



If you've been to the capital of the Philippines lately, you know it's a beautiful, modern city, and certainly deserves its nickname as the Pearl of the Orient. While hotel prices in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore and Beijing and other Asian cities have risen into the atmosphere during the past several years, Manila offers the same luxury features at a much lower cost.

A visit there today is well worthwhile for the senior traveler. The city and countryside scenery are breathtakingly beautiful and the people friendly in this former American colony. My memory goes back many, many years when I first saw Manila as a teenager. As the city was being recaptured by the GIs in March 1945, I was part of a Navy team sent there to establish a fleet landing facility.

The Navy SeaBees (Construction Battalions) arrived first, put down their carbines, took up hammer and saws, and built a Quonset hut as our HQ. They set up tent living quarters for us alongside the Pasig River, and also repaired the bomb-damaged Navy pier, so that boats and ships cruising in from Manila Bay could dock in the city.

It was heartbreaking to see how the Japanese soldiers had needlessly devastated the once-beautiful city during the fighting and their retreat from advancing American GIs and Filipino guerilla troops. Most of the widespread destruction was random, including the burning of homes, dynamiting government buildings and killing thousands of people.

The saddest scenes we saw as we rode through the streets were the many orphaned and homeless and orphaned kids who wandered through the rubble looking for food and shelter. Whenever we stopped, hordes of them surrounded our Jeeps, their thin faces turned up to us and their hands outstretched, begging for food.

Soon we were taking (sometimes swiping) food supplies from Army and Navy units nearby, and handed them out to the kids every day. However, as much as we could give, it was never nearly enough to feed more than a small percentage of the thousands of starving kids and families in what was once beautiful downtown Manila.

In addition to bringing free food, we operated a sort-of reverse black market. The Army allowed us to buy cigarettes at a cost of 50 cents a carton of 20 packs. As we rode our jeeps through the city, we tossed cartons to the most ragged-looking little kids. They could earn \$25 to \$50 per carton, a fortune for that time, by selling single American cigarettes on the streets for 25 cents or more each.

Maybe the most tragic scenes we witnessed were when we rode shotgun on convoys of Navy and Army trucks to the city dump. There they deposited loads of trash and garbage. Whenever we approached the area, we could see hundreds of civilians, including many street kids, waiting for us. Then, as the backs of the trucks tilted upward, the kids jumped on top and rode the contents down into the piles of dumped refuse.

There were frantic gatherings in the trash piles as people loaded up sacks to take to their families. Many hungry scavengers, standing knee deep in garbage, picked through to find edible bits of food and ate them while continuing to root for anything useful.

WWII ended a few months later, and of all the terrible wartime sights I had seen, those I most remember today I witnessed on the streets and at the Manila city dump.