



The Historian of the Marianas

■ BY ED PROPST

Don Farrell has definitely become a Marianas icon. He served his country in the United States Air Force. He was a teacher in Guam and Tinian high schools. He has worn several different hats in the political arenas of Guam and Tinian, including serving as the senior member of former Guam Governor Carl Gutierrez’s Senior Management Team. Don has received numerous awards, proclamations, and commendations, including the Governor of Guam’s Ancient Order of the Chamorro and the CNMI Governor’s Award for the Arts. He has also served as Vice Chairman and Chairman of the CNMI Board of Education.

Despite all his accomplishments and accolades, Don is best known for his writing. He has written eight different books about Saipan, Tinian, Rota, and Guam, including *The History of the Northern Mariana Islands*, which has served as the standard Northern Marianas history textbook for the public school system since 1991. Undoubtedly, Don is the most widely read author in the Marianas.

Intrigued by this man I had never met, but had heard so much about, I decided he deserved to be featured in *MP* magazine, especially because he had generously offered to allow us to publish a sneak preview from his upcoming book, *Declassified: the Tinian Atomic Bomb Files*. For this reason, my staff and I traveled to Don’s home in Marpo Heights, Tinian, to interview the “historian of the Marianas”...

It was late afternoon when we pulled up to the side of Don’s house in Marpo Heights. There Don greeted us in his refreshingly unassuming and casual demeanor, and then invited us up to the second floor of his house, where we were stunned by his enormous deck, measuring 20 feet deep and 100 feet long. Initially, I couldn’t understand why someone would build such an oversized deck, but it all made sense when I looked out and saw the majestic view stretching across Marpo Valley to the southern tip of Tinian and on to the island of Aguiguan, also known as Goat Island. “When I decided to build this deck and measured it, it didn’t seem quite this big,” laughed Don as he pulled out some plastic chairs for us to sit on. Don poured us some coffee, and I pulled out my interview questions.

Please tell our readers a little bit about your background and how you ended up on Tinian.

I moved to Guam in 1977 and taught at Inarajan Jr. High School. There I became fascinated with the Chamorro culture and its rich history. I enjoyed the warm waters, the beautiful beaches, and the island lifestyle. It was truly paradise for me. It was in Guam where I met the love of my life,



Carmen Muna Dela Cruz, and we married in 1983. We decided to move back to Carmen’s home island of Tinian in 1987, and we’ve been here ever since.

What is it about living on Tinian that appeals to you most?

The peace and quiet. I love it. This is where I do all of my writing.

What frustrates you about living in the CNMI?

The government’s lack of support for education. I am first and foremost an educator. If you were talking to a different *haole*, it would probably be lack of certain food supplies or conveniences. But I’m a country boy by heart, raised in Littleton, America. I don’t need a mall to make me happy. We definitely need to focus on the real priorities, such as education and health care.

What led to your interest in the history of the Marianas?

The history of the Marianas is engrossing. The more I read about it, the more I wanted to learn. I wrote some articles for *Glimpses of Micronesia* and the editor, Ruth Ann Becker, encouraged me to write more. Writing became a passion, and since I was already addicted to the

history of the Marianas, it was only fitting that I write about it. It truly stands out as having one of the most unique and complex histories in the entire United States.

To date, which of your books and articles on history have you most enjoyed working on and completing?

It would have to be *The Sacrifice of Guam*. That book was the most gratifying because it provides an account about the tortuous path leading to the people of Guam acquiring U.S. citizenship. In terms of importance, it would have to be the *History of the Northern Mariana Islands*. I owe a lot to my editor Phyllis Koontz and most especially to Barry Wonenberg for his artistic talent in doing the layout for that book.

What do you find to be the most intriguing facet of NMI history?

The rapid changes in international control of the islands and the influence this had on the indigenous people. From 1898 to 1947, control of the Northern Marianas changed from Spanish to German to Japanese to American.

What are some topics you expect to be writing about in the future?

I received a grant from the NMI Humanities Council that will lead to a publication called *Tinian at the Turning Point*, a comprehensive history of Tinian—with its role in World War II being a focal point.

After we ended our interview, Don gave us a guided tour of North Field, the atomic bomb pits, and Invasion Beach. As he threw out statistics and figures and drew diagrams in the sand illustrating how the U.S. took control of Tinian from the Japanese, I was astounded by his memory, which I likened to that of an elephant. Don spoke with passion and vigor, and if you closed your eyes, you could just about hear B-29 Superfortresses soaring overhead. Don truly is passionate about the history of our islands, and we owe our icon a great deal of gratitude. Not just for recording the fascinating history of our islands, but for presenting it to the world—and to us. ^{mp}