

Wash

Only a Bookkeeper

A Biography of
Washington Z. SyCip



By Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr.

Wash

Wash

Only a Bookkeeper

A Biography of
Washington Z. SyCip

By
Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr.

The SGV Foundation and the
AIM Scientific Research Foundation
Co-publishers

Co-published June 2009
by the SGV Foundation, Inc and the
AIM Scientific Research Foundation, Inc.

Copyright 2009 by SGV Foundation, Inc.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written
permission except in the case of brief quotations
embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Book design by the Marketing and Communications Group, SGV & Co.

The National Library of the Philippines CIP Data

Recommended entry:

ISBN

*All photos are from the personal collection of W. SyCip and family, the archives of
SGV & Co., and the Asian Institute of Management.*

To Anna SyCip



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Prologue	ix
Preface	xi
<i>Part One</i> Passenger on a Ship.....	
<i>Part Two</i> To Stay and To Serve	
<i>Part Three</i> Building Up the Firm	
<i>Part Four</i> Family and Friends.....	
<i>Part: Five</i> The Asian Dream	
<i>Part Six</i> Beyond Retirement	
<i>Postscript</i> The SyCip Legacy	
Appendix	
Index	

FOREWORD

While SGV & Co. celebrates this year its 63rd anniversary as a professional services firm, its story actually began 88 years ago on the 30th day of June 1921, in the year of the metal rooster, with the auspicious birth of a baby boy named Washington SyCip. The boy with a strange name would grow up a wunderkind, skipping grade levels and excelling in all his subjects from elementary to graduate school. His precociousness did not dissipate after his formal schooling – and by all indications – never will. But by the time he established W. SyCip & Co. in 1946, he had assumed another persona – that of a visionary.

For us in SGV, Wash SyCip – or more aptly, WS to us – is any or all of the following: father figure, school principal, mentor, conscience, critic, friend, and standard of integrity. It is very difficult to separate WS from SGV, mainly because he created and nurtured the Firm and influenced over 30,000 professionals who have, at some point in their careers, been connected to his legacy. When he retired from SGV at age 75 in 1996, we suddenly felt the enormity of the responsibility that he had assumed for 50 years.

However, we quickly realized that, true to form, WS had ascertained that a new generation was prepared to take over and lead SGV to the 21st century. He knew that the rules of business were shifting, and while he had laid very solid foundations, it was time to hand over the reins to younger, more technologically inclined and globally attuned professionals.

We rose to the challenges of the new millennium with confidence because we knew that WS had taught us well. In our darkest moments, we would ask ourselves, “What would WS say? What would he do? What would he not do?” Often, the introspection would give us the answer but on rare occasions, we would have to literally seek out his counsel – as would several companies and organizations that

seized upon his independence once he retired. And always, like a wise owl that he is, he would not dish out the answer outright but would draw it out from us. In the end, the decision or course of action would be ours alone and WS would just sit back in his easy chair and nod his head.

This is a privilege that very few people have had – to be counseled by WS. His wisdom is sought after by global and regional businessmen, politicians, civil societies, educators and even the religious. His knowledge is expansive and he continues to be curious about anything and everything that is new. He is always on the lookout for what is good in the Filipino, be it a talent, a product, a song or a dream. Because WS is all this, there was unanimity in the clamor for him to finally sit down with an author and narrate his lifework so that others may learn from it.

With the AIM Scientific Research Foundation, the SGV Foundation in 2006 embarked on its most ambitious publication project to date – this biography of SGV's progenitor. It was a three-year labor of love, trust and respect. At some point we had to coax WS to stop remembering facts and stories because we had to end it so that it can actually be published. But maybe he is, again, right in that there is still no final chapter to write; that he has not stopped envisioning possibilities. Expect, then, a sequel because Wash SyCip will definitely want to have the last word.

David L. Balangue
Chairman and President
Board of Trustees
SGV Foundation



PROLOGUE

For a very long time, the prevailing sentiment among business leaders and Wash's friends was that it would be important to have a biography of Wash written. They believed it vital to document his significant impact on the Philippines' economic development throughout the past five decades. Unfortunately, every time the idea was brought up to Wash's attention, he invariably politely declined it.

At a breakfast meeting about three years ago, sometime after Wash's 84th birthday, another discussion with some close friends of Wash was organized. Ramon del Rosario Jr., Bobby de Ocampo, Roy Navarro, Joey Cuisia, Dave Balangue, Marlu Balmaceda, and I all agreed it was time to begin writing the book. Wash was invited to the meeting, and he finally agreed to have his biography written on one condition—that he would have the last say on what would be included in the book.

Together with SGV, the Asian Institute of Management searched for someone Wash would feel comfortable working with to write the biography. We selected Butch Dalisay, a columnist, University of the Philippines full professor, writer, publisher, and professional editor. Wash then began to tell his stories, most of which are narrated in this book. For such a long, eventful, and still active life, Dalisay patterned this book on a chronological framework, broken up by occasional flashbacks and flash-forwards as the narrative required.

AIM is one of the institutions Wash built up. Since AIM's inception in 1968, Wash has been its major guiding force. He devoted his time and resources to build the Institute, and continues to help enhance its capability and reputation as part of his lifelong commitment to develop socially responsible managers and leaders.

Wash, Only a Bookkeeper is a fine collection of Wash's various experiences. We hope that the stories will inspire readers to emulate his love for country, professional integrity, and dedication to uplifting the lives of every Filipino.

Felipe B. Alfonso

Vice Chairman

Asian Institute of Management

and the AIM Scientific Research Foundation



PREFACE

One of my earliest memories dates back to my childhood years in Shanghai where I was brought as a toddler and cared for by my unmarried aunts. I remember the garden of the family residence where huge, ceramic urns sat and when I stood on my toes to look into them, I would see fishes swimming around and around those urns! What a treat that was for a three-year old boy who had no idea where the next 85 years would take him.

Needless to say, it has been a long, exciting and pleasurable journey and this book will try to bring you along that journey. But before you turn to the first page of my story, I wish to thank some people who have made it possible for me to traverse the many twists and turns along the road.

First of all, I am grateful to my family – to my parents, brothers and sisters who have all gone but whose presence is still very much alive in the values that I continue to practice. I am very much indebted to my wife, Anna, and it is to her that I dedicate not only this book but my lifework. She raised our children almost single-handedly while I focused on solving the problems of other people. My children – Vicky, George and Robert – with their respective families continue to be my inspiration and comfort. Spending time with my grandchildren keeps me updated on what young people are interested in and which refreshes my outlook on life.

Secondly, I am thankful to all the past and present partners of SGV & Co. who continue to uphold the principles upon which I built the first truly Filipino professional services firm. While the Firm is constantly challenged by the changing times, I know that the partners and staff will always be guided by a work ethic that is centered on excellence and professional and personal integrity.

Thirdly, I would like to express my appreciation to the Asian Institute of Management and the AIM Scientific Research Foundation for believing in this project and working closely with the SGV Foundation on its completion. Fil Alfonso's persistence has paid off and I thank him, the Board of Governors, the faculty, and many donors for their dedication and generosity to AIM. I also wish to thank Joey Cuisia and his wife, Vicky, for their friendship and for his steadfast leadership in guiding the school's growth and future.

Fourthly, I am indebted to my friends who have been by me in the past years and who have shared in my dreams of nation building. The late Jobo Fernandez, Monching del Rosario, Bert Villanueva and Charlie Palanca were great men of vision. My boyhood friend, Fred Velayo, has been a constant companion since we were five years old. I am grateful to the families who placed their confidence in this bookkeeper and SGV for so many years like the Lopezes, Ayalas, Sys, Tys, del Rosarios, Gokongweis, Aboitizes, Gotianuns, Tans, Cosetengs, Sorianos, Cojuangcos, Kuoks, Delgados, Yuchengcos, Uytengsus, Yangs, Chiongs, Roxases and numerous others. From them I also learned much – that the country is more important than the ups and downs of domestic politics or international finance.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the people who make things happen for me. On top of that list is my loyal and dedicated assistant Sylvia Sanchez who has known the meaning of 24/7 even before it was coined. She rose to the standards set forth by her predecessor, Tessie Lagman, who ran my office seamlessly for 25 years. Then there is Quina Jamias whose talent in managing buildings and finances allows me to continue my other pursuits without having to worry about making a living.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the masterful writing of this book's author, Butch Dalisay and his assistant researcher, Migs Villanueva, who both took on the daunting task of listening to me, my family and friends for hours on end. And I appreciate the work of Marlu Balmaceda in coordinating this project from its inception to publication.

Two years ago, a park in Makati City was named after me. It was a much-appreciated gift from the Ayala family through Ayala Land, the Makati Commercial Estate Association, the City of Makati, Barangay San Lorenzo and SGV & Co. As you stroll along the lush greenery sprinkled with choice sculptures donated by renowned artist Impy Pilapil, you will eventually be led to a pond where hundreds of koi coexist with a paddling of boisterous ducks. There are also some huge earthen urns close to the gateways, similar to the ones in our family garden in old Shanghai. When the park was first opened on a rainy August day in 2007, I stooped down and looked into those urns, just like I did when I was a little boy. And to my joy, I saw a school of little fish swimming in them, around and around.

It is true, then, what a Chinese philosopher said a long time ago:

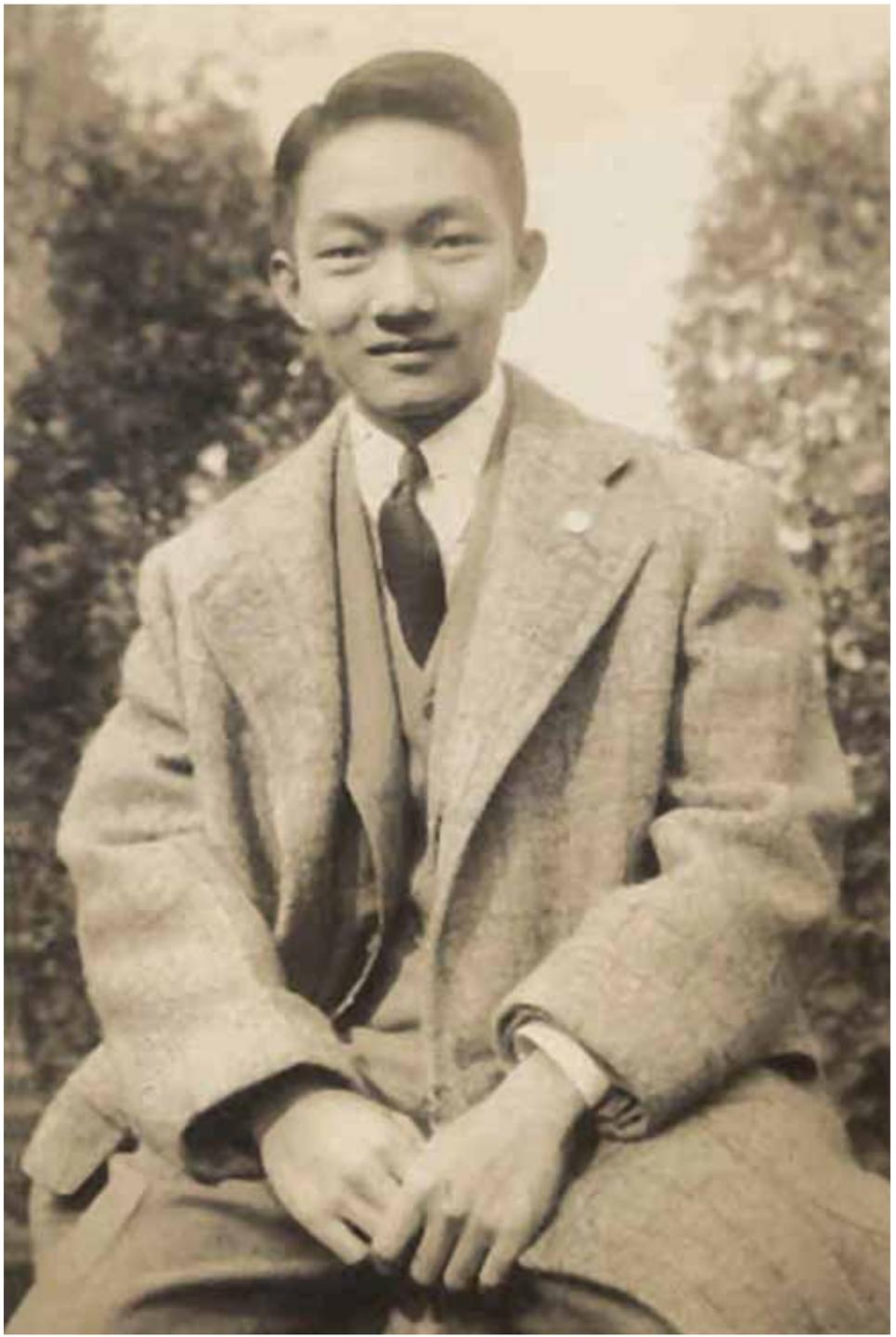
*There are many paths to the top of the mountain,
but the view is always the same.*

My life's journey continues to be blessed with rich experiences, unique opportunities and inspiring people. It is my hope that you will pick up a lesson or two from the memories of a bookkeeper.



Wash SyCip
19 May 2009





Wash SyCip as a graduate student in Columbia University, New York



PART ONE

PASSENGER ON A SHIP

To the small, wiry man on deck, the city across the water would have been barely recognizable. The smoke of war had cleared—a few months had passed since the last shot had been fired in a bloody campaign to drive out the invaders—but much of the rubble remained; indeed the city itself was a mound of rubble, many of its old majestic landmarks gone up in dust and smoke.

In the city's oldest section, within the stone walls of Intramuros, an entire procession of churches—the Manila Cathedral, Lourdes, Santo Domingo, San Francisco, San Ignacio—had crumbled to the ground; only San Agustin remained. Of the city's many universities and colleges, only two colleges—Letran and Sta. Rosa—withstood the bombs and the artillery. The City Hall, the Post Office building, and the Metropolitan Theater were all vacant hulks, their bone-white shells pockmarked in thousands of places by sustained bombardment between February and March 1945.

The man on board the Navy ship was too far to see these details for himself, but the strange concavity of what had been the metropolitan skyline, the impression of a body supine and overrun by tubercular rot, and the brooding silence that waited across the bay would have encouraged his worst fears.

The last time he had seen this city, more than six years earlier, it had been the Far East's liveliest port, and looking over his shoulder, on the ocean liner that would take him to Hong Kong and then to America, he would have, in the gathering dusk, seen and remembered Manila as a ribbon of sparkling lights, throbbing with trombones

and saxophones, belching from a surfeit of good food and easy liquor, puffing Chesterfields and whistling coolly in the tropic dark.

Now he was returning in the afternoon, when the bay typically turns leaden, the blinding clarity of morning replaced by a dirty, vaporous film. His ship lay at anchor, unable to dock just yet because the city's longshoremen had inexplicably chosen this moment—this day! this ship!—to go on strike, but its engines would have been running at some level to keep its officers and refrigerators cool while temperatures and tempers rose, and its fumes, however faint, would have contributed to the general pallor of the day.

This ship was biding time in a virtual graveyard. Months earlier, a US Army soldier named Bob Armstrong had taken a similar ship from San Francisco and had kept a diary of the voyage, which ended with this entry: “3/24 Arrival Manila Bay we are told there are 300 ships sunk in the harbor of which we could see many some just the masts and stacks you can see the city and much of it is burned.”

And yet, for all these losses, the ravaged landscape was the least of the young man's worries. The city that waited for him was steeped in death; the liberation of Manila had exacted the lives of more than 1,000 Americans, 16,000 Japanese, and 100,000 Filipinos, these latter victims ruthlessly massacred by the retreating defenders. They could have included the young man's relatives; at one point he had believed that his father had been executed. It wasn't true, this he now knew, but the euphoria of learning that his father had been spared would have since been replaced by the gnawing impatience to rejoin his family, to squeeze their bony arms with his own small but steady hands, to recover the lost years, and then to rebuild his future.

A banker's son

The man's name was Washington Z. SyCip. He was 24, short and slight of build but toughened by two years of military service in India. His ship—half laden with Asian civilians coming home, and half with soldiers on a fresh tour of duty—had come from San Francisco. SyCip himself had been on a much longer, roundabout voyage that had taken him from India to Europe through the Suez Canal, and then to New York, before boarding this transport on the West Coast. In his luggage was a box of

golf balls he had picked up in New York for his father, an avid golfer. He prayed that the old man, Albino, would be well enough to use them.

But first he needed to get off the ship, fast. It was extremely frustrating to have come this far, after so long, only to be stalled by a strike in one's home port, within sight of land. "Wash"—as SyCip was called by all his friends—would have paced to and fro on that deck, surveying the fractured landscape across the water in search of anything familiar. His father had been a prominent banker, and his family had been well off, living with relatives in a compound in Sta. Mesa. He was a middle child, between two brothers and two sisters, and while he knew they had survived the brutal war, he had no idea how they looked at this moment, how much had changed in the short span of six years, since he had left on another ship for more schooling in America. That was almost another man then, but this was now almost another country—battered, yes, but also eager to get back on its feet, as the sound of cranes, jackhammers, and traffic would have conveyed to new arrivals.

Luckily for Wash, a friend of his had known he was coming, and had made arrangements to pick him up shipside. Lt. Cmdr. Ed Brunstead, US Navy, had met Wash in New York before the war, where he was studying with Wash at Columbia. They had a mutual friend named Frances Cornwall, who was also doing her PhD in Economics. The war broke up these friendships—but now, in his capacity as a naval officer whose own ship was fortuitously in Manila when Wash's arrived, Brunstead had a chance to do his friend a tremendous favor. Soon enough, a captain's gig—a small boat used by ships as a water taxi and reserved for the captain and his officers—pulled up alongside the transport; Wash heard his name called, a familiar face emerged in the haze, and after a flurry of handshakes and embraces, the gig pulled back out into the water, bearing its solitary passenger to meet his family—and, little did anyone realize at that moment, his destiny.

The person Wash was most anxious to see again was his father, Don Albino, an accomplished and exemplary businessman whom Wash looked up to, and whose personal standards would help define his own. "If there was one person who influenced me more it was my father, because my mother died when I was very young," Wash would later say.



Albino SyCip and Helen Bau on their wedding day in Shanghai.



The SyCip Family

*Above: Paz, Elizabeth, Helen, Wash,
Albino, Alex and David*

*Left: Seated in front are Wash and David;
Helen with Elizabeth and Albino with Alex*

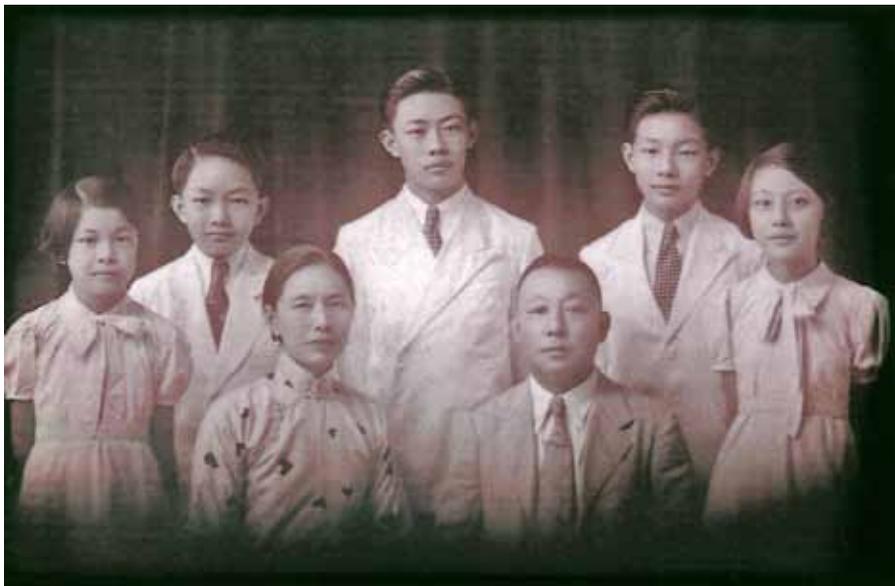


The SyCip Family

Albino and Helen SyCip with their children. Standing are Paz, Alex, David and Elizabeth. Seated in front is Wash.



*Paz, Wash, David, Alex and Elizabeth with their parents
Albino and Helen SyCip*



The SyCip boys – Alex, David and Wash – in their grandfather's house in Shanghai with their aunt who took care of them (left), grandmother (middle) and mother (right).



Growing up in Shanghai. Wash as a toddler (photo above) and a young boy (right).





*Don Albino SyCip at his desk in his
China Bank office.*



Helen Bau SyCip



Wash (seated, front row center) on an excursion to Montalban, Rizal with his physics class at the V. Mapa High School.



Wash with high school classmates.

Albino Z. SyCip was born in the Philippines in 1887; like many other Chinese immigrants, his own father had come over from Fujian province in the late 19th century. Wash never met this grandfather; he believes that one time the family might have been in Cagayan Valley before it moved to Manila, because of the presence of relatives there.

Albino SyCip had thought about studying medicine, but when he saw his first cadaver, he quickly changed his mind, and decided to take up law instead. He clearly had the brains for it, becoming the first Filipino-Chinese to top the bar examination in 1913.

A Dr. Lyons of the Methodist Church then arranged for Albino to go to the US to finish his high school and study law at the University of Michigan. He excelled further in Ann Arbor, joining the staff of the prestigious *Michigan Law Review* and becoming fast friends with a classmate named George Humphrey, who would later become President Eisenhower's Secretary of the Treasury. In 1955, Michigan would accord Albino an honorary doctorate in law. Albino returned to the Philippines to practice, joining the law firm of Feria and LaO.

On yet another voyage to Manila, Albino had met a young woman named Helen Bau, whose family had roots in Shanghai, and who had also gone to the US to study music at Oberlin College in Ohio. She was Presbyterian and he was a Methodist, and both came from Chinese families, but unions between Fujianese and Shanghainese in those days were quite rare; even their dialects were different, and the two communicated in the common language they knew, English. Nevertheless a romance blossomed—in English—and the couple married in Shanghai. Helen would later learn to speak some Fujianese, and their children would be exposed to both dialects as well as English.

Soon Albino was asked to become one of the incorporators of what would become China Bank—the first commercial bank in the Philippines owned by Filipino-Chinese. On August 16, 1920, China Bank opened for business in Binondo, capitalized at P10 million, with Dee C. Chuan and Albino SyCip as two of the leading incorporators. With his full attention now demanded by banking, Albino dropped his law practice—at least until he was asked by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to take up a case involving the controversial Bookkeeping Act, which required Filipino businessmen to keep their accounts in English or Spanish, to the detriment of the Chinese whose

knowledge of either language was inadequate. As it happened, SyCip lost the case in the Philippine Supreme Court. But as the Philippines was still a colony then, he had one more recourse, which was an appeal before the US Supreme Court.

And so, in 1921, Albino SyCip found himself arguing and winning his case in Washington, DC. Here he got news, presumably by cable, of his wife Helen's giving birth to their third son on June 30 ("at exactly the end of the semi-annual period," his brother Alex would later quip, adverting to Wash's profession). He had named his two other children, both boys, after a king and an emperor: David and Alexander. David was the oldest of the SyCip children, born in October of 1917; Alex was born December 1919; the sisters Paz and Elizabeth came after.

But whether it was the elation of his judicial victory or the majesty of the American capital's statuary that inspired him, or both, Albino decided to commemorate that visit by naming his new son "Washington." "Up to now Wash has semi-annual recurring bad dreams about what might have happened if the old man had been in Buffalo, Walla Walla, or Vladivostok," the impish Alex would say.

Boyhood in Shanghai

Very early in his boyhood, Wash was sent to stay with his grandmother in Shanghai. The Baus were very nicely positioned in Shanghai, with Helen's father having founded a firm reputed to be Asia's largest publishing company at that time, the Chinese Commercial Press. Helen's mother and sisters wanted a boy to play with and take care of, and the new baby suited the bill perfectly. Even as a young boy, Wash was smooth-skinned and chubby. Much to his embarrassment, "his lady school teachers could not resist pinching his cheeks," Alex would recall. Helen, who often commuted between Shanghai and Manila, took Wash along; he would stay there until he was around six years old and ready to go to school.

The Shanghai of the mid-1920s was hardly a vacationer's paradise. It was a veritable battleground between and among the foreign powers that had carved out their spheres of influence in China, the Chinese Nationalists and Communists jockeying for power, and various warlords engaged in their own vendettas. The Communist Party of China had been established in Shanghai in 1921, but the Communists now faced stiff resistance from Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek. A Communist-led strike

was seized upon by Chiang as an opportunity to decapitate his enemies. An account relates that “With the help of Shanghai’s underworld leaders and with financial backing from Shanghai bankers and foreigners, Chiang armed hundreds of gangsters, dressed them in Kuomintang uniforms, and launched a surprise attack overnight on the workers’ militia. About 5,000 Shanghai Communists were killed. Massacres of Communists and various anti-Chiang factions followed in other Chinese cities.”

Wash’s grandfather, a devout Presbyterian, had started his company in 1897, and by the time Wash arrived it had grown considerably. “He was clearly very prosperous by the time,” Wash says, “because I remember that the house had a Western sitting room and a Chinese sitting room. And I guess he was wealthy enough to be kidnapped.”

Indeed, Wash’s grandfather became the target of a kidnapping attempt. He had a car, a Buick—at that time a prestige marque—and it was a touring car, with a canvas roof and low doors all around. The design saved the old man’s life, or at least his freedom. Once, he was kidnapped in his car while he was leaving his house, and as they drove over a bridge, Mr. Bau heard a voice urging him to jump, and he did, landing in the water and being picked up by a boatman. But the jump broke something inside him; they say it weakened his heart, and it was of a heart attack that he would die some years later.

But he was still alive when Wash was there, and Grandfather Bau took the rosy-cheeked boy around in his Buick to the printing press, possibly racing the electric trolley cars that ran shoulder to shoulder on Jiujiang Road or driving down the Bund in the towering shadow of the wedding-cake-like Customs House. It was a divided city in more ways than one. One observer, the reformer Rewi Alley, saw this “Shanghai of two halves” created by foreign conquest and by the crush of native poverty: “On one side it was a foreign-run, international metropolis, affluent, gay, rich, steaming with the sound of jazz and the last opium-dazed colonial cocktails. On the other, utter destitution and want, child labor, and appalling living conditions for the majority of its inhabitants.”

Much later in his own life, the boy would return to these realities, and witness China’s rise to global power. In 2000, Washington SyCip would revisit the plant; it had long been taken over by the Communist Party. Wash had come as the head of the Asian Advisory Board of the New York Stock Exchange, and he met China’s premier, Jiang Zemin,

at the Great Hall. Wash was introduced to him as the direct grandson of the founder of one of China's biggest firms. Wash's connections with Shanghai would endure; he speaks some Shanghainese, and expresses a preference for Shanghainese food.

The SyCips in Sta. Mesa

He was returned to Manila at the age of six. Although David and Alexander had also vacationed in Shanghai with their mother, neither had stayed there as long as Wash did, and they called Wash a "foreigner" upon his return. This provoked a few fights, but soon the youngest boy fell in with his elders, and their relationship improved and stayed good for life, despite the occasional rivalry and ribbing. (Wash would later conclude that one reason for the brothers to have remained on such good terms was the absence of any business relationship between them, minimizing opportunities for conflict.)

The three brothers all went to public schools in Manila—first to Padre Burgos Elementary School in Sta. Mesa, and then to Victorino Mapa High School in nearby Mendiola.

Sta. Mesa then was still largely open space; not too long before Wash was born, American soldiers played baseball there; steeped in history, Hacienda Sta. Mesa was where a young Andres Bonifacio worked as a warehouseman in a tile factory, and where he learned to read; one of the books he read was Rizal's novel *El Filibusterismo*, which had Simoun planning to attack Manila through Sta. Mesa, then on its fringe.

The SyCip compound occupied a whole block with a long driveway. One end, the entry, was on Sta. Mesa, and the other, the exit, was on Valenzuela. Trees shaded the compound—Wash remembers a large rubber tree, and a tamarind tree from which they picked fruit. The houses were two-storey wooden structures, with the ground space holding the garage and the servants' quarters.

The first house in the compound belonged to Albino's brother Alfonso and the next to Eusebio. It was at Eusebio SyCip's house that Quintin Paredes stayed after the war. "The houses were very comfortable, but I wouldn't say they were palatial," Wash recalls. "My uncle Alfonso was the head of the chamber of commerce, and had a trading firm that was sometimes successful, sometimes not."

The place had no air-conditioning then, but Wash remembers that it was cool and well ventilated because the walls that divided the rooms did not go all the way up to the ceiling. He and his brothers shared one long room.

A photograph from the late '40s or early '50s could be all that remains today to suggest how that house looked, and the kind of people it hosted and sheltered. The picture is a group portrait of the SyCips and the Zuelligs, The Zuelligs were a Swiss family whose patriarch, Frederick Eduard Zuellig, had come over to Manila in 1901 and had built up a major trading firm; Frederick was a good friend of Albino's, and his son Stephen was in turn a friend of Wash's. Though not much of the interior is visible in the picture, the living room where the picture was taken looks fairly large, with carved wood in the cornices.

Their neighbors included Simplicio del Rosario, a judge and a signatory to the Malolos Constitution, whose family would hide the SyCips when Albino was arrested by the Japanese during the war. Sergio Osmeña lived across the street; Albino was a good friend of the future president, and Albino would teach Esperanza Osmeña some exercises, being a health buff.

P. Burgos Elementary and Mapa High may not have been the most obvious choices for the children of the Filipino elite—and given their father's position, the SyCip boys would certainly have belonged to this category—but Albino was intent on impressing upon his sons the need to lead modest, unpretentious lives. "We're all going to be living here, we should get to know the people here," Albino told his sons. The boys walked to school or took public transport, despite the fact that their father owned a car. It was also a time when the public schools were still on a par with their private counterparts as far as the quality of instruction was concerned. V. Mapa (opened in 1923 as the Manila East High School), for example, would produce such luminaries as the writer Nick Joaquin and Chief Justice Artemio Panganiban. The high school had quite a few American schoolteachers on its staff—Wash remembers the indefatigable Mrs. Sarah England—and Wash learned his English there from Miss Orata, a lady from Arizona.

The boys knew some Tagalog, but nearly everything was conducted in English, and they learned it well. Albino himself had learned English from the Thomasites, and barely spoke Tagalog; much later in life, in his mid-70s, Albino would remedy this



The SyCips spent summers at a mountain resort home owned by their Grandfather Bau. Photo shows Wash's uncles in the front row. On the porch are (from left) his mother, grandmother and aunt.



The interior and exterior of the Bau mountain resort home.



A very young Wash with his baby sister Paz.

by hiring a tutor to teach him Tagalog, along with his senior executives, but only he persisted. Albino also spoke Spanish fluently, a language which served him in good stead as a lawyer, as cases then could be argued in either English or Spanish. But English was clearly the language of the future, and Albino made sure his sons were immersed in it. In the afternoons, a tutor came to teach the children Chinese, but that also met with little success. None of the children developed any kind of fluency in Mandarin.

Of God and golf

Helen Bau, their mother, also came from a well-off, progressive family. Few Chinese families then sent their children to study in America, but the Baus had no qualms letting their eldest daughter Helen go off to Oberlin in Ohio, a college known for its music department. A sister would later marry someone with a Ph.D. in chemistry from Yale, and the husband became president of Nanjing University, helping that city become a center for the international chemical industry.

When Helen joined Albino in Manila, she quickly became a leader among women in the ethnic Chinese community, her husband being a prominent lawyer and banker. While she never got to use her music skills professionally, Helen sought to teach her children how to play the piano, without too much success. The youngest, Paz, was the only one involved with music throughout her life.

The elder SyCips were devout Christians, and the Bible was read at home every evening. Helen took the children to church. But Albino had his own ideas about these obligations, manifesting a liberal streak that the children would inherit. Wash explains: “My father’s philosophy was always that, ‘On Sundays, it’s better to be at the golf course thinking of God, than to be at church and thinking of golf.’ So he would go to church only when there was something special. He believed much more in living a Christian life. He gave away hundreds of rulers on which had been printed the Golden Rule: ‘Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.’ And he would give these to patrons and clients of the bank.”

It was a close family, one that got together for dinner as often as it could—certainly on the weekends, but also on weeknights when Albino could free himself from business.



Albino SyCip and his second wife, Anastacia Uy.

Albino was affectionate but didn't lavish gifts on his family. Birthdays meant that the children received a special deposit in savings accounts he kept for them in the bank. (Much later, Wash would do the same with his children.)

Treats came in the form of vacations to Shanghai and other parts of China, taking one of the Empress Liners operated by Canadian Pacific. The Baus had a summer home on a mountain, accessible at that time only by sedan chair.

Helen Bau died of asthma when Wash was only 14. Don Albino did what he could for his wife, sometimes taking her to a hotel by the sea, but his best efforts could not stave off the inevitable.

Albino SyCip would remarry, and happily for all, his new bride turned out to be a reassuringly familiar face. Her name was Anastacia Uy, and she was a tutor from Cebu who had been hired to teach the children Chinese. By chance, she was also a pianist. She and the children got along very well. "It was good that my father got married again," Wash says. "My father was not a person who would go to night clubs. And looking back, as we were all growing up, my father would have been very lonely being alone in the house, and she really took very good care of him. So it was very good that he married her." Albino's granddaughter Vicky remembers that "My dad's stepmother was amazing. She stepped right into the role of being mom. They already loved her as a tutor. She loved us grandchildren, always gave us special treats, like small boxes of Sun Maid raisins. As I got older, I realized how healthy raisins are for you. She was very warm, and she was an incredible pianist." To George, she was "a very nice lady, always smiling, puttering around." Wash's children knew and liked Albino, whose house they would visit. As George remembers, "He wasn't a man of many words. But he was always very calm. He let us nap in his place, in his air-conditioned study, which I came to look forward to. A few years later, he handed out to us kids a small card with the Golden Rule distilled from several religions printed on it. I still have it to this day and have passed it on to my daughters."

Anastacia would outlive Albino, who died of pneumonia at about 90 years of age. Albino had smoked a bit, but he was in good health for most of his life, being an avid golfer, and remained active well into his 80s. Albino cautioned his sons against any excess, but his counsel must have escaped Alex, who would die from smoking three packs a day.

Alex picked up the habit from his student days, when he was both editor of the *Collegian* and captain of the debating team while attending law school at the same time. For relief, Alex turned to cigarettes, and was soon lighting up a storm. Wash used to wonder where Alex got the money to support his vice, knowing the allowance their father gave them both. Alex had a ready answer for that: revealing yet another talent, he had been writing short stories for popular periodicals such as the *Sunday Tribune Magazine* under various pseudonyms, and was earning the not inconsiderable sum of P50 for every published story.

When Alex began writing and publishing short stories in college under various pseudonyms, he sent copies out to Dave, who sent back his comments on the fiction. Wash's reaction, however, was simply to ask, "How much did they pay you?" When Alex told him how much, Wash then proceeded to compute Alex's earnings against the time he had expended on the writing of the stories, and concluded that the effort was well worth it—no matter what the contents were.

The brilliant livewire that he was, Alex was something of a big man on campus, and had no problem attracting attention. Once, when Wash went to the *Collegian* office to look him up, Alex was still out, so Wash waited in his chair; in came a pretty girl who struck up a conversation with him, thinking he was his brother. Savoring the moment, Wash took his time to tell the truth.

A glutton for studying

In high school, Wash remained unsure of what exactly he wanted to be. He knew, however, that somehow or other, he was going to be engaged in business—that is, except banking. Wash explains: "At that time there were few banks, such as BPI, People's Bank—set up by American old-timers—China Bank, Standard Chartered, HSBC, and Citibank. But my father's policy was that we should not think of working at the bank. He said, 'If you do well and I promote you, they would think nepotism and it would embarrass me. If you don't do well, it would also embarrass me!' So therefore, banking, which would have been a normal thing to think of, was out as far as I was concerned."

The law was also out, because Alex was already studying it. As close as they were in other ways, the brothers seemed disinclined to imagine a future working together in

the same company or profession. David took up mechanical engineering in UP and then mining engineering in Colorado. Having a head for numbers but shut out of banking, Wash settled on accounting.

Wash first went to UP, which was then on Padre Faura. As the valedictorian of his high school class, he was automatically entitled to admission and free tuition at UP. However, the school and its new student proved a far from perfect fit. “The dean then was Conrado Benitez, but it was not really a business school,” Wash says of the UP he briefly knew. “It offered a liberal arts program where you could major in business or something. I did well there, but I don’t even remember having any accounting. I wanted to study commerce and we were getting into all kinds of other things.”

Wash and his classmates had also heard of a very capable American professor by the name of Stanley Prescott, who had been assigned to the Philippines by Haskins & Sells, a big American accounting firm which had set up a local practice after buying out the British firm of Clark & Larkin. After a few years, and finding that he liked teaching better, Prescott resigned and served as dean with three schools—Sto. Tomas, La Salle, and Letran.

Wash felt a strong urge to study with this man, so he transferred to UST after just a semester in UP, convincing his father that the move was well worth having to pay tuition.

The fact that the nominally Presbyterian Wash was entering a staunchly Catholic school didn’t seem to faze him. “Aside from regular courses, we had to take Religion. But it wasn’t a problem because Catholics don’t read the Bible!” Wash says with a chuckle. “So I knew more about the Bible than my Catholic classmates, and I still got the gold prize in Religion.”

A glutton for studying, Wash would be accelerated three times in elementary school, breeze through high school, and complete college in two and a half years. (“I never knew Wash to let a single school day pass without thorough homework, and his report cards were consistently beautiful to behold,” Alex would write.) Not surprisingly, Wash barely had time for anything else, including sports and any proper semblance of a social life.

This proved to be a problem when he graduated from college—as usual, at the top of his class: “When I graduated, the dean told me that we were having a graduation party at the Manila Hotel. And, as I was at the top of the class, I was supposed to be at the reception line and would open the dance. This was to be at the Fiesta Pavilion. I didn’t know how to dance, so he told two girls to teach me—Virginia Borbon and Aurora Enriquez, who later married an Azcona, the owner of Tropical Hut. In two weeks they had to teach me how to dance the foxtrot.” Presumably applying the same resolve he did to his books, Wash learned what he had to. “Today, if I had to dance, I probably still could. But not the kind of dances the young people do these days.”

The relative lack of social skills didn’t mean Wash shunned the company of the fairer sex. He remembers taking not one but three girls out to Chinese dinner at the Great Eastern Hotel. All came from prominent families and would become, or already were, society belles—Chito Madrigal, Elvira Manahan, and Diding Mañosa.

For such delicate encounters as this, he needed to brush up on his Spanish, an acknowledged weakness. Washington SyCip has a “Z” as his middle name, for the Spanish-sounding “Zarate”; his passport shows it, but doesn’t know exactly where it came from; Albino used it as well. To help him along in Spanish Wash got a friend named Bololo Tuason, whom he was tutoring in accounting, to tutor him in turn. Bololo promptly taught Wash some cuss words he didn’t know the meaning of, and when his dinner dates began conversing in Spanish, Wash had a ready “*Coño, coño, coño!*” to contribute.

A teacher at 17

Wash started teaching as soon as he graduated, *summa cum laude*, at the age of 17, when most Filipino students today will just be starting college. Dean Prescott was going on vacation for the summer, and asked Wash to take over his senior class.

Wash put on a *de hilo* suit and tie, and marched into a room full of his former classmates. But, he says, “It was all right. I liked it, I enjoyed teaching.” Wash’s problem—if it was that, at all—wasn’t his teaching. “One day the rector, Fr. Sancho, sent for me and said ‘Do you know that this is a pontifical university—and that you’re the only non-Catholic on the faculty?’ I said that I didn’t know, but also that I didn’t apply for the job.” The rector then asked Wash if he could send someone over

to try and convert Wash. Wash agreed, and no less than the head of the philosophy department, Fr. Blas, came over to speak to him.

Wash found the priest to be an intelligent and pleasant man, and they took long walks around the campus, talking. But Wash proved stubborn: he had no problem with the Church, he said, but if it came to a conflict between something he believed in and a papal encyclical, something would have to give, and it wouldn't be him. "You cannot argue with the Church on that," Wash remembers Fr. Blas telling him, and that was that. The two remained good friends, despite the failure of this project to convert Wash SyCip to Roman Catholicism. (Much later, Wash's differences with Church teaching would resurface in his strong support for family planning and artificial contraceptives as a means of dealing with the Philippines' runaway population growth.)

The issue of his being a non-Catholic soon proved moot, because Wash's life was to take yet another important turn. While teaching, he had also finished his master's degree at UST, then taken and passed the board exams for certified public accountants—only to discover that, at 19, he was too young to be allowed to practice his profession. "So I asked my father—could I go abroad? I was 19. I had never been to the States, only China."

On to Columbia

To Albino SyCip, himself a graduate of an American university and a firm advocate of education, Wash's plan to take a PhD in the US made good sense, and Wash soon found himself aboard a ship bound for San Francisco, passing through Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kobe, and Yokohama. Also on that ship was Carnival Queen and lawyer Pacita Ongsiako de los Reyes (later Phillips), also bound for her studies. Manifesting a deep curiosity about other people that he would carry with him throughout his life and serve him in good stead, Wash remarked to Pacita that three brothers who had come on board in Hong Kong all had different features, and probably had different mothers. Later he would meet them again in Hong Kong, and would confirm his theory: indeed, their father had more than one wife in that city.

Before going to the US, Wash had heard of and had met with Nicanor Reyes, who had been the first Filipino to graduate with a PhD in Accountancy from Columbia. Reyes had established the Institute of Accountancy in 1928, later to become Far

Eastern University, and wanted Wash to promise to teach at the institute upon his return.

Wash was going to Columbia as well, to study with Roy Bernard Kester, who had also been Reyes's professor, and to whom Reyes sent a gift with Wash. Kester was a major figure in American accounting, having pioneered the idea of a five-year program in Columbia at a time when some states didn't even require a college degree for someone to become a CPA, arguing that "If schooling is the key to being a professional, then being more professional means being more schooled." This emphasis on proper training would rub off on SyCip.

Wash applied to Columbia from the Philippines; Columbia had no idea what UST was and what its standards were, so it required Wash to score at least a B on his first semester for his UST units to be credited. "I had no fun that first semester," says Wash, who otherwise had no problem meeting the requirement, getting an A on all his subjects save one, an A-minus.

The rest of his time in Columbia wasn't easy. He took as many subjects as he could, including courses in the summer. Accounting subjects were fairly easy for him. What he found more challenging were courses like Economics, Economic Geography, and Statistics—subjects that were not emphasized at UST then. "So you really had to study very hard. I had a lot of readings to do. I had six majors, and finals. I had two written and four oral exams." He studied with the best professors; aside from Kester, he had Frederick Mills—a pioneer in mathematical economics—for Statistics. When Washington SyCip entered Columbia in 1940, the university was already acquiring a formidable reputation for toughness; between 1940 and 1956, for example, the average time spent by candidate to acquire a Columbia PhD in Sociology was 10.5 years.

Columbia in 1940 was also a hotbed of research, much of it work that would prove useful in the war that was just about to explode. The Manhattan Project that would result in the atomic bomb was brewing in the university's Pupin Hall, with the likes of Enrico Fermi, Leo Szilard, and Edward Teller prowling the corridors. Wallace Eckert was using IBM's punch-card machines to compute planetary orbits, and in 1940 came out with the first computer book. The Bureau of Radio Research had also just moved from Princeton to Columbia.

Wash (front row, far left) with Fred Velayo (far right) and their classmates at the University of Santo Tomas with the Dean of the College of Commerce, Professor Stanley Prescott.



Left: Wash, Fred and their college friends at an outing.

Below: Wash visits his namesake, Washington D.C. as a graduate student.





Left: Wash with Mariano Lee in Columbia University.

Below: Wash with Al Yuchengco and friends in New York.



Wash in Vermont with Frances Cornwall (second from right) on horseback and Jan Jacob van Scharck of South Africa (far right).



New York itself was sizzling with energy and optimism. Just the year before, it had hosted the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, devoted to "Building the World of Tomorrow" and featuring, among others, the advent of public television broadcasting in America. Charlie Chan was all over the movies, along with *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Broadway was ablaze with Rogers and Hart's *Too Many Girls*, "a musicomedy of college life"; elsewhere on that street, Sally Rand was wowing them with her famous fan dance.

To all this arrived Washington SyCip, flush with excitement and hope, not even 20, a smallish man with a sharp, capacious, omnivorous mind. He had come by way of San Francisco, where he had met up with the son of Dee C. Chuan, his father's partner and co-founder at China Bank. This boy, Edward, was studying at Stanford and took care of Wash in San Francisco, and they drove up Telegraph Hill, a popular tourist spot from where the rest of the city could be seen. Wash noticed many cars parked in the area, and "saw a lot of people necking. I thought, that's why I didn't have fun in Manila! So many people were necking inside the cars, and some even had towels covering them. I was shocked." Wash stayed a few days at the Washington Hotel, then took a train to New York.

Sharing household chores

No one met him in New York. He went straight to John Jay Hall, Columbia's freshman dormitory. Fifteen stories high and located on the southeastern end of Columbia's Morningside Heights campus, John Jay Hall had hosted, among others, the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca.

Subsequently, Wash moved into a small apartment on 114th Street with his brother David. David had studied Mining Engineering in Colorado and, after finishing, came to New York to work with a mining company located at the Woolworth building. This company was headed by K. C. Li, a good friend of their father; Li's company mined tungsten, used as a material for hardening bullets. Tungsten was then almost a monopoly of China, although they later found deposits in South America.

To finance Wash's education and living expenses in New York, Albino had opened a letter of credit with the Irving Trust Bank for \$5,000, but as large as the amount was even then—tuition in Columbia was just \$400 a semester—Wash knew that every dollar counted. He had been given a lump sum so he could exercise his judgment.

“My father wanted to see that we knew how to manage our own affairs.” Wash kept a detailed accounting of his expenses, which came to about \$80 to \$85 a month including rent, which he shared with David, along with household expenses. “I was quite thrifty,” he says. Alex would remember David telling him that “Wash made a habit of comparing prices in the groceries nearby and would go to a farther shop to save a few cents and was quite proud of the savings he achieved. Dave’s view, however, was that Wash failed to consider the wear and tear on his shoes and whether the savings of a few cents a week was worth the faster depreciation on his shoes.”

There were no trips home to Manila for vacation. “Coming home would have cost a lot relative to tuition. I wrote home. I didn’t call—it was too expensive. Mail was cheap and reliable, even if it took three weeks or so.”

Wash and David also shared household chores. Wash did a lot of the marketing, and David did most of the cooking because Wash didn’t come home from his classes until 6 or 7 pm. When it was Wash’s turn to cook, David knew what to expect. Alex would write: “According to Dave, Wash kept a very careful budget of their expenses and would regularly make a chicken and potato salad—the only dish he was good at—that would last for days.” The boys clearly couldn’t live by salad alone, but they had a hard time finding authentic Chinese food—at that time, such restaurants in New York catered to a mainly Jewish clientele—until they discovered a Chinese eatery on 126th Street, which offered what they needed for 50 cents a dish.

Aside from food, there was love—at least for David. Wash remembers something else about that apartment: “It was a four-storey walk-up. We had a sitting room, a bath and a bedroom. When his girlfriend came, I had to leave the apartment. Later, my son George—who’s in San Francisco now—told me that he had met one person in real estate whose mother knew me and my brother. By that time my brother may have passed away. I met with her—she was a small tiny girl, a very attractive Chinese American named Gladys. When my brother was dating her, he didn’t want me in the apartment so I had to walk around Broadway or go to the library.”

Wash had other things to get busy with. Not content with being frugal, he was also earning a little money on the side. “There was an auditing class where Professor Byrnes was writing a textbook, and he asked me to write problems for the back of the textbook. I used the names of my classmates or my friends.”

A discount on ducks

After he had passed his orals, Wash went to work for his professor's firm, Byrnes and Baker. This was his first real job in New York, and it was as junior auditor of a duck cooperative. "They raised Long Island ducks, a descendant of the original Peking duck." Like Wash himself, these ducks had come a long way from China to New York, their forebears having been brought over from Peking by a merchant in 1873. These ducks were bred for the dinner table, and as a member of the audit staff, Wash was allowed a discount on ducks. He would make a present of one of these to a friend.

Wash's landing this junior auditor position was no small feat. Blacks or Asians were practically unheard of in the accounting profession in those days, but Professor Byrnes knew he had a gem on his hands, and was willing to take the risk—as long as his clients agreed. "He told me that as far as he knew, I was the first Asian on the professional staff. 'I hope you don't mind that I have to call the company first before I send you,' he said. Blacks didn't even get clerical jobs. There was this black guy who had an MBA from Harvard who couldn't even get a bookkeeper position—what he could do was teach at a university for blacks. So Byrnes told me he would call up the client first to be sure he wouldn't object to an Asian. In fairness, no one ever said no. And most of them asked for 'that young man' to be sent back again."

Wash doesn't remember ever having met any Filipino in New York during his stay in Columbia, aside from his brother. His social circle included his classmates, some of whom were women.

Among them was Frances "Frankie" Cornwall (later Hutner), who would later be known for her work on women's issues. Frankie met Wash in the fall of 1940, when she was in her first year as an economics student at Columbia's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. They met through a mutual friend named Ed Brunstead, and the three—aside from taking some of the same courses—became good friends. Frankie and Ed played tennis, went skiing in her dad's place in Vermont, and sometimes went dancing in John Jay Hall or in a midtown hotel. "Wash sometimes joined in the walking and, at least once in the dancing," Frankie recalls. Skiing, however, was something else.

That winter, Frankie invited Wash to go to her father's home in Vermont. Ellsworth Cornwall was a professor of politics in Middlebury College and, like his daughter, was an avid skier, and so they invited their visitor to go skiing with them. But Wash would not be persuaded. "I was always worried about making the grade—and now skiing! I was thinking what would happen if I broke a leg. My father had sent me to the States to study, not to have fun."

During that same visit, Wash volunteered to do the vacuuming—something that must have been, to him, a novel and engrossing experience, because Frankie remembers him "cheerfully maneuvering the Hoover vacuum around the living room furniture. He was having a good time. Ed was startled by this picture. He quietly took me aside to say that when Wash was at home he lived in a house with an abundance of servants."

Still, Frankie says, "Wash was always fun to be with. He was lively, cheerful, optimistic, and extremely intelligent, an attribute he never used simply to impress people. He was thoughtful and helpful and, as I discovered when I pressed him for some training in accounting, he was patient. From Ed I learned something of his background--that his father was an important banker in Manila, that he was a friend of Wellington Koo. But Wash was secure about who he was and what he did and could do and didn't feel the need to broadcast his background."

Frankie was the friend that Wash gifted with the duck from the client he audited. "I bought a duck for her once from the place where I worked—a small duck. I carried this duck on the subway, and the subway in those days was so crowded. I was worried that when I arrived there it would be pressed duck. I didn't know if the passengers knew it was a duck." Setting her PhD aspirations aside for the moment, Frankie took and cooked the duck. "Duck was extraordinary fare for us, a great treat," says Frankie. "I hope I did it justice."

One afternoon, Frankie took a walk with Wash, Ed, and another friend named Jan; they had decided to take a spaghetti dinner at Caruso's, an Italian restaurant on 42nd Street. The only problem was, they were on 116th Street—74 blocks away. But they marched gamely downtown and got to the restaurant. There's no record of how Wash felt about that excursion—but Frankie remembers that he appeared the next day wearing new golf shoes with one-inch-thick rubber soles, just in case.

Those were carefree times for Wash and his unlikely gangmates. By Frankie's account, they comprised "Wash, with a Chinese background, from the Philippines; Jan, an Afrikaner from South Africa; Ed, a descendant of Norwegian pioneers, from Wisconsin; and me, a New Englander, with English ancestors who came to America in colonial days."

Another close friend of Wash in those days was Mary Fitt. Her parents were from Scarsdale, owners of the company that manufactured Simmons beds. Mary introduced Wash to American baseball, and once took him to Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. Because they had not purchased tickets in advance, all they got were seats high up in the bleachers. Mary pointed out the players on the field to him, teaching him about positions and plays. But Wash said he couldn't see the numbers on their uniforms. Mary later took Wash to the Manhattan Eye Hospital where she had a friend test his eyesight. This was how Wash found out that he needed prescription glasses.

Caught in the whirl of war

Soon Wash would discover that his eyesight was the least of his worries. War had been raging in Europe for more than a year now, but on Dec. 7, 1941, it took a drastic turn eastward. A few hours after Pearl Harbor was attacked, Japanese bombers flew over Baguio, Davao, Aparri, Iba, and Clark Air Field, catching the Americans flat-footed. The war could not have come at a more inopportune moment for Washington SyCip, who was just 20 and was already poised to achieve his PhD in record time.

"When Pearl Harbor day came, I was in the library working on my dissertation—my outline had been approved. A friend came running in, crying, 'Wash, Wash your home is being bombed!' So we went out of the South Hall library and listened to the radio broadcast. I felt so completely lost. I was in a foreign country, and there was a war, and my family was over there."

It isn't hard to imagine Wash's anxiety at this instant. Sharp as his instincts were, he must've sensed that the war was coming to America, perhaps even the Philippines, and the only question was when—even if, at times, America and especially New York seemed too busy or having too much fun to worry about a war.

Just a few months earlier, in October 1941, the only war that mattered to the city was the World Series, which had come down to a cross-town tussle between the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers in the “Subway Series.” New York film critics were gushing over what they considered to be the best film of the year, “Citizen Kane.” Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland were hamming it up on “Babes on Broadway,” released December 5. The airwaves hummed with the easy melodies of the year’s top hits: “Amapola” by Jimmy Dorsey, “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” by the Andrews Sisters, and “Chattanooga Choo Choo” by Glenn Miller.

But over all these happy tunes loomed the shadow of war, and here and there early warnings were sounded. For example, *Life* magazine’s December 8 issue—prepared just before Pearl Harbor—featured a 13-page essay contemplating the likelihood of America going to war, even venturing to calculate the distance in air and sea miles between Tokyo and Manila. “Will the Island of Luzon then become the great theater of war, and General MacArthur the outstanding khaki-clad figure in it?” asked the writer Clare Boothe. “Or will peace descend upon the Pacific while the US plunges into the war across the Atlantic?”

When the war finally came, America snapped to attention and Wash would’ve felt the surge of energy—part nervousness, part bravado—that ran through the city. New York local historian Christopher Gray reports that “The news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor came to New York on Sunday afternoon, December 7th. The FBI immediately sent out protective guards to public works like the Kensico and Croton dams, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where the battleships *Iowa* and *Missouri* were under construction.” The atmosphere was electric. Says Gray: “Anti-aircraft guns were set up in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, at Fort Totten, in Queens, and other locations. The Port of New York Authority canceled vacations and leaves, and put guards at its bridges and tunnels.”

Swarms of civilians turned up to join the fight. “On Monday,” Gray continues, “the recruiting office at the Post Office at Church and Vesey Streets was swamped by men trying to enlist—women volunteers gave out coffee.... Almost six thousand people signed up to become air raid wardens—bringing the city total to 125,006.”

For Wash SyCip, stranded in Manhattan many thousands of miles from home and family, the question was what to do next. For much of 1942, having been cut off from

funds, he continued working with Byrnes Baker. But then “At some point I had to make a decision whether to ask for an exemption or join the military,” he says. It was a dilemma that would soon be rendered moot by a horrifying bit of news.

Sometime late in 1942, in New York, Wash received a letter from his friend Mary Fitt, expressing her sympathies. The letter mystified Wash, who didn’t know what Mary was sympathizing with him for. It only made Mary feel worse that Wash seemed completely unaware of what she had already learned—that his father had been killed. She told him of an article she had read in the *Reader’s Digest*—condensed from an article by Carl Crow in *The Nation*—telling of his father’s execution by his Japanese captors.

“Crow had written that two of his friends—one of them Chief Justice Jose Abad Santos and the other my father—had been killed. My father had been put in solitary confinement, and usually one got shot after that. I wrote Carl Crow. He wrote back and said, ‘This was the information I had.’ So I thought my father had been killed.”

Unknown to Wash at that time, Crow’s source may have been a dispatch cabled to the US State Department by longtime Manila resident Charles “Chick” Parsons dated August 12, 1942 from aboard the *M/S Gripsholm*, which reported in part that “From information available, it appeared that populated centers in the Philippines were comparatively free from atrocities; the story in more isolated places, however, was quite different. In February, three British nationals (two of them ship’s officers from the *S. S. Tantalus*) who had escaped from the Santo Tomas Interment Camp were, after brutal torture on the camp premises, taken to Camp Santiago and shot. There were also reports of the execution of twenty out of 50 leading Chinese in Manila who were taken into custody by the Japanese upon their entry, the executed men including the Chinese Consul General, Mr. C. Kuangson Young, and Alfonso and Albino SyCip. Justice Jose Abad Santos was also reported as having been executed in Cebu.”

The news devastated Wash. “I took it very, very badly. Later on, news came out, from different sources, that people had seen him in prison, alive. But that was much later. I was already in military training in the States.” He had decided that “the right thing to do was to be directly involved in the war effort.”

Suiting up for boot camp

Wash was hardly alone in this sentiment. As Alex Fabros notes, “Thousands of Filipinos had petitioned for the right to serve in the US military immediately after December 7, 1941. On January 2, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed a law revising the Selective Service Act. Filipinos in the United States could now join the US Armed Forces and they were urged to volunteer for service. President Roosevelt quickly authorized the founding of a Filipino unit, which would be organized for service overseas. It estimated the number of available Filipino volunteers between 70,000 and 100,000....”

“So many Filipino volunteers came from all over the United States that the 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiment was formed at Fort Ord, California on November 22, 1942. In January 1943, the 1st Regiment was reassigned to Camp Beale, near Sacramento, and the 2nd Regiment to Camp Cooke, near Santa Barbara.”

It was here, in Camp Cooke, that Wash would report for training, after signing up in New York and asking to be assigned to one of the two Filipino infantry regiments he had heard were being organized specifically for the retaking of the islands. Camp Cooke had just been set up in September 1941 by the US Army mainly for the training of the 5th Armored Division; eventually over 400 units would pass through this facility. (In 1956, Camp Cooke was turned over to the Air Force, under which it became Vandenberg Air Force Base.)

Wash considered himself physically fit, enough to weather the arduous three-month basic training course. “My waistline was 28,” he remembers. He and his fellow trainees had to carry heavy packs and rifles and to march the whole evening, putting one’s hand on the shoulder of the man ahead and trying to get some sleep in that position, before switching roles. They were up again early in the morning. But Wash never thought of quitting, fired up by the challenge of being part of the campaign to drive the enemy from his homeland. “At that point, the announcement was that the Japanese were moving ahead, and MacArthur promised that he was coming back. That was a lie, but at the time, we believed that the US would actually at some point rescue the Philippines. Of course much later we would find out that their priority really was Europe.”

After boot camp in Camp Cooke, Wash was summoned for an interview. They told him he had the highest IQ in the regiment; the military believed he was overqualified for the infantry, and that he could be made better use of in intelligence work, so they were sending him to language school to learn Japanese. Wash knew that some people were also being sent there to learn Chinese, and suggested that he be shipped directly to where Chinese was required, as he already knew the language. But the military, having reasons that Wash was still unaware of, insisted on sending him to the language school in Denver for Japanese lessons.

After Japanese language school, Wash was sent to the cryptography school at Vint Hill Farms Station in Warrenton, Virginia. This station had been set up by the Army Signal Security Agency six months after Pearl Harbor to monitor and decode enemy communications and provide vital intelligence.

Here—in a bucolic environment known more for horses and fox hunting—Wash learned to chase after problems on paper. It was a task for which his intuitively analytical mind was well disposed, and, told to solve problems at their own pace, Wash was soon arriving at solutions ahead of the others.

Once, on a furlough, Wash went to Washington, DC, to visit a good friend of his father's—Carlos P. Romulo, who was a member of the Philippine government-in-exile. Wash had never met CPR before, but they hit it off. Wash found Romulo to be warm and friendly, despite the military uniform he wore as a general. He told Wash that the last native chicken he ate came from a SyCip farm in Bukidnon, owned by one of Wash's uncles. He had passed by the farm in a group that had fled Corregidor and was making its way to Australia.

On another break, Wash paid a visit to Columbia, and Frances Cornwall went with him to a tea dance in a Manhattan hotel. It would be one of Wash's few brushes with an unpleasant side of American life. Frankie recalls: "He was in uniform but that didn't stop a few of the dancers, obviously confused about his ethnicity, from making hostile remarks as they passed us on the floor. Wash made no comment. I hoped that this wasn't a common experience for him in the service."

Wash was doing very well in Vint Hill, but then another factor intervened just two weeks before Wash and his batchmates were supposed to graduate from the course.

The Signal Corps enforced a requirement for its personnel to have American parents, disqualifying Wash and another trainee, a Canadian, from their present assignment.

Instead, Wash found himself being shipped out to another military installation—Camp Pinedale Army Base, located in a scenic lumber mill town just north of Fresno. Pinedale had been used briefly as an internment camp for Japanese nationals, but now the military was raising an Air Force squadron for deployment overseas. Wash told them that he was ready and willing to join that unit, without letting on that he had been let go of by the Signal Corps; he wasn't telling if they didn't ask. The Air Force reviewed his records and accepted him. They didn't require personnel to have both parents as citizens. But meanwhile, Wash himself acquired American citizenship—a prerequisite for working in his branch of military intelligence.

Codebreaking in Calcutta

“So I went abroad. When we left LA we didn't know where we were going. It was a long ride, and we landed in Melbourne. Then, we knew we were going to India. At the time the Air Force was active in the Australia-Pacific area. Cryptography had two bases—one in Australia for the Pacific, and other in India, for the China-Burma-India theater, including Southeast Asia.” Wash would be sent to the base near Calcutta, where the British 14th Army had set up codebreaking operations patterned after those of Bletchley Park in England.

“Calcutta was in the eastern part of India. But in the waters there were a lot of Japanese submarines, so rather than go straight to Calcutta where the base was, we went through the south of Australia, where the sea was very rough, then to Bombay where there were no Japanese submarines.”

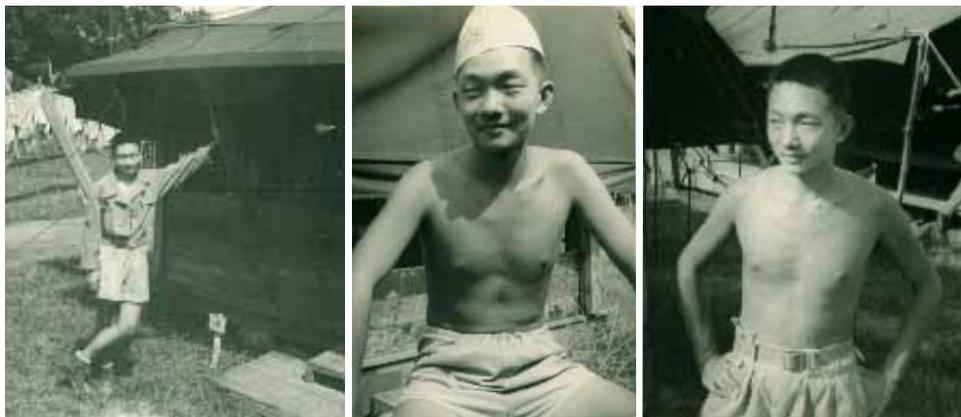
Upon the arrival of his squadron in Bombay, Wash and his mates were given a briefing, where they were told that, as cryptographers, they were never to permit themselves to be flown over enemy territory. The Japanese were unaware of the Allied success in breaking their codes, and if a cryptographer were captured and should talk about what the Americans knew, the Japanese could switch codes, complicating and prolonging the war effort.

*Right: Wash with the Second Filipino Regiment
in Camp Cooke, California.*



*Middle and lower photos: Wash in Denver,
Colorado where he took Japanese language class.*





*Top and middle photos:
Tent life in India
when Wash was a
cryptographer in the
China-Burma-India
theater during
World War II.*



Wash (third from right, top row) pointing at Robert Bidwell who would later tell him about the teaching job in the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

From Bombay, Wash took a long, slow ride on a filthy, rundown cattle train to Calcutta. “The camp was outside Calcutta, on the banks of the Hoogly River that flows into the Ganges before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. The tents were pitched on that land. Occasionally a dead body would surface on the waters. Life was not valuable in India then,” Wash recalls.

The cryptography center had separate buildings for cryptographers. The teletype operators who listened to messages and typed out the numbers were in another building. Wash, the only Filipino, joined about 30 cryptographers who worked under an American commander. Across the fence were their British counterparts. “They had scotch, but we had beer. A bottle of scotch was the equivalent of a case of beer, and we bartered across the fence. It was hot, so iced beer or scotch with water was great.”

The cryptographers worked on transcripts of intercepted Japanese communications. There were no computers then, and they used IBM sorting machines that couldn’t break codes by themselves but could reduce the possibilities. The codebreakers began with a code chart with a thousand blanks, then worked their way to coherence, beginning with the knowledge, for example, that yesterday, five bombers had been sent to bomb a certain place; this was the specific information one looked for, the pattern by which other messages and meanings could be discerned.

“We were given the teletype operators’ reams of papers with series of numbers. That was the raw material. The code system worked like this: if you had a number like 589, you tried to figure out the additive. But the additive was a non-carry-forward additive, so first you had to see what it could be. The message did not begin at the first numbers, and could be at any part of a hundred numbers, so first you had to see where it started. Once you deciphered a message, the following ones were easier. And then one day the codes changed, so you had to start all over again. It was like auditing in many ways. You looked for clues.”

If the cryptographers read a message ahead of an event, the Air Force sent out interceptors to challenge the bombers. If not, they used the information on the field as a guide to breaking codes post-mortem. Not all messages had to do with movements or attacks. Sometimes it was about malaria, but even this information said something about the status and condition of enemy troops. Secrecy and security were of paramount importance.

“A Japanese general was shot down in New Guinea, and Imperial Headquarters in Tokyo was worried whether the captain in charge of the codebook had destroyed it. The codebook was supposed to be in the hands of at least a captain, and first thing this officer was expected to do when in danger of being captured was to destroy the codebook. He swore he did, but he did not, so this codebook was captured, and it helped a lot. That’s why our security was so tight.”

And then, on August 15, 1945—what would be known as “V-J Day”—the war in the Pacific was over. The tens of thousands of Allied men and women who had fought in the China-Burma-India theater could now expect to go home—but not just yet. Wash and his unit remained in Calcutta, awaiting transport. They had no more work to do; they were debriefed, then told to forget everything they had learned. A week after those instructions were given, an article came out in the local newspaper breaking the story of the codebreaking operation, and the secret was out. Now the only thing left to do was to take a ship home.

The long way home

Wash asked if he could be taken from India to Manila, the obvious and shorter route. But when his ship came, it took him back to New York—the long way, passing through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic. “Because the war had ended, the transport was fully loaded. Everyone was anxious to get home. And it was a small ship. Even chow time was by shift. But by the time we were on the Atlantic Ocean everyone was sick in bed, and so many people were vomiting. I was all right. I wasn’t seasick, so I didn’t have to wait in line for my chow. Spam. Powdered eggs. Horrible.”

Back in the States, and impressed by his wartime work, the military asked Wash to stay on for officer school. But that meant signing up for a fresh tour of duty, and Wash had had enough of the military life, and was eager to rejoin his family in Manila. Wash took his discharge. In New York, he went shopping for gifts, having saved some money from his soldier’s pay. At the Abercrombie and Fitch store, he bought his father some golf balls, and here he had an interesting experience.

“The sales clerk was trying to cheat the store,” he says. After Wash gave him the money, the sales clerk wrote out an invoice, and together with Wash’s money sent it through the pneumatic tubes to the cashier. When the change and the invoice came

back, the clerk gave Wash his change—more change than was needed, as it turned out, and Wash began to wonder. He asked for the invoice. Wash realized that maybe because he was clearly Asian, the clerk didn't think he knew any better. Wash found that instead of golf balls, the clerk had put in "tees," which cost much less, thus the incorrect amount of change. It became clear to Wash that the clerk intended to pocket the difference, but in his carelessness gave more to Wash than was necessary. "He didn't know I was an auditor!"

And neither did the Philippines, not just yet. When the captain's gig nudged the edge of the pier and Wash SyCip set foot on home soil for the first time in five years, his future career wasn't the first thing on his mind. He just wanted to get home as quickly as possible—whatever the family's Sta. Mesa home may have become in the orgy of destruction that brought a cataclysmic end to the war in Manila.

Fortunately, Wash had an angel in the person of his old New York pal Ed Brunstead, now a naval officer in Manila. "He knew my address here. When his ship arrived, he went to Sta. Mesa and met my father. I had told my family I was coming back on the ship, so that was how he knew I was coming. As Lt. Commander, he was his ship's second-in-command. He got the captain's gig and he went to my ship and told the commander, 'Look, my good friend here...' He took me off the ship. I was the only one who got off."

At the pier, they boarded Brunstead's jeep, and they sped off to Sta. Mesa. Wash could hardly tell where they were going—the whole cityscape looked strange. "Ed drove me to my father's house. At that time, when you passed the Ermita area, you normally knew where to turn right or left, not because of the street names, but just using landmarks. But there was so much destruction you couldn't recognize it."

A family reunion

When they arrived at the SyCip compound, Wash saw how much had changed, and learned the full story of what had happened to the SyCips during the war. "My father was very thin. There was no fancy welcome. We hardly had anything. People were living on canned goods from the military. I think it was about noontime when I got home. My father, my brother, stepmother, and my sister Elizabeth was there. Paz was already married then. A month later, David also came home."

The Japanese had picked up Don Albino in 1942, along with other leaders of the Filipino-Chinese community, in for “anti-Japanese activities” they had supposedly undertaken under the Commonwealth government. This very likely referred to the boycott that the local Chinese had declared against Japanese goods when the Japanese invaded China in the 1930s. The Japanese had kept close watch on the boycott leaders, and Wash later discovered how. “When the Japanese invaded China, Filipino Chinese boycotted Japanese goods. And the Japanese had at the time had a large presence in the Philippines. I was told that my uncle Alfonso had a Japanese driver before the war. At that time they were gardeners and drivers. It turned out that my uncle’s driver was a captain in the Imperial Army. My father had a friend who was the head of the Yokohama Specie Bank. He turned out to be a colonel. In Davao they built a Japanese cemetery, and it turned out that there were no bodies buried there at all. The coffins were full of guns.”

Albino could have spared himself imprisonment; the Japanese asked him to cooperate in the establishment of their “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere,” but he refused, and ended up in Muntinlupa, the national penitentiary. There he suffered with fellow inmates like the young Jovito Salonga, who taught Albino how to plant mongo beans in the prison grounds. Only the intercession of a subordinate named T. S. Wang, who had learned Japanese while studying in Japan, later secured Albino’s release. (Knowing what his father went through, Wash would much later provide a donation of computers to Muntinlupa prisoners who were serving their last year and who had requested him to talk about the Philippine economy.)

Wash’s brother Alex helped support the family while Don Albino was in prison. Just before the war, he had been set to captain the UP debating team on a tour of the US, but the war aborted that, and it turned out to be a good thing, because no one else would have been around to provide for the family. He couldn’t practice law during the Japanese occupation, so Alex went into the buy-and-sell business, earning whatever he could.

The Japanese kicked the SyCips out of their home, and so they stayed briefly with their neighbors, the Simplicio del Rosarios. A retired judge and fiercely patriotic, Del Rosario had been Leyte’s delegate to the Malolos Congress. Before the Japanese came, however, the SyCips hid the family silver in the ceiling—where they found it untouched, after the Japanese fled. It was practically all that Albino’s family retained of their worldly possessions.

The other SyCips didn't fare so well. The Japanese had also imprisoned Albino's older brother Alfonso. But on the Japanese emperor's birthday he pardoned and released all prisoners over the age of 65. Upon his release, Alfonso decided to bring his entire family to Fuga Island in Batanes, which he partly owned. He invited Albino's children and wife to join them there, but Alex wanted to be able to see his father in prison. As it happened, that island was later bombed, and several of Alfonso's family members died. Albino had known Gen. Douglas MacArthur before the war, and now he asked the general for help, which MacArthur granted by sending a PT boat to rescue the surviving SyCips on Fuga.

Their eldest brother David was also in the US when the war started. An engineer by profession, David attempted to join the US Air Force, but was rejected on account of a kidney problem. So instead, David joined the Chinese Air Force, which had a unit that accepted ethnic Chinese on the US mainland, and whose physical standards were a bit more lax. He couldn't fly, but he was posted to Chengdu in Sichuan province and put to work as a ground engineer. He secured a release and rejoined his family a month after Wash did.

And now, with the return of Washington, the Albino SyCips were going to be a family again, and face the uncertain future together.





Wash at his desk in his one-man office: W. SyCip & Co.