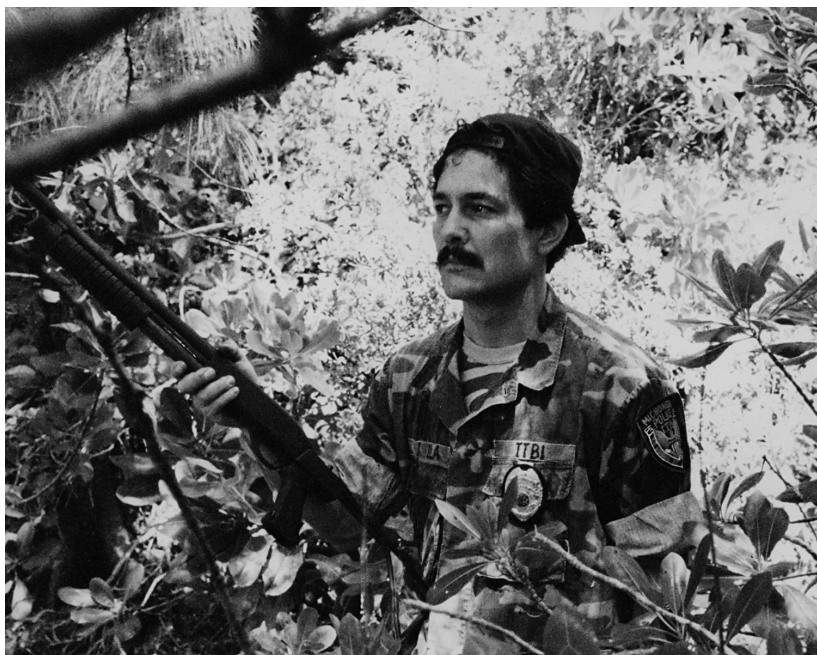


# MICRONESIAN BLUES

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**The Adventures of an  
American Cop in Paradise**



**by Bryan Vila  
as told to Cynthia Morris**

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# Preface

Thirty years ago, I quit my job as a street cop in the ghettos and barrios of Los Angeles to become a police trainer in the far Pacific islands of Micronesia.

Why? That's a long story for another book. The short version is that after nine years on the job I was burnt out, and a new adventure in a tropical paradise sounded like just the right cure. When the opportunity came up I jumped at it, and six weeks later I was on a plane headed west.

Here's all I knew about Micronesia when I got on that plane back in 1978. Actually, it's probably more than I knew at the time . . . .

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Micronesia is not one island but many. About 2,000 of them, in fact, scattered across a vast region of the Pacific Ocean about the size of the United States. Most of these islands are so tiny that the total landmass of all 2,000 combined is smaller than the state of Rhode Island. But together, they've unwittingly played a role in the economic, political, and military affairs of numerous countries—including the United States—for nearly 500 years.

Micronesia was “discovered” by explorer Ferdinand Magel-

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lan, who claimed the islands for Spain in 1521. Spain kept them until the late nineteenth century, when Guam was taken by the United States after the Spanish-American War, and Germany bought the rest of the islands for a song. The Germans were primarily interested in copra—dried coconut meat used to make oil for soaps and cosmetics—which meant that apart from the establishment of some schools and health services, they left the locals pretty much alone. Germany held on to the islands until World War I, but when they lost that war the League of Nations gave the islands to Japan, along with a mandate to protect and develop them and help bring the people to “civilization.” The Japanese were very serious about development until shortly before World War II, when they began fortifying the islands and placing the Micronesians under military rule.

During the war, my father and a lot of other GIs—mostly Marines and sailors—took the Micronesian islands away from Japan through a long and bloody series of battles that left many thousands of Americans, Japanese, and Micronesians dead by the time the war finally ended in 1945.

After the war, there was a substantial and heated debate back in the States over what should be done with Micronesia. The Navy wanted us to take the strategically important islands as spoils of war. But the folks in the State Department, who opposed the idea of increased colonialism, argued strongly against annexation.

Eventually, a compromise of sorts was reached. The United Nations was formed in 1945, and in 1947 it gave the islands to the United States as a strategic trust territory. Under the trusteeship agreement, the United States was given the right to develop and fortify the islands in the interest of international security. However, the islands officially belonged to the United Nations, not the United States, and it was expected that they eventually would become independent and self-governing.

With that agreement in place, the United States set up a mili-

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tary base on Kwajalein, conducted some intelligence activities, and ran a few CIA training camps for Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang guerrillas here and there in Micronesia during the fifteen years or so that followed. We also blew up a couple of atolls, Bikini and Eniwetok (now Enewetak), during nuclear testing in the Pacific Proving Grounds—a Cold War decision that displaced a lot of folks for a lot of years and resulted in contamination that we've paid hundreds of millions of dollars to clean up. But by and large, we left the local people as they were and tried not to screw things up for them any more than we—and everyone else before us—already had. In our effort not to contaminate the local culture, we even went so far as to put an anthropologist at the right hand of every administrator of every district in Micronesia. This well-intentioned policy has been uncharitably characterized as the “zoo theory.”

Things went along pretty much that way until 1961, when John F. Kennedy became president. Despite the trusteeship label, it was obvious to him that the Micronesian islands were essentially colonies of the United States—a real embarrassment in view of the fact that, like the United Nations, he was pushing for worldwide decolonization.

At around the same time, the UN sent a visiting mission out to Micronesia. The mission report harshly criticized the lack of economic, social, political, and educational development in the islands and recommended “greater and speedier effort” toward Micronesian independence. So now the problem facing the Kennedy administration wasn't just that we still had these islands, but that we had them and hadn't done much of anything with them—or for them—in a long time. Cultural conservation had meant no progress.

Kennedy's solution was to begin pouring serious amounts of money into the islands. The money went primarily for education—which Kennedy viewed as the key to economic, political, and social progress—and for health care. The motivation behind

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the plan was largely humanitarian, although as critics have pointed out, it also was in America's best interest to "win Micronesia's hand" in the hope that the leaders and residents of the islands would vote to maintain a permanent relationship with the United States after they had attained independence. After all, these tiny islands cover an immense and strategically important region of the Pacific.

The push for Micronesia's development and sovereignty continued to gain momentum even after Kennedy's assassination in 1963. The Congress of Micronesia was formed in 1965 to help the islands become self-governing, giving many newly educated Micronesians a chance to participate in their political future. In 1966, the first of many Peace Corps volunteers were sent out to help the islanders along on their way to independence. And top experts like John Kenneth Galbraith, a professor of economics at Harvard and adviser to presidents Kennedy and Johnson, were brought out to the islands as consultants. The goal of these folks was to help the Micronesians figure out what it was they wanted to become—whether it was independent countries, territories of the United States, commonwealths with the United States, or something else. It truly was government in the making.

Contrary to what some people believed at the time, most Micronesians *wanted* change. They embraced the idea of progress and a more modern lifestyle. They wanted better schools and higher education for their children. They wanted access to consumer goods, and the money to buy them. They wanted television. In short, they didn't want to be left behind while the rest of the world headed into the twenty-first century.

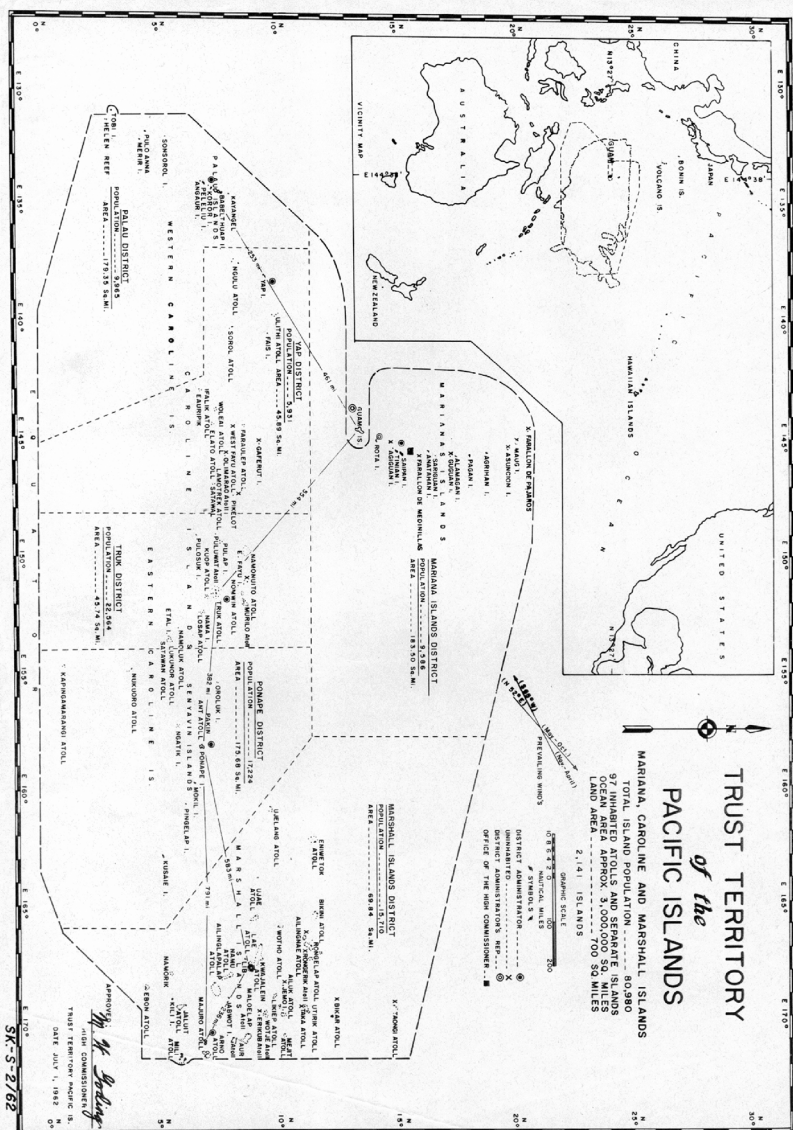
One of the things the Micronesians needed to take their place among the independent nations of the world was a more modern system of laws and law enforcement. That's where I came in. I was told that my new job as a police specialist for the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands would include training

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police, designing law enforcement programs, and a little “saddle up” time here and there, whenever things went sideways. The goal was to help each group of islands develop new laws that fit with their traditional ways but still met the challenges of modernization, and to help them become capable of enforcing those new laws on their own.

Frankly, the job sounded like a paid vacation in paradise. Was I ever wrong. With six different governments, twelve different cultures, and nine different languages to deal with—along with more than a few riots, rapes, and murders—policing in Micronesia turned out to be as challenging as anything I had ever done as a street cop in L.A. or a Marine in Vietnam. Yet living and working there was one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve ever known. It was also the adventure of a lifetime.

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# CHAPTER I

## Island Hopper

June 15, 1978

I cinched my seatbelt down tight, grabbed both armrests, and hung on for dear life as the plane banked sharply to the right, then continued its descent on our final approach into Saipan. The old couple next to me were likewise braced, white-knuckled, and staring straight ahead. The woman's lips were moving slightly, as if she was reciting a prayer.

Flaps swung down and the pitch of the engines dropped an octave as we lost altitude. I looked out the window and saw nothing but dark blue ocean beneath us, lightening rapidly to shades of green as we approached the island. I took a deep breath and held it in preparation for landing. Not a crash landing—at least I hoped not. Just another typical adrenaline-pumping, smash-down landing on an unpaved Micronesian runway.

I'd been through six of them since the Island Hopper—an Air Micronesia Boeing 727 with reinforced landing gear—left Honolulu more than twenty-two hours earlier. Johnston, Majuro, Kwajalein, Ponape, Truk, and Tinian. What an experience! Especially that first landing on Johnston, where I'd had no idea what to expect.

It was *slam* down and flaps up, braking all the way. We landed so hard the oxygen masks fell down and several of the overhead

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storage compartments popped open. Babies squalled, while most of the adults just sat there in stunned silence, staring numbly at the carry-on baggage that had tumbled down into the aisle.

On every island but Johnston and Kwajalein, which were military bases and off-limits to civilians, we'd had about an hour on the ground. The plane would slide to a halt on the coral runway next to a thatched-roof terminal, and those of us whose legs weren't shaking too badly from the landing would get off for a few minutes to stretch them and to look around.

I'd wander about in the humid darkness among the crowds of people who came to greet the plane. Even though it was the middle of the night during most of the journey, there were people everywhere, every time we landed. Everyone seemed to know everyone else, and they'd greet each other with leis and floral crowns called *mar mars*, speaking in languages I'd never heard before. I'd watch them curiously, bewildered by the newness of it all, yet relishing the edge of a new adventure.

At most of the airports, there were pretty young women selling Coke, cigarettes, and local handicrafts. Many of them wore faded missionary dresses with high ruffly collars, puffy Cinderella sleeves, elastic waists, and full skirts that went down past their knees. At first glance they looked quite prim—but then I noticed that most of them had unzipped their dresses all the way down to their waists in back to let out the heat, and wore nothing underneath.

I didn't blame them. It was stiflingly hot, even in the middle of the night. I was wearing jeans, running shoes, and what I had thought would be a very cool, short-sleeved nylon shirt. But you know, you get out into the tropics and you find out that there's only one fabric if you want to be cool, and that's cotton. One hundred percent, don't-give-me-poly-anything cotton. Period. That shirt was so hot, I might as well have been wearing long underwear.

I'd buy another pack of cigarettes, and sometimes a Coke,

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even though I didn't care much for the stuff, and then it would be time to get back aboard the crowded, smelly Boeing 727.

The smell had gotten worse toward the end of the journey—and not just because all of us on the plane were pretty ripe with sweat and travel grime. We'd been traveling for hours, with no place to dump the heads along the way, and they had begun to overflow. Every takeoff brought blue slimy sewage spilling out of the forward head, sloshing down the aisle. Every landing sloshed sewage out of the rear head and sent it flowing down the aisle in the opposite direction, like some evil-smelling tide that shifted with the currents of the flight. It was so bad I found myself wishing I'd worn waders instead of running shoes. *Thank God this is the last leg*, I thought, as I continued to brace myself for the inevitable jolt.

It didn't come. This time, with just the barest chirp, the wheels touched down and we coasted smoothly to a gentle stop. Amazingly enough, the Saipan runway was paved.

I let out the breath I'd been holding, exhaling loudly with a profound sense of relief that the journey was finally over.

\*\*\*

It was mid-morning when I stepped off the plane on Saipan, my new home.

By now, I was almost used to the sudden burst of hot, heavy air that greeted me as I started down the stair ramp of the travel-weary 727 amid a bustle of Japanese tourists. The air in Micronesia is so moist and soft you can feel it on your skin, and there's this overwhelming smell to it—a heady combination of coconut husks and mosquito coils and insect repellent and plumeria and salt from the sea.

I followed the tour group into the old airport building, which wasn't much more than a tin shack back then. We waited for about twenty minutes, until three pickup trucks overflowing

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with luggage and other cargo pulled up to the back entrance of the building and a crew of workers began heaving the baggage off the trucks into a big pile. I retrieved my bags from the bottom of the heap, went through immigration and customs, then lugged my suitcases outside and stood under the shaded eaves next to the curb, wondering what to do next.

I guess I'd just assumed that Jim Grizzard would be there to meet me at the airport. It was two months since I'd met him in the walnut-paneled bar of an upscale hotel in Pasadena. He'd been the funny little guy in the aloha shirt and chinos at the end of the bar, regaling a group of people with one hilarious story after another. I'd been the dapper cop dressed in a gray herringbone polyester bell-bottomed suit, maroon knit shirt with long collar points, broad paisley necktie, and two-tone platform shoes. (Hey, it was the seventies. We all dressed like shit.) The coincidence that Jim worked for the Justice Improvement Commission on Saipan, where my dad had fought and almost died during World War II, had been enough to draw us together in conversation. Four or five martinis later, when he'd mentioned that there was a job opening for a police specialist on Saipan, I'd been hooked.

It wasn't just that I was burnt out and in search of a new adventure. Another reason the job appealed to me was that I'm basically an optimist, and I didn't want to give in to cynicism like many of my fellow officers. I'd become a cop back in 1969 because I wanted to help people—maybe even be a hero with a small “h”. But in the ghettos and barrios of Los Angeles where I worked, people were afraid of cops. Most of them tolerated us as a necessary evil, but they certainly didn't regard us as heroes. We were more like an occupation army in a war zone. Deep down, I hoped this move would give me a chance to finally wear the white hat I'd been searching for since I'd joined the Marine Corps when I was seventeen.

So I'd said yes, and now here I was, my nine-year career

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with the sheriff's department behind me and God only knew what stretched out in front of me. Waiting. Jim, with his dark tan, droopy mustache, bad comb-over, and smoker's cough, was nowhere in sight.

Finally, a high-pitched, nasal voice behind me asked, "Bryan?"

"Yeah?" I replied expectantly. I turned to find a sparrow-faced ectomorph—about five-foot-six and 120 pounds—with a mustache, thinning ginger-red hair, and freckles. He was wearing an untucked aloha shirt with a pack of Chesterfields in the pocket.

"I'm Denny Lund."

"Denny? Hi. Good to meet you," I said, doing my best to hide my surprise. My new boss was nothing like I had pictured. According to Jim, Denny had run security on the Alaska pipeline and headed the state of Alaska's criminal justice planning agency before coming to Micronesia as administrator of the Justice Improvement Commission. I guess I had been expecting the Hollywood version of the adventurous type. Denny seemed quiet and unassuming—shy, even.

"How was your trip out?" he asked.

"It was amazing," I said.

Denny chuckled and nodded, tipping his head down a little and covering his mouth behind his hand to hide a row of half-rotty teeth. "Yeah, it's quite an experience. Especially the first time. But you'll get used to it." He paused and chuckled again, like maybe he was remembering his first trip to Saipan. "Well, have you got all your stuff?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I think so."

"C'mon then," said Denny. He led the way as we lugged my suitcases and carry-on gear out to the car. "Sorry Jim couldn't be here to meet you," he said over his shoulder as we walked. "He's at a training session on Ponape this week."

Denny's car was an old, beat-up Subaru station wagon

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with giant rust holes all over, a muffler that was just barely hanging on, and windows that didn't work on one side. It was filthy beyond belief—even worse than the cars I used to see when I worked in the ghetto. This, I soon learned, was the norm here. There were a few jeeps and some trucks, but most of the islanders drove cars that were shipped over from Japan, and because of the humidity and salty air, rust was the most prevalent color.

I loaded my suitcases into the rear, sweating. It was still morning, but the sun was already blazing, and I was really starting to hate that nylon shirt I was wearing.

"I live on Capitol Hill," Denny said as he slid in behind the wheel. "You'll be staying with me for a couple of weeks until your house is ready. Hope you don't mind."

"No, that's fine," I said. I dumped my carry-on bag on top of the suitcases in the back and got in front. When Denny started the car it made a loud mechanical shriek, but the engine finally turned over and off we went.

"So, when's your wife get here, then?" Denny asked, as he drove the car with one hand and fished out a Chesterfield from the pack in his shirt pocket with the other.

"She'll be here in a couple of weeks. She wanted to visit her folks in Seattle before she came out," I explained.

Denny nodded. "That's good. It'll give you some time to get settled in."

I could tell something was bothering him a little bit. He puffed on his cigarette and looked out the window. "Sometimes Micronesia is hard on families—especially stateside women," he said.

"Yeah, I can appreciate that, Denny. But I don't think it'll be a problem for us," I said. "Susan's lived overseas before. She taught English in Japan for more than a year and really enjoyed it. She's looking forward to this move as much as I am."

Denny nodded again, but he didn't look convinced. It wasn't

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until much later that I found out why—his own wife had left him earlier that week.

Swiftly changing the subject, Denny began a running commentary on everything we passed as we drove along the bumpy, rutted road between the airport and his house on Capitol Hill. Frankly, I only had half an ear on Denny's monologue. My attention was too fully captured by the incredibly beautiful natural scenery—dark blue sky scattered with white, billowy clouds, sprawling flame trees bursting with bright orange-red flowers, coconut palms, and plumeria—and the stark contrast of the ugly, dilapidated man-made structures, most of them made of concrete or rusting tin. I kept reminding myself to put my state-side sensibilities aside, but it still looked pretty disreputable.

"The CIA built these houses in the early 1950s when they were training the Kuomintang guerrillas here," Denny told me as we pulled up in front of a gray concrete bunker that apparently was his home. "The nicest thing you can say about them is that they're typhoon-proof. Well, sort of."

There was wood trim around the windows and doors that helped to relieve some of the plainness of the concrete, but the wood was all peeling and termite-ridden, so it didn't help much. The roof was a flat concrete slab, partly covered with scabs of moss and gobbets of tar, with a little slope to let the rain run off. Landscaping was limited to a few big Norfolk pines, tall hibiscus hedges, and a struggling lawn.

Denny parked the car in the driveway. The engine subsided with a gasp and a sigh, as if it had just drawn its last breath. We pulled my luggage out of the back and dragged it into the house. I followed him past the living room, which was furnished with floral-cushioned rattan, and down the hallway to one of the back bedrooms, where we deposited my luggage.

Denny spent the next half hour or so showing me around the house and explaining how various contraptions worked—like the water distiller that was gurgling away in the kitchen.

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Then he went back to the office, leaving me to settle in and get some badly needed sleep.

I unpacked first, then headed for the shower, anxious to be rid of nearly two days of travel grime. The water that drizzled weakly from the showerhead was the dark reddish color of rust, but it felt refreshing anyway. I toweled off, climbed into bed, and was dead to the world in less than five minutes.

\* \* \*

As it turned out, I needn't have bothered to unpack at all. The very next day, after introducing me to everyone at the Justice Improvement Commission office and having me fill out a mountain of paperwork, Denny informed me over lunch at the Continental Hotel that I'd be catching the Island Hopper back to Ponape in the morning.

"Tomorrow?" I repeated, not sure I had heard right. Ponape was 1,200 miles away, and I had only just gotten here.

"Yeah. Sorry for the short notice, but I'd really like to get your take on this officer training program that Jim's at," Denny said apologetically. "It's being run by the FBI and the acting police chiefs for Ponape, Truk, Yap, and Palau. The chiefs are all from Honolulu P.D. We brought 'em over about six months ago to help us get the departments here into better shape."

"How's that working out?" I asked.

"Not too bad," Denny told me. "But not great either, in some places. I mean, we figured they're Hawaiians, they're islanders, so they'd fit right in here, right? Well, Oahu's an island all right, but Honolulu's a big city, and Hawaiian culture is a lot different from Micronesian culture. So the island theory didn't really pan out. Things are going pretty well overall, but there's still lots of room for improvement. I'd appreciate any suggestions you might have about that, once you get more familiar with things here."



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"All right. I'll keep my eyes open," I assured him.

"Good, good. That's exactly what I want you to do on this trip," said Denny. "Watch, listen, and get to know people. Learn as much about Ponape as you can. It's real important to get to know the different islands and their cultures when you're working out here. One of the first things I did when I came out was take a tour all the way out to the Marshalls and then back to Guam and down to Yap and Palau. We'll try to get you the same coverage during the next few months."

I nodded, still somewhat taken aback by the thought of traveling again so soon, but at the same time realizing what a smart idea this was. Every veteran cop and soldier knows that one of the keys to success in a new environment is an intimate knowledge of the people and the terrain. Denny obviously understood this, and my respect for him went up a notch.

## II

Still seriously jet-lagged from my trip west, I took the first flight to Guam the next morning. From there, I caught the Air Mike flight to Truk and Ponape. The plane—the same one I had been on just two days earlier—arrived right on schedule, and pretty soon I was wheels-up again.

I spent a lot of time staring out the window on the two-hour trip to Truk. It was amazing. There were few clouds over the open ocean that day, and no land in sight anywhere. You could see from one horizon to the other, with absolutely nothing to break the view. No boats, no islands, nothing. Just mile after mile of water. It's hard to comprehend that kind of water. After a while, it starts to feel like you'll never see land again. And then, way off in the distance, there's the tiniest bump on the horizon and you can't help but feel a thrill of discovery.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing on Truk in approximately fifteen minutes," the flight attendant said, soon after I had detected the bump up ahead to our right. "We'll be on the

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ground for one hour before the flight leaves for Ponape. Passengers going on to Ponape who wish to deplane, please be sure to leave an 'Occupied' card on your seat."

We put down with the usual slam-bang landing. I fumbled in the seat-back pocket in front of me, found my "Occupied" card, and placed it on my seat. Then I gathered up my carry-on bag and went down the back stairs in search of some iced tea.

The airport was just as overflowing with people this morning as it had been the other night. I made my way through the crowd to the little counter inside the airport building where they sold cold drinks.

"Hello," I said to the elderly woman behind the counter.

"*Ran annim*," she said.

I assumed this was the Trukese equivalent of a greeting, so I smiled and asked, "Do you have any iced tea?"

"Coke or Pepsi?" she asked with a heavy accent.

"No, thank you. I'm looking for iced tea. Is there any place I can get some around here?"

She sort of giggled and turned and walked off, a splay-footed, heavy walk. She returned shortly with a very pretty young woman, probably her granddaughter.

"May I help you?" the young woman asked in good English.

"Is there some place I can get some iced tea, please?" I asked.

"Sure. Over at the Christopher. They have iced tea."

"Great. Where's that?"

"Just over there," she said, pointing to a blue, low-lying two-story building a block and a half away.

"Thanks," I said.

I checked my watch and saw that I still had nearly forty-five minutes till the plane was due to depart—plenty of time. I hoisted my bag over my shoulder and walked briskly down the road to the hotel.

The bar was open, and a few people were sitting around drinking coffee or Coke.

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"Could I get some iced tea, please?" I asked the woman standing behind the bar.

"Sure," she said, and disappeared.

Five minutes later, she still wasn't back. Ten minutes later, just when I was starting to get concerned, she returned with my tea.

I had just taken my first sip when I heard the roar and whine of engines starting up. I checked my watch again. It was still half an hour before the plane was due to take off. *What the hell?*

I slapped a dollar on the counter, ran out the front door and down the street, just in time to see the plane—*my* plane—taxiing down the runway for takeoff. Panicked, I raced into the airport building and up to the Air Mike counter.

"I was supposed to be on that plane," I told the ticket agent, a heavy-set Micronesian woman in her mid-thirties.

"Well, it's gone," she replied complacently.

"I can see that. What happened? When I got here from Guam they said it was going to be on the ground for an hour."

"They got a weather report that there's a storm headed for Majuro. They have to hurry to beat the storm," she said.

"So they just left? Half an hour ahead of schedule?" I said.

"Yes."

"So what do I do? I have to be on Ponape today."

"I dunno," she said.

"Well, when's the next plane?"

"Two days."

"Two days? Isn't there anything else? Could I take a boat?"

She looked at me like I was crazy and shook her head.

"What about a charter? Are there any other airlines that go to Ponape?"

"No. No other airlines."

"What about that little red plane out there?" I asked, pointing to a red Cessna sitting out on the runway.

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"Oh, that belongs to PIA. Pacific Island Aviation."

"Are they flying today?" I asked hopefully.

"I dunno."

"Where's their office?"

"They're closed," she said. "But maybe you can find the pilot."

"Great. Where would he be?"

"I dunno. Maybe at the Christopher."

I didn't remember seeing anybody who looked even remotely like a pilot at the Christopher, but I went back over there anyway to look again. There were a couple of somewhat reputable-looking Americans drinking coffee and playing cards in the back of the bar.

"Are either of you guys the pilot for PIA?" I asked.

They both laughed. "No, you want Earl. Earl the Squirrel. He's out there on the patio," said one of them, pointing. "Guy in the shades."

I followed his finger and saw a sixtyish man wearing mirrored aviator sunglasses slouched over a cup of coffee. *Earl the Squirrel? Shit.*

"Thanks, I think," I said.

I went outside and over to his table.

"Are you the PIA pilot?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Suit yourself," he grunted. He had gray hair and a sort of gristly look about him, in spite of his red nose and cheeks, heavy jowls, and paunch. It was pretty obvious that he was nursing a serious hangover.

"Any chance of getting a flight to Ponape today?" I asked.

"I already got a charter," he said.

"Oh? Where are they going?"

"Ponape."

"Have you got room for one more? I missed my flight on

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Air Mike and I've gotta get there today," I said.

"Maybe. It's three Japanese businessmen. If they haven't booked anyone else on you can come along."

"Great. How much is it?"

"Hundred and seventy-five."

"Round trip or one way?"

"One way."

"Well, there goes half my budget for this trip," I said.

"It's that or Air Mike."

"All right," I agreed. "When are you leaving?"

"'Bout an hour, depending on when the Japs get here."

"Great. Where do I meet you?"

"You can just hang around here and I'll stop by when I'm ready."

"That's OK, I think I'll wait at the airport," I said. I wanted to wait in full view of that red Cessna. I had already missed one flight today, and I sure as hell couldn't afford to miss another.

"Suit yourself," he said, getting up and tossing a bill down on the table. I followed him out of the hotel and down the road, back to the airport.

"A friend of mine's supposed to be picking me up at the airport on Ponape," I said. "Is there any way to call ahead and let him know I'll be late?"

There was a long pause. "You're new here, aren't you?" Earl asked, giving me a sideways glance.

I didn't answer. I figured the question was rhetorical anyway.

Earl snorted. "Look, everybody misses planes. Your friend'll know what to do. Quit worrying about it. Go wait inside and I'll come get you when I'm ready."

So I went inside the airport and waited. I sat where I could keep an eye on the Cessna—and get a better look at it. It turned out to be an old push-pull, a funny-looking airplane the CIA used to fly in Vietnam. It had an engine in front of the pilot's cockpit, a four-passenger cabin, and then another engine behind the cabin.

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The good thing about this kind of aircraft is that it's made for bush flying, so it can take off and land on a very short airstrip. The bad things, in my opinion, outweigh this advantage. For one, you're sitting between two 300-pound chunks of metal that are likely to flatten you into a pancake if you crash. Second, the wing is on top of the fuselage instead of under it, which means that if you go down in the water and somehow survive the pancake effect, you'd have to force the doors open underwater in order to escape instead of just stepping out onto the wing like you would in a plane with the wing below the fuselage—unless you got “lucky” and the plane flipped over on impact. Third, this particular aircraft—like its pilot—had seen better days.

Pretty soon I saw the Japanese businessmen show up and get on board. I didn't wait for Earl to come get me—I headed straight out to the airplane.

“You ready?” Earl asked as he saw me coming.

“Yeah,” I said. What could I say? I had to get to Ponape, and there was no other way. Hell, I'd survived Vietnam. I figured I could probably survive Earl the Squirrel.

“Why don't you go ahead and sit up front with me. It's pretty crowded in back,” he said.

“Great,” I said. I nodded hellos to the businessmen, stuffed my lone bag in along with their heaps of luggage, and hopped up into the cockpit. At least the seat was comfortable.

To his credit, Earl did make a safety check of sorts before we took off. He shuffled around the plane a couple of times, kicked the tires, checked to make sure the fuel was up and that there was no water in it—which can be a real killer in the tropics—spun up the engines and we were off.

Being up front, I soon discovered that there was no fancy navigational equipment on the plane. Earl simply took a compass heading for Ponape and figured our flight time based on distance and prevailing winds. We were about to travel 450 miles across the open ocean to a tiny island that we very well

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might miss all together if we were even a smidgen off, and that was as sophisticated as it got.

Worse, about an hour into the flight, Earl put the plane on autopilot, tipped his hat over his eyes, and fell asleep. I could see the reflection of his eyes in the corner of his mirrored sunglasses and they were shut tight. He was copping Zs for the next two hours. I just sat there and didn't say squat, but I kept a close eye on all the gauges and a keen lookout for anything that looked remotely like land.

Earl must've had a pretty good internal clock, because as soon as we got within communicating distance of Ponape, he came to. After a few phlegmy coughs and a swig of coffee (at least I hoped it was coffee) from the battered thermos he kept in the pouch next to his seat, he got on the radio with the communications station on Ponape and gave them our heading and ETA. Everything appeared to be in order, and we continued on for the next half an hour or so, until land appeared on the horizon.

As we approached the island, Earl got back on the radio with the communications station and asked them to *listen* for us. Seriously. The cloud cover was so heavy that the control tower couldn't see us, so this is how he typically landed the plane. As soon as they could hear us, Earl started descending in a gradually tightening spiral, homing in on the radio signal from the communications tower.

As we descended, the lagoon finally came into view. From my previous flight into Ponape on Air Mike just two days before, I remembered that the airstrip had been built over the lagoon. One of the other passengers had told me that it's a fairly dangerous place to land, because there's a thirty-foot drop-off at one end that creates a condition called a wind shear where you're flying along level and lined up with the airstrip and all of a sudden, just about the time you get over the runway, the air drops out from under you and you start to fall. The pilots know about it and have to correct for it, but it's always a little hairy

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because there's no way of knowing how far you'll drop.

My confidence in Earl was not great, but I figured that anyone who flew here regularly must be pretty familiar with the conditions. So I was just starting to think I might actually survive this flight when I noticed a cloud of heavy black smoke smudging off to the side of the airstrip where some yachts and sailboats were moored.

Earl saw it, too. "That's my sailboat!" he yelled. "That's *my* fucking sailboat on fire! Son of a bitch! I built that boat with my own hands!"

Then he tipped the Cessna to starboard to get a better view. That's when the turbulence began. We were at the midpoint above the end of the airstrip and likely to encounter the wind shear any second now.

"Earl, fly the plane!" I yelled.

Too late. We hit the wind shear and the plane dropped suddenly, like an elevator car with a broken cable. I braced myself, expecting to eat it any second, but somehow Earl just set the damned thing down, amid all the sluing and thrashing about, shut it off, opened the door, and ran off toward his sailboat without another word to me or his other passengers.

My legs were just a little shaky. I undid my harness but took my time getting out of the plane. I pulled the curtain back to see how the businessmen were doing, but they seemed pretty unimpressed. Maybe they had thought the sudden drop was normal, or maybe, being in the back, they hadn't had the same bird's-eye view I had just had of how close we had come to crashing.

I gathered up my stuff and headed off toward the airport terminal. There was Jim, his back to the bar, a Budweiser in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He was tan as ever, stringy hair plastered across the top of his head, and a big grin on his face.

"Well, welcome to Micronesia, Bryan," he said, slapping me on the back.



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“You see that landing?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“What an asshole,” I said. I caught the bartender’s eye and ordered a Budweiser. “Sorry I’m late,” I added.

“Hey, don’t sweat it. You’re here, aren’t you? What happened anyway?”

I told him and he laughed. “Yeah, like I said, welcome to Micronesia.”