Bataan, Corregidor, and the Death March: In Retrospect

Introduction: This article was submitted by Richard M. Gordon of Clifton Park, NY, who writes, "While numerous articles have been written on Bataan, Corregidor, and "The Death March", I believe that my article dispels several myths found in other writings. I am a firm believer in historical accuracy. The myth concerning who was on the Bataan Death March must be dispelled." Gordon was a defender of Bataan, a survivor of the Death March, Camps O'Donnell, and Cabanatuan. His is presently writing a book on his experiences in the Philippines from October 1940 to October 1945, when he was liberated in Japan.

The recollection of these historic events should elicit memories of the early dark days of World War II. Our fleet had just been crippled at Pearl Harbor. Hong Kong and Singapore had fallen. Whatever the Japanese military had touched "turned to gold." The one bright spot in those dismal days was the Philippine Islands, where Americans and Filipinos were making a stand on Bataan, Corregidor, and the southern islands of the Philippines. Such resistance would lead to a disruption of the Japanese military timetable of the conquest of the South Pacific and gain valuable time for the United States to recover from Japan's initial onslaught.

Each event, however, was different from the other and the difference often spelled life or death for the participants. Bataan was not synonymous with Corregidor, despite mistaken belief to the contrary. As a result of this misbelief for the past 40-odd years, many have assumed that Bataan, Corregidor, and the Death March to be interrelated. Corregidor had very little relationship with Bataan; it had no connection with the Death March whatsoever. Such a mistaken belief has been spawned by numerous writings.

An example of such misinformation can be found in the writings of a noted historian, William Manchester, author of "American Caesar," a biography of General Douglas MacArthur. Manchester is widely accepted as a "meticulous researcher", yet he commits an unforgivable sin in his writing on the subject of Corregidor. In his book, Manchester writes, "On May 6, a terrible silence fell over Corregidor. White flags were raised from every flagstaff that was still standing and the triumphant Japanese moved their eleven thousand captives to Bataan. The next day began the brutal Death March."

Aside from the error in the number of prisoners taken on Corregidor, Manchester made several glaring mistakes in the above quote. Error number one, the captives were not taken to Bataan, but, instead, to Manila, where they were forced to march through the streets of that city to impress the Filipino with the might of the Japanese military forces. Error number two by Manchester: When Corregidor fell on May 6, 1942, the Death Marchers had already entered the hellhole called Camp O'Donnell on April 24, 1942, twelve days before the surrender of Corregidor. Error number three: Captives on Corregidor did not leave the island for two weeks' time, pending the surrender of Fil-American forces in the southern islands of the Philippines.

Manchester, however, is not alone in his misconception of what occurred in the days following the fall of Bataan, and it's subsequent Death March. In 1982, a joint resolution of congress, perhaps following Manchester's writings of 1980, made the same mistake when honoring the men of Bataan and Corregidor who made the Death March. Obituaries of men who were captured on Corregidor often indicate that the individual made the Death March. Such information obviously comes from the relatives of the deceased, who also were misinformed.

One can readily see how powerful myths can be. Someone once said, "When history becomes legend, print the legend." The Corregidor garrison did not participate in the Death March, despite any belief to the contrary.
About 1,200 survivors of Bataan are alive today. In perhaps ten years, they will all be gone. Most, if not all would like to leave behind them the truth that was Bataan. To do less would dishonor those men who died in both events.

April 9, 1989 has been selected, as "Former Prisoner of War Day." Obviously that date has been selected to recall the day that Bataan fell, with the subsequent capture of the largest military force in US military history. It is important, however, to point out that the "Battling Bastards of Bataan" did not surrender, as some of us are prone to say, but were surrendered. A vast difference exists between the two terms. In fairness to the men of Bataan, and Corregidor, the difference must be emphasized. Specific orders were given to the Bataan garrison to surrender. Initially, some commanders refused to do so and were threatened with court-martial, if they failed to obey a lawful order.

The reasons for the surrender order, given by Major General Edward P. King, commanding officer of the forces on Bataan, were many. Time and space do not allow a lengthy explanation of the situation that compelled General King to give such an order. Suffice to say that only two days rations for his troops remained. Medication to treat the countless number of Bataan defenders suffering from the deleterious effects of malaria were exhausted. Ammunition of every type was about to run out. Weak, diseased, starving soldiers lacked the physical strength to mount a counter-attack ordered by General Jonathan Wainwright, on Corregidor. Continuous aerial bombardment and artillery barrages for several consecutive days, unanswered, had left the men of Bataan reeling like a prize fighter who had absorbed too many punches. To prevent a "slaughter" of his troops, General King opted to surrender. Later, in a gathering of his men in prison, Camp O'Donnell, King told them, "You did not surrender, I did. That responsibility is mine and mine alone."

To begin to understand the fall of Bataan and the aftermath, the Death March, one must know what led to it's fall. When the Japanese invaded the Philippine Islands in December 1941, with their 14th Army consisting of two full divisions (the 16th and 18th), five anti-aircraft battalions, three engineering regiments, two tank regiments, and one battalion of medium artillery, led by Lt. General Masaharu Homma, they faced a defending force of ten divisions of the Philippine Army. Numerically speaking, the advantage belonged to the defenders. What appears to be an advantage, however, was in reality a disadvantage: one that hastened the fall of Bataan and one that contributed to thousands of deaths in O'Donnell's prison camp.

At the end of the first week in December 1941, the Philippine forces consisted of 20,000 regulars and 100,000 totally raw reservists, most of whom were called to the colors within the three months preceding the war. The training of their artillerymen, so vital in any military action, did not take place until after the outbreak of hostilities. Many of these troops were illiterate and lacked the simple ability to communicate with each other. The enlisted men spoke their native dialect, depending on the area they were from, the officers spoke English, Spanish, or the so-called national language, Tagalog. Unfortunately, Tagalog was spoken mainly in and around Manila, the country's capital. Weapons such as the British Enfield rifle of World War I were obsolete. Uniforms consisted of fiber helmets (the men were never issued steel helmets), canvas shoes, short-sleeve shirts, and short pants, hardly suitable for the jungles of Bataan and their surprisingly cold nights.

In addition to the Philippine Army, Bataan's forces consisted of 11,796 Americans and several regiments of Philippine Scouts who had been part of the United States Army in the Philippines for many years prior to the war. These were magnificent soldiers, well trained, loyal, and dedicated to the war effort. Led by American officers, they repeatedly distinguished themselves,
in the four months of combat. Adding to the number of military in Bataan were civilians who fled the advancing Japanese. They entered Bataan of their own free will, yet they had to be fed from military supplies.

Forced to feed such a large number of military and civilians, food became an immediate and critical problem to the command. Tons of precious rice were left in the warehouses upon the withdrawal into Bataan and were destroyed by the Japanese. Americans accustomed to "stateside chow" found themselves (mid January) on half-rations along with the Filipino soldiers. A month later these rations were cut again (1,000 calories per day) and consisted of rice and fish, or what little meat could be found. Most of the meat came from the horses and mules of the 26th Cavalry, Philippine Scouts, or the Philippine Islands beast of burden, the carabao, or water buffalo. Occasionally monkeys, snakes, ECT, supplemented the diet. Malaria ran rampant in Bataan, one of the most heavily mosquito-infested areas in the world at that time. Medication to offset the effects of that disease began to disappear early in the campaign.

On April 3, 1942, General Homma finally launched his long awaited (by both the Japanese high command and the Americans) final push to crush the Philippines. He easily broke through the final line of resistance of the Fil-American troops on Bataan, but he did so because of the deplorable state of the defending forces facing him.

Food supplies stored on Corregidor often never found their way to the front lines of Bataan, being stolen by hungry rear area troops, while the food was enroute in trucks. Hijacking became a common practice along the way. Here may be found the first difference between Bataan and Corregidor. Corregidor troops did not go hungry until their capture by the Japanese. Consequently, the men of Corregidor entered captivity in relatively good health and with very few cases of malaria on record.

Such differences were to have a major impact on who was to survive the prison camps that were to follow. Comparing rosters of units serving on Bataan and Corregidor, it was determined that the chances of surviving imprisonment were two in three, if captured on Corregidor and one in three if captured on Bataan, an obvious substantiation of the differences between the two groups at the time of their capture.

On Corregidor, there were 15,000 American and Filipino troops, consisting of anti-aircraft and coastal defenses, along with the Fourth Marine Regiment, recently arrived from China (December 1941), less a detachment stationed on Bataan, as part of a Naval Battalion. Despite some writings to the contrary, again dealing in "legends", the Fourth Marine Regiment did not participate in the defense of Bataan. Their mission was beach defense on Corregidor. Approximately, 43 marines arrived in Camp O'Donnell after completing the Death March.

Of the 11,796 American soldiers on Bataan on April 3, 1942, about 1,500 remained wounded or sick, in Bataan's two field hospitals, after the surrender. Others, relatively few, made their way across the two miles of shark-infested waters to Corregidor, where they were assigned to beach defense. About 9,300 Americans reached Camp O'Donnell, after completing the Death March. About 600-650 Americans died on the March. Of the 66,000 Filipino troops, Scouts, Constabulary and Philippine Army units, it can be said the approximately 2,500 of them remained in the hospitals of Bataan, about 1,700 of them escaped to Corregidor, and a small number of them remained on Bataan as work details for the Japanese, after the surrender.

Those captured on Bataan on or about April 9, 1942, were in the general area of the town of Mariveles, at the southern tip of the Bataan peninsula. Large fields outside this town were used as staging areas for the thousands of captives, American and Filipino, gathered together.
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Mass confusion reigned in these areas and when darkness fell, it became impossible to recognize anyone. In a brief period of time buddies were soon separated and, in many cases, never to see one another again. Two friends from the same unit entered one of these fields and did not know of each other’s survival for over 40 years.

Each morning groups of several hundred would be hustled out on Bataan’s only concrete road (National Road) leading north out of the peninsula and began the exodus to prison camp. No design or plans for the group ever materialized. Each sunrise shouting, shooting, bayoneting, by Japanese, would assemble anyone they could to make up the marching groups.

As a result, individuals generally found themselves among perfect strangers, even if they were fellow Americans. Consequently, a "dog eat dog, every man for himself" attitude soon prevailed. Few helped one another on the March. Those belonging to the same military unit were fortunate, with their buddies helping when needed.

During one group’s march volunteers were sought to carry a stretcher containing a colonel wounded in both legs and unable to walk. Four men offered to help. After hours of carrying the man in a scorching hot sun with no stops and no water, they asked for relief from other marchers. No one offered to pick up the stretcher. Soon, the original four bearers, put down the man and went off on their own. The colonel was last seen by the side of the road begging to be carried by anyone.

After the first day of marching, without food or water, men began to drop out of column. Japanese guards would rush up, shouting commands in Japanese to get back in the group. When that approach failed, shots rang out killing those who would not or could not rise. Many of those failing to obey the order to march were beheaded by sword wielding Japanese guards, usually officers and non-coms.

Such actions on the part of the Japanese brought many captives to their feet and they continued the march for awhile longer. As each day and night passed without water, the marchers began to break from the group to run to anything that resembled water. Most often they would hurl themselves into a water puddle alongside of the road and lap up, similar to a cat lapping milk from a saucer, the so called water. The puddles were used by the carabao to coat themselves with mud as a protection against the huge flies constantly about them. Upon rising from the puddle, the water would assume a "clear" state. Needless to say the water was not potable and drinking of it soon brought on cramps, diarrhea, and eventually, dysentery caused by the numerous flies found in the puddle. Such acts continued for each day of the March, lasting from five to ten days in duration, depending upon where one joined the March, and continued until the marchers reached the town of San Fernando, Pampanga, P.I., a distance for most marchers of over 100 kilometers.

Upon reaching San Fernando, the prisoners were forced into 1918 model railroad boxcars (40X8) used in France during World War I. With over 100 men in each car, the Japanese then closed the doors on the prisoners. There was no room to sit down or fall down. Men died in the sweltering of the cars. Upon arriving in Capas, Tarlac, almost four hours later, the men detrained for Camp O’Donnell, another ten kilometer walk.

Official figures estimate that between 44,000 and 50,000 of the Filipinos arrived at O’Donnell after completing the March. Between 12,000 and 18,000 of their number are unaccounted for. What happened to them is unknown, but a safe guess is that between 5,000 to 10,000 of them lost their lives on the Death March. The death toll for both Filipinos and Americans, however, did not cease upon reaching O’Donnell. Instead, during the first forty days of that camp’s existence, more that 1,500 Americans were to die. At least 25,000 Filipinos died by July 1942
in the same camp. All of the deaths were the direct results of malnutrition on Bataan, disease, and the atrocities committed by the Japanese on the March.

Shortly after the last of these prisoners entered O'Donnell (April 24, 1942), Corregidor fell on May 6, 1942. Battered by constant shell fire from Bataan and aerial bombardment, with their supplies running out, Wainwright, successor to MacArthur as commanding officer of the United States forces in the Philippines, decided his situation was hopeless and surrendered Corregidor and the troops in the southern part of the Philippines. With the establishing of a beach head on Corregidor by the Japanese, he avoided a "bloodbath" that would have most certainly occurred had the Japanese fought their way from the beach to Malinta Tunnel, where most of the defenders of the island had withdrawn.

After two weeks of the famous Japanese "sun treatment" for prisoners, in the sun-baked areas of Corregidor, these troops were taken across Manila Bay to Manila and then taken by train to Prison camp Cabanatuan, Cabanatuan, P.I. The men were in that camp when the Bataan survivors arrived from Camp O'Donnell in June 1942. The extremely high death rate in that camp prompted the Japanese to make such a move, and thereby allowed the American medical personnel to treat the Filipino prisoners remaining behind until their release beginning in July 1942. The condition of the prisoners arriving in Cabanatuan was such as to shock their fellow Americans from Corregidor. In a short period of time, however, they, too, would feel the full effects of Japanese captivity.

It was not, however, until June 1942 that the men of Bataan and Corregidor began to share a common experience. During the first nine months of Cabanatuan's existence, when the vast majority of the camp's 3,000 American deaths occurred, most of the deaths were men of Bataan, still suffering from the effects of Bataan, the Death March, and Camp O'Donnell. That the men of Corregidor were more fortunate than their fellow Americans in avoiding starvation, pestilence, and atrocities up to this point, is beyond question.

It is the author's hope that by this writing we have contributed to the dispelling of some myths, provided some insight, and recognized those who died on Bataan, and it's subsequent Death March. If we leave nothing else behind us, when we leave this earth, let us at least leave behind the truth that was Bataan. Americans on both Bataan and Corregidor share one common bond: they were both prisoners of the Japanese, but so were those captured on Wake Island and elsewhere in the South Pacific. Each group played a distinctive, vital role in World War II.

By
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He was gracious enough to let me reproduce his most comprehensive overview of Bataan that I have ever read, and when you have finished reading this I am sure you will agree.

Ray H. Thompson