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Odyssey Extraordinary

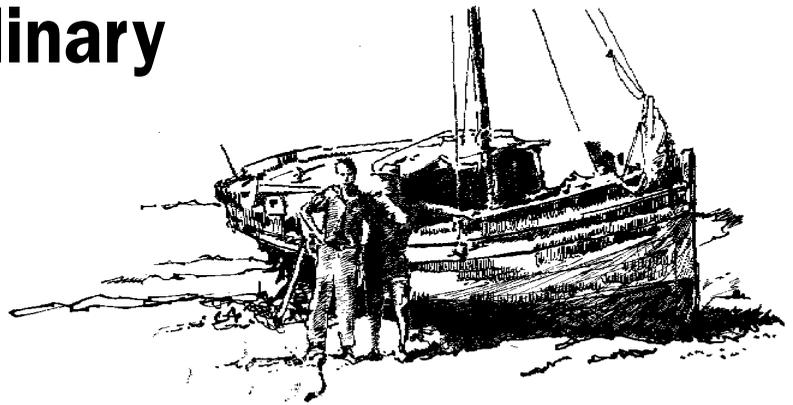
Lt. Damon J. Gause was the central figure in one of the most dramatic events of World War II.

Lt. Damon J. Gause, a member of the 27th Bombardment Group (Light), arrived in the Philippines in November 1941. The group's A-24s were diverted to Australia and never reached the Philippines. Along with other Americans, he fell back to Bataan when our forces no longer were able to hold positions in the Manila area. The group fought with the infantry until the Japanese overran Bataan and killed or captured all but a few of the US and Philippine defenders.

Gause escaped from his captors by attacking one of the guards, whom he killed with the man's own knife, then swam the three miles to Corregidor, where he led a machine gun squad. When Corregidor fell on May 6, Gause again escaped, found a small boat, and set out for Luzon. An enemy fighter sank the boat, leaving him to swim for many hours to the island. He then made his way through enemy-held territory to the island of Mindoro. There he met an Army captain, William Osborne. Their plan—ambitious to say the least—was to reach Australia and rejoin the fighting.

With the help of friendly natives, they located a dilapidated 22-foot sailboat with a diesel engine that ran only when it chose to do so. When the engine was out, they relied on tattered sails. The two men had no charts or navigation equipment and little fuel for the engine. The latter problem was solved by eliminating the Japanese guard at a lighthouse, taking on a load of fuel, and replenishing their meager larder. They also took a Japanese flag that was to save their lives on the long voyage through unfriendly waters.

Gause and Osborne made frequent stops at small islands to gather food and, with luck, water, and to work on the engine, which ran for a few hours between recurrent rest



periods. One stop was at the small island of Bugsanga, a leper colony. One of the inmates was an American, who had been a marine engineer before his illness, and he helped them repair the engine. At another island, they were greeted by a lady missionary who provided food and gave them her camera and all the film she had so they could document their escape.

Sailing south in the boat, which they named *Ruth-Lee* after their wives, the two Americans survived several tropical storms, one lasting for five days, that left the boat leaking in many places. The leaks were stuffed with rags. Then came a typhoon with violent winds that snapped the mast and broke the rudder. The mast was replaced with a small tree and a rudder was carved with knives provided by friendly natives. Off the coast of enemy-occupied Palawan, they ran up the Japanese flag, which saved them more than once from enemy ships and aircraft that came down to look them over.

Drinking water was a constant problem. There were no containers on the boat that could store rainwater. Several small islands proved to be devoid of streams or springs. Coconuts became a prime source of water. A shark that followed them for several days helped out on that score as well. It was caught on a hook made from steel wire and provided both food and some moisture. As their coconut supply ran low, they moistened their mouths by chewing raw fish.

When *Ruth-Lee* reached the south shore of Timor, which they mistakenly believed to be in Allied hands, they

hailed down the Japanese flag and hoisted the Stars and Stripes that Gause had taken when Corregidor surrendered. They soon found out they were not yet out of the war zone. An enemy fighter strafed them, setting the boat afire. The two men put out the fire and plugged many bullet holes to keep the boat afloat. On the verge of collapse from starvation, thirst, and tropical sun—after several more days of sailing—they were picked up by an Australian boat.

The men were flown to Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters, where a barefoot Gause saluted the general as he "reported from Corregidor." The general's amazed response was said to be, "Well, I'll be damned." Gause was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroism in the Philippines and the unprecedented escape through enemy waters.

Returning to the States as a captain and war hero, Damon Gause was present for the birth of his son, Damon L., who has the account of the escape that his father had scribbled during the 3,000-mile voyage that lasted for 159 days.

Gause, by then a major, checked out in P-47s and was assigned to the European theater. In one of the war's great ironies, this man, who had survived what probably was the longest and most harrowing escapes in modern military history, was lost on a mission over Germany. His heroism in combat and against almost insurmountable odds during the escape to Australia must not be forgotten. The courage and tenacity he displayed more than a half-century ago should be an inspiration to all those who follow him. ■