

Ghost soldiers by hampton sides (analysis)

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Marek Sulich Mr. O'Connor American Literature 1 March 2011 Ghost Soldiers

The novel, *Ghost Soldiers*, written by Hampton Sides, is a great work of literature, depicting the true horrors of war, friendship, and the one thing that was never lost, hope. The non-fictional book takes place in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation of the islands from 1942 and goes through three gruesome years to end in the year of 1945. The book begins with the idea of surrendering Bataan, an American occupied area of the Philippines, because of the severe amount of wounded and very little defense to last out or defeat the incoming Imperial Army.

General Edward King formally surrendered Bataan and this marked the start of what would be later called the Bataan Death March which was a grueling and painstaking exodus of prisoners and one of the largest surrenders the Americans had made. During the exodus, the Japanese were relentless, taking victims for sheer revenge and the enjoyment of picking on someone of a now lower status than they were. If a soldier would be falling behind during the march a Japanese soldier wouldn't shoot him because they believed bullets were precious but instead they would stab the prisoner in the abdomen with their bayonet and twist it around to cut up the intestines and leave the body where it had just died. The prisoners were also stripped of any items on their person that were deemed valuable or if a Japanese soldier simply wanted a certain item. One account of this was when a prisoner had a ring from West Point and a Japanese soldier wanted the coveted ring, since the prisoner's finger had swollen he could not get the ring off so the Japanese soldier took the prisoner's hand, placed it against a tree and cut

the man's finger off to get the ring. The Japanese were also cruel beyond belief during the prisoners' stay at the P.

O. W. camp. The men had very little to eat and disease quickly engulfed them, measly diseases that would normally have not even had the slightest effect on a healthy human being. After almost three years, the healthy prisoners that could work were to leave on ships for Japan to be used there and the sick were to be left behind, the prisoners had to take three different ships all of which were destroyed by American airplanes which had many friendly casualties.

The Japanese were beginning to show fear for they knew that an impending American army was fast approaching after three years at war. During this time that the Japanese were making arrangements to leave for their home country, a group of Rangers in the Sixth Army Battalion lead by General Mucci, made way to free the entrapped prisoners near the city of Cabanatuan. The one hundred twenty-one Rangers joined forces with two ally Filipino guerilla groups to free the prisoners at dusk and then hike a twenty-five mile trek back to American lines. The assault was successful but there were some casualties like Dr. Jimmy Fisher who was injured because of a shrapnel wound to the stomach, one which caused him excruciating pain to the point where he would come in and out of unconsciousness but later the next day after the liberation of prisoners he unfortunately died.

Throughout the novel, Ghost Soldiers, there were many memorable and important moments signifying different aspects of the book. One especially memorable moment in the book was the Bataan Death March. This moment

was just the start of all the hardships that the soldiers, now prisoners of war, would endure and the gruesome and hideous things that the Japanese soldiers would do. The prisoners were told to march to their encampment even though many of which were already sapped of their strength from lack of nutrition and the current war. Prisoners were also stripped of material possessions many of which the Japanese soldiers took as their own as souvenirs.

Not only were the Japanese soldiers cruel but they were relentless in acting out orders and had a thirst for vengeance because of what they were put through by their superiors or by the Americans simply fighting and killing their comrades: " The two armies entertained radically different views on the matter of corporal punishment. Beating had long been an acceptable and routine method of discipline within the Japanese Army. Soldiers could strike subordinates with no questions asked and no explanation warranted. The slightest distinction between ranks was of critical importance because it meant the difference between who could inflict blows, and who could expect to receive them. This sort of institutionalized brutality had a tendency to work its way down the ranks to the lowliest private.

One can imagine what would happen when an enlisted man, hardened by this psychology of top-down violence, found himself suddenly thrown into a foreign and not altogether distasteful situation in which he was the superior, in charge of a group of helpless prisoners. For some, the temptation to beat proved irresistible. For others, beating was only the beginning. " (Hampton 91-92) The Japanese soldiers had no sense of remorse or sorrow for the prisoners instead they pushed them to their breaking point. Many prisoners

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collapsed which proved fatal because if you fell behind you became a practice dummy for the Japanese to sharpen their bayonet skills and techniques of killing on you. On one occasion, a prisoner was falling behind in the rear so tanks that followed lined themselves up to run over the victim and squish him into the pavement to make it look as if he were from a cartoon.

Since the Japanese could not resist in taunting the prisoners, when one of the groups stopped near a little stream of water, the guard made the prisoners stand even though they were becoming dehydrated. One of the prisoners could not last the temptation of water being so close at hand but not able to drink it that he threw himself to the ground and began to lap up water and splash his face. The guard, in response, was infuriated at the prisoner so when the prisoner stood up, the guard lopped his head off with his sword so the head fell into the water with the body following shortly after, the hands still twitching from the nerves being separated. This march signified the cruelty of the Japanese and that their treatment of the American prisoners was out of proportion because they took sadistic pleasure out of killing the defenseless American men. Another moment in the book was the stay in the P.

O. W. amp which proved almost equally fatal as the Bataan Death March with people dying at ridiculous rates from disease that would normally not even show the slightest hint of effect on a healthy human being. People not only died from disease but also from too much strain on the body and if a prisoner were to break a rule in the camp most of the time the death penalty awaited. The conditions in which the men lived in the camp could be <https://assignbuster.com/ghost-soldiers-by-hampton-sides-analysis/>

considered less sanitary than barn animals lived in, feces and dead bodies piled up, all types of insects and rodents fed and flourished on the rotting carcasses and feces.

Burying the dead bodies even proved hazardous for all the prisoners: “ When the Monsoon rains came, the burials became particularly problematical, because the graves would fill with water, and the corpses would float to the top. “ While one person threw on dirt, another would have to hold the bodies down with a long bamboo pole to keep them from bobbing up to the surface,” recalled Bank. Sometimes the bodies would wash out of the graves entirely. Because the cemetery was located on a slight rise, the runoff would seep back toward the O’Donnell barracks. The burial crews had to be especially careful when handling the bodies of those who had died from wet beriberi. The disease, a degenerative condition caused by thiamine deficiency, makes the feet, legs, hand, and testicles hideously swell up, elephantiasis-like, and, if left untreated, ultimately causes the victim to drown in his own pus.

” (107) The prisoners began to contract many diseases at once, considering dysentery and beriberi were very contagious many of those prisoners were quarantined and even the healthy guards made sure to stay away from those people. Beriberi had two forms, wet and dry, both were uncomfortable and the effects it had to the body were hideous that even picturing the diseased body brings shudders and Goosebumps. The beriberi disease cause the body to swell up greatly to the point where the skin would crack and ooze with pus. The dead bodies afflicted with wet beriberi weighed almost three hundred pounds and the weight was not gained from eating a lot but <https://assignbuster.com/ghost-soldiers-by-hampton-sides-analysis/>

the pus just began to form in such numerous proportions that the body simple began to gain weight. There was also the case with people that had dysentery and had little control of when they had to excrete which is one of the reasons that the prisoners' living quarters were unsanitary.

The men had daily duties of either going out into the field to harvest crops even though they weren't for them, dig graves and burial sites for the massing dead carcasses, or if someone was lucky enough, they were able to go into the town to buy much needed supplies such as medicine or food. All was not safe inside the camp because the Japanese still had such a strong hatred for the Americans that there was one case of an unjustified killing of an innocent man. A prisoner tending to his own personal garden that he was allowed to keep was being watched by a guard, the guard suddenly took aim with his rifle and shot the man but got him in the arm, the prisoner collapsed and was crying out in pain when the guard then took aim and fired another bullet straight to the prisoner's head. The prisoner's comrades were trying to rush to help save the man's life but the guard then began to take aim at them and threatened to shoot them if they came near the body. Later, the guard was transferred out of the camp because the Japanese knew that the prisoners were seeking revenge even though they said it was the prisoner's fault for being too close to the fence and was considered trying to escape.

This moment in the book signified the hardships that came with being a prisoner of war under the Japanese. A third moment that I will remember as a necessary evil was when the healthy prisoners were to be transferred to Japan for work camps and that the sick were to be left behind. The ships that the men were to be transferred on all contained the word " Maru" which
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meant circle. This signified for the Japanese that no matter where the ship went, it would always safely return to port. The necessary evil that occurred during the transfer of the prisoners was that the Japanese ship used for the transport were being attacked by American airplanes: " Perhaps it was Bridget's influence, but the men remained remarkably calm as they listened intently to the sounds of the planes hectoring the ship.

Some even cheered the planes on, momentarily forgetting that the pilots' success was their own doom. " The prisoners were soldiers to the very end," Taylor recalled. " As the guns were strafing the decks of that ship, the men were yelling, ' Give 'em heck, pour it on! ' And here we were right down under it. " No one seemed to panic at the prospect of being sunk. " (196) The bombing of the ships was a necessary evil because even though friendly American prisoners were killed by their own comrades, it was the only way to keep the prisoners from leaving to Japan which kept them in the Philippines.

Not only this but the prisoners, even when facing their own doom, showed a tremendous amount of patriotism and died with their dignity. They knew that it was for the success of the American Army that they were fighting and meant to put their lives on the line for. On one instance when all the prisoners were stuck in the hold of the ship and were suffocating, it brought out the heroism and leadership of one American prisoner. He talked with the guard that looked over them and arranged that the hatch was to be open and that each prisoner should use their shirts to fan air. This created circulation and instead of having a musky stench begin to suffocate those in the hold and especially the prisoners located in the far corners away from the hatch, the prisoners began to slowly revive. Eventually, because of the <https://assignbuster.com/ghost-soldiers-by-hampton-sides-analysis/>

airplanes bombing and destroying the transportation ships, the prisoners were relocated to a nearby P.

O. W. camp located near the city of Cabanatuan. The last memorable and probably the climaxing event of the book was the assault on the P. O. W. camp near Cabanatuan. During this event, a great deal of heroism and friendship was shown by the Filipino guerillas which longed for the revenge against the Japanese which invaded their homeland and used it as a warring zone and also the Rangers of the Sixth Army Battalion. The Filipino guerillas during the attack were meant to hold back the Japanese which were located about one mile from the camp so that the rangers could have enough time to enter the camp and extract the prisoners with minimal casualties. Since the Filipino's knew how to fight on their own turf, the Japanese knew but only one way to get to the camp which was across one bridge. Before the attack was to commence, a bomb would be placed under the bridge to take it out so it would be impassable by enemy tanks and jeeps. The Filipinos laid in wait and when the Japanese came they were easily picked off until their bodies stacked, one on top of another.

Whilst this was occurring, the American Rangers began their attack in the dark of night on the camp. They took out the sentries and guard towers first and then due to the confusion created by the sudden assault, began to kill off the enemy resistance inside the camp. Once most of the enemy was killed, the Rangers began to extract prisoners, the moment they saw what condition their comrades were in they were overwhelmed with emotion: " Some of the Rangers welled with tears at the hideous procession and tried to

offer comfort. “ they tucked our men under their arms like babies,” said Ralph Hibbs. “ they shook their heads in disbelief and cried at the sight of these emaciated countrymen so far down the starvation trail. ” Standing next to the young, strapping Rangers, the prisoners realized anew how sorry they must look, and some were overcome with self-pity and shame.

(261) The American Rangers were so overcome with joy to see their fellow countrymen now free but they also felt as if they saw the living dead. One Ranger recalled them being just skin and bones which was not entirely incorrect. Since the prisoners were so famished, they lost so much weight to the point where their bodies felt like that of a ten-year-old child. Many of the prisoners also overwhelmed with the situation, refused help and began to walk out of the front gates proudly as now free men. The prisoners could not believe that they were now finally free from their bonds that were so closely held for the past three years but nonetheless they still had a long trek back to friendly American lines where food and medical treatment awaited them.

Two thematic concerns in the novel, *Ghost Soldiers*, were “ Hope” and “ Friendship”. Hope was one of the many themes in this book because it was what every single one of the prisoners held dear so that they could still believe that one day they will be set free and wouldn’t die in captivity in conditions fit for the lowliest animals on Earth. Hope was held even by the Rangers that were the ones doing the rescuing because even one spy in the towns they were passing could have informed the Japanese of an assault. The Rangers also hoped that the Japanese didn’t notice them on several occasions when trying to sneak up close to the camp because that would

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jeopardize the entire mission and the lives of not only the Rangers but the Filipino people in the surrounding towns and the Filipino guerillas awaiting the stationed Japanese about one mile from the camp. The other theme in the book was “ Friendship”, and this was one of the major themes because it was the close bonds that all the prisoners made with each other which helped them get thru the tough times in the camp.

They would help each other gather food in their personal gardens, there were cases in which groups of about three or four prisoners helped each other and their bonds became so close that when one of the members died the others would also die in the days following. There was one case where a prisoner by the name of Thomas allowed for his medical shot to be give to the patient after him even though this was the last dose of medication until the next arrival of medication. Miraculously, his close friendship saved his new friend’s life and he was cured the next day when he awoke. During the time before the rescue from the prisoner camp, the men became very close, they all helped each other during times when the Japanese threatened them especially when liberation was so close at hand. Also, the Rangers were all close riends with each other, neither of them wanted to be better than the other.

Instead, they all focused on what situation was at hand and this was shown when the medic was injured with a shrapnel wound to the stomach, they all wanted him to survive and felt sorrow at the sight of their comrades suffering which exemplified their close bond of friendship. That is why I believe “ Friendship” and “ Hope” are two major themes of the book because of how they affected all the prisoners and even their liberators. The novel, <https://assignbuster.com/ghost-soldiers-by-hampton-sides-analysis/>

Ghost Soldiers, takes place during World War II in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation of the islands. This book has much to do with the American and Japanese war section of World War II even though the harshest and most widely known view of World War II is the European part. The war with Japan had some parts of equal cruelty or sometimes worse treatment than that in Europe's section of the war because this book puts great detail into what went on during the time of imprisonment.

Mainly because of my Polish heritage, World War II is a big part of history that I know about and the hardships of war even in the smallest form, are cruel and unusual. The book's perspective of the American war shows that the Japanese were unforgiving, even in retreat they would kill off prisoners so that no survivors would tell of the harsh and cruel punishments they gave the American prisoners. Just as with the war in Europe at the time, many concentration camps were said to be work camps so that nobody would find out that what the end result would be from staying at one of those camps would be death, unless you survived and were liberated. This was so people would also keep quiet about the cruelty of the German soldiers and Hitler. During the time of the war many people died, friends would die and you would also suffer just by watching them suffer and cling to the last bit of life they had left.

Also, not only in America's war was unusual cruelty found like the random shooting of a prisoner but cruelty was hellish in Europe to the point where babies were thrown into the air as targets for the machine guns and masses of people were gassed naked so that the clothes could be reused for the next group of poor souls. The book also places the war in the perspective of not <https://assignbuster.com/ghost-soldiers-by-hampton-sides-analysis/>

one person but the contribution of several people that lived thru that horrid time and had to cling to life by a hair, just as if you were holding on a rope, if you let go you would die. Throughout the book there were many stylistic devices used to improve the work and make it more interesting. Three such devices that were used in this novel were chronology, characterization, and setting. Chronology was used in this work in the way that the books chapters changed every other chapter between events.

What I mean by this is that the first chapter may be about the Rangers preparing for the assault then the next chapter is about the prisoner's perspective and what is happening with them. The chapter after the prisoners refers back to what is now currently happening with the Rangers at the time which is how the chronology of events and places is changed in each chapter. The second stylistic device used in the book was characterization and it was used mainly when a new character was being introduced. Whenever a character was either introduced or mentioned, there would be a following page, two pages, or more on the character's background, what he did, where he served, or even where the character travelled. With the characterization there was much detail and you can personally get a sense of the person's abilities and personality.

The third stylistic device in this novel was setting and mainly because a lot of detail was given to allow the reader to know exactly what was happening, where it was happening, the environment and the surrounding area of the event that was taking place, and when an event happened. Setting played a great deal in making this novel turn out the way it did in a positive way because the reader can get a sense of what the characters are experiencing

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and what war is like. The setting just helps the reader so there is no confusion about what is going on and why something is happening, this is why I also believe that the detail in the setting of the book makes the novel so great. Works Cited Sides, Hampton. Ghost Soldiers: the Epic Account of World War II's Greatest Rescue Mission.

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