

# The Later March

*The Capture of US Navy Sailor, Ross H. Gilbert 1942, Philippines  
As told to his daughter, Maureen Lang*

I hate pancakes. Give me a couple of eggs, once over easy, a piece of toast, a cup of coffee. Pancakes on the side? No, thanks.

But for weeks while the Japanese daily bombed the Bataan peninsula and then the small, nearby islands of Corregidor, Hughes and Ft. Drum that's all I ate. Twice a day. Pancakes.

Little did I know I'd long for those flat, tasteless bits of flour over the next three and a half years.

I had been assigned to a gunboat in China on the Yangtze River. Remember the movie *The Sand Pebbles* with Steve McQueen? That was me, keeping peace on the Yangtze. But after about a year of such duty, my boat was unexpectedly called out. We were halfway to the Philippines before any of us knew where we were headed.

We reached the destination late fall of '41 and docked in Manila Bay to defend the islands. By December the Japanese had invaded the northern tip of Luzon. A bigger invasion followed, at the Lingayen Gulf. The Japanese Christmas gift to us was the bombing of Manila Bay.

We knew the Japanese forces were getting closer. Our flat bottomed boat, which could navigate the shallow rivers, was assigned to go ashore and bring back all the supplies we could before taking refuge behind the island of Corregidor. We were soon forced to abandon Manila under the overwhelming Japanese push.

We stayed aboard ship during the day except when we were called ashore on Corregidor to dig foxholes. Sailors like me were outnumbered by the many U.S. soldiers and Marines who were forced to retreat to the Bataan peninsula and surrounding islands. Before long the Japanese sent aerial bombers every day and their ground forces were pressing down the peninsula. I didn't know it at the time, but the plan was to hold on for six months until reinforcements could be brought in.

Probably none of us would have believed we could hold on as long as we did. MacArthur left for Australia on March 11th, when it was obvious the Japanese would prevail in the area because American reinforcements couldn't be spared from the war in Europe. Thousands of men were taken prisoner by the Japanese when the Bataan peninsula fell on the morning of April 9th 1942.

We went under cover of darkness on our flatbottomed boat to pick up what few survivors we could find and bring them back to Corregidor. But by then we feared we weren't so much saving them as delaying the inevitable. We were outnumbered and knew it.

With Bataan fallen, the Japanese army was closer than ever to where I was sitting with a platoon of Marines.

Before long the order came to scuttle our boat so the enemy wouldn't have use of it. We saved what we could and watched the boat—home to me for the last year or more—sink to the bottom of the bay. Even though all of us guessed what was to come, when that ship went down we knew we were really trapped.

The Marines, trained to fight on land, gave us the high ground of Ft. Mills on the small island of Hughes where we found 100 lb bags of powder and a topside gun. But we quickly learned the pivot arm on the only gun available wasn't there...sent for repairs before the Japanese arrived. The big gun bottomside worked, manned by Marines trained in ground warfare. All we had was our riot shotguns from service on the Yangtze.

We found water topside, though...not salt water, but not exactly fresh, either. There were big kegs with algae growing on top. We brushed aside the green foam and used the rest anyway. It accompanied the pancakes I hated.

Once the Japanese controlled Bataan, they showered their bombs on Corregidor, Hughes, and Ft. Drum every day, twice a day—for the rest of April through the first few days of May with no apparent reason to subside. We used all we had against them, but it wasn't enough.

Finally the Japanese sent word to the Americans they were going to annihilate anything on the islands. If anyone fired back they would double the effort. Our officers told us to get rid of our shotguns that were legal on the Yangtze but not so in conventional war. We threw those in the bay, too. Companions to the boats already down there.

The bombardment began with constant shelling. By the second day it tapered off and the Japanese landed. There must have been a hundred thousand of them spread across those few tiny islands. They came with everything from firearms to flame throwers to stomp out any resistance.

The order came to line up for formal surrender, and we were then searched. Anything of value was taken. We were allowed the clothes on our back, one change, a blanket and our mess kit. Then we were brought to an air base and put in a seaplane hangar on the now conquered island.

It was that same night I started to feel the fever. Sweat and chills alternated throughout my body all night long. In the morning I was one of the men chosen for work detail. We were ordered to carry all of the radio and electronic gear from topside of Hughes to bottomside so it could be sent to Japan.

I don't know when I collapsed, but the next thing I knew I was on the ground with a Japanese soldier kicking me to get me back to work. I thought I'd had it, but a minute later a Japanese officer intervened and must have seen how sick I was. Next thing I knew I woke up in the Melinda Tunnel Hospital, being treated for malaria.

But that only delayed my entrance into the March. Those who'd been taken before us at Bataan had paved the awful way with their blood. We were taken first to Bilibid prison camp in Manila, where any groups of friends were separated. We weren't there long. Next we were marched again and finally herded into the same boxcars that had been used by the Bataan POWs. Those boxcars where so many men were shoved inside and could barely breathe in the heat, without adequate water and with a single bucket as a lavatory. For a bunch of men with heat stroke, dysentery and other island diseases, there was quite a smell.

And so they took us by foot and by train and eventually by boat as they shuffled us around in the next weeks and months to place so many POWs. From Bilibid I was taken to Cabantuan, then back to Manila Bay where we left for Taiwan, then Fusan (Pusan, Korea) and finally for me, Mukden, Manchuria in the North of China. Ironically, the Japanese had raised and refitted my old gunboat and it was that very boat which escorted us out of the Bay.

It would be three and half years before I knew freedom again. One morning we weren't roused for work detail and I knew something was up. The Japanese running our camp had taken off. They'd gotten word of their country's surrender and probably didn't want to be caught in the jobs they'd had for the past few years.

Freedom came with a price, a price paid by all sides. But it left on me one immutable fact: the price we paid was worth it.

---

*For more real-life tales of valor, as well as exciting novels set in World War II, visit [www.TriciaGoyer.com](http://www.TriciaGoyer.com)!*