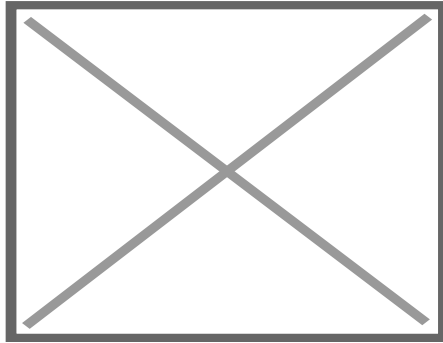


## Chuuk Corps – Mustering a dedicated Army

**An unassuming but passionate leader, Hermes Otis has quietly mustered a dedicated army in faraway Chuuk State.**

*by Sondra White –*

When you converse with Envoy Hermes Otis, you have to get close and put your best ear forward. When he's not praising God during Sunday service or quoting



William Booth, he's as soft-spoken as the warm summer breeze that wisps through the islands. He has achieved on Chuuk what many would believe impossible, and he has done it with humility and benevolence. He commands your respect, but he does so with a gentle spirit and compassionate heart.

"I've never heard anyone say one bad thing about Envoy Hermes Otis," said Captain David Harmon, Guam corps officer. "I don't think we could have found a better envoy for Chuuk State." Hermes seems almost uncomfortable when telling his story, as if perhaps it is unworthy of such attention. But this modesty is a characteristic common to many Chuukese islanders, and with time his tale unfolds.

### **Beginnings**

Hermes Otis, 46, is one of 10 children born on Weno Island to Eries and Simako Otis. His father was born on Weno, as well, while his mother is from nearby Nama Island. Hermes' penchant for public service came honestly. His father was a teacher, as well as the founder and first principle of the school on Fono Island. After his teaching career, he began a health-care training program and opened the first dispensary on Fono.

Hermes excelled at English and other subjects at a large Catholic elementary school on Weno, and at 16, he already was showing his promise as a leader. He took a test offered by the Liebenzell Mission in Chuuk and was offered a scholarship to Emmaus Christian High School for boys in Palau. He was

the first in his family to leave Chuuk to attend school. "I was really scared but also excited," he said. "It was my first time to leave home and the first time I would fly on an airplane." After a semester, he came back to Chuuk for summer vacation, but his family was unable to afford the return ticket, so he transferred to Truk High School and graduated in 1979.

One afternoon that same year, he saw a special girl sitting under a tree. "I was young and there were so many beautiful girls in our village," he said. "But I knew then that she was the one for me, and I decided I would try to win her heart." The girl Hermes saw was Rufina, and the couple was married before the year ended. Soon they had their first child, a girl named Glady.

### **Change in direction**

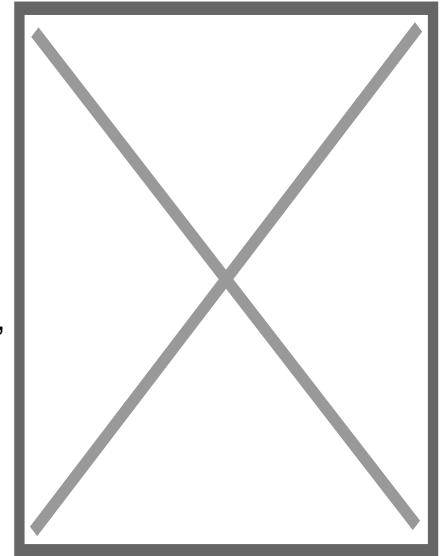
His new family made Hermes even more determined to continue his education elsewhere, and he hoped to find a way to attend college in the United States. His faith and determination landed him a seat at the Hawaii Job Corps Center on Oahu, where he studied business for about six months. Rufina and Glady stayed behind, as do many Chuukese wives and children. With the help of the Job Corps, Hermes in 1980 was accepted at the U.S. International University in San Diego, where he began taking courses in English and business.

Hermes learned much about himself during that year in San Diego. One lesson was particularly hard, and it again changed the course of his life. During an especially rambunctious party in his dormitory, Hermes was badly injured and ended up in the hospital. "During that time I became very homesick and really wanted to return to Chuuk and my family," he said. "It was then that I began to realize that many of my bad habits had to change."

Back home, Hermes enrolled in a training program for health assistants, which resulted in a five-year post at the Chuuk State Hospital. Following in his father's footsteps, Hermes moved his family to Fono Island, to work in that island's dispensary for several years. He soon became the youngest pastor of the Bethen Protestant Church on Fono.

### **Opening Chuuk**

Hermes first heard about the work of The Salvation Army from his sister-in-law, Marcela Rufino Otis, who was a soldier in Hawaii. Each time she would travel back home to Chuuk, the two would discuss the ministry of The Salvation Army, and the possibility of its introduction there. Over the course of the early 1990s, Hermes began to pray for a plan for The Salvation Army in Chuuk. In 1996, during one of Marcela's visits to Chuuk, he made the final decision. "If it is God's will to start The Salvation Army in Chuuk, I will do it," he said. That year Hermes and Rufina traveled to Kolonia, Pohnpei, and took the oath of Salvation Army soldiers from Captains Mike and Barbara Harris of the Kolonia Corps.



Hermes' original plan was to begin his work on Fono Island, but neither the Protestant nor Catholic churches there were receptive. Despite the FSM's association with the United States, freedom of religion often is a matter of interpretation in the more isolated islands of the region. Offended by his attempts to start a new church, the traditional chief and other leaders on Fono told Hermes it was against the constitution to introduce The Salvation Army to Fono, and that they would have to leave the island to continue their work. "But I was listening only to God," he said.

Hermes resigned from his government job and the Otis family moved back to the center of Weno, where people were more accustomed to the idea of religious freedom. There they began their work as Salvationists. "Many people made fun of us and did not understand," he said. "They asked if we were security guards or pilots because of our uniforms. Some were confused with the word 'army' and expected to see us carrying guns. I just continued to pray for God's help."

In the early days, even their own children had a difficult time understanding their parents' actions. Today, however, all five of the couples' children – Gladys (25), Gladwin (21), J.J. (19), Joylynn (17) and Erlist (15) – are Salvation Army soldiers.

### **A household name**

Soon after moving back to Weno, Hermes and Rufina began an outreach ministry at the hospital and jail. They also began to organize open-air meetings to explain The Salvation Army to anyone who would listen. They formed a League of Mercy, and Hermes started a Bible study at Weno Junior High School every Wednesday. These meetings and Bible studies were the foundation of today's Chuuk Corps, which is 91 soldiers strong.

In 1997 Hermes and Rufina became outpost sergeants. In 1998 the direction of their outpost was transferred from Pohnpei to Guam, and that year they were commissioned as envoys by Commissioner David Edwards, at the recommendation of Captains David and Linda Harmon of the Guam Corps. Last year, Hermes was told that Chuuk was an official corps of The Salvation Army. "To me it said that DHQ has trust and confidence in my work here," he said. "I am proud and very excited about becoming a corps."

Today, The Salvation Army is a household name in Chuuk. It is an essential part of the state's disaster relief team and the spiritual home to a large congregation. It is perhaps best known in Chuuk for its weekly radio program that is written and produced by Hermes. The program is broadcast regularly to all of the islands by the state radio station. With singing, gospel readings and sermons, Hermes uses it as a way to spread the good word and to invite others to his Sunday service.

The Chuuk Corps also operates a thrift store on Saturdays, and each weeknight hosts prayers meetings, Bible studies, fellowship programs or fundraising activities. Sounds of the Sunday service reverberate throughout central Weno each week beginning at 10 a.m.

### **Changed lives**

Mention The Salvation Army in Chuuk and most will comment on the soulful singing of the corps' youth group. Hermes recruited most of the army's soldiers from the village of Tunnuk in central Weno. Linda Morita Hartman, advisory board chairman for the Chuuk Corps and a Tunnuk villager, gives credit to The Salvation Army for a drastic change in the character of Tunnuk during the past seven years. "Before, my village was known for its troublemakers," Hartman said. "Many of the youth spent their time drinking and harassing others. Now most of the youth from Tunnuk are soldiers of The Salvation Army, and they sing and praise God instead of causing trouble."

A scenic lot in the corner of Tunnuk could be the future home of the Chuuk Corps. The corps office, chapel and the Otis' living quarters are located now in central Weno, but the buildings are worn and often lacking power and running water. A new facility in Tunnuk would allow for a more secure facility that could accommodate church services, meetings, living quarters and other activities. The lot, which overlooks a gorgeous little lagoon, is in an area the locals coincidentally call "Mechen," which means a holy or spiritual place.

"In the future, I see The Salvation Army very big and strong in Chuuk and throughout the FSM," Hermes said. "But my first priority is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ—this is my first priority and area of expansion. I know though that spiritual and physical needs go together. They must be incorporated. If these people do not have clothing, they will not come to church. If they are hungry, they will not come to church."

He hopes to focus more on troubled youth and those who are unemployed, many of whom often turn to alcohol and crime. He envisions a school and job training program within The Salvation Army to prevent high-school dropouts.

"We want our island people to be beautiful, loving and peaceful people," he said. "We want to expand this ministry to reach out to the lost ones. There are so many who make trouble here with drugs and alcohol, but when they are born again and come to Christ, it really does change their lives. They become strong servants of God and they want to share the good news with others.

"Along the way to where I am now, I have done some backsliding. But I have never given up. I am the founding father of The Salvation Army in Chuuk. Like William Booth says, 'I'll fight—I'll fight to the very end!'"

What started as just another rainy day in Chuuk on July 2, 2002, turned into the worst natural disaster in the state's recent history. When Tropical Storm Chata'an pounded the islands with heavy rain, it ran down the hills like waterfalls. Then, in many places, the earth moved, sending soil mixed with rocks, foliage and other debris sliding downward. The landslides occurred throughout the day, some just within minutes of each other. They crushed trees, homes, cars, animals and people. They crushed hopes, many of which have yet to be restored almost a year later. Forty-seven people died and many more remain missing in massive mounds of earth too large to be moved by man or machine.

During the days and months following the storm, The Salvation Army worked hand-in-hand with the Chuuk State government, FEMA, the Red Cross and other relief agencies in the region. With

donations and manpower from the U.S. mainland, Hawaii and Guam, the Chuuk Corps delivered assistance to those most affected by the disaster. Some were in dire need of medical care, others clean water. Some were hungry; others needed spiritual guidance.

“The Salvation Army was very quick during this time to come in with disaster relief in the form of food, clothing and water,” said Bernard Billimont, the governor’s assistant and chairman of the special disaster task force. Besides FEMA, no one could get these donations so quickly and in such large quantities but The Salvation Army. Without their help we could not have met the needs of so many storm victims. In Chuuk, we count on the help of The Salvation Army in caring for the lives of our people.”