

# 32 MONTHS

## a Japanese Prisoner

by WO J.B. Shimel  
as told to Sgt Duane Decker

**T**he Japanese took me at Corregidor when it fell on May 28, 1942. I shuttled from one Japanese prison camp to another from then until Jan. 30, 1945, when I was finally liberated, along with 510 Army, Navy and civilian prisoners from Cabanatuan prison. In those 32 months I learned about the Japanese the hard way. Every time I think of them now, I know that a Browning Automatic Rifle is a thing of sheer beauty.

I'll start at the very beginning, from the day they got me. I was tossed, along with hundreds of others, into a building at a submarine base there at Corregidor. We were packed in that building so thick ... No one was allowed to leave the building. So there was no let-up in the hot, dirty crush.

Since we weren't allowed to leave this building, and there were no interior heads, we had to defecate on the floor. That led to conditions so shockingly unsanitary that I would not care to put the details into print. You can imagine.

All we got to eat was rice—and little of that—with water. The flies were so thick that I would stand by, batting them away from another man's rice while he ate it. When he finished, he'd do the same so that I could eat mine. We could hardly sleep at night, with these conditions, and the heat of that human-packed place. The majority, therefore, reached a state of exhaustion quickly.

After five days, we got some shovels and were allowed to dig some latrines outside. That helped some. We stayed at this base for three weeks, and by that time practically everybody had a case of dysentery, among other things.

Then we were packed into a transport

and taken to Bilibid prison at Manila where we joined thousands more like ourselves. We were at Bilibid a week, then we were crowded into steel boxcars and taken on a five-hour ride, 90 miles north to Cabanatuan prison—the place we were finally liberated.

They removed us from Bilibid in groups of 1,000. I forgot to say that before leaving there, a Japanese officer squeezed \$27 each out of us for medicine which he said we'd need when we got to Cabanatuan. We sure needed the medicine at Cabanatuan,



Men were dying so fast we lacked the strength to bury them.

yes, but all we got for our \$27 were a few pills and very little quinine. Your guess is as good as mine as to how much profit they shook out of us on that little deal.

I stayed at Cabanatuan the first time I was there for five months. In all that time we lived on practically nothing but rice and water. They gave us a little salt once in a while, but it was so little you might just as well call it no salt at all.

These sudden deficiencies in our diet did some terrible things to us. For instance, it affected us in one way so

that we would find it necessary to go to the head anywhere from 15 to 25 times a night. Without trying to go into the full medical explanation of it, the thing was that rice is about 95 percent water. During the day we were on our feet, and it made our legs look swollen while our shoulders and chest looked emaciated. At night, when we laid down, that water would then circulate all through us. That accounted for the misery of those nights. With a schedule like that to keep up with, a decent night's rest was out of the question.

And by this time, malnutrition and a general combination of diseases were killing off the weaker ones in the camp at the rate of 40 to 50 per day. At first, as a matter of cold, hard fact, men were dying so fast and the condition of the living was so wretched and weakened that it was three or four days before we could get the physical strength to bury the dead men. The bodies just laid around and there was nothing any of us could do about it there for a while.

In October, we shoved off by boat for Mindanao Island, our destination the Davao penal colony. We got a break on that boat, too. There was a big pile of very small fish—I don't know what the name of them was—which the Japanese didn't want because they were practically all bone and head. So they said we could eat up what we wanted of them.

We tore into those little fish, believe me. We ate them ravenously—raw—swallowing the heads, scales, and insides. Everything. They tasted wonderful, too, and were the first proteins we'd had since becoming Japanese prisoners. There were also some potatoes on that boat which had rotted. The Japanese wouldn't touch them, of course. So they let us have them. We ate those rotted potatoes with relish.

Then, when we got to Davao, they added pigweed and radish tops to our rice diet. Also, rotted potatoes, occasionally. We were

really much better off now, thanks to these improvements in our diet. It may not sound like much of a treat, I know, but that was wonderful stuff to us then.

The death rate had now shrunk way down. In 20 months at Davao, only 20 men out of 2,000 died. This was due to the fact that only the stronger were still with us, and at this point we stronger ones had adjusted ourselves to our diet. But the widespread dysentery continued.

Most everyone's weight had dropped off to abnormal proportions. I had always

SGT JOHN CLYMER



been thin, normally weighing 149 pounds. Now I was down to 109 pounds. Lieutenant George W. Green, USN, who was there with me, had dropped from 192 pounds to 117. And Lieutenant Earl Baumgardner, USN, had gone down from 200 to 140.

There at Davao, the head was some distance from the barracks. In the daytime, we were allowed to go to it but only in groups of 20 men. This led to a pathetic sort of humorous situation in which maybe 14 men would be lined up outside the barracks, needing badly to go to the head. But they couldn't go until the group numbered exactly 20—that was the rule the Japanese had imposed upon us. So, some of us in the waiting line would go around and sell a half dozen others who didn't need to go on the idea of getting in our formation, just so the ones who needed relief could get it.

At night, since the head was too far and too difficult to reach in the darkness, we posted buckets in the doorway, one of which was painted red, the other white. The red was for one form of defecation, the white for the other. We posted a guard by the buckets and his job was to point out this difference to people who came, half-asleep, to use them. Since somebody or other had to defecate at least every 15 seconds—all night long—the guard's directing voice droned on in an almost continuous monotone—all night long. I know because my bunk was right close to the buckets.

We were now working in rice paddies and other fields. Our original uniforms and shoes had long since worn to shreds. But once the Japanese discovered that we could do without clothes, they stopped giving us the scanty clothing they had at first. We worked barefoot, in loincloths only. I didn't wear shoes for two years.

Of course, we got all kinds of sores, blisters and cuts from the sharp grass of the rice paddies. We had our own doctors, but practically no medicine. Most of the medical supplies sent us by the Red Cross must have been confiscated by the Japanese for we got only a very small amount—never enough to help very much.

At one time, I had about 150 blisters and sores on every part of my body. I know it was about that number because I counted them on the front of me, where I could see them. That way I approximated how many must be on my back where I couldn't see them. And due to malnutrition we were frequently losing whole fingernails—they would simply get sores which would enlarge and then the fingernail would drop out. LT Green, I remember, lost every single fingernail on both hands at least three times each.

Another thing—we were constantly

## ALSO IN LEATHERNECK...



**Left: January 1934—**  
MajGen Smedley D. Butler, seated, visits Marines of the American Legion, Boston, Mass.

**Below: July 1944—**  
SSgt Ronald L. Hoblit troubleshoots Marine Corps power lines on Bougainville.



**Above: April 1944—**  
1stLt George S. Plantier, demonstrates how to inflate his invention, the poncho raft.

**Right: August 1944—**  
Marines gratefully accept coffee and doughnuts from civilians at a stop along their troop train's route.



**August 1925—**  
Veteran Marines, George "Sarg" Connally and Eddie Collins, stars of the Chicago White Sox, enjoy *The Leatherneck*.



being promised part of the produce from our farm work. But we never got any of it. I mean, none at all.

Up to now I haven't got around to saying anything much about physical abuse and violations of personal dignity by the Japanese. That is not because there wasn't plenty of it. I've just been too busy telling other things. But here goes:

The Japanese guards had what we used to call a "vitamin stick." It was thick at one end and narrowed down at the other. When we failed to move fast enough to suit them or displeased them in the slightest way, they'd give us a good clubbing around with those sticks. If you were able to take the clubbing without a sign of a whimper, they generally let up on you quickly. But if they saw you flinch under it, you took a lot of it before they let you alone.

Here's another clear memory of mine. One day there was one of our men on a work detail who was given two bananas by a Japanese officer walking by. This Japanese officer, in case that gesture puzzles you, was one whom we considered almost pro-American compared to all the rest. Well, this prisoner started to eat the first of the two bananas when the Japanese officer walked slowly away. Immediately a Japanese private came up, grabbed the bananas from the prisoner and began to club him around with his vitamin stick. The Japanese officer who'd given the prisoner the bananas heard the commotion, turned around, and saw what

was happening. All he did was break out laughing and walk on. And mind you, that officer was one whom we considered pro-American compared with the rest of them.

Then, the Japanese organized what they called 10-man shooting squads. This was a neat, self-policing idea of theirs. The thing worked like this: We'd be put in a squad of 10 prisoners. If any one of those 10 men disobeyed or did anything wrong, the other nine of us were punished equally. If any of us tried to escape, the other nine would be shot as well as the one who made the break.

Finally, on June 5, 1944, we were shipped by freighter from Davao back to Cabanatuan. We reached Cabanatuan on June 28. All this time, I might mention here, we'd had absolutely no news of how the war was progressing. The only way we'd gathered the slightest inkling that it was going against the Japanese had been by means of some propaganda sheets they'd passed out to us every month or so in the early days.

These sheets, all written 100 percent for Japanese exploitation, would say one month that Marines in attempting to land on Guadalcanal had been wiped out completely by the defending Japanese forces. Then, a month later, in the next sheet, we'd read that the Japanese were bombing the hell out of Guadalcanal. We'd put two items like that together and we'd have some sense of the true story.

But one of the prisoners was foolish enough to point one of these discrepancies

out to a Japanese guard one time and asked him how it could be explained. The Japanese guard gave him a going-over with the vitamin stick. After that we didn't get any more of their propaganda sheets.

We never got anywhere trying to talk to Japanese guards although we occasionally tried to draw out scraps of information. A conversation with one of them would open up with personal inanities and die before we could make it go any further. For instance, it might start something like this (in fact, it usually did):

"You have wifey back homey?"

"Yes, I have wifey. You?"

"I have a wifey, too."

"And baby? I have baby."

"No. No baby."

After that, the conversation just fizzled out. Beyond such silly scraps of social discourse, they wouldn't talk to us. They wouldn't say a word that could in any way tip us off to any light on the outside world.

Mail was just about as helpful as that, too. I hadn't seen my wife in six years. During those 32 months I got letters from her. One was a page long, the others were 25 words long—I guess the Japanese must have given the folks back home a rule that 25 words was the limit. All the letters were close to a year old before I got them.

Actually, I guess in the light of what I've found out about the progress of the war, we were always overly optimistic about when the Yanks would come. You see, we had to be optimistic about that—it was all we had to live on. And there were always

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**Left: January 1938—**  
Parris Island Marines  
enjoy a picnic.

**Right: October 1925—**  
Jeff Daniels, *Leatherneck*  
correspondent, stands  
between Parris Island  
football team players  
2ndLt C.J. "Nellie"  
Eldridge, left, and Sgt  
"Tiny" Kimbrough, right.



**Right: October**  
1938—Shanghai  
Marines perform  
a combat drill.



**Left: March 1948—**  
A deeper look into  
the role of the  
Code Talkers,  
including PFC Carl  
Gorman, who was  
an observer on  
Saipan.



## ALSO IN LEATHERNECK...



**Above: November 1925—Long and short of it on Parris Island—Marine buddies both qualified as sharpshooters.**

**Right: July 1938—Cpl Fortenberry demonstrates the semi-prone position for 500 rapid winks.**



**Left: February 1945—A Corsair takes off from an airstrip on Leyte.**



**Right: September 1938—A group of USS Chester Marines at the Miles and Childs Glacier, near Cordova, Alaska, June 5, 1938.**



**Above: January 1945—PFC Jeff Smith is presented with a Purple Heart for wounds he received during the fighting on D-day on Saipan.**

rumors starting, dozens of new ones every week. As early as the close of 1942 we had talked ourselves into thinking that the Yanks were getting close. It was crazy, I know. Probably in our hearts we really knew better. It was wishful thinking, but we sure needed that kind of wishful thinking in our position.

However, in September of 1944, we knew we weren't kidding ourselves any longer. For the first time we actually heard bombs exploding on Luzon. That was wonderful beyond words.

Then, in October, the Japanese began to take all the able-bodied men from the prison to send them to Bilibid. They shipped them in groups of 500, every two or three days. I was left at Cabanatuan, thank God, with 510 others who were considered hospital cases. Actually many of those who were sent to Bilibid were more authentic hospital cases than some of us who remained at Cabanatuan, myself included. All of the ranking officers were removed from Cabanatuan, and when they had gone, I found myself the ranking Marine officer in the prison.

Then, three weeks before the actual liberation, the Japanese guards at our camp were suddenly yanked out. The Japanese commandant there, a Major Takasaki, told us the guards were leaving due to "inconveniences." We knew damn well what the inconveniences were by then. He said he was leaving us enough rations for 30 days, but that if we left the stockade we would be considered combatants and treated as such.

But we went on forays for food. We killed and butchered Brahma steers, we raided storehouses and took all the provisions we could lay our hands on. Once we stole 500 cases of milk.

In the three weeks that elapsed between the time the Japanese guards left and the time we were liberated, we ate. We started to gain weight. Our health improved considerably. I'll venture to say that if our liberation had occurred three weeks earlier than it did, not half of us could have walked out of that prison camp. The reporters described us as "emaciated." Well, if they thought we looked emaciated then, they should have seen us before we'd started fattening up.

The rumble of guns crept closer and we knew our time was finally coming. And then, on the night of Jan. 30, we heard shots and explosions close by and suddenly we saw a bunch of soldiers rushing toward the camp.

We heard them yell to us to break for the main gate. They added—and I'll never hear a more wonderful three-word statement in my life—"These are Yanks!"

**END**