

# A Philippine Odyssey

by  
Louis Jurika

*Louis Jurika was born in Manila shortly after the war ended. Both his father and mother's families were long-time residents of Mindanao whose lives were torn apart by the Japanese invasion; but they resisted in every way they could. Based on extensive research, he tells the story of his father, Major Tom Jurika, and his odyssey from the time he was a guerrilla in the Visayas and Mindanao until he returned to Manila, assigned by General MacArthur to the administration of Santo Tomas Internment Camp, where he commenced his search for his mother, Blanche, who he had last seen in Manila in November of 1941*



*Tom Jurika – Portrait by Fernando Amorsolo\**

Thomas Walker Jurika was born in Zamboanga, Mindanao, in 1914. The youngest of four children of Stefan Jurika and Blanche Anna Walker, Tommy had grown up sailing his bamboo-outrigger Moro vinta around the Sulu Sea like a native, which indeed he almost was. His father, a naturalized American citizen originally from Czechoslovakia, had founded a south seas trading company in 1902 on the island of Jolo between the Philippines and

Borneo, later moving to Zamboanga and establishing branches of the business in Cotabato and Davao as well as Jolo. After Stefan died in 1928, Blanche, from a California family, established a coconut plantation on her own at Panabutan Bay to the north of Zamboanga, later moving to Manila and building a home overlooking Lake Taal at Tagaytay, to be closer to her two daughters and grandchildren. She became well known as “The Story Lady”, the radio voice of The Children’s Hour on KZRH, reading evening bedtime tales to young listeners.

Tom was 13 years junior to his brother-in-law Chick Parsons, a legend in the Philippine guerrilla movement, and became Chick’s right-hand-man in the islands after Chick was repatriated from the Philippines and secretly returned to direct guerilla operations. The Japs had been looking for Tom ever since he had burned and destroyed equipment and war materiel useful to them during the defense of Cebu in April 1942. He was wanted dead or alive and the price tag on his head was second only to the price on Chick’s head. It was no longer safe for him to remain; but more importantly, someone from the Philippines was needed in Australia who knew exactly what the guerrillas needed sent in by submarine. Tom’s last guerrilla mission was to install a radio and coastwatcher at San

Bernardino Straits between Luzon and Samar. Then he was ordered out on the submarine Narwhal in February 1944.

Now, in early 1945, Tom had flown up to a Lingayen airstrip on a C-47 from the Leyte beachhead. Knowing from experience what survivors needed most, Tom had arrived with a cache of hard-to-find goods accumulated from his position in the Quartermaster Corps, all the way from Australia to Leyte.

On January 29, while the American forces were stalled in their advance to Manila near Guimba, orders had been issued at MacArthur's advance headquarters for Colonel T.M. "Pete" Grimm, who, upon liberation of the area surrounding Santo Tomas, "will assume command of the internment camp". He immediate relatives or special interest therein". Among those listed was Major Thomas Jurika.

At the Lingayen beachhead and on the way to Guimba, Tom had picked up more supplies, plus a couple of members of Pete Grimm's new staff. Now finally it was on to Manila. More supplies would follow on trucks behind them, with an army administration for Santo Tomas.

Tom had orders personally signed by MacArthur enabling him to operate at will, be his own boss or link up with any units he cared to be under, truly a "carte blanche" as he was indeed looking for Blanche, his mother. She was hopefully still alive somewhere in Manila after having been picked up a year earlier by the Japanese Kempetai and taken to Fort Santiago with other members of an

underground resistance group that had been penetrated by a traitor.

Monitored radio reports from 1 st Cavalry tanks in the Flying Column reported progress through the suburbs to Santo Tomas the afternoon and evening of February 3rd . There were no real pitched battles yet, as the first tanks rolled into the internment camp around 9 PM that night. Waiting north of Manila behind the 1 st Cavalry, officers like Tom under Colonel Grimm had their own vehicles and orders to proceed independently of one

another in order to get to Santo Tomas. Orders had been to link up with any armored unit when and if needed.

It was still dark early Sunday morning, February 4th, 1945, when the major climbed into the cab of his truck for the final run into Manila to Santo Tomas. Known to his guerrilla colleagues as "Major Tom", he stood six feet tall, skinny as a rail with black hair and very blue eyes and a wide smile, and he knew the route into Manila from

many angles.

Now daylight was only an hour away on the 4th . Incredibly, it appeared that there was no opposition on the highway ahead, so far at least. Switching on the headlights for a second at a time revealed the tread marks on the asphalt left from tanks that had been here just hours earlier. Still, they were wary. Way up ahead the city was on fire in different places, but not along their route, not yet at least.

Tom had fought the Japanese in the defense of Cebu three years earlier, and as a



Blanche Walker Jurika

guerrilla in the ensuing two years he was mindful of the ways of the Jap. He already had a Purple Heart and Bronze Star from action at Cebu and Mindanao in 1942 and wasn't looking for another medal now. The objective was to stay alive and avoid engaging the enemy. Closing in on Santo Tomas, they started zigzagging through side streets to get there instead of taking broad avenues that went in a straight line right to the gates. Especially after Cebu in '42, Tom's rule for urban warfare was: "Never drive more than two blocks in a straight line". The Japanese were masters at ambush and hidden "booby traps".

As they got closer to Santo Tomas and could make out the familiar bell tower, Tom recalled that the dawn in the streets that day still held the old familiar Manila smells of smoky charcoal stoves and garlic rice. But now the city ahead of them was really going up in flames as the Japanese set fire to homes and everything combustible. It was also the dry season and the smoke overhead was swept up in thermal currents for days, with the acrid burning smell of explosive cordite searing one's nostrils for weeks on end, especially when American artillery finally opened up on the enemy across the Pasig River and in the beautiful old Walled City of Manila that had been built by the Spanish four hundred years earlier.

In the suburbs and then the city streets, Filipinos were smiling and laughing and shouting. They had seen the tanks go by the night before and were flashing the V-for-Victory sign in the faint glow of dawn, waving from windows flung open everywhere, cheering on the healthy-looking young soldiers in their olive-drab uniforms, heavy-duty lace-up boots and strange new style helmets. Tom was feeling quite unwashed in his rumpled, stinky army fatigues, under a

helmet with his major's insignia, canteen and .45-calibre automatic pistol on his cartridge belt and carrying his favorite carbine with the folding stock. Designed for use by paratroopers, it was small and light.

At two points on the run into Santo Tomas, the truck was fired upon by small arms from a side street. No one was hit, but it was a reminder that they weren't home yet. On the truck were footlockers filled with medicine, cigarettes, liquor, chocolates, chewing gum, razor blades, soap, shampoo, toothpaste and toothbrushes. Along with a portable generator, radio sets, microphones and sound system, there was also a wind-up record player with a stack of new 78's. And there were two collapsible "parabikes", small two-cylinder motor bikes originally designed to be dropped with parachute troops. These proved to be the ideal way to get around Manila in the next month.

At 6 AM on February 4th Tom's truck rolled into Santo Tomas through gates blown from their old posts by American tanks the night before. Those early arrivals were now parked off to the side of the Main Building with their barrels pointed at another building still occupied by Japanese soldiers with internee hostages in their midst. In the Main Building, Tom found the nurses and people he was looking for and started unloading supplies from his truck, all the while asking if anyone knew anything about his mother Blanche. There were a lot of suggestions of hospitals and churches where she might be holed up, but no one inside Santo Tomas had even heard that she had been arrested by the secret police a year earlier and incarcerated in Fort Santiago. Some of the internees had known Tom from pre-war days in Cebu, Mindanao, or Manila, but no one knew anything about Blanche. In the meantime more trucks, tanks and jeeps arrived until it seemed there were

over a thousand soldiers milling about on the grounds, many setting up stoves for breakfast. As more arrived, it was a festive atmosphere.

The first two days of the liberation of Santo Tomas were an effusion and confusion of happiness and deliverance. But then the Japs found the campus in their sights and started a sporadic artillery bombardment from across the Pasig River. Tom was out front standing by an army tank talking to its crew when the first Jap shell hit the camp. From that moment on it was a peculiar ebb and flow of havoc as the internees scrambled for cover when under fire and alternately came out for air and socializing in the open with all the troops. Tom never forgot the crumpled body of a young American girl, one of many internees to be killed by Japanese shelling in ensuing days. After waiting for three years, many more Filipinos and Americans would not live to see the end. The crescendo of artillery fire was now constant.

As more supplies arrived at Santo Tomas, Tom deferred to others in charge of handling the camp while he directed supplies into neighborhoods where refugees were arriving from the inner city. He was also working with G-2 in the search for Blanche. In the process he was able to get to a number of newly-liberated churches and buildings where crowds had taken refuge from not only the Japanese but also the incessant American artillery barrage. The carnage Tom found was just unbelievable. The Japanese had obviously just started shooting and bayoneting Filipinos wherever they found them, on the streets, in houses, cut down in groups or individually on sidewalks or against a wall. It was too much to take.

During this time and in the days to follow, Tom never stopped asking if anyone knew where Blanche was.

Between February 19 and 21, while the Battle of Manila continued around them, Major Jurika directed a group that discovered the grave of the four Santo Tomas internees – Grinnell, Duggleby, Johnson and Larsen. (*They were members of the Santo Tomas Executive Committee who were accused of various offenses by the Japanese and removed from the camp on January 5, 1945, except the Japanese made an error and arrested the wrong Larson.*) Altogether, they dug up 14 bodies bound together in small groups, decomposed, but identified by teeth and personal effects. All had been beheaded, probably around January 15th. Tom was increasingly pessimistic that he would find Blanche alive.

Continuing the search, Tom joined a column of army units going to a rendezvous at the edge of Laguna de Bay, the large inland lake east of Manila. On the far shore of the lake was the town of Los Baños where 2,136 allied civilians were imprisoned on the grounds of an agricultural college. At dawn on February 23, a low-level paratroop drop from C-47's, accompanied by guerrillas emerging from the jungle and a flotilla of amphibious tractors crossing the lake, took the Japanese by complete surprise, liberating the internees. The raid was a stunning success with few casualties on the American side. Tom arrived at Los Baños in an amtrac and found his brother-in-law Bob Cecil and many old friends, but no Blanche. Bob was badly underweight and glad to be alive, but he hadn't seen Blanche since his internment in early 1942.

Tom was now quartered in the Port Area, assisting with opening the port after Corregidor had been seized and Manila Bay swept of mines. After that he started assembling materiel for the final invasion of Japan itself, while still taking every

opportunity to pursue leads on Blanche. By summer, with most Santo Tomas internees having returned to their respective countries, the fighting was still going on in the mountains north of Manila. There was a rumor that someone had seen Blanche in Baguio; another rumor was that she had been taken to Japan in 1944.

Then came the day of the lucky break when, after the Japanese surrender in August, Tom was busy assisting G-2 with investigations in a Port Area building. Walking down a hallway lined with offices full of clacking typewriters and cigarette smoke, he passed an open doorway as the noise level dropped momentarily and heard the name "Jurika". It was an amazing happenstance. If he hadn't been there at that very moment, the ensuing story could not be told.

Tom spun around, walked through the door and in a raised voice asked, "Who said Jurika'?" Everyone in the room looked up as two officers behind a desk pointed at the young Japanese prisoner seated in front of them. The lucky break quickly turned into heartbreak as testimony spilled from the prisoner, who had been a witness to it all.

Blanche was dead, executed in late August, 1944, hands tied behind her, blindfolded and kneeling over a newly-dug trench somewhere in Manila's North Cemetery, killed with over two dozen other civilians accused of various acts of conspiracy by the Japanese. For Blanche and the few other American women, death was by beheading by Samurai sword. For the men, it had been a single shot to the back of the head.

G-2 released the prisoner into Tom's custody to guide a search team to the grave. The families related to those executed were alerted. One of the five Elizalde brothers was

on the list, and their company sent Tom a truck and team of workers with shovels for the unpleasant task ahead.

It turned out that Tom's Japanese eyewitness spoke fluent English and was not completely what he appeared to be. Richard Sakakida was in fact a young bilingual Nisei from Maui, Hawaii, who had arrived in Manila in 1941 as a sergeant in the US Corps of Intelligence Police. Moving into a residence hotel owned by a Japanese national and patronized by local and visiting Japanese businessmen, in civilian clothes and with a cover job as a store clerk, Sakakida's mission was to network the Japanese community to collect intelligence. He was so successful gaining the confidence of the Japanese that he was offered a job at the Japanese Consulate in Davao just prior to the war's outbreak. Unfortunately the start of hostilities a few days later precluded him from taking up that plum opportunity.

When the war started, Sakakida was picked up by his army handlers and taken to Bataan and Corregidor where, back in uniform, he translated Japanese radio intercepts until Bataan fell. Then the Japanese took him back to Manila, where his story of being a civilian pressed into service by the Americans was plausible enough to win him a job as a bilingual aide to the Japanese army commandant. For the next three years, he did what it took to stay alive while working for the Japanese. Assigned to attend trials of suspected subversives, as well as their executions, he served as a translator, privy to all files and talk at army headquarters.

One of the trials he attended was Blanche's. She had been able to stay out of Santo Tomas because of a medical dispensation, the result of a mastectomy just prior to the war, but she was suspected of

being in league with an underground group that operated loosely in Manila.

In 1943, Blanche was a volunteer assisting doctors and nurses at Welfareville and at Emmanuel Hospital, and at times she was also living with nuns in a Manila convent. This was the cover for her efforts to raise funds that were channelled to the guerrillas outside Manila. Through the guerrilla news network, the “bamboo telegraph”, Tom in Mindanao had occasionally learned of Blanche’s location in Manila. Then a Filipino double agent named Franco Vera Reyes infiltrated the group and betrayed her and other well-known citizens. Dozens were taken to Fort Santiago by the Kempetai starting in February 1944.

G-2 found Sakakida to be a suspicious subject of inquiry, questioning exactly where he had been during the Occupation, as there were a few holes in his story. Now he was with Tom searching an open field on the fringe of North Cemetery. For two days the laborers had dug in spots pointed out by Sakakida as the execution site, but his memory was proving elusive. At sundown the large field was pockmarked with a dozen excavations, and Tom had come to the conclusion that Sakakida didn’t really want to find the grave. No bodies, no case, end of inquiry!

Finally Tom snapped. Grabbing Sakakida by the neck, Tom whipped out his .45 pistol

and pressed the barrel to Sakakida’s head, screaming “You son-of-a-bitch, the next hole better be the right one or you’re going in it!” The very next hole was indeed the right one. Over two dozen decomposed bodies were unearthed, all eventually identified by dental records or personal effects and clothing. Blanche was one of them.

It was finally over. Tom had seen enough for a lifetime and nightmares would plague him for years. A suitable memorial was erected for these civilian martyrs, 29 of whom were laid to rest in a Heroes Monument in North Cemetery. In a wall of individual crypts, they were interred in three rows. Blanche, at 59 the eldest, was accorded the first place in the top left-hand corner. She lies there today. All 29 crypts bear the same date of death, August 30, 1944, and on that day every year the squatters living in the cemetery say an unknown angel arrives during the night to place a burning candle by each name.

#### ABOUT THE AMORSOLO PORTRAIT

*While searching for his mother, Blanche, during the battle of Manila, Tom Jurika came under Japanese machine gun fire. He dumped the parabiike he was riding and dived over a low wall. He was temporarily safe behind the front wall of a house, amazed that he was still alive, when he looked up to see the face of a middle-aged Filipino man only a few feet away who somehow looked very familiar amidst all the craziness. At that very moment the man cried out “Tommy Jurika!” It was Fernando Amorsolo. Crouching and crawling away to safety, the two quickly exchanged information. Fernando had not seen Blanche since before the war. Like the rest of starving Manila, he was out looking for food as the American lines approached.*

*Knowing that Amorsolo had a very large family, Tom told him to stay right where he was, while he made his way back behind the lines to a supply truck. In a few hours Tom returned to the now-secured area in a jeep with a case of Spam and a case of Klim milk for Amorsolo. Moved to tears at such largesse, the famous artist asked Tom how he could possibly repay him. The only thing Tom could think of was to say that if the two of them somehow survived the war, maybe the artist could paint his picture someday. A few months later Major Tom was sitting for this portrait in Amorsolo’s studio.*



Heroes Monument, Manila North Cemetery