CHAPTER 3

‘DEPLOYMENT’ IN GUAM
(MARCH–JULY 1944)

After having just about survived the wretched voyage, Guam appeared to me a fantastically beautiful island. This Micronesian island was first colonized by Spain (Magellan, the Portuguese navigator, sailing for the king of Spain, landed in 1521), and then by the United States in 1898. On 8 December 1941, a few hours after their attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, the Japanese invaded the island and faced little resistance. During the early few years of the war, the island was located far away from the battlefront, and only a few small inactive garrisons were stationed there. Towards the end of 1943, however, the Mariana Islands including Guam and Saipan in the north, were deemed significant strategic bases for the United States to carry out their final air assault on mainland Japan. The Japanese, for their part, tried to fortify them in great haste as bastions of their homeland security. I have now learnt that I had been appointed to be a part of this effort.1

We entered a port called Piti, north of the Apra Harbor on the central west coast of the island. Some local natives helped us unload the ships. The first order which we received was, ‘Watch out for air strikes at all times!’

I supervised the unloading. I was surprised to see that some of the cartons among every load of cargo brought down by a derrick, were damaged. Some food cans were missing from their boxes. There was often a hole in a straw bag of rice and our precious rice spilt out like waterfall as we unloaded these bags. These apparent
thefts were indicators of the low, deteriorating morale of hungry Japanese soldiers.

We spent the first night on the island at Police Inspector Tachibana’s lodging in Piti which also served as a police sub-station. The spacious premises with a large house and a large garden were reportedly requisitioned from a local person. Apart from the senior officers who stayed inside, we camped out in the garden at the foot of what appeared to be a betel palm tree about 33 feet (10 metres) tall. As we were suddenly transported from freezing Manchuria where the temperature was minus 20 degrees Celsius (subzero Fahrenheit), to this tropical island near the equator, our bodies were unable to adjust to the heat. As soon as we lay down, we sank into a deep sleep.

Next morning, some soldiers brought in some pale pumpkins which they had found somewhere. Likewise, we were unable to resist taking coconuts. All of us were desperately hungry for something fresh and untinned. In any event, we wanted to taste coconuts and drink their milk for the first time out of sheer curiosity. However, the palm trees were as tall as a telegraph pole. There were only thin footholds carved into the stems by natives. From among my section, those who were young and confident at tree climbing came forward and smoothly climbed up the trees and dropped fifteen to sixteen coconuts for us. Still, at first, we had no idea how to eat them. We asked an employee of a local Japanese company for help. We borrowed a local tribal machete, cut aslant a coconut’s lower green part, and split the hard shell of the kernel (copra) by inserting a blade and knocking it. I put my mouth to the crack, and poured the coconut milk into my mouth. It tasted like a soda pop which had gone flat.

We stayed in Piti for three days. After the unloading, our company walked to the east, and were put on guard duty along the coast east of Agana. In general, the north and the east coasts of the island were cliffs. The west coast, including Agana, was surrounded by coral reefs spreading outwards some 1.2 miles (2 km) from the shore. Then, the sea bed sinks steeply into the world’s deepest ocean trench. Consequently, the number of accessible harbours was limited. Also sharks were so frequently seen in the area that swimming was not permitted except at specific locations.