

Captured on Corregidor

By P.L. Thompson

Editor's note: On May 6, 1942, American forces on Corregidor, including 4th Marine Regiment surrendered to Japanese forces.

The Western Union messenger checked the address once more before pulling to a stop in front of the house on Nebraska Avenue. Moments later, he handed a telegram to Mr. and Mrs. Paul H. Garden, of Norfolk, Neb. In silence they read the stark message, so dreaded in wartime.

Just a few days before Wendell Garden's parents received the telegram, Garden walked to the entrance of Malinta Tunnel on Corregidor. A 20-year-old Marine corporal with two years of service in the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, Garden was following the orders he had been given to destroy his weapon and surrender to the Japanese.

"The first Japanese soldier I saw came over to me and took my wrist watch and ring. I tried to tell him the ring wouldn't

come off, so he was going to use his bayonet to cut it off. Well, I managed to get the thing off in a hurry," said Garden.

"They took everything but my dog tags. In fact, I still have them. They [the combat troops] didn't mistreat anyone, not like later in the prison camps. They might shoot you if you did something wrong, but they didn't beat me," Garden continued.

Kept on the island of Corregidor for nearly three weeks, Garden's captors provided him with no food.

"The only thing we got to eat was what we could scrounge from the island's food dumps, and that wasn't much. Sometimes the working parties might find some canned goods, but never enough for everyone," Garden recalled.

From Corregidor, Garden and his fellow prisoners began a long, nightmarish odyssey that would end in death for thousands and long, hard years in Japanese POW camps for those, like Garden, who would ultimately survive.

"We were taken to Bilabid Prison in Manila. We spent some time there and then were taken to a train station. I re-

member it was a long march and very hot. When we got there, they packed us into small railroad freight cars, a hundred men to each car. There was no room to sit. If you passed out, you wouldn't even fall down ... we were packed that tightly," said Garden.

The tropical heat, combined with the crowded conditions, soon turned the freight cars' interiors into an oven. Because of the lack of air, some men aboard the train went mad; others suffocated.

When the train arrived at its destination, the men were again marched, this time to a prison camp named Cabanatuan.

"There wasn't much there; huts made of bamboo that had grass roofs and were open at the sides.

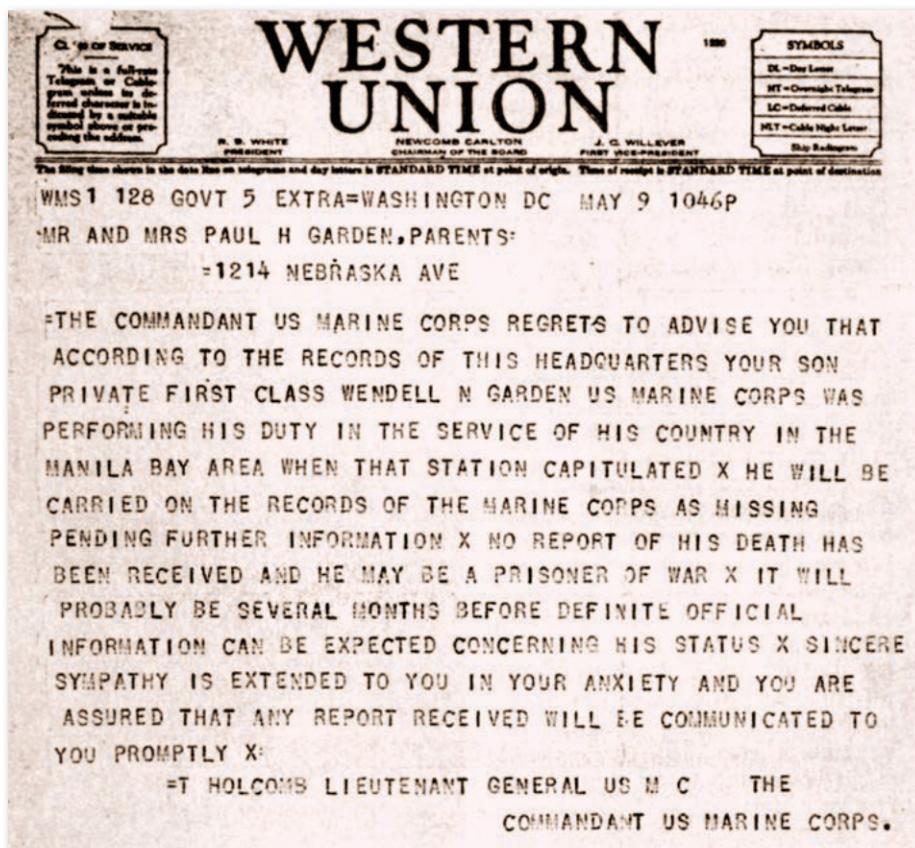
"Our officers had their own huts, but they were no different. They tried to set up a command structure, but again there wasn't much they could do. The Japanese wouldn't let them. They would even detail men to take charge of the food when it came in, what there was of it," explained Garden.

The prisoners were fed rice, barley and



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

When Japanese guards failed to show up at his prison camp the day WWII ended, Wendell Garden slipped into the prison administration building and "liberated" his identification photograph. At the time of his release, Garden had lost 100 pounds and was suffering from malaria.



whatever happened to be in season, but it was never enough.

"I remember they used to give us just the tops off the vegetables. The Japanese guard would get the vegetables and we would get the tops.

"Once in a while the guards would shoot a carabao and bring it back for us. The problem was, with thousands of prisoners, the one carabao was just never enough. We were always hungry," Garden said.

The Japanese would take men from Cabanatuan Prison for working details in other parts of Luzon. Very often, being picked—or not picked—for a working party could mean the difference between life and death. Garden was sent on one detail that almost cost him his life.

Transported to Clark Air Base to help repair the war damage, Garden found the conditions there worse than at Cabanatuan.

"Clark was about the worst detail you could have. It was real coolie work. We had one barracks for ourselves, a regular army barracks, and the Japanese came up with a unique way of guarding us," Garden recalled.

Keeping prisoners from escaping was rather a simple matter for the Japanese. If one prisoner escaped, 10 others were chosen at random and executed.

"I don't remember exactly how many, but there were one or two who did escape. The Japanese came down the line, just like an officer going to inspect your rifle. They would stop in front of you and if they touched you, that meant you were to be shot.

"One of them stopped in front of me and I thought, 'God—here it goes,' but he went on to the next guy, right next to me, and took him. There was no rhyme or reason to the selection. I guess it's God's will that I'm still here; there could be no other reason," said Garden, his voice choking. "That happened twice that I personally know of."

Garden remained at Clark for several months and then was taken back to Cabanatuan. At the time, he was suffering from both malaria and jaundice as were many of the prisoners. They received no medical attention. In the camp at Cabanatuan, sick prisoners died at an appalling rate.

Within several weeks, Garden was taken from Cabanatuan to Manila and put aboard a ship, bound for Japan. This time he was lucky. While most of the prisoners were held in the crowded, sweltering hold of the ship, Garden was detailed to help prepare what food was to be given to the prisoners of war.

"We were attacked several times by American submarines, or at least the convoy we were in was. There were six



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

In May 1942, after nearly a month of continuous bombardment and an assault by the Japanese, U.S. forces in the Philippines surrendered. Garden and his fellow Marines remained on Corregidor for three weeks after the surrender.

or eight ships, I don't remember. We also had Japanese destroyers along with us and they drove the subs off. We were glad of that," Garden sighed.

The ship Garden was aboard stopped at Formosa and the prisoners were given fresh fruit. To men used to so little, the appearance of anything out of the ordinary was an overwhelming joy. With so little to eat, food had become an obsession with the prisoners.

"It's so very hard to explain, now, how deeply you can appreciate something like even an old banana. Just anything, you know?" Garden reflected.

As with other men who underwent the same type of experience, Garden's memory of time and place is sometimes limited. As a prisoner, time means very little when you're trying to stay alive, day by day.

"I think we landed in Osaka, Japan, in December of 1942. I know there was an air raid going on when we arrived and it was terribly cold. We had nothing but what was left of our original uniforms, and not much remained of those.

"After the raid, we got on a train and went to Niigata, north of Tokyo. I was there for the rest of the war," Garden said.

On March 20, 1943, Garden's parents received a letter from Headquarters Marine Corps. It said, in part, "A partial list of American prisoners of war has been

received from the International Red Cross, containing the name of your son, Corporal Wendell N. Garden, U.S. Marine Corps, confirming the fact that he is alive and a prisoner of war. The report fails to state the place of internment."

This was the first news the Gardens had heard about their son in nearly a year. But they knew, at least at the time of the report, that he was alive.

The prisoner of war camp at Niigata was in an old lumber yard. It had been used as a prison for some time and Chinese prisoners from Formosa were being used there as slave labor.

"The buildings and facilities were a lot better than at Clark or Cabanatuan, but our diet got worse. There was never enough to eat and everyone was always hungry. I should explain. Because of the way things were then, the Japanese didn't have much to eat either," said Garden.

The treatment of the prisoners at Niigata was bad from the start and it got worse as American aircraft brought the war to Japan on a regular basis. After a bombing, the prisoners were often beaten.

"Every time the planes bombed, the Japanese would come and collect us. Things really got bad. The work was bad, and it never ended. They worked you until you dropped. If you couldn't work, you didn't eat"

The prisoners worked in a plant that

manufactured huge diesel engines for ships. Garden's job was to chisel the excess metal from the engine castings with an air hammer.

"For prisoners to be forced to work in that type of place was clearly against the rules of the Geneva Convention," Garden said. "It was a prime target for air raids and we were hit several times."

The POW camp at Niigata was not marked as a prisoner of war compound either, and it too was hit several times during air raids.

Garden's days, like those of the other prisoners, drifted by, one by one, marked only by the constant backbreaking labor and starvation diet. There was only the occasional terror of a sadistic guard to break the monotony.

"We had one guard who was really bad when he got drunk. He would come around the barracks and hold a loaded pistol to your head and threaten, 'I could shoot you!' I would look at him and say, 'Yes, I suppose you could,'" recalled Garden.

The prisoners at Niigata received little or no news about the war. They had been encouraged from the start to learn Japanese because, their captors reasoned, Japan was winning and everyone would need to speak the language after the war.

As the U.S. bombings increased and food became even scarcer, it became clear

to the prisoners that things were not going well for the Japanese war effort.

"Toward the end, even the guards who had been sadistic became a little more friendly. They wanted us to put in a good word for them when it was over."

One morning, the prisoners noticed something strange. The military guards were gone.

"Later in the day some of the civilian guards came by and told us the war was over. It was hard to believe. We could even go to town if we wanted! We had no money, but we were free to do as we pleased," Garden recalled.

The next day the prisoners heard the roar of fighter aircraft, almost at ground level, coming across the camp.

"They were Marine Corps fighters, and they were dropping cartons of cigarettes. One of those pilots came in so low that his propeller brushed the trees

when he pulled up over the camp. The pilots had signed their names on the cartons.

"The day after that, larger planes came over and dropped a number of 255-gallon drums, welded together, full of food. Someone had figured the load wrong because the parachutes broke, and the drums came down like bombs.

"We also had a problem with the food. A couple of the prisoners overate and died

as a result. We had been starved for so long that we just couldn't eat that much at one time," Garden said.

Within a few days, the Japanese civilian guards told the former prisoners they were to go to Tokyo by train. When they arrived, they were met by members of the U.S. military.

When Garden set foot in Tokyo, he weighed 126 pounds. He had lost 100 pounds as a POW.

Back in Norfolk, Neb., Garden's parents finally received word that their son was definitely alive and would be returning home. Wendell Garden sent the cable himself.

"We had a bit of an adjustment period after we were released. We left Japan by ship and went to Guam, where they put us in the hospital for a while. I was doing well, except I still had malaria.

"When we arrived in the States, I checked in at the hospital in Oakland, Calif., and then headed for home. I bought a new set of greens to go home in, and after I'd been there for a month I couldn't wear them any more—I had gained so much weight back," Garden laughed.

Wendell Garden settled in his hometown and became a successful businessman. He counts himself luckier than many of the other former POWs he still sees occasionally.

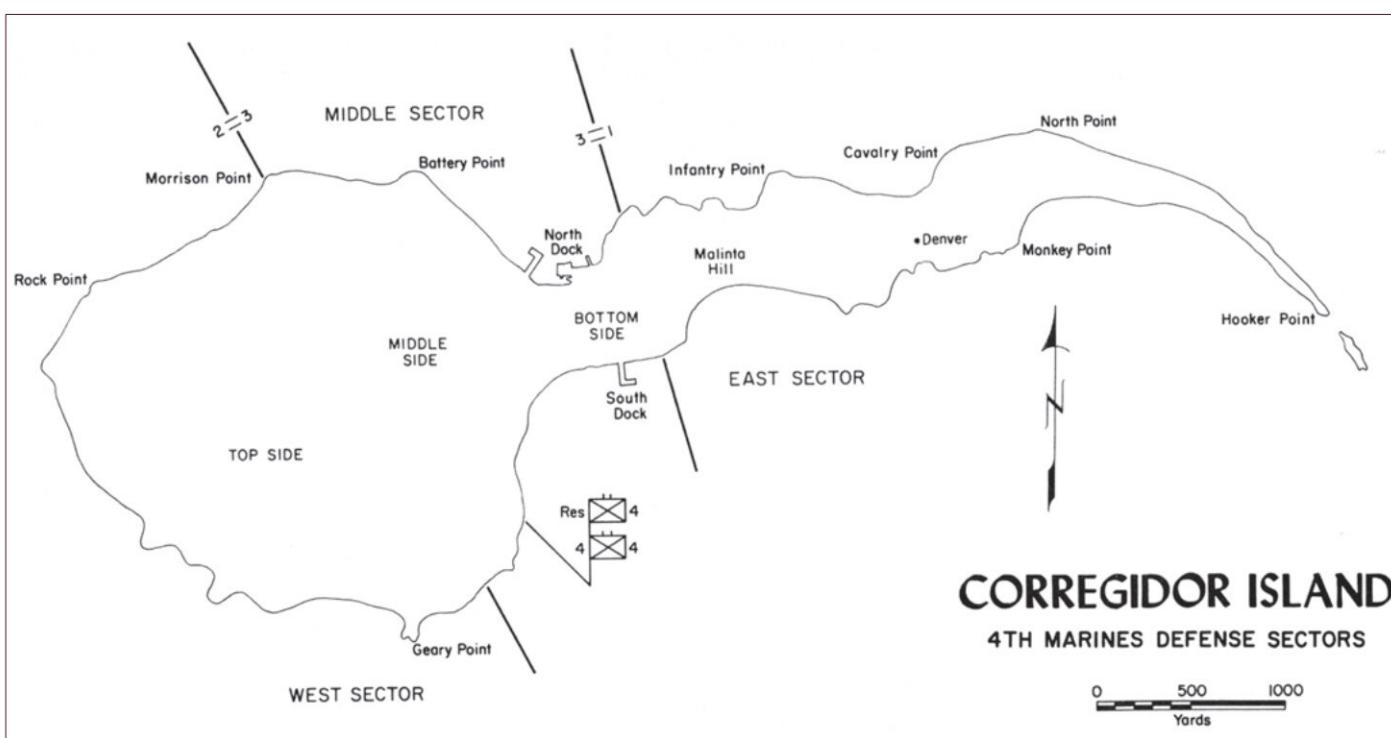
"I believe it was really mental attitude that got me through those years. I also believe that my Marine Corps training had a lot to do with it," Garden states.

"There were many prisoners I knew who just gave up—just turned everything off and sat down and died. Most Marines

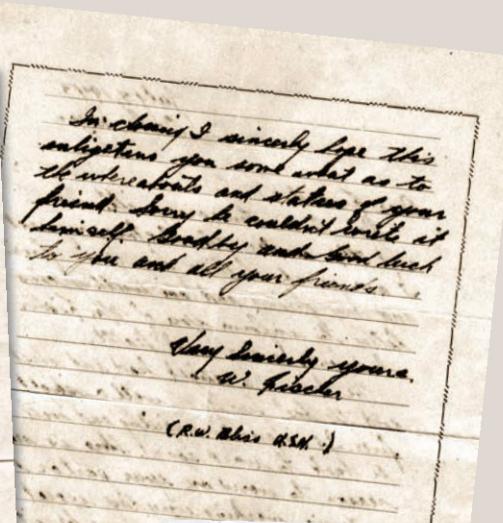
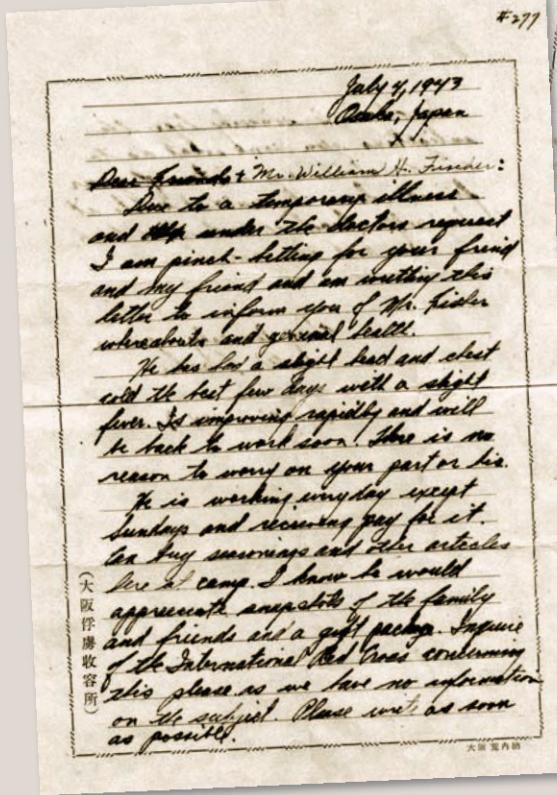


COURTESY OF WENDELL GARDEN

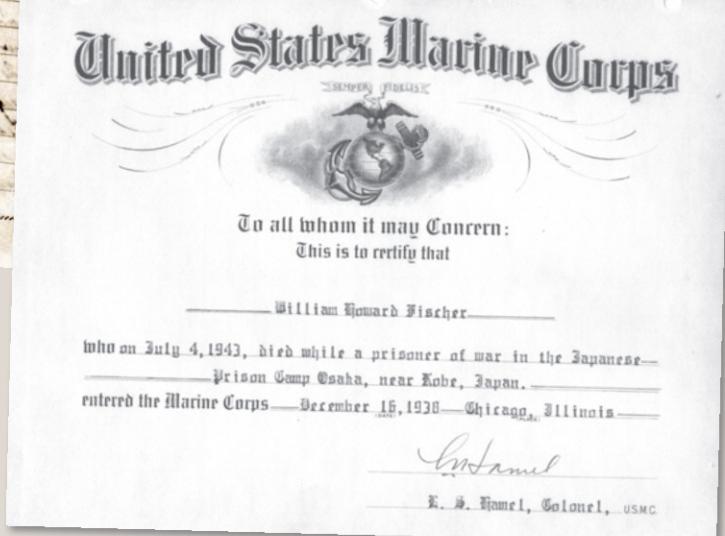
Wendell Garden went on to become a successful businessman in his hometown of Norfolk, Neb. He died in 2000 at the age of 78.



A Letter Home From a POW



Another POW who was captured on Corregidor, William H. Fischer, served in Headquarters Co, 4th MarDiv in Shanghai before being sent to the Philippines in 1941. He died in a camp in Osaka, Japan, on July 4, 1943, the same day his friend and fellow POW R.J. Bliss wrote the letter, left, to Fischer's parents. (Courtesy of Nels W. Luthman Jr.)



July 4, 1943
Osaka, Japan

Dear Friend of Mr. William H. Fischer:

Due to a temporary illness and under the doctors request I am pinch-hitting for your friend and my friend and am writing this letter to inform you of Mr. Fischer's whereabouts and general health.

He has had a slight head and chest cold the last few days with a slight fever. Is improving rapidly and will be back to work soon! There is no reason to worry on your part or his.

He is working every day except Sundays and receiving pay for it. Can buy seasonings and other articles here at camp. I know he would appreciate snapshots of the family and friends and a gift package. Inquire of the International Red Cross concerning

refused to do that. They fought every inch of the way.

"I knew I was going to make it—at least give it a good try—when they didn't shoot me as I came down from Topside on Corregidor. I just set my mind on surviving."

Like many of the men who survived those long years in POW camps, Wendell Garden doesn't talk much about the experience. He has done his best to put it all behind him, but memories of the pain, hunger and suffering are still with him.

It's a long way back to the days of Corregidor and the POW camps for Wendell Garden, but his association and ties with the Marine Corps did not end when he left the Corps. His son, Harold, later joined the Corps and was commissioned a Marine lieutenant.

Author's bio: P.L. Thompson was one of the last active-duty Marines to do a tour with Leatherneck. He made four trips to Vietnam for the magazine to cover stories, and spent almost a month in Hue

City during the Tet Offensive. During his next assignment, he returned to Vietnam with the Marine Corps Combat Motion Picture team. He retired from the Marine Corps as the NCOIC of public affairs, MCB Quantico, Va., and joined the Leatherneck staff again. Two years later, he moved to the Voice of America, the government's international broadcast facility in Washington, D.C., as a writer/producer/director. He retired from VOA after 21 years.

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