

# *A Cockroach in my Cornflakes*

Alan John



*adventures of a foreigner in the Philippines*

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*The next few pages show some of the photographs and extracts from  
some of the stories that you will see in the complete e-book.*

*The photographs you will see are published in the e-book, but  
not necessarily in the chapters indicated*

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*Three little princesses. May Ann is in the centre*



*Felix getting our breakfast*

*From: Chapter Two*

*On the plantation in Pangil*

I struggled wearily through the afternoon heat, looking for somewhere to camp. By 1530Hrs. I felt I couldn't continue much further on this my first day in the saddle. I was near Pangil and quite exhausted; burning from the ferocious heat. I pulled to the side of the road to wet my parched mouth using the liquid I carried in my drinks bottle mounted on the bicycle. I stood leaning on the saddle of my bike trying to summon more strength. A few children gathered as if by magic. They so often do this magical appearance, as if pulled out of a conjurers hat. Two young ladies soon followed the children; their mothers. I was swathed round the neck by a towel to prevent me burning further, I must have looked quite a sight. Not a pretty one! The children came nearer, curiosity written all over their bright shining faces. Seeing I was harmless and fairly friendly, the mums came for a closer look too. They could speak English quite well. Even in this remote place, people can communicate in English. I was ashamed that I knew no Tagalog. I told them I was from England as most Filipinos assume I'm from the USA.

Their names were Arlene and Amy. Lovely girls. Seeing I

was so tired they invited me to stay in their community. Amy's husband Terry ( 37 ) was a kindly man. He showed me where to park my bike under cover, and invited me to stay in his home. I explained I had my tent, not wishing to impose on their generosity. I was surrounded by children all the time. Arlene and Amy had ten children between them. They all wanted to look at me, this *big nose* in their midst. Despite having bits and pieces of my kit scattered all over the place, I was never worried about things going missing. I was reassured by a little child collecting my unused tent pegs and carefully placing them with the bags in which I kept my camping gear . Amy's husband and other young men of the community helped carry my belongings into their home for safe keeping overnight.

My tent was surrounded by trees of many varieties - all productive. Coconut, Coffee, Banana, Mango, Guava, Kalamansi and others with unpronounceable names. Water was drawn from a well some way into the plantation. It was lovely to splash water over my face and head. I had been quite badly sunburned on my hands and arms, as I'd applied the lotion a little late in the day. I stood on the rocks a few

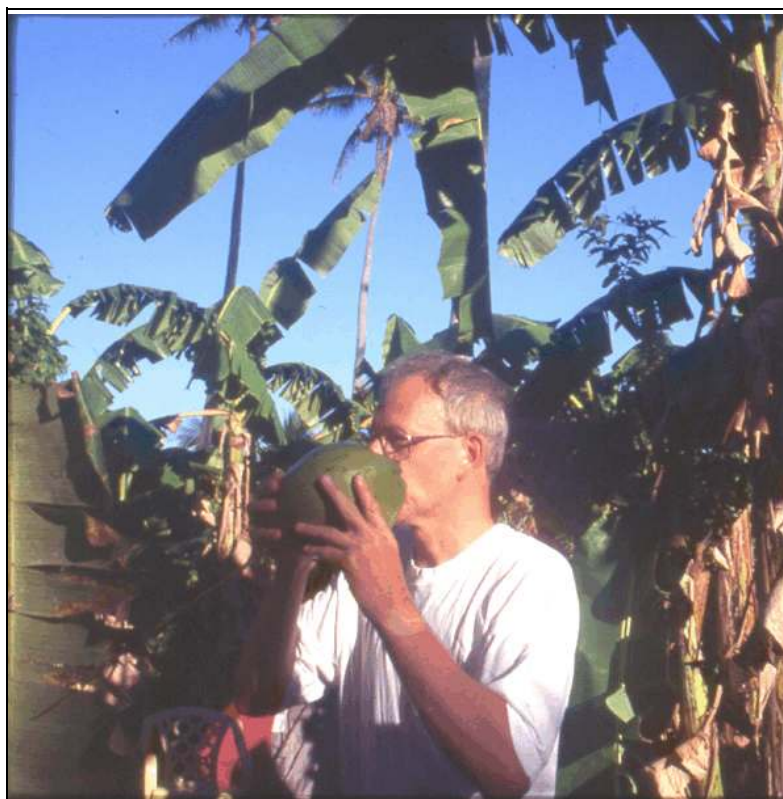
yards from the well and kept splashing and pouring the cool water all over me, trying to bring myself back into the human race after being melted by the sun all day. I was constantly watched by the children. They were so kind and thoughtful. One in particular, May Ann, was a beautiful 7 year old who filled my bowl with water and brought it to my tent. She always seemed to want to be nearby, watching me and helping me. All the children became special to me but May Ann was someone extra special. Before I left, her mother told me that her husband, Leonardo, had been looking for May Ann around the home in the early morning on the day following my arrival, but May Ann had already left her home to come and visit my tent soon after 0600Hrs. She was the first of my many visitors throughout the day. Always attentive.

I was given a plate of cooked rice to eat. I was made so welcome by all the community. After dark I escaped the mosquitos by going into my tent. Later, Terry came to chat with me. We sat in my tent, illuminated by torch light. He told that he was a happy man. He loved his work of looking after the plantation as he was able to be with his family all the time. He said that they were all happy. It certainly showed on their faces. Terry had built his home from pieces of wood and it was sparsely furnished. It gave adequate shelter and protection. They now had electricity, and the light from a couple of lamps shone dimly through the gloom of the room, which had a very low ceiling. They had an

electric fan to blow away the mosquitos during sleeping hours. They had managed to save for a small TV but it seemed to be seldom watched.

### **Day Two - 9 April 1997. Wednesday.**

**F**elix was also an early arrival, the first of the adults to arrive (the children were always first). A man of very few words, he would sit contentedly chain smoking near my tent. He was a real specialist, as I saw for myself when he shinned up the 80 feet tall coconut tree near my tent, to release some young nuts which the children gathered from their landing places amongst the other trees and bushes on the plantation. Felix climbed the tree just using his bare feet and hands to grip the rough, branchless trunk. Three or four times during his ascent he paused to puff on his cigarette. He'd been climbing the trees since he was 11 or 12 years old. Now aged 40, he could still climb the dizzily high trees, seemingly without effort. I was presented with two of the nuts that had been trimmed with a machete by one of the older children, in such a way that I could drink the Buko straight from the nut. Exquisite. After the juice had been drunk, the machete was again used to cut the nut in half so that I could spoon out the soft flesh with a spoon. What a breakfast. What a good start to the day.



*The author having breakfast*



## *From: Chapter Seven*

### *Gasan*

I pedalled away and slowly headed towards Gasan. This is another town which celebrates Easter in a big way. I passed through Boac en route, but didn't stop for long, I just had a rest in a covered concrete bus shelter with open walls, located outside the airport, where I chatted to a few of the local tricycle drivers who are the local transport service providers. No motor bikes for them either.

I reached Gasan in the early afternoon and headed for the seaside. I stopped at the Northern end of the town where there were some concrete stools under a concrete canopy. I sat there in the shade for a few minutes. Nearby, stretched across the river was the shakiest suspension bridge I've ever seen. Designed for pedestrian use only, it looked positively dangerous as a few of the locals crossed; the walking people causing the bridge to sway in all three dimensions. A young man came to speak with me and I asked him about the boat that might take me to the island of Mindoro. He pointed to a very small vessel on the wrong side of the suspension bridge and told me it departed at 0830Hrs. every morning.

I cycled on, trying to find a safe place to camp.

At the southern end of the town I found a beach from which men were shovelling sand into a couple of sacks and carrying them up the bank to where I was standing. There they emptied the sacks and made a cement-like mixture, which they poured into moulds to shape hollow blocks, which were then left in the sun to dry. It was a tedious, back-breaking job without the mass production machines of modern industry. Everything here being done by manual labour, resulting in only a small number of blocks being made each day.

I continued on my way. Just outside the main part of the town I found the beach once more. Like all beach areas, there is no escape from people. The deserted tropical beach must be a fantasy in the eyes of the armchair traveller. I still continue to search for one in this country of islands. The heat and the Sun are merciless. I often think of the likes of Wilfred Thesiger walking or camel riding across the Empty Quarter of Arabia and wondered how they endured it. I love both sunshine and heat, but there are times, when the temperature is in the 40's (°C), that both seem over-powering. Finding some shade becomes an important part of the day's tasks. I had a quick look at the beach and

looked longingly at the water in which I wanted to immerse myself, but it was too hot, and the risk of even more sunburn too great.

Next to the beach I met Marilyn, Eunice and Leo sheltering from the sun on a raised, slatted bamboo platform under a banana leaf canopy. They invited me to join them out of the glare of the sunlight. During our conversation I asked them about the possibilities of camping on the beach and if it would be safe for me to do so. I was thankful to receive an affirmative reply. Marilyn was 27, married with one child, a daughter. She was a real Filipina beauty with the lovely dark brown skin that many of her city dwelling country women try to eradicate using special 'Whitening Soap'. Leo was Marilyn's brother in law, still single at 28.

Surrounding our shelter were all of Eunice's eight children. In her forties, Eunice was separated and Marilyn joked that Eunice and I should get together. No way! Supporting and bringing-up eight kids is not my idea of fun. I was offered a slice of a type of Cassava cake spread with butter. I usually enjoy Cassava cake, it being one of my favourite Filipino foods, but this was rather too bitterly strong tasting for my liking and I only tried a small piece which left a taste in my mouth that lasted for hours. Eunice lived in a leaf roofed wooden hut on the edge of the nearby beach. Later, I would see her cooking on the open fire in her kitchen, through the gaps in the wooden walls. I camped next to the fence that

surrounded her home during my stay in Gasan.

The folks under the canopy departed so I laid on the bamboo slats and had a snooze. It was too early to pitch my tent as the heat on the beach was still intense. I awoke at 1615Hrs. and started work. Numerous onlookers gathered as I unloaded the sidecar and carried my bags onto the sand where I pitched my tent. I had a swim, trying to avoid contact with the rocks which would tear my skin like paper given the chance. I soon learnt to avoid swimming from this type of beach as it was too dangerous. The sand of the beach didn't extend into the water but at least I had somewhere relatively soft on which to sleep. After my swim, the gas was soon lit and a pan of water on the boil for my brew of tea. I was constantly surrounded by children; up to a dozen at a time. I offered them some biscuits which had so kindly been given to me by Pacita before I left Mogpog. They were very reluctant to take a biscuit from me until one, more bold than the others, accepted. Seeing this, the others gradually overcame their shyness and took their biscuits too. I gave a couple of their dogs a biscuit each and received their friendship for life! Animals are treated without feeling or love in this country where dogs are very wary of humans, never knowing who will be throwing the next stone at them. Dogs and cats are usually untrained, unloved and un-cared for. Many have horrific skin disorders which would result in expensive vet's bills in the countries of the West. Here, the people have hardly enough on which to survive, and....



*The children on the beach at Gasan*

*From Chapter Eight:*

I headed towards the southern tip of the island instead of cutting across the mountain pass. It was a much longer route than I'd planned but I thought it would be easier. Little did I know what I was in for.

I stopped for a picnic lunch in the shade of some coconut trees where I ate the bread rolls and the melon I'd bought in Buenavista. Nearby to where I sat, a black pig was tethered, who looked at me rather disdainfully; maybe she thought I was eating ham sandwiches. I washed my hands and face in the nearby sea, returning to my bike just in time to see another black sow walk past with 11 piglets following her. They all came to see this crazy white man before scurrying on to catch-up with Mum.

The road started to climb. It didn't seem to be much of a gradient, and the words of the lady in the bakery were still fresh in my mind, so I refused the offer of a tow from a local lad on his motor-tricycle. I soon regretted that decision, although I'm not sure that I could have remained on board my machine had I been towed along the rocky track that pretended to be a road. It was a hellish ascent, as I headed along the coast in the direction of Fantasy Elefante Island, where the Japanese tourists get rid of their hard earned Yen at a rapid rate. It was not just the heat or the steepness of the ascent, although they were bad enough. The real enemy was

the road. A rocky track covered with a layer of loose stones and gravel which provided almost no grip for my feet. I had to walk backwards, pulling my machine up the hill. As the afternoon wore on, I dragged my load upwards, stopping every few yards to draw breath. Whenever I could, I stopped to buy soft drinks, but these places were becoming fewer and farther between, the further I travelled into the countryside.

At last I reached the top of the hill and gratefully sat on my machine. The descent was very uncomfortable, but it was quicker and easier than the ascent had been. I stopped under a concrete canopy to admire the view and shelter from the sun. Many of the local youths appeared, to have a look at my machine, but few could speak English. I continued on my way.

Disaster struck. I'd been having gear selector problems for some time so I stopped to see what I could do to adjust the mechanism. I then noticed another, far more serious problem. The chain was just about to part! I was in a fairly remote place with few tools and no spare chain. I could hardly believe it when, within minutes, a policeman arrived on his motorcycle. He stopped to lend a hand but it proved impossible to refit the parts of the chain that had parted company.

Our efforts counted for nothing so we tried to attach my machine to his with the tow rope. This too was impracticable as it would have damaged his rear light fitting.



*The steep rocky road out of Bueanavista*



*View from the road some way out of Buenavista*