

WORLD WAR II

Survivor: Corporal Glenn McDole And the Palawan Massacre

Story by Dick Camp

Photos and map courtesy of the author

Superior Private Tomisaburo Sawa, Imperial Japanese Army fixed the bayonet on his rifle and carefully checked to make sure it was loaded. From the veranda of the barracks, he watched as members of his platoon advanced across the courtyard. Marine Private First Class Glenn "Mac" McDole saw them coming from the entranceway of his trench air-raid shelter. He knew instinctively that something was terribly wrong.

The Japanese guards were in full combat gear with fixed bayonets. A guttural order was given, the line stopped, and the Japanese quickly formed a semicircle around the trenches filled with American prisoners of war (POWs).

"I saw five soldiers go up to one of the air-raid shelters and throw buckets of gasoline into the entrance," Sawa stated. "This was followed by two men who threw lighted torches into the opening."

McDole watched in horror as flames engulfed the trapped Americans. One human torch climbed out of the trench and ran screaming toward the Japanese. They shot him down, but others were not so lucky. The guards watched them burn to death. McDole ducked down, terrified by what he had seen. "My God," he thought, "the Japanese are going to kill us all."

The one entrance to the Palawan prisoner camp (below left) helped control the prisoners of war. Inside the walls (below right) were numerous coconut trees that prisoners would climb at night to retrieve the coconuts.



Cpl Glenn McDole

Palawan, Camp 10-A

With the surrender of U.S. forces in the Philippines, American POWs immediately were confined in filthy, overcrowded camps near Manila. McDole was sent to the infamous Cabanatuan Camp #1. It was a death camp; every day 10 to 15 men died of malnutrition, vitamin deficiency or contagious diseases. In addition, brutal Japanese guards executed many prisoners for trumped-up charges.

McDole knew that the same thing might happen to him. He searched for a way to escape the camp. It finally came in the form of a large working party. "Want men, want men," the guards shouted. "Three hundred go to Manila."

McDole, envisioning better conditions, quickly raised his hand, despite the Corps' adage, "Never volunteer."

On 12 Aug. 1942, he landed on Palawan, one of the largest islands in the Philippines, 270 miles long, 15 miles wide and located on the western perimeter of the Sulu Sea. McDole marched to an old, dilapidated Filipino constabulary barracks, his home for the next 2½ years. In a courtyard in front of a U-shaped barracks, the prisoners were met by the commander of the 131st Airfield Battalion, Captain Nagayoshi Kojima, nicknamed "the Weasel" by the POWs.

"Kojima stood on a little pedestal so he could look down on us," McDole remembered. "In a squeaky voice, he would say, 'Americans,' and pause, 'today we build roads.' It wasn't long



Japanese fighter aircraft operated from the Palawan airstrip, which included a concrete runway down the middle, concrete turnoffs and two dirt strips, all built by the POWs.

before we knew it was a lie. We were to build an airstrip."

The prisoners started working almost immediately. There was nothing around the camp but thick jungle. The POWs felled trees, hauled and crushed coral gravel and poured concrete day after day without adequate rest or food. "It was all hand labor," McDole emphasized, "with only a level mess kit of rice and an occasional bowl of mongo bean soup to keep us going."

Food became an obsession; the prisoners thought of it night and day. McDole dreamed of angel food cake and ice cream. Others made up elaborate menus they intended to eat upon liberation. In the meantime, they had to eat what they could scrounge—lizards, birds, monkeys and snakes. McDole took a fancy to roasted snake. "Tastes just like chicken," he claimed.

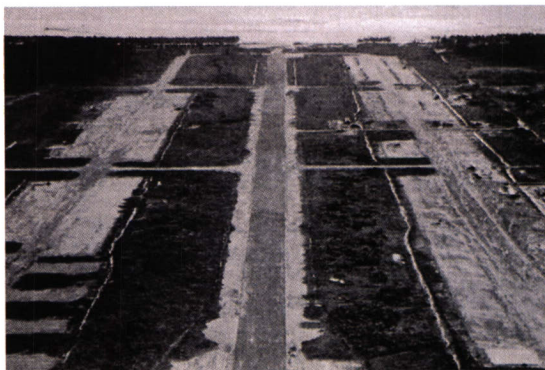
Many of the prisoners became sick and were unable to work, while others suffered from Japanese brutality. "We had so many fellows sick and beat up," McDole recalled, "that they filled one wing of the barracks, which we called sick bay."

The term "sick bay" was a misnomer. There were no medicines, and the men were put on half-rations if they did not work. "The Japanese carried a short club a bit thicker than an officer's woven leather 'swagger stick,'" McDole recalled. "The guards were expert at applying it to the kidneys or the back of the head. They could drop a man with one blow."

The Japanese learned that several POWs had made contact with local Filipinos, who gave them information and food. The men were tied to the courtyard coconut trees and beaten in front of the rest of the prisoners. One of the men was thrashed with a wire whip, which tore his flesh to the bone. When one guard tired, another took his place. The men were beaten unconscious, dragged to a cell and put on a ration of half a mess kit of rice every three days.

Even with the close supervision and threat of dire punishment, several prisoners managed to escape, but not all of them made it to freedom. Two POWs managed to elude capture for six days before being dragged back to the camp. They were beaten un-

This deserted Palawan warehouse is where many of the prisoners had to sleep on the floor or on whatever they could find.



conscious in front of the assembled prisoners and then loaded on a truck and taken away. Filipinos said they were shot and buried in unmarked graves.

"A Stitch in Time"

One American doctor was in the camp, but the Japanese would not give him any medicine, so he relied on his own remedies. On 14 March 1943, McDole desperately needed the doctor's expertise. "I was busting rock when I suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. I grabbed my side, and down on my knees I went. The next thing I knew a guard was beating the heck out of me, telling me to get back to work."

The American doctor convinced the guard that McDole was really sick. He had acute appendicitis and was told he would die without an immediate operation, but there was no anesthetic. McDole responded, "If I'm going to die, let's die trying." He was held down on a table by five guards, who made fun of his screams as the doctor operated. "It took him two hours and fifty minutes to get the appendix out and suture me back together," McDole recalled. Unfortunately, infection set in.

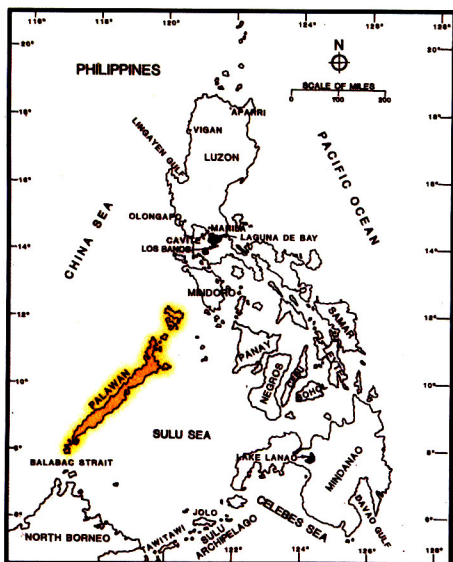
One night his abdomen ruptured. The doctor sewed the wound shut, but the thread would not hold. When that failed, the doctor took shirt buttons, lined them up alongside the incision and sewed it up. After weeks of recovery, McDole was able to work again.

Massacre

By mid-October 1944, American B-24s began to systematically bomb the airfield. In one raid, they destroyed 60 Japanese planes on the ground. Their arrival verified the rumors that an American invasion force was approaching the Philippines. The POWs were overjoyed—but also worried. They had heard that the guards would kill all the prisoners if the Americans invaded the island.

The camp commander decreed that the POWs would dig trenches roofed with logs and dirt to serve as air-raid shelters. Three large and several smaller two- and three-man shelters were scattered around the prison compound. Shelter A held 50 men, Shelter B, 35 and Shelter C had room for 25 to 30 prisoners. There was only one entrance, small enough to admit one man at a time. The prisoners were instructed to get in the shelters when the air-raid alarm sounded.

On 14 Dec. 1944, after spending the morning filling bomb craters on the runway, the prisoners unexpectedly returned to camp. The camp commander appeared and announced, "Americans, your working days are over." At this pronouncement, most of the men believed that the invasion was coming, and they soon



would be free. Suddenly, the air-raid siren went off, and the guards started screaming to get into the bomb shelters. Their shouts were punctuated by rifle butts and clubs. McDole made a beeline for Shelter C, which was located on the edge of a 60-foot cliff. After some time, with no sign of planes, McDole was encouraged to "look out, and see if [he could] see anything going on."

Lieutenant Sho Yoshiwara ordered the men of his company into formation and told them to load five rounds of ammunition and to fix bayonets. Superior Private Sawa remembered that "Captain Kojima appeared and announced that it was necessary to kill all the POWs. Lieutenant Yoshiwara personally directed the placement of individuals and issued the necessary objectives and methods of killing. He ordered those with rifles and machine guns to kill any POW who came out of the air-raid shelters."

As McDole peered out, he saw several guards carrying buckets of liquid. Others carried lighted torches. He watched as they poured the contents of the buckets into Shelter B and threw in the torches. There was a burst of flame. Horror-struck, McDole heard

agonized screams as the men inside burned. He ducked back inside the trench and screamed, "They're murdering the men in the B-company pit. Finish digging the tunnel."

The inhabitants of Shelter C had dug a tunnel to extend beyond the barbed-wire fence. Only a 6-inch plug of earth concealed an emergency exit. McDole took another quick look. He was horrified by the carnage—men engulfed in flames, guards bayoneting, shooting and clubbing the helpless Americans.

Marine Sergeant Douglas W. Bogue "saw several Americans, while still burning or wounded, rush the Japs and fight them hand to hand. One American, whom I could not recognize in the confusion, succeeded in tearing a rifle from one Jap and shooting him before being bayoneted to death."

Sawa admitted at the war-crimes trial that "seven or eight POWs came running out of one of the shelters. Lieutenant Yoshiwara yelled out, 'Shoot them. Shoot them!' The light-machine gun on the veranda, near my post, went into action and leveled these POWs to the ground, killing each one of them. I opened fire with my rifle and believe I dropped three of them. After that, Yoshiwara and another soldier threw two hand grenades into a trench. I also saw two or three POWs bayoneted and one killed by a sword."

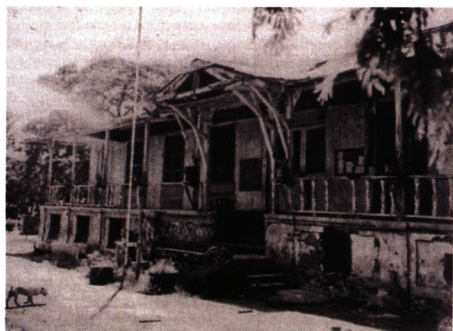
Escape

As McDole kept watch, the prisoner at the end of the shelter clawed the earth, quickly breaking through and widening the hole. One by one the men pulled themselves out of the opening and tumbled down the cliff to the beach. Suddenly, burning gasoline splashed on the floor of the trench, setting one man on fire. It was now or never for McDole. He pushed the last man out and jumped. The screaming of the burning man stayed with him as he stumbled and fell to the beach.

Sgt Bogue also was lucky to escape the trench, but he had to tear through a barbed-wire fence with his bare hands to reach the cliff. McDole ran into his best friend. "This is it, Buddy, isn't it?" McDole gasped.

Suddenly, rifle fire erupted from the top of the cliff. The two men ran; bullets impacted all around them, as they desperately searched for a hiding place. McDole spotted the camp's garbage dump and dove into the rotting mass. The smell was overpowering, but he pushed deeper and deeper until he was covered completely. He ignored the worms and maggots and forced himself to remain still. Within minutes two other escapees burrowed into the mound.

Muffled shots penetrated the garbage pile. One of the men panicked, jumped up and ran for the water. He was gunned down immediately. Another stood up and shouted, "All right, here I am, and don't miss me you SOB!" A volley of shots ended his shout.



Left: Japanese machine-gunners and riflemen stood on this veranda shooting POWs while others burned the captives alive in air-raid shelters.

Above: These Japanese soldiers stood trial in Yokohama for war crimes at Palawan.

McDole gutted it out until morning when he was nearly discovered. A guard was almost close enough to touch. Suddenly another escapee was discovered, and the guard ran off. Taking advantage of the distraction, McDole fled the dump and took refuge in a sewer outlet where he found a badly wounded prisoner. The two tried to swim across the bay, but the man was too weak. McDole stayed with him until he succumbed to his wounds.

Bogue escaped the guards' attention and found a small crack in the rocks to hide in, "all the time hearing the butchery going on above. The stench of burning flesh was strong." The incoming tide forced him to move. "While crawling about, I found four others," he recalled. "We decided our only chance was to swim across the bay."

Bogue became separated from the others and spent the next five days wandering around the jungle without food or water. He was rescued by prisoners from the Iwahig Penal Colony, a jail for locals convicted of low-level crimes. The prisoners fed and clothed him and contacted the local guerrilla organization, which took him under their control.

God Bless America

On the evening of 18 Dec., three days after the massacre, a badly weakened McDole slipped into the water and began the five-mile swim. He was in the water all night, arms and legs numb and almost useless, until he collapsed on the beach shortly before dawn. He found a coconut, cracked it open and drank the milk, which helped him regain some of his strength. As daylight emerged, he saw huts across the bay and decided to swim to them, praying it was a friendly village. Halfway across, just before his strength gave out, he spotted a wooden fishing trap, climbed aboard and passed out.

The next morning he smelled food being cooked in the village and saw a fishing boat approaching the trap. He half rose, and they spotted him. "Hey, Joe," a Filipino called out. "You a POW?" McDole responded weakly, "I was, but no longer."

Shortly thereafter, he was reunited with Sgt Bogue. The two rested one day, but were forced to flee after word was received that a Japanese patrol was headed their way. On Christmas Eve, they were on a hill overlooking a Filipino village, just as the sun was setting. Their escorts stopped and in almost perfect English sang, "God Bless America." Both Americans broke down as one of the natives said, "My friends, you are now in the free Philippines!"

Postscript

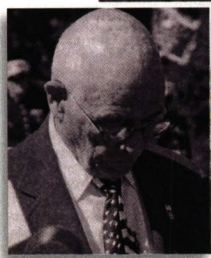
McDole was evacuated from the Philippines on 21 Jan. 1945. He was one of only 11 survivors of the 159 American POWs who were massacred at Palawan. An Army mortuary unit excavated the burned and destroyed dugouts after the war. The unit reported 79 individual burials and many more partial burials. The skeletons either had bullet holes or had been crushed by blunt instruments. Most of the remains were found huddled together at a spot farthest away from the entranceway, in an attempt to escape the fire.

In two dugouts, remains were found in a prone position, arms extended with small conical holes in the dugouts at fingertip level. They had tried to dig their way to freedom. In 1952, the remains of 123 victims were interred at the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis.

After the war, the Japanese were treated considerably better



Above: Cpl Glenn McDole reunites with his mother, Dessa, after his daring escape from Palawan.



Inset: In 1952, the remains of 123 of those murdered at Palawan were buried in a group gravesite at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis. Glenn McDole remembered his comrades during a 4 Dec. 2003 ceremony at the gravesite.

than their prisoners had been. The senior Japanese officer was tried and sentenced to hang, but the sentence was reduced to 30-years imprisonment. Only 14 Japanese guards were brought to trial; the others could not be found. Six were acquitted, and the others received sentences from two to 12 years of imprisonment.

Superior Private Sawa appeared at the trial the worse for wear. The indomitable Sgt Bogue admitted to beating Sawa, who had been one of his guards. Sawa received a five-year sentence despite Bogue's request to have him hanged.

After his discharge, McDole was an Iowa highway patrolman for 29 years and a Polk County sheriff. He was called up for Korea and served one year at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., before hanging up his Marine uniform for good. McDole, in his 80s, donates his time to talk about Palawan, so that the men who died there will not be forgotten. His book, "Last Man Out," is an account of his POW experiences.

Editor's note: Retired Col Dick Camp is the vice president of Foundation Museum Operations at the National Museum of the Marine Corps. A frequent Leatherneck contributor, he also has written several books, including "Leatherneck Legends," "BattleShip Arizona's Marines at War" and "Two Jima Recon." His "Devil Dogs at Belleau Wood" was published in May 2008. His books are available from the MCA bookstores or online at www.marineshop.net.