

TO WWII MOMS: I TRIED TO FIND THE BODIES

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DATE: May 24, 1998

PUBLICATION: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (PA)

EDITION: VOICES NORTH

SECTION: METRO

PAGE: VN-1

Abie Abraham of Connoquenessing Township was a staff sergeant in charge of 40 men in the Battle of Bataan in the Philippines at the start of World War II. He survived the infamous Bataan Death March and several Japanese prison camps. After the war, he became known as the "Ghost of Bataan," because of his job to retrace the path of the Death March and disinter the bodies of his fallen comrades.

During the war, Abraham's wife, Nancy, and daughters, Lily, Edith and Mildred, were among the nearly 4,000 American civilians held in a concentration camp at the University of Manila. Abraham served 23 years in the Army. Now, at age 84, he volunteers five days a week at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center near Butler. He helps vets find their way, gets them coffee, greets the silent patients with a rub on the head or a firm hug.

Abraham has published two books about his experience on Bataan: "The Ghost of Bataan Speaks" in 1971 and "Oh, God, Where Are You?" last year. In a Memorial Day tribute, Abraham talked with correspondent **Darlene White Natale** about the horrors of the Bataan Death March, life in a Japanese prison camp and the grueling job of locating the bodies of American soldiers.

In December 1941 I was at home in Manila, and my wife and I heard the screeching of brakes outside. One of the guys told me Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I thought he was joking. As we rushed to the base, we saw a large formation of Japanese planes. We saw bombs dropping and heard women and children screaming. This was barely eight hours after Pearl Harbor.

American troops were put on ships to cross Manila Bay to the Bataan Peninsula. The Japanese were bombing our ships, and the fighting was bitter. The Filipinos and Americans stood the constant fire of the Japanese for about five months, cut off from all sources of help. We had enough food for only six months.

We were supposed to hold off the Japanese while our fleet was rebuilt, but supplies and reinforcements didn't come. When our captain ordered a withdrawal, we heard crashing in the jungle thicket. It was a Japanese tank followed by enemy soldiers. They moved us to the main road where we saw thousands of troops who had surrendered a few hours earlier. Our forces on Bataan surrendered April 9, 1942.

The Bataan Death March began at Mariveles on the southern tip of the peninsula. We marched past thousands of Japanese troops, cavalry, tanks, trucks and artillery in the boiling sun. One of the men fell and a tank flattened him. Others were hit by passing Japanese trucks. After marching many

kilometers, I saw two other soldiers fall. The Japanese dragged them into the bushes and we heard two shots.

As we staggered on, the Japanese yelled at us **to** go faster. They charged us with their bayonets. I was stabbed in the palm of the hand. If our men couldn't continue, they were clubbed, bayoneted or shot. As the march continued, the Japanese began knocking off our helmets and hitting us with rifle butts.

We had been walking in the hot afternoon sun, and we came upon a cool stream. We stared at the water but were not allowed **to** drink. One of our boys rushed forward and plunged his face into the water. A Japanese soldier raised his sword and with a quick swish, beheaded the soldier.

Later when the guards changed, the pace slowed and we were permitted **to** drink from stagnant fly-infested pools. We knew those who didn't have dysentery or malaria soon would become ill.

We marched for six days until we reached San Fernando, north of Manila Bay. There, we were herded onto trains and 100 men into each steel boxcar. The rail cars were dark and there was little air. Some men died standing up. The smell of feces and vomit was unbearable. We left the boxcars at Capas with eight miles **to** walk **to** Camp O'Donnell, which had been a Filipino army training base. Many of the men had contracted dysentery by drinking polluted water from ditches as we marched **to** Camp O'Donnell. The overcrowding, filthy latrines and lack of soap caused the camp **to** become a breeding ground for dysentery. Many men would lay on the ground near the latrines, too weak **to** move.

The Bataan Death March was just the beginning of the misery at Camp O'Donnell. I suffered with the fevers of malaria. Many men had beriberi. Digging graves was routine, and we discovered it was cool in them. One day when our detail was burying 31 Americans, our minds were numb and someone asked, "Oh, God, where are you?" This is the title of my recent book.

We were moved east **to** a former Filipino army camp at Cabanatuan. There 100 men were packed in each bamboo building. Ten were in a squad of blood brothers, so named because if one squad member escaped, the rest were killed. I met a guy from Butler, another from Ambridge and another from Erie. We talked about home. They were among the 2,500 men who perished at Cabanatuan. When we buried our dead, they were placed in a common grave with no markers permitted. A Lt. Col. Johnson was the first **to** be buried in an individual grave in July of 1942. In the spring of 1943, we were allowed **to** fix up the cemetery and put markers on graves.

I kept records of my comrades, their hometowns and thoughts, on the labels from milk cans and any paper scraps I could find. I had **to** hide the notes or the Japanese would have shot me. I passed along my notes on the dead through the chaplain, who got them **to** the underground in Cabanatuan.

I asked **to** be placed on a work duty being sent out **to** sea. A Japanese doctor examined us before we were allowed **to** go. He said I was too sick, and sent me back **to** my barracks. I was disgusted, but I later learned the ship I would have been on was sunk by American forces.

I was suffering from asthma that caused chronic wheezing - but I think God gave it **to** me. It was what kept me from being sent as slave labor **to** the mines in

Korea, Formosa, Japan or Manchuria. Because of my wheezing, the Japanese didn't think I could work there.

I begged **to** go out on a detail even though I didn't know where I'd be sent. I was crammed onto a train with about 600 soldiers. It was dark when we got **to** the camp in Las Pinas in Manila. Our job was **to** make an airstrip in a field of rice paddies.

My asthma came back, and I was sent by truck **to** the old prison in Manila. I saw my house in the distance. My stay was short; I got sicker, and they sent me back **to** Cabanatuan, where the air was drier.

On Sept. 21, 1944, I was talking **to** Don Snyder of Fayetteville, Franklin County, and we heard buzzing. We thought it was a swarm of bees, but it kept getting louder. We could see wave after wave of planes. A few fighters zoomed low enough over the camp that we saw the star markings - American planes! This made the Japanese nervous, and they sent us into our buildings.

By October, our planes were raiding the Japanese airfields and installations. On Jan. 9, 1945, we heard bombing and naval fire. The Japanese left in a hurry. We cooked rice and slaughtered the two bulls the Japanese had kept. We ate good for the first time in three years.

Soon, our troops came **to** rescue us. I went back and got my notes, and headed out through the fence. We were still 25 miles behind Japanese lines. The few remaining enemy soldiers fired and shot mortars. We made our way **to** Guimba and the 92nd Evacuation Hospital. The war finally was over for the soldiers who had been defeated at Bataan and Corregidor. For me there was no joy, though. I had **to** get **to** Manila and find out if my family was all right.

When I got **to** Manila, the 37th Infantry was still fighting on the outskirts, and many buildings were smoldering. I found my wife - she was pale and frail. She just stared at me, and then she cried in my arms because she had heard that I died in a prison camp. I told her I had almost died a dozen times. My wife had sent the children **to** the country with Filipino friends so they would be safe and have food.

I was sent **to** a camp a few miles from my Philippine home, but had not received my orders **to** go home. One afternoon, my colonel called me **to** his office, and I thought he'd give me the good news that I was going home. He said he got a call from Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters, ordering me **to** report.

I was shaking when I went into MacArthur's office. I didn't know why he'd want **to** see a staff sergeant. While he loaded his pipe, MacArthur asked me about my health and if I knew why he sent for me. He needed someone who had been on the Bataan Death March and in prison camps **to** locate the fallen American heroes.

My body shook as I thought about disintering my comrades from their graves. He told me **to** locate the graves of Americans and Filipino scouts and turn them over **to** the Graves Registration Unit.

I began my two-year task of finding graves at the Manila prison where there were about 150 graves along the walls. These were marked with crosses and some with names of men I had known.

I received many leads on where soldiers had been buried. I questioned the Filipinos for any leads. One day when the leads were drying up, I went **to** a beer hall, and sat down in disgust. A Filipino lady I was questioning told me the Japanese shot many Americans when no one was around. She suggested that I interrogate Japanese prisoners. I found one Japanese soldier who claimed **to** be the executioner of 20 at the Chinese cemetery in Manila.

Next, I left for Camp O'Donnell with a large group of Filipinos. The wooden crosses had been burned by the Japanese **to** destroy the evidence. After disintering men from 10 graves, I had my bearings and was able **to** tell the men where **to** dig. There were 1,547 men buried at O'Donnell.

Reports and maps of graves kept coming. I remembered when an American was clubbed **to** death crossing a small bridge outside of Balanga. I found his body under the bamboo thickets. The Filipinos handed me his skull that had a deep crack from the blow.

When we were disintering some men from graves in San Fernando, a Filipino man said he and four others had been ordered **to** dig a large hole at the cemetery and then were chased away. Later, they saw a Japanese truck drive into the cemetery and stay for an hour. He said he didn't know what they buried. It was getting dark, but we decided **to** dig. We saw a skull with blond hair and another with red hair. It was too dark so we covered the grave over. In that grave, we later found the body of a major and 18 of his men who had been beheaded. There were many gruesome finds.

My wheezing became so bad that I was ordered home by a doctor. But I wanted all the mothers **to** know that for more than two years, I did the best I could. I still get letters from loved ones who want **to** know how, where and when a soldier died.

I didn't tell this story **to** bring back sad memories, but as a reminder **to** the younger generation that our freedom wasn't bought easily. It required guts, sweat, blood and death.

Abraham will be signing copies of his books from 10 a.m. **to** 2 p.m. June 13 at Waldenbooks in Butler Mall.