3 Our Fisherman Myth
9 Into the Boondocks – Exploring Palawan’s Longest River (Part I)
13 Balabac, Paradise or Hell
21 An Accidental Explorer
29 Centenarian Pilot who flew in five wars
35 News / CERS in the Media and Lectures
36 Thank You / Current Patrons

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Fung’s graduating class 1952.
Crocodile “Singko” caught.
Felix delivering first air mail to Ma Pu-fang.
HM Explorer II back at base.
Introductory Message

Most people sleep in order to have energy in day time to work or play. My sleeping pattern is slightly different. Since a child, I am more active in sleep than when awake. I dream every night. I dream even during a daytime short nap.

My dreams allow me to explore with fewer limits and boundaries, transcending time and place. There are no political borders, no mountain too high, nor ocean too deep. My dream goes from real to surreal, to even bizarre. Such mental exploration in the subconscious at times has prompted me to express myself in unsympathetic and insensitive remarks toward friends with insomnia, “If you cannot sleep, you probably don’t need it.” Now, with a bit more maturity despite resisting growing up, I have become more sensitive and refrain from such off-the-cuff snap remarks.

In “real” life, however, I continue to explore, though with more limitations than in my dreams, yet with no less romance. But much of that romance is with nature, both with that massive force of creation as well as with the tiniest miracles around me. Our human world is becoming more and more difficult for me to reconcile with, being a person who hangs on to the past and mentally projects into the future. The “present” is the most difficult to arbitrate and to negotiate.

And with the “present”, despite my love for our next and younger generations, at times I cannot help but be blunt. I often tell them that I did not take my first flight until I was 19, on the way to America for higher education. Today, by that age many have seen much of the world, even places at distant corners. Since they are starting from such a high platform, my expectations of them are naturally very high. But have these places seen them?

Until they have an impact on the places they have visited, made friends locally, written or shared about these places beyond a few selfies, they have seen places, but these places have not seen them. Of course, as young persons, their impact may be limited and minimal. But it should not stop them from making local friends. In time however, their capacity would grow, and their impact may expand accordingly.

In this issue, my CERS colleagues share with you some of the places we have seen. And most gratifying to me, I can say that these places have also seen us, and benefitted because of it. If that’s not enough, I can try sharing my dreams.

Wong How Man
Founder/President CERS
The waters of the Sulu Sea during winter, under constant attack by typhoons, are notorious for being perilous. Even skilled and experienced fishermen avoid setting sail during this time of the year and seek other ways of livelihood. There was but one exception. At dusk on a November day; on the vast and boundless ocean, one could only see two boats, fearlessly cleaving through rough waves and tough winds, determined to get to an off-the-grid island named Cawili regardless of the potential hazards. In the name of exploration, a diverse group of passengers, from the United States, the United Kingdom, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Kunming, and the foothills of Tibet, with a local Filipino boat crew, daringly sailed against the strong currents while being assaulted by aggressive gusts of wind. The passengers preferred the unshielded upper deck for better ventilation, despite being constantly showered with salty water. Rolling billows surmounted the deck as if they were trying to engulf the boat like a giant whale shark feeding on plankton. The crew tried their best to stay sharp and focused, for every second they were on the verge of being tossed out of the boat. However, putting aside the forces that the rocking of the boat by raging waves caused the voyagers – stimulation that normal urban dwellers could only experience through thrill rides - the not-so-peaceful cruise was blessed with a panoramic view of a clear sky. As the sun set while the boat braved the sea, the bright sky was soon veiled by a star-adorned night. Stars offer guidance to fishermen, one of the perks of night sailing, while for commoners, stargazing on a boat in the wilderness is stunning - the most visually satisfying experience one can get. Yet, that wintry night was no ordinary night. Suddenly, a ‘fireball’ appeared out of nowhere, plunged and vanished into thin air. It was not any normal meteor shower, but a large luminous burning meteor dropping from the sky. Little did the spectators know that this was a ‘warning’ sign for dangers lurking ahead, as they were busy chatting away about the extraordinary astronomical phenomenon they had just witnessed.

The night darkened and the anger of the tides had yet to cease. Under such adverse circumstances, the time to reach the faraway island would be doubled. After discussion, the explorers compromised and decided to first take shelter in a nearby bay. Switching course, the two boat fishing fleet was steadily steering towards the nearest haven. Suddenly, a loud ‘bang’ shook the first ship. The engine whirred and stopped, its noise was replaced by dead silence. The boat had struck a coral reef, or so they first thought. To free the boat from large coral, members of the crew jumped overboard and jolted the boat with great force. Their attempt was in vain. The crew divided into two teams, one pushing at the back of the boat and one pulling the anchor in front, yet the vessel did not bulge a bit. One of the sailors dove into the sea with a waterproof flashlight to inspect the bottom of the boat, only to find that the ocean bed was flat without any coral outcrops or rocks that could have hit the boat - the boat was in fact still floating in the middle of a shallow sea, grounded in a very uncanny manner.

Fortunately for the exploration team, the companion fishing boat came to the rescue. Despite all the commotion, eerily, it had taken them quite a long while for them to realize that the main boat had been grounded. After what felt like forever, with the help of the backup crew, the...
larger vessel was released from the seabed without getting wrecked. Luckily, no major damage was suffered apart from little cracks on the bottom of the boat and no one was injured. Were the bizarre incidents of ship grounding and the sighting of the fireball a warning from supernatural forces not to continue the voyage ahead? With no second thoughts, the explorers, towed by the accompanying smaller boat, embarked on the return voyage back to their base...

The tale above may sound like one of those myths circulated among the fishing community, only it wasn’t a fairytale, but a first-hand account based on the shortest expedition I’ve ever undertaken with CERS, one that lasted less than 24 hours. The truth is, everyone on board would have their own version of the story, be they the foreign passengers or local Filipinos, the boat captain or sailors, the scientist or filmmaker, the Christian or Tibetan Buddhist. Based on our diverse backgrounds and beliefs, we observed and interpreted the incidents that we experienced together in very distinct and idiosyncratic manners. For example, Jocelin said four fireballs plummeted in front of her eyes when the ship was grounded, while some crew men claimed they saw a headless man sitting at the back of the boat. How we got stuck while remaining buoyant was another enigma that could not be solved; Jocelin and the crew thought that the mastermind might be some supernatural force that prevented us from carrying on the expedition, whereas Dr.
Bill maintained that we hit a nearshore reef shown on the chart. We were not able to discern our true location, because the GPS of the captain, How Man and Dr. Bill showed us in three different spots. Jocelin believed that we would never be able to return to the site where we got stranded, almost as if we were in a different dimension under enchantment. Echoes of Tibetan prayers chanted by Drolma our friend from the high Tibetan plateau lingered as Jocelin’s uncle, an expert captain, poured soup into the ocean to pacify the angry spirits. As for me, my focus of attention was neither on how we got stuck in the middle of the ocean nor the fireball sightings, but how differently people reacted to the incident based on their own experiences and beliefs and how they negotiated between different versions of the story.

Saskia and I, with the help of Jocelin, interviewed the fishing crew about the night of the accident after we returned to our base safe and sound. When asked what they believed had caused our boat to run aground, a sailor named Ellen, aged 48, replied that he thought it might be due to the malfunctioning of the GPS so that we hit the shore, or it might also be tricks that spirits played on us to impede our expedition. ‘Chances are fifty-fifty’, he said. Ellen personally could not feel the presence of spirits, but Jocelin and her uncle very much did. Uncle sensed bad omens surrounding us earlier that night, hence he had earnestly tried to persuade us to return even before our boat ran aground. He also told us how traditionally fishermen regarded fireballs as fairies, their gender distinguished by the shape of the fire – fireballs dropping down and leaving a track behind were female fairies, with fire as their long hair, while male fairies appeared in the form of a blast. The one we saw was a female fairy according to this reckoning.

Contemporary sailors like Ellen saw fireballs as natural phenomenon and tended to ignore it, despite that he did mention the reason why he failed to see one that night was because ‘maybe the fireballs are only meant for you to see.’ In contrast, the elder crew members associated fireballs with supernatural forces in a symbolic sense. To them, the appearance of fireballs might not necessarily be a bad sign, the fairies could express goodwill as well, however more than one fireball sighting per night should be considered as fairies tailing the boat, giving warnings to humans not to proceed with their journey. Years ago, when Jocelin’s cousin passed away, Uncle was responsible for shipping his body from Roxas back to their hometown in Cagayan. In the face of adverse weather the original one-day journey took him two days and nights, the crew soaking wet from waves and rain. A lot of fireballs were seen during that trip, flying from both sides, following them back to Cagayan. It was believed that the bloodthirsty fairies knew that there was a dead body on board and would have liked to take more lives. Some give food offerings to spirits to appease them. Younger sailors say their great great grandfathers were very superstitious. They would cook rice and eggs
and leave them at home before setting sail as offerings to spirits in exchange for protection. Sailors seldom practice such offerings nowadays.

Being rational, opting for scientific explanations, and being superstitious, believing in spirits and taboos, are contradictory at first glance, but renowned anthropologist Evans-Pritchard asked ‘How does it come about that people capable of logical behavior so often act in a non-logical manner?’ From the perspective of functionalist anthropology, how do fishermen’s taboos and myths come about and what purpose and meaning do they serve? Is there any logical reasoning behind upholding such ‘superstitious’ beliefs? With technological advancement and improved maritime equipment, is religious behavior no longer necessary for fishermen? These are complicated subjects that numerous scholars have spent their lives tackling. I here just briefly shed light on this topic from an anthropological angle.

‘Anxiety-ritual theory’ explains religious behavior, magic and taboos as means to relive man’s anxiety. Malinowski, the father of anthropology, gave an account of the fishing taboos of the Trobriand islanders that became an exemplar of this model. He reported how villagers that made a living by inner lagoon fishing, a relatively easy and absolutely reliable mode of fishing via poisoning, did not practice any magic at all, as abundant return could be yielded without danger and uncertainty. In contrast, for fishermen who fished on shores of the open sea, comparatively more dangerous and uncertain as the yield varies in accordance with weather and environmental constraints, extensive magical ritual and taboos were undertaken to ensure safety and great yield. In other words, there is a correlation of economic and personal risk with the amount of ritual behavior; when there is higher risk and uncertainty, more ritual behavior will be observed to reduce stress.

Palmer, another anthropologist, was skeptical about this theory and offered an alternative explanation. Palmer argued that religious behaviors can only achieve the purpose of stress-relief if the fishermen truly believe in the efficacy of the rituals and taboos they practice. This is not consistent with his observations of lobstermen in the port of southern Maine where Palmer conducted his fieldwork. Lobstermen filled in a questionnaire on which they were asked if they had knowledge of, observe and believe in certain taboos and rituals. It turns out that some fishermen adhere to particular religious behaviors without believing in them. To resolve such discrepancy,

Palmer proposed the ‘cooperation hypothesis.’ According to Palmer, ‘all religious behavior is distinguished by “the communicated acceptance of another’s supernatural” claim, a claim whose accuracy cannot be verified by the senses… Hence by communicating acceptance of a supernatural claim one is communicating a willingness to accept the speaker’s influence skeptically.’ Since acceptance of influence between individuals is essential in cooperative social relationships, practicing religious behavior together is likely to foster positive cooperation among fishermen. Therefore, under this theory, open sea fishermen tend to observe more ritual taboos not because of the inherently higher risks but because a lack of cooperation among the fishing crew would likely lead to disaster. For fishermen that often find themselves in precarious situations in the danger-laden open sea, communicating similar beliefs helps them bond and develop trust, yielding better teamwork in times of adversity.

Religious behaviors, like following ritual taboos or giving offerings, used to be a great part of fishermen’s lives. In contemporary times, however, where sailing knowledge are consolidated not through oral tradition but formal education and training, and where information on weather, maritime geography and maps is becoming more and more precise, accurate and accessible with the assistance of satellites and GPS, taboos and rituals are gradually dying out. Uncertainty of sailing and fishing, though not completely eradicated, has been reduced significantly with the help of technological advancements. Fishermen rely no more on signs given by fairies representing themselves in the form of fireballs, and they certainly do not try to win favor of sea gods through offerings in return for protection. Depending more on technology and science, belief in such religious behaviors among younger fishermen and sailors has fallen apart and they have started to call these acts and myths superstitious. The religious behaviors have lost their stress-relieving property among the youngsters, who have therefore ceased to perform offerings and rituals. Local taboos and mythologies will be left uninherited.

Nonetheless, from the interviews we saw how these younger fishermen, on the one hand, called these beliefs superstitious, yet on the other, were quite reluctant to completely negate the possibility that the power of such supernatural beings exists, or even might be the cause of our hazardous situation. For Ellen, the odds for both scenarios were equal, and even for the younger sailors who did not belief in fairies or offering rituals, they listened attentively to uncle’s story with intrigued looks on their face.
faces. This middle ground could not be explained by ‘ritual-anxiety theory’ which builds upon the belief in the efficacy of the religious acts, but could be by the ‘cooperation hypothesis’. Circulating myths, complying with taboos and practicing magic are not merely religious acts, but more importantly, are social ones. Through communicating stories and performing rituals together, a special bond is created. In other cases, some might follow under peer or authoritative pressure; if other parties are believers or practitioners of such taboos or magic, they dare not resist even though they are not spiritual themselves. Interestingly, based on the ‘cooperation hypothesis’, Palmer suggested that the skipper or anyone that holds a managerial position, and who thus plays the role of maintaining cooperative relationships under his/her authority should be the one who are reportedly more interested in taboos and myths. In our case, the person-in-charge of the Palawan projects, Jocelin, who oversees and liaises with all the local Filipino workers and boat crews, is in fact the one who takes the fireballs and myths most seriously. Crew members who are willing to accept such taboos and myths, endorsed by the authority, are communicating a willingness to accept the authority’s and the other co-acceptors’ influence, such that they belong.

Taboos and mythologies have social bearings in collaborative relationships, which is crucial among fishermen and sailors. Although people no longer seek mental comfort from or rely on them for protection, the act of story-telling and taboo-abiding may still be carried on. As for me, the phenomena presents both a chance to think logically and illogically, the former using my intellectual mind, and the latter my emotional and empirical side, which is far more romantic. In the final analysis, I prefer to live more of a romantic life – I simply could not resist the joy that a good fairy story brings. But in all seriousness, I do believe that both of these modes of thought are important to life, and it is though the eternal mind-battle between the logical and the illogical that our experience as human beings becomes so unique and valuable.

After all we had been through, maybe someday, our story of the fireball fairies and the grounded boat will be circulating among local fishermen - it’s not hard to imagine how the fishing crew engaged in this exciting odyssey will vividly depict how we escaped from the hands of the deadly fairies, laying it on thick for the sake of dramatic effect. Who knows, we might end up becoming the unknown protagonists of a fairytale. I would be glad to be a part of this complex social web that everyone plays a part to weave.
On 2018 Nov 26 a Monday, we travel from Shek O to the CERS Maoyon base in Palawan. Late that evening, at 23:00, several of us travel to Barangay Tagabinet to attend the wake for Ardes F. Cayaon (Dec 15, 1976 to Nov 21, 2018), caver, river guide, explorer, and friend. He will be missed. When it was my turn to stand in front of the coffin, its glass top fogged up with condensation from the refrigeration, a large cricket hops down onto the top of the casket directly over Ardes’s mouth, then hops on to the back of my neck as I turn to leave.

Having my coffee the next morning as sun slowly rises and the temperature climbs, I watch the fish in the estuary swimming around the CERS boat dock. There are dozens of juveniles seeking safety under the shade of the dock; there are Yellowtail Scad, Atule mate, and a Caraganoides the shape, size and colour of a silver dollar, perhaps young Bump-nosed Trevally. Odd looking pencil-thin Black-barred Halfbeaks, Hemiramphus far, patrol the outer perimeter with the pale spots on the end of their long lower jaws almost poking out of the water, as if lighting their way. Banded Archerfish, Toxotes jaculatrix, up to 30 cm long, rush in and break up the school of smaller fish. I see a particularly large specimen spit a narrow fountain of water through the air up into the mangrove roots, perhaps, true to its archer name, it was aiming to knock down a cricket or katydid that was perched on the dry prop roots above the waterline.

Before the sun is high, I take the big green kayak out and paddle down the Maoyon River alone. Striated Herons fly out from the bank, a pair of Whimbrels and a Common Sandpiper fly off complaining. A Little Egret forages, high stepping daintily and pulling its yellow stocking feet out of the mud by the bank. A Great Egret watches my boat nervously, interrupted from its intense attention on the water in front of its sharp bill. A Stork-
billed Kingfisher flies out from its perch on a mangrove above the bank, as does a smaller kingfisher with powder blue back. Near the river’s mouth, a smaller tributary joins the main channel and I paddle into the tree-lined waterway that beckons to me into the dark tunnel created by the dense canopy of mangroves overhead. On another visit to this backwater, I have heard the raucous laugh, and then seen the enormous grey shape and the oversized bill and feet of a Great Slaty Woodpecker clinging to the large trunks of one of the biggest mangroves trees. On that same visit, a Philippine Pied Fantail sat on the red mangrove roots in plain view, wagging its very long black tail with white outer tail feathers and tip. It sallied out from its low perch again and again to catch flies. Then I saw a Collared Kingfisher, with its white collar and brow and dark cap, and then the larger Stork-billed Kingfisher with its rufous head and oversized bill, and finally an River Kingfisher, with ruddy back and crown, reddish flanks, and white cheek stripe.

The sun is getting high and cicadas are calling loudly already. The peace in the swamp is deafening. I paddle back to the main river, rounding the end of a wide bend to see the bright blue sea beyond the river’s mouth to the south.

On another morning, we all board a small banka fishing boat and steam out just beyond the river mouth to Fondeado Island in Honda Bay for snorkelling and swimming lessons in the clear ocean water. While Xavier teaches Sandra, Lina and Drolma to swim, Saskia and I swim about exploring over boulder coral reef, eel grass and rubble. Despite the damaged condition of the reef here, small fish are numerous here. I see a small Crescent Wrasse, a Dash-dot Goatfish, Blueback Damselfish, Bridled Monocle Bream, a Longfin Spadefish, an Oval-spot Butterflyfish and what may be a Vagabond Butterflyfish. Shimmering cardinalfish swim together in small schools. Slate grey damselfish with iridescent spots defend their territories vigorously, unafraid to stand up to me. A pair of Clark’s Anemonefish has staked out an anemone among the boulder corals, the female large and deep red with 2 pale bars, the male smaller, orange with two clear white bars. Bluestreak Cleaner Wrasse are
common, or are they the treacherous mimic, the False Cleaner Wrasse? Larger fish seem to avoid their lively solicitations, making me suspicious that their invitations to grooming are fake news, and they are actually out to nip a bit of skin off an unwary victim. I try to follow two larger fish with bright pyjama spot patterns, a juvenile Oriental Sweetlips, and a Many-spotted Sweetlips.

Life at the mouth of the Maoyon River is diverse and idyllic, but I yearn to continue our exploration of the upper reaches of the river, the longest in Palawan. On previous trips we floated down the river on bamboo rafts with local Batak guides, past karst towers, banana farms and coconut plantations, past the Peace and Love Forest Resort and under the bridge of the main highway back to our CERS base near the mouth. We also hiked up the mid-region river where it changes its name from Maoyon to Babuyon River, hiking up as far as the first confluence with Batak guides. The guides told us that beyond that point, the path becomes difficult and dangerous, requiring passage over the infamous “Goodbye Pookie” cliff. But I am eager to continue up, into the boondocks, a word the True Cleaner Wrasse uses to refer to an unwary victim. I try to follow two larger fish with bright pyjama spot patterns, a juvenile Oriental Sweetlips, and a Many-spotted Sweetlips.

Joceline helps me by assembling a five-man expedition team, led by Captain Arnel, also known as Punoy, a boat captain based in Sagang. Jolito, a new CERS staff member, is a Batak tribe member from the Babuyon region. Paulino, another CERS staff and also a Batak tribe member, has gone to hospital in PPS for respiratory problems. Instead, Pogoe joins the team. He is also a new CERS hire, and looks nearly identical to Jolito. Also on the team is Moosenjoe, a neighbour of Jolito’s. With his kinky greying hair and grey goatee and wide flat nose, he captures the look of an aboriginal elder. Later, we are joined in Caruray by Jimille Ramos, a young Tagbanua with wavy frame, wavy hair, big eyes and boundless energy. He makes a living collecting almaciga resin in the forests where we are going and he knows the trails well, so he usually takes the lead. We all soon take to calling him “General Ramos.”

On the morning agreed, I set out from the CERS base at 5:00 AM sharp to Sabang with Joceline and Jesse driving the van. By the time we arrive in Sabang and stop at Paulino’s “infirmary,” the first light of dawn is already glowing through the trees. While we wait for Joelito and Moosenjoe, I watch a troop of Palawan Long-tailed Macaques eating litchi-like fruit in the tall trees above the hut. We arrive at Sabang harbour with the team at 7:00 AM sharp and are soon aboard Captain Panoy’s boat, a colourfully decorated banka outrigger that he usually uses to take tourists from Sabang to the entrance of the Subterranean River World Heritage Site. It is mostly clear, but dense cloud cover in the northeast has me worried. At 8:50, we arrive at the mouth of Caruray town at the mouth of the river of the same name. We wait for our Captain to meet the kapitan of the Barangay. All permissions have been arranged ahead of time, but they need to be checked and re-checked. Tourists never come to this remote port, and I gather that the mountains ahead are not on the approved list for trekking. Finally, at 13:33, we arrive at the end of a rough motorcycle track and begin our hike, soon passing the last farmhouse. Stripe Peak is visible to the left ahead. Just below the peak should be two of the longest sources of the Maoyon River. We continue on and into the beginnings of forest, and the trail begins to climb up on a well-worn track. Sign of wild pig foraging are everywhere, and the leeches are annoyingly abundant. The tiger leeches of the Philippines, brown with black and orange stripes, are unlike their relatives in China in that they do not inject anaesthetic with their bite. So it is relatively easy to detect them with the first sharp prick on an ankle or above the belt-line and scrape them off before they can dig deep. As we climb, the forest is getting better, and we pass a station where someone has been collecting almaciga resin in recycled 50 kg bags. At 17:37, just as dusk descends, we arrive at a nice stream, a high tributary of the Caruray River. I set up my hammock in the fading light between a large tree and a young sapling, then go to take a sponge bath in the dark. The water is crystal clear and cold.

The next morning, there is oddly little bird song. Perhaps it is too cold on this winter day. We strike camp early and continue on this good trail up to a pass in the divide between the Caruray and Babuyon basins. Caruray harbour is behind us and to the right, and Sagang Bay is visible in the distance ahead. According to the satellite map, on the right along this same ridge should be the source of one of the major tributaries that contribute to the Maoyon River, and Stripe Peak is on the left, below which two more
Continuing on into the region of Maoyon’s headwaters, we pass another almaciga collectors’ camp and then cross several small streams. All of these contribute their waters to the Maoyon River. We leave the heavy things, including 5 days of canned provisions, at the side of a large stream. The trail then forks, and following Jimelle’s suggestion, we hike counter-clockwise around the base of Striped Peak to try to find an easier access to its upper slopes. We meet an almaciga collector tapping a huge tree, more than 1.5 meters across at breast height. We continue on along the rough trail to a large stream that drains the west slope of Stripe Peak. Scrambling up the stream, alternately hopping from boulder to boulder and splashing through the water, we soon have to climb up short waterfalls as the slope becomes steep. We pass a spring where the water bursts from among a wall of head-sized boulders. Continuing on, there is only a small trickle above, and finally only an isolated puddle can be seen.

Our plan is to continue up to the ridge crest, where I am guessing there should be a trail up to the top of Stripe Peak. Perhaps I am too used to the mountains of Tibet, whose upper slopes are often clothed with grassy meadows that are striped with clear trails up to their peaks. Here in Palawan, we must cut, stumble and push our way through dense viny bamboo. Interspersed among the bamboo tangle are fronds and tendrils of rattan, their ends coated with hooked barbs that grab hats and arms and will not let go. The main stem of the rattan palms are covered with one inch razor sharp needles. We continue heading up but the going slows to a crawl. There is certainly no time left to try to climb Stripe Peak or explore other tributaries. Even trying a short-cut back by descending down one of the streams on the north face now seems too risky. Jimelle explores and pronounces it too steep. Looking at the clock, I realize that we are in trouble. I seem to be the only one who thought to bring a torch, and the light will soon fade. A night out in the forest without dinner or shelter among the mosquitos and leeches is certainly something to avoid.

[To be continued.]
Thirty-three-year old fisherman Cornelio Bonete was out looking for crab along a stretch of the mangrove not far from Balabac, a small island town off the southernmost tip of Palawan in the Philippines. Bonete had been conducting such activities since childhood, a way to supplement his family’s diet if the crab he caught were small, and to supplement his income by sale in the market if the catch were big. On the night of November 27, however, there were neither big or small crab. Bonete did not return home.

The following day, family members went to his favorite spot and searched. His mutilated body was found on the shore of Sitio Bual. The victim’s right arm and left foot were missing. The police and coastguard were quickly alerted and summoned to the scene. Checking the carcass, it was determined that Bonete was killed by a Saltwater Crocodile, one of the giant amphibious reptiles that frequented the neighborhood estuary, where the waters of the river and the sea mingle.

By December 1, a team of croc experts were called in from the provincial capital of Puerto Princesa (PPS). A cow was slaughtered and raw meat used as bait. Soon a 15-foot crocodile weighing 500 kilos was entrapped and restrained. It was transported to PPS for observation and a round of “gastrointestinal decontamination”, an act of pumping the stomach of the animal to flush out its content for inspection. Later, the “flushing” procedure was called off, citing that the animal, now nicknamed “Singko”, referring to the location it was captured, might become too stressed and die. Besides, other evidence already provided enough proof that the caught croc was the culprit in the death of Bonete.

Critics, especially some environmentalists, cited the conflict between man and beast as being the result of habitat destruction, the decrease of the animal’s habitat caused by cutting down the coastal mangrove forests. Such mangrove is crucial for the crocodile to subsist on its natural prey. Failing that, the carnivore would go for human.
This was the third or fourth case of crocodile attack on humans within the last two years; each time the victim was killed or severely injured. Before that, men and croc seemed to live peacefully next to each other. The last time such brutality, or worse, happened around here was when a German was kidnapped from his yacht by the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group and beheaded before ransom could arrive. Such headline-catching news had already stopped any tourist or vacationer from setting foot on this remote island, despite that the croc attacks only started quite recently, and the beheading was just over a year ago.

I, however, was not deterred. Not because of bravery or stupidity, but because my journalistic instinct told me that most news is usually exaggerated and dramatized, in order to get attention, not unlike how I chose the crocodile story to start off this article. Let alone, I am not traveling in a posh yacht that attracts undue attention, and thus the ransom seeking terrorists. A good friend Vince Perez, former Secretary of Energy for the Philippines and past WWF Chairman, told me how beautiful and pristine the area was. He, however, arrived in a helicopter by air, with full security detail.

Balabac, at the southernmost tip of Palawan in the Philippines, seems to embrace both heaven and hell, famed as a tropical island paradise with turquoise atolls, coral reefs, pearl culture, sea turtles, but also notorious as a land of pirates, kidnappings, Muslim extremists, and more lately even with headlines of killer crocodile. Paradise, a town in northern California, could turn from
its heavenly namesake to hell overnight. It was only a month ago when wild fire ravaged the Californian town, leaving many dead, hundreds unaccounted for, and almost 30,000 people evacuated. Just so, Balabac can also be transformed from hell to paradise, in fact, back and forth, depending on what, where and when we choose to focus our attention.

I choose to believe that the bad news is exceptional and selective, whereas the good news is the norm. That is what we went for, and certainly we were rewarded in plenty. For me, it is not unlike a quiet town in America suddenly shot to national and international fame because of a once-in-a-century headline-catching mass shooting. In contrast, Everest and K2 are mountaineer killers year after year, but there is no shortage of climbers attempting to reach the summit.

It was such spirit that drove me to lead a small team to scout out the real situation in Balabac, an island I have wanted to visit since first arriving in Palawan over three years ago. The 580 square kilometer island is somewhat larger than Lantao in Hong Kong, and off the main island of Palawan. Even electricity is off the grid, depending on a large generator to provide for the needs of the town, but only from 2pm to 6am every day. As a crow flies, it is less than 50 kilometers from the northern islands of Sabah in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, warnings are to be taken seriously and some precaution had to be made, as with all exploration expeditions.
With us were CQ Robin and CQ Suyuer. CQ is my term for Security. Both were from the intelligence service of Palawan. Both were Muslims originally from the islands around Balabac. They ought to know if there were danger looming, as they were responsible for our safety.

Five hours by car took us from Puerto Princesa to Rio Tuba in Bataraza where the main pier is at the south tip of Palawan. There a charter ferry boat, capable of taking 80 passengers, was sitting in wait for us five, in addition to the two CQs. It was already late afternoon and right before sunset, so we quickly loaded our gear and food onto the boat and set off. As the sun set, we passed several beautiful islands on both sides, but did not stop. Three hours later in the dark, after going through some choppy sea, we arrived inside the estuary bay of Balabac. By then only some dim lights lit the small town by the water.

With a motor-tricycle making two trips, all of us arrived at a hillside lodge with two spartan, but very clean, rooms. First surprise; the rooms came with air-conditioners, and they worked. Toilet was basic, and a bucket worked as shower. As with most remote islands, if you have running water off a tap, that’s considered a luxury. Second surprise; our rooms had pictures of the Virgin Mary and Christian emblems on the wall, although this is known to be a Muslim area. A simple dinner was soon cooked and consumed, and everyone felt ready for the days ahead. That night, I heard my first live-story about killer crocodiles looming in the dark.
The next morning, it rained hard, unusual for this late in the season. We went early to register with the local police, and the policewoman had our pictures and passports taken for record. She even posed with us for a group portrait. We also met Toto, the Balabac Councilor who arranged all our island-hopping itinerary. Across from the police station is perhaps the only decent café in town, next to the main pier. Naturally we had our breakfast there, while it was pouring outside.

As the space under the house became like a stream, I saw a scorpion crawling out into the street. Such a tiny pest can be quite nasty, comparable to the killer croc, though inflicting a slower but perhaps more painful injury, at times fatal. As the rain stopped, I nosed around town and saw quite a few young and old ladies in partial veil. I managed to see a couple of older women with even a full veil.

One of the fully-veiled women I met was Amina. She had previously been a Christian, and turned Muslim after marrying her husband almost thirty years ago. Now she says Islam is the true religion. Her husband Omar is the local Imam who presides over the service in the mosque. She kept offering to show me the almost finished new mosque, but I declined, as I had just come from a visit there. Momentarily her husband walked up and we had a good chat. They would love to go on the pilgrimage, but going to Mecca is prohibitively expensive, costing around 80,000 peso, or over 12K USD. However, our CQ Robin was already addressed as Haji, an honor bestowed on those who have visited Mecca.

What seemed unusual in Balabac is that the Christians live very peacefully among the Muslim majority. Our informants said the town is about 90 percent Muslim, but the red-brick church is relatively grand and new, with a tall bell tower. It is literally a few steps away from the new mosque, just around the corner. The minaret seemed to stand higher with its moon and star insignia. Apparently, that may be good enough for the Muslims. While in town, folks were celebrating a pre-Christmas Christian festival, and everything seem joyous and festive, though basic compared to more populated cities.

There is little information available on the smaller islands, some forty or so, near Balabac. We headed straight for Onuk, the jewel among them. The Councilor, Toto, who co-owns the island, had made arrangements for us to stay two nights at a lodge, built on top of a 100-meter jetty protruding into the sandbar. As our boat sailed for an hour through calm and rough sea, we approached Onuk and right away I knew we had chosen the right spot to spend our time - a truly off-the-grid enclave.
One account called the water “sapphire blue”. Another nature worshipper described it as emerald, crystal, and deep blue. It has only caught the attention of off-the-beat travelers within the last couple years. A photographer from Manila caught a scene with a rainbow that landed him an award from the National Geographic. One blogger called it “island Paradise”, another said “breathtaking”, while two others described it as “Undiscovered Paradise,” “Hidden Gem” and “The Most Beautiful Spot in the Philippines”. And these are Filipinos who had frequented many pristine islands within their country.

The entire island with coconut trees, but no regular residents, is about 300-meters long and half that in width. Thus, walking around the entire atoll may take only fifteen to twenty minutes. Perhaps the word, boondocks, which came from Tagalog, is quite fitting, meaning the back and beyond. But then, Onuk is exceptionally beautiful to be called such.

It is rare that I idle the day away, but in this case the better part of two days were filled with almost a single preoccupation. As the tide came in, so did dark shadows, bobbing up and down along with the surf, just below the surface. These are the Green Sea Turtles, swimming near to shore to forage on the seaweed hugging the bottom. As I watched from a deck on the jetty, some came as close as five meters from where I stood.

I would wait patiently until the turtle would pop up to the surface for a breath of fresh air, which generally happened every five to ten minutes. Just as the head popped up, my camera would click - another shot taken, while hoping the auto-focus would freeze the turtle in sharp focus. I could follow that routine all day long without feeling tired. The same turtles would come in at night to the beach, to lay eggs before returning to the sea. When the tide receded and the turtles were out at sea, I would then take to the beach to swim or snorkel a bit. When lying around, I contemplated the Old Man and the Sea Turtle.

Two days on Onuk and another day at Balabac passed by quickly, and we were soon on our way back to our base by the Maoyon River an hour north of PPS. But before that, we visited several more islands, most hosting a small community. One such village, Mantangule, stood out. Barely an hour from the main island and Rio Tuba, it is perhaps the largest island community among the group. Most families engaged in fishing and farming of seaweed. The water was crystal clear and many sheds with fish nets below were built over the water slightly off shore, reachable by narrow plank-ways.

We visited one such shed with fish and lobster nets below deck. The two types of lobster caught here are dark green and pale green, the latter being considered “Class One.” The catch is not sold to the Philippines side, but instead to Malaysia, which apparently provides
higher returns. We bought several of each type, the former at 2300 peso per kilo and the latter 5000p. A spotted garoupa weighing almost three kilos went for 1250p (around USD25), a fraction of what it would cost in Hong Kong.

At Mantangule, I was also fascinated by a make-shift school where locals teach Arabic to little kids during after-school hours. Most people living among these islands also speak Malay, and their boats, both large outriggers and the faster speed boats, take on the shape and style of those from Malaysia, rather than resembling those in Palawan.

As our team turned back on our long drive home, I kept pondering the killer crocodile story. It was in 1985 when I was exploring the entire Yangtze River for the National Geographic. I stopped by Wuhu to find out about the Yangtze Alligator, an endangered species. It was then that I found out that along the coast of southern China there used to be Saltwater Crocodile as well. But long since, the killer croc has become extinct in China.

During the Tang Dynasty, Han Yu (768-824AD), a scholar and member of the court literati, was exiled and banished to become governor of Chiu Zhou, an ancient town adjacent to today’s Swatow port in northern Guangdong province. At the time, crocodile infested the estuary waters, and both livestock and humans were regular victims. Han wrote an edict and burnt it as an offering to heaven. In it, he ordered the crocodile to move south and away from the populated area, warning that otherwise he would organize the locals to eradicate them. Apparently, this threat worked and, from then on, the menace of the crocodile was eliminated, as they moved south for some sixty kilometers.
Suddenly I recalled at the small and beautiful island of Kenderamen, we interviewed 49-years-old Ben Jahuji whose family was there seasonally to harvest seaweed, to be collected and sold to Japan. He recounted recently seeing a huge crocodile swimming near their beach. “The animal is very very big, over fifteen feet long. His body very wide, just like a big drum,” described Ben. This reminded me of another historic story about the crocodile in China.

This story circulated that since the time of Spring and Autumn era, some 3,000 years ago, Chinese had been choosing crocodile hide to make the best battle drums, the beating of which was a signal for the army to advance and attack. For retreat or calling off fighting when darkness approaches, a gong would be sounded. As the crocodile is an amphibious, the hide has the best sound retention quality, be it rain or shine, whereas cow hide could not produce the same quality sound and resonance in a battlefield when it rained.

Perhaps because the Chinese fought too many battles throughout the centuries, the crocodile went extinct in China. However, for ladies who enjoy sporting a crocodile handbag, maybe they should know that such bags will weather nicely, looking just as elegant during a shiny or rainy day.

My visit to Balabac was surely like visiting paradise on a sunny day, until another episode of disaster. Then, for the victims, hell it may become once again.
Fung was crossing the blockaded Victoria Harbour on a crowded sampan in the dark. He had paid the fisherman five dollars and anxiously waited for hours until it was relatively safe to set sail. Hazard was not from the weather or imprisonment, but from the powerful spotlight shined from the Japanese military lookout tower with a fire-at-will machine gun next to it. To deter the Japanese advance, the British resistance force had wrecked ships to strategically block the harbour. The ride was slow as the fisherman skillfully paddled his way crisscrossing through the floating obstacles. Everyone on the sampan kept dead still and silent. Sixteen year old Fung squeezed himself behind the bow and held tight to his bundle of green cabbage thinking of treating his mother and elder sister to a better meal. Rumour had it that no fresh vegetables were available on Hong Kong Island, and this must have been first in his mind. He could not have known that this would be the start of a dangerous journey that would take him to the remote jungles of Hainan.

It was the end of 1941, soon after the surrender of British Hong Kong. Fung had been away from home for over 3 months working in Kowloon Yaumati as a foreman in an underground factory cutting and trimming stolen metal wire fences into nails for binding wooden boxes. Workers, mostly young girls who feared brutality, had disguised themselves to look sick by wiping charcoal with blood on their faces and dressing rough. They had all fled into mainland China leaving Fung alone at the abandoned factory where they once had made a living happily. ▶
Early the next morning in Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island, Fung met the owner, who in fact had already anticipated the total loss of his investment and was busy planning his own way out of Hong Kong that same day. He was furious about Fung’s stubbornness in coming in person to explain the failure of the company. He had previously instructed all the workers to escape Kowloon into China, either by Castle Peak Road to the west or Tai Po Road to the north, depending on the invasion route. Fung, however, was reluctant to leave. As the only son and man of the family, he was proud to bear the responsibility. Knowing that they would never see each other again, the owner showed his appreciation with a few ten dollar notes and wished Fung good luck.

Holding tight the bundle of cabbage on the way home, Fung walked past the Central fire station (now Heng Seng Bank Headquarters in Central District). A Japanese soldier across the road shouted and waved him over to Central Market. A fireman guarding the station door quietly told the young Fung that he must go and bow all the way if he wanted to live. The fireman, nodding his head lightly and rolling his eye to his left to a wall hook, hinted that he could guard the cabbage for him to pick up later. Fung hung the cabbage on the hook and thought “Well, just in case I should ever return!”

The officer, Lieutenant Lim On-yee (林安然), was originally a teacher from Taiwan. During the war, over 200,000 men were enlisted from the Japanese colony of Taiwan, both voluntarily and forcibly, for the honour of fighting for the Japanese Emperor and for higher than average pay. Some soldiers claimed to fight for the pride of their own tribe, since they were discriminated against as lower class citizens in the colony. Getting enlisted ensured honour to the soldier and the family, and hence the tribe. This was the cunning way that the Emperor’s propaganda had been designed to lure young men to the war.
Fung was the third of the first batch of eight summoned by this soldier. The boys had no idea what would happen. Standing still and keeping their mouths shut was the best they could do. Fung was strongly built and tall by Chinese standards at 5'8", so did Fung scare when standing behind the short and lightly built Lieutenant Lim? Yes, but he acted calm and prepared to obey orders. He didn't want a bullet in the head. Since childhood, Fung was taught by his sister that, so long as you refrained from harming any other person, the “Sky,” sometimes referred to as “Heaven” or “The Spirit,” will look after you well.

When Lim had completed the recruitment of eight, he immediately led all the boys into action. They were ordered to unload baskets full of vegetables from lorries into the Japanese military’s centralised kitchen. They then quickly distributed cooked food boxes in baskets according to the destination labelled. A cloth arm badge with a military insignia and hand written Japanese words “Sun Squad” 『昭部隊』 was given to each boy. For Lim, there was no identification required for the boys, not even their names. He simply called every boy xiao hai (小孩) - kid. In the land of starvation, the Japanese manipulated human desire with simple incentives. A half bag full of clean rice weighing roughly one kilogram was rewarded if the work was done well. Each boy would then be asked to return the next morning. Absence went unpunished due to no record or identification, meaning work was not enforced. However, those who had experienced hunger would not hesitate to return. Fung was the first to agree. He bowed to Lim then crossed the road back to the fire station. He and the fireman were both surprised, the fireman - surprised that this boy was still alive, and Fung - that the cabbage was still there.

There were corpses scattered along the street that had either been shot or starved to death; a symbol to suppress resistance and enforce military control. With only the thought of home, the exhausted Fung daringly carried the rice and cabbage down Queen’s Road. He could sense remotely that all the eyeballs of soldiers, hungry people and gangsters were fixed on what he was holding, and yet nobody did anything. Childishly he strutted with his food, but later realised that it was actually the cloth badge that shined his way home.

Fung had little memory of his father, an opium addict, who had died when he was just 9 years old. His mother and sister, who stitched up torn rice sacks under the stair entrance to make a living, were always worried about him. After months away from home, Fung’s sudden return delighted them. They had a simple but happy family dinner together with fresh green cabbage. Insisting to carry on his kitchen adventure, despite his sister’s concerns, he reported to Lim the next morning earlier than expected. With a few new faces, they were transported on a truck to various secret locations where the British forces had hidden their provisions. The Japanese spies had previously identified these houses long before their occupation. Now, obtaining them was just a matter of time. Fung and the others moved sharply to load all of it.

For weeks, Fung and family were sufficient in food. His humble performance was satisfactory, and Lim assigned Fung as the leader in charge of recruiting new coolies. So Fung gathered his friends, young and old, strong and weak. Some friends refused as they didn’t want to be branded as traitors. For Fung, a graduate of primary sixth grade and street boy, his instinct to feed the family was stronger. He had no knowledge in politics nor sense of national identity. Rice or a bullet, he chose wisely.

Fung observed that not all soldiers were actually of Japanese origin. They were an ethnic melting pot of Koreans, Taiwan aboriginals, Indonesians and even minorities from North East China. Despite the atrocities committed by the Japanese, Fung believed that there were bound to be some good-hearted persons among them. Lim, in Fung’s eyes, was one of them. According to rumours, Lim had never fought on the enemy front and certainly didn’t look like someone who could kill.

Fung worked from dawn to dusk, usually barefoot. Meals with meat and vegetables were provided, sometimes with hot soup. No beating required, unless someone misbehaved. One day, an orange was reported stolen. No one dared to admit it, so the soldier lined up all labourers and smelled each of their hands. The unfortunate coolie, standing next to Fung, was then beaten and thrown into the harbour.
Fung learned to speak the essential Japanese words allowing him to communicate with Lim. Although Fung knew Lim could speak Chinese, he never heard him utter a single word of it. Fung didn’t know if it was because of his role or his discipline, but certainly there was a mutual respect between the two. It was just that the situation did not allow them to develop any friendship.

Three months into the coolie work, Fung was offered a chance to follow Lim to Singapore, but he refused. Lim then generously recommended him to work for the meal delivery service. Due to fears of poison, the Japanese soldiers were only allowed to take food prepared by their centralised kitchen and only trustworthy persons would be assigned to deliver. The reward was the same as before, but the work less harsh, so Fung was again being looked after by the “Sky”. Fung would never see Lim again. Even 50 years later, Fung always wished to locate Lim and thank him for his care.

After working for two weeks as a delivery boy, Fung learned from others the tricks to earn extra cash. The Japanese soldiers had been confiscating bicycles from citizens who misbehaved. Hundreds of bicycles were stacked near the kitchen. Fung and others were allowed to use them for meal delivery. Occasionally, they would ride the bicycle out with the meals to various posts, then secretly sell the bicycle and return to the kitchen on foot. The gate guards who were familiar with their faces usually waived their security check as long as they continued bowing on the way in and out. Sometimes a packet of cigarettes or bottle of sake could also smooth their operation. This worked until one afternoon, the soldier who had confiscated a bike a week before was surprised to come across the same bike in the city again. He filed a report. One of the boys got caught. The consequence was unknown but certainly severe. Fung was warned by other boys never to return to the kitchen. He immediately burned the once invincible arm badge that had guaranteed his survival for the past four months.

To achieve the goal of creating the “New Order of Asia”, the ambitious Emperor and his military government first had to take control of resources. Hainan Island in the South China Sea had abundant natural resources, and it was also a key strategic location due to its deep harbours where the Japanese Navy could set up a base to launch attacks throughout the region. It was early 1939 when the Japanese invaded Hainan and began their plan to rob the island. Private Japanese enterprises were commissioned to exploit all the available resources, particularly in mining and agriculture. Naval and air bases were rapidly built around the island. All this required a huge labour force. Fung almost inevitably became a part of it.

Fung was desperate to find a job, but there were virtually none available in occupied Hong Kong. Hop Kee (合記) in Wan Chai was the sole agency to recruit labourers to work in Hainan for Japanese companies. Successful applicants could receive on the spot approximately a kilogram of rice and a bottle of cooking oil to take home, without commitment. And once a contract was signed, each labourer was entitled to a monthly salary package payable in Hong Kong to their family whilst they were away. Food, accommodation and insurance were provided by the company for free. Labourers could terminate their contract at will and be shipped back to Hong Kong immediately. That was precisely the kind of offer Fung could not refuse. As a strong but desperate young man who had worked with nice Japanese soldiers, he thanked the “Sky” again for such an opportunity. Even so, he would utter his favourite karmic line. “When the sky falls, embrace it as a quilt!” (天掉下來當蓋被).

Fung, like many other contracted labourers, had to stay at the back of Hop Kee for medical quarantine and wait for the unpredictable ship schedule. Young Fung had been voluntarily detained for around two weeks when a ship finally arrived. He was soon on board a cargo ship...
named “Yuen Lam” (榆林丸) waving farewell to his worried sister on the pier. It was summer 1942.

“Yuen Lam” would only travel along the coastlines at night when fewer allied fighters patrolled the area. It took a week to reach Haikou harbour in the north of Hainan Island. There were about 400 men on board lying around on the upper deck covered by a huge camouflaged canvas. Some were suffering from seasickness but received no medical attention. In fact, no one seemed to be in charge until the ship docked. Some casually dressed officials and medical staff were waiting on the pier. Newly arrived labourers were then separated into four squads and lined up in quarantine for medical assessment. Fung could see the pier was heavily guarded by troops, but they did not intervene in the process. It was a hot and humid sunny day. “So far so good!” he thought.

Fung was assigned to a construction site by the beach. His job was to pump fresh air manually from a small boat to a Japanese diver wearing a copperhead SDD (Standard Diving Dress). He had no experience on the sea but was eager to learn. The diver’s job was to lay the sea floor with the foundations for a new bridge, a job that would take months to complete. It was during that period that he learned his maritime knowledge, courtesy of the Japanese diver, who in fact was not a hard working man. Fung learned to tie knots, sail a boat, fix an engine, observe weather and water currents, wind and wave directions and he even tried the SDD on for fun. It was this set of skills that influenced the rest of his life.

There were soldiers guarding the beach monitoring all activities. Fung and the diver had to be careful not only in work but also when taking unauthorised leisure time, usually an afternoon nap or fishing. The diver once caught a big fish but was unable to pull it out of the water. Fung was ignorant enough to use both his arms to pull the fish firmly towards himself resulting in hundreds of wounds poked by the razor sharp fish fin. Blood was everywhere.
It seemed to Fung that the diver was not keen to work fast and certainly not necessarily loyal to the Emperor. Perhaps he was originally a seaman forced to work on Hainan. On days that they were required to work on a beach, the first thing they needed to do was to dig their own trench nearby. A sand hole roughly their body size must be prepared in which to take cover in case of emergency, as Allied fighters would often come to bomb the naval facilities. Whenever the siren sounded, Fung would jump into his ditch and cover his head with the shovel in his hand. Dead or alive, it’s all up to the “Sky.”

According to Fung, contracted labourers were treated fairly. Basic accommodation and adequate food were provided. He never felt like a slave or got beaten for being slow like a POW. Periodically, labourers would be transferred to different sites for different types of work, from sugar farming to rock mining, sawmill to fishing boat. Surprisingly, there was an unwritten rule that, as labourers were always in high demand, they could run away from one job to find another without punishment if they felt dissatisfied with the current job. Every company welcomed new-comers with the basic bed and three meals. It was like water circulating inside a closed pond, as no labourer could leave the island.

Fung ran away once into the jungle and lost his way in the forest, where directions were difficult to define even with a compass. Fung had been told to hide under a fully loaded mining train destined for downtown. Instead he took an emptied train, which went the opposite way further into the jungle. He caught malaria, but was luckily saved by the local Li minority people (黎族), who knew the jungle well. Fung spent a few days recovering, then walked out to a sawmill. The living and food conditions in the factory were poor but Fung had no much choice but to settle, at least for the time being. For Fung, the only worry was not about his well-being but whether his salary package would reach his family. This seemed unlikely.

Two weeks passed. One day, unusually, Japanese troops came to their site. All labourers were ordered to line up. An officer shouted loudly for eight volunteers to step forward to work for the military. No further details of the job were given and there was dead silence for a while. The shouting continued. Standing in front of Fung were two brothers. The older one stepped out but was pulled back in line by his younger brother. Surprisingly, the officer didn’t react to this withdrawal, so Fung felt a little bit at ease. Without second thought, he raised his hand and stepped out.
On the back of the truck, surrounded by the troops, he thought of being captured for his wrong doings and he thought of death. However, it was very rare for him to feel defeated and miss home. The truck stopped at a closed gate in front of an area surrounded by high fences and guards armed with machine guns. As the guard opened the gate, Fung, kept his delight to himself. It was a cookhouse, the military centralised kitchen. Right after a proper lunch, Fung and the other men were riding on a truck into the villages. They went to collect farm products from different fields to bring back to the kitchen, a job that he was so familiar with. He thanked the “Sky” and also the “Ground” for this beneficial arrangement.

Fung was always a person with a conscience. He condemned the atrocity of the Japanese invasion. Like many others, he resented the Japanese. Yet due to fear and the will to survive he inevitably opted to lower his head and continue his work. Days later, sitting on the back of a pick up truck fully loaded with potatoes, Fung realised there were many runaway fellow Chinese workers peeking through bushes by the road. The road condition was rough, both he and the potatoes were bouncing out of control. He would first check if the Japanese soldiers in front were not looking back, then he would synchronise with the bumpy ride and casually kick the potatoes off the truck. A simple but dangerous act to help others.

Fung remained working in the kitchen until August 15, 1945, the day of Japan’s surrender. Just when everyone thought peace had been achieved, chaos returned. Fung was out of a job and no arrangement for returning home. Many were summoned by the Nationalists to become soldiers. Fung was no exception. They were brought to a military camps for training. Here he saw how the warlords had converted the enemy headquarters into a casino, and were using lorries to run illegal bus service. Prostitutes, drug addicts and the homeless were everywhere. His training mainly involved marching on parade, which was actually a scam. A five star General was coming to Hainan, but only a handful of troops were available. So the warlord rounded up all the men and forced them to line up as a parade to make up the numbers on the payroll. The corrupted General came and inspected with satisfaction. Soon after the parade, all fake soldiers were immediately dismissed.

Fung later found a job in a grocery shop downtown. The shopkeeper family treated the lonely boy well, especially the eldest daughter who was about the same age as him. For the past six years, he had had little news of Hong Kong and none from his own family. The severe air...
The bombing of occupied Hong Kong Island by the Allied bombers had destroyed most of the buildings from east to west. He thought that they might have died. However, when the Nationalist government resumed mail service, the shopkeeper helped him to write a letter home. Fung had sadly assumed that the old Western District had been destroyed and his family vanished. He had prepared to stay in Hainan for good. The shopkeeper insisted he should give it a try. A month later, a reply from his sister reached Fung. He cried.

It was summer 1948. Walking to his home in Western District, Fung saw his ageing mother sitting at the stairway entrance. He first noticed that her hair bun, previously large and firm, had apparently shrunk, as had her body. He slowly walked up to her close enough to grab her hands and whisper, “Sister!” In the old days, when child mortality was still high, young children were prohibited to call their parents directly Mother and Father, but instead used Sister and Uncle, so as to mislead the evil spirits into thinking that they are not closely related. His mother, now blinded by cataracts, recognised the voice and knew that her constant praying to the “Sky” had been answered. Tears mixed with laughter as she caressed the rough skin of her son’s face with her shaking hands. She grabbed tight his hand and ran to the street shouting “My son is back! ... My son is back!” What a moment for Fung!

Fung was never a hero nor a role model. He was just an accidental explorer and truly dedicated survivor. Born in 1925, it required a collapse of an ancient Chinese dynasty, a period of political and social turmoil, the economic unrest of colonisation and two world wars to breed such a character. I have spent the past 25 years documenting Fung’s life through numerous conversations and on hours of films. There is more to tell. We owe that war-torn generation so much. Without their struggle to survive, we would not have what we have today.

Back in Hong Kong, Fung continued to engage in a different war. He started as a street hawker selling fish and vegetables, joined the Chinese Customs Bureau, then the Maritime Department and subsequently the Royal Hong Kong Police Force as a Marine Police Officer. He raised eight children and by the end of 1980, he retired from the force at the age of 55. Fung had returned to Hainan Island but failed to reconnect with the grocery family. At the age of 93, Fung returned to the “Sky” peacefully on October 2018 with most of his family by his side, including his best friend and youngest son, me.

At CERS, we study the past, the present and the future; personal stories from royalty to nomadic herders and ocean- edge fishermen, from enemies to comrades, from outer space to deep caves. As a Filmmaker with CERS, I have made multiple trips visiting the Li Tribe at Hong Shui Village in the jungle of Hainan Island. Every time, I humbly presented myself and offer help as much as I could afford. Simply that deep from the bottom of my heart, they had saved my father’s life and theoretically, mine too.
His fingers are long, slender and frail. Felix Smith held the pen firmly and with slow but determined movement he autographed his book for me. “For How Man, with thanks for all of the good things you have contributed to the history of CNAC and CAT. Felix.” So it reads now on the inside cover page of the book, China Pilot, flying for Chiang and Chennault. That’s the first time I saw someone short-cut the words “with thanks”. For Felix however, his life had no short-cuts, but instead was long and distinguished.

A later edition of the same book has the title China Pilot, Flying for Chennault during the Cold War. Chiang Kai-shek was cut off, as he became less and less relevant in Asia and the world. This is not just another book among a very long list of books written by pilots who saw action in battles and wars. According to Felix, the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, which published the later version, chose the book as one of ten best war aviation history books.

These same fingers signing the book must once have danced on the keyboard of the baby grand piano now sitting idle in the living room, covered with two layers of cloth. During Felix’s childhood growing up in Milwaukee, his father was a head music teacher. That influence certainly must have rubbed off on young Felix, since he learned to play both the violin and piano.

Not far from the piano by the corner window, boxes of papers and old photographs surround a bed transforming the space into Felix’s bedroom. Having turned 100 earlier this year, age and frail...
condition have imposed constraints on movement, and Felix has moved the bed from his second-floor bedroom to the ground floor, at a corner of the living room.

It was also these same fingers which held firmly to the steering wheel inside the cockpits of a large array of airplanes as Felix flew through darkness, thunderstorms and sprays of gunfire during five wars in Asia. “In total, I have flown over thirty thousand miles in an airplane,” Felix confided to me.

As a young man, Felix joined CNAC, China National Aviation Corporation, in 1945, flying the HUMP during the final days of World War Two. That was followed by a long stint after the War with CAT, Civil Air Transport, started by General Chennault of Flying Tiger fame. In fact, CAT had nothing civil about it. Instead, it was run much like a military logistic and cargo airline.

With CAT, Felix flew on the Nationalist side during China’s Civil War from 1945 to 1949, ferrying troops and ammunition back and forth as conflict dragged on throughout the Mainland. Such flights continued after the Nationalist retreat to Taiwan, after which Felix and other CAT pilots conducted dangerous covert flights into the Mainland during the early years of the PRC. Throughout much of the Cold War and through several hot wars, CAT was the civilian proxy airline for the CIA, flying junkets into much of Southeast Asia. Similar airline outfits were named Air America and Air Asia.

Between flying for CNAC and CAT, Felix became a pilot for the first ever Christian Missionary Airline in the world, flying a war surplus C-47 turned into a cargo plane for relief and medical supplies. The plane was christened St Paul, after the first missionary disciple. On its fuselage was painted a red heart with
orange flames around the edges, inscribed with bold lettering underneath, “Lutheran World Mission.”

**Felix** was hired by Reverend Daniel Nelson, a missionary who started this odd airline. Besides St. Paul there was St. Peter, another C-47, but missing an engine. “We rob Peter to pay Paul,” Daniel confided to Felix, explaining how they cannibalize one plane for spare parts to keep the other in the air. Daniel was killed with his family some months later in a Macao Airways flying boat, when four passengers who were bandits tried to waylay a shipment of gold in the plane’s cargo hold. Amid the mayhem on board, the pilots were shot in the cockpit and the plane plunged into the sea.

The Korean War followed, and Felix continued his flying career with CAT, which Felix in his book often referred to as “the company.” Many of the flights were carrying military personnel or supplies, all contracted by the US Army. When the French Indo-China War began, CAT began flying covert missions in Southeast Asia, which was the beginning of a long relationship with the CIA, which Felix called “the customer.”

The flights to service the French forces in Indo China lasted many years, at times flown in big planes like the C-119 called the Flying Boxcars, right up to the siege of Dien Bien Phu. Indonesia was another theater where CAT saw action, airdropping supplies to support an uprising in an attempt to unseat then President Sukarno, whom the US suspect to have communist leaning.

Lastly was the Vietnam War, from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies, with most of the action for CAT in Laos, when CAT was again contracted by the CIA. There were also smaller contracts and lesser skirmishes in between, like ferrying Hmong hill tribe fighters in an attempt to harness the communist rise in Asia. These missions, while small, were no less significant and were just as dangerous to a flyer as the five recognized “Wars” listed above.

In one incident, Felix had just finished training for flights into Tibet to airdrop Tibetan Khampa guerilla trained by the CIA to harass the PLA after the Dalai Lama went into exile in India. William Welk, his colleague at CAT, pioneered most such flights. But in 1960, just as Felix was about to be dispatched in a B-17 bomber for this long-range mission out of Bangkok in full darkness, the US government stopped all covert flights after a U2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union and its pilot Gary Powers was captured.

Several times during our conversation about his clandestine missions, Felix put his finger to his lips with a secret grin and whispered, “I kept my mouth shut, but we all kind of knew what each other was doing.” This happened whenever he was recounting their work for “the customer” as he called the CIA. Occasionally, there would be a slip of the tongue and he would simply say CIA. Each time he realized it, he again put his finger to his lips.
But Felix flew more than military missions. Once he flew a full load of sheep from New Zealand to Mainland China for the Nationalist’s Agriculture Ministry. These were to be used as new stock and studs to revive the local livestock after the War. Later, CAT, operating from Taiwan, pioneered a passenger service called Mandarin Jet in parallel to its military cargo service, more or less as a cover for the covert missions.

“This book I wrote is really about all my pilot friends, not so much about myself,” he reiterated more than once. But reading through it, one cannot but be carried along by someone who was quite a maverick during the heady days of the Cold War. It was a far cry from today’s automated flying machines in which a fighter pilot does not even have to see the enemy aircraft before engaging to shoot it down with the push of a button.

“Some of our fellow pilots were such great flyers that when I saw them fly, I wanted to resign,” Felix said. I asked about the father of a common friend, Harry Cockrell. “Oh, I knew Harry Junior since he was born. And Senior is one of those very fine pilots, and also a gentleman with excellent manners, always immaculately dressed,” Felix recounted. I asked about Moon Chin, another common friend, who turns 105 this year. Felix was all praise and said Moon was one of those best pilots that Felix admired. “I’ve learned a lot about Chinese through Moon”, he added.

CAT was stationed in Taipei during the 1950s and 60s.

“In those days, I had a Chinese cook, and I told him ‘Cook no lap sap!’ meaning no trash” Felix said. “But I could tell just from the smell coming from the kitchen that he was cooking up some nice Chinese dishes, not for me, but for his other friends,” Felix recounted with a smile in his face.

His book recounted several major airplane disasters. One was the downing of a Cathay Pacific flight near Hainan Island in 1954. The commercial flight was shot out of the air by two Chinese Air Force jets. Among the passengers was Len Parish, one of the CNAC pilots, and his family. His wife Fran and daughter Valerie survived the crash and were rescued from a life raft, while Len and his two sons went down with the plane.

I have known Valerie for many years as we met at the annual CNAC reunion in San Francisco. While the fiasco triggered massive media coverage at the time, few knew or noticed the final reparation and apology that China made afterward, admitting to a mistake. Felix thought the fighter pilots might have mistaken the first three letters of Cathay for CAT, the American-funded airline.

Felix also exposed another mysterious loss of a CAT C-46 passenger flight operating around Taiwan. It was in 1964 and during the time of the Asian Film Festival hosted in Taiwan. Returning from the south, the plane made a stop at Makung, an off-shore seaport island with many military installations less than a hundred miles from the Mainland. Piloting the plane was Benji Lin,
a seasoned captain with fourteen years of flying experience. Benji graduated from the Chinese Air Academy and was son-in-law of Tiger Wang (Wang Hsu-ming), commanding general of the Chinese Air Force.

Boarding the plane in Makung were several US military advisors and two Chinese. One was a Navy lieutenant, a radar expert attached to the Makung shipyard. He was accompanied by a retired naval officer turned businessman. They had no luggage and the lieutenant was on a 72-hour leave. They carried two confidential radar manuals as hand-carried items. The plane continued to Taichung and picked up the group of celebrity passengers with their entourage.

A US air attaché expert was allowed to inspect the crash site since there were US military advisors among those who died. Contrary to the Taiwan government crash report, the expert reached a highly disturbing conclusion. He surmised that the plane had been hijacked and made to turn toward the mainland, commencing a flight path back and forth, before finally plunging into a rice paddy.

To make a complicated espionage story short, the account by the air attaché described the pilot being shot in the head. And the two confidential radar manuals, which escaped detection, had been cut out inside in the shape of a gun, sufficient to hide two .45 pistols. But for security reasons, this report was never released, as the Nationalist government did not want to raise panic with a report of a hijacking during a sensitive time when relations with the Mainland were volatile. Instead, CAT took the blame in a cover up that accused the airline of poor maintenance of the airplane.

Among those who died in the crash was Asia movie tycoon Loke Wan-tho. I wish I had uncovered all these intrigues of the CAT crash earlier, as I could have related all of these details to an old and dear friend. Lady McNeice, who passed away in 2012 at the senior age of 94 in Singapore, was the youngest sister of Loke Wan-tho. Both brother and sister are avid bird watchers, with the former being a great photographer of birds.

Sir Run Run Shaw, an acquaintance I have met once, barely missed that plane disaster, because he changed to an earlier flight to Hong Kong in pursuit of William Holden, who himself was originally also scheduled to join Loke to visit the National Central Museum down south. Had history taken a different turn, the movie industry of Asia in the second half of the last century might have played out quite differently.

Felix and I discussed briefly the November 9, 1949 defection of twelve CNAC and CATC (Central Air Transport Corporation) airplanes from Taiwan to China. Felix was in Hong Kong at the time and played a role in the subsequent court battle to keep the remaining airplanes, seventy-one in total, on the ground.

I knew well two of the pilots, Jack Young and Leonard Lin, who piloted two of the planes, both owned by CATC, to Tianjin on that fateful day. I also knew Barrister Percy Chen, who fought in court for China to take charge of the remaining planes in Hong Kong. His arguments were at first successful, with the Hong Kong court making a ruling that the planes belonged to New China, the PRC.

Later, the decision was reversed during an appeal to a higher court in Britain, with the planes finally ceded to the USA through a cobbled-together ownership and fire sale payment. It ended, to the delight of General Chennault, through the interference and threat of the US government intervening in the British judicial system, citing behind the scene the higher national and allied interests and priorities during the Cold War. Ultimately the planes were shipped to the U.S. in 1952.

Our interview was coming to a close in the last of two mornings that I spent with Felix at his home in New Berlin, a suburb of Milwaukee in Wisconsin. Felix struggled to stand up from his rocking chair. This chair, which he seemed to have been affixed to for both long mornings, had a book stuck on the floor to stop it from rocking.

I offered to give him a lift under his arm, as his legs were weak and a bit unstable. He shook me off and insisted in getting up on his own, staggering a bit to hold on to his four-legged walker on wheels. He was eager to get to his desk. Fiddling with two drawers, he found the winged medal with a twelve-point star given to him as an honor by Taiwan’s Nationalist government. From boxes next to the window, he flipped through old black and white pictures to show me images and memories from his past.

As I was rising to leave, I told Felix that, this weekend, I would be attending the nearby Oshkosh Air Show, a once-a-year event when over ten thousand experimental and small planes would be flying in. Also being flown in would be many rare WWI and WWII warbirds. Felix offered a parting comment. Barely standing, with his back bent, and holding on to his four-legged walker, he said with a grin, “Give me a C-46, I can still fly it. It is easy.”

At 100 years of age, Felix Smith’s spirit is still taking flight.
CERS welcome Dr William Fung as our new Chairman of the Board. Dr Fung has been a friend and supporter of CERS for over two decades and have visited CERS sites and on expedition with How Man. He is also Chairman of Li & Fung Group.

CERS celebrated its 32nd anniversary dinner at the Football Club with over 400 friends and supporters.

Retiring CERS Directors Barry Lam, James Chen and David Mong joined as CERS Advisory Council.

A group of ten students and two teachers of the Hong Kong University Graduate Association College (HKUGAC) joined CERS for one-week study cruise on HM Explorer along the Irrawaddy in Myanmar.

Three head teachers, Jason Von Wachenfeldt, Leah Domb and Gil Domb from Lawrenceville School visited CERS sites in Yunnan, Myanmar and Palawan to design future collaboration trips for students.

Two teachers, Stephen Hindes and Freddie Sum from HKUGAC joined CERS in Palawan to prepare for student involvement in the future.

Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuk visited CERS premises in Hong Kong.

A three-story house is completed as mooring base for the HM Explorer boat in Mandalay. The riverbank house will also provide accommodations for our boat crew and service staff, as well as facilities for visiting CERS personnel.

Chan Myae Cho, our new staff in Myanmar began offering environmental and English classes for village children at our new boat base, using the HME as a teaching venue.

CERS IN THE MEDIA AND LECTURES

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Film crew with HM on top of Hua Shan. “Life As An Explorer”. “Shenzhen, China’s Southern Powerhouse”. Grade 3 students of the Canadian International School.

BBC filmed with HM in Hua Shan for an upcoming six-part new series on China. HM discusses China’s history in the context of exploration.

A large format limited-edition book “Life As An Explorer” by How Man will be published covering his first of five decades of exploration from 1974-1983. This is intended as a series of five volumes.

How Man wrote the Foreword for a new book “Shenzhen, China’s Southern Powerhouse”, and contributed his early pictures from 1977.

Dr Bill Bleisch and HM jointly gave a lecture to Grade 3 students of the Canadian International School.
A subscription to this newsletter is US$100 for three issues. All proceeds support CERS projects. Please contact us directly if you are interested in signing up. See the bottom of page two for contact details.

CERS’ MISSION:
The mission of the China Exploration and Research Society is to enrich the understanding of our cultural and natural heritage.