

Adventures on Lily Hill, Clark Air Base, PI

by Gregg Eckhardt, 2018



From the nipa hut in the backyard of 5944 Simon, Lily Hill was the entire northern skyline. It rose about 100 feet above the open field across the street from the corner cul-de-sac location where Chief Master Sergeant Alton O. Eckhardt and his family resided on Clark Air Base.

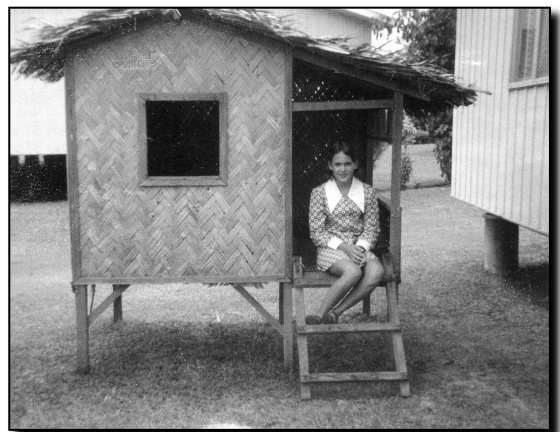
The nipa hut served as base of operations for me, Alton's son, and Robert and Kurt, a band of boys who only had to attend school four hours a day. During the remaining daylight hours, Lily Hill was an irresistible adventure.

In early 1970, this band made the decision that Lily Hill had to be thoroughly explored. Lily Hill was off-limits to base personnel, and we eventually found out why, but this restriction did not bother us much.

Hopping out of the nipa hut, we only had to jump the drainage ditch, dart across the street, and we were on the wide, flat, grassy approach to the tallest part of the Hill.

First order of business: get to the top. An initial reconnaissance revealed that from the eastern edge, a long and gently curving paved road started at Lily Hill's base and climbed its narrow spine, ending at a complex of radio towers and several low, round water tanks.

At the top, Lily Hill was not very wide, but it afforded panoramic views of Clark and the flightline to the southeast. We watched F-4E fighters scream past and rooted for lumbering C-130 Hercules as they practiced equipment drops.



This nipa hut in the backyard of 5944 Simon was our early base of operations.



A view of the base from Lily Hill. In the foreground is the Airman's Open Mess, with the Bamboo Bowl behind.

On the west side near the water tank, Lily Hill sloped into a narrow valley that offered a footpath shortcut to the Commissary and Base Exchange, known as the BX, for people living in the barns of the NCO Family Housing area.

Overlooking the valley, we noted a collection of small huts about halfway down the slope that we assumed belonged to the Negritos, small-statured natives who had been granted perpetual access to their historical homeland on the base. We did not see anybody present.

On the south and north sides, the slopes of Lily Hill were a dense green tropical jungle of bamboo, ferns, and orchids that at first appeared impenetrable. We were surprised to find the slopes were easily traversable using long horizontal trails cut by the Negritos.

These paths apparently extended from one end of the hill to the other, with occasional branching stems that emerged at the Hill's base. From near the water tower, we found a stem that led past the Negrito's huts, down to where the Hill met the narrow valley and shortcut to the BX. On our future expeditions, there would be no need to use the paved road.

With a clear picture of the overall layout, our explorations could now focus on selected sites or features. The element that most demanded our inspection was a low grassy mound just in front of the steep southern face. This mound enclosed a partially buried, square concrete fortification. Lily Hill had served as a strategic defensive spot for Japanese forces during WWII, and we were told this bunker had subsequently been

used by General Douglas MacArthur to command American troops. It would now be used by us to do the same.

For this mission, we would need flashlight batteries and cigars, because MacArthur always had a cigar. After an early morning excursion down the footpath to the BX, we were fully stocked with D cells and Swisher Sweets.

We approached the bunker from the rear, where the berm facing Lily Hill was divided by a narrow concrete passageway. It led to a small steel door, where a very large padlock threatened to end our explorations. On top of the berm, however, Robert found a rectangular ventilation shaft with a hinged steel grating that was easily opened.

Our lanterns revealed an interior in complete disarray, with moldy papers and rusting electronic gear strewn about on gray steel desks and cabinets. We dropped inside and lit cigars to help us feel like MacArthur. There were wires everywhere. A long, low table along the bare concrete interior wall appeared to have been some sort of communications hub.

We decided that from here, MacArthur likely would have issued directives to the field. Kurt began to issue some, and for emphasis, as if he needed to crack the whip on the troops, began to swing a wire in a circular whipping fashion.

Suddenly, the wire exploded in a blinding shower of sparks, and Kurt dropped to the floor. There was still electricity in this bunker!



Members of the Lily Hill exploratory gang, Halloween 1971. Kurt is in the center, Robert at right.

Robert and I froze in our tracks, not wanting to contact any other wire. But we had to get to Kurt, who was moaning and appeared to be shivering. We carefully stepped between the strewn wires and helped him to his feet. "Are you OK?" He could barely stand or speak, and we knew he could not climb the ladder back out the ventilation shaft.

After about 10 minutes, he appeared to be gaining strength, so we waited a few minutes more and finally, all of us were able to hoist ourselves out. Several days later, Kurt insisted that he still felt like he was tingling. We never returned to the bunker.

The unfortunate accident at the bunker did not dampen our enthusiasm for further explorations. We would just have to be more careful. While at the bunker, we had

noticed that immediately behind it, at the base of Lily Hill, there appeared to be an entrance to an unusually wide trail.

We supposed this would meet up with some of the other trails we had seen, and it became the object of an afternoon's exploration. When we went a few feet in, we realized this was not a trail at all and must have been a road at one time. It was much more overgrown than any of the Negrito's trails, and it did not lead up the Hill's steep slope but instead began to narrow towards an indentation in the hillside.

It was impossible to see what lay at the end until we were upon it. Through the brush we slowly began to discern a dark three-sided frame of huge timbers. It was the entrance to a tunnel! Without our lanterns, we were not prepared for exploration in the dark, but we did set about clearing some bamboo and brush so the entrance was more easily seen. It seemed huge...large enough to drive a jeep inside.

The next day, we returned with our flashlights. We turned their beams toward the interior but they could not reveal the deepest recess. We slowly went in. There were rusted war implements everywhere. A rusted pistol here. A rusted ammo box there. Soldiers had scrawled their names on the walls 25 years earlier, and we even made out that "Kilroy Was Here".

We knew better than to touch most of the objects laying around. An acquaintance of ours had recently been shipped stateside after a phosphorous shell he had found exploded in his face. We were content to observe and wonder at what sort of battle this tunnel had witnessed. It ended abruptly about 100 feet from the entrance.

The tunnel entrance became our new base of operations, replacing the nipa hut at 5944 Simon. From there, we met to plan further explorations, and we were quickly becoming very familiar with the Negrito's trail system. Although we still had not seen any Negritos.

The first consequence of familiarity was that we began to notice unusual pits and mounds above and below the trails. We surmised these must have somehow served as defensive positions. Casual digging turned up ancient K-ration containers.

Also, we believed that if there was one tunnel, there must be more. And there were. We became experts at peering through thick brush to pick out their overgrown entrances. None were as large as the first we had discovered or had openings braced by square-cut timbers; some were so cramped we did not venture inside.

We realized that some of them connected with others, and we decided that a thorough mapping project was in order. On a crude hand-sketched drawing, we eventually had seven tunnel entrances noted, and we did our best to render the winding passageways that led to other tunnels or dead-ended into the brown basaltic heart of Lily Hill.

As young boys, smoking was one of our favorite pastimes. Kurt would often borrow Pall Malls from his mother's purse, and we would find a secluded spot to light up. One of the best places was in the abandoned Negrito village on Lily Hill. We would crouch under a lean-to or inside one of the huts and practice blowing smoke-rings.

One day, we were astonished to see a tiny, smiling man appear on the trail and walk into the village. It was a Negrito! He came toward us beaming with happiness, holding his index and middle finger tightly parallel while repeatedly raising them to his lips. We surmised that he wanted a smoke. We were happy to oblige; Kurt offered him a Pall Mall and I lit a match. We only spoke several words of any native language, so we smiled and said "Mabuhay!", and he responded in kind. When the cigarettes were out, he waved cheerily and went off down the trail.

A few days later, we saw campfire smoke rising from the village and, upon inspection, noted the village appeared to have been reoccupied by about a dozen Negritos. We decided to look up our smoking buddy.

We approached the village slowly and noisily so as not to alarm anyone, and our friend came out to greet us, inviting us into the village. We offered him another Pall Mall, which he accepted happily. We noticed that suspended over a small fire the Negritos had employed an American World War II helmet, presently empty, as a cooking pot.



Kurt made gestures toward the helmet, and then pointed at the pack of Pall Malls, and the Negritos immediately perceived that we were willing to make a trade. A woman nodded approval, snatched the pot from over the fire, gave it to our friend, who handed it to Kurt, and the trade was made.

We got this helmet from the Negritos on Lily Hill.

Later that day I bought the helmet from Kurt for \$3, and I still have it.

Part of the large grassy area between 5944 Simon and the base of Lily Hill was occupied by a baseball field, which our group also occasionally used to hit balls around. All of us played on baseball teams. From behind the centerfield fence, while watching airmen play fast pitch softball, I taught myself to spit with astonishing accuracy, a skill that all good baseball players possess.

At night groups of airmen would sometimes lounge on the ballfield bleachers and burn candles. With their portable cassette player at maximum volume, the sounds of Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin would echo back from Lily Hill. Thousands of fireflies would dance and flit about. When they appeared in places that I knew concealed tunnel entrances, I imagined them to be muzzle flashes from World War II battles.

We had not found any new tunnels in a long time, but Lily Hill always promised surprises. One day after baseball practice, Robert and I stopped for a smoke in a horseshoe shaped cove near the eastern base of the Hill. We had explored it several times before and so were not expecting any discoveries.

Yet lo and behold, this time Robert noticed an especially dark patch behind the foliage, which in the past had tipped us off to tunnel entrances. And sure enough, here was a new one. Without our flashlights, we first peered into the entrance, and then ventured a few feet inside.

As our eyes became accustomed to the darkness, we slowly began to perceive the tunnel had a distinct curvature. Pressing forward, now almost in complete darkness, we saw a bulbous shape on top of a pole about 10 yards ahead. We both seemed to realize about the same time that it was a rifle with bayonet stuck into the ground, and a helmet on top. A burial, just like in the GI Joe comics!

We were spooked and beat a hasty retreat out of there. The next day, we recruited several members of my baseball team to help us re-investigate. We felt a lot braver when there were five of us. This time, armed with flashlights, we approached the entrance and shone the lights inside.

About 10 yards from the entrance, the entire tunnel had collapsed. Was there a spirit protecting this gravesite? Had this tunnel been booby trapped? We were probably the first visitors in the 25 years since the war. Was it a coincidence this tunnel collapsed just after we went inside? Lily Hill offered surprises, but also held many secrets.



One day, a group of boys who lived nearby approached our group and said they had heard we were very familiar with Lily Hill. They wanted to know if we could show them a good way to get to the water tank without being seen. Their plan, they revealed, was to go swimming. I considered it a stupid and dangerous idea, so I was more than willing to go along.

I led the group up the trail I knew to be the shortest route, past the again abandoned Negrito village, all the while recounting our grand adventures. We presently arrived at the bottom of the water tank. They climbed the ladder, found a way inside, and I could hear them laughing and thumping on the side of the tank as they had their swim. For a few days after that I only drank soda pop.

My mother worked in the Office of the Vice-Commander while we were busy exploring Lily Hill. Although more than 45 years have elapsed, I am going to be in big trouble when she reads all this.

By early 1972 both Kurt and Robert had left Clark, and I did not venture often onto Lily Hill by myself. During a strong typhoon, I watched between cracks in taped-over windows at 5944 Simon as tall trees on Lily Hill were uprooted and tossed about. I saw the announcer's box at the ballfield topple and blow away.

When the typhoon's eye passed over us, we went outside to see the eyewall, which was capped by a disk of deep blue sky. I could tell the vegetation on Lily Hill had already been significantly changed. An hour later we were back in the storm, and it was back to watching the trees topple.

By the time we were set to leave Clark in July of 1972, construction had begun on a new elementary school that would occupy much of the flat grassy area between our house and the Hill. The bunker in front of the Hill was being demolished, and the ballfield too. Nothing about Lily Hill seemed the same.

My only pet was a mouse named Harvey who had grown into, well, a rat. My last visit to Lily Hill was to turn Harvey loose, where I am sure his descendants still survive to this day.



Harvey was released on Lily Hill in July of 1972.

Our map of the Lily Hill tunnel complex was left on the upper shelf of my bedroom closet at 5944 Simon, where I hoped the next explorer would find it and benefit from our cartographic efforts.

I have always wondered if anyone ever did.

