REPORT ON AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR INTERNED BY THE JAPANESE IN THE PHILIPPINES

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DAVAO PENAL COLONY

In Oct 1942 a group of approximately 1,000 prisoners of war at Cabanatuan Prison Camp were taken from there and sent to Bilibid Prison in Manila, where, after being processed, they were placed aboard transports and shipped to Davao, a city on the southern tip of the island of Mindanao. The camp in which they were confined was the old Davao Penal Colony, formerly a penal institution for Filipino civilian offenders. It was located about 50 miles from the city proper, in a region of swamps and jungles. The buildings in the prison area were of brick and concrete. Fruit trees of many different varieties grew in abundance in the area just outside the camp. Soon after their arrival at Davao, the prisoners from Cabanatuan were joined by another group of about 1,000 prisoners who had formerly been interned at Malabulay, in north central Mindanao. These 2,000 prisoners constituted the personnel of the Davao Penal Colony Prison Camp (called "Dapaco").

In general, the prisoners from Cabanatuan found conditions at Davao Penal Colony not too bad, in the beginning, at least. It must be remembered, however, that at the time they left Cabanatuan, conditions there were at their worst. Diseases had reached almost epidemic proportions, deaths had risen to an average of 50 a day, and those who were not ill were so weak from undernourishment that when they arrived at Davao more than half of them were unable to work. It may be readily understood, then, that they would regard any improvement in their situation, however, small it might be, in the most favorable light. The prisoners from Malabulay, however, had not had the same bitter experiences or rough treatment as their fellows from Cabanatuan. To begin with, they had not gone through the five months of strenuous campaigning on Bataan and Corregidor. After they were captured at their posts in various parts of the southern islands they had been allowed to keep all of their personal possessions, such as clothes, money, jewelry, etc. Officers had not been required to work, and all of the prisoners had received sufficient food to keep them in fair health. It is equally understandable, therefore that these men should not have looked upon their life at Davao with the same optimism as did the men from Cabanatuan.

Sanitation: No eyewitness information is available concerning the sanitary accommodations for the prisoners at Davao.

Water Supply: The water supply for the prison came from artesian wells in the vicinity of the camp. Water from these wells was pumped into three tanks set on towers within the compound, and then carried by force of gravity through pipes to faucets in the camp. So far as can be ascertained, the Japanese took no steps to insure that the water supply would be kept chemically pure.

Food: At first the diet was fair, consisting mainly of rice, salt, sugar, and vegetables. Some of the comments made by the prisoners on the food in those days run as follows: "We grow our own food, including rice in paddies. Still living well on farm." "Working on poultry farm for our own consumption." "We eat lots of rice 3 times a day, banana buds and green papaya, mongo beans, camores, and Jack fruit [which] makes good soup. Native jungle food good." On 29 Jan 1943 each prisoner received 1 ½ Red Cross packages, which helped somewhat, but at the same time the Japanese stopped issuing any food, and did not restore the original issue, even after the Red Cross supplies had been exhausted. In April of this year the rice ration was cut 1/3, after 10 prisoners had escaped, and in Aug it was cut a second time. For a time the Japanese set up a canteen where they sold dried bananas, but this did not last long. Later they put some moldy tobacco leaves on sale, which the prisoners bought eagerly, in spite of their moldy condition.

Reports from returned prisoners show that in the later days of the camp the Japanese took more and more of the food the prisoners raised on the farm for themselves, leaving only a very little for the men. They also forbade the prisoners to eat the wild food that grew in the vicinity of the camp.

Clothing: No clothing was ever issued to the prisoners at Davao by the Japanese. In April 1944 they ordered that the prisoners would no longer be permitted to wear long trousers, shirts or jackets.

Medical Supplies and Care: Sick prisoners of Davao Penal Colony were hospitalized in the building which had been used as a hospital in the days before the war, when the colony had been a civilian prison. The Japanese exercised general supervision of the hospital, but left its administration in the capable hands of a staff of United States Army Medical Corps officers, under the direction of Lt. Col. Dieter. Testimony offered by various former prisoners at this camp indicates that the medical staff did an outstanding job in caring for the men, in view of their limited facilities. The hospital

had accommodations for only about 200 patients. There were no beds, however, the patients sleeping on wooden bunks, most of them without mattresses, or at best, covered with shelter halves filled with kapok, which grew wild near the prison.

One-third of the inmates of the camp were always ill with malaria. Fortunately, there was an adequate supply of quinine available. The hospital equipment was extremely limited, especially before Feb 1944, at which time a large quantity of medical supplies and equipment arrived in a Red Cross shipment.

An American dental officer took care of the prisoners' simpler needs, such as extractions and fillings. He had no facilities for prosthetic dentistry, however, his only equipment being a field-type dental chair and a foot-propelled drill.

Work: Every prisoner who was not in the hospital was forced to do work of some sort, most of it manual labor, such as planting and harvesting the rice, or work of a more degrading kind, such as building and cleaning the Japanese latrines. Neither officers nor chaplains were excepted from this rule.

Recreation: Capt. Hugh Francis Kennedy, Chaplain, reports that in 1942 there was a general library in the camp for the use of all the men who were on heavy duty status. Unfortunately, these men never had any opportunity to read, and patients and others who were not assigned to heavy duty were not permitted to use the library. Consequently, it remained only an idle, mocking gesture in the faces of the prisoners, many of whom would undoubtedly have been able to find some measure of release from the agony and strain of their situation in reading.

Reports show that in 1943 the prisoners had some movies, newspapers, and athletics. During this year they also organized a glee club of 800 voices.

Lt. Col. Harry O. Fischer states that in 1944 the prisoners tried to organize entertainment among themselves for Sunday evenings, but their efforts were stopped by the Japanese, who would not permit the men to gather in groups. In spite of this interdiction of gatherings by the Japanese, however, the prisoners did assemble occasionally.

> *...Sometimes 15 or 20 men would get together* [Lt. Col. Fischer says] *and men would lecture on their fields.*

Lt. Col. Fischer notes further:

> *In Jan 1944 the Red Cross sent some books to the camp, and these were appreciated, even though they were old (1896) and long since out of circulation.*

Of the opportunities offered to the prisoners to see movies Lt. Col. Fischer remarks:

> *The Japs showed a few propaganda films such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or about the surrender of Singapore. As a rule, the men did not have much time though, for entertainment.*

Religious Services: There is no evidence of any formal religious services having been held at Davao. Chaplain Francis reported that all Bibles, prayer books and other reading matter were taken from the prisoners on 26 July 1942. Some of this material was returned later, while the rest was turned over to the general library. One returned prisoner has said that in 1943 a Bible class held daily sessions.

Brutalities and Atrocities: As has been remarked before, conditions at Davao were considerably better than they were at other prisoner of war camps in the Philippines. This does not mean, however, that the men did not suffer harsh and even brutal treatment on occasion. According to the testimony of one escaped prisoner, his legs are still scarred with sores from the knees to the feet from his labor in the fields. The only treatment he had for these sores, some of which penetrated to bone depth, was hot water and rags.

The escape of two of the prisoners in the early spring of 1944 furnished an excuse for the Japanese to sentence 12 of the remaining men to solitary confinement for 15 days. Later, when 10 others escaped, the Japanese executed 25 of those who were left.

Prisoners who were suffering from malaria were required to work half-days even while ill, and on the third day after their recovery they had to report for full duty. The protest of two American officers that this was in violation of the Geneva Convention received the arrogant answer from the camp commander, Maj. Maida: "We treat you like we wish."

Movements of Prisoners: In Aug 1944 some 1200 of the American prisoners of war at Davao Prison Camp – all of the able-bodied ones – were bundled together, blindfolded, their hands tied behind their backs, and then transported by truck to the city of Davao, where they were placed aboard a transport and taken to Manila. Those who were too sick and feeble to be moved, approximately 250, were left at Davao.

The trip was marked by the same hardships that always accompanied any movement on a Japanese ship. Like cattle in a car bound for the stockyards the men were crowded on top of each other in the dirty, smelly hold, with scarcely room to move, and no light. Each day they were given a very small ration of rice and a little water, never enough to quench their thirst. By the time they reached Manila most of the prisoners were weak and ill. There they were taken off the ship and shipped through the Bilibid clearing house to Cabanatuan. This movement from Davao brings to an end the known history of the organized prison camp at Davao Penal Colony.

Even after the evacuation of Davao, however, there were still some 750 prisoners left at Iasang, on the island of Mindanao. These men had been transferred there on 2 March 1944, to work as laborers on a work detail at a Japanese airstrip. The prisoners in this detail, among whom there were many American officers, suffered untold hardships. They were cruelly beaten by their captors, forced to work unreasonably long hours at the most grueling kinds of labor, and were given only limited food rations. They were given no protection against the bombs dropped on the airstrip by American planes.

In late Aug or early Sept 1944 these 750 prisoners were loaded aboard an old Japanese freighter, crowded into two holds, and shipped north. Several different times the ship was bombed by American planes, and on 7 Sept it was struck by torpedoes fired by American ships. Prisoners who jumped from the ship into the water were machine-gunned by the Japanese as they struggled in the water. Others were beaten into unconsciousness by their guards and thrown into the sea to drown. Only 87 of the original 750 who had gone aboard the ship managed to escape with their lives, and eventually reached the Philippine archipelago. There they established contact with Filipino guerillas, who helped them reach the American forces, to whom they told their story.

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, Beriberi 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 & Scurvy was still questionable after 9 months and began to definitely appear in 10 months. Xerophthalmia and nystalopia 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 1942-42 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.