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THE HELL SHIPS

By 1944, the Japanese military had utilized more and more of Japan's economy. The standard of living had decreased noticeably. The American submarine blockade prevented raw materials from entering the country, and American bombers were hitting the industrial centers.

Thousands of POWs had been brought to Japan as replacements for the labor force. The first Bataan prisoners were shipped to Japan as early as the summer of 1942. Shipments continued on a sporadic basis for the next two years and then increased as the Japanese sought to get the prisoners to Japan before they could be liberated in the Philippines.

The POWs shoveled coal, pushed dump cars, fed and cleaned blast furnaces, and unloaded and loaded ships and barges. They worked in mines, foundries, steel plants, dry docks, and piers. They worked in rain, snow, heat, and freezing temperatures without adequate clothing, food, or medical care.

Too many prisoners were put on too few ships for the move to Japan. The treatment aboard ship coupled with the prisoners' physical and mental condition caused large numbers of deaths and earned the antiquated freighters the name of "hell ships." These hell ships sailed in convoy with other Japanese shipping with no external markings. American submarines and aircraft attacked the convoys and struck several such freighters. The *Arisan Maru*, for example, when sunk by an American submarine, took hundreds of American prisoners to their death.

The last detail of prisoners from Cabanatuan left for Japan in early September 1944, aboard the *Orokyu Maru*. Capt. Marion Lawton, a survivor, would later state: "Inside the hold there was madness, claustrophobia, and total darkness. Then there was the heat, the desperate need for air. The temperature had to be near 120 degrees. Men became desperate. They went mad. Some drank urine."[1]

Pfc. Lee Davis, another survivor, recalls, "The men went literally mad. I saw Americans scrape sweat off the steel sides of the ship and try to drink it. Men would suck the blood from cuts on other men."[2]

As many of the men went mad and attacked one another, a Catholic priest, Father Bill Cummings, began to speak in a strong, clear voice. "Have faith," he said. "Believe in yourselves and in the goodness of one another." The men became quiet. "Know that in yourselves and in those that stand near you, you see the image of God. For mankind is in the image of God." Sanity slowly returned to many of the men.[3]

On the morning of December 14, U.S. planes found the convoy and the *Oryoku Maru* off the northern coast of Luzon. The ship was bombed and strafed and started to sink. Many of the POWs were injured or killed by the shrapnel and ricocheting bullets. Others were killed by the Japanese guards as they tried to escape from the flooding hold. The POWs who did survive swam to shore where more Japanese were waiting for them. The POWs were moved by truck to San Fernando which was well remembered from the earlier death march. Near the end of December, the POWs were moved to the port area again and were loaded aboard the *Enoura Maru* and the *Brazil Maru*. The *Enoura Maru* had unloaded a cargo of horses and the floor of the hold was covered in horse manure, urine, and flies. The POWs were not permitted to clean the hold prior to departure.

The convoy arrived in Formosa on New Year's eve. Shortly

thereafter, the ship was attacked by U.S. aircraft and mortally damaged. Half of the 600 men in one hold were killed during the attack. About January 12, the survivors were put aboard the *Brazil Maru* and the voyage continued. "Men died like flies. Their bodies were stacked against the bulkhead like cordwood. It was so cold the deck was covered with ice. We had no clothes, having just left the tropics," recalled Pfc. Lee Davis.[4]

On January 30, the *Brazil Maru* reached Moji, Japan, the same day that American troops recaptured Clark Field on Luzon. Only 497 prisoners survived the ill-fated trip to Japan. Seventy-six of these POWs would die in Moji, too ill to be moved. About 1,198 POWs died on the voyage. For many of the 421 survivors, there still remained yet another trip, a later move to Korea or to Manchuria in April 1945, if they survived their hard labor in Japan.

A rough count suggests that more than 5,000 Americans died when their hell ships were attacked enroute to Japan.

More than 175 camps were established in Japan to house POWs who would do hard labor so long as they remained alive. The work was hard, the hours long, the food inadequate, and the living conditions harsh. Typically, the men were forced to work 12 hours per day for 10 days before earning any kind of break. If work quotas were not met, there was no time off and the men were punished.

By 1945, the surviving prisoners entered their fourth year of captivity and chronic starvation. Perhaps more important than their physical deterioration, which reduced most of the prisoners to walking skeletons, was the erosion of the human spirit. Their cruel treatment had worked on their minds and spirits for so long that their source and sense of community had unraveled. Unable to prevail against the enemy, it was all anyone could do just to survive. Life had been brutal since they were captured but was becoming even more so as the Japanese themselves found life more and more difficult. The prisoners were kept alive for one day at a time so long as they continued to work. When the war ended, survivors of

Bataan were found in some 15 work camps in Japan, at Hoten, Manchuria, and Jinsen, Korea.

General Wainwright is being forced to broadcast his surrender instructions over station KZRH, on May, 7, 1942.

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