

The Raid at Cabanatuan and a New Cause for Americans During World War II

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The raid at Cabanatuan and events leading up to it had a powerful impact on the United States and their relations with Japan and the Philippines. Thousands of American soldiers were being kept as prisoners of war in the Philippines, which were occupied by Japan during World War II. There were many more held captive in other countries, but conditions at the Cabanatuan camp in the Philippines were among the worst. Prisoners of war experienced terrible mistreatment for years, and a group of American soldiers, joined by Filipinos, were determined to help them escape these conditions. Led by Colonel Henry Mucci and General Douglas MacArthur, these men spent months planning, knowing they needed every specific detail to be perfect for everything to go well. This preparation resulted in a successful invasion that lasted thirty minutes and freed over 500 prisoners of war. The raid at Cabanatuan, which took place on January 30, 1945, was a successful rescue mission led by the United States, and one of the most significant in the history of America's military.

Three years before Colonel Mucci and another soldier, Bob Prince, even began planning the raid, a major act of cruelty by Japan was experienced. Not too long after the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, approximately 70,000 prisoners of war from the United States and the Philippines were forced by Japanese soldiers to march sixty five miles.¹ This occurred because there were far too many men to transport by vehicles, and it led to mistreatment and suffering of thousands of American soldiers. Not only were these prisoners of war extremely weak and tired from the long march, but they were also given inadequate amounts of food and drink.² This was already creating major conflicts for Americans and it was worsened when they

¹Megan Johnson "[Army History] THE RAID ON CABANATUAN: WORLD WAR II'S GREATEST RESCUE MISSION." *On Point* 18, no. 3 (2013): 37-38. www.jstor.org/stable/26363221.

²Johnson, 38.

were also beaten, tortured, and the ones too weak to walk further were left to die or were even killed. This miserable trek across the Bataan Peninsula became known as the Bataan Death March, and provided a reason for Americans to become angry and want to rebel,³ which happened at Cabanatuan not long after.

During World War II and the rescue at Cabanatuan, there were heroic soldiers who risked their lives to fight for their cause. Many of these men, such as MacArthur and Prince, who fought at leading positions are still remembered today as well known heroes of the war. There are numerous people who do not remember or acknowledge nurses and women, even though they are just as important to the battlefield as soldiers. This was no difference during the Bataan Death March and events leading up to the release of Cabanatuan prisoners of war. Margaret Utinsky was one of the many nurses who risked their lives to help the wounded during World War II. She volunteered as a nurse for the Red Cross, unpaid, as she was focused on saving lives and helping others rather than making money to help herself. Her passion for providing assistance to soldiers began when she went searching for her husband, John Rowley.⁴ On this journey, Utinsky witnessed how poor the conditions of soldiers actually were, and the need for them to be helped. Although Utinsky is better known as a nurse, caring for the injured, she also spent a lot of her time finding ways to bring food, water, and clothing to soldiers. Her dedication to serving others during such difficult times was finally recognized when she earned the

³Johnson, 39.

⁴Sherrilyn Coffman. "Margaret Utinsky: A Nurse Undertook Heroic Underground Activities in Support of American Prisoners in the Philippines during WWII." *The American Journal of Nursing* 109, no. 5 (2009): 72-74. www.jstor.org/stable/40384988.

Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1946 from President Harry Truman.⁵ Utinsky was a better known nurse of ones during World War II, but there were so many other women who risked their lives to save others, going practically unnoticed, at times even when the war was taking place. It is understandable, however, that the soldiers she treated did not fully recognize her because they still needed to focus on helping the United States troops defeat Japan.

Although relations between the United States and the Philippines with Japan were horrible for most of the war, there were still a few people not only focused on fighting the enemy. This is also similar with many other countries during World War II and even wars occurring before and after. There was an incident when an American, who was a former prisoner of war, met two men of Japanese descent on a street in the United States. The American soldier had been a hero during the Bataan Death March, and was later held by the Japanese at Cabanatuan for three years. He told the Japanese-American men of his experiences there, and they listened respectfully.⁶ This was significant especially then because when American soldiers met Japanese soldiers, it was rarely ever peaceful.

There were very few instances of Japanese and American soldiers communicating kindly, but there were many cases of American prisoners of war helping others in the same situations. At Cabanatuan, many prisoners were too sick and weak from disease or lack of food and drink to take care of themselves anymore. The ones who were strong enough often assisted each other, as was shown in a famous photograph from around 1944. A man was unable to stand, and another

⁵Coffman, 73.

⁶Bill Hosokawa. "Heart Mountain Sentinel". (Heart Mountain, WY), Apr. 21 1945.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84024756/1945-04-21/ed-1/>.

prisoner of war gave him something to drink, which was likely his own that he selflessly shared.⁷ This makes it clear that the Japanese soldiers in charge of prison camps, in this case Cabanatuan, did not provide enough basic supplies that should be required, such as food and water. Many men needed to share the small amounts they did have to help keep others alive, but it was not nearly enough for them to remain at their strongest and healthiest. When Japanese soldiers saw prisoners already sick or dying, they chose to execute them when they were unable to do anything anymore.⁸ Ones who were becoming sick with common diseases such as malaria would occasionally find a way to smuggle some medicine inside the camp, but it was not enough to cure them. Japanese soldiers did not want Americans to help themselves when they could, and sickness often spread throughout the camp as a result.⁹ If they had been providing supplies for them from the beginning, there would have been fewer men who were seen as a bother to the Japanese because of their weaknesses, and perhaps they would have been treated slightly better.

Reasons such as lack of supplies, food, and torture all played a role in the desire for American and Filipino soldiers to help the prisoners of war. It also had a significant effect in the last few years of the war, because Americans had a new reason to fight Japan based on the cruelty hundreds of their soldiers experienced. They were aware of the horrible ways in which prisoners of war were treated, and knew it was necessary to help in any way they could. Besides

⁷Ben Steele, Artist. Giving a sick man a drink as U.S. P.O.W.s of Japanese, Philippine Islands, Cabanatuan prison camp / Ben Steele. Philippines, None. [Between 1943 and 1945?, c1946] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98501808/>.

In this photograph, three men were pictured in black and white, one off in the distance and another helping a weak soldier drink. This image also shows smoke in the distance, likely from gunfire and other results of fighting.

⁸Dahl, John, dir. *The Great Raid*. Miramax, 2005. DVD.

⁹Johnson, 40.

these awful conditions, even more unimaginable actions were done by the Japanese. One of the most unnecessary ways the leaders of Cabanatuan disciplined prisoners of war was their way of taking care of the situation when one of the prisoners tried to escape.¹⁰ For every one man who did this, whether he was successful or not, ten others were killed at random.¹¹ This was among the cruelest of actions because it is obvious that none of these ten men had anything to do with the attempted escape. Either way, someone simply trying to attain the human right of freedom does not require even the person considered guilty to be killed.

On the evening of January 30, 1945, after months of planning every single minute of the rescue mission, Henry Mucci and the American and Filipino soldiers were ready. A bomb had been set up on a nearby bridge, along with other explosives serving as a way to distract the Japanese. The men in charge also decided to have an American plane flown over the camp as another form of distraction. Hundreds of men hid in nearby trenches, armed with rifles and prepared to shoot when notified. When one of the leaders, Lieutenant John Murphy,¹² set off the first shot, the peace was disrupted immediately, as Japanese soldiers were shot at from every direction, completely shocked about what had just started. They had all come into the field when the bomb went off and the plane spun by, but none of them were expecting such an instant attack without warning. A Japanese guard up in a tower was the first target of gunshots, and after he fell dead, soldiers on both sides began running out and attacking. Some Japanese men tried leaving on huge tanks, but these were blown up as well.¹³

¹⁰Dahl, *The Great Raid*.

¹¹Dahl, *The Great Raid*.

¹²Johnson, 41.

¹³Dahl, *The Great Raid*.

The fighting was still going on and soldiers were continuing with even more courage than before. When Prince and Mucci believed it was as safe as it was going to be, they called for everyone to run forward and raid the camp. Once Americans entered the gates of the Cabanatuan prison camp, they were met with hundreds of terrified and sickly men. Although they were assured many times that they were being rescued and saved from the Japanese, it took awhile for the prisoners to believe and realize that they were actually being freed. They had waited for such a long time and it was finally becoming a reality for them, one that many could not completely take in. When they finally knew they were going to be safe, soldiers and now free prisoners quickly took action to help up the sick and injured men and carry them to safety.¹⁴ This event, lasting approximately thirty minutes, left hundreds of Japanese soldiers dead or severely wounded. Very few Americans had died, and although there was not an exact number calculated, it is estimated that deaths remained under ten to twenty men. Only two died during and immediately after the attacks from injuries, and the rest of American deaths were from diseases or injuries which took longer to kill them. One man died of a heart attack, which was most likely caused by the horrible events and experiences he had.¹⁵ Considering the extreme risk and danger of attacking hundreds of armed Japanese soldiers, the few American deaths were really incredible. This showed just how accurate their planning was and how necessary it was to perfect each tiny, seemingly unimportant detail.

Although everyone, both prisoners and rescuers, were extremely relieved and happy, there was even more left to be done. American and Filipino soldiers had successfully saved around 500 prisoners of war, and had the rescue mission not taken place, it is likely that they

¹⁴Dahl, *The Great Raid*.

¹⁵Johnson, 41-42.

would have all been executed separately not long after.¹⁶ The two American men who died on the field, along with all other members of the raid, knew they were risking their lives for the freedom of others. It was during a time of war, and everyone who was fighting knew this, but even then they did not give up. Before the night of the attack, none of the American and Filipinos playing a role in this operation knew exactly how it would turn out. Everyone was certainly aware that there was a high chance of it not going as planned, but they would do everything they could to put months of planning into action. Leaders Mucci, MacArthur, and Juan Pajota from the Philippines had even created a procedure for a second option if the first went completely wrong. If they were caught by Japanese guards and fired upon, instead of fleeing the scene they would charge forward and attack with as much force as was necessary. Their major goal at the end of it was to free every single prisoner at Cabanatuan, and they would fight for as long as they needed to make it happen. Their group had spent too much time and energy finding a way to help American prisoners of war, and nobody was going to let it go to waste.

Finally reaching San Francisco, and more importantly safety, American and Filipino rescuers with over roughly 500 prisoners of war were welcomed by hundreds of Americans. Arriving on March 8, 1945, many of the soldiers had been gone for three years, away from everyone they had known. When the ship arrived at the San Francisco Port in California, a huge crowd was standing there waiting to greet them. Many of these people did not even know any of the former prisoners or rescuers, but wanted to congratulate their efforts nonetheless.¹⁷ Not only

¹⁶Thomas M Huber. "The American Bataan Campaign December 1941 to April 1942." *Army History*, no. 21 (1991): 1-13. www.jstor.org/stable/26302928.

¹⁷James A. Sullivan, and James J. Fisher. "Return from Cabanatuan." *Army Transportation Journal* 1, no. 5 (1945): 8. www.jstor.org/stable/44094221.

were there hundreds of friends, families, and strangers, but there were also many reporters for the press and radio.¹⁸ Everyone knew the importance of what had happened at Cabanatuan, and even though the army's future was unknown, it was rightfully predicted that there would be a new reason for fighting.

Telling stories of what happened at Cabanatuan gave Americans a new and stronger desire to defeat the Japanese during World War II. Prior to the attack, no one knew the extent to which prisoners of war were mistreated, and after hearing some of the worst of it, they were certain it was time to go back and fight. Terrell Tennant, an American soldier from a previous battle at Guadalcanal, which took place from 1942 to 1943, believed there were two wars. In an interview with the *Topaz Times*, Tennant said that a second war was being fought against intolerance, and if that one were lost, it would make no difference if they were defeated in the real battle.¹⁹ For many Americans, the war was not fought simply to defeat their enemies, significantly the Japanese. It had become a cause for human rights, and becoming aware of the suffering of hundreds of prisoners at Cabanatuan made them realize the importance of continuing their battle.

The rescue mission at Cabanatuan was one of the most important in United States history, and gave Americans a new cause for freedom during World War II. The 500 prisoners of war rescued in the Philippines experienced unimaginable actions by the Japanese, significantly torture, executions, and being given extremely small amounts of food and water. It was impossible for them to remain healthy, and Japanese soldiers made sure they had practically no freedom. When

¹⁸Sullivan, 9.

¹⁹Tama Yoshimura. "Topaz Times". (Topaz United States Utah), Apr. 1 1944.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/sn85040302/1944-04-01/ed-1/>.

American soldiers became aware of these conditions, they knew something needed to be done to help them escape. Along with soldiers from the Philippines, they spent months planning a way to help the men held captive, and were ultimately successful on the night of the raid. 500 prisoners were rescued, and when they finally returned to America weeks later, they were greeted by hundreds of friends and family. Troops of American and Filipino men were relieved to arrive back home, but they knew their task was far from over. Not only did they want to defeat Japan, but they had a new desire to fight for human rights, which had been taken away by Japanese soldiers. After witnessing the horrors at Cabanatuan, Americans had a new cause to fight for, hoping to defeat the country who took away their freedom.

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