Battle at Saipan

By Frank D. Morris

RADIOED FROM HONOLULU

Among these civilian prisoners are the first Japs taken on Saipan. They shuffled down a "surrender road" to give themselves up to our Marines

Saipan is the first purely Japanese island, complete with Nip civilian towns, to fall to the U.S.A. The cost was high. But Saipan is one third closer to Tokyo than Pearl Harbor is to San Francisco. A Collier's correspondent who was there tells the early high spots

WITH a Fifth Fleet Task Force off Saipan: The bombardment chart, spread out in front of the cruiser's gunnery officer, looked like a real-estate prospectus. Neat little squares checkerboarded the island area where there were choice beach-front sites with riparian rights, mountainside lots offering a sweeping view of the Pacific, and elevated level tracts where a man could build a bungalow and putter around a Victory Garden. The gunnery officer, however, had no such illusion about this potential homeowners' paradise. His sales talk stressed, not building, but destroying.

"See this area? One-four-seven? The Japs have coastal defense guns there and we're going to knock hell out of them. There's a warehouse here somewhere near the airfield. That's it in one-six-two. We will set that afire and then work on the other targets assigned us."

It was a half-hour before dawn. We saw the patches of purple, mottled hills and the valleys of Saipan as our light cruiser steamed along the southeastern coast. The flagship of a bombardment support group, our ship led the parade of cruisers, battleships and destroyers as we moved in to serenade the sleeping Jap islanders with the unmuted symphony of our fourteen 6- and 5-inch naval guns. The rear admiral who was the conductor of our orchestra had mounted his flag bridge podium and now he was raising his baton, a pair of long-range binoculars.

The Fifth Fleet, of which this command was an important but small fraction, was really sticking its sunburned neck out this time. It was the most ambitious operation to date in the Pacific War, this invasion of Saipan, an enemy stronghold in the Marianas Islands only twelve hundred-odd miles from Japan proper, and flanked by plenty of other Jap sea and air bases.

Saipan, you must bear in mind, is the first hunk of Japanese homeland that we've tackled. Its streets and its people are as Nip as Nagasaki. The women wear those long kimonos and thick wooden sandals. Garapan, the capital, features a half-mile of geisha houses for the amusement of the wealthier Japanese gentlemen. Behind the sheer cliffs of Saipan are plenty of Shinto temples.

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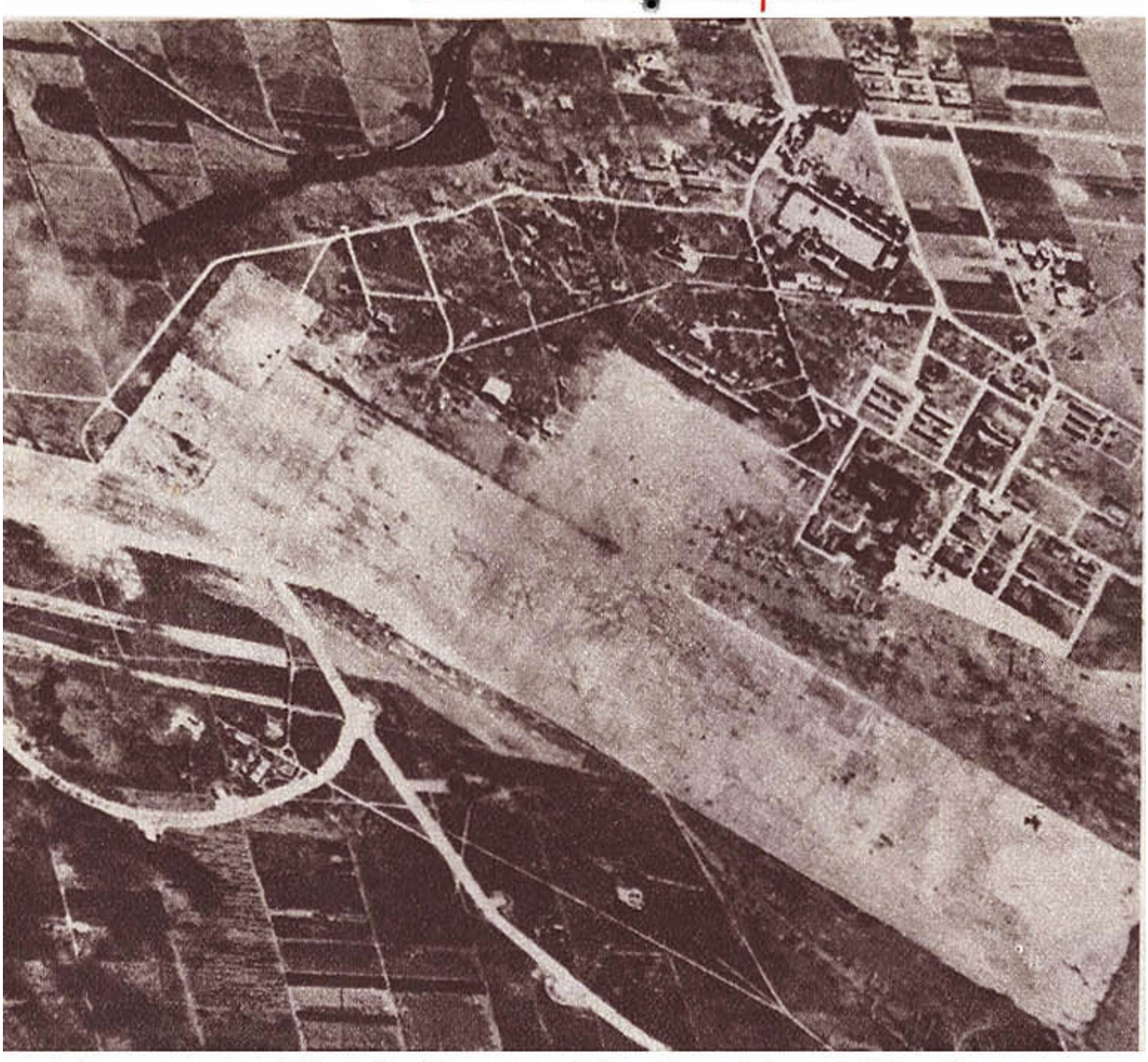

Our guns and bombs hit everything but this—Aslito Airport

The entire Marianas group has been *verboten* to the white race since Japan seized the islands in 1914. They had been German, and, before that, Spanish. After the war, Versailles deeded the Marianas over to Japan as a "mandate." Since that time, perhaps five white persons have been permitted to visit Saipan. Two of those were Mr. and Mrs. Willard Price, writers.

Most of the non-Japanese element are native Chamorros and Kanakas, who look and have customs like the Filipinos. Tokyo emigrated all the Japanese it could to the Marianas, and, in 1938, about 50,000 had been sent there to live. When the Willard Prices left Saipan, they estimated that the natives were outnumbered by Japs about ten to one.

These things we knew before we arrived off Saipan—and others. We knew that the Japs had dredged the coral from Saipan Harbor. We suspected they had a submarine base there. If they haven't, Washington may decide to build one. That would increase the length of time our subs could stay in Japanese waters without facing a long haul back to a base halfway across the Pacific.

From Aslito Airport, the run to Tokyo itself is under 1,500 miles. For a B-29, that would be a fair day's work. These thoughts were in my mind as this task group of the Fifth Fleet moved in for the kill at Saipan.

Here was a roundhouse punch aimed squarely at Tojo's gleaming white teeth. The power behind that punch comprised the greatest massed naval strength in history. Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, boss of the Fifth Fleet, counted his carriers by the dozen, his battleships couldn't all be added on the fingers of two hands, and there were large multiples of cruisers and destroyers.

Admiral Spruance, an unsung hero until he drew the spotlight in the Gilbert and Marshall shows, knew that the major part of the Jap fleet was based in the Philippines, a few hundred miles away, and he hoped our bold attack on Saipan would draw it out of its chronic caution for a fleet engagement. So this invasion of the Marianas had a dual purpose: to acquire airfields within bombing range of Tokyo and to challenge the Imperial fleet to come out and fight.

Reveille for the Jap garrison on Saipan was sounded abruptly at five-forty that morning of D-Day minus one, with a salvo from the 14-inch rifles of one of our battleships. Other guns, big and small, joined the opening chorus, and from then on we realized why we had stuffed cotton in our ears. The bass-drum jam session was to continue for hours.

"Up fifty—right two hundred." The pilot of one of our spotting planes was calling our shots from his mile-high perch directly over

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our coastal battery target. His radioed critique informed our gunnery officer that the aim of our first salvo was roughly fifty yards short of the Japs' guns and about two hundred yards to the left.

This correction was fed into an intricate fire-control mechanism below decks in the plotting room. Gears, meshed wheels whirled, and seconds later the error was adjusted.

Our turrets spoke again, and the next report from our plane spotter, "No change, no change," touched off a satisfied smile on the gunnery officer's face.

"Right on the button!" he announced.

Our spotting plane must have annoyed the Japs, for we now could see the black puffs of antiaircraft bursts all around it.

The pilot ignored them as he continued his radio reports: "Guns one and two have been well plastered. There are so many shell holes it's hard to tell whether they are knocked out, but no one is manning them."

Some of the other coast-defense guns weren't so reticent. They were firing at the ships in our group, but the splashes in the water between us and the shore line showed that they didn't have the range. We particularly watched a spot on Nafutan Point, a promontory jutting out toward us where we had located a battery of heavy-caliber Roscoes. This battery was being pounded by the 14-inch guns on one of our battleships, but there wasn't an answering peep from it and our spotters relayed the information that they could see no enemy activity in the vicinity.

At the ending of the first leg of the firing run, the ships in our group reversed course, the turrets were swung around from port to starboard, and the symphony of the salvos was resumed. On this run, the flagship's gunners concentrated their fire on several warehouses on the southern coast. These buildings, located in the sugar-refinery village of Charan Kanoa, were fair game because they were now being used by the Japs to store military supplies. Direct hits were scored on each of three such targets, and the resultant fires made them doubtful insurance risks.

Bombarded from All Sides

Meanwhile, another naval bombardment group, similar to ours, was pasting the southwestern end of Saipan, and a third was working over the northern coast of Tinian, a Jap-held island a few miles south of Saipan. The effect of this wholesale thumping was that of a Texas oil field with dozens of gushers coming in simultaneously. As each naval shell found its target, the ground beneath it opened into a huge cloud of dusty debris, and from this base a fiery pillar of smoke tried to connect earth and sky.

Occasionally one of these black geysers, taller and angrier than the others, furnished spectacular proof that an oil or ammunition dump had been given the kiss of death. The fires started by these hits lasted for hours.

Oddly enough, the seemingly prize target on Saipan was carefully ignored by our gunners. This was Aslito Airfield, clearly visible from the bridge of our flagship. Apparently the Japs had spared no expense or labor in laying out the wide, mile-long landing strip and the connecting taxiways and revetments. Immense hangars, a radio station, shops and barracks, all as modern as today, completed the enemy aviation setup.

Throughout a day's bombardment, Aslito remained an untouched oasis in a desert of destruction. The reason it was spared is an easy guess: Our own Air Forces planned to take over the airfield in the near future, and

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the less damage to be repaired the better.

But if the airfield was exempt from our gunfire, other landmarks were not so favored. One of these was a large sugar refinery through the rollers of which some six million dollars' worth of cane was squeezed annually for export. It seemed shameful to reduce such an impressive plant, the sole industry in a village, to a mess of broken machinery and rubble surrounded by roofless walls. But from a military standpoint, it was inevitable. The thick masonry walls of the refinery made it an ideal fort and a machine-gun nest from which the Japs could resist our landings on the beach just a few hundred yards away.

Approaching dusk rang down the curtain on the first act of our bombardment show, but that didn't mean that the beleaguered Japs on Saipan and Tinian would be given any rest during the night. No! Destroyers were assigned in relays to lob 5-inch shells at assorted targets all night. The island defenders did not know where the next shell might land and they must have been the victims of a case of mass jitters.

As our ships withdrew from firing range, an incident occurred which confirms the reputed craftiness of the Nips. One of the first to leave was a battleship which had been blasting away that morning at the coastal guns at Nafutan Point. When no return fire was forthcoming, the ship's big guns had been shifted to other targets until the order to cease firing for the day was issued. Now she steamed out to sea, and, some distance astern, a light cruiser and two destroyers followed.

Led into a Jap Ambush

The cruiser, with a portion of her day's ammunition allowance still unexpended, fired these remaining shells at Nafutan as a farewell message. By this time, the battleship was well out of range of the coastal battery, while the cruiser and the destroyers were within range of its gaping muzzles. Suddenly, these muzzles, which had been silent all day, spat flame and steel. Splashes close aboard the cruiser and destroyers showed the Jap aim was sour, but the three ships didn't wait for it to improve. Putting on full speed and laying a heavy smoke screen, they took it on the lam, firing salvos at the reawakened battery as they departed.

That night our bombardment ships cruised, marking time. Thick, low-lying clouds furnished a convenient screen against enemy air attacks, although we were on the alert for them. No disturbing planes came in, however, so we were able to store up a good night's rest against a busy tomorrow, D-Day itself.

Before dawn, the three bombardment groups were back at the shooting gallery, and again the early morning stillness was broken

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by their barrages. Planes from one of our carrier forces bombed and strafed all island targets, mopping up unfinished damage from the day before. The possum-playing battery on Nafutan Point was, of course, a magnet for concentrated fire, and it wasn't long before the entire side of the cliff at that spot erupted like a miniature earthquake. A salvo had penetrated the battery's ammunition storage, silencing its guns permanently.

"H-Hour will be at eight-thirty." That picket fence we had seen on the horizon shortly after dawn now emerged as the masts of transports ferrying the landing forces. Hard-bitten Marines, many of them veterans of Tarawa and Kwajalein, would hit the beach at eight-thirty. Already they were scrambling over the sides of the transports into the landing barges, Alligators, Ducks and Water Buffaloes. The first wave of landing craft moved in toward the beaches on the southwest side of the island, and the other waves followed at spaced intervals.

At exactly eight-forty (there had been an announced delay of ten minutes) the first Leathernecks splashed through the shallow blue water lapping the Saipan shore line, and charged across the white sand toward the Jap lines. It wasn't easy going. Machine-gun emplacements just beyond the beach line slashed at them, mortar fire from farther inland dropped high explosives on men and landing boats, but it takes more than that to slow down a landing of Marines.

They drove on. To cover these landings, the naval bombardment was accelerated now, and the planes dived down to bomb and strafe the Jap positions near the beaches. The rocket guns on oncoming landing craft also helped to plow a path ashore. The entire beach area was obscured by a pall of smoke through which succeeding waves of assault troops landed and moved forward. Within ten minutes after this initial landing, they had captured a small airfield flanking the beach, and the drive was on toward the major objective, Aslito.

The fierceness of the Jap counterattack indicated how reluctant they were to yield Aslito. From their consolidated position on the near edge of the airfield, they tried to mow down the invaders, and farther to the rear a tank attack had been organized, with its guns pounding away at the troops on the beach and at the boats bringing them in. Our plane observers over the island had spotted this tank drive, however, and within a few minutes a flight of dive bombers was roaring down to break it up.

This land battle continued at white heat during the next two days, while our forces inched their way ahead. All through this trying period, the Jap artillery laid down a devastating barrage on the beachhead. On the third day, however, all enemy opposition in this area was stifled; our mobile guns and vital supplies rolled ashore in increasing quantities, and Army reinforcements arrived from transports to bolster the Marine attack.

While all this island activity was in progress, our ships were cruising around the perimeter of Saipan, playing policeman. There were frequent air-raid alerts, usually at dawn or dusk, and then the sky would be polka-dotted by ack-ack bursts as our gunners drove off or knocked down the attacking Jap planes. These were only nuisance raids, however, for the total number of planes in any one was relatively small, thanks to the good work of the Fifth Fleet carrier forces, which had neutralized the Jap air bases in the Bonins and other menacing neighborhoods.

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During this phase of the Saipan occupation, an even greater threat was the reported movement in our direction of that powerful Jap fleet from the Philippines. Admiral Spruance, well aware of this danger, had dispatched still more carriers and surface ships to meet and, if possible, engage this armada. The result of that contact between plane squadrons from the Japs and our flat-tops is a glorious page in American naval history. The Japs lost hundreds of planes, a number of surface ships, including carriers, were sunk or heavily damaged, and they forgot all about rushing to the rescue of their comrades in Saipan.

Within a week, our forces had captured Aslito Airfield and were operating their own planes there. The taking of Aslito at this time had a particular significance, for we had just received word that the new super-super B-29 bombers had made their first raid on the Japanese homeland. Now, in our mind's eye, we could see scores of these same B-29s taking off from Aslito some day in the near future to make unwelcome calls on Tokyo.

Day by day, the Marines and the Army reinforcements continued their sweep northward on Saipan in an unbroken line from coast to coast. During this progress, they picked up some new and interesting bits of information on Japanese warfare. They found abandoned, for example, a number of gadgets they promptly dubbed "turtlebacks." These were hoods of light steel, shaped to fit over the head and shoulders of a soldier swimming in shallow water or crawling along the ground, as protection against rifle fire or shell fragments.

As usual, the Japs dug deep into their bag of tricks in an attempt to confuse their opponents. One of these shenanigans might be labeled "The Mystery of the Missing Corpses." During the first few days of the invasion, our officers were puzzled by the small number of dead Japs found on the field of battle as our troops advanced. They were sure that hundreds of Japs had been killed in the fury of that assault, but the evidence was strangely missing. They also knew from previous campaigns that the Japs seldom paused to bury their dead.

The mystery finally was solved when several enemy trucks were captured in a position hastily abandoned by the Japs. The trucks were piled high with bodies which the Japs had collected and were about to spirit behind their lines, obviously to conceal from us their total casualties.

During the infrequent lulls between actions, the Marines and Army men found time for humanitarian work. Hundreds of civilians, mostly women and children from the sugar-refinery village, were found hiding in mountainside caves, waiting out the battle. Many of them were in poor physical condition, the children suffering from rickets and trachoma, the older people either starving or obviously undernourished. These refugees were gathered in a stockade behind our lines, given medical treatment, and their scant rice diet was augmented by generous portions of vitaminized field rations.

New Friends for the Marines

Possibly as a natural reaction to the horrors of war they had undergone a few short hours previously, the troops showered attention upon the little slant-eyed kids, some of whom were even adopted as company mascots. It was startling at first, however, to see a tall husky Marine, fresh from the front lines, strolling down a dusty road, hand in

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hand with a toddling brownskin who was nibbling blissfully on a C-ration candy bar. If you drew close enough, you might overhear the doughty Leatherneck telling stories to his new-found pal—in pidgin English baby talk.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to stick around and see how these beautiful friendships developed. We did have the satisfaction, however, of knowing that our forces ashore were now well established, and that the remainder of the occupation would be chiefly a mopping-up campaign. Later, the whole island fell to our forces. Uncle Whiskers had opened up another of his branch offices at this way station, an important express stop on the road to Tokyo.

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