

INTERVIEW NO. 46
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Jones

This is Interview No. 46 for the Southeast Asia History Report. Andy Macs is with me here at Corporate, and he's going to give an outline and a summary of a special activity that occurred over there. Andy, would you take it from there?

Macs

Right. Last May (the dates are somewhere between 22, 23 or 24, plus or minus a day either way), they had some rough weather. We had been out for about a week on some jobs, some work to do in Davao, close to our Milbuk operation. We had just returned from Milbuk and were waiting for plane space to go from Davao to Manila. Because of some very rough weather in May, the Manila Airport was shut down for a couple of days and the space availability was very, very short. So we stood in line for a couple of days trying to get back.

To make a long story short, the planes were full. We did get on a flight from Manila — from Davao back to Manila. The security prior to boarding was a little bit lax because the flights were very full and a lot of confusion existing. People had been backlogged for two or three days, trying to get out of Davao to return to Manila, because of the weather.

Anyway, as we were about to take off, the plane was completely full and we had to use the chairs or jumper seats that were used by the crew. So we got airborne and, all of a sudden, there was a lot of noise in the background, in the back of the plane, shouting in Muslim, and then we saw there were six young men who got up and pulled guns — two guns and four grenades — out of their jockey shorts, that apparently the frisking process was very lax again, mainly due to the volume of people trying to get on board to get out of Davao because they'd been sitting there for a couple days, again because of the weather problem. So, they did take the plane.

Prior to that — about a month before that or so — there was another plane hijacked that did go, was allowed to go on to Libya, with stops in Bangkok and Rome and what have you. So these fellows that hijacked this plane, our destination was Libya as well. They were some young men from about 15 to 28, somewhere in that range. There were six of them, four with hand grenades and two with guns. The handguns were 45 and 38, I believe, or two 45s or something like that.

So we were going to refuel. The refueling stop - instead of going to Manila, we were going across to Sabah. We started down in Zamboanga to refuel. So after we did land and we did refuel, the army blocked the takeoff entrance of the field - the landing strip - that prevented us from taking off. At that time, they threatened to blow up the plane and eventually it was cooled down and they stated their demands which were about \$300,000 in cash and airplane passage with a crew and full gear to Libya where the leader - supposedly the leader of the movement, of the Muslim movement - is living. So they wanted to go and talk to him.

Jones

They blocked the strip with vehicles, did they?

Macs

Yes. They had an army carrier, a light tank. It was on wheels, an army carrier, a tank-type vehicle. And we had an army officer on board, so they brought him out to the captain's quarters and they were going to shoot him, just to prove a point. And the count got to 2-1/2 on a count of 3, and the women were wailing and screaming and shouting, and it got very exciting. That was about an hour out of Davao, so that sort of set the tone a little of what was going to happen later. As it happened, they said that things cooled down. They sent their demands in and we sat and waited.

Periodically, RV tried to pull a few things and nothing really materialized. What they did do was basically ignore the hijackers. Ignore the people on board. The food situation was rather sad. For about 40-some hours, there was very little food and very little water, if any. So we had some sick people on board. People were passing out. Oxygen had to be administered. And the general tone of the plane was really at the army, whose fault it was that we were in a situation that we were in, because of the lack of control or security at the airport. They were really taking it out - taking their frustrations out - on the passengers rather than doing what the hijackers wanted them to do.

So after about three days of sitting there, we finally convinced the hijackers to let the women and children out, which they did. There were about 30. Total people count was about 96 to 98, I think. We left about 30 off and the rest remained.

Meanwhile, negotiations were still going on. Threats of blowing up the plane and shooting people continued throughout and on Sunday morning, which was probably the 24th or 25th of May, the army let the parents and relatives on board - of the hijackers - and we thought at that time that the episode was over and nothing more than a bad dream. But after sitting there for 48 hours that this would finally end because, when the Muslim families come on board, that generally is a sign that things are pretty well-settled. But they weren't.

Again, they got into a big screaming and shouting argument. They were going to shoot the army officer again, and when the families left the plane, for some reason unbeknown to anybody else — at that time when we figured the whole ordeal was over — the army rammed the plane with this vehicle carrier or this mobile tank in the back exit. That's the only exit that can be opened from the outside. It drops down and the ladders come out. It's a different — it's not a side door, it's a back-under-the-tail-type entrance and exit. If that's hit hard enough, from the outside, it does loosen the latch and it pops open.

At that time, the army was afraid to come in, so they sat on the ground and fired in tear gas, an unbelievable amount of tear gas. And the hijackers started shooting out the windows at the army. The army was shooting in. The hijackers were shooting out, and it became rather hectic. Where we were sitting at the exit windows, finally we all hit the floor. The tear gas was just absolutely unbelievable and we finally were able to pop the windows on our side. I popped one, and then three people on my side got out and I joined them.

Luckily on our side, the army wasn't as trigger-happy as on the other side, because the first two persons out on the other side were shot by the army in fact, after they got out. So you had an option to stay inside and get cooked or shot by either the crossfire or by — it's a smoke grenade they set off. It's not a fragment grenade, or whatever they call them. It's a smoke grenade, so they let that off.

Well, then your options were to stay inside and get cooked or jump outside and get shot by the army. So, as it continued, they let the smoke bombs off. There's some pictures of the plane blowing up and people who were killed. There were 13 of them — three who were the hijackers and ten were innocent people — were killed either by the army bullets or by the smoke and the fire, burned to death. We lost one of our very good lawyers, an employee with Weyerhaeuser for the past 15 to 18 years. The guy was Fabian Mejia. He was in the back, trying to get out, and he suffocated, pretty charred body, pretty bad at the end.

So at the time when we jumped down on our side, we were able to get to the recovery station, if you want to call it that, and then because of the tear gas we had inhaled, it was another almost half a day before we were able to see and walk. That, however, had very little to do with what was going on in the plane at that time. It was just an open fire. The army was shooting at anything that moved. One of the Swiss fellows, a young man of 21, was shot in the leg after he got outside the plane, and his leg was later amputated.

So all of this — and it probably should go off the record — but none of this would have happened if they hadn't had a hijacking about a month before that and if the conference of the United Arab no, the Libyan states and the other Muslim states — had not voted against Marcos the week before. That he was really, not properly caring for the Muslim community. So apparently, later we found out, that Marcos had reviewed the passenger list, and a decision was made that the plane would not leave. Dead or alive, no one would leave Zamboanga.

In retrospect, what the hijackers wanted was just a matter of going to Manila, changing planes and flying off to Libya. This could have been accomplished. And also, if they wanted to ram the plane, they could have done it when the Muslims had their families in the plane. And that would have caused no damage whatsoever because the Muslims are not noted to shoot another Muslim, especially if it's a member of the family.

Some of the things happening, we were in the plane for 47 hours. The toilet facilities got plugged up about the second day, and when you start loading in the plane, it was getting pretty sad towards the back of the plane. The lack of water — we were on one-half cup of water in three days — and basically no food, and this is good or bad. I guess as long as you didn't have the intake, you didn't have the need to use the toilet facilities.

And there were a lot of women and a couple of people that took it very hard. I guess, for the time being, they definitely had to be strapped in chairs, because they were delirious. They lost consciousness. They probably were one step away from losing their minds. Two of the elderly types died in the plane because they had to be strapped in their chairs by various seat belts and, in that confusion at the end, they were still sitting there when the whole thing blew up.

It was a fiasco to say the least, and I think that's common knowledge. The army certainly had no professionals at all. They were trigger-happy, and this is the first incident of that sort. They tried to repeat the Israel commando efforts, and they really weren't very successful. So that's basically how it happened.

We lost a very close friend who had been with the company for a long time. He got shot in the leg. He couldn't move, so he suffocated at the end. Although we were able to get the window open and get out — everybody from our row was able to get out — and I crawled out after they were on the ground.

And there was a lot of controversy about what happened, what should have happened. And the President to this day has never acknowledged that this incident had ever occurred. So it goes to show you that this whole thing was handled very, very badly. And being as we spend a lot of time in Zamboanga, because of the feeling, we were — the company was, well, is quite well-known

in that area. The military people that I know, the two-star general and the one-star general, really didn't have the guts to look me straight in the face, even after I had survived. Because it just wasn't called for. But I guess in the confusion that exists, these sorts of things do happen.

But it was strictly an army error, from the beginning. They brought in the guns. They were strapped to the lower half of their bodies. The hand grenades were put in jock straps and lowered in their pants, that were not searched physically. And they came on board. There were a couple of very hectic moments where they threatened to kill this one particular colonel and blow up the plane. And the women, of course, and the kids were in hysterics about -- well, twice a day for the 48-hour stay. That, I guess, was the worst part.

We did a lot of praying and there a few moments that we thought that no way we'd get out. But when the families came on board -- the hijackers' families -- and that's a general indication that things are pretty well solved because they're a very close-knit family group in the Muslim situation. And yet why the army let the families off and then decided to, in essence, to attack the plane and they really didn't have the guts to come in the plane, so there's a tremendous amount of tear gas.

And then the captain, who got out safely -- but the captain apparently must have pulled the oxygen plug to help out with the oxygen masks and, I think, this is what caused the fire. There was an electric short and it must have somehow -- either a bullet hit it or something, and then it just blew up, while it was still sitting there with the people inside.

Jones

When he fed the oxygen, why it really went, huh?

Macs

Yes. It really went. And then the people -- it got really sad because of the moaning, groaning, the screaming. That's a situation that one doesn't want to go through more than once, of course.

Jones

How long after the families had been aboard and then left did this occur, Andy?

Macs

About another day. Yes, the following day. About noon on Sunday. The families left about Saturday late afternoon, and then on Sunday, after lunch. That's the funny part, they brought in those damn Muslim families and everybody was feasting, in essence, that it was over. They left the families off and all of a sudden,

boom, they hit the plane, which started all this, which if they By that time, we really figured, when the families came on board, that there was a semi-peace and the whole thing was over, and yet it was just the start.

Jones

Okay, now this was starting on a Friday, I take it?

Mac's

Yes. Roughly on a Friday.

Jones

And it was daylight when you landed at Zamboanga? Still daylight?

Mac's

Yes. Because it's only about an hour's flight from Davao, and we sat there for - the total span from the time of hijack to the time of the army ramming the plane was 47 hours. I guess that's right, from Friday to Sunday.

Jones

Yes, that's right - 24 hours a day and 47 hours - it wound up apparently an hour short of two days. Andy, what was the action that finally concluded it - terminated it?

Mac's

The burning of the plane?

Jones

The burning of the plane and, well, the taking over by the army, I suppose.

Mac's

Not really taking over, because the plane burned and everybody jumped. The army didn't take over anything. See, because nobody - the exit that they rammed, the exit in back, no one, no one went out of that exit, because the army was shooting at anybody that moved so - if the army wasn't, then the hijackers were - so you didn't get near that exit. So the only exits that the people got out of were the exits that - another American, and I should tell you, that only two sets of rows, there's two rows of long seats. The rest are agent seats. And our size and an American, John - but anyway, he and I are both the same size and we make - when the plane is about to load, we're the first ones out because there are only - they're limited - there are two seats on one side and three on the other side. Two rows of long seats. So, for other than that, they're agent seats.

But back when I used to run the Davao schedule, the actual seating capacity was, I believe, 63. In the plane that runs in the Philippines, it is 96. So they jammed up all the seats except for two rows over the wings, which are exit rows, so they can't

jam them. So we usually, the bigger fellows, or the palefaces as they were called, take those chairs just for the matter of comfort because then we have a chance to sit down in semi - crammed in with the expats. So those were the only two exits, two on each side, that people were really able to get out of. Other than that, it was pretty sad.

Jones

These exits were over the wing? You go out the window on the wing?

Macs

Right. And then you jumped to the second level if you didn't get shot in the process of jumping to the first level. And people got shot. As you'll note in the file, there were a couple of bodies laying on the wing, which made it rather bad for the people jumping out, because at that time the Muslims were shooting, too, at will, and so it was rough.

Jones

Now, there were three of the hijackers that were killed?

Macs

Yes.

Jones

And what happened to the other three?

Macs

Ten of the others. And then, I suppose, the other three were put in jail and supposedly shot at a later time. There's a full hearing that's documented in the papers. You'll see something in there about a - there was a very strong-willed Australian on board, and you know they're kind of funny anyway, when they get mad. And he was - this was the water problem we were having - the people were really going into shock and passing out - and he was going to - he, the Australian, was going to go out and get the water, as the army was playing cat and mouse.

They'd put the water out where we could see it and drink it themselves. And then, of course, they said he was not and he said he was. And they threatened to shoot him and he said, "You'll have to shoot me in the back." And it was an ongoing controversy between the Colonel on the outside and this John Bridges on the inside.

Anyway, to make a long story short, when he did get out - he was fortunate. He got out, he did get out - he went right after the army colonel and just kicked the hell out of him. So they put him in the brig and it almost became an international incident, because they were going to shoot him, too, as claiming

him to be a protector of the hijackers. But he got out. He didn't waste but ten seconds that he found the colonel, and he just kicked the holy hell out of him. You know the Australians are kind of big, bony and relatively mean, like Perkins, you know. He just beat the hell out of the guy.

Jones

Good for him. Okay. Andy, did the hijackers on the plane — did you have any conversation with them?

Macs

Yes, yes. A lot of conversations. I was going to be the — because I knew the military people outside the plane, because they were in Zamboanga, because of the feelings, we had very close contact with the military during our day-to-day operations in Basilan. I knew who they were, and I was waiting to try to negotiate on behalf of, not only the foreign community which was — that was kind of odd, too, because you see their cause — we had nothing to do with their cause — their cause was against the government, nothing to do with us, and the month before that hijacking, the foreigners were allowed off the plane, at the time they landed in Manila. They were not involved in the hijacking, but once the plane was taken over, they were — the month before — they, the hijackers, after they took the plane, the first port they landed, they let the foreigners off, because it wasn't really the foreigners' involvement. It was the Muslim's fight against the Marcos, the Philippine government. This case wasn't that at all.

Again, then to go back — since I did know the army quite well, I was going to negotiate on behalf of not only the plane but the foreign community in particular. But that wasn't concluded, although I had been a lot of the time in the captain's, in the pilot's section, talking to them on the radio. I was going to go out one evening, but then the Muslims were getting upset and they wouldn't guarantee me that I wouldn't get shot in the back. So consequently I didn't go.

But we kept negotiations on for quite a while. We had a Filipino that went out and a stewardess that went out to negotiate. They didn't come back, which really upset the Muslims, and that was Sunday morning. That's when they were going to blow it up, because the negotiating team that was sent out didn't return. So they thought they were being taken, which I'm sure that the army didn't allow them to come back.

But be that as it may, that probably caused the most ruckus of anything, and then we really thought we'd had it, because they were upset. The leader cried because he didn't want to kill the 60 or 80 that were left but he had to, so he brought the Colonel out again. The Colonel was about to get shot for the third time in about two days.

And then the rest of the boys were ordered to stand up, get their hands on the pins and the grenades. Because the weather was so hot — it was so damn humid and hot sitting in there for 48 hours — that in order to be sure that their grip on the grenade — on the pin — doesn't slip, they wrap a hand towel around the pin, so when you do have sweaty hands — that's the pin problem, the release would not be either — you'd always have command of the release of the pin.

So they were ordered to stand up and hold the pins at the count of ten or three or whatever. That really caused a lot of ruckus. And then the army came back on the radio and we played some more games, before the final bumping of the back end. That was just hell.

Then the bad part, of course, was Mejia's seven children. And we just had an awful time. In fact, I had to explain to the wife what happened and again the comparison that if he was home, this probably wouldn't have happened. He had seven children. But all came out well as it could, in a situation like this. We were able to support the family with some insurance of items that weren't cleared, but the family came out very well. Their new home was paid for, and she's got the kids in school, and they have quite a sizable estate to work from. It's not a substitute for a working husband, but they're all right. Most people on board have very, very sorry feelings for the government, in the way this was handled.

Jones

Is there any reason to think that if it happened again, it might not be just equally tragic or . . . ?

Macs

No, no. They've quite a bit of training after that fiasco. They went to Clark and got together with some of our fellows, and the goon squad or whatever they call it, and they have developed a better — the biggest problem was that the soldiers outside were from 15 to 18 years old. There weren't any professionals among them, so — and they'd been standing out there for 47 hours, too. So the trigger-happiness was just unbelievable, you know. The tension that, if anybody moved, the first thing you do, you start shooting, because they'd been out there for the same period of time that we'd been inside. So it was a hell

Jones

I've been at the airport at Zambo, of course, many times; where was the plane located, Andy?

Macs

The plane — as you know, you come in and you turn around and head out. Well, that's where it was stopped. At the time that you turn around, get gassed up and heading out towards the airstrip.

Jones

Headed away from the terminal, towards the airstrip. It wasn't actually on the strip?

Macs

No. It couldn't get through because that semitank came and it blocked the way. And then, the first night, they cut all the tires, the front tire anyway, so you had to change planes, no matter what. You had to change planes. They would have to bring in the DC-9, because that's the only international craft at that time of any size that they had. Because this thing couldn't leave regardless. So that's what we were waiting for. Some of the writeups that you'll see, in the other papers, you'll probably recognize some of it's from Hong Kong, where they had much better coverage. And needless to say that, in the Philippines, the only good coverage was the "Stars and Stripes" - that's an army bulletin out of Tokyo.

Jones

They had good coverage?

Macs

Yes. And our plane was there. Nardo was there. Weselsky was there. All of our people were there, and we had to fly Mejia's body back to Manila.

Jones

Nardo flew it back?

Macs

Yes. That's about it. Other than the threats of getting blown up, but at the last minute when the whole thing blew, it was 47 hours that we were sitting there, and a lot of that time spent praying. There was no one shot prior to the - lots of attempts but no one was actually executed prior to this time. The army bumped the plane, so In this whole process, you know, what you saw just lately, where apparently the Dutch were having problems and people were shot, well, this didn't happen until right at the end, during the tear gas.

Jones

But immediately after the army rammed the rear door, the ramp door, then things fell apart, is that right?

Macs

Yes, that's right. The army started pouring, just pouring in tear gas. Just unbelievable the amount of tear gas. And there were no exits because the only exit that was open was there, and if you just stood up, or tried to get near there, besides tear gas, they'd be shooting. And at that time the Muslims were shooting back, so you had a cross-fire, you know, between the Muslim side which was inside the plane, in between the seats, and of course the army which was sitting outside the plane.

In that one open exit which was controlled from the cockpit — then as the side doors opened, of course, that's when it was shooting at will and that was the other problem. Not only from the inside but from the outside as well, as you see in one of those pictures — that was one of the first persons out. He never got past the wing because he was shot. He was shot on the wing, and then a pregnant woman got shot.

Jones

Where was the army? Were they in the terminal building or . . . ?

Macs

Nope, they were just outside the plane, like from me to you or farther.

Jones

Just standing around?

Macs

They'd surrounded the plane just like that. So the tension that was built up outside, again due to lack of experience and a lack of leadership, they just got trigger-happy. So they surrounded the plane, and if you could take off, you'd have to go over 60 or 80 or 100 army guys who were all surrounding it like bees do the honey. You were surrounded. But again, just a lack of — they just panicked. The army panicked, and it was a sad, sad case.

Jones

Just one more question. What about the leadership on board the plane, Andy? Were there people that tried to provide a form of leadership, or calm them down?

Macs

Yes, yes. As a matter of fact, we did. We had — I had, I guess, formed a community under my wing and at the end when — this is the other ironic part about Mejia being killed and shot in this case — because after the original negotiating team did not return, Mejia, Mejia was voted unanimously by the plane to be our spokesman because he spoke the language and, of course, he was a lawyer. So he prepared a speech to be sent to Marcos on behalf of the plane, that was never delivered because he was shot in the process. But he was going to be the plane's representative in the new area of negotiations, because he had won the confidence of the hijackers. Because he was so — you know, a very soft-spoken individual. A very, very nice, very soft-spoken, quiet type of guy.

Jones

I don't remember meeting him. That's tragic.

Macs

It is. So that's about where it is. I'll leave you the file. You can take a look at it.

Jones

Thank you, Andy, very much. I know it was a distressing situation. Another authorization, just sign if you would please.

Macs

I guess you probably should edit some of the remarks against the government because that's one of the reasons some of the Americans were not interviewed by the press. Because they were not allowed - the press was not allowed - near us, for the possibility of anti-government reactions that we would have, did have.

Jones

Would you say that your feelings and conclusions are pretty generally held by the people on the . . . ?

Macs

Yes, 100 percent. One hundred percent, sure. I don't think there's anyone that would argue with what I've said. Okay.

Jones

Thank you, Andy.