Capture and Death March

"A terrible silence settled over Bataan about noon on April 9," remembered General Jonathan Wainwright, the man who had assumed MacArthur's command after he left for Australia. On that day, Luzon Force commander Gen. Edward King, without informing Wainwright, surrendered to the Japanese. Numbering more than 70,000 (Filipinos and Americans), it was the largest American army in history to surrender. Some refused to become prisoners and fled, joining a significant resistance movement which grew to perhaps 180,000 guerrillas throughout the Philippines.

While the Japanese pounded Corregidor (which would surrender on May 6), they led their prisoners on a forced march out of Bataan. Before the "Death March" was over, those who survived would march more than sixty miles through intense heat with almost no water or food. Somewhere between 5,000 and 11,000 never made it to Camp O'Donnell, where fresh horrors awaited.

Edwin Ramsey: On the 9th [of April] we noticed a cessation of bombing and strafing of artillery. The morning of the 10th, there were a number of escapees from the town of Mariveles --soldiers who did not want to surrender, who reported to the squadron commander, who was with my platoon, that surrender had been made the day before, on the

9th. The Squadron Commander told us...we're missing in action at the moment. You have the choice of going down and surrendering or taking off and trying to get out of Bataan. Joe Barker -- Captain Barker, who was Troop Commander of the unit I was with, Troop G of the 26th Cavalry -- and I had already discussed that we were not going to surrender. So, we were able to grab a couple of cans of salmon and and a couple of hands full of rice and we took off and went directly up Mount Mariveles ...to the main line of resistance, which was the Pilar-Bagac road. When we got to that, we crawled up to that, during the late afternoon and waited until nightfall.

At that time, the Japanese troops were moving across there, in a steady stream. So we timed them and waited until we could see that there was an interval between the troops that we're passing and the ones that were following, and it was already night time. In between one of the units we dashed across the road and laid down in the high grass on the other side and waited until daylight, the beginning of daylight, in the morning. It's fortunate that we didn't try to go on because right within a matter of 50 yards of where we were, there was a large unit of Japanese asleep and we could have wandered right into them. But, at any event, we crawled on through there and made our way on up the peninsula, paralleling what had become the "Death March," about one kilometer in from the road.

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Richard Gordon: I didn't come down with a surrender group. They caught me actually two days after the surrender took place. First thing I did was receive a good beating. And everything I had in my wallet, in my pockets was taken from me. And as I was marched down that road, where they captured me, I passed my battalion commander, Major James Ivy, and he had been tied to a tree and he was stripped to the waist and he was just covered with bayonet holes. He was dead obviously. And he had bled profusely. He had been bayonetted by many, many bayonets. And that's when I knew we had some troubles on our hands. We were in for deep trouble. And they brought us down into a staging area and put me in with the rest of the thousands that were assembled on the side of the road, and that's where I spent my first night.

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Alfred X. Burgos: Well, when Bataan surrendered, they gathered all of us in Mariveles, Bataan, and they told us that we had to march all the way to San Fernando Pampanga because we were all going to be accounted for and taken to prison camps. Of course, the Americans that were there were made to walk on the right side of the street to distinguish them from the Filipinos, and on the left side were all the Filipino troops. Unfortunately, as you see me, I was mistaken very many times as not being a Filipino. And always I was yanked out and put in the American group, and there of course I got slapped so many times for crossing, but I knew very well, inside of me I said, "I am sure they are going to treat the Americans in a worse way than they're going to treat the Filipinos." And all along they started saying, "Well, you Filipinos, you know, you should have been on our side, why are you fighting for these Americans, anyway. There is no chance of them winning this war."

Interviewer: Did you witness cruelty on the Death March?

Alfred X. Burgos: Oh, yes. For example, if you should not want to walk anymore -- let's say you were tired -- well, I've seen them shoot walking prisoners of war -- actually be shot. Or if you tried to get food which was thrown by the civilians to the walking military, the Filipino military, that not only endangered you, but the one who was giving the food or throwing the food to you...Well, those that they could catch, they'd just shoot them there.... If you could not keep up with the group in the Death March, rather than slow the Death March, they'd get rid of you by shooting you.... Oh, they bayoneted people, they shot people, and if they think that you were delaying the Death March, you're dead.

Interviewer: Did you see anybody else die or get killed?

Richard Gordon: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. A number of times. As we were marching out of Bataan, men were very desperate for water. And they would break ranks and the Japanese wouldn't tolerate that. And they'd run to the side of the road to get some water. And along the side of the road would be caribou wallows, which were puddles of water that the caribou used to wallow in ...so they'd keep away flies and mosquitos. And the Americans and the Filipinos both would actually lap up that water like a kitten would lap up milk. And of course the water was contaminated. So many of them became very ill as a result of drinking that. Several who broke ranks ...would be shot by the Japanese who were part of that detail. I saw a beheading of a Filipino who had broke ranks and ran for that type of water. So killings, yes, we saw a number of them along that march at different places.

...But one of the problems we had on that march was the lack of discipline among the troops, the American and Filipino troops. Nobody knew anybody. And because of that, that caused many problems. As an example, I volunteered for a detail to carry an injured officer who had

broken a leg. And we had four people carrying that litter. We went so far and we couldn't get a soul to replace us and give us a break and let someone else take over. We carried that gentleman all day long in some of the hottest weather I've ever been in. And when it came night time, everyone went their own different way. Nobody would, would relieve us. So that man was left lying alongside the road. I never knew what happened to him either. The lack of discipline on the part of the troops led to much of this.

Interviewer: What was the Death March like?

Leon Beck: It depends on the guards you had over you. Some of the guards were not too abusive and some were very abusive. They would harass you, they would make you line up at daylight, get in a column of fours, usually 100 to 125 men, in a column of fours and keep you standing at attention until the sun came up and got real hot.... They would start you double-timing until the line got stretched out. The sick, lame and lazy, we called them, fell back. Then, they'd close you up again and they might keep you standing another hour in that hot sun.... There are ways you can rest one leg and shift your weight, it's not too noticeable and you can slough off and rest a bit. But, if they caught you at it, it meant a butt stroke with a rifle or a beating over the head, and the people that fell down and didn't get up, you'd hear a shot fired and you'd look back and there lays a body behind you. But they wouldn't let you go back and take care of him, even at the artesian wells, when the prisoners would break and run for the water. They'd shoot indiscriminately into the crowd and some got shot and laid there. You couldn't go take care of them ...At night, they put us in barbed wire enclosures, just a single string of barbed wire around the trees and they'd herd you in there. There was no latrine facilities, you defecated right where you were and it got pretty bad and stinky come morning and you couldn't walk around. You had to stay there. Because of the mess, everybody was sick with malaria and dysentery....

Some, seeing that the Japanese were not going to abide by the Geneva Convention in treating their prisoners, escaped into the jungles of Bataan. Most joined the guerrilla movement.

Leon Beck: I don't think there's any glory in being a prisoner of war, and I'd made up my mind, when it looked desperate ...I told everybody: "I'm not going to march in the prison camp. If I have to die, I'm going to die in the attempt or I'll die free. But, I'm not going to go in prison camp, no glory in being a prisoner." We were taught [that] you had a moral, legal, and ethical responsibility if you were ever captured, that you should make an attempt to escape and if that attempt was successful, you had to continue to resist to your enemy, until such time as you could re-join friendly forces. That's the way it was taught to us, every time they read the Articles of War to us. So, I've tried to fulfill that. I enlisted voluntarily and I felt I had a responsibility and I tried to fulfill it.

Interviewer: How did you escape?

Beck: The road that we were marching on was the main road from Manila all the way into Bataan, to Baguio, which was the summer capital. And, as we came in to the town of Guagua, there was a tide river, that paralleled the road. And nobody would go with me, I'd been begging for many days for people to attempt an escape with me. And, they just flat refused.... [Finally] I said "hit it." I just rolled off of the road and got into the edge of the river and there's a lot of palmetto brush and weeds and one thing or another growing and as soon as the group marched on past me, and got a ways down the road, and out of sight and there wasn't anything in sight, coming up the road, I went up swam and waded across that river and got out into a cut rice field and I could see a shack over there.