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PALAWAN BARRACKS

The island of Palawan, on which one of the Japanese camps for American prisoners of war was located, is a narrow strip of land running southwest in the South China and Sulu Seas, just opposite the Occidental Negros Islands. The only village of any size on the island is the village of Puerto Princess, on the east coast.

The Japanese seized and occupied Palawan in the very early days of the campaign in the Philippines. In 1942 they decided to enlarge the airfield on the island, with the aid of American prisoner of war labor. In Sept 1942, therefore, a detail of approximately 400 American prisoners of war was sent from Cabanatuan to Puerto Princess. Later, in July 1943, 150 of this number, most of them too ill to work, were shipped back to Bilibid. Those who were left were joined in Aug of that year by another detail of some 70 men, also from Cabanatuan. There were then roughly 350 prisoners in the permanent work detail on Palawan.

Housing--The prisoners in this work detail were housed in Puerto Princess, in an old Filipino constabulary barracks, an ancient building in a sad state of disrepair, surrounded by a double row of barbed wire. The Americans, finding that the overhead and the docks were in good condition, immediately busied themselves with making the repairs most necessary to insure them reasonably habitable quarters, piping in water and constructing a galley, and soon, as one prisoner put it, they "settled down into somewhat of an organization." The Japanese did not supply any bedding, and the prisoners were forced to sleep on dirt or cement floors, most of them without covering except for the few who had been fortunate enough to hand on to a blanket throughout their numerous shifts from one prison camp to another.

Sanitation--Sanitary accommodations were of the most primitive sort--indeed, almost entirely lacking--but the Americans, having, as one of their number said, "learned our lesson in the first days of our capture," wasted no time before seeing to it that toilet and bathing facilities were made available to them.

Food--At first the food, according to reports of various prisoners, was fairly good, although far from sufficient in quantity, considering the heavy type of labor the men were expected to do. The interpreter informed the men that any time they had a complaint or a suggestion about the food that would serve to better conditions they would inform him, and he would convey it to the commander, who would then take steps to remedy the situation. There is no evidence at hand to show whether this plan was actually carried out, however.

In Sept 1944 a new commander took charge of the camp. One of his first acts was to order a cut in rations. Previously each prisoner had received 1 level mess kit of rice every day, besides approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ canteen of soup made from potato vines boiled in salt and water. Now, under the new order, their daily rice ration was cut to $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of a level mess kit. About once a month they were given some carabao bones, which they boiled to make soup. (The Japanese kept the carabao meat for themselves.) Occasionally the diet was varied with a few vegetables.

Clothing--The Japanese supplied no clothing at all for the prisoners on Palawan. The only clothing the men had for the entire length of their stay on the island was what they brought with them when they came; and inasmuch as most of this they had been wearing when they were first captured on Bataan or Corregidor, it was soon completely worn out. Within a few months more than 50% of the men were working practically naked, and without shoes for their feet.

Medical Supplies--At no time during the entire period of almost $2\frac{1}{2}$ years, from Sept 1942 until their liberation early in 1945, did the Americans get any medical attention at all from the Japanese, or any medicine except a little quinine. Once, in Jan 1944, some supplies were received from the American Red Cross, but the Japanese opened them and took out practically all the drugs, such as morphine, surgical anesthetics, etc., leaving only a few bandages and other supplies, including some sulfa drugs. Fortunately for the prisoners, though, the Japanese doctors apparently either didn't recognize the sulfa drugs for what they were, or else did not know how to use them, for they turned them over, along with the bandages, to the American doctors.

Work--As has been stated before, the American prisoners were brought to Palawan chiefly for the purpose of helping to enlarge the Iwahig airfield, a huge rock-and-gravel structure enclosed by barbed wire, designed to handle plane operations even during the rainy season. This project, which the Japanese had originally envisaged as a 3 months' job, too 2½ years to complete. The prisoners began work on it 8 Aug 1942. They were given axes, picks and shovels, and first set to the task of clearing a jungle area 220 meters long & 210 meters wide. The Japanese told the prisoners many different stories about what this clearing was to be, but, in the words of 1 of the men, "there was no doubt in our minds that it was going to be an airfield."

The job was a hard one. All day long the men worked out in the blazing sun, with almost no water to drink. Some of the men would fill their canteens with water before they left for work in the morning, and refill them at noon, but even so this did not give them enough water to quench the terrible thirst engendered by the heavy exertion and the heat.

American prisoners crushed the rock that was used in the construction of the airfield, and Filipino laborers were used at Iwan to load trucks with gravel, which was then brought to the airfield by American truck drivers. At last, in Aug 1943, the field itself was almost completed, and from that time on until the end of their stay in Palawan the detail of prisoners who had been working on the airfield proper was engaged in installing concrete runways on the field.

Besides the work detail employed on the airfield project, there were other details of prisoners assigned to such tasks as operating the prison camp, and building and improving the roads between Puerta Princesa and Tapol. After the bombing of the air strips on Palawan by American Air Forces, details of American prisoners were set to hauling broken concrete from the runways, and building revetements and dispersal areas for the Japanese as a protection against future Allied air raids. Other prisoners were employed at building fox holes for the Japanese in the vicinity of the guard barracks and guard shacks.

An amusing sidelight on some of the tricks engaged in by the American prisoners at Palawan to outwit their captors is offered by the following incident recounted by Pfc Edwin A. Petry, an Air Corps mechanic with the 7th Material Squadron:

...From Sept 1944 [he says] until the time of my escape in Dec 1944 I drove a gravel truck to Iluan daily, with 1 Jap guard, & Filipinos from the Penal Colony loaded the truck. Then I would drive to the Iwahig air strip, where POW's unloaded the truck. I was supposed to make 5 trips a day, but I had fixed up the ignition switch near the accelerator, and would turn off the motor with my foot while driving. The car would stop, and I would get out and pretend I was trying to find out what was wrong with the engine. The Jap guard would be very much interested in the whole business, but knew nothing about automobile engines. When I got good & ready, I would flip on the secret ignition switch and drive on. The Japs never caught on to this little trick, and it meant that the boys at the strip could rest until the next load of gravel arrived.

Recreation--There is no record of any attempt being made to lighten the lives of the prisoners by any forms of recreation, amusement, entertainment, etc. Evidently the hours for them were filled with nothing but work, and then more work.

Religious Services--Nothing in the way of religious services was provided for the men at Palawan. It is difficult to understand how they were able to endure those nearly 3 long years of unmitigated drudgery--indeed, well-nigh slavery--without becoming complete physical and mental wrecks.

Brutalities & Atrocities--The fate of the prisoners at Palawan was almost worse, if that is possible, than that of any other group of prisoners confined in Japanese internment camps. They were forced to do the hardest kind of labor, exposed to all kinds of weather, and with a minimum of food. Many of them died from starvation, to say nothing of the brutal treatment given them by their Japanese guards, who beat and otherwise abused them at the slightest provocation. One such incident was reported by a prisoner in the following words:

While working on the field, S/Sgt Mullins, USA, got into conversation with a Japanese soldier. Mullins would not admit the American forces were in defeat, which so angered the Japanese soldier that he picked up a club and swung it at

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Mullins' head. Mullins tried to cover himself by raising his arm, and the club struck his arm and broke it. The next day Mullins was forced to return to work with his arm in a sling.

Another prisoner, speaking of the treatment accorded the prisoners during the last year at the camp, reported:

Capt. Nishamoto had been relieved by Capt. Kinoshita, but it made no difference in our treatment. As a matter of fact, the work became harder, and there was more abuse. Not a single day passed without several beatings of the American prisoners by the Japanese soldiers. The Japanese guards carried hardwood sticks about a yard long & 1 inch thick and beat men over the head with these for no apparent reason whatsoever. As far as Capt. Kinoshita and his soldiers were concerned, the American prisoners were there for one purpose to work. Whether they ate or were sick made no difference.

Various attempts were made by different ones of the prisoners to escape from the camp, but only a few of them were successful. Those who did get away were eventually enabled to return to Allied military control through the valiant aid of loyal Filipino guerillas. The less fortunate ones who were recaptured by the Japanese suffered punishments of varying degrees of severity. After one such unsuccessful attempt in 1942, Capt. Kishamoto, the camp commander at that time, acting on instructions received from Manila headquarters, placed the men on 1/3 rations for 3 days, and had the barracks enclosed with a barbed wire barricade which was patrolled night & day thereafter by armed sentries. Other men who tried their luck later, but were recaptured by the Japs, were subjected to all kinds of fiendish tortures, and finally executed.

After the American air raids began in late 1944, the Japanese, apparently taking the attitude that the prisoners were directly responsible for the bombings, increased the severity of their treatment. The food the men got now was not fit for human consumption. The prisoners were forced to work even harder, if that were possible, and they were punished on the slightest provocation--and frequently on no provocation whatsoever. The only thing that enabled them to keep up their morale under this inhuman treatment was the realization--or, rather, the fervent hope--that it would not be long now before our forces would come and set them free.

One of the most horrible examples of the fiendish lengths to which the Japanese dared to go in their torture of the prisoners under their lash is the tragic event of 14 Dec 1944. The airfield at Palawan had already been subjected to sporadic bombing by the American Air Force. On this particular day the men had been relieved of their work at the field, and were all in the compound around noontime, along with some Japanese soldiers, when an air raid alarm sounded. A short time later there was a 2nd and then a 3rd alarm. When the last one came, the Japanese insisted that all the prisoners should get completely down in the shelter. Then they poured gasoline down into the shelter, set it afire, and began firing rifles and machine guns through the entrance, to prevent any of their victims from escaping from the blazing inferno inside. Nevertheless, a few of the men did manage to get out, and eventually returned to their own people.

But listen to the story of this event as it is told in simple but graphic words of one of the participants, Pfc Edwin A. Petry, one of the fewfortunates who escaped death that day:

On Dec 14, 1944, for some reason [Petry testified] I took the men from the strip [at Iwahig] to the compound at noon, together with a bunch of Japs. I left the truck outside and had started eating when the 1st air raid alert sounded. We all went to our shelters until the all clear, when we resumed eating. The same thing happened at the 2nd alert, 35 minutes later. A few minutes later the 3rd alert sounded, and this time the Japs were insistent that we all get completely down in the shelter. The Japs then started shooting in the entrances of the shelter, and poured gasoline in, and set it on fire. I managed to get out, dashed through the barbed wire, and practically fell down the cliff on to the beach, where I hid in a cave with Pacheco. After 3:00 p.m. there were very few shots. Another man came in, wounded and delirious, and later 4 more, who said that the beach was being searched. By 2:30 that night we decided to look around, and told the wounded man and another to wait until we returned. When we got back the wounded man had gone

off in a delirium.

The Jap landing barge cruised by, looking for survivors, and when it had gone by the 5 of us started to swim across the bay toward the civilian Penal Colony. Three turned back, but Pacheco and I kept going, and made it after 7 hours. The distance was about $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

We rested awhile, and then headed north through the cogon grass until we came to a Filipino house. A dog barked, and the man spoke to it in Tagalog, and we knew he wasn't a Jap, so went to the door. The man couldn't speak English and apparently thought we were Japs, for he called 6 other Filipinos, who came at us with bolos. Pacheco tried Spanish and English, and finally got them to understand. They gave us food and clothing, and put us to bed.

We arose at sunrise, and travelled with a guide all day. The next night we contacted guerillas, and were taken by them to Brooke Point, from which we were later evacuated by Catalina to Moretai.

Conclusions:

1. Starvation, "nutritional and actual" was present among American prisoners of war in the Philippines in 1942 and was the direct cause of the great majority of the excessively large number of deaths which occurred.
2. On changing from a balanced diet, at the beginning of the war, to a nutritionally deficient one, Beri-beri was the first nutritional disease observed, occurring after 3 months departure from a balanced diet; Pellagra was observed after 9 months; Ariboflavinosis after 9 months and Scurvy was still questionable after 9 months and began to definitely appear in 10 months. Xerophthalmia and nyctalopia although difficult to diagnose microscopically was definitely present in 10 months and very severe thereafter, increasing in intensity to complete blindness in many cases, cleared up by massive doses of Vitamin A. and Thiamin.
3. Severe and sharp "shooting" pains in the feet and legs developed during the winter months of 1942-43 and resulted in gangrene of the toes and many deaths. It was definitely cleared up by great doses of thiamin in test cases, administered intra-spinally and intra-muscularly.
4. The efficiency and fighting capacity of the Filipino-American troops in Bataan was markedly lowered by a very poor diet, affecting military capabilities, their morale, and fighting capacity.