

My First Day as a Peace Corps Volunteer

It was a brief shuttle ride from the Legaspi International Airport to the Peace Corps office for the Bicol region. Bicol encompasses the southernmost part of the island of Luzon, Republic of the Philippines, and is characterized in travel brochures for its perfectly symmetrical volcano, Mount Mayon. We pulled into the driveway of the tidy office, located in a quiet residential district about a mile from downtown Legaspi, and were greeted by a festive marching band, complete with uniforms and drum majors, coming around the other side of the circular driveway. In the doorway stood Fran Sharp, the Bicol region Peace Corps liaison with local agencies (AKA our regional rep), dwarfed beneath a huge sign welcoming "Group 38."

Our arrival party featured local foods and we were briefed on our job assignments. Group 38 was somewhat unique in that all of us had spent some time as classroom teachers prior to volunteering. Many other Peace Corps programs accepted BA-generalists and trained them for whatever job a country requested. Our program differed in that we were all "trained" professionally and most were assigned to "pilot" schools in order to centralize staff development workshops throughout the district. We were still a bit jet-lagged from our long flight, and the brief medical layover in Manila was a cultural anomaly most of us were happy to forget. After our thoughtful introduction to Philippine hospitality, we headed to local hotels in preparation for our departure to our assignments the following day.

My assignment was in Tabaco, a port town about 45 minutes by bus from Legaspi and sandwiched between the active volcano and the Lagonoy Gulf. Interestingly, far fewer Volunteers dropped out during training (this was during the Vietnam War and, while not recognized as satisfying one's military service, most Volunteers were granted deferments while serving). Because group 38 was larger than expected, regional reps were forced to scurry around locating jobs for us idealistic souls, and my job was one of those. In my case, it was rather easy since the rep found me a job as a replacement for another Volunteer who had recently completed her 2 years. It was arranged that I would accompany the rep for a short visit and then take local transportation back to Legaspi, collect my "locker" (a large trunk into which we packed enough gear and goodies to last us

through our assignment) and return the following day to settle into my home stay. The school year was flexible, and the details of my status as a teacher-trainer were still being arranged.

The next morning, October 13, 1970, appropriately dressed in slacks and a sports shirt, Fran gathered me up for our scheduled meeting with the district superintendent and school administrators. We headed north out of Legaspi in the government-issued Jeep Wagoneer, a sturdy vehicle particularly suited for the often-dreadful road conditions. We'd been advised of a "tropical depression" heading toward the Philippines from the southeast, so we packed umbrellas—rain garments being uncomfortable in the humidity. It was a combination of rain, flooding, and limited fiscal resources that kept these heavily trafficked roads in a constant state of repair, and Fran was experienced at navigating around and over the frequent potholes. The entire province of Albay extends around the nearly perfect inverted cone of Mount Mayon, and several sizeable rivers flow down its steep slopes to the sea. The approximately 25 kilometers between Legaspi and Tabaco crosses several gullies and rivers over makeshift bridges that link the highway circumnavigating the base of the ever-smoking volcano and, for a brief stretch of roadway, parallels the peaceful Bay of Legaspi. Fran was a wonderful guide, pointing out important landmarks, accessible islands, and more than a few historical ruins commemorating previous eruptions of this cantankerous volcano.

We arrived with plenty of time to spare, made the obligatory visits and introductions, and Fran departed according to plan. Neither of us was aware, however, that the approaching weather system had been upgraded to that of a tropical storm (winds in the 35 – 65 km/h range). While touring the school, the light rain became heavier and the coastal breeze developed into regular, forceful gusts. After lunching at the home of Mr. Santos Bocaya, the principal at Tabaco South Pilot Elementary School where I would be working, I was given a brief tour around Tabaco, my new community, and then taken to the bus station for my return to Legaspi.

We were alarmed to learn that the bridge in Malilipot had washed out making my return impossible. As the wind and rain intensified, the temperature dropped, rendering my tropical garments totally

inappropriate. I was invited to spend the night in the principal's home and, wearing borrowed clothing, visited with his wife and children in the living room of their newly constructed wooden home. Although still early, the sky had darkened and the storm was elevated to typhoon status (wind velocity between 65 km/h and 119 km/h). This was serious enough to destroy all but permanently constructed buildings, and I learned later that the intense wind churned the Lagonoy Gulf into a violent sea that ravaged the shorelines and the modest nipa houses of fishing families. Nipa is related to the palm plant, and is combined with bamboo to make crude (but dry) accommodations. These fragile structures didn't stand a chance in the storm, and those seeking shelter in them shared a similar fate.

The storm raged throughout the night with the wind being clocked at 275 km/h (an amazing 170 m/h). Coconuts were flying horizontally and, in one extraordinary gust, the Bocaya family's new roof creaked, shuddered, and simply disappeared. We were stunned. Rain poured in, shock morphed into terror, and the entire family and I evacuated to the stone outbuilding that served as a backup kitchen. It was there I spent the first night in my assignment, sharing a plank table with his children while their parents huddled beneath us trying to keep warm.

The following morning, with the killer super typhoon *Sening* well on its way north and out into the China Sea, Mr. Bocaya and I surveyed the extensive damage. The school was a wreck; buildings were leveled, roofs ripped off, contents of classrooms heaped into corners and churned as if placed in an oversized blender. Most pathetic was the ruined 3-classroom building recently constructed with reparation entitlements paid by Japan from World War II. Sadly, it was to that same building where many residents from nearby villages rushed for safety. The building was constructed with common concrete cinder blocks, but the integrity of the blocks was compromised by a reduced ratio of concrete to sand thereby lowering the production cost. It was rumored that the savings found their way into private bank accounts, and the lost lives of those families was the unfortunate result.

I learned something else more relevant; the reason the building collapsed was due largely to its roof. The galvanized iron roofing sheets were bolted to iron rafters, rather than using some quick-release fasteners. The wind picked up the roof as if it was the wing of

an airplane, and the attached building, lacking the strength to withstand the incredible force, demolished onto the refugees inside. Throughout the province, scores died from flying debris, collapsing homes, falling trees, and floods. We visited the makeshift morgue established in the city hall and the grisly image of rows of corpses, victims of the carnage, will last forever.

From October 11-15, 1970, this storm caused damage bad enough to rank it as one of the most destructive storms ever. Super Typhoon *Sening* (AKA Joan) killed 768, injured nearly 1,600, and left over 80,000 people homeless. In addition, agricultural losses throughout the Bicol region were devastating—a reported 92% loss of crops, including nearly 98% of the coconut crop. Later that same week, Super Typhoon Kate ravaged an already battered Philippines, making conditions unimaginably worse.

So how's that for a first day on the job? Speaking of jobs, with the school in such a state my role as an in-service teacher evolved into that of a project manager for school reconstruction projects. A \$3,000 contribution from a school in Rapid City, SD, combined with volunteer labor from local citizens, allowed me to oversee the construction of a Peace Corps-designed "typhoon-proof" 3-room school building. Rest assured, that building featured high-quality cinder blocks and a quick-release roof. My Peace Corps experience provided me far more than I could have ever imagined, and I'm proud to say that, 40 years later, my sister is into her second year as a Volunteer in Jordan. Thankfully, her first day wasn't as terrifying.