One beautiful morning in early June 1947, my desk-bound routine was broken when I received a message from the Republican Army Siliwangi Division base in Tasikmalaya, a town in the highlands of southwest Java, that a large aircraft had landed on a remote beach to their south. That was a remarkable enough occurrence, but I was astounded when told that the foreign occupant had asked for me by name.

I reported this news to Suryadarma, who agreed that this was worth an official investigation. Suryadarma ordered me to fly to Tasikmalaya and liaise with Army command there. Considering the urgency of the mission, Suryadarma instructed me to take the fastest aircraft in our motley fleet, a Nishikoren monoplane, for the journey. I would also have one our best pilots. Soenario, or Betet, as we called him, was one of the remarkable success stories of our fledgling air force. A year earlier, he had been a village boy who had barely seen an airplane. Now, after only rudimentary instruction on decrepit Japanese wrecks, he was at the controls of a nimble, powerful military aircraft. But I had every confidence in Betet, which was good, as only he was wearing a parachute.

In Tasikmalaya I reported to the base commander, who assigned Lieutenant Pang Soeparto as my liaison counterpart. The foreigner had since returned to his aircraft, so Pang and I hopped into a jeep for the drive to the beach. We arrived shortly before dusk to see a Dakota, still in camouflage colors and with no markings at all, parked on the sand halfway between the water and a line of palm trees. It was not a bit damaged, indicating that this emergency landing on a narrow strip of sandy beach had been a masterpiece.

During the journey, I had assumed that this had been an unannounced blockade run gone wrong, and wondered who might be the pilot. As the former contact person for the CALI blockade runs, many pilots would know my name and would consider me as the obvious person to ask for assistance in an emergency such as this. However, I knew that landing on an unprepared beach in fading light would require piloting skills of a high order, and that being in such a situation in the first place indicated an adventurous pilot. Therefore, as we drove up to the Dakota I was not the least surprised to see Bob Freeberg, unshaven, unwashed, with the bright expression of cheerful optimism that I would remember, fondly, long after Bob himself was gone.

It was Bob's typical good fortune that the sand at the time of landing, shortly after nightfall, had been moist and compact. But now, after two days of hot sun, the sand was dry and loose and the wheels had sunk twenty centimeters.

"Two days ago I kept rolling and rolling when I landed," Bob said. "But now the plane doesn't budge an inch, even when I apply full power."

Bob introduced me to the two flight mechanics, whose love of adventure had overcome their quite-justified annoyance at being, basically, shanghaied. They were enjoying

this mystery trip to an unknown destination, proudly explaining that the beach landing had been beautifully done and they were happy to be alive.

“The skipper is a good pilot,” one of them volunteered.

While Bob busied himself with his Dakota, the mechanics told me how they had come to be on this remote beach. Three days previously in Manila, Bob had offered them a token fee for what he had claimed to be a test flight. If the mechanics wondered why this test flight took off before dawn, they did not ask questions. But they were certainly surprised when the aircraft, once airborne, headed directly south toward Borneo, landing four hours later at Labuan to refuel. They knew they had been fooled, but their love of adventure won out, and they put their trust in this young American pilot.

They would soon discover how much adventure this flight had in store. Bob was navigating from a chart with a scale of one to ten million. The entire island of Java, stretching over a thousand kilometers from Sumatra to Bali, was only a ten-centimeter-long smudge on his map. Five hours out of Labuan, Bob spotted an island that he identified as Bawean, which on his chart is represented by a small dot in the Java Sea to the east of Madura. I believe that, in fact, he had flown over an island in the Karimun group some three hundred kilometers to the west. Bob continued southward, following what the chart indicated would be the correct bearing from Bawean to Jogjakarta – until he reached the south coast of Java, with a large town nowhere in sight.

Thinking he was still far to the east of his actual position, Bob headed westward, searching for familiar landmarks until he spotted a railway line. He explained to the mechanics that on his previous flight to Java he had navigated by following this railway line. Thinking that he was much further east than he was, he had every reason to believe that following this line west would take him directly to Jogjakarta.

Bob was therefore dumbfounded, and not a little concerned, when it terminated in Purworejo. He flew north to south over mountainous territory until the light of the gibbous moon illuminated the terrain. By nine p.m., his fuel was almost finished. Bob suggested that he might ditch the aircraft and swim to shore with the help of life vests stored in the cabin. But the stricken look on the faces of his companions suggested that this would not be a viable option.

At last, Bob spotted a stretch of beach gleaming in the moonlight. With only a few liters of fuel left in the tanks, he set the Dakota down without a scratch.

The beach seemed deserted. Bob and the mechanics performed their post-flight checklist and prepared to sleep on the hard benches in the cabin. After several minutes, Bob saw flickers of orange light through the cabin windows. He rose and cracked open the rear cargo door. Indistinct figures, some holding flickering bamboo

torches, were visible among the palms lining the beach about fifty meters from the Dakota.

Several of the figures approached, stopping twenty meters from the aircraft. One of them, a robust middle-aged man who they later learned was the village headman, spoke a few words in an unfamiliar language. Bob turned to the mechanics in hopes of a translation. They only shrugged. Bob spoke in English, and one of mechanics repeated the phrase in Tagalog. Bob and the headman regarded each other in mutual incomprehension for a few moments. The villagers spoke a few words to each other, then turned and walked back toward the line of palms. Bob shrugged, and closed the rear door.

Two hours later, the chattering of voices and the flickers of torchlight through the windows awakened the crew. Bob again opened the door to see the headman and his companions now standing only a few meters from the door. The headman handed his torch to a companion and made the universal signs of hospitality: bringing his bunched fingers to his mouth to indicate eating; tilting his head and laying his cheek on an open palm for sleep.

Bob turned to the mechanics, who knew better than to refuse an offer of hospitality when alone and defenseless in foreign territory. They gathered their gear, hopped onto the sand and slid the door closed. Bob motioned that no one was to touch the Dakota, and the headman nodded. They followed the villagers to the tidy cluster of raised wood-and-bamboo houses they called Cikalong. There, the crew were given a sparse but satisfying meal of rice and grilled fish, then invited to sleep on straw mats laid on the wooden floor of the headmans house.

The following morning Bob and his crew rose at dawn to make a visual inspection of the Dakota. The aircraft had no visible damage. Bob fired up the engines and attempted to roll the aircraft along the sand. The heavy Dakota would not budge, the wheels trapped in the soft sand.

A few villagers squatted at the treeline, enthralled that the aircraft had roared mightily, visibly straining, but could not free itself from the sand. The headman indicated that Bob should return with him to the village.

At the village, Bob was met by a squad of armed soldiers, one of whom spoke halting English. He informed Bob that he would need permission from the army command in the region to take off again. The soldier also noted that some of villagers thought he and his crew were Dutch spies and wanted to shoot them.

In late afternoon, Bob climbed into the army truck and embarked on a harrowing 60-kilometer ride over the coastal limestone hills to the army base at Tasikmalaya. The six-hour trip over the narrow road with bad hairpin turns and sheer drops on either side kept Bob anxious the whole way. He finally arrived after midnight.

In Tasikmalaya Bob was able to explain his situation more fully, including giving the officers the name of his one contact in the Republic: Captain Petit Muharto.

Pang and I now had to decide what to do about the Dakota. Though this village was staunchly Republican, many residents of this region remained sympathetic to the Dutch. Chances grew with each passing hour that the news of Bob's landing would reach Dutch-controlled Batavia and prompt the dispatch of an air patrol. Time was not on our side.

Bob had not yet grasped the seriousness of the situation. He suggested we contact a Singaporean firm to ship perforated steel plates by landing craft to the beach. I had to remind him that the Dutch naval blockade would make this impossible.

More than a hundred villagers were standing around the plane, some of them running their hands along the fuselage, unable to believe that such a colossus could fly. By this point almost every Indonesian, even those living in remote areas, had seen an airplane in the sky; but few had seen an aircraft up close. In this hard-scrabble seaside village, the landing of Bob's Dakota was a welcome diversion. Life was hard even in the best of times in this remote corner of Java. The villagers eked out a living through fishing, rice cultivation on the narrow strip between the coast and the Parahyangan range, and for the "lucky" few, penurious wages working on nearby rubber plantations.

So, as usual in those times when even the most basic necessities were often unavailable, we improvised a solution using whatever was on hand. We first attempted to make a runway of woven coconut leaves. This failed as the strips could not take the weight of the Dakota. By this time, hundreds more villagers, some from tens of kilometers away, had descended on the village. This crowd gave me an idea.

As is typical in Java, the houses in this village were constructed of woven bamboo matting attached to wooden support poles and beams. Bamboo is strong as well as pliable: a mat could easily support the heavy Dakota. Pang called together the heads of each nearby village. Using both our authority as military officers and appeals to the villagers desire for independence from their despised Dutch overlords, we convinced the leaders to mobilize the residents of their respective villages to weave a total of five hundred bamboo mats, in size and shape similar to the walls of their houses.

The villagers would need three days to complete the 500 mats. Since it was Bob's intention to seek charter contracts with the Republicans, I decided we could best use this time to make such arrangements. Bob and I returned with Pang to his army base in Tasikmalaya. From there we boarded the Nishikoren for the thirty minute flight back to Jogjakarta to meet with Suryadarma.

The briefing with Suryadarma took less than thirty minutes. The Air Force commander explained that the Republic had a stock of quinine stored in Tasikmalaya.

The anti-malaria drug would fetch a high price on the international market, but the Dutch had forbidden direct commercial transactions with the Republic. Suryadarma wanted Bob to sneak the quinine out from under the noses of the Dutch and fly it to Manila to be sold, along with some high-value vanilla beans stored in Jogjakarta. Bob agreed without hesitation, and we returned to Tasikmalaya with the Nishikoren.

We again wedged ourselves into the open rear cockpit, Bob plumping his large frame onto the deck of the aircraft lying flush on the bulkhead, me squatting between his feet, face-to-face. To take my mind off the discomfort during this thirty-minute flight, I studied the features of this remarkable foreigner, a cheerful, open face highlighted by sky-blue eyes. The eyes, somehow, were both piercing and kind, the eyes of a strict but fair military man who would forgive you any mistake—if you made it only once.

Bob did not speak during the entire flight, as any conversation could scarcely be heard over the roar of the powerful engine and the wind whipping past our ears. But I regarded Bob's reticence as fitting for a person of such extraordinary skill and confidence. Here was a man who had flown his aircraft single-handed on a fifteen-hour flight to a destination in a foreign country he had visited only once before, by a very different route, all the while guided by a chart that showed critical navigational landmarks as mere specks in the ocean. Nevertheless, he could land on an unprepared beach and take off again from an improvised runway—all without much fuss. At the time, I wondered whether he was extraordinarily skilled, incredibly lucky, or just an incurable optimist. In the following months, I would come to realize that he was all three, and more besides.

Crammed into the open cockpit of what was currently the most advanced aircraft in our armada, I saw clearly how the Dakota, and Freeberg himself, could serve our revolution. Here was an opportunity to do things off the beaten track—new ways to outsmart the enemy. I was certain that the arrival of this brave young pilot, literally dropping from the skies, might be a turning point in our revolution.

The next morning, we again made the nerve-wracking drive across the stark limestone hills to the beach at Cikalong, this time carrying two drums of aviation fuel. We now had to wait two more days, each moment dreading that we might hear the faint drone of a Dutch patrol aircraft approaching the beach. To pass the time, I visited the houses where the mats were being hand-woven. The four-square-meter mats, fashioned from five-centimeter-wide bamboo strips, represented prodigious (and wholly voluntary) effort by these impoverished villagers. Many would work at night, then depart for another back-breaking day in the rice fields or in fishing boats. I hoped they had not lost sleep for no reason.

On the morning of 8 June 1947, the 500 mats were finished. I ordered them laid in two 450-meter parallel strips the width of the landing gear. As the mats were

being put in position, Bob and I had the first of many disagreements which would mark the time of our professional collaboration. I felt the mats should overlap in the direction of travel, while Bob insisted on the opposite. I forget which of us prevailed on that occasion, but I do remember a spirited argument.

The Dakota would take off with thirty minutes total fuel, the 92-octane fuel I brought from Tasikmalaya mixed with the traces of 100-octane fuel remaining in the tanks. We scraped the sand from around the main landing wheels. Bob revved the engines to full power. Pang, myself, and scores of villagers strained at the tires until, with a lurch, the Dakota rolled onto the first mat of our improvised runway. Pang and I then thanked the villagers for their assistance and joined Bob and the two mechanics on board.

"Now, watch the air speed," Bob told one of the mechanics, who was sitting in the right-hand seat. "As soon as we reach sixty, get the flaps down full, okay?"

Off we went. I felt a sudden heave as the flaps went down and we were airborne. We made a wide, shallow, climbing turn over the Indian Ocean, then passed over the landing site to see that the matting was scattered all over the sand by the propeller backwash. With Pang navigating, we headed inland, landing in Tasikmalaya thirty minutes later with no fuel to spare.