

Ghost Soldiers (WWII's greatest rescue) by Hampton Sides (2002)

The US had “won” the Philippines from Spain during the Spanish-American War of 1898. Soon the US built them schools, roads, bridges, etc. and sent teachers & missionaries to help. The death rate of the POWs held in the German (& Italian) camps was 4%, The Japanese camps were 27%. It's a known fact of war that rations mysteriously shrink as they make their way to the front. The Japanese did not have much fuel so their soldiers walked. When Japanese first invaded the Philippines, they insulted them in many ways, but one in particular was the problem they had of slapping.

1942 US soldiers on Luzon were losing to the Japanese. Some from the jungle warfare, but most were starving waiting for more supplies. But they were not coming. The Naval fleet in Pearl Harbor was destroyed and President Roosevelt promised supplies he couldn't deliver. Roosevelt was sending most of his power to fight Hitler. MacArthur pulled out of the Philippines, leaving his 50,000 men; who had to surrender. The Japanese had to get the POWs north & Japanese soldiers south very quickly since the Japanese were trying to gain control of the harbor. The Japanese were not aware of the number of soldiers, let alone their condition (starved & diseased). 750 US & 5000 locals died on the “death march” while marching the 75 miles to a camp intended for 9000. 10% died there. In two months, 1500 Americans & 15,000 Filipinos were buried in mass graves at Camp O'Donnell. Most died of malaria, dysentery, pellagra, dehydration, beriberi & malnutrition or starvation.

During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 the Imperial Army treated their POWs with goodwill. But the Imperial Army chief of staff, Sugiyama, wanted results and didn't want POWs around if they were of no use. The best Japanese Army was at the front lines & the dregs were guards of the POWs, as some of them like the sense of power. The 14Dec44 Japanese guards ordered 150 POWs into an air-raid shelter and set it on fire. Any trying to escape were shot. But a few had secretly escaped out of a trap door and swam across the bay (somehow missing the search boats) where they were rescued by local sympathizers.

Claire Phillips was one particular US informant ran a nightclub for Japanese officers & used the profits to help POWs with food & meds. Before she was eventually murdered, she saved thousands of US lives and cost thousands of Japanese theirs from her intelligence. Somehow she even smuggled in parts to make a short-wave radio to hear the American news (not Japanese propaganda). The POWs felt forgotten, but Christmas of '42 they let the Red Cross come and give them care packages (pilfered by the guards). Some prisoners past time with their imagination. One man in the mental ward could broadcast baseball games play-by-play. Another built an imaginary house (which he actually built it when he got home).

Dec '44 the prison guards left the 500 sick POWs and told them if they left they would be shot. The POWs raided the camp for any food left behind and to their amazement they even found a roasted pig in the oven. In the next month their health returned from the change in diet. The Japanese troops were retreating and many started to occupy the camp again.

9Jan45 MacArthur landed on the shores on Luzon, Philippines (Manila Bay is the finest natural harbor in Asia) with 280,000 soldiers. The Japanese were now in retreat and realized they

would die on that island, but wanted to delay the American attack of their homeland. While moving toward Manila the Americans heard the rest of the POWs were soon to be killed. 3000 of the 9000 died at Cabanatuan Camp, the healthy POWs were already evacuated to other islands; only 500 of the weakest were left. 120 US Rangers volunteered for the mission, and another 200 local guerrillas.

The raid would have to be delayed 24-hours due to a mass retreat of the Japanese on the road in front of the camp. 8000 Japanese soldiers were 4-miles west of the camp & 1000 only a mile to the east. The Rangers had air recon photos and field verified info from the Alamo scouts. The local guerrillas set up road blocks past the camp. They had to crawl on the bellies through the rice paddies around the camp. The guards were distracted by US planes. Some Rangers crawled in a ditch around to each of the towers and took out guards while the main group stormed the gate and went straight to the Japanese's barracks & equipment. There was 25-minutes after the sun went down before the moon came out & this is when they struck. Many POWs thought it was a trick from the Japanese. The guerrillas blew up the bridge & used a bazooka to take out tanks & trucks; and gunned down 500 Japanese. The Rangers had to make field stretchers out of their riffles & shirts. The locals donated their ox & carts to transport the injured the 15 miles to safety of the "life march". They sent guerrillas back the next day to recover camp documents, diaries, etc. & found one deaf POW who was in the outhouse and missed it all. Only two POWs & two rangers died on this mission. The POWs were given a hero's welcome as their ship returned to San Francisco.

Quotes:

"I shall return." (General MacArthur – March 1942 to the Philippines)

"There are no atheists in foxholes." (Chaplain Cummings – WWII)

"Every animal is most vicious when he is backed in a corner."

"We are all ghosts now, but once we were men." (POW diary)