

Overview of the bataan death march



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Thesis: It is unfortunate that the majority of Americans have no idea of the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines and the heroic stand that was made by these soldiers, sailors and Marines during World War II in the Pacific.

Historically the Japanese aggression towards other nations started very early in the twentieth century. Many would not believe that this human behavior would escalate to the degree in which it did. It is unfortunate that the majority of Americans have no idea of the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines and the heroic stand that was made by these soldiers, sailors and Marines during World War II in the Pacific.

Imperialism: the policy of extending the rule or authority over another foreign country.[1]This term fully portrayed the actions of the Japanese military starting as early as 1905 and continuing through decades to come. In 1905 Japan defeated the Russian army, and the Treaty of Portsmouth was signed. The signing of this treaty forced Russia to surrender its concession in Southern Manchuria to Japan. This now allowed the world to recognize Japan as the dominant power and controller of Korea. Nearly twenty-five years later, on September 18, 1931.[2]Japan launched an all-out attack on Manchuria[3]wanting to expand their land mass due to overcrowding and agricultural means[4].

Another early casualty of the Japanese Empire's brutality is the country of China. In 1937, the Japanese moved south into Northern China from Manchuria. This invasion showed no restraint as Japan continued to move

into Peking and Shanghai in that very same year, 1937. Chinese-Japanese tensions increased with training sessions near the Marco Polo Bridge. On the night of July 7, 1937, the Chinese requested that they be notified prior to this exercise as to not alert the locals. On that day no alert was issued and many locals believed an attack was under way. This incident ended up starting a full scale invasion on China and would live in notoriety as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident.[5] Furthermore on December 13, 1937 the Japanese imperial Army committed unspeakable atrocities in the city of Nanking by murdering 3000, 000 people and raping 20, 000 women. This event would set the stage for the horrors that the American soldiers would face in Corregidor and Bataan.[6]

After the atrocities committed in China the Japanese shockingly attacked as far west as Pearl Harbor. On Sunday morning December 7, 1941 at 7: 55 AM a fleet of several bombing planes released a crippling surprise attack on the key military base of Pearl Harbor.[7] Two weeks after the air attack Japanese hohei (foot soldiers) invaded.[8] Although this attack was of great proportion it also had many counterparts throughout the Pacific and Asia. While this bombing was taking place in Hawaii, similar attacks were being executed 5, 000 miles away in the Philippines. It was 2: 55 AM on Monday morning, December 8th.[9]

Accounts given by Pvt. Harold Poole of the United States Army Air Corps, who was stationed at Clark Field on the island of Luzon, recalled hearing soldiers speaking, “ Look, the navy’s showing off.” Harold then saw the red dots on the aircraft and immediately knew it was not the US Navy, but in fact the Imperial Japanese Navy. After this revelation the bombs began to fall. The

Japanese planes were flying at twenty-five thousand feet which was out of range of the US aircraft guns and they demolished almost everything. The demolition included hangers, runways, cookhouses and many other base structures were among the targets. The goal of these numerous attacks was to cripple the United States military air capability in the Pacific Region.[10]

The region of the Bataan, much of which was dense jungle, had become a last resort for the US in the Philippines. Many areas like Manila had been ordered evacuated by General Douglas McArthur and were later bombed in December of 1941. Manila was officially occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army in January of 1942.[11]Corregidor, a natural formation of rock in the shape of a long tunnel hallway, was at the time impenetrable by bombs or other weapons. It was located a short distance away from the Bataan Peninsula and was used as a secure base for many of the higher ranking officials. The very malnourished, diseased and physically and mentally exhausted soldiers were fighting what they saw as an unending battle with fierce gunfights lasting hours upon hours. The Imperial Japanese Army seemed to have an unending supply of men and artillery. General McArthur sent a message to the troops from the safe haven of Corregidor explaining that there would be reinforcements coming and they should remain strong. The soldiers waited and hoped but the foretold reinforcements never came. They fought until they literally ran out of ammunition and guns.[12]They surrendered at Bataan on April 9th 1941 after nearly three months of fighting.[13]

Many reasons forced General Edward King to surrender. One such reason was that the soldiers had been fighting and surviving on many days with only

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a bowl of rice and a glass of contaminated water. These heroic men had been pushed to the brink of starvation and despair. General King made the decision to surrender, no doubt feeling that continuing longer would be synonymous as to committing suicide.[14]

When General King surrendered these troops he would have no idea of the coming cruelty that would befall his soldiers. After their surrender the Japanese became infuriated at the fact that the Americans were not surrendering Corregidor which was still impenetrable to the Japanese. This reality only furthered the hatred that the Japanese felt against these men who already were classified as not human by Japanese war doctrine through their surrendering. Just one day after the surrender, the Imperial Army started forcing the Americans to march a brutal 65 mile trek that would later live in infamy as the Bataan Death March.[15]

The Japanese were transporting the American troops to some of the dozens of POW camps. One camp in particular was especially important Camp O'Donnell which lay 85 miles away.[16]The Japanese had no doubt that they could carry out a forced march for 60 of those miles and the remainder of American and Filipino troops was stuffed into railroad cars. This most definitely was a seemingly impossible idea for these troops who were already hungry, overworked, and diseased.[17]To further the momentous task they were in the months of April and May, the two hottest months in the scorching heat of the Philippines where daytime temperature, would spike to one-hundred ten degrees in the shade.[18]

Prisoner of war camps were normally very brutal often lacking in almost every human need. Many of the POWs had to sleep outside on the concrete ground in heavy rain. They were put in showers ten at a time as they tried to wash themselves and their clothes at the same time and seldom had any soap.[19] Many men were contracting malaria and other diseases, some of which were causing blindness and paralyzing legs. During captivity many ate a small bowl of rice and very thin soup for a day's rations.[20]

One of the thousands of men who went through this terrifying reality, Private Harold Poole recalls when he was sent to the prison hospital in Camp O'Donnell due to swelling legs. He stated that one of the few doctors there said he had beriberi but they didn't have any medicine.[21] Fortunately, however, he was able to survive. For many survival wasn't accomplished; over 29, 000 American and Filipino soldiers died while in captivity at that camp alone.[22]

On the 8th of September 1942 Emperor Hirohito sent a message to " All Transportation and Communication Chiefs" expressing the need for labor in the home country of Japan. He continued saying to send the white and Filipino POWs to Japan's mainland by means of ships transportation and cargo. These ships commandeered by the government for this purpose had such brutal and unlivable accommodations that they became later known as " hell ships".[23]

After this order was sent to nearly all Japanese companies owning ships were told to lend a hand in this ambitious effort. Many of these ships still carried out their general purpose which was transportation of Japanese citizens or

livestock shipping. The ships also held hundreds of POWs whether in windowless cargo holds, suffocating vent decks, or basically anywhere they could pack them in. These ships had no conversion to accommodate men instead of artillery. These trips had a casualty rate of over 50% more than the rate in combat.[24] Nearly 21,000 men died en route from the Philippines to Japan in these retched ships.[25]

One account of the conditions on board the Brazil Maru from Manny Lawton describes a horrible 27 a day death toll through a brutal sixteen day voyage. The Brazil Maru was in fact a horse transporting vessel that was used to transport hundreds of men through the South China Sea. The men were so numerous and the conditions so bad some took to escaping through holes in the ship but few survived in the unrest of the sea.[26]

The transportation was the first step of Emperor Hirohito's labor intuitive. The idea was to use these men as slave workforce being used in such companies as Mitsubishi in copper mines, Mitsui in coal mines and several other large companies.[27] These labor localities were spread throughout the nation Mitsui had a rather large coal mine operation in Omuta, Japan[28] and Hirohata Steel Works had multiple mills in Hirohata, Japan.[29]

One eyewitness, Private Harold Poole, recalls the twenty months he worked for Hirohata Steel Works and the backbreaking work that he had and the one day off a month. Mr. Poole continues by saying that on top of this all he had military exercises, " We'd do all that after we'd worked all day. I can tell you we sure didn't need the exercise". Many talk of the horrors of working in a coal mine deemed unsafe for the Japanese workers.[30] It is estimated that

around only four hundred of these men who went through the Bataan Death March, hell ship transportation and slave labor are alive today.[31]

It is truly unfortunate that the majority of Americans have no idea of the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army on the Bataan Peninsula during WWII in the Philippines and the heroic stand that was made by these soldiers, sailors and Marines during World War II in the Pacific. These testimonies above should be taught further in the school setting so Americans can witness the amazing stories of these true heroes who fought, struggled and in many cases died for the freedom and protection of our nation. The cemetery in Luzon holds the remains of 17, 106 Americans who died for these freedoms we enjoy today.[32]