WWII Pilot Robert W. Aschenbrener
Downed in the Philippines on Christmas Day of 1944
(The Story in His Words)

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"Captain Robert W. Aschenbrenner of Lac du Flambeau, Wis" Name and date of publication unknown; it is likely that it came from the newspaper in Minocqua, WI

***Background**: After flying 272 combat missions with the 8th Fighter Squadron of the 49th Fighter Group, Captain Aschenbrener returned to the United States in the summer of 1944, transitioned to P-51s, and was assigned as an instructor to Pinellas Field, Florida. After only three months as an instructor, however, Aschenbrener managed a reassignment to the 49th Fighter Group. By then, the group had moved from New Guinea to Tacloban, on the Philippine island of Leyte. Aschenbrener had been reassigned to the 8th Fighter Squadron, which was commanded at the time by Captain William Drier, a former wingman of Aschenbrener. During Aschenbrener's brief tour in the States, the 49th Group had been re-equipped with P-38s.*

December 25, 1944

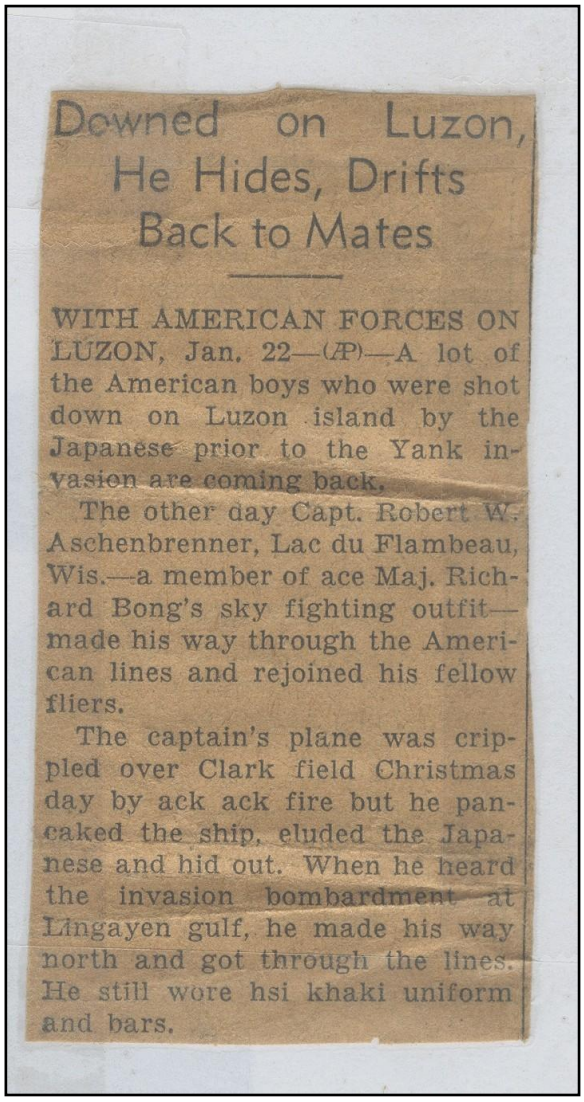
Willie Drier made me the squadron operations officer, and part of the job was scheduling pilots for the various missions assigned to our squadron. On December 24, I had tacked up the roster for Christmas day. Willie and I had flown quite a bit and had gotten quite a bit of action so I had the next most experienced man to lead the squadron. Fifth Air Force had ordered a monstrous raid again on Clark Field. It was explained to us that the Japanese were in the habit of flying everything off the field when an attack was to take place. We were ordered to take off 15 minutes after the main strike, mark time off the east coast of Luzon, and then move in as the Japanese were returning to base.

I left camp to go to the strip along with those who were to fly the mission. Shortly after takeoff, the squadron leader had to abort because of a mechanical malfunction. When he reported the problem, I grabbed my chute and took off, caught up with the formation, and assumed the lead. We headed for the tarrying spot and waited there until the strike was over. We then vectored

toward Clark at 10,000 feet. Approaching the south area of the base, we saw very little of returning aircraft. Then I spotted a lone Zeke a couple thousand feet below us and almost directly ahead.

I broke off the lead flight and directed the other flights to maintain altitude. Then I dove for the enemy.

Just as I was about to fire, the Zeke rolled onto its back in a split-S and lost about 500 feet. I went wide and came back in, firing a short burst. He performed the same maneuver again, also without damage. The same thing happened a third time. I got lined up dead astern, but I was then only about 500 feet off the ground and nearing the south edge of Clark. As I fired, I heard and felt a thud as 20 mm ground fire tore through my left engine. Tiny bits of aluminum tore into my knees, thigh and left a gash on the front of my skull, but I was relatively unhurt.



Downed on Luzon, He Hides, Drifts Back to Mates

WITH AMERICAN FORCES ON LUZON, Jan. 22—(AP)—A lot of the American boys who were shot down on Luzon island by the Japanese prior to the Yank invasion are coming back.

The other day Capt. Robert W. Aschenbrenner, Lac du Flambeau, Wis.—a member of ace Maj. Richard Bong's sky fighting outfit—made his way through the American lines and rejoined his fellow fliers.

The captain's plane was crippled over Clark field Christmas day by ack ack fire but he pancaked the ship, eluded the Japanese and hid out. When he heard the invasion bombardment at Lingayen gulf, he made his way north and got through the lines. He still wore hsi khaki uniform and bars.

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In front of me and about 100 feet below was the old concrete strip, crossed by the grass strip the Japanese used most of the time. I hit the feather switch on the left engine and pushed down to make myself as small a target as I could. Then I bent the wings over to escape to the northeast. I knew the P-38 wasn't going to fly long, and I wanted to get as far away as I could. It wasn't far.

The coolant lines in the right engine had been hit; the gauge was in the red. I sunk into a hedge of low trees first and then bellied into the rice paddies. It was not the growing season, so the dikes were like concrete. Flying into one was like flying into a brick wall. As I hit, the right propeller spun completely clear of the plane. The shoulder straps restrained me from flying out of my seat, but the jolt so injured my back that I could barely get out of the plane. It became urgent because fumes in the cockpit ignited. My eyebrows and lashes were singed, and my forehead was burned.

I managed to get out of the cockpit, but I couldn't stand or walk. (I later learned that I had fractured the tips of two vertebrae and compressed two spinal discs.) I crawled about 30 feet

from the P-38. As I did, some of the remaining ammo began to cook off from the heat of a small fire in the nose of the plane. The flames, which did not spread, eventually died out.

Only as I pondered my plight did it suddenly occur to me for the first time that I wasn't going to get back to base. Our last survival briefing stated that all means of rescue had evaporated, except for a possible submarine rescue off the east coast of Luzon. As this flew through my mind, I saw a group of Filipinos approaching. As I tried to stand, they shouted, "Don't shoot!" They didn't have to worry because I had left my .45 caliber pistol in my tent.

The Filipinos approached warily, indicating all the while that they were friendly. When they reached me, I tried to get up again, but I couldn't. They helped me to my feet. Seeing that I was in a lot of distress and that I couldn't navigate on my own, one of the men went to fetch a caribou. On his return with the animal, one of the men mounted and the others lifted me up behind him. Then, another member of the group mounted behind me. It was only a few hundred yards to their barrio, where one of the villagers tried to treat the visible wounds on my head and legs. They handed me a raw egg with a hole in it and indicated that I was to eat the contents.

They made me understand within a few minutes that I had to be taken elsewhere for fear of Japanese patrols. After they helped me board the caribou in the same fashion as before, we left the barrio for a small guerrilla camp hidden in the brush and trees at the foot of Mt. Arayat. The Filipinos helped me into a small hut. They brought me some kind of a potion, which, I learned later, was made from dried and fermented fish. I could hardly get it down. Shortly, they brought the rubber boat from my parachute pack, partially inflated it and spread it on the ground. I didn't leave it for the next six days. For some reason, I did not even have a need to evacuate my bladder or bowels in all that time.

A guerrilla named Doming, who was about my age, was designated to look after me. Later that day, which was still Christmas, Doming escorted the commander of the local Hukbalahap guerrillas and his wife to visit me. The commander's name was Aquino and I believe that Doming was an Aquino, too. I exchanged greetings with the Aquinos, but they did not know much English, and I had no knowledge of Tagalog, the native language. Doming knew a little English, so he acted as some sort of interpreter. He explained that Mrs. Aquino was complementing me on being a Christmas guest. My mother had given me a tiger's eye ring, which I removed from my finger and gave to her.

The guerrillas had very little food. Once a day, Doming brought me a bowl of rice and, more often, a tea made from the leaves of the guava tree. It was medicinal and had the effect of a pain reliever. We talked about the Japanese and the Huks. Doming kept telling me how much more effective the Huk guerrillas could be if they had more weapons and ammunition, but they had no recognition from the U.S. armed forces. In fact, the Huks, who were Communists, were virtual enemies of the U.S.-backed USAFFE guerrillas.

After a week had passed, I began to gain my strength and was able to move around a bit, but the pain in my back was excruciating. A few hundred yards north of the camp was a riverbed with a shallow creek flowing through it. There was a chance to wash up there, and we often lay on the edge of the creek, in the sun. Mt. Arayat was only a few miles from the east side of Clark Field, and our location was beneath the landing pattern of the Japanese planes. Some of them were close enough when banking into the final approach for me to see the pilots and crewmen. I was getting another lesson in identifying enemy aircraft in very unusual circumstances.

After I had been mending for a week, a small column of guerrillas entered camp. They had with them three Navy airmen who had been shot down a few weeks before. One of them, Lieutenant James Robinson, was a Hellcat pilot who had suffered a nasty gash on his upper arm when he bailed out of his fighter. The other two were enlisted members of an Avenger crew. They told me that we needed to get to the USAFFE guerrillas if we were to escape from Luzon. Kenong Aquino, who seemed to be the senior of the young Huks in the camp said that we would have to cross the valley and the main highway connecting Manila and the Lingayen Gulf area in order to contact the USAFFE guerrillas in the mountains west of Clark Field. That is what we decided to do.

A couple days later, we left Mount Arayat in early morning with a band of thirty-five to forty Huks, three or four of whom were women. They were armed with an assortment of weapons, some of them out of commission and many of them without ammunition. I had no weapon of my own, so they gave me a Japanese pistol that looked to be in rough shape and also had no ammunition. I still wore my khaki uniform and had my flight helmet strapped to my belt. A short distance out of camp, we arrived at a narrow-gauge railroad, about the size of a trolley. There was a small flatcar waiting. I imagine it was used to transport bags of rice out of the paddies. The Huks put me on it, but all three of the Navy airmen chose to walk. As the column moved off up the tracks, the Huks pushed me on the flatcar. We proceeded northwest, until that direction no longer served to get us to the planned highway crossing point. Then I was on foot.

Aviator Robert W. Aschenbrener, WWII, South Pacific (SAM's Collection of Family Photos)

We spent the day passing through barrio after barrio, pausing a few minutes in each. The reason for this procedure, I learned, was that Huk runners had to be dispatched to the next barrio to make sure that no Japanese patrols were in the vicinity and that it was safe to proceed. When night came, we remained at the last barrio, sleeping in an elevated hut that accommodated ten to fifteen people besides myself. We slept in our clothes—as I had for the past ten days—with no cover and on the bare sapling floor. That night slept a young

guerrilla woman, next to me, very light complexioned and the Huks described her as a "mestizo." No one thought anything of the arrangement including the Navy trio.

The next day was similar, but the following night brought some real concern. As we ate our rice at dusk, a runner from the next barrio informed us that a Japanese patrol was approaching. I was told the Japanese often made such night excursions into the territory surrounding Clark, many times confiscating whatever fresh food they could obtain. It was decided we had to keep moving, so we hiked until early the next morning, always keeping one barrio between us and the Japanese patrol. We came very close to the spot that had been picked for crossing the highway, but we were too exhausted to undertake the delicate operation.

After pausing for a couple hours at the last barrio, we headed for the highway and arrived at a spot I was certain had been selected carefully. There was a deep drainage ditch intersecting the highway and covered with a dense growth of cane-like grasses and young trees. We were to hide in the undergrowth until the opportune moment arrived to cross the road, which was travelled by processions of Japanese vehicles. The plan was to cross at noon, a natural lull.

While we waited, sporadic traffic traveled north and south along the highway. Then, at just about noon, a truck slowed down and came to a halt just past the ditch. We heard the Japanese talking but they made no effort to proceed. Kenong decided to investigate. He moved closer to the highway until he could see the vehicle. In a few minutes he returned and told us they were fixing a flat tire. We waited another half hour or so before we heard them start up and leave. The time to cross had arrived, and Kenong hurried the entire column across the highway, staying in the undergrowth until we were well clear of the road.

Farther on, we came to a river. It was wide, but had only ankle-deep water flowing in it. We followed it toward the foothills on the opposite side of the valley. As we moved along, we climbed a few hundred feet and soon had a good view of the valley and Clark Field, which was a little to the south of our path.

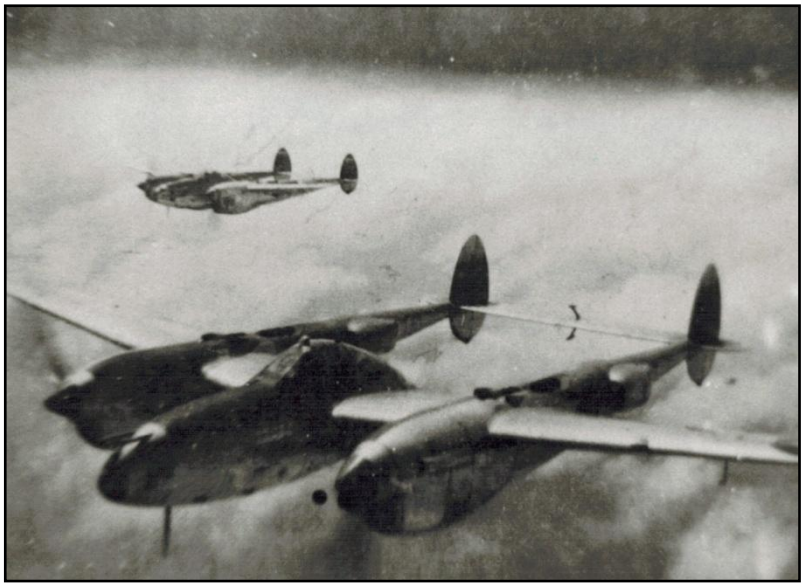
Late in the afternoon, Kenong explained that a USAFFE camp was ahead and that he wanted to turn us over to them before dark. We went on to a point a hundred yards or so from the USAFFE camp and halted. I didn't realize until then how much tension there was between the two groups of guerrillas. Kenong sent a runner ahead to explain the purpose of the visit. We watched as he approached the USAFFE camp, walking very slowly. A few words were exchanged, and then he returned to the column. Everything was okay, Kenong said; we were to go over. We shook hands there, wished each other well, and I returned the Japanese pistol. Then, at the direction of Kenong I guess, one of the Huks handed me a scabbarded Japanese samurai sword. I was surprised, honored and very grateful.

As soon as we joined the USAFFE unit, we were informed that we had to move to another camp, which was higher in the mountains. We left almost immediately, even though it was almost dark. Several water buffalo were brought out and the four of us got aboard. I had a guerrilla seated in

front of me because of my bad back. The skin on the animal was so loose it was difficult to remain aboard. It became dark before we moved very far, so it was difficult to see the landscape. I knew, however, that we were climbing.

I hoped the animal could see better than I could. A short time later, it proved its hearing ability. As we approached the mountain camp a sentry called out "Halt!" He waited a second or two and then worked the bolt in his rifle. The noise spooked the water buffalo I was on and it bolted away to the right; my guerrilla partner and I both fell to the ground. The guerrillas let the animal go. A few minutes later, we were in camp, which was a half dozen or so thatched huts with the floors raised about three feet off the ground. We turned in right away to get some sleep.

The next day I discovered we were going to eat a little better. In addition to the rice there was a kettle of some kind of stew simmering on an open fire. It was the Filipino version of menudo – the entrails of a water buffalo and highly seasoned. In the grassy area near the camp was the flesh of the animal cut into strips and drying into a jerky. Although I had eaten neither before it really tasted good. There still, however, was very little to go around.



P-38 Patrol over Leyte (Photo from SAM's collection of family photos)

I did a lot of relaxing during the next few days. There was a long grassy slope near the camp and a small stream among trees on the opposite side. I could sleep in the sun and bathe in the stream. I thought a lot about the Huks and their plight. The Huks helped a lot of pilots evade the Japanese, and I began to figure out ways I might help them. I thought about putting guns and ammunition in a belly tank and skip-dropping it near Mt. Arayat. The idea, I thought, would likely net me a court-martial. I spent some of my time watching air battles from the Japanese side. There were several attacks on Clark while I watched. As I stood on the grassy slope, a P-47 flew by at 4,000 to 5,000 feet. I was in a good position to use the signal mirror the Huks had returned to me from my parachute pack. The P-47 pilot saw the flash, winged over, and had a look, but there was no recognition between us. It probably was fortunate. He might have taken me for an enemy and come in shooting.

We were told that a Japanese Zero had crashed some time ago on another grassy area a short distance above camp so the four of us went to have a look. The Zero lay in the middle of the clearing. As we approached it, a lone aborigine, wearing only a loin cloth and carrying a wooden

spear, crossed the knoll in front of us. He seemed oblivious to our presence. We went on to the Zero, which was almost intact; only a patch of metal had been ripped from its side. Alongside the plane was a skeleton. It must have been there a long time, and I wondered why the pilot was never sought out by his comrades.

One day, as we were sitting around talking, a small column of USAFFE guerrillas entered camp. With them was Lieutenant Alex Vraciu, a Navy ace with 19 kills. We had been hearing some distant heavy guns, but we didn't know what they were until he gave us the news that an invasion by U.S. forces was underway at Lingayen Gulf. He was on his way there and left the next morning with the small band. The day after, we followed suit, going with another small band of guerrillas.

Heading down for the valley again, we moved to the northeast. In each of several barrios we passed through, we learned that many Japanese contingents were retreating south in disarray. We avoided them and soon were on the main road once again, heading north. Fortunately, the Japanese troops were steering clear.

Our first contact with our own forces was just south of Lingayen, near San Carlos. A jeep with four, heavily-armed 43rd Infantry Division troops approached us. Fortunately, they were quick to recognize friendly Filipinos and the four Americans with them. We were told to proceed on north to their base camp and division headquarters.

We arrived safely and, after interrogation, the four of us airmen were sent on to a landing strip. The Navy airmen were transported to their ships off the coast. Eventually, I was put aboard a C-47 heading for Mindoro where the 49th Fighter Group was by then located.

On the way back I began to think about the case of beer I had left under my cot back on Leyte. I had wangled it from some sailors who were unloading supplies at Tacloban a couple of days before Christmas, but I hadn't had a chance to break it open. Upon my return to the squadron, I learned that several of my friends had put it to good use. I hope that one of them toasted me.

Robert W. Aschenbrener returned to the 49th Fighter Group on January 23, 1945. Shortly thereafter, he was promoted to Major and given command of the 7th Fighter Squadron. After flying a total of 345 combat missions, amounting to 850 combat hours, Aschenbrener left the 49th Group to command the fighter division of the V Fighter Command's Replacement Pilot Center. In August of 1945, he married Ann Middleton, American Red Cross Staff Assistant at Clark Field in the Philippines. Before leaving the country, he and Ann located and had dinner with the Huk guerrilla family that had rescued him. Ann wrote to her parents that the family was wonderful. Robert always felt a deep debt of gratitude to these guerrillas who had rescued him and saved his life by keeping him from the Japanese who patrolled the area, and then helping him to return to the American forces.