

April 11th

On this day in 1968, Saipan and Tinian were devastated by a powerful typhoon.

On the evening of April 11, Typhoon Jean packing winds in excess of 175 mph approached the islands from the east. The storm pummeled Saipan and Tinian for the next twelve hours. The following day, people emerged from storm shelters to find a devastated landscape.

Homes, schools, and office buildings lay in ruins. Roads were blocked with fallen vegetation, power and water services knocked out, and two ships lay at the bottom of Tanapag Harbor. Such destruction had not been seen since the terrible days of World War II a quarter century earlier.

Although there were no deaths and only a single serious injury, initial estimates placed storm-related damage at 15 million dollars.

With food, water, and medicine in short supply and thousands of people homeless, the islands were declared a major disaster area by President Johnson on April 19.

Emergency supplies soon arrived and plans were made to rebuild public infrastructure with disaster funding.

Within a few weeks, power and water service had been restored in most areas. Priority attention was also given to repairing schools and restoring normal operations at the islands' airports, harbors and communications facilities.

One serious challenge confronting the community was replacing residential housing since nearly 70% of homes on Saipan and Tinian had been totally destroyed or severely damaged by the storm. Many families were forced to live in hastily-repaired residences for several months.

In August, an emergency housing program was launched utilizing funding from the Office of Emergency Planning and the Trust Territory Government.

This program involved the construction of pre-fabricated wooden houses erected on concrete foundation slabs.

Over the next three months, local construction teams completed over 500 of these pre-fab buildings, known locally as "*Guma Haikyu*," in villages throughout the islands.

Although these buildings were intended to serve as temporary shelters, many remained in use for decades after the storm. A few can still be seen today.

Other projects completed in the post Typhoon Jean period included the all concrete Civic Center government complex, Marianas High School, and several clusters of new government residences called "Samoan Housing."

Learn more about local history during the upcoming 3rd Marianas History Conference to be held on Saipan from 4-6 September. Contact Humanities Council staff for more information about this upcoming event.



A home in Tanapag Village following Typhoon Jean. The missing roof has been covered by a tarp (photo courtesy of Dwight Ovitt).



Workers finish the roof on an emergency shelter or *Guma Haikyu* (University of Hawaii).