



## **A Medical/Surgical Mission to the Southern Philippines**

*NIFA Sends Instructor on  
a Medical/Surgical Expedition in the Southern Philippines*

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## *How It All Started*

While at a national forum in Washington D.C. a few years ago, NIFA's CEO attended a presentation entitled "Giving Back to the World through Third-World Medical Missions," by Dr. Glenn Geelhoed, Professor of International Medicine at George Washington University. Dr. Geelhoed, who has written hundreds of papers as well as books on surgery, history, and ethics, was voted "Humanitarian of the Year" by *George Magazine* in 2001.

Hearing Dr. Geelhoed speak about the intense need for medical care in third-world countries, NIFA's CEO was moved, and realized that a medical mission would be an excellent opportunity for NIFA first assisting students to have an opportunity to help a "higher cause."

I have worked with NIFA as an instructor for over three years, and loved it, so when the CEO asked me if I would like to be the first NIFA instructor to go on a NIFA Medical Mission, I was elated! It was decided that I would join Dr. Geelhoed on a trip to Mindanao, the second-largest and easternmost island in the Philippines.

## *Preparing to Depart*

I live in Savannah, Georgia. The trip started out with my meeting Dr. Geelhoed – soon to be known to me as Dr. Glenn – at the airport in Jacksonville, Florida. He is obviously an extremely intelligent man, 5'7", has a white beard and an addiction to running in marathons all over the world. He spends approximately half the year helping the underprivileged in third-world countries and has been on this expedition 18 times.

From Jacksonville, we flew up to D.C. to Dr. Glenn's home in Deerwood, Maryland, to pack surgical supplies and get a good night's sleep before embarking on the long flights to follow.

The next day, with everything carefully packed, we headed off for the airport. We both checked our bags, and Dr. Glenn went to park his car, leaving me with all his carry-ons, including camera, film, and laptop computer. The time went by and it was time to board and he was nowhere around. I boarded the plane, carrying my carry-ons and his, and still there was no Dr. Glenn! I heard his name being paged as it was the last call, and then the doors closed and the airplane took off without Dr. Glenn! Oh, boy!

Well, I was in the air and heading for Missouri or somewhere for a layover and at the new destination I waited for Dr. Glenn. The time went on and I boarded my next flight for LAX. I was a bit concerned, as I did not have a cell phone, and I didn't have the contact phone numbers for anyone I was to meet up with at the end of my journey. On

this long flight, I found the in-flight phone and used my charge card to call MMI ([Medical Ministry International](#)) in Texas. MMI is the group sponsoring this Mindanao Mission, and I did get to speak to a real person, who let me know I was doing the right thing. They told me to continue on my journey and they would let my contact in Manila know to look out for me, as I might be traveling alone.

### *Arriving in Manila*

After a five- to six-hour layover at LAX, Dr. Glenn showed up at the very last minute to accompany me the rest of the way, leaving LAX on January 9th and arriving January 11th in Manila. (When you travel westward to the other side of the world, you lose a whole day.)

Dr. Allan Melicor, Project Director on the Mission, met us at the airport and drove us to Tropicana Apartment Hotel where we could rest and freshen up before flying out to the “bush” early the next morning, where we would be working. Allan took us across the street for a snack, since our rooms were not ready.



*Street vendor serving us some “taho”*

First we stopped outside a restaurant and had a cup of “taho” from a street vendor. Taho is a soy mixture with something called “sago” (little pearls) swirled in with it. Then we went in the restaurant and had a fish called “bangus” that was fried whole with the head still attached – including the eyeballs! This was served with garlic rice and a fried egg. We had coffee and calamansi juice, which is made from something that looks like little round limes, and tastes like limeade (almost). We also had fresh mangos purchased from a street vendor, and some papaya slices.

I took my first cold shower in the hotel room and a quick nap, while Dr. Glenn and Dr. Allan went to the airport to pick up other members of the team: Dr. Alison Froese (an anesthesiologist from Canada) and Helen Deyer (a retired nurse, also from Canada).

We then went from mall to mall in Manila looking for the book “Dream Weavers,” which is a beautiful coffee-table book on the folk art of the T’nalak, a beautifully woven fabric made by a particular tribe. Dr. Glenn

and Dr. Alison got several copies of this book and a videotape of the weaving process of this magnificent tapestry that is made in one of the villages. Then to bed to rest up for the journey to come.

A tip: Toilet paper in your pocket is important to have!!! None of the bathrooms in the mall had any, and they also don't have toilet seats or running water!

## *Flight to T'Boli*

### **Sunday, Jan. 12**

Up early in the morning (4am) to repack and head to the airport for the flight to a city called General Santos. Arrived at the airport in time to go to the club of breakfast (Mabuhay Lounge) and wait for three more team members to catch up with us.

Reading the Metro Manila paper: "Korondal City-15 rebels of MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) were killed and 17 wounded in a raging gun battle that started on Thursday and still heavy fire today." Dr. Glenn said that this is just 30 miles north of where we were getting ready to fly to. At this point we didn't have the guards, but that was to change when we were to arrive in South Cotabato.



*Our team with our new escorts*

After a smooth flight to General Santos, we were met with heavily armed guards—actual army escorts, maybe 12 that could be seen and many more providing undercover security for us. From here, we all loaded up in trucks and cars with our new escorts and traveled to T'Boli to settle in and set up for surgery.



*Bamboo house and rice field*

The trip was beautiful, lush, and green, with many rice fields, and most of the family dwellings (houses made with bamboo) had carabaos (water buffalo) working the fields.

We arrived at the compound and were met by Dr. Bing and her husband, Wani, to be guests

at their home. We also were met by Wilma Parel, who went by the nickname “Wing” as she was such a little petite thing, and Al, a circulator and anesthesia technician. Wing and Al were great and would be traveling with us on our further surgery venture to Malaybalay to work.

### *Patients Gather*

At T’Boli Evangelical Clinic and Hospital we found lots of patients lined up waiting to see if they could be scheduled for surgery. Many had traveled for days down from the mountains, knowing of our arrival and wanting help. Surgery is not done for these people unless MMI sends a surgical team to them and, according to Dr. Glenn, surgery occurs only once a year when he gets there with the team.

I’ve never seen so many goiter patients, and the enormous size these goiters were!!! We set up two small rooms for surgeries, one room with two OR tables side by side to do two cases at the same time right next to each other, and another small room with only one table.



*Wing (at right) and me. She’s standing on a ladder.*



*One of our goiter patients*



*Dr. Glenn with another goiter patient*

Sunday evening was spent with a celebration of our arrival, fellowship, and we watched the video about the “Dream Weavers.”

## *Getting Down to Work*

### **Monday, Jan 13**

Started the day off assisting Dr. Glenn in the first goiter of many. Surprisingly, this procedure only takes one to one-and-a-half hours to do (not what I was used to in the U.S.). These goiters are HUGE! Incision is made, the goiter is delivered, and the middle thyroid vein cut, and depending on how it is presented, the superior or inferior pole is transected, and then the other pole, and since the bleeding is controlled the goiter is then removed and the incision is closed.

As a first assistant, I did many closures, lots of ties, clamping and cutting, tissue handling, homeostasis, etc. I lost count of how many goiters were done on this first day of surgery, but we had three tables going at once and along with goiters, we did cleft palates, cleft lips, hydroceles, and hernias. These patients wake up with a smile on their faces and lots of “thank you” and hugs!



*Dr. Glenn and I finishing one of the goiters*



*This is a post-op goiter patient. As soon as she recovered from the anesthesia, she sang songs to us. She is a singer and a music teacher in one of the schools.*

### **Tuesday, Jan 14th**

Started the day with a large bilateral hydrocele with Dr. Glenn, then did a cleft palate repair with Dr. Fred Casino, a retired general surgeon from Akron, Ohio who has trained in plastic surgery to volunteer time on many missions with cleft palate and cleft lip repairs. I then worked with Dr. Alan Melicor on another hydrocelectomy (unilateral).

These hydroceles were also huge and to conserve on our limited supplies, only one suture was used for everything, including the closure.

The total procedures this day were: 5 hydroceles (2 bilateral), 2 cleft palates, 2 cleft lips, 5 thyroids, 1 submandibular mass, 1 lipoma from left ear, 1 D&C, 1 gum papilloma plus a sebaceous cyst from the face, and 2 other minor procedures.

## Wednesday, Jan 15

The roosters don't know what time it is . . . they crow all night long, every hour and every few minutes in between hours!

The clothesline behind where we were doing surgery stayed full with the disposable surgical gowns, gloves, masks, hats, laps and most everything we used, as they were hand washed and hung to dry. This process was done over and over till they completely fell apart. After they were dry, they were then folded and packed in paper wraps to be sterilized in a cooker atop burning coconut husks and steamed for reuse. The anesthesia circuits, suction tubes, tips were washed, packed and sterilized the same way. The bovie tips were just wiped down with alcohol before each use.



*Our "autoclave"*

## Visiting Lake Sebu

Lots more surgeries, but we stopped at lunch time and took the afternoon off to go to Lake Sebu (a two-hour drive north). The first two days of surgery we had done 33 cases, a few on this day, and a full schedule planned ahead for Thursday.

In the mountains around Lake Sebu, we went to see Lang Dulay, who is internationally known for her weaving, and Dr. Glenn and Dr. Alison purchased some of her original artwork.



*Marissa next to her grandmother (center) holding the T'Nalak tapestry.*

"T'Nalak" tapestries are souvenirs of the real T'Boli culture. One tapestry takes about a year to make and costs only \$30 U.S.

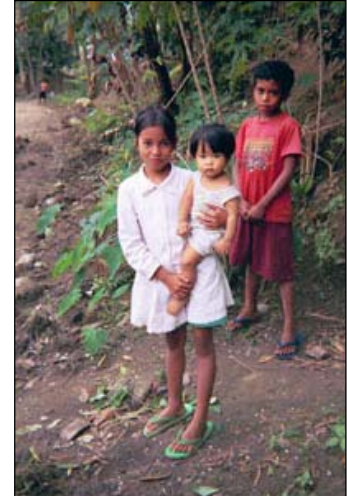
Lang's granddaughter Marissa worked at the clinic as a midwife, and she was the one to set up this special meeting for us.



*Tapestry weaving*



*Lake Sebu resort*



*Children on the road*

After our meeting with Lang Dulay, we went for a snack at a resort on Lake Sebu.

### **Thursday, Jan. 16**

Surgical cases today: 4 goiters, 1 cleft palate, 1 adult hernia, 1 pediatric hernia, 1 ventral hernia, 4 lipomas, and a couple of other minors.

### **Friday, Jan 17**

Surgical cases: 3 goiters, 1 ovarian cystectomy, 1 nephrectomy, 1 cleft lip, 1 cleft palate, 1 Inguinal hernia, 1 hydrocele, 1 radical mastectomy, and 4 lipomas.

Friday night was a big celebration. The main course of the meal was “lechon” which is a roasted young pig. In the course of whole trip we had four celebrations with a total of four lechons! It is a delicacy one local girl called “a cardiac delight” – all that greasy fat

waiting to slip inside your arteries – but ooh, so good and tasty! I did eat one of the crispy ears.



*Our first “lechon”*

After dinner we moved into a bigger room where the long-distance patients and their families slept and they sang native songs to us and gave us a memorable farewell ceremony. An older gentleman played for us on a two-string guitar called a “helung.” This is a sleek, beautiful instrument with a mellow, twangy sound.

The women dancing wore their native dresses called “Kegal Nesif.”



*Man playing helung*



*Women dancing*

Total surgeries for the week in T’Boli were: 58 major cases and 18 minor cases, making a total of 76.

## *Off to Malaybalay*

**Saturday, Jan. 18**

Went to Allah Valley Airport in Surallah, South Cotabato to fly in a light SIL Navajo plane. The airstrip was closed to everyone but us and we were to fly over central Mindanao, which we did. I was wearing the headsets and could hear the conversations between the pilot and the tower, and I heard the pilot tell someone that we were now flying over a MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) camp hidden in the foothills.



*Allah Valley Airport in Surallah, South Cotabato*



*Here I am with some of our armed guards*



*On the plane*



*Our pilot*

It took us 45 minutes flight time to reach Malaybalay City. We landed in Nasuli Airport, which is part of Valencia, 30 KM from Malaybalay. Nasuli is the retreat of the Summer Institute of Linguistics-Philippines (SIL), a nonprofit organization that researches and documents Philippine indigenous languages and promotes literacy and health among speakers of those languages.



*Scenes from SIL Camp, including the popular swimming hole*



When we landed in Nasuli, we rolled up the grass runway to see the red Cessna that had been Martin Branham's plane of the New Tribes Mission. Martin and his wife, Gracia, were the center of attention in June 2002, when the Philippine Army crossed the still-smoking camps of the Aaabu Sayeff group that had captured them and held them for ransom for over a year. In the firefight that resulted, Martin was shot and killed and Gracia was shot and wounded.

We arrived in Malaybalay to stay in the guesthouse for the week, got settled in and took a walk to the rain forest, which was along Kamalaon Park in Malaybalay. This was a beautiful forest with mountain streams, little bridges, and hiking trails.



*Scenes from the Malaybalay rain forest*

### **Sunday Jan 18**

Today we went on a trip to Mt. Kitanglad for a church service, after which we drove down into the banana plantation for another feast with "lechon," and 25 people were baptized in the mountain stream in the tropical forest. Alison and I went for a swim in the icy cold water, which reminded me of North Carolina mountain streams. We then drove back down the bumpy dirt roads. We passed several rubber tree forests where cups were placed beneath the scored bark of trees, collecting the oozing latex.

Some facts I wrote down that Dr. Glenn was talking about, which I want to share: In Africa, middle class people live on \$2.00 a month. Here in the Philippines, middle class people live on approximately \$20.00 a month. In Tanzania 80 cents is budgeted per capita per year in health and education. Also, 40 nations spend less than \$1.00 per capita per year in health and education.



*Outing to Mt. Kitanglad, with baptisms in a mountain stream.*

## *Working in Malaybalay City*

### **Monday Jan 19**

The day started with our whole group being requested for a council with the Mayor, Honorary Florence T. Flores Jr. , at Malaybalay City Hall. He wanted to meet each of us and offer thanks on behalf of the people in his region. We all received a key chain with his name printed on the back, and we had a photo shoot with him.



Surgeries today: Occlusion cyst on the scalp, 1 ovarian cyst, total prostatectomy and vesical stone, 1 breast mass, and 2 cleft palates.

### **Tuesday, Jan 21**

Surgeries today were 3 goiters (all done with a cervical block), 3 facial reconstructions (lip, from gunshot to the mouth) and a second-stage facial reconstruction, a few lumps and bumps, and a hemorrhoid and a hernia. It was a slow day, so when the afternoon came, I took another walk in the beautiful rain forest.

### **Wednesday, Jan. 22**

Today was a half-day of work with a couple of goiters, undecided testes, and a couple of cleft lips. We drove through the rain forest, and saw the Bukidnon Province's offices where the Governor resides and the location of the Provincial Hospital. We then went to the Monastery of the Transfiguration on a volcanic hilltop. It is a Benedictine Monastery and the Monks are self-sufficient, producing farm products, and the hand-processed "Monk's Blend" coffee.



*Scenes from the Monastery of the Transfiguration, Bukidnon Province*



*At a pineapple plantation*

On the way home we visited another pineapple plantation and ate till our hearts and stomachs were content! We had a big celebration with another “lechon” in the evening with more singing and dancing.



*Celebration with “lechon”*

## ***Surgeries in Malaybalay***

**Thursday, Jan. 23**

Surgeries today were: Colon resection (which was pretty much my case, under Dr. Glenn’s supervision, with hand sewing the anastomosis with Connell and Lembert stitches). We also had an emergency C-section, 1 thyroid, and a few other minors. An emergency came in with a young man who had just been in an accident and had a mid-shaft fracture of the femur, but we did not have the needed supplies and equipment to do this surgery, so he had to be transferred elsewhere.



*A baby girl!*



*Large bowel resection*

Total surgeries in Malaybalay were: 53 major and 18 minor. We also had 77 dental patients and pulled a total of 165 teeth!



*Standard OR shoes*



*Bovie*



*Line-up for tooth pulling*



*Facial reconstruction*



*Our Malaybalay team*



*Working with Dr. Ragan*



*Drs. Ragan and Bhaby*



*Assisting Dr. Ragan*

In the evening we had a farewell dinner with the hospital staff and said our good-bys as Dr. Glenn, Dr. Ragan (a general doctor/surgeon from Leyte) and I were to travel to another field , and the rest of our team would be flying home.

## *Travel and Rest*

### **Friday Jan 24**

We departed for the road trip to Cagayan de Oro to a resort on the ocean, where all the staff stayed overnight before their trip home except for Dr. Glenn, Dr. Ragan, and me. We stayed for about four hours to rest, shower, and get organized, then made our way down to the sea-going boat, "Our Lady of Good Voyage," for our overnight trip to Cebu City.



*Fishermen on the beach at the resort . . .*



*. . . and their kids*



*Dr. Glenn at the beachside resort*



*"Our Lady of Good Voyage"*

## *Arrival in Cebu City*

**Saturday, Jan. 25**

We arrived in Cebu City at dawn and headed to yet another boat, the “Ocean Jet 11” which took us to Leyte. This boat was very fast and it took only a couple of hours to get there. Leyte is where Dr. Ragan lived and worked.



*Early morning sunrise*



*Boat people begging for coins*

The boat took us to Hilangos, Leyte, where we were met at the dock by another local surgeon, Dr. Bhaby (she was a GYN doctor/surgeon in Leyte and delivered a lot of babies). We were then taken to Leyte Baptist Hospital. When we arrived, they had

welcome signs up for us proclaiming a warm welcome to Dr. Glenn Geelhoed and Ms Jennifer Curran. We settled in the guesthouse. Once again there was a big celebration feast with “lechon”!



*Ocean Jet II*



*Our welcome sign in Leyte*

## *Visiting a Deserted Island*

**Sunday, Jan. 26**

After a church service and lunch we all loaded into little “pump” boats and headed to a deserted island named Canigao. It was quite beautiful with crystal-clear water and a white, sandy coral beach.



*Dr. Glenn gives the “thumbs-up” as we depart*



*We land on a sandy beach*

Had a wonderful relaxing swim, collected some shells, explored a little bit, and had fresh fruit snacks, and then at sunset we all headed back. Heading back was not as smooth as it had been going there. The clouds came up and so did the wind, putting us on a long bouncy ride, with salt water sprays from the ocean’s five-foot swells.



*Enjoying the beach*



*Sunset – time to head back*

## *Performing Surgeries in Hilongus, Leyte*

### **Monday, Jan 27**

The surgeries for this day were: 2 thyroids, 1 thyroglossal duct cyst, 1 hysterectomy, and 1 vaginal prolapse with a huge cancerous mass protruding out involving the left ureter. This last case, Dr. Bhaby and I did and it took quite a few hours. I think we finished about 9:00pm.

### **Tuesday, Jan 28**

This was the last day in Hilongus, Leyte. We did some minor cases, including a young schoolgirl who had had a draining sinus fistula in her neck since birth. We also worked on a woman who had had a neck mass for three years, which was probably a lymphoma, and a three-year-old boy with an inguinal hernia.

## *Heading for the Long Journey Home*

### **Wednesday, Jan. 29**

Today we were to head out early for the long journey home, but we had an emergency appendectomy to take care of first. Then we loaded up and headed out.

We drove across Leyte and through the mountains in a lot of tropical rain. On the way to Tacloban, where we were going to be flying out, we stopped at a few historic sites. We drove by Imelda Marcos's large estate in Tolosa. We saw racks of drying abaca fibers from which many things are made, from the hemp of "Manila rope" to sandals, and baskets, and even the T'nalak weavings of the T'Boli people.



*Planting rice fields*



*Abaca fibers drying*

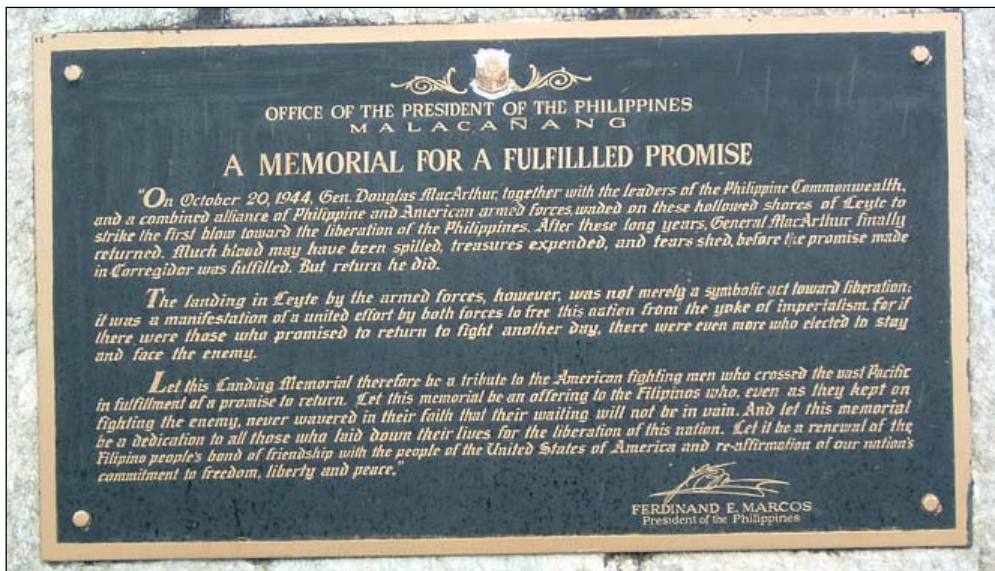


Coconut harvest



Bamboo home and rice field

We went to the small village of MacArthur, and then up Hill 120, a memorial park atop a hill of 120 steps, which is a renowned site of WW II. As Dr. Glenn has written, "This is where the Japanese watched the Americans under MacArthur land on the beach below at 10:00am on October 20th 1944. Only 42 minutes later, the 96th infantry had taken the hill and the Japanese on it in a very expensive battle that secured the raising of the U.S. Stars and Stripes for the first time since they had been hauled down on April 9th, 1942, when troops had retreated from Bataan above Manila Bay."



Scenes from MacArthur Memorial Park, Leyte



*Sculpture celebrating MacArthur's coming ashore on the island of Leyte in 1944, MacArthur Memorial Park, Leyte*

We made it to the airstrip on time for our flight to Manila, then back to the States, arriving home to Savannah, Georgia on Thursday, January 30, a day later even though it took two nights to get back. Traveling eastward, I made up for the day I had lost in going to the other side of the world.

A trip like this is a great opportunity for any NIFA student who wants the experience of working and helping others in poorer countries. It really makes you thankful for all the comforts you have back home. It teaches you not to take things for granted, and it makes you remember why you chose the exciting field of surgery to begin with. It is not easy in a third-world country, and you have to be flexible and able to adjust to foreign surroundings. It is hard work and you have to overcome a lot, but it is worth it!!! You can't help but fall in love with the people, especially when they hug you and genuinely tell you, "THANKS!"

I am deeply thankful to have had this opportunity through NIFA and their staff.

Jennifer Curran, CRNFA and Thankful NIFA Instructor!