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The True Story of a POW: Richard M. Gordon

Throughout the history of war, there are countless untold stories of heroes risking their lives for the benefit of their country. One such story that is available through an oral history interview [conducted January 31, 2001], which is archived at the New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, is that of Major Richard M. Gordon, who was in service from August 5, 1940 to January 1, 1961.

This brave man was held captive by the Japanese army for three and a half years as a soldier in the 31st Infantry. As a prisoner of war, he took part in the infamous Bataan Death March which began on April 9, 1942 and lasted for six days and ninety miles [Outline of Events]. By the time he returned home after six years of being away at war, he had lived through some tragic experiences that most people will never be faced with.

Mr. Gordon was born in Bellevue Hospital in a part of New York City that is commonly referred to as "Hell's Kitchen." He joined the army on August 4, 1940 at the tender age of eighteen because of his desire to become a soldier. Although a recruiting officer talked him into enlisting as an infantryman in Manila, Mr. Gordon was like most Americans at the time who couldn't point the Philippines out on a map if their life depended on it.

His first task was to go to Fort Slocum in Long Island. According to Mr. Gordon, he "wouldn't call it basic training...It was mostly left foot, right foot and close quarter drills." After this, he boarded the USS *U.S. Grant*, a transport ship, which was docked outside the Brooklyn Army Base, on September 14, 1940. He went through the Panama Canal and ended up in San Francisco at Fort McDowell. From there, he was put back on the *U.S. Grant*, at which point he travelled through Hawaii, Guam, and eventually ended up in the Philippines in October. Mr. Gordon said that the conditions in the Philippines were "a luxurious five months, then things started to heat up." Officers and recruits tried to get posted to the Philippines at first for this very reason.

General Douglas MacArthur took on the Japanese army, which many considered the best the East had to offer at the time, with a large majority of Filipino soldiers who didn't even know how to fire a rifle. This is why the Japanese had the advantage even though the U.S. and Filipino troops outnumbered them. According to Mr. Gordon, there were about 12,000 native soldiers, and most of the fighting and dying was done by them [History Web Pages]. General MacArthur eventually went to the Bataan peninsula in a retreat, even though he won a Medal of Honor for it. There were about 1,000 patients in the medical wards every day in Bataan, both Americans and Filipinos. This was largely because the Filipinos lived in horribly unsanitary conditions, not getting a chance to wash their dishes and living dangerously close to the. The Japanese "didn't win a military battle, they won a medical battle" because of the constant disease.

MacArthur was forced to cut the rations for his troops in half, then cut them in half again, and one more time. By the end of these ration cuts, Mr. Gordon was receiving rice and a bit of canned salmon twice a day. Any ships that tried to help supply them with

food and medical supplies were destroyed by the Japanese navy. The only bit of help the Americans received came from the submarines, and even that was extremely minimal.

By the time the Japanese made it to the edge of the peninsula, Mr. Gordon and many other servicemen had retreated to the mountains. If he had stayed there, he would most likely not have been captured by the Japanese army. Instead, he and a buddy volunteered to go back down and search for supplies. He considers this to be one of the biggest mistakes of his life, as he was found by the Japanese and began his trail on the death march around April 11 or 12. He didn't know anybody in his group, as most were Filipinos, with just a few Americans.

The details of the Bataan Death March prove that humans can treat other humans like animals. 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 torture techniques 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 [History Web Pages]. Mr. Gordon witnessed a man get run over by multiple tanks. By the time Mr. Gordon passed the victim, he was completely flattened.

Richard Gordon said he believes that he survived the march because of his ability to ration the water in his canteen. He did this by not swallowing the water. He would just gargle a mouthful in an attempt to moisten his mouth. Then he would spit the water back into his canteen. This allowed him to avoid drinking the contaminated water from the dirty puddles, which was the only place the Japanese allowed them to drink from. Just about everybody who decided to drink from this filthy water would eventually die from disease. One thing that Mr. Gordon never understood was why the Japanese stopped the Filipinos from feeding those on the march. Many natives would line the roads with buckets of rice and water in hopes that the POWs would get to eat and drink. When the Japanese saw these buckets, they would kick them over and laugh. Mr. Gordon said he found this confusing, because later on the Japanese defense for not feeding the soldiers was that there were too many to take care of. When they reached Samal, they were finally given a bit of food, which consisted of a handful of hot rice. Because he had no eating utensils, he had the hot rice put in his hand, something he still regrets, he said with a chuckle.

Mr. Gordon ended the march with his fellow POWs by landing in Camp O'Donnell. This was the final stop of the Bataan Death March, and about 2,200 Americans and 27,000 Filipinos died here. He stayed here until July 5, 1942, a bit later than most of the POWs. This was because he was on burial duty, and many of the doctors found him quite helpful and therefore made him stick around until the last batch of soldiers left. From here, he was shipped to Cabana Cawan [sp?], where he stayed until October. He came down with malaria here, at which point a doctor told him that his best option was to "change temperatures." For this reason, he volunteered to go to Japan.

About 15,000 other Americans went with him. They were hit by a submarine attack, but luckily the torpedo was a dud. He arrived in Moji on November 25, 1942. They were all sent up to the mountains, which were extremely cold. The POWs were given thin old British soldier uniforms that they were forced to wear at all times. It wasn't

much, but it was a little extra warmth. The only heat they were given was coal for fire. The smoke that came from these fires really got into the prisoners' lungs.

Mr. Gordon noted that the thought of losing the war had seemed never to enter the minds of the Japanese soldiers, because they were doing extremely well up to this point. Now, perhaps for this reason, they were more cruel to the prisoners than they might otherwise have been.

The Japanese were having the POWs build a hydroelectric dam for them in Nagoya, which still exists to this day and is the fourth largest in Japan. Mr. Gordon and his fellow prisoners worked on the dam for three years. They would mostly do manual labor, such as hauling huge logs from one point to another. A lot of their tasks were just busywork, such as moving heavy machinery from point A to point B, and then back to point A the next day.

Mr. Gordon said, "I became very disenchanted with my fellow Americans... [This] had to do with the lack of discipline they had before they entered the war." This was around the time that he made it a point to learn Japanese. He related how many other Americans declared, "I'm not learning this slant-eyed language," a stance they seemed to consider as patriotic but which Mr. Gordon saw as foolish. He believed that learning Japanese was one of the smartest decisions he made at the camp.

On August 15, 1945, Mr. Gordon had his first glimpse of the end of the war and his sufferings. Japanese officers told the prisoners that there was no work for the day. This was the second day in a row, and came as a huge shock and a sign of the imminent defeat of the Japanese because he had never been given two straight days off before. Usually, the Japanese would keep the prisoners busy with mindless tasks, but they had stopped trying to do that by this point. A couple prisoners were actually allowed to go to the nearby town of Yokohama because one of them was extremely sick. This is around the time that Mr. Gordon and his fellow prisoners found out about the atomic bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When the war finally ended, the final death count at the camp in Japan was about 48 British and Americans.

The survivors were taken out to a hospital ship to be checked up on and cleared to leave. From here, they were sent to the town of Yokohama, where they were put on another ship on which they spent four days. They eventually ended up on Atsugi airbase. From here, as many POWs as possible were packed onto any seats leaving the airbase. Once they left the airbase, they made it to Okinawa. Here, they stayed in tents for a couple nights until they made it on to ships that were going through the Pacific Ocean.

The first stop that the ship made on this side of the world was in Vancouver, Canada. This was because that Mr. Gordon's particular ship had a few Canadian soldiers. Spotlights and whistles went off throughout the pier. This was a welcome reception for the Canadians, an emotional scene that Mr. Gordon recounted that he just "couldn't help but cry" for. The story was quite different for the Americans when they got to Seattle.

Owing to poor scheduling, the only reception they received was from a lone drunk on the pier. The soldiers were not allowed to get off the ship until their relatives arrived. This didn't affect Mr. Gordon, as he was from the East Coast and therefore had no family members to greet him. When he arrived at Penn Station in the city, he saw his brother for the first time in six years. When Mr. Gordon had left for the war he was twelve, and now he was eighteen. Mr. Gordon's immediate reaction was to turn around and go back to the

place he “felt comfortable,” which was Japan, although he said that this feeling went away very quickly.

Mr. Gordon enlisted back into active duty in the army as a second lieutenant. He was sent to Fort Devens in Massachusetts, then spent three years in occupation duty in Germany. Mr. Gordon got orders for Korea but he did not want to report there. He managed to talk his commanding officers into letting him report to Okinawa instead. Here he spent three years commanding two units. Mr. Gordon then ended up in Wisconsin, where he had reached his twenty years of active duty. On January 1st, 1961, he retired from active duty.

Mr. Gordon became a narcotics agent in Suffolk County, but later joined the District Attorney’s office as an investigator. After this, he became the Deputy Director of the Narcotics unit in Suffolk County. He retired after an undisclosed amount of years, at which point he became a teacher in Florida. Finally, Mr. Gordon moved to Vermont where he was the Director of the Police Academy from 1977 to 1986.

The fact that those Japanese soldiers who ran the prison camps got off so lightly after the war was over didn’t sit well with Mr. Gordon. He was bothered that so many Japanese war criminals were absolved of any wrongdoing while those Nazis who were involved in the Holocaust were searched for so fervently.

Mr. Gordon went on to become the editor of the *Bataan Banner*, a newspaper for and about those involved in the death march. He refers to his readers as the “Battling Bastards of Bataan.”

According to this publication, 37.3% of the POWs died during imprisonment in the Japanese camps. That is a percentage out of the roughly 36,000 that survived the transit to these camps. Private Japanese companies benefited from the slave labor done by American soldiers in the horrible conditions. For these reasons, Mr. Gordon wanted a movement toward some sort of reparation for the POWs who went through the hardships in Japanese camps. He notes that the British gave their POWs \$15,000 for being in those same camps. Mr. Gordon believes that he and his fellow American soldiers deserve some sort of repayment for what they were put through.

Major Richard M. Gordon endured one of the worst POW experiences that a soldier could face. His selfless act to come back down that mountain to search for supplies ended up changing his future in the war. While he was in no position to fight for most of the war, what he went through was so much worse. His firsthand account of the Bataan Death March and the lessons he learned from it are things that only a soldier can teach you.

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