

Bataan Death March is not to be forgotten

St. Charles man visits Philippines to learn about WWII atrocity

Sixty years ago, unspeakable horrors took place in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Last spring marked the anniversary of the Bataan Death March, and Steve Thompson of St. Charles was among those who retraced one of the reunions among veterans and family members.

Thompson, whose interest in World War II history and veterans has spurred him to take several reunion trips, traveled with the military historical group Valor Tours from California.

Thompson's group of 35 included seven survivors of the Bataan and Corregidor battles. They were at Mile 1 of the march the day it started on April 8, 1942.

Here is Thompson's description of the battle and the horrors that followed:



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE THOMPSON
Lt. Gen. John M. Wright, U.S. Army-Ret., revisits a prisoner of war camp at Subic Bay in the Philippines. The narrow pipe by his right foot is the same one that supplied water for POWs; they would wait in line for up to three hours each day to fill their canteens. Wright was held in the temporary camp after surviving the sinking of a ship full of POWs bound for Japan during World War II.

Camp O'Donnell. Three days later, only 54,000 of these men arrived. The scorching heat and brutality had taken a huge toll on these sick and starving men.

The Japanese battle for the Philippines was supposed to take just a few weeks but had turned into months. They had lost thousands of their elite troops in the furious fighting, and the artillery on Corregidor had deprived their ships the use of Manila Bay. They had hoped to invade Australia by then, but the advance to the south had not even started at this point.

The Japanese brutality showed no mercy. During the grisly march, the only available water was in the small streams and ponds along the march, or the rancid puddles in the road. However, the captives were not allowed to drink any of that water.

Regardless, that did not stop these men crazed with thirst from bolting from the line, where they would push aside the acum and dung of the water buffalo and drink. They would pay for this with a

brutal beating, or a beheading if a man fell in the roadway, the passing Japanese tanks would roll over the struggling soldier.

Friendly Filipino women and children would attempt to give rice and water to the men, only to be bayoneted by the guards.

The thousands of men captured on Corregidor were not part of the Death March, but rather transported to Manila, and then onto a POW camp known as Cabanatuan. Eventually O'Donnell was closed, and the Death March survivors were moved to Cabanatuan.

Those who survived the brutality of Cabanatuan were sent to Japan for forced labor on what became known as "Hell Ships." Sadly, many of these men were lost when these ships were sunk by our own planes and submarines, for we did not know of this pitiful human cargo lying in the bowels of these ships.

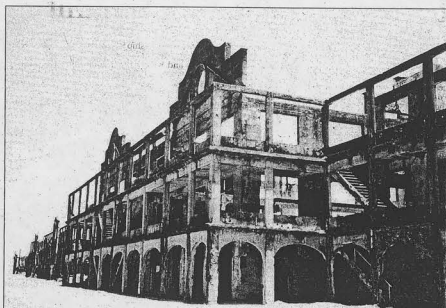
American troops had landed at Leyte in September 1944 and we began the methodical liberation of the Philippines.

By early 1945, the population of Cabanatuan was down to just 500 infirm and sick men, but they persevered in the hope that our troops soon would reach them.

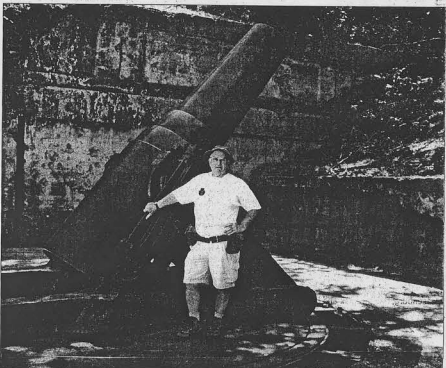
However, it was learned that the Japanese were killing all POWs as they retreated before our advance. In one such case on the island of Palawan, more than 150 American POWs were killed.

The American command was determined to prevent a similar fate for the men remaining at Cabanatuan.

In January 1945, 120 elite troops from the U.S. Army's 6th Ranger Battalion slipped behind enemy lines and crept 30 miles, day and night, into the heart of 6,000 Japanese surrounding Cabanatuan.



The remains of a bombed-out American hospital on Corregidor. Visitors are moved by thoughts of the suffering that took place within these walls.



Steve Thompson of St. Charles stands near the 12-inch M1890 mortar at Battery Way near Corregidor. A memorial service was held at this location during the trip to honor the memory of Maj. William "Wild Bill" Messelie Jr., the battery commander. His courage during the defense of Corregidor earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, two Presidential Unit Citations and four Purple Hearts.

Together with Filipino guerrillas known as the Alamo Scouts, these soldiers raided the camp the night of Jan. 30 and successfully extracted the remaining POWs and led them to safety.

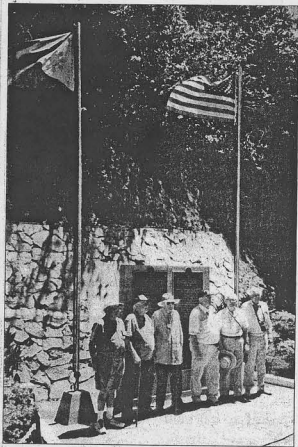
It was the tenacity and bravery of the American and Filipino fighters of Bataan and Corregidor who stopped the Japanese advance after Pearl Harbor.

They fought with honor and courage but unfortunately were left alone to suffer and die, with no reinforcements, food, water, medicine or ammunition.

An unsigned diary recovered from the Cabanatuan Camp had this sad notation from a weakened American POW: "We are all ghosts now, but once we were men." It represents the sense of abandonment many survivors felt.

After the war, the U.S. government presented each surviving POW the sum of \$1 for each day of captivity. This came to about \$1,000 beyond their normal pay.

So little reward and recognition for such a huge sacrifice.



Six survivors of the battles on Bataan and Corregidor gather last spring at the memorial where the Bataan Death March began 60 years earlier. They are Harry Hansen, Malcolm Amos, Clinton Jennings, Everett Reamer, Dick Francis and Lt. Gen. John M. Wright.