

As tide of World War II shifts, so does the fate of prisoners

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column we told of George Nelson's imprisonment at Bilibid prison hospital in Manila, Philippines, for 10 months while his wounds healed and of his later transfer to the notorious Cabanatuan Prison Camp where he arrived May 17, 1943.

The prison was at the terminus of the Manila railroad at the Sierra Madre Mountain range, about 6 miles east of the city of Cabanatuan.

With the tide of war favoring the Allies in 1944, the Japanese began transporting the prisoners from the Philippines to Japan, Korea and China.

Nelson left Manila for Japan on March 24, a 16-day voyage. He was somewhat lucky to be on one of the early transports as later ships increasingly came under attack from Allied planes and submarines, which were not aware the POWs were on board.

When I say he was somewhat lucky, I refer to stories of other "Hell Ships" as they were often referred to. In a biography titled "Twelve Hundred Days," Russell A. Grockett Sr., a survivor of the Bataan Death March and three years as a Japanese prisoner of war, described the following:

"The prisoners had endured months of hardships and deprivation in the POW camps and now they were ordered to prepare for a hazardous sea voyage. On Oct. 5, 1942, Russ and hundreds of other prisoners were taken from Cabanatuan to be loaded on prison ships. The boat Russ left on was the Tottori Maru.

"After being at sea for some time they were again attacked, by Dutch submarines.

"During the battle, the men became an uncontrollable mob, screaming and pounding against the sides of the ship. Even an animal can't be this confined for this long without going mad.

"Russ said he and his friend Diesinger, who was later to die in Manchuria, got up on their bunk, out of the way of the shoving, running, screaming men and opened a can of food they had been saving and began to eat. They figured that if they went into the sea they would need strength to try to survive.

“As they sat there eating, someone shouted, ‘The ship’s going to be blown up. Why are you just sitting there?’ Russ calmly replied, ‘Tell me which end will be hit by the torpedo and I’ll be on the other.’

“Luckily, their ship did not get hit although others did. Out of about eleven ships that left the Philippine islands over the months, only five made it through all the bombings. Thousands of POWs died.”

Rumors of mass executions had also been making the rounds of the prison camps and with good reason.

The Cabanatuan POWs’ fear of becoming victims of another large-scale massacre was well-founded. After the war, it became clear that there existed a high command order, “The Kill-All Order,” issued from the War Ministry in Tokyo, to kill all remaining POWs. This order, read in part:

“Whether they are destroyed individually or in groups, and whether it is accomplished by means of mass bombing, poisonous smoke, poisons, drowning, or decapitation, dispose of them as the situation dictates. It is the aim not to allow the escape of a single one, to annihilate them all, and not to leave any traces.”

Another prisoner of war who was in the same POW camps as George Nelson, Clarence Clough, wrote a three-piece series of his experiences for the Ladysmith News, Ladysmith, Wis., from Feb. 25, 1949, to March 11, 1949. In it, he tells of one such massacre:

“On December 20, 1943, as the project was nearing completion, I together with half of the others, was again loaded on a ship in the same fashion as before and was taken back to Cabanatuan. I later learned that when the American offensive started in the Philippines, the remaining 150 men were forced into air-raid shelters, gasoline was poured on them and they were burned alive. This story was vividly told in August 1945 issue of Liberty Magazine, by two of my best friends, Rufus W. Smith, of Hugh Springs, Texas, now located at Dallas, Texas, and Glenn McDole of Des Moines, Iowa, now located at Mt. Ayr, Iowa. They were two of the nine who escaped from the Palawan massacre.”

About his trip, Nelson recalls, “It was a regular freighter, and they put us in the cargo hold. There were about 300 of us down there. We didn’t even have room to lay down. We were lucky if we got to sit down. Actually, we were luckier than the men on some of the other ships. We had water running through troughs on the deck for us to do you-know-what. On other ships, the prisoners were locked in the hold and they would get a bucket. And when they got bombed, they wouldn’t open up the holds. The guys

got killed right down in that hold. They wouldn't let them out."

Nelson's transport arrived in Osaka, Japan, on April 10 and the POWs were further transported to Camp XII, located near the town of Hotachi, about 90 kilometers from Tokyo, on April 11. Camp XII was a military prison camp at the site of a copper mine in which the prisoners were forced to work under very undesirable conditions.

Nelson remained at that camp for four months, and then on Aug. 11, 1944, was transferred to Camp VIII-D in Ashio, where he remained until the end of the war.

Ashio was a copper mine opened in Japan in the 1600s. Chinese prisoners were the first POWs to arrive at the camp in 1940. Later, Koreans were used in 1942 and the first allied POWs started arriving around 1944.

About the first camp at Hotachi, Nelson says, "That was one we were glad to get out of. When we first got there, we were ordered to stand at attention in formation. The camp commander got up on the table, and I remember the words: 'And we will beat your country to its knees.' I will never forget those words. 'And you will stay here until we beat your country to its knees.'"

"And we thought to ourselves, 'The hell you will.' But it was a dreary day. It was cold. I think snow was blowing a little bit. It was cold and windy, and then you get a jolt like that, 'We will beat your country to its knees.'"

It was at this camp at Hotachi that the Japanese gave the prisoners each a small rice-paper book. Nelson used his book to record his daily experiences in the camp, titling his diary, "Starvation Days."

In his biography, Grokett wrote about starvation:

"Starvation was one of the major causes of death. Many lives were saved when the prisoners learned that the Japanese had soybeans, which they used for cattle food. An American doctor went to the Japanese and explained to them about the terrible dysentery, beriberi and malnutrition that the prisoners were suffering. When the Japanese asked what they needed, the doctor said, 'Protein, meat, fish, milk, cheese.' Then he said, 'You have a lot of soybeans, haven't you?' The commander said, 'You eat soybeans?' 'Yes,' replied the doctor, 'We prefer meat but we will eat soybeans.'

"So the Americans ate soybeans which were baked, boiled, fried, crushed and also made into bean curd. It got to the point where the prisoners would count the number of beans in each bowl of soup. If one man got five and another got six, all hell would break out."

George Nelson's diary was named, "Starvation Days," for good reason as we shall see in the final column of this series.

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I am grateful to the Rio Vista Museum for permission to quote from George Nelson's book, "Starvation Days." You can purchase the book from the Rio Vista Museum. There is so much more to the story than will appear in the columns. While you are at the museum, take the time to enjoy this fine home of our past. They are open on weekends from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.

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