



An Old Land For New People



Bontoc: An Old Land for a New People

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The road to Bontoc wound its way across bridges, along the sides of mountains, streams and past waterfalls. Wide places in the river valley were often occupied by several thatched-roof homes. The first major city is Baguio is about 4 hours bus ride north of Clark Air Force Base. The cool mountain air at 5,000 feet elevation makes this a favorite vacation spot. Further on north about 90 miles of narrow dirt road is Bontoc. It required a full day along this winding, hilly mountain road to reach our destination.

This story was originally written in 1958 while in the U.S. Air Force stationed in the Philippines. The primary purpose was to share my journey with my Dad and Mom who lived near Gateway, Arkansas. It was a time when every opportunity was taken to travel around to learn about different places and the people who lived there.

That was 60 years ago. Recently my wife, Arline, and I added several pictures. Most of the pictures were obtained from the 16mm movie film taken during the trip.

The companion video provides some additional information at:

www.crfmedia.com

www.ozarkview.com

Enjoy! Carl

Rogers, Arkansas November 2018

Captions for cover page pictures:

1. Old man down town Bontoc
2. Eastern Bontoc across Chico River
3. Bus stop for toilet break
4. Family of Ifugaos in Bontoc
5. Washing Buses in the Chico River
6. Sagada located in the mountains
7. The Government Building in Bontoc
8. The mountains along the way to Bontoc

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To Mom and Dad, those two wonderful people that have helped make home seem not quite so far away, and made the past eighteen months go by a little faster.

They are the ones who have kept me informed on the little things that happen around the farm like getting the crops in, and how cold it is getting or how much rain fell last night. They have kept my bank account straight and are always ready to send me some money should I need it.

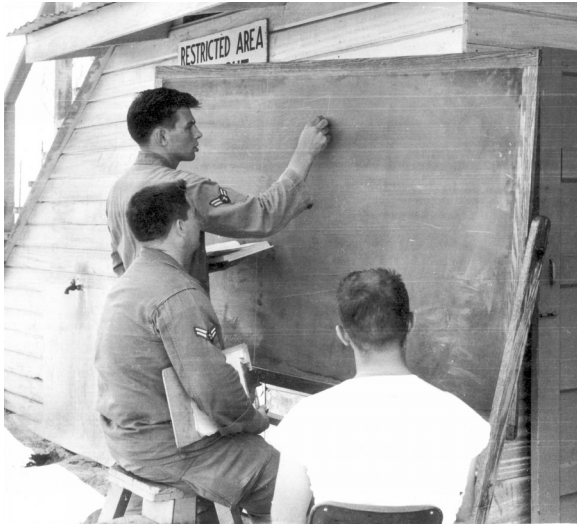
To them, I give this story, a story of a small portion of the Philippines that I was able to visit while there.

Don, Carl Ray Ryan
April 3, 1958.

BONTOC: AN OLD LAND FOR NEW PEOPLE

Carl Ray Ryan April 1958 Philippine Islands
Revised November 2018

Less than fifty years ago the mountain provinces of Northern Luzon were inhabited by a primitive group of people that hunted the heads of their neighbors for sport. Few knew anything about the outside world, about the marvels of civilization and Christianity. But, now it is changing; a 2000-year old civilization is taking a big leap into the twentieth century.



Planing for trip to Bontoc

How were the people taking the change and how long was it going to take to make the change? Well, I decided to find out and as soon as possible. It was a cinch that I couldn't go alone because of the nature of the land and people. I finally convinced a couple of friends of mine of the beauty of the mountains and that the Bontocs and Ifugaos no longer hunt heads (the U.S. made them stop several years ago). The next thing to do was to get a pass approved and that was pretty easy. We got one from Wednesday the ninth of April to the fourteenth – five days. We then made reservations on the Air Force bus that went to Camp

John Hay at Baguio, then on up to Bontoc, and other necessary plans. We also bought all the necessary films that we figured we would possibly use. We were finally all ready to head for the mountains.



Main Gate at Clark Air Force Base

Wednesday morning finally came. The bus left Clark Field at eight a.m. The trip thus far was no new experience for me however. The rough, poorly paved road no longer bothered me much. I didn't feel faint every time the driver would barely make it past a pony-drawn Calesa in time to miss an oncoming bus, Jeepney, or another Calesa coming toward us on the narrow highway.



Kennon Road near Baguio

The first two hours was not too bad. We had a rest stop at the half way point where we ordinarily change buses to one that is smaller and can make it more safely up the winding mountain road. What's more, the Air Force wouldn't lose as much should the bus make a wrong turn and go off down the side of the mountain. Luckily, however, a man from the American Red Cross, who had also stopped at the half way point and had a '55 Ford, offered us a ride on up to Baguio. Naturally, we grabbed the chance. The ride was much more enjoyable now than in the bus. I could get a much better view of the mountain road as we progressed on toward Baguio.



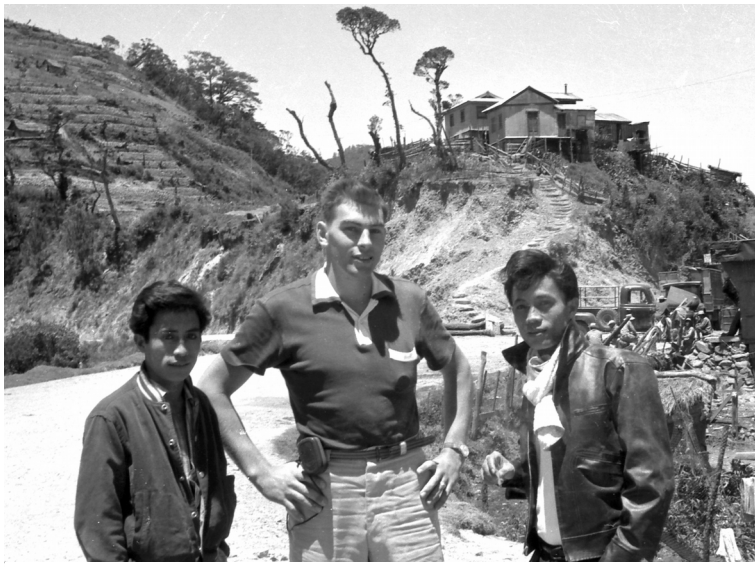
Bus stop on the way to Bontoc

The last part of the road to Baguio gets pretty narrow in places. All the bridges spanning the rivers and ravines are one way and usually one car. Shortly before we entered the city limits of Baguio we stopped at a roadside park to take a look at the road we just came up. The road seemed to start way back in the mountains, twisting and turning, going every direction except straight up or down. It was jutting in and out of the trees and over deep canyons and finally making its way on up to where we were. A person might wonder how man and nature could team up so closely to create such a picturesque view.

It was only a short distance from the road-side park to Camp John Hay where we were going to spend the night. Camp John Hay was built by the U.S. Government for military personnel serving in the Philippines as a place for rest and relaxation in the cool mountain air. We checked in at the B.O.Q. and left our bags so that we could take another tour of mile-high Baguio City.

Because of its scenic location among the fragrant pine trees (Baguio means City of the Pine) and away from the uncomfortable lowland heat, it attracts tourists and business men from all parts of the Philippines in all seasons. However, the hot and dry months from December to May attracts the most tourists. Baguio is also the summer residence of the President of the Philippines as well as many other important people from Manila and other parts of the islands. A small landing strip has been carved out of the mountains near the military academy where the future officers of the Philippine Militia are trained. It is only a few minutes by car outside of Baguio. Railroads to the town would be almost impossible.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon in Baguio finding out what bus to take on up to Bontoc and shopping in the stores, many of them very American in style. We then went over to a carnival that was going on down in the city park. It reminded me very much of the ones that I used to go to when I was younger and back in the States. There was the ferris wheel, airplane rides, tilt-a-whirl, fortune tellers and games of chance. We went to a movie, an American one. After the movie, we caught a Jeepney back to the base and turned in.



Two fellow passengers at another bus stop

We had a wonderful night's sleep in the cool mountain air refreshed by the fragrance of the pine trees covering the mountain tops. But, all good things must come to an end. We got up with the early morning sun, checked out of our quarters and headed for the town. We were at the bus terminal by 7:30. Our tickets cost P3.65 each.

We loaded on the bus along with the other strange passengers. Some of the women wore beads in their hair and smoked brown cigarettes with the fire inside their mouth. This was the custom of the older and more backward peoples of the Philippines. Also riding along with us were some chickens, hogs, and several baskets full of fruits and vegetables. There were also other things, but I have no idea what they were.

The bus was operated by the Dangwa Transportation Company that operated a whole fleet of buses around the mountains and the only bus going to Bontoc. The bus was an odd affair; the hard, bench-like seats went the full width of the bus. You got in one side of the bus which was completely open. I don't know how many passengers they could carry this way, but with the small mountain people, I suppose they could carry eighty or ninety with seven or eight people in each seat. They had a rack on top where part of the extra baggage was carried.

Well, the bus finally pulled out about eight with about half a load. The three of us had a whole seat to ourselves. I might add that we were the only Americans on the bus and were the first to go to Bontoc in this manner in more than two weeks.

Starting out of Baguio we had a fairly smooth road but it wasn't wide enough for two cars to pass comfortably. This road didn't serve us long. Only about two miles from Baguio we were on dirt road that wound its way up, down and around the mountainsides for ninety miles to Bontoc. It then went west even farther if one wanted to travel it. The road was built mostly during the American occupation of the islands.

The ride on up to Bontoc was far from boring, however, because every time we went round a curve a new and beautiful sight was unveiled. At times, I could look almost straight down for more than a half mile and down at



Sawmill along the mountain road

the bottom of the canyon would be an almost dry river bed. In some places, we observed a couple of Nipa Huts surrounded by a small garden spot. This consisted of a rice paddy or two and a few vegetables like cabbage and a type of beet or turnip that is uncommon to the states but it is good to eat raw. We stayed near the top of the mountain all the way and that, of course, gave us a bird's view of the country-side. However, I almost froze to death in my short sleeve shirt while the rest of the passengers wore a heavy or long sleeve shirt or a jacket or both.

The narrow mountain road would appear very dangerous at first since it was wide enough for one-way traffic. When we met another car, one of us had to stop and pull over in the ditch to permit the other to

pass. There was very little traffic on the road. We met only about ten cars and trucks during our entire trip. At about noon the bus reached the small town of Abatan, consisting of about six buildings and a nearby sawmill. Most of the passengers ate at what might be called a cafe. This gave us a chance to get out and stretch our legs and shake the dust out of our clothes. We didn't eat anything at the restaurant because of their unsanitary method of preparing food.

As we left Abatan a little after noon, it was still another four hours ride to Bontoc. We again made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the hard wooden back seats. As the unforgettable, awe inspiring sights unfolded before our eyes, the road seemed to be getting more steep, crooked, and narrow. We were gaining some altitude too, reaching our peak near Mt. Data of about 7500 feet.

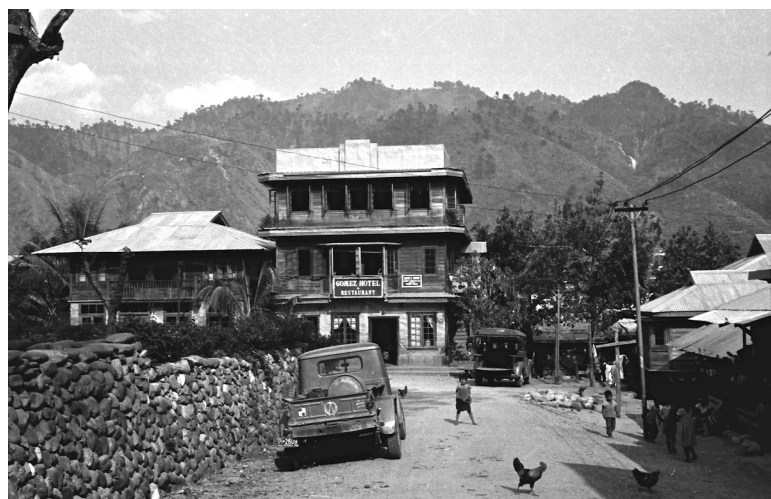
On our ride from Abatan to Bontoc, we must have made more than fifty stops to let on or off passengers. Some of the stops were at what might be called a town, consisting of a couple of houses and always a school building that was built with American funds. In the larger towns, they had a church which was their largest and most beautiful building and the school-house came next. Most of the houses along the roadside had tin roofs and the sides were made out of fair lumber. But some houses deep down in the valley had thatch roofs and sides. They were not on high poles as was characteristic of the houses down in the hot and wet lowlands. The bus would occasionally stop along the road to let on a few people; usually men clad only in a gee string and shirt, no shoes of course. They would ride for a few miles, pay the fare of ten or twenty Centavos, and get off at some foot path that leads either up or down the mountainside to their home.



Road near Bontoc

minutes, never once going up, winding back and forth until we were almost at the bottom of the canyon, and to the town of Sabangan. Sabangan was a pretty large town, about two thousand people I suppose and with a very beautiful and new church. We stopped just outside the town at a toll bridge which crossed one branch of the river. There were several old mountain women that rushed up to the bus as soon as it stopped and offering for sale anything from baluts to bananas. I bought a bunch of bananas for twenty Centavos. They were pretty good and satisfied our hunger until we reached Bontoc.

When we reached Kamatagan, we started down, down the steep mountainside for about thirty



We spent our first night here at the Gomez Hotel

The road on up to Bontoc was not too bad. We followed the canyon wall on around near its bottom, reaching the town a little after four that afternoon.

We checked in at the Gomez Hotel near where the bus let us off. It was a three-story frame house and unpainted. The structure was truly strange looking with holes in the walls for windows and no curtains or glass window panes. It was about the tallest building in town. The rooms were also strange to use. The one I slept in was about seven by six feet with two military type bunks but the mattress was much harder. The inside was paneled and the bare rafters on all sides sure didn't



Bus station across the street from Bontoc Hotel

give much atmosphere as a tourist resort (which it wasn't).

After I put my bags away in the room, I began looking for the bathroom, but that didn't help much. I found it in the back left hand corner of the building with the toilet and shower occupying about half the space as my room. This was for half the people in the hotel (one bathroom on each of the top two floors). There were ten rooms on the top floor where we were staying each holding two or three persons. What the heck? It was about the only place to stay and it cost only three Pesos (two Pesos per dollar) apiece per night. We decided to stay despite the water-less shower and the community toilet.

It was still a good while until sunset so we walked around the town for a little while to get acquainted with the place. We wanted to find out what the points of interest were and also to find out just what we would do the next day.



Catholic Church

Actually, the town was by no means primitive. They had a photo studio and several stores that sold everything from native wood carvings and embroidery to American tooth paste. The stores were small and the front was completely open. At night, the owner would put metal bars in front of the opening and usually step inside the store, probably the only place that he had to sleep. There was also a movie theater that showed some movies on the week-ends (American ones). There also was a pool hall and a few bars and restaurants as well as two filling stations that sold gas for 27 Centavos per liter. The building that impressed me most was the large hexagon shaped church with its six steeples and stained glass windows. It had a seating capacity of more than five-hundred and was situated on the north end of the main street and near the Capital Building.



Heading to the market

The Capitol building was larger but not so beautiful. In the front of the building, overlooking the main part of Bontoc, was a statue of José Rizal (the national revolutionary hero). Then on across the Chico River is the rest of the town situated on the side of the towering Bontoc Mountains.

As we walked back, we marveled at the cement paved main street and sidewalks and found ourselves walking right out in the middle of the

street. It was plenty wide enough to handle two lane traffic but there just isn't any traffic problems here; no Jeepneys, no Calisas, few Caribou drawn carts and few trucks or cars of any kind.



View across the Chico River. Note the small church Cross.



Bontoc main street. Not many vehicles.

which (I don't think) couldn't have put out more than twenty kilowatts. He said something was wrong tonight but the lights should be on before the night was over.

When we made it back to our hotel about nine o'clock, the whole town had already gone to sleep. There was no one on the streets and all the lights were off. It just seemed that these people go to bed with the sun. We tried again for some water in the shower but with no success so we just went to bed without a shower. (We didn't have much choice.)



Small shop open for business early in the morning.

It was already getting dark. The sun had gone down behind the mountains sooner than we thought it would. When we got back to the hotel, we again tried the shower for water but with no success. We decided to eat some lunch that we brought along. I opened two cans of potted meat and some cheese and crackers. We had this eaten before we realized it and wanted more. However, knowing that we still had another day here, we had to save the rest. The dry crackers made us thirsty so we went down to the hotel restaurant to try to get some cold beer or pop but they didn't have any cold. We walked about a block or two down the dark street to another hotel. They had some cold drinks. As we were sitting at the table, I suddenly realized that the room was lit by kerosene lamps. As I gazed into the lamp on our table and watched the steady orange flame, I thought of the time when I used to eat supper and get my school work by a lamp exactly like this one. As we sat at the table drinking the cool San Miguel, I wondered how it was kept cold. We asked the owner of the hotel (a German, I guess, in his seventies and staying up in the mountains for some reason that I was unable to get him to tell me). He said that they do have electricity but tonight it was off. The generator, located just outside of town, was powered by a spring about fifty feet up the mountainside. The water is carried down by a twelve-inch pipe to the turbine and generator

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The next morning we got up about six a.m. and ate some more cheese and crackers. We were up before the sun had a chance to peek over the mountains but not before the town was awake. Most of the stores were already open and ready for business.

This time we brought our cameras along with us to take some pictures of the town and people. There were several varieties of people ranging from the few very westernized ones that wore the latest style of clothes to the primitive mountain people. The men sometimes wore only a gee string but, when they came into town, they would usually put on a shirt. The women wore a

wrap around, hand-woven skirt that came down to their knees. While they were in town, they usually wore some kind of blouse, but not necessarily. A lot of the younger children didn't wear anything at all.



Another view of main street

After talking it over when we got back to our hotel, we decided not to stay there any longer since there still was no water in the shower. We inquired at the Bontoc Hotel where we found our cold drinks the night before and decided to move over there. It cost us five Pesos apiece but was worth it to get all the dirt off us in what they called a shower -- anyway it was wet.

It was about nine-thirty by the time we had checked out of the Gomez Hotel and into the Bontoc Hotel. The next thing on our list to do was to catch the ten a.m. bus up the mountain to Sagada.



Bus up to Sagada

The bus left a little before ten and started back on the road we had come on to go to Bontoc. After going about four miles, we made a sharp left turn at a junction and started up the mountain. We had gone less than a hundred yards when the bus was stopped by a long tree limb suspended across the road by a pivot at the side of the road. The limb could be raised and lowered to let the cars go through. I found out that we would have to wait here about thirty minutes because a truck had just started down from the top of the mountain. Since the road was one way, we would have to wait. They had a station at the top and bottom of the mountain connected by telephone so that they could tell whether the traffic was going up or down.



A Woman going to the Chico river for water

The stop gave us a chance to get out and look around for a while. We went down to the main road and took a few pictures of the Chico River bed. There was beautiful clear water running over the white and gray rock and between the small rice paddies on either side usually reaching only two or three steps high. Farther on down the river toward Bontoc, I could see their power plant that furnished the electricity. It was very small and the entire setup was smaller than a three room house. Then we looked up, up the side of the mountain that we were going to climb. I saw the truck that we were waiting on, slowly making its way down the mountain. There were four layers of road that I could see; one right above the other on the

mountainside. We had to go on all of them to get to the top.



Winding road up the mountain to Sagada



First view of Sagada



Another view of Sagada

The truck finally made it down and then we could start our climb. It was really a wonderful sight to see the Chico River recede from us as we slowly made it up the winding dirt road to the top. We could now more clearly see the stone-walled rice terraces. They stacked one on top of another all the way up the mountainside and were green with young, growing rice.

When we finally made it to the top of the mountain, it was still a good long ways to Sagada but who cared about the time it would take us to get there now, because I had the feeling of riding on top of the world. I could see below me the works of the Ifugaos that had migrated to the Philippines from South China more than two-thousand years ago. They had accomplished an engineering feat that would be inconceivable by modern man; building of the rice terraces up the side of such a steep mountainside. This was done with their bare hands and with primitive tools that they could fashion out of sticks and stones. The terraces were begun as soon as the Ifugaos settled in the mountains. More and more additions were put on them as the population grew until they reached the top of the mountains. The population then reached a stand still where it has remained for several centuries. I could also see a village almost directly below us. It was truly a beautiful sight with its grass roofed houses and an overall appearance of a happy and prosperous community. Americans had marred some of the real ancient beauty. However, some of the buildings had tin roofs and some were even made out of lumber. There was a Christian Church off to itself at one edge of the community indicating that these people were no longer a savage, head-hunting, atheist tribe. This was a peace loving tribe that believed in one god and were now trying to change from their primitive culture to a more desirable, clean, and healthy outlook for the future.

Just outside of Sagada were some limestone caves that were supposed to have been formed during the time the Philippine Islands were under water

more than twenty million years ago. We asked the driver to let us out there so that we could have a better look. The caves all had fairly small openings and inside was the native peoples burial grounds. They would hew out wooden caskets that were just long enough for the dead man's body; his legs had to be broken so that he would fit in the casket. Then the caskets were boarded up at the top and just placed back in the cave to remain. Civilization had stopped this practice of burial, however, and I don't suppose the caves had been used in this manner for more than fifty years.



Rice terraces near Sagada



Rice terraces near Bontoc

We walked the rest of the distance to Sagada, arriving there a little before noon. The town itself was a disappointment though. We expected to see a primitive village but it was far from that. Most of the narrow streets were paved. There were several nice wooden buildings, some of them painted, and another beautiful church that was run by American missionaries. We walked further down in the town and found that, despite the wooden houses with their tin roofs, most of the people still held onto the practice of having their pig pen in their back yard. The pig pen was really pretty odd to me. It was a circle about six to eight-feet in diameter dug about four-feet deep on one side and about two-feet deep on the other with a few boards placed over the shallower side. The whole pen had a rock floor and sides and would hold two or three pigs or a brood sow in one pen. It didn't smell very good.

Our bus left again for Bontoc at one pm. We made it back to Bontoc and the hotel. The whole trip cost us only P1.40 apiece for the bus fare. At the hotel, we ate a little more of our cheese and crackers. We then walked around the town to make sure that we hadn't missed anything, knowing full well this would be our last chance. We arrived back at the hotel about dark without anything to do for the rest of the night we thought.

One of the hotel attendants came to rescue us from our boredom, however, by asking us if we wanted to go up to the Ato and Olag about eight o'clock that night. We, of course, were game and agreed to go. They were located a good ways up the side of the hill and the climb up there was no delight in the dark. There was a constant fear of stepping off in one of the pig pens or running into something, but our guide took us there safely. First he took us to the Olog or girls' dormitory where, according to the primitive customs, the girls must stay from the time they are about ten or twelve years old until they are married. But, they can't get married until they become pregnant. It was a thatched roof house similar to the others in the area. Inside were the beds, which were merely boards, for the girls to sleep on with no blankets or anything for comfort. On up a little farther was the Ato where the boys grew up. The house was similar to the Olog but outside was a rock circle. In the center was a pole with some Caribou horns starting at the bottom with one about four-feet wide and then going on up to the top with one only about a foot wide. The town council would meet in this circle in the old days and decide on the laws of the town. On up a little ways from the circle, some teenage boys were putting on a dance around a campfire. They all had some tin pans and a stick. They would bang on the pan in sort of a rhythm so that everyone would hit their pan at the same time. They would keep in step with the noise, dancing around the fire.

We found our way back down the hill and to our hotel, and were ready to turn in since we had to wake up at five the next morning and catch the six am. bus back to Baguio.



On the way back to Baguio

checked into our quarters and changed our dusty clothes.



Bus stop on way to Baguio



Voice of America Transmitter at Camp John Hay

that with only a little help and time a head-hunter can be changed into a Christian and be happy.

Today, Bontoc and the surrounding area is a major tourist destination. Air conditioned buses, paved roads, reliable electric power, hotels and restaurants abound. And, of course, many denominations of Christian churches are located within the cities, towns and villages. The Ifugao people are no longer a primitive tribe lost in a world all to themselves.

The next morning we settled up our bill and caught the bus. This time it was really crowded and we barely managed to get a seat, but once on the road the miles went by fast. We left, not because we wanted to but because our billfolds and U.S. Air Force demanded it. We knew full well that two days up there was by no means long enough. The real beautiful and primitive scenery was still farther up north toward Lubugan in the Kalimngan country but it would have taken two or three more days to get up there. We had to be satisfied.

The bus took only a little more than six hours to get to Baguio, arriving about noon. We then caught a Jeepney out to Camp John Hay and

We stayed overnight at Camp John Hay; then caught the eight a.m. bus to Wallace Air Station about twenty-five miles northwest of Baguio located on the Lingayen Gulf. This was a remote early warning site operated by our squadron. We ate a good meal there, our first full meal for four days. It was then over to the V.O.A. (Voice of America) Transmitter Site, where I, for my first time, saw a one million-watt transmitter. This was used to beam the voice of democracy to the Communist infiltrated countries of China.

We caught a train out of the town of San Francisco at one-forty pm. and started back to Clark. It was a long and tiresome ride in the third class coach. There were all kinds of people and things riding with us. Before we reached Clark, we must have made more than fifty stops at all the different small towns along the way letting on and off people and animals all riding together.

As we were reaching Clark, the old-faithful sun was slowly going down behind the Zambales Mountains west of the base. Yes, the sun was giving an end to five wonderful and inspiring days that truly brought me a better understanding of the primitive people of the Philippines. Now I know