

Bataan Death March



[Follow the Bataan Death March](#)

In March 1942, Homma began his plans for the American and Filipino troops who would become Prisoners of War. He planned on moving them to Camp O'Donnell, about one hundred miles away. According to the Japanese military, this was not a long distance, and their troops could easily accomplish it within a few days. However, those on Bataan were not in good physical health. Since January they had been on half-rations or less. During the surrender agreement, King told Homma that he had more men than the Japanese planned for and that they were ill and undernourished. But Homma ignored these facts, plus King's offer to drive the troops to the prison camps. According to the Japanese, once the POWs were in their captivity, they could do with them as they wished, and King's requests were disgraceful. (47)



"U.S. prisoners on Bataan sorting equipment while Japanese guards look on. Following this, the Americans and Filipinos started on the Death March to Camp O'Donnell in central Luzon. Over 50,000 prisoners were held at this camp. A few U.S. troops escaped capture and carried on as guerrillas."

From: Hunter, p. 45

From the day of surrender on, the POWs would be harshly beaten and killed for the slightest or no reason at all. Officer status did not provide protection either. First the troops were searched. Any prisoner found with Japanese souvenirs was executed immediately, because the Japanese believed the soldier must have killed a Japanese soldier in order to get it. Many soldiers had found these items, such as money and shaving mirrors. Their own personal property was usually stolen as well. (48)



"Articles Carried on Death March. Crucifix and other possessions of Lt. Col. Dyess. The tobacco can was his billfold."

From: Dyess, between pp. 96-97



The Bataan Death March.
U.S. National Archives

From: Daws, p. 229

The Bataan Death March began at Mariveles on April 10, 1942. Any troops who fell behind were executed. Japanese troops beat soldiers randomly, and denied the POWs food and water for many days. One of their tortures was known as the sun treatment. The Philippines in April is very hot. Therefore, the POWs were forced to sit in the sun without any shade, helmets, or water. Anyone who dared ask for water was executed. On the rare occasion they were given any food, it was only a handful of contaminated rice. When the prisoners were allowed to sleep for a few hours at night, they were packed into enclosures so tight that they could barely move. Those who lived collapsed on the dead bodies of their comrades. For only a brief part of the march would POWs be packed into railroad cars and allowed to ride. Those who did not die in the suffocating boxcars were forced to march about seven more miles until they reached their camp. It took the POWs over a week to reach their destination. (49) Those on Corregidor would suffer the same fate as their fellow soldiers on Bataan did as they too were transferred to Bataan.



"The infamous Death March from Bataan in 1942, showing thinning file of prisoners carrying comrades who dropped along the way."

Photo by: Wide World Photos, From: Buchanan, between pp. 108-109 photo #7



"Left for dead by the Japanese at Davao, Southern Philippines, 1945."

MacArthur Memorial Archives, From: Daws, p. 237

[More Prison Camp Photos](#)

Japanese POW camps

Tojo's orders regarding POWs was very clear. Guards "must supervise their charges rigidly, taking care not to become obsessed with mistaken ideas of humanitarianism or swayed by personal feelings toward prisoners that might grow over a long incarceration." (50) Rarely did top government officials visit any Japanese prison camps. Therefore, the local commanders could do as they wished without reprimand. However, considering the indoctrination of Japanese troops, reprimand was highly unlikely. If the commander wished, he could make anything, even whistling, a crime and inflict any type of punishment, including execution. (51)



"Death of a POW."

Australian War Memorial, From: Daws, p. 236

The Geneva Convention stated that if a prisoner escaped and was recaptured, he was not to be punished. However, the Japanese did not care. The POWs were forced to sign non-escape oaths soon after they reached the POW camps. They signed at the advice of their officers with the secret understanding that the oaths were not morally binding. Escapes were rare. Any re-captured escapees were executed. Not only were they killed in front of the other POWs, but ten additional POWs were executed as well. While some officers knew the Geneva Convention said it was their duty to escape, many did not know this and the rest did not want to have the POWs left behind to suffer for their actions should they get caught. Therefore, few escapes were attempted. Fewer still succeeded. (52) Successful escapees, such as Dyess, were the rare exception and not the rule.



"Gen. MacArthur greets escaped heroes. Left to right: Lt. Col. Dyess, Lt. Cmdr. M.H. McCoy, Gen. MacArthur, Major S. M. Mellnik."

Photo by: Signal Corps, From: Dyess, between pp. 96-97

The Japanese tried to get some POWs to turn on their comrades or tell military secrets. POWs selected would be questioned for hours. Others would receive good treatment for a day, in the hopes that they would be more willing to talk. Most did not cooperate with their captors. (53)

There were over 140,000 white POWs in Japanese prison camps. They received the harshest treatment of all.

One in three died in captivity at the hands of the Japanese, starved to death, worked to death, beaten to death, dead of loathsome epidemic diseases that the Japanese would not treat. From the beginning, what the Japanese did to their prisoners, body and soul, was humanly appalling. Even so, the prisoners stayed and took it. For them the stakes were: try to escape, with the chances of suffering and dying almost a hundred percent, or stay with what turned out to be a two-to-one chance of surviving. The final gross score was: died trying to escape, next to none; died as prisoners, tens of thousands. (54)

According to the Geneva Convention officers were exempt from labor. But those rules did not apply in Japanese prison camps. They did everything from growing crops barefooted in very deep mud to working on the railroad. The POWs usually did not have the proper clothing for their jobs. The prison guards usually confiscated Red Cross supplies. These included food, medicine, and clothing. (55) A civilian underground system was able to smuggle some of these items, plus money, so that the prisoners could buy items on the guard's black-market. This was dangerous, and many civilians caught in this underground movement were tortured and then executed.



"Working on the railroad. The Japanese have classified these men fit for heavy labor. They are aged 19 to 23. POW Geoge Aspinall took the picture with a secret camera and kept the film hidden till liberation."

From: Daws, p. 232

As the end of war came near, the POWs were transferred to other prison camps or to the hell-ships. Thousands more died due to these actions. The only ones left behind were those so ill they were expected to die within hours.



"Left for dead by the Japanese at Davao, Southern Philippines, 1945."
MacArthur Memorial Archives, From: Daws, p. 237

POW Camp Photos



POWs were allowed to send only a few messages to their families on these pre-made postcards. This one is a copy of the first card William Dyess sent to his wife from Prison Camp No. 2.

From: Dyess, between pp. 96-97



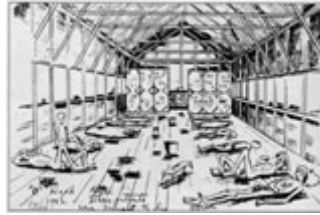
"Typical food provided in prison camps."

From: Dyess, between pp. 96-97



"The last stretch. Japan, spring 1945. Photo taken by POW Terence Kirk with a pinhole camera he made secretly in camp. Note that the man in the center is being supported from behind by another man."

From: Daws, p. 237



"The Zero Ward at Cabanatuan, drawn by Medical Officer Eugene Jacobs."

From: Daws, p. 230



"The cemetery, Cabanatuan, July 1942."

Drawn by: Eugene Jacobs, From: Daws, p. 230



"The Bataan Death March-the end of the road."

U.S. National Archives, From: Daws, p. 229

The fate of the POWs near war's end

MacArthur vowed to return to the Philippines. He was finally able to keep his word. Toward the end of 1944, a possible reentry into the Philippines was becoming a reality. The battle of Leyte Gulf in October was one of the initial steps taken toward an American victory over Japan. The POWs in the Philippines could see the American planes and hoped liberation would be coming soon. The Japanese realized the same thing and decided to move the POWs. The result of their actions would cause thousands more POWs to die, this time, by the hands of America. The POWs were put on hell-ships. The tragic fate of three of them demonstrates the extent the Japanese were willing to go to kill their captives.

The POW death rate had finally stabilized. Thousands were not dying anymore. But when American submarines and torpedoes sunk three Japanese ships with no Red Cross or POW markings, thousands more, mostly officers, would die.

The *Shinyo Maru* with 750 POWs was sunk on September 7, 1944. Only eighty-two would be rescued by Filipino guerillas. This was followed by the sinking of the *Arisan Maru* on October 24, the first day of the battle of Leyte Gulf. The ship went down 200 miles off the coast of China. Of the 1,790 POWs eight were found, five survived. Nearby Japanese destroyers saw the POWs in the water and pushed them away when they came near. Finally, the *Oryoku Maru* went down on December 13. The 1,619 POWs were on the ship for forty-nine days. Amazingly, 1,300 survived. (56)



"Gen. Douglas MacArthur returns to the Philippines, October 20, 1944."
Wide World Photos, From: Buchanan, between pp. 412-413, photo # 18

MacArthur invaded Luzon on January 9, 1945. As the Americans advanced they liberated those left in the POW camps.



"Airdropping Food - the view from the B-29."
U.S. National Archives, From: Daws, p. 238



"Liberation - prisoners wearing airdropped clothes, with some flesh back on their bones."
U.S. National Archives, From: Daws, p. 238

Conclusion

On March 4 troops entered Manila. But the war was not over yet. World War II did not end until September 2, 1945, after the Atomic bomb was dropped on Japan.



"Japanese surrender signatories arrive aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay for the ceremonies, September 2, 1945."

U.S. Army Photo, From: Buchanan, between pp. 412-413, photo # 25



"General of the Army Douglas MacArthur signs as Supreme Allied Commander. Behind him (left) is Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright, who surrendered to the Japanese after Bataan and Corregidor."

U.S. Army Photo, From: Buchanan, between pp. 412-413, photo # 26

The atrocities committed by the Japanese were not ignored. Justice had to be served, though nothing could ever be true justice for the victims, survivors, and their families. There were three classifications for war criminals. A Class was the top officials. The International Military Tribunal of the Far East, (IMTFE), tried them. B and C Class criminals were tried by the Allied nations in the areas where the crimes occurred.

The top Japanese war criminal was Tojo Hideki, Japan's war minister and Prime Minister. It was under his orders and with his blessing that the atrocities were committed against the POWs. He made an unsuccessful suicide attempt after Japan surrendered. On December 8, 1945, he was sent to Sugamo Prison in Tokyo as an A Class war criminal. He was executed on December 23, 1948.

Yamashita Tomoyuki also received a death sentence. He was the Japanese Army commander who faced MacArthur as the war ended. His death is significant because, "he was the first ever high level officer of a defeated army to be tried by the victors for command responsibility, specifically for atrocities committed by his troops in the Philippines." (57)

Homma Masaharu, the Japanese general before Bataan fell, was charged with "bombing Manila after it was declared an open city, refusing quarter to the American troops on Corregidor, and - specifically concerning POWs - allowing the massive atrocities of the death march out of Bataan, and the disgusting atrocities at O'Donnell and Cabanatuan that followed." (58) In April 1946 he was executed by a firing squad and not allowed to wear his military uniform.



"Victor's justice - the Americans hang a C Class war criminal, by the book."
U.S. National Archives, From: Daws, p. 239

While hundreds were accused of war crimes, a little over two dozen were tried and sentenced. Over 300,000 Japanese were charged as B and C Class criminals, but all were not tried due to their vast numbers. Over 5,700 were brought to trial. Trials lasted anywhere from days to months. Sentences ranged from prison terms to executions. Only seven A Class criminals were put to death, four due to their treatment of POWs.

"Twenty-five A Class criminals were convicted and sentenced, seven of them to death, sixteen to life. Five thousand seven hundred-plus B and C Class criminals were brought to trials, about 3,000 were convicted and sentenced, 920 were executed." (59)

This is roughly equal to one Japanese sentence for every fifty POWs held for three-and-one-half years (over 150,000) and one executed for every 250-plus who died due to atrocities (almost 232,000). The Japanese did not believe their sentences were just, saying it was only Allied revenge. (60)

Japan's emperor, Hirohito, remained in power.

The treatment accorded to the American and Filipino soldiers in the Philippines was unnecessary and uncalled for. However, the events on Bataan cannot be blamed on one person or one event. As has been shown, many factors contributed to the thousands of deaths. These range from the Japanese treatment of the POWs to the fact that Europe had priority over the Pacific according to officials in Washington. Hopefully, these types of events will never be repeated again.

Appendix

Maps



From: Dyess, p. 72



From: Dyess, p. 81



From: Dyess, p. 89



From: Dyess, p. 96



From: Dyess, p. 119



From: Dyess, p. 154