

# Spare The Bullets; Save Our People

story and photos by Don A. Farrell



"You, writer, climb in that jeep," barked the crisply dressed Philippine marine.

Camera bag in one hand and heart in the other, I leaped into the drab green vehicle. The armored personnel carrier in front of us ground into gear and the freshly washed convoy lurched down the washboard road to Sanga Sanga airstrip. It was a fifteen kilometer ride from Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, southern-most capital in the Philippine archipelago.

A rain squall set in, caking dust onto the jeep. The driver traded Tagalog epithets with two enlisted men in the back seat, one with an

M-16, the other a grenade launcher. I stared into the steamy jungle, imagining John Wayne in a green beret.

"Hey, writer!" broke in the driver, jolting me out of my dreamy heroism. "You know, a whole squad of our men were blown away right here in an ambush just a couple of months ago."

The driver spread a toothy grin as his two riflemen laughed openly, their weapons rattling against the jeep's metal floor. Camera hugged to my chest, I gazed back out the window, most of the fantasy now lost.

The caravan roared up to a dirt

airstrip and the troops filed out, setting up defensive positions and forming the parallel lines of a welcoming committee. Shortly there came a buzzing out of the overcast and a twin-engine aircraft zoomed in from the north. The plane landed, opened its doors and through two columns of stiff marines marched Dr. Ernesto Espaldon and his brother, Rear Admiral Romulo Espaldon.

They were greeted by government officials, then by the Datus (hereditary Muslim chieftans) and lastly by the officers of each of the military branches under the admiral's command. In this con-



*(preceding page, top) Villagers of Sindangan are treated by the Guam Balikbayan Medical Mission; (preceding page, bottom) the Philippine Marine Task Force in Tawi Tawi, the deciding factor.*



*(top) Zamboanga anxiously awaits the annual arrival of the medical mission; (middle) Muslim Datus (hereditary chieftans) and lovely village girls dressed in their native costumes, await the arrival at Bongao; (bottom) Paul Lichfield and Dale Kay attended to the vaccinations of Bongao's children.*



fused conglomerate of military and civilian, American and Filipino, Muslim and Christian, there was as much hugging and kissing, as there was saluting and hand shaking.

Deep in the nearby jungle, facing this phalanx of power in a deadly guerrilla war, was another group of Filipinos. Here then were all of the players in the drama of the rebellion in the southern Philippines. Filipino against Filipino. Why were they fighting? Would the warfare ever end?

The Espaldon brothers have dedicated their lives to easing this conflict. Ernesto Espaldon was born at the very foot of the Mosque of Makdum, the first Muslim structure built in the Philippines. He and his older brother grew up in the Muslim South. Their Christian parents were pioneer school teachers, sent from the north by the American Administration in the 1920s to help educate the Muslims.

As with other children around the world, race and religion meant little to the Espaldons and their toddler playmates. Their parents taught, with equal fervor, all of the children in the southern villages.

When Japan invaded the Sulu Sea on Christmas Day, 1941, Romulo was about to graduate Valedictorian from the Jolo High School. Ernesto, a year younger, was following in his brother's footsteps. These Christian boys, 16 and 15, along with their Muslim friends, joined the guerrilla resistance. Fearless as teenagers, they picked up the first shortwave radio brought to the Philippines by American submarine from Australia. For the rest of the war, these young men packed that radio around the southern jungle, outmaneuvering the Japanese intelligence and relaying troop movements to MacArthur.

When the Americans landed in Tawi-Tawi, there was hardly an enemy left. The historically bloody Muslims had driven them out. Tawi-Tawi became practically an "R and R" stop for American troops. More than one white-skinned soldier disappeared from the Tawi-Tawi beaches with a lovely, dark-eyed Filipina.

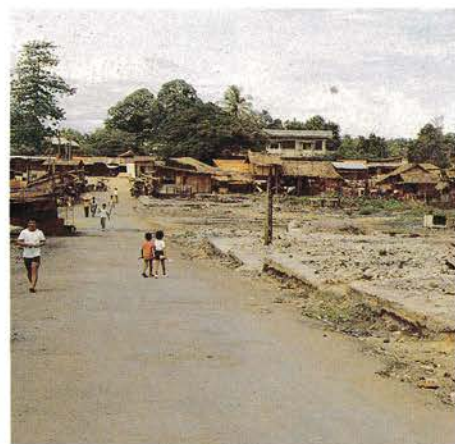
At the end of the war, Romulo Espaldon left his homeland to continue his education at Kings Point Merchant Marine Academy in New York. Ernie Espaldon went off to medical school in St. Louis to become a surgeon. With the guns of war silenced, the door of progress once again slammed shut on the Southern Philippines and Tawi-Tawi returned to its sleepy drift through time.

To understand how the bloody Muslim-Christian conflict developed, one must go back into time, back through 40 generations of emerging culture.

When the prophet Makdum, first of the Islamic missionaries, introduced civilization to the Philippines in 1380, the 7,000 islands were fractured into a hundred different pagan communities. They were geographically isolated in space and time. From the first mosque built in Tawi-Tawi, the Islamic culture and law spread throughout the Philippines. For 200 years the Moros ruled the islands. The Filipinos enjoyed nationality for the first time since their emigration from the Malay peninsula.

And then came Magellan. Establishing a base on the Visayan Island of Cebu, the Spaniards carried their cross of Christ, and used their superior weaponry, to drive the Moros from the central Visayas as well as Luzon. But when the Spaniards enlisted their Christian converts from the north to carry their crusade to the south, the Muslims declared a Jihad, a holy war, and ferociously defended their freedom of religion. Fighting the Spaniards so preoccupied the Muslims (over 1000 invasions were launched from the North) that their economy lagged far behind the rapidly advancing north.

In 1898 when the Americans appropriated the Philippines from Spain, they found the Muslims of the south, still unconquered by the "Sword and the Cross." Because of their political isolation from the Spanish government in Manila, the Muslims were still living in a "fishing trading" society. The Muslims, leary of any outsider after 300



*A major portion of the village of Ipil in the province of Zamboango del Sur was burned by rebel infiltrators.*

years of fighting, defended their heritage with the blade of a bolo, the long curved knife traditionally used by Muslim farmers. Even Black Jack Pershing and his .45s could not pierce the pride of the Moro fighters. Unable to beat them, America appeased them with modified self-rule and closed the door on an embarrassing chapter in American-Asian hegemony.

The Muslims, in peaceful co-existence with Christians, continued to travel the inland waterways in dugout canoes and lateen rigged fishing boats. Nothing much had changed for them in the last millennium, and might not for another to come.

World War II left the Philippines devastated by the battle for liberation. The industrialized north lay in ruins; no utilities, no roads, no service, Manila three quarters flattened, one million of the 18 million Filipinos dead. And then, in one bold stroke of the pen, America granted Philippine independence. It couldn't have happened at a worse time. The surviving industrialists leaped at the throat of the gasping young republic, monopolizing its riches and strangling its congressional process with zealous partisan politics.

This was a death blow to the southern Muslims. Expecting the worst from the Christians in the north, the Muslim Datus had petitioned the American Congress not to include the South in the independence act. It was simply





*(left) Conditions aboard the ship were conducive to intimate cooperation; (below) LST Ferry Manju transported the 1980 Medical Mission.*



laughed off in Manila. With the arrival of northern carpetbaggers, the Muslims' fears were realized. The Moros had learned well how to use guns and knives, but paperwork was another thing. They had their rights under the law, but the Muslims were in a caste considered beneath the meaning of the law. They were treated in much the same fashion that the black Americans were treated in the South after the American Civil War.

The lands of the Muslims, which were held in tribal custom much as those of the American Indians, were stolen. Into the Muslim lands flooded misfits and powermongers, who rolled up the flanks of the Muslims with various legal maneuvers. Then began a methodical process of resource exploitation, as demonstrated by their American colonial tutors.

Feelings of rebellion began to stir. There was talk of a new Jihad. A million Muslims with guns could be

a fearsome force. Atrocious incidents were reported by both religious factions. The Muslims still hated the northerners for fighting with the Spaniards against brother Filipinos. The Christians saw the Muslims as primitives, polygamists and pirates standing in the way of progress.

In 1953, Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay pressed the Filipino claim to North Borneo, now called Sabah. A tenuous bit of Muslim history relates that the Sultan of Borneo, in gratitude to the Sultan of Sulu, gave him Sabah for services rendered. That made Sabah part of the Philippines. The Sultan of Sulu rented this land to a group of British businessmen in 1830. The British government annexed it after World War II as part of the British empire.

When the empire began to fall apart, Sabah was made a part of Malaysia and the fur began to fly. Sukarno, Indonesian leader in 1963,

declared a "confrontation", claiming Sabah as part of Indonesia's natural boundaries. The Philippines had its own claim. Both nations severed relations with Malaysia and all three agreed to United Nations intervention. A referendum was allegedly held in which the Sabahnos reacted favorably towards Malaysia.

Among the Muslims of the southern Philippines, and especially among the heirs of the Sultanate of Sulu, no referendum would justify giving Sabah to Malaysia. Rumblings began for an armed invasion to take Sabah.

The Malaysian government saw the danger of this continuing agitation for Sabah by the Muslim Filipinos. They decided something had to be done to keep the Philippine government busy; to help them forget their claim to Sabah. So in 1969, they invited 90 young Muslims to come to Malaysia for special training. Among them was a



quiet spoken Muslim by the name of Nur Misuari.

In the early fifties Misuari, had gone to the University of the Philippines in Manila to study Asian politics. He became the understudy of José Sison, the chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Sison sent Misuari to China in the early sixties to study Mao's Red Book. On his return, they organized the Kabataang Makabayan (patriotic youth), a communist youth movement.

Because of successes with the Manila youth, Sison directed Misuari to go to the south and to organize a similar youth group among the Muslims. Misuari found that the ideals of communism and the religion of Islam were incompatible. When he was invited by the Malaysians in 1969 to lead a guerrilla movement in the south, he found a ready and willing facade for his communist movement.

He sensed the basic socio-economic woes of the Muslims. He saw a lot of people out of jobs and resentful of the northern Christians who held the good jobs. He went to them and said, "Brothers, why not

join me in seceding from the Republic of the Philippines. When we are independent here in Mindanao, I will make you governor, you will be the comptroller, you will be the general, you will be . . . .". He promised everyone jobs and the idea caught on like wildfire.

Misuari and the first group of 90 Muslim rebels received intense guerrilla training in Malaysia, supported by Libyan money and arms. Each day Misuari led a one-hour political discussion, during which he extolled the teaching of the Red Book. Before the end of their training, this group organized the Moro National Liberation Front. Styled after the PLO, their objective was to fight for secession of the South from the Republic of the Philippines.

Misuari began to prophesy that Ferdinand Marcos, strongest of the Northern presidents to have come to power, was going to begin a war of religious genocide, shades of Auschwitz for the Muslims, and that his first act would be to take away their right to bear arms.

On September 21, 1972, as a result of rioting instigated by

Sison's KM organization in the north, President Marcos declared martial law in the entire Philippines to arrest what he called "national anarchy." His first order to the Philippine military was to collect all loose firearms. To the pseudo-prophet Misuari, this was an oracle. He told the Muslims that Marcos was going to kill them after taking away their guns. Revolution exploded in the south. Young Muslims shouted "Jihad!" and fled to the hills. Misuari ran to Libya, where he duped Khadafy into supporting his brother Muslims against the Christians. Taking up a luxurious residence in exile, Misuari began a flow of arms that would eventually kill thousands of his countrymen.

The first Philippine Southern Commander to face the Moro National Liberation Front exacerbated the situation by trying to out-gun the Muslims. For every rebel he shot, another ten would join the cause. By 1973, 90 percent of the Southwestern region was under Misuari's control.

Fighting an ambush war akin to a mini-Vietnam, the rebels tied up



*American colonialism coexists with Ipil's native culture.*



thousands of Philippine Armed Forces troops in a no-win war. Marcos decided on tactics that might preserve his nation. Bitterly, he renounced the Philippine claim to Sabah, giving in to the clandestine activity of Malaysia and hoping that his Malay cousins would stop harboring Misuari's guerrilla insurgents.

Marcos also recognized that he needed a change of command in the south. Searching among his high ranking officers, he found Romulo Espaldon. Now thirty years in his country's uniform, Romulo had been military attache to Indonesia during Sukarno's 'confrantacion' and had finished a recent successful cleaning up of the corrupt Bureau of Customs. More important than that, he was a native of Tawi-Tawi, he spoke Tausug, and he was a true blood-brother of the Muslims.

And so back to his home went Commodore Espaldon, soon to become Rear Admiral Espaldon, Commander of all Philippine Armed Forces in the South. With him he brought the orders of his President. Across the bottom of the crisply typed document Ferdinand Marcos scrawled a note which said, "You shall proceed to the Southern Philippines and as much as possible resolve any conflict peacefully."

Romulo brought to his people a "policy of attraction." He traveled without his side arm and often in dangerously small groups in unguarded rear areas. Here he met with his old school mates and World

War II guerrillas.

Filipino blood brothers from a previous war faced each other in the darkness of the jungle: one in the uniform of his country, the other a rebel. The soft words of the compassionate admiral were muffled in the sounds of the dank undergrowth. "Lay aside your arms, my old friend. Come back with me. I cannot hurt you. Please help me rebuild our country. We must spare the bullets and save our people."

One after another the rebel commanders thankfully put away their weapons to take responsible positions in the local government.

This same year, 1974, after 8 years of not having seen his brother, Dr. Ernesto Espaldon, Ernesto returned to the Philippines on vacation. He heard stories of the battle for Jolo and said to his brother, "I want to go to Jolo." There the Espaldon brothers walked through the burnt out rubble of their high school playground, viewing corpses in the street and aimless children crying for lost mothers. There, between these two brothers, was born the Balikbayan Medical Mission. Balikbayan loosely translates to 'return to the country'.

The following July, still at the height of the rebellion, Dr. Espaldon returned to the Philippines with his wife, his children, and one volunteer, Dr. Eddie Del Rosario, chief public health officer on Guam and a Filipino-American. They brought with them whatever medical supplies they could muster to help treat the suffering Muslims of their homeland. Now the group has enlarged to as many as fifty volunteers and thousands of dollars in supplies.

Each year's mission begins in Guam, where Dr. Espaldon and his family have lived since 1965. Ironically, Guam has been an outpost to the Philippines for most of its civilized history. The tiny island, fifteen hundred miles from Manila, was an unloved stopover for the Spanish galleons that connected the silver of Peru with the silk of China. The Spaniards eradicated most of the native Chamorros from Guam,

repopulating it with political exiles from the Philippines. Today, 25 percent of Guam's population is Filipino-American, and the majority of Guamanians have Filipino blood somewhere in their ancestry.

Dr. Espaldon is among Guam's most prominent Filipino-Americans, and a senator in the Legislature the last six years. Each year he organizes the Guam Balikbayan Medical Mission. Gathering medical volunteers from Guam and the mainland United States (they must pay their own air fare and take time from their regular practice), he, with his brother's help, takes them into the hinterlands of the Muslim Philippines to treat the poor people of his birthplace, Tawi-Tawi.

Each year these few hardy stateside physicians have jammed their duffle bags with medical supplies and soon found themselves out of place and out of time in Zamboanga, the City of Flowers.

The stateside doctors usually spend their first night in the Zam-bayan Hotel. In anticipation, they carefully smile at every Filipino that passes. Sitting in the heart of the Muslim rebellion, the anxious physicians from Chicago, California and Hawaii listen to the shouting of "Mabuhay! Mabuhay!" (long life) by a rather raucous gathering in the hotel's convention room.

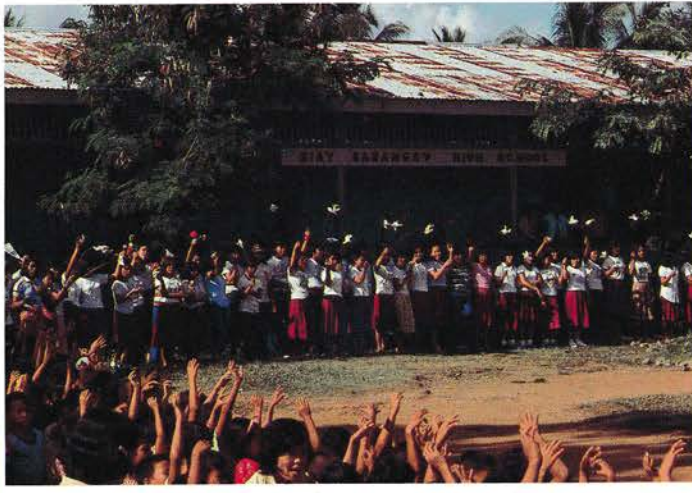
After sleeping moderately with fears of an uprising next door, the group is informed in the morning that it was just the annual election of officers for the Barter Traders Association, an organization of ex-smugglers made legal by presidential decree. These wrinkly-eyed sages of the sea carry what was formerly contraband between the Southern Philippines and Indonesia, just a stone's throw away. This traditional economic tie between the Muslims of two neighboring countries could not be broken by law. Now it provides a controlled income for the state. However, it is also an avenue for arms to whomever can pay the price, about \$200 for an M-16.

To even the casual traveler, the difference between the modern cities of the north and the primitive

*Doctora Espaldon meets the children of Sindangan who have waited three years for the mission.*







*(left) The tension-ridden mainland doctors will always remember the singing children of Siay.*



*(above) The smiling faces of the Ipil villagers reflects the simple pleasure from the window of their nipa hut; (right) Not exactly John Wayne in a green beret, writer Don Farrell relaxes with his security guard aboard a Subano pump boat during the ride ashore to Sindangan.*







**Dr. Armie Adamson performed over 1,000 extractions under less than optimum conditions.**

life in the south is striking. But to the members of the medical mission, introduced to the stark realities of an underdeveloped people, it was shocking.

At a Muslim resettlement camp in Zamboanga, the veteran team members dug into their work ravenously. Statesiders reacted to their task first with horror, and then with compassion. Hundreds of patients had to be seen in a matter of hours for checkups, vaccinations, vitamins and tooth extractions.

The poverty stricken Muslim Filipinos were thankful for anything they received. Their village had been burned during a Muslim tribal feud and they were resettled in some rickety huts over the Zamboanga estuary as a humanitarian gesture by the First Lady Imelda Marcos.

Some of the medical cases, which are pitiful by Filipino standards, were unbelievable to the Americans. Stark brown eyes stared blankly from an eleven-month-old baby who was dying from malnutrition. The infant had survived, without breast milk, on canned Enfamil, twice diluted with water. The doctors frequently found physical deformities caused by the low-protein diets of rice and water. For these people, a successful day meant staying alive — surviving by whatever means necessary.

At the Southern Command Hospital, established by Admiral Espaldon at his assumption of command, Dr. Espaldon operated

on patients, many of whom had traveled long distances by tiny inter-island craft. Unheard of cases of adults with cleft lips, cleft palates and gross tumors were surgically repaired from dawn to dusk.

The statesiders, unprepared for what they would find, were numbed by their first day in the field. That night at dinner twinges of guilt seemed to plague their consciences. The doctors ate sumptuous meals and soaked in hot bathtubs at the hotel, while the people at the resettlement camp, who had hailed the medical team as saviors, shared a bowl of rice gruel and defecated through the floor into the tidal waters that served as both sewage system and fishery.

By whose fault had these people been forced into such an existence? This had once been an American colony. What had happened? How could Manila spend millions on cultural centers, while these people waste away? These questions and others eventually crept into every conversation.

Although the work in the civic action centers was a gratifying sacrifice for the affluent Americans,

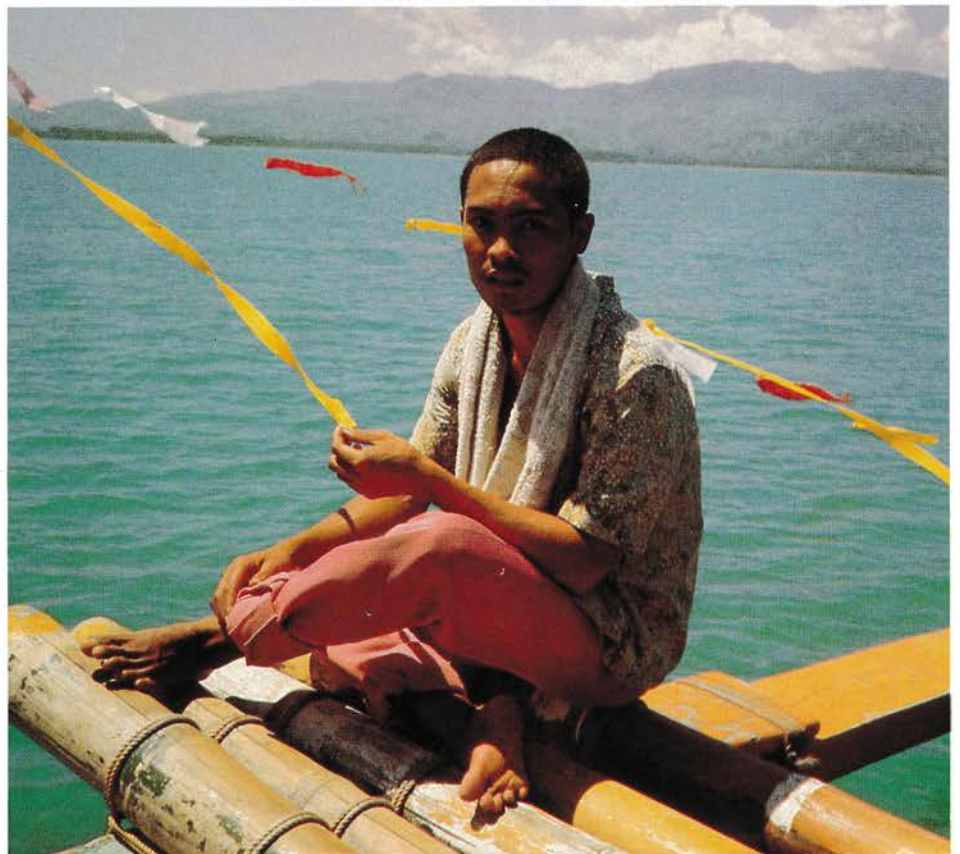
what lasting effect could it have on the centuries old socio-economic plight of the Muslims? The medical mission must have some greater purpose, a means to a solution, not a pain reliever to mask the symptoms of a disease.

After two days in the home base of Zamboanga, the team boarded a Philippine Naval vessel, the LST "Ferry Manju", to travel to the outlying islands of the Sulu Sea. The first destination was Bongao, Tawi-Tawi.

The 24-hour ride through the inland waterway was peaceful and relaxing. The ship was never out of sight of land. There was always an island near at hand, its volcanic peak neatly reflected in the still waters. Forests of mahogany and rubber in the splendor of their green contrasted with the vermillion sea.

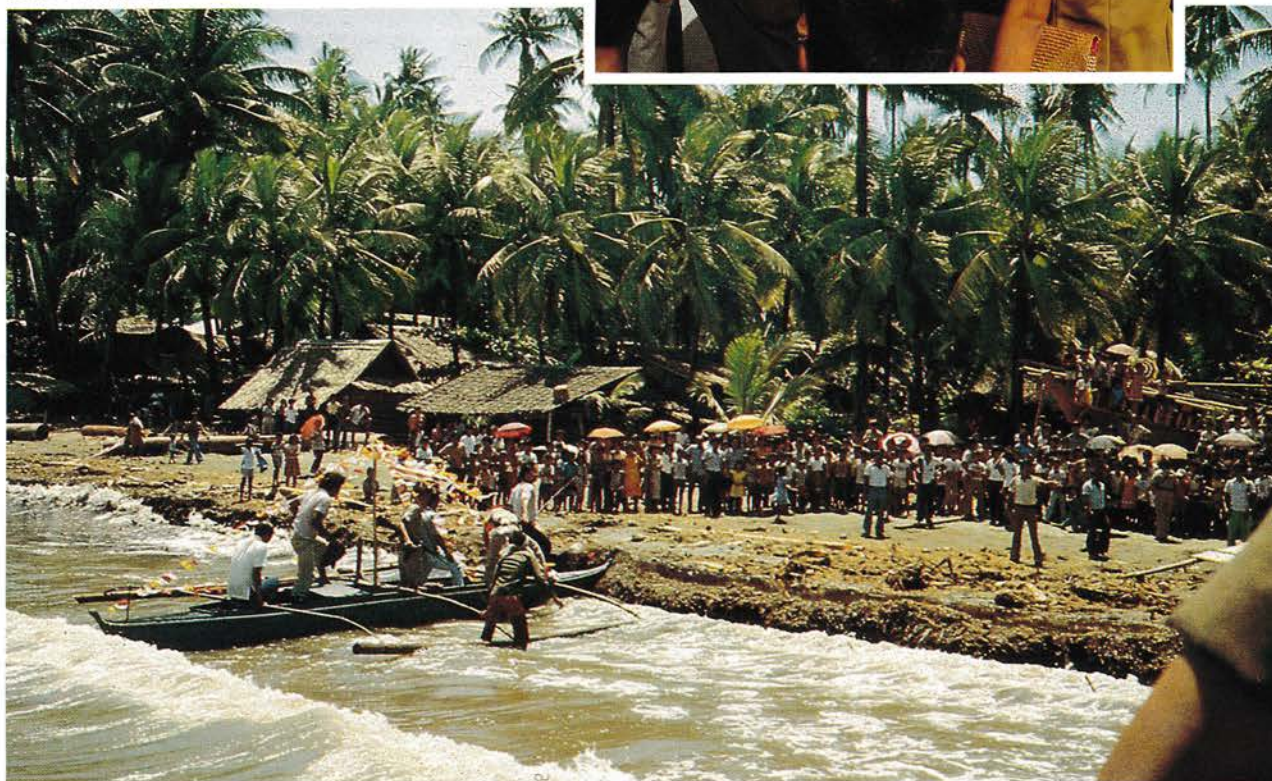
Early in the morning the island of Tawi-Tawi came into view. It is a traditional stop for the mission. Bongao is the main port of the province and is a secondary American Naval base. A huge empty bay now, it was big enough to hold a whole fleet during the war. Out-

*A Subano fisherman relaxes on an outrigger for the ride to Sindangan.*





(right) Dr. Espaldon with Datus; (below) the arrival at Sindangan, Zamboango del Norte, afforded a measure of adventure for the mission members as well as the villagers.



lined in the green of the rain forest on the steep slopes of the volcanic island can be seen the white, Mosque-like dome of the temporary provincial capital building.

Riding out to meet the LST, like a ship lost in time, came the sleek long lines of a Philippine bisnic, an ancient and honored fishing craft. The LST steamed up to the beach where it dropped its landing gate.

As the gate fell, the American members of the medical mission must have thought they had been transported to another time. A gathering of Muslim girls on the beach were dressed in costumes right out of the pages of Ali Baba. In the background stood home-made wooden dwellings that might have survived from another era. The

group on the ship, and the other on the beach, stood agape at each other. Then, in a rush of camera clickings and squealing laughter, members of the two cultures rushed together.

With the troops of the Tawi-Tawi task force under Admiral Espaldon's command as guards, the statesiders led by Dr. Espaldon, the throngs of bewildered Muslim peasants and their hordes of children, all swarmed down the streets of Bongao towards the treatment center. American and Filipino, Christian and Muslim walked hand in hand.

Thrumppppp! went the sound of automatic gunfire in the night. Even muffled by distance, it is a sound one never quite forgets. Ramon Salapuddin, a Muslim, elected Provincial Board Member from

Tawi-Tawi Province, was explaining the current situation. Upon the declaration of martial law, he declined the rebel offer to join his Muslim brothers in the hills.

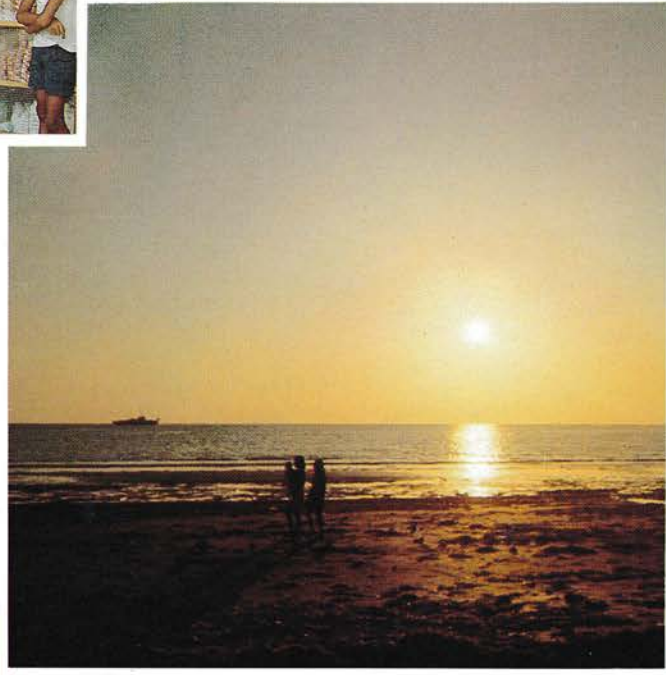
"There is no Jihad, no holy war," he says. "Marcos is not out to destroy Islam in the Philippines. He has built more Mosques during martial law than all of the mosques built in the history of Islam in the Philippines. There is much money coming into the South now. I and my Muslim brothers should be here, with the government, to see to it that the money is used properly.

"But some of my brothers disagree. They think that the only reason money is coming into the South is because of Nur Misuari's rebellion. They think that if they stop fighting, the money will stop





*(left) A medical mission security guard enjoys a soft drink with civilians at the Ipil pharmacy.*



*(right) Sunsets at Tawi Tawi beach contrast with the suffering imposed by years of armed conflict; (below) A Muslim Bisnic, a traditional fishing craft, docks at the ancient port of Bongao. The architecture of the provincial capital of Tawi Tawi reflects the modern Muslim atmosphere of the southern Philippines.*





flowing."

There are two sad scenarios in this confrontation between Filipinos. Because so many Muslims have now rejoined the government, Misuari's Arab-Muslim bullets are killing Filipino Muslim peasants. Also, because of the fighting, investors are reluctant to come into the South, which means jobs are not created which would bring the remaining rebels out of the hills.

As a result, the killing goes on, but in a sadistic, disgusting style. The policy of attraction has drawn back to the folds of the government the leaders of the rebellion. The few remaining groups are scattered about the countryside, hidden in the walls of the thickest jungle. From these lairs, they strike out in any given direction, setting an ambush and then slithering away in the night. If in the ambush they happen to get a military uniform, they wear it during their next raid. Then, if an innocent bystander is killed, the incident is blamed on "Marcos' military".

It is estimated now that fifty percent of the so-called rebels are actually outlaws, bandits taking advantage of the guise of a rebellion to terrorize the countryside.

The young Filipino armed forces troops walk a thin line. Both Christians and Muslims serve in the same infantry units. No one knows among the civilians who is a rebel and who is not. In town during the day, they are all Filipino citizens who must be treated with respect. At night, any one of them could throw a grenade. The tragic victims of these night-time fights are usually civilians, innocently caught in the crossfire. It was not uncommon for the medical mission to see the result of these fire fights. A child with a leg shot off, a mother with her jaw blown away, a young girl with one side of her face destroyed — a tear gently rolling down her remaining cheek.

But these are only a fraction of the patients eventually seen by the medical mission. The greatest damage suffered by the people is still their 400-year-old socio-economic repression. Their diet con-

tinues to be poor, at best. Low protein intake leads quickly to diseases. Death from measles and mumps is disproportionately high. The diet can't improve until the economy improves. But the economy can't improve until the fighting stops... and the fighters won't stop until they are fed better.

The mission goes on. Landing at one beach after another, Dr. Espaldon and his volunteers do what they can to relieve the suffering that distrust has created. At each greeting, the next more elaborate and more mind-boggling than the last, the admiral and his brother

sow the seeds of good will. Among the Subano pagans of Sindangan, the workers in the rubber forests of Ipil and the singing children of Siay, the American and Filipino medical volunteers donate their tokens of modern medicine and a large piece of their hearts. Thousands of children are immunized against disease and unknown numbers are inoculated with love.

And then, as miraculously as they had arrived, another jet whisks the Americanos out of the land of Muslim Filipinos and back to the land of plenty. □

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