 31 countries. Unlike the World Bank, which provides development assistance to countries around the world, the Asian Development Bank assists countries in Asia and the Pacific only. Like the World Bank, it provides its assistance in the form of grants and concessionary loans.