

Rio Vista man survives war as a POW

By Jerry Bowen

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When we last left George Nelson of Rio Vista, he had been transferred by the Japanese to Camp XII on April 10, 1944, at Hotachi, near Tokyo where as a prisoner of war he was required to work in a copper mine.

He had received a small rice paper book of blank pages that he put to good use by starting a daily diary. His first entry on April 25, 1944, declared:

“Worked through the fifth day in the local copper mine. Living on top of a mountain, eating chiefly barley, rice and a few vegetables with a little fish and meat. Old shrapnel wound in foot causing me trouble due to the heavier work and deformed bones in foot, and probably remaining shrapnel.”

The majority of the time in the mine was spent picking up ore that had been blasted out of the sidewalls by the drillers. The Japanese would drill the holes and they would set the dynamite charges and blow out the ore. The prisoners would then pick it up and put it in a car. George described the tools they used; a kotsa and a conomee.

“A kotsa was a V-shaped piece of metal, sort of like a hoe, and a conomee was like a large, heavy dustpan with handles. We used the kotsa to scrape the ore into the conomee, and then dumped it into the ore cars. A good old American shovel would have done the job better, but we never saw one in the mines.”

They were given a quota of so many cars to fill in a day. Some of the men would try to fill the quota as fast as they could so they could relax the rest of the day. But that only worked one time. The Japanese then raised the quota to the previous day's level.

Nelson commented, “For a healthy man, the work would be a picnic, but when you're tired and you're hungry and you're beat, a lot of guys are sick, it's a different story. If we would have gotten good food, we would have come back pictures of health. Some places they would feed us soy beans, like a navy bean. You couldn't handle it. You couldn't digest it. You'd get diarrhea from it.”

Meanwhile, back in the United States, people were doing their part to support the war effort. The B-24 factory at Willow Run, Michigan had disgorged 150,000 planes since the beginning of the war. Liberty ships were being built at the rate of four per day and synthetic rubber production reached about 800,000 tons.

Food and gas was rationed to the public so the troops would be able to obtain needed supplies. The Red Cross attempted to distribute care packages to the prisoners of war, but most of it never got through to the men.

On a local note, Tech Sergeant Raymond Paolini, a Vacaville resident, received the Air Medal with four oak clusters while serving as a radio operator during May 24, 1944, raids over Germany.

Kwajalein, Eniwetok, and Wake Island were in the process of being taken by the allies.

With little knowledge of all this, the prisoners in the Japanese prison camps were slowly starving while being forced to labor for the Japanese war effort.

On May 2, 1944, Nelson's entry was, "Got off work this morning at sick call by Dr. Robinson. Soaking foot in boric acid solution again. Inspection made by Japanese Lieutenant Colonel from Tokyo. Heard our wage scale was ten, fifteen and twenty-five sen per day - imagine being that cheap. Got small rations of salt (tablespoon) from galley since Japanese won't ration us any."

The copper mines were a private business, but were supervised by the government. The Geneva Convention required that prisoners were to be paid a certain amount a day. On occasion, they paid them 10 sen a day, about the same as 10 American cents.

Later, during the production of his book, Nelson said, "I mean, I had money when I came back. Couldn't spend it, couldn't buy anything. The only thing that had any value was food or cigarettes."

As the days passed, the 1944 entries in the diary focused more and more on food. "May 17 - I came in from 'mucking' (filling cars with ore) at five fifteen today and walked up to the barracks in fog thick as pea soup. Had a pretty good day in the mine. Three of us mucked together and put out eleven cars, not bad at all for a change. It's been rainy and foggy all day. We had straight rice without barley for supper tonight, the first time since we arrived here. Also had mashed sweet spuds for chow.

"May 21 - Had two bowls sweetened lugao (watery rice) from galley, usual 'yasume (rest time)' ration. Added my Red Cross milk and sugar plus small leftover jam and milk from room Red Cross chow. Tasted almost like stateside oatmeal. Partial blackouts at night continue. Maybe they mean something or maybe just one of those things.

"May 30 - Memorial Day today ... sat down to a small porpoise steak. Never thought it could be eaten before but it tasted good and would I like to have about twice as much

three times a day. Oh, well, some day, steaks, steaks, and more steaks. Went to the camp hospital to see Mr. Reardon. Doing okay. There's been quite a little air activity the last few days.

"July 13 - The average weight per man now is 62 kilos (about 130 pounds), the lowest average of a group of Americans I've ever heard. Issued three cigarettes. Put out 424 cars in mine and sure was a rugged night. Men are passing out in mine every day from hunger and lack of nourishment.

"July 31 - The chow is getting scosh, scosh again, and everyone is hungry. Three cigarettes issued. Total of 386 cars today."

On Aug. 11, 1944, many of the prisoners were marched to Japanese military POW Camp VIII-D at Ashi, Japan to work in another copper mine.

"August 23, 1944 - Feel worn-out, tired and hungry all day. Tried to get worn-out shoes surveyed, got inside storeroom and got run out. Issued one Nip vitamin pill. Something is sure missing in this stuff we're eating. Everyone is getting sick and the beriberi. We get hardly any vegetables and no soy beans. Sure is getting rough. Today I have duty of carrying in carbide can (fuel for lamps). Menu tonight is: One bowl maize cooked with spuds, 'shadow' soup (water with a little bran and probably a green radish leaf) and a side dish amounting to about two tablespoons of spuds with a little sauce. Believe it or not this is a working man's ration (that is, a prisoner) who works hard in a copper mine every day."

As time passed some despair was beginning to set in, but there were clues that something was going on: More and more air raids could be heard in the distance. The war was going badly for the Japanese and President Truman ordered the atomic bombs to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

From August 12 to 15, 1945, Nelson noted that the Japanese were holding several hurried meetings and noticed many of them had been crying.

Nelson's diary ended with an Aug. 16-17, 1945, entry as follows: "Things are turning our way more and more. Worked on hill in morning cutting down brush and trees and breaking up ground. Afternoon 'yasume.' All prisoners relieved of all work for Japanese on 17th but officially 16th.

"Only Japanese and American officers will be saluted hereafter at tenko and otherwise. Japanese withdrew their store from our kitchen. Cigarettes are very scarce. Can buy anything with them, especially Chesters, Camels, and even Kentsies and stovepipes. Rumor of ten grams per meal increase of grain by Japanese."

The war was over and Nelson, USMC was a survivor! He went through Guam and Pearl Harbor before arriving in San Francisco on Oct. 2, 1945. At Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland, he spent the next eight months being treated for dysentery, worms and beriberi, had his teeth fixed and his tonsils out.

For his distinguished service during World War II, Nelson was awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. He remained in the Marine Corps until Aug. 1, 1962.

He returned to Rio Vista and went to work for Amerada Hess Corp. He married his wife, Tina, in 1948 and raised three sons Bill, Chuck and Tom. He retired in 1994 and unfortunately died last year. In reading the book, "Starvation Days," it makes the reader realize that we in America lead very good lives and much of it can be attributed to "Our Greatest Generation."

Today a new generation is hard at work keeping our homeland safe and secure. We all need to recognize them for their sacrifices and to respond to their needs whenever we can: they're worth it!

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