

American Prisoners of War: Massacre at Palawan

With the stunning defeats suffered by the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands in the early months of the Pacific War, thousands of Allied military personnel became prisoners of the Japanese. The Americans captured in the Philippines were initially detained in filthy, overcrowded POW camps near Manila, but eventually most were shipped to other parts of the Japanese empire as slave laborers.

Among the American prisoners remaining in the Philippines were 346 men who were sent 350 miles on August 1, 1942, from the Cabanatuan POW camps north of Manila, and from Bilibid Prison in Manila itself, to Puerto Princesa on the island of Palawan. Palawan is on the western perimeter of the Sulu Sea, and the POWs were shipped there to build an airfield for their captors. Although the prisoners' numbers fluctuated throughout the war, the brutal treatment they received at the hands of their Japanese guards was always the same. The men were beaten with pick handles, and kickings and slappings were regular daily occurrences. Prisoners who attempted to escape were summarily executed.

The Palawan compound was known as Camp 10-A, and the prisoners were quartered in several unused Filipino constabulary buildings that were sadly dilapidated. Food was minimal; each day, prisoners received a mess kit of wormy Cambodian rice and a canteen cup of soup made from camote vines boiled in water (camotes are a Philippine variant of sweet potatoes). Prisoners who could not work had their rations cut by 30 percent.

When six American POWs were caught stealing food in December 1942, they were tied to coconut trees, beaten, whipped with a wire and beaten again with a wooden club 3 inches in diameter. After this brutal episode, they were forced to stand at attention while a guard beat them unconscious, after which the prisoners were revived to undergo further beatings. A Japanese private named Nishitani punished two Americans, who were caught taking green papayas from a tree in the compound, by breaking their left arms with an iron bar.

Medical care was nonexistent, and one Marine, Pfc Glen McDole of Des Moines, Iowa, underwent an appendectomy with no anesthesia and no infection-fighting drugs. The prisoners suffered from malaria, scurvy, pellagra, beriberi and tropical ulcers, as well as from injuries suffered at their work or from the physical mistreatment perpetrated by their Japanese guards. When Red Cross supplies finally were received in January 1944, the enemy had removed the medicines and drugs from the parcels for their own use.

One American, J. D. Merritt, stated that fights broke out on occasion among U.S. POWs who were loading these supplies on the interisland steamers *Naga* and *Isla Princesa* in Manila for shipment to Palawan. It seems that some Americans were willing to rob their fellow prisoners and attempted to pilfer the Red Cross parcels. Merritt said that the men at Palawan 'came to

represent our 'little brothers' in that obviously their lot was much harder than ours. He also recalled that the POW dockworkers in Manila used to send notes of encouragement to the Palawan POWs and sometimes received notes back.

The Japanese unit in charge of the prisoners and airfield at Palawan was the 131st Airfield Battalion, under the command of Captain Nagayoshi Kojima, whom the Americans called the Weasel. Lieutenant Sho Yoshiwara commanded the garrison company, and Lieutenant Ryoji Ozawa was in charge of supply. Ozawa's unit had arrived from Formosa on July 10, 1942, and had previously been in Manchuria. Master Sergeant Taichi Deguchi was acting commander of the *kempeitai* at Palawan, the Japanese army's military police and intelligence unit. The *kempeitai* were much feared by anyone who fell into their hands because of their brutal tactics.

In September 1944, 159 of the American POWs at Palawan were returned to Manila. The Japanese estimated that the remaining 150 men could complete the arduous labor on the airfield, hauling and crushing coral gravel by hand and pouring concrete seven days a week. The total area to be cleared was approximately 2,400 yards by 225 yards, with the actual airstrip measuring 1,530 yards long and 75 yards wide. The men also repaired trucks and performed a variety of maintenance tasks in addition to logging and other heavy labor. Late in September, General Shiyoku Kou, in charge of all POWs in the Philippines, ordered the remaining 150 Americans returned to Manila, but that order was not carried out until mid-October, even though transportation was available.

An attack by a single American Consolidated B-24 Liberator bomber on October 19, 1944, sank two enemy ships and damaged several planes at Palawan. More Liberators returned on October 28 and destroyed 60 enemy aircraft on the ground. While American morale in the camp soared, the treatment of the prisoners by the Japanese grew worse, and their rations were cut. After initially refusing the prisoners' request, the Japanese reluctantly allowed the Americans to paint American Prisoner of War Camp on the roof of their barracks. This gave the prisoners some measure of protection from American air attacks. The Japanese then stowed their own supplies under the POW barracks.

U.S. forces under General Douglas MacArthur had successfully landed in the Philippines at Leyte on October 19. While this was not known to the prisoners, the daily sightings of American aircraft led them to believe that their deliverance was not far off. MacArthur also signed a directive to the Japanese commander in chief in the Philippines, Field Marshal Count Hisaichi Terauchi, warning him that his military command would be held responsible for the abuse of prisoners, internees and noncombatants. The directive incorporated phrases such as dignity, honor and protection provided by the rules and customs of war and violation of the most sacred code of martial honor. Leaflets to this effect were dropped by air on enemy positions throughout the Philippines on November 25, 1944.

The constant presence of Allied aircraft overhead caused the prisoners to construct three shelters, each 150 feet long and 4 feet high, for their own protection during air raids. The Japanese had ordered that the entrances at each end of the shelters be only large enough to admit one man at a time. The shelters were roofed with logs and dirt and were located on the beach side of the camp.

While not totally bombproof, they did offer a significant level of protection. There were also several shelter holes that could hold two or three men.

On December 14, Japanese aircraft reported the presence of an American convoy, which was actually headed for Mindoro, but which the Japanese thought was destined for Palawan. All prisoner work details were recalled to the camp at noon. Two American Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter aircraft were sighted, and the POWs were ordered into the air raid shelters. After a short time the prisoners re-emerged from their shelters, but Japanese 1st Lt. Yoshikazu Sato, whom the prisoners called the Buzzard, ordered them to stay in the area. A second alarm at 2 p.m. sent the prisoners back into the shelters, where they remained, closely guarded.

Suddenly, in an orchestrated and obviously planned move, 50 to 60 Japanese soldiers under Sato's leadership doused the wooden shelters with buckets of gasoline and set them afire with flaming torches, followed by hand grenades. The screams of the trapped and doomed prisoners mingled with the cheers of the Japanese soldiers and the laughter of their officer, Sato. As men engulfed in flames broke out of their fiery deathtraps, the Japanese guards machine gunned, bayoneted and clubbed them to death. Most of the Americans never made it out of the trenches and the compound before they were barbarously murdered, but several closed with their tormentors in hand-to-hand combat and succeeded in killing a few of the Japanese attackers.

Marine survivor Corporal Rufus Smith described escaping from his shelter as coming up a ladder into Hell. The four American officers in the camp, Lt. Cmdr. Henry Carlisle Knight (U.S. Navy Dental Corps), Captain Fred Brunie, Lieutenant Carl Mango (U.S. Army Medical Corps) and Warrant Officer Glen C. Turner, had their own dugout, which the Japanese also doused with gasoline and torched. Mango, his clothes on fire, ran toward the Japanese and pleaded with them to use some sense but was machine-gunned to death.

About 30 to 40 Americans escaped from the massacre area, either through the double-woven, 61½-foot-high barbed-wire fence or under it, where some secret escape routes had been concealed for use in an emergency. They fell and/or jumped down the cliff above the beach area, seeking hiding places among the rocks and foliage. Marine Sergeant Douglas Bogue recalled: Maybe 30 or 40 were successful in getting through the fence down to the water's edge. Of these, several attempted to swim across Puerto Princesa's bay immediately, but were shot in the water. I took refuge in a small crack among the rocks, where I remained, all the time hearing the butchery going on above. They even resorted to using dynamite in forcing some of the men from their shelters. I knew [that] as soon as it was over up above they would be down probing among the rocks, spotting us and shooting us. The stench of burning flesh was strong. Shortly after this they were moving in groups among the rocks dragging the Americans out and murdering them as they found them. By the grace of God I was overlooked.

Eugene Nielsen of the 59th Coast Artillery observed, from his hiding place on the beach, a group of Americans trapped at the base of the cliff. He saw them run up to the Japs and ask to be shot in the head. The Japs would laugh and shoot or bayonet them in the stomach. When the men cried out for another bullet to end their misery, the Japs continued to make merry of it all and left them there to suffer. Twelve men were killed in this fashion. Nielson hid for three hours. As the Japanese were kicking American corpses into a hole, Nielson's partially hidden body was

uncovered by an enemy soldier, who yelled to his companions that he had found another dead American. Just then the Japanese soldiers heard the dinner call and abandoned their murderous pursuit in favor of hot food. Later, as enemy soldiers began to close in on his hiding place, Nielson dived into the bay and swam underwater for some distance. When he surfaced, approximately 20 Japanese were shooting at him. He was hit in the leg, and his head and ribs were grazed by bullets. Even though he was pushed out to sea by the current, Nielson finally managed to reach the southern shore of the bay.

Radioman 1st Class Joseph Barta, who had worked in his family's poultry business before joining the Navy in 1934, later testified: At first I did not get into my shelter. But a Jap officer drew his saber and forced me to get under cover. About five minutes later, I heard rifle and machine-gun fire. Not knowing what was happening, I looked out and saw several men on fire and being shot down by the Japs. One of them was my friend Ron Hubbard. So I and several other fellows in the hole went under the fence. Just as I got outside the fence, I looked back and saw a Jap throw a torch in the other end of our hole, and another one threw in a bucket of gasoline.

The slaughter continued until dark. Some of the wounded Americans were buried alive by the Japanese. Men who attempted to swim to safety across the bay were shot by soldiers on the shore or on a Japanese landing barge commanded by Master Sgt. Toru Ogawa. Glen McDole, the Marine who had survived the appendectomy without anesthesia, hid in the camp garbage dump with two other men. One of them, a military policeman named Charles Street, made a run for the bay as the Japanese closed in and was shot dead. The second, Erving August Evans of the 59th Coast Artillery, stood up and said, All right, you Jap bastards, here I am and don't miss me. He was shot and his body set afire. Somehow the enemy missed McDole, who later witnessed a party of five or six Japs with an American who had been wounded, poking him along with bayonets. I could see the bayonets draw blood when they poked him. Another Jap came up with some gasoline and a torch, and I heard the American beg them to shoot him and not to burn him. The Jap threw some gasoline on his foot and lit it, and the other Japs laughed and poked him with their bayonets. Then they did the same thing to his other foot and to his hand. When the man collapsed, the Japs then threw the whole bucket of gasoline over him, and he burst into flames.

When the Japanese ended their search for the surviving prisoners, there were still a few undiscovered Americans alive. Several prisoners hid in a sewer outlet. When the Japanese shone lights into the pipe, the POWs ducked under the water and were not discovered. After nightfall, they attempted to swim the bay, which was 5 miles across at that point. Several of them were successful, including Rufus Smith, who was badly bitten on his left arm and shoulder by a shark but managed to reach the opposite shore. Of the 146 enlisted men and four officers held in the Palawan prison camp, only 11 men survived the massacre on December 14, 1944. Most of the survivors swam across the bay and were rescued by the inmates of Palawan's Iwahig Penal Colony, where several of the officials in charge were involved with the local resistance movement.

Another U.S. Marine, Pfc Donald Martyn, also swam the bay successfully but was never seen again after reaching land and turning north, in the opposite direction of the path taken by his

surviving comrades. Filipino civilian prisoners at the colony, who were interned during the Japanese occupation of their homeland, fed and clothed the American POWs and contacted local guerrilla leaders on their behalf. The guerrillas escorted the Americans down the coast to Brooke's Point, where they were evacuated by a U.S. Navy seaplane to Leyte. There they told their story to U.S. military authorities.

Barta, who described the Japanese *kempeitai* as the meanest bastards that ever walked the face of the earth, wandered the jungle for 10 days after swimming the bay. At one point, he came within 3 feet of a Japanese sentry on a jungle path before making his escape. Although wounded in that encounter, he managed to reach the Iwahig Colony, where he was hidden in a well. A local witch doctor treated his wounds by spreading a solution of boiled guava leaves over them with a gray chicken feather, accompanied by much dancing and hollering. He was reunited with Bogue and McDole, and they were ultimately evacuated from Brooke's Point.

While there were no civilian witnesses to the massacre of unarmed prisoners at Palawan, after the war several Filipinos reported to American authorities that the Japanese officers from Captain Nagayoshi Kojima's command and personnel from the *kempeitai* held a celebration to commemorate the event the same night that it occurred. Civilians who questioned the absence of the prisoners were given divergent replies—in some instances they were told that the POWs were all killed in American air raids, in other instances that the prisoners had been transferred to another camp.

The thoughts of one Japanese soldier regarding the atrocity were recorded in a diary left behind at the camp. December 15—Due to the sudden change of situation, 150 prisoners of war were executed. Although they were prisoners of war, they truly died a pitiful death. The prisoners who worked in the repair shop really worked hard. From today on I will not hear the familiar greeting, 'Good morning, sergeant major.' January 9—After a long absence, I visited the motor vehicle repair shop. Today, the shop is a lonely place. The prisoners of war who were assisting in repair work are now just white bones on the beach washed by the waves. Furthermore, there are numerous corpses in the nearby garage and the smell is unbearable. It gives me the creeps.

After Palawan was liberated by the 186th Infantry Regiment of the 41st Division, the men of the Army's 601st Quartermaster Company, under Major Charles Simms, excavated the burned and destroyed dugouts to properly inter the dead Americans. The unit reported 79 individual burials during March 1945 and many more partial burials. Its report stated: 26 skeletons, some still with flesh on the bones, were found piled four and five high in one excavation. The skulls of these skeletons either had bullet holes or had been crushed by some blunt instrument. These were the dead from the compound thrown into the shelters by the Japanese after the massacre. The report also stated: Most of the bodies were found [in the shelters] huddled together at a spot furthest away from the entrance. This would indicate that they were trying to get as far away from the fire as possible. In two dugouts bodies were found in a prone position, arms extended with small conical holes at the fingertips showing that these men were trying to dig their way to freedom.

Japanese atrocities against Allied military and civilian personnel after capture were well-documented by war's end. Although the famous Nuremberg Trials held in Europe received the lion's share of interest, especially from the world press, the Military Tribunal for the Far East

managed to capture the Americans' attention. However heinous the crimes of the Nazi government, they rarely involved Americans, while the Japanese were brutal and criminal in their treatment of captured Americans and other Allied military personnel.

MacArthur essentially controlled the War Crimes Trials in the Pacific theater. On August 2, 1948, the Palawan Massacre trial began in Yokohama, Japan. On trial were several staff officers who had exhibited criminal liability through their failure to take command responsibility. Thus, most of the accused Japanese had very little direct involvement with the atrocities perpetrated at Puerto Princesa. However, due to the chain of command, they were deemed responsible. Their attitude was described as callous indifference to the fate of the prisoners in their hands. Of certain import in the trial was the introduction of a written order sent to each Japanese branch camp commander in May 1944. It stated that during an attack on a branch camp by the Allies, the main force shall keep strict guard over POWs, and if there is any fear that the POWs would be retaken due to the tide of battle turning against us, decisive measures must be taken without returning a single POW. In hindsight, there is very little doubt regarding the true meaning of this order to camp commanders.

Several of the American survivors of the Palawan massacre were willing to testify against their former tormentors and returned to the Far East for the trial. Under questioning, Marine Sergeant Bogue admitted that he had physically struck one of the accused, Superior Private Tomisaburo Sawa, several times while the Japanese soldier was confined in his prison cell after the war. When asked why, Bogue replied, For the same reason you're going to hang him! But that was not to be.

At the beginning of the trial, the prosecution announced its intention to show that Lt. Gen. Seiichi Terada, commanding general of the 2nd Air Division headquartered in the Philippines, radioed instructions on the evening of December 13 to the 131st Airfield Battalion at Palawan to annihilate the 150 prisoners. Accordingly, the Japanese soldiers involved were issued 30 rounds of ammunition each, and the battalion commander announced to the men that due to an imminent Allied invasion, the prisoners regretfully were to be killed. Next, Lieutenant Sho Yoshiwara ordered fix bayonets and load five rounds (the magazine capacity of the standard Japanese infantry rifle), after which the massacre ensued.

Unfortunately, Lieutenant Yoshiwara was nowhere to be found after the war ended; nor was Captain Kojima, the prison camp commandant. In fact, it was impossible to find almost anyone from the Palawan garrison. The battle for the Philippines had been costly for both sides, but especially for the Japanese, who lost 80,000 men. There is no doubt that many of the soldiers who participated in the Palawan massacre died in battle or from disease. Many just disappeared in the hostile atmosphere engendered by the Japanese defeat.

Several weeks had passed between Japan's agreement to surrender to the Allies and the actual signing of the surrender document aboard the battleship USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. During that time, millions of Japanese wartime documents were destroyed, and most certainly many Japanese soldiers and civilians, who knew they would be held accountable for their actions against both soldiers and civilians, disappeared from view. The staff

of the Allied War Crimes Tribunal accused the Japanese Demobilization Bureau of protecting these alleged war criminals from prosecution, but if they were, Allied threats had little effect.

The war was over, and Americans wanted to get on with their lives. The Japanese, who to this day do not accept responsibility for the initiation of hostilities in 1941, were reluctant to reveal any damaging information about their citizenry and military that could be concealed. At the same time, the U.S. government was anxious to prepare Japan for its new role as part of the defense system against the expansion of international communism, and the fate of 150 American soldiers caught up in the savagery of war was certainly not a political priority. Only the few survivors remained to beseech their government that justice be done.

In the end, six of the Japanese defendants were acquitted of the charges against them related to the massacre. The other 10 were given sentences ranging from two years' imprisonment to death. The death sentence for *kempeitai* Sergeant Taichi Deguchi was commuted to confinement and hard labor for 30 years on July 19, 1950, by none other than MacArthur himself.

On March 23, 1949, Toru Ogawa, a company commander in the 131st Airfield Battalion who was charged with abusing 300 POWs and causing the death of 138 prisoners by ordering subordinates to massacre them by surprise assault and treacherous violence, and killing them by various methods, received his sentence of two years' hard labor, reduced by 91½ months for time served.

Tomisaburo Sawa, the prisoner struck by Sergeant Bogue while in jail, admitted in sworn testimony that he had participated in the Palawan massacre by killing at least three American POWs. On March 29, 1949, he received a sentence of five years' hard labor, reduced by 131½ months due to time served.

For all of the Japanese military personnel still imprisoned for their barbarous treatment of captured and interned Americans during World War II, liberation day was December 31, 1958, barely 13 years after the end of the war. At that time, any war criminals still in custody were released from Tokyo's Sugamo Prison in a general amnesty. While all was certainly not forgiven, especially by those Americans who had survived brutal captivity at the hands of the Japanese, it certainly was officially forgotten by the American government.

In 1952, the remains of 123 of the Palawan victims were transferred to the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery near St. Louis, Mo., where they lie in a mass grave, honored today by the few who remember.

This article was written by V. Dennis Wrynn and originally appeared in the November 1997 issue of *World War II* magazine.