

GUAM CALLING





have been a state game warden, with the Texas Parks & Wildlife, for 26 years. My career was stationed in the extreme southern tip of the state, which includes the southern Gulf of Mexico Coast and the Rio Grande River. Currently, I am one of the full-time operators on our agency's Special Operations Division's Maritime Tactical Operations Group (MTOG). As the "Texas Navy," Texas Game Wardens are tasked with the important role of maintaining the state's maritime security. Our law enforcement division staffs a specialized unit comprised of trained, equipped, and tactically proficient game wardens known as the MTOG for maritime operations. MTOG exists to enhance game wardens' response capabilities during critical waterborne incidents or special maritime details that include port/homeland security, interdiction of narcotics and human trafficking, and tactical waterborne response.

Having the desire to instruct, I started adding layers to my skill set, and after receiving my basic instructor certificate and firearms instructor certificate, I started looking around for something in the maritime domain. In 2011, I sat through the first National Association of State Boating Law Administrator's (NASBLA) course in Texas. That particular course was the NASBLA tactical operator's course. Soon after completion, I was asked to become an instructor. I am now a lead instructor and national program manager for the NASBLA airboat operator's course.

Having taught all of the courses in our catalog throughout the US, there was one course, held in a special location, which had still eluded me. That location was on the island of Guam. For those of you not familiar with Guam, it is an unincorporated and organized territory of the United States in Micronesia in the western Pacific Ocean. It is the westernmost point (in terms of jurisdiction) and territory of the United States, along with the Northern Mariana Islands. The capital city of Guam is Hagåtña and the most populous city is Dededo. The inhabitants of Guam are called Guamanians, and they are American citizens by birth. Indigenous Guamanians are

the Chamorros, who are related to other Austronesian natives to the west in the Philippines and Taiwan.

The solicitation for a tactical operator's course on Guam, requiring five instructors, went out in June with the course dates in August. I quickly threw my name in the hat and was accepted.

Sooner than I could believe, I was on my way to Guam. I was amazed that after an 8 hour flight from Houston to Honolulu, we still had another 8 hour flight from Honolulu to Guam! If that doesn't give you an impression of just how big the Pacific Ocean is, I don't know what would.

As we approached the island, my anticipation grew. Prior to this trip, I had read every piece of information



I could get my hands on about Guam. I knew Guam's history, its customs, and major cities. I knew how the island was laid out in relation to roadways, cities, military bases and so on, and knew it is roughly 30 miles long averages about 8.5 miles wide. What fascinated me the most about Guam were two things; first was the history of the island, in relation to its Spanish conquest and World War II. The second thing that fascinated me were the stories I had heard from other instructors who had previously taught courses on Guam, about the friendliness and humbleness of the Guamanians.

To lessen the effect of jetlag, we arrived two days before the course began. To this day I still haven't been able to wrap my head around the whole what time is it in relation to Texas or even what day it was in relation to Texas. It was something like 14 or 16 hours in the past on the previous day, crazy! To give you some perspective, when we flew home (direct, no layover) we were in the air for over 15 hours and when we touched down in Houston it was two hours before we left on the same day. It gives me a headache to think about it!

Our first two days were spent exploring the island. Guam showed us

amazingly clear aquamarine water, light trade winds, daily rain showers in the afternoon (which cooled the air), and oppressive humidity (after the rain showers). Our first stop was to War in the Pacific National Monument; a multi-site park throughout the islands that included bomb holes in a shallow lagoon, Japanese pill boxes, the remains of Japanese and US aircraft and tanks, all along the beaches where the US Marines came ashore during the liberation of Guam.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the natural beauty of the island itself. The coast consisted of high precipices overlooking shallow lagoons with coral reefs that gave way to deep water. In fact the deepest water on earth; the

Marianas Trench which reaches depths of over 36,000 feet (that's over 7 miles deep)! The beaches were covered with snowy white sand so fine you could hardly hold it in your hands. Away from the coast were lush jungle covered

mountains and deep valleys that hid waterfalls and quaint villages. Guam is truly a paradise.

One of the most interesting sites on Guam is the cave of Sgt. Soichi Yokoi. Sgt. Yokoi was a Japanese soldier in the Imperial Japanese Army during WWII. He was among the last three Japanese holdouts to be found after the end of hostilities in 1945, discovered in the jungles of Guam in January of 1972, almost 28 years after U.S. forces had regained control of the island in 1944. Talk about dedication. His cave is nothing more than a hole in the ground covered with bamboo to hide the opening. On the evening of January 24th 1972, Yokoi was discovered in the jungle by a grandfather and grandson duo checking their shrimp traps along a small river. The two men had assumed Yokoi was a villager from Talofof, but then Yokoi attacked them. They managed to subdue him and carried him out of the jungle with minor bruising. "It is with much embarrassment that I return," he said upon his return to Japan. The remark quickly became a popular saying in Japan. Despite hiding for twenty-eight years in an underground jungle cave, he had known since 1952 that World War II

had ended. He feared coming out of hiding, explaining, “We Japanese soldiers were told to prefer death to the disgrace of getting captured alive.”

We began our course on a Monday and completed it on Friday. The course was delivered to the Guam Port Police, NOAA Agents, The Northern Marianas Islands Port Authority Police and the Guam Customs Service. These guys were all excellent officers and made the course go smoothly because of their willingness to learn and excitement for the course.

I have traveled a great deal in my almost 51 years and I have yet to encounter a people so openly giving and genuinely humble as the Guamanians. First off, they absolutely love America and Americans. There’s no doubt this stems from WWII and the fact that the US Marines liberated the island from the Japanese who were extremely brutal and oppressive towards the Guamanians. Some estimates claim the Japanese wiped out one-third of the islands population during their occupation.



One day, we walked into a small convenience store searching for something to drink. Now this was a tiny little store in a small village in the interior of the island. It took all of 5 seconds for the proprietor, a large lady with a friendly smile, to figure out we weren’t exactly “from these parts”. It took another 2 minutes before she had called her husband from the back of the store to meet us and another 2 minutes after that before we had been invited to a BBQ in our honor at their house where they would invite the entire village. That was not an exaggeration. It was the weirdest thing to be made to feel like we were so special, and for no other



reason than we were cops from America! This friendliness was not an isolated incident. It was real and palpable everywhere we

went, to include the students who threw a going away bash for us to rival any party I had ever been to. The food was all local and unique to Guam: BBQ Parrot Fish, stewed Sambar venison with coconut milk, fresh Conch Ceviche, I can go on but I’m making myself hungry. The party was highlighted by an invocation and prayer by a local sha-

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man who was also one of our students. One of three official island Shaman, it was intense and mesmerizing, a true honor. He then presented us all with Conch Shell Horns

I want to take a moment and talk about NASBLA and the Boat Operations and Training Program (BOAT) to which I personally owe much. It has been one of the greatest honors of my career to be associated with such a professional and dedicated group of people. I really can't say enough about the other instructors and program leaders that I have had the privilege to work with throughout the last 5 years. I have gained several mentors along the way from which I have learned much. I have gained lifelong friendships along the way from instructors and students alike. I have grown in my career and personal life because of the relationships I have made along the way through NASBLA. "From everyone who

has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" Luke 12:48. A verse I take personally when it comes to giving back in the way of training. I've always said that it doesn't do us any good to go out and get great training and not pass it along to our brothers and sisters in the field. This is especially true when you're in a special operations team. We take pride in passing along knowledge and making our partners better.

Through the BOAT Program NASBLA establishes a U.S. Coast Guard recognized national standard for the training, qualification, credentialing and typing of marine law enforcement and emergency first responders. Adoption and implementation of the program provides a true national standard for maritime interoperability at all government levels. Standardization ensures maritime agencies can interact together and will bolster their ability to act as force mul-



tipliers nationwide. Adapted from the U.S. Coast Guard's Boat Forces training framework, the BOAT Program is comprised of vital maritime training and management components, including: System Policy, the Training and Qualification Process, Boat Crew Qualifications Tasks, Program Manager Roles and Responsibilities, Boat Crew Currency Maintenance, and Documentation Requirements.

NASBLA offers more than a dozen courses from Basic Crew Member to Pursuit and Stop to provide a variety of training options for marine law enforcement officers and first responders. The NASBLA Course Catalog can be found at; new courses are being developed on a regular basis to keep with the demand of changing environments, equipment and threats.

As a bonus, one of the other instructors and I had planned a side trip on the way home to Tokyo. We figured we were half way around the planet so why not take advantage of the situation. We spent four additional days exploring Tokyo and I accomplished a personal bucket list item. Being a lifelong baseball fanatic I always wanted to attend a Nippon Professional Baseball game. I can check that one off this list. The Hanshin Tigers vs. The Yokohama DeNA Baystars was a hoot. More college football atmosphere than Pro Baseball, but a lot of fun none the less.

It was a great trip with great people. I learned a lot from the Guamanians and how they view life. I would go back in a heartbeat and look forward to my next trip as the "Local Expert", as we always send an instructor who has gone before. That's a hint to my NASBLA bosses who may read this...Send Me!👊

*By Texas Game Warden
Will Plumas*