

# LCI (G) 66 - "Firefight on the Mindanao River" By Don Hawley

## *FIREFIGHT ON THE MINDANAO RIVER.*

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The symbol for taking back the Philippines was a six-sided coffin, and LCI(G)66 was part of the convoy to drive home the last nail--the invasion of the island of Mindanao. At dawn we sailed past Zamboanga where "the monkeys have no tails," and a long line of LCI(R)'s pounded the beach of Illana Bay with rockets. It turned out the Japanese had, as usual, anticipated our arrival and moved inland.

Shortly after the beach had been secured, our ship--along with another LCI(G) and three smaller PGM's (subchasers turned into gunboats)--was ordered to proceed up the Mindanao River in an attempt to bring our three-inch gun to bear on Fort Pickett. No ship the size of ours had ever navigated this swift-flowing river, and it was an interesting assignment. After getting underway the Captain called the crew together and explained our mission. He pointed out that although we would be in full view like sitting ducks, the whole Japanese army might be hiding in the jungle along the shore and we wouldn't be able to spot them. We were ordered to wear our helmets and life jackets at all times, and all guns were fully manned. Since our Skipper was in charge of the mission, we led the group of vessels. From time to time Filipinos lined the banks waving little American flags and shouting, "Maboohoi" For once Navy men got to be recognized as liberators.

## **Doing Up Cotabato**

We docked at the inland town of Cotabato only twelve hours after Japanese troops had pulled out. As usual the enemy had dug many caves in the hill at the edge of town. I went ashore and linked up with a soldier who had a carbine and a Filipino guerrilla sporting some ancient blunderbuss. All I had was a flashlight but we hit on a plan: I would enter each cave first, hunched over and holding the light, while the two armed men would have their gun barrels right over my shoulder ready to fire. I'm glad we didn't find any caves occupied, as it really wasn't a great arrangement.

This was one time the Navy got to go souvenir hunting ahead of the Army. We were warned about booby traps, but were eager nevertheless. Upon entering the building the Japanese had used as headquarters I spotted the perfect souvenir, a small handmade Shinto shrine. I wasn't the first to see it,

but no one had touched it yet because it was just the kind of item that would likely be booby-trapped. I decided I had to have it so, in a moment of insanity, just walked over and picked it up. No problem. The former owners had taken their god with them, but as I write this the little shrine is in the attic just over my head.

Men from our ship also scrounged a bicycle, a refrigerator, and a 1940 Mercury! The latter lacked a battery, but we used the one from our stern winch and roared around town with men hanging out every window. Before long an Army officer flagged us down and commandeered our prize; we took our battery and left. Many Moslem Moros live on Mindanao, and some citizens disliked them even more than the Japanese. In any case, they handcraft beautiful, ornate knives. I traded old white uniforms for several knives and a wavy-bladed kris sword.

### **A Nasty Discovery**

The second day a buddy and I checked out carbines and went cave exploring. We found one very large excavation with iron doors. It ran back into the hill about a half-block, and all along one side 500-pound bombs were stacked five high. I went tippy toeing along until the beam of my flashlight shown on a little can imprinted with Japanese characters lying on the cave floor. It had a small stirrup at the base to which was fastened a copper wire. The wire ran toward the bombs for about six inches and then disappeared into the dirt floor. I knew I had found a booby trap, and there was enough ammunition to remove the entire side of the hill.

Backing gently out of the cave, I reported my find to the Army. I figured that was the end of my responsibility, but not so. That afternoon a jeep pulled up alongside our ship and the occupants asked for me. The two men, a demolition team, wanted me to show them the cave. I tried to get someone from the ship to go with me, but no one was interested.

I took the two men to the mouth of the cave, described the trap, and prepared to leave. Instead of merely thanking me, they asked me to accompany them and hold a flashlight while they worked. I was too embarrassed to say no, but the light wobbled in my hand. The moment they saw the can they were convinced they were dealing with a booby trap. For several minutes they merely talked about what kind of a set-up it might be, but finally one of them began digging around the can with a wooden matchstick. My eyes were on stalks and I was holding my breath; I really thought I was about to be the first American in space. I nearly blacked out when the man put down his matchstick and just picked the can up!

It turned out the can was used as a small lamp with oil and a wick. The "stirrup" was the handle, and the copper wire was for hanging the lamp. When the can fell or was discarded it landed upside down, and the end of the copper wire stuck in the dirt. Now I really was embarrassed, but the Army men

assured me they too had been convinced it was a lethal device. They had already defused some traps; one of them was a beautifully tooled leather case with nude pictures--and a hand grenade.

## **Fire Fight**

We left Cotabato with our ship leading, and the other LCI(G) and three PGM's bringing up the rear. That night the LCI(G) officers behind us did the wise thing; they dropped both a stern and bow anchor midstream. This left them surrounded by water and less vulnerable to attack from ground forces. Our Captain, usually a savvy man, tied right up to the bank, which was the same height as our deck. That meant there was nothing between us and the waist-high grass but the two chains that formed our lifeline.

It was still daylight when we tied up, and the local Filipinos said a contingent of Japanese troops had been in that area just hours before. Our Gunnery Officer called for volunteers to go ashore and look around. I didn't volunteer, but a handful of others did. They armed themselves and took off. There was no contact, but our men warned the local people to go to bed at sundown; we would shoot anything that moved after dark.

The Captain ordered every gun manned and ready to fire. My twenty-millimeter was on the side away from the shore; I couldn't shoot across my own deck but would cover the river and the far shore. None of us liked the arrangement. We weren't trained for hand-to-hand combat, and the coconut trees and tall grass that came right up to the ship could hide a lot of crawling Japanese. If a sizable group rushed us we would no doubt be taken. Quietly, and without permission, each of us visited number four hold to pick up a small weapon; I chose a carbine.

Sometime after dark I saw a light on the far side of the river. Just to have something to do, I squeezed off one round in the general direction. Several shots immediately followed mine--the crew obviously was tense. A fellow named Teraz manned the twenty-millimeter like mine, but on the shore side. Soon he was imagining he saw things crawling up through the grass, and began popping off with his carbine. A little later he began firing bursts with a submachine gun. I thought, "This guy is really freaked out. Surely some officer will soon quiet him down." Then he suddenly began raking the shore with his twenty-millimeter. Every so often when he hit the trunk of a coconut tree and it would jump up and topple over. Now I knew they would have to give Teraz a sedative.

Then I saw them. There were tracers coming back at us! Teraz wasn't so dumb after all; we were under attack. When you see tracers at night you remember that for each one you can spot there are two you can't see. The enemy fire came lower and lower over our deck until it was nearly head height. Since I couldn't use my gun, I was pretty low myself.

Then suddenly I realized what was happening. Having charted our position myself, I remembered we had stopped on a loop in the river. The three PGM's were on the other side of the loop; we were fighting it out with our own men!

It's bad enough to be shot at by the enemy, but there's something terrible about "friendly fire." I began yelling into my phone set, but the Gunnery Officer also had figured things out and was shouting, "Cease fire!" Once the heat of battle is joined men don't hear too well, and it took some time before the last gun was silenced. Finally the PGM's got us on the radio, and they were very unhappy. After all we had started this small, private war. One of their skippers threatened that if we fired one more shot they would open up with their three-inch guns. We capitulated.

Our Captain was both embarrassed and enraged. One of the hits we took was in the conning tower that also sheltered his bunk. He'd been asleep when the action started, but came dashing out in his underwear firing a submachine gun. The incident would have to be reported, and now the only people he wanted to shoot were his own crew. Calling us all to the quarterdeck, he looked down from the conning tower and unleashed all the salty language he had learned from a life in the Navy. He shouted, "Who gave you permission to break out all those small arms? Shinners, is that carbine unloaded?" (Shinners was my striker; I was teaching him to be a QM.) "Yes sir." Shinners replied, and pulled the trigger to prove it. The ensuing shot whistled right past the Skipper's ear. Before he had been mad; now he had apoplexy.

The Captain ordered all small arms put away, and sent everyone to bed except for a skeleton crew to man some of the guns. Teraz was tucked in, and I was ordered to take over his gun on the shore side. We couldn't fire unless ordered to do so. Now I became extremely unhappy, staring into the grass a few inches from my nose. I imagined various shapes crouching toward me. Finally I did the best I could in view of the situation. I got a bayonet and sat on an upturned pail, so that by leaning forward the edge of my helmet almost met the edge of the gun shield. All any enemy could see would be the whites of my eyes.

The next morning as the PGM's passed by to take the lead, their crews had a number of sarcastic remarks to share such as, "Nice going!" It turned out they had hit us three times and we had put several rounds into their boats. No one had been hurt, but the potential was there for real tragedy.

### **Up the River Without a Paddle**

Our orders told us to proceed up the Mindanao River, but didn't tell us where to halt. We just kept going until the water was so shallow we got stuck in the mud. With nothing to do, we had some of the best duty since leaving the United States. The Filipino people were very friendly. One man invited Lum and me to his home for "tuba" (coconut liqueur), and then took us to his brother's house for fresh, hot

roasted peanuts. I got especially close to a preacher who had studied at Yale. His wife made me a delicious dish of avocado, native chocolate, sugar, and cream. I gave her one of my mattress covers; she was thrilled as they had no material for clothing. They unraveled a sock to use for thread.

The preacher's little boy proudly showed me his favorite toy, the largest insect I had ever seen. It was a coconut bug as big as a mouse and attached to a stick by a string. When it flew round and round it sounded like a small fighter aircraft.

The preacher was especially proud of his small library, but the Japanese had taken some of his best volumes. I promised that after the war, when I was back in the States, I would send him some religious books. I kept that promise and sent quite a box full. I was disappointed, however, when he didn't write for some time, not even to thank me for the books. Finally he wrote and explained his apparent rudeness; something happened that had shattered his life and left him unable to communicate. After the war the countryside was littered with unexploded ammunition. One of his little girls innocently played with a shell, and it exploded tearing her apart. He described the horror of trying to pick up all the pieces of her body before the birds could carry them off.

While we were stuck in the mud the minister held dances for us at his home. A nearby Army unit provided a generator for lights. Many of the girls couldn't come as they just didn't have anything to wear. For the time being the war had passed us by and we were living the good life.

### **Praying for a Drought**

Word came through that if LCI(G)66 remained stuck in the mud as long as three months it would be decommissioned. Of course we all began to pray for a drought, as decommissioning would probably mean going back to Hawaii for a new ship assignment. Naturally it rained and we came loose.

The trip downstream was a lot faster than the trip upstream, as we were now carried by a swift current. Since the river was relatively narrow, navigating the turns was very difficult. The Captain put me on the helm full time; my meals were brought to me there. Our ship had twin screws, and playing one against the other could help greatly with maneuverability. The officer in charge usually handled engine orders, but since the Skipper knew I had a better feel for the helm than he did, for this trip he also put me in charge of engine changes. I felt I did a good job, although on one occasion I did bounce -then ship off the bank much like a billiard ball.

We had hardly gotten our breath when we became part of another convoy heading for the invasion of Balikpapan, Borneo. That is where LCI(G)66 hit a mine—but that's another story.

(I wanted to include a copy of the commendation we received for this action, but can't seem to find it just now.)