

The Iligan Death March

ROBERT JOHN I. DONESA

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the rather untold story of the Iligan Death March in Mindanao—one of the only two death marches recognized in the Tokyo war crimes trials as evidence of the inhuman treatment of prisoners of war (POWs). On 4 July 1942, surrendered Filipino and American soldiers in Mindanao were made to march on a rocky dirt road and under the blazing tropical sun from Camp Keithly in Marawi to Iligan in Lanao—a distance of about 36 kilometers for the purpose of joining

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them with the rest of the POWs at Camp Casisang, Malaybalay, Bukidnon. Transport trucks, although available, were denied the POWs. Without food and water, the soldiers fell down one by one due to exhaustion. Those who fell were shot in the forehead to prevent them from joining the guerrillas in case they recovered. It is fortunate that at least four American soldiers who survived the gruesome war left narratives of their ordeal. From their stories and other contemporaneous accounts, one can put flesh to the sketchy accounts on the Mindanao Death March.

KEYWORDS

Death March, Prisoners of War (POW), inhuman treatment, World War II in Mindanao

INTRODUCTION

During World War II, there were two death marches that took place in the Philippines and were presented in the Tokyo war crimes trials as evidence of the inhuman treatment of prisoners of war (POWs). These were the “Bataan Death March” and the “Iligan Death March.” The Bataan Death March, which took place in April 1942, was an arduous 65-mile march from Mariveles, Bataan to San Fernando, Pampanga. The Iligan Death March, sometimes called the Mindanao Death March, happened on 4 July 1942, was a 25-mile walk under the scourging heat of the tropical sun from Dansalan to Iligan.

While the Bataan Death March was a widely known indignity to the POWs, there was apparently a very scanty account on the Iligan Death March. It is fortunate that at least four of the American POWs who were in the said death march eventually survived the gruesome war and narrated their ordeals. They were Victor L. Mapes, Herbert L. Zincke, Richard P. Beck, and Frederick M. Fullerton, Jr. who made it possible to retell the story of the Iligan Death March for the present and future generations.

THE TOKYO WAR TRIALS AND THE ILIGAN DEATH MARCH

On the heels of the Second World War, the victorious Allied powers—France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America—established the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) in Tokyo, Japan. The IMTFE had jurisdiction to try individuals for crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The subsequent trials held were collectively known as the Tokyo War Crimes Trials.

The IMTFE was mandated to try and punish Far Eastern war criminals. It presided over the prosecution of nine senior Japanese political leaders and 18 military leaders who were considered to be the prime movers of the World War II atrocities. Eventually, the tribunal found all the defendants guilty and sentenced them to punishments ranging from death to seven years imprisonment. Two of them died during the trial. The Japanese Emperor Hirohito and the members of the imperial family were not indicted.

Hirohito was permitted to retain his royal position, although on a diminished status.

General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) as authorized by the IMTFE Charter, appointed judges to the IMTFE from the countries which signed Japan's instrument of surrender: Australia, Canada, China, France, India, the Netherlands, the Philippines, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each of these countries also sent a prosecution team.¹

The Tokyo war crimes trials were held between May 1946 to November 1948. The Philippine prosecution team presented and proved before the IMTFE at least 16 incidents of indignities, torture, and barbarities committed against the Filipino and foreign prisoners of wars (POWs) and civilians. These incidents were as follows:

1. The Bataan Death March
2. Bataan General Hospitals 1 and 2
3. Camp O'Donnell
4. Iloilo Camp
5. Corregidor Fortress
6. Iligan Death March
7. Cabanatuan Camp
8. Gapan Camp
9. Bilibid Prison
10. Davao Penal Colony
11. Nichols Field

12. Tayabas Road Detail
13. Puerto Princesa
14. Bombing of Oryoku Maru
15. Execution of Two American Fliers
16. Los Baños

Each of these incidents was a bundle of gruesome stories and tales of untold human sufferings because one culture, the Japanese, showed off dominance over the other cultures, the Filipinos and the Americans. The Bataan Death March, notorious as it was, overshadowed all the other incidents in history books. In fact, of the 16 incidents, only the Bataan Death March appeared in many history textbooks. All the others became mere footnotes.

Since evidence against the accused were overwhelmingly strong, the Iligan Death March, along with others, were only summarily presented and proven during the Tokyo war crimes trials. The trial records summarized the incident as follows:

A milder counterpart of the Bataan Death March happened on July 4, 1942, in Lanao. On that day, American and Filipino forces were forced to march from Keithley to Iligan, Lanao, a distance of about 36 kilometers with Malaybalay as their destination. During the march a prisoner who was sick and unable to keep pace with the rest was shot. No food or water was given the prisoners. One died during the march.²

GUESTS OF THE EMPEROR

The Japanese landed in the southern part of Mindanao, in Parang, Maguindanao. From there, they began advancing north towards the province of Lanao. The Filipino troops and Moros formed the “Bolo Battalion” under General Guy Fort. The plan was to defend Ganassi, Bacolod Grande on the southern end of the lake and to stop the advancing Japanese troops. Gen. Fort dreamed of a guerrilla warfare. However, on 6 May 1942, Gen. Jonathan Wainwright surrendered the Filipino and American forces in Bataan and Corregidor. Gen. Homma threatened to kill the American surrenderees from Bataan and Corregidor unless all American and Filipino forces surrendered. Subsequently, on 10 May 1942, Gen. William F. Sharp ordered the troops in Mindanao to surrender.

At Bubong, Lanao del Sur, a large number of Filipino troops went to the hills. The Americans were ordered not to desert lest they face court martial. On 26 May 1942, soldiers from Bubong walked six miles to Dansalan where they surrendered their arms. The Japanese commanding officer declared them as “guests of the Emperor” and not “prisoners of war.” Soon, the surrenderees realized it was just lip service. There were 46 Americans and some 300 Filipinos under General Fort’s command who surrendered.

While awaiting instructions from Gen. Homma, the POWs were billeted in an abandoned building once used as mint for producing provincial money. Eventually, the Japanese guards were replaced with extremely young men. These new guards forced the prisoners to count themselves

in Japanese language. Anyone slow in learning Japanese numbers or committed mistakes in counting received a hard slap on each cheek.

Starting 10 June 1942, the Japanese guards invaded the sleeping quarters of the POWs. During these nightly invasions, the Japanese looted the POWs of their belongings, beat, and abused them physically. These incidents resulted in hushed talks about escaping. To avert possible escape, the Japanese guards adopted the honor system. For every Filipino or American soldier who escaped, one of their officers would be executed.

On 1 July 1942, Cpl. William Knortz, Pvt. Robert Ball, and Seamen Jas S. Smith and William Johnson escaped. Under the “honor system,” Col. Robert Hale Vesey, Captain A.H. Price, and Sgt. John L. Chandler were executed. The Japanese interpreter said: “They died like soldiers.” The Japanese were very angry with the escape. As punishment, all POWs were made to walk instead of ride to Iligan.³

THE ILIGAN DEATH MARCH

At 8:00 A.M. of 4 July 1942, the POWs lined up for the march at Dansalan. The Americans were arranged by four abreast and were strung together, in columns, by a gauge wire through their belts. The Filipino POWs, though unwired, were to walk barefooted.

A truckload of Japanese soldiers with a mounted machine gun followed the prisoners, ready to shoot

anybody who would try to escape. As the day progressed, the midday sun became unbearable.

Without food and water, the soldiers fell down one by one due to exhaustion. Those who fell were left behind; however, they were first shot in the forehead to prevent them from joining the guerrillas in case they eventually recovered.⁴

THE DEATH OF CHILDRESS/KILDRITCH

Mr. Childress—in other documents, Kildritch—was an American civilian who owned a coconut plantation in Mindanao. Fullerton shared that Childress married a Filipino and settled in Pagadian, Zamboanga.⁵ When the Japanese landed at Parang, Southern Mindanao, he volunteered for duty. During a skirmish at Ganassi, Lanao, Childress was separated from his unit and wandered for days in the jungles around Lake Lanao. While asleep by the side of a trail, a Maranao attacked him, wounding him on the left side of his body. The Maranao took his rifle, and left him unconscious.⁶

Lt. Ali, the leader of the emerging Maranao guerrilla battalion, found the unconscious Childress and brought him to Camp Keithley. At the time, the camp was already under the control of the Japanese Imperial Army. Lt. Ali had to intoxicate the Japanese guards for Childress to be slipped in. Lt. Ali believed that the patient would be better taken good care of at the camp's medical facilities and supplies and by Major Luther Heidger, the American military surgeon.⁷

Indeed, Childress improved under Major Heidger's care. However, he was not fit enough for a long walk. During the "Independence Day" march, the throng had not gone far when Childress collapsed on the road. He had to be carried by three other prisoners wired with him. They were soon exhausted and called Col. Mitchell for intervention. Col. Mitchell dropped back and explained the situation to Lt. Osawa, who was in charge of the march. But Lt. Osawa angrily replied, "this march is my responsibility." He ordered Col. Mitchell to get back into the truck.

A Japanese guard unhooked Childress from the throng and brought him to the rear, supporting the poor man with his left arm and keeping his rifle under his right arm. Col. Mitchell hoped that Childress would be placed on the second truck. Instead, the Japanese guard led him some 75 yards behind the column and into bush. A shot was heard and then the guard came back into sight. Lt. Osawa screamed at the guard ordering him to make sure Childress was dead. The guard returned to the bushes, leaned over, fired another shot, and rejoined the column. The march became a death march.⁸

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA OF RICHARD P. BECK

Richard P. Beck was one of the lucky survivors of the war. He was maneuvered into a safe spot as General Fort's orderly while a prisoner at Camp Keithley. Herbert Zinke, a sturdy sergeant, managed to be tied next to the small Beck and kept him going all the way to Iligan. It was

obvious to everyone that without help, Beck would not have made it through the day.⁹

The march was even more traumatic for Beck after he saw people shot and executed. Beck felt like he was the next to die as he was hardly moving. His friend, Herbert Zincke, slipped his arm around Beck's shoulder and helped him along. "Had it not been for him," recalled Beck, "I would not have made it through the march."¹⁰

THE DEATH OF MAJOR JAY J. NAVIN, COMMANDING OFFICER, 84TH REGIMENT

Lt. Col. Barnes, the medical officer of the 81st Division, loaded himself down with beddings, canned goods, and medical books. This load slowed down not only him but his whole file. His companions, Lt. Robert Pratt and Major Jay J. Navin, had to pull the file like hell to keep up with the rest of the columns. The other prisoners tried to convince Barnes to throw off the yoke before he, or his comrades get killed, but to no avail.

The Japanese guards allowed a 10-minute rest for every hour of walk. But the rough and rocky country road, the burden of pulling loaded comrades, and the mercilessly blazing tropical sun took their toll. After two hours of walk, Major Jay J. Navin, the commanding officer of the 84th Philippine Regiment, was in a bad shape. Suffering from exhaustion, Major Navin fell to the ground.

Victor L. Mapes offered him pineapple juice and tried to get him on his feet. It did not help. Major Navin asked

for water. Zincke handed him a canteen but insisted that he only drink a little. Instead, Navin turned the canteen upside down and drank half of it before he could be stopped. He became delirious and was gasping for breath. His comrades laid him on the ground, opened his shirt, and called Major Heidger, the surgeon. A watching Japanese guard stopped Major Heidger, walked over and looked at the unconscious Navin. He pulled him off the road by his collar and shot him in the forehead. Then, the death march continued.¹¹

THE DEATH OF THE FILIPINO SOLDIERS

The Filipino soldiers, being resilient men, started the march at a lively pace. They weren't tied together. But unlike their American counterparts who wore military shoes, they walked barefooted. Few hours into the walk, the hot rocky dirt road started to burn their feet. The heat was so unbearable that some of them started crawling. One was left behind. The Japanese guard, tired of prodding him to walk, bayoneted him to death. The Japanese killed four more Filipinos, including a medical officer with a Red Cross band on his arm. At the end of the day, Fullerton, Jr. estimated that some 10 or 12 Filipino soldiers were fatally shot or bayoneted.¹²

AT ST. MICHAEL'S ACADEMY, ILIGAN

By mid-afternoon, when the throng was about three kilometers near Iligan, the gauge tie was removed. They arrived in Iligan at around 7:00 in the evening. All were tired, thirsty, hungry, and at the point of complete exhaustion.¹³

The POWs, both Filipinos and Americans, were housed at the rickety, two-storey school building of St. Michael's Academy, located across the St. Michael's Church in Iligan. The Filipino POWs occupied the first floor while the Americans were locked at the second floor. Physically drained of the long walk without food and water, the Americans struggled their way up the stairs. They were cramped in a small room that when they tried to sit down, their legs became entangled. The prisoners were irritable. They growled at each other like wild animals at the slightest provocation. It was only when the Japanese realized that their prisoners were manageable when properly hydrated that they allowed the men to obtain water from the nearby well.¹⁴

THE DEATH OF LT. ROBERT PRATT, FINANCE OFFICER, 81ST DIVISION

During the march, Lt. Robert Pratt, the young and conscientious finance officer of the 81st Division, was positioned in front of Lt. Col. Barnes, the medical officer. The fat Lt. Col. Barnes could not keep up with the pace of the throng. He was further burdened by his baggage, which he refused to let go. As a result, Lt. Pratt was forced to pull him all the way to Iligan. This left him completely exhausted and dehydrated by the end of the walk.

That night, Lt. Pratt was violently vomiting. Some of his comrades tried to comfort him by giving him what they had—water, juices, etc. The physicians in the group, Lt. Col. Barnes and Major Heidger, said there was nothing they could do for him. He was delirious and he passed out.

Before dawn, Pratt died in the arms of his comrade, Victor L. Mapes, with a faraway look in his eyes. He was buried in a shallow grave at a nearby Catholic Cemetery. Atop his grave, they placed a wooden cross with Lt. Pratt's dog tags.¹⁵

OFF TO CAMP CASISANG, MALAYBALAY, BUKIDNON

The POWs stayed in Iligan for two days before they were ferried away to Cagayan de Oro. The Japanese confiscated the POWs' money, valuables, gold rings, wristwatches, etc. on the pretext that the POWs had to purchase their own food or pay for their transportation. Afraid of another dreaded march, the POWs gave whatever they had that were of value to the Japanese. On 6 July 1942, the POWs boarded a canon boat and sailed a hundred miles east along the shore of Mindanao to Cagayan de Oro, a town in northern Mindanao. From there, trucks took them to Camp Casisang, Malaybalay, Bukidnon where they joined other POWs from other parts of Mindanao.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The story of the Iligan Death March remained relatively unknown. As shown, it was a tragic story of the American and Filipino POWs who experienced undue brutalities and indignities. They surrendered and thus under the laws of war they expected, at least, civilized treatments from their Japanese captors. But why were they treated that way? They were told that the Japanese were disgusted by the fact that they surrendered without a fight—contrary to the Japanese

seppuku culture. During the death march, the Japanese emphasized that their culture and traditions were superior and should be forced down their enemy's throats for their own good. Every single moment during the ordeal, the Japanese exhibited superiority and arrogance. The POWs could only wonder why God would allow such brutality.

In closing, it is hoped that this exposition will contribute to the promotion of democracy and cultural diversity so that never again will the world commit the same barbarity and cruelty against fellow human beings.

APPENDIX

THE LANA O SURRENDEREES

The following were the American military personnel who surrendered in the Lanao area. The list was culled from writings of the survivors Victor L. Mapes, Herbert L. Zincke, Richard P. Beck, and Frederick M. Fullerton, Jr.

ARMY AIR CORPS

From 14th, 19th and 30th Bomb Squadrons

1. Major Luther C. Heidger, Medical, 14th - Died on the *Shinyo Maru*, 7 September 1942.
2. Lt. John Doe, 14th
3. Robert Ball, Fifth Air Base - Joined the guerrillas; survived.

4. Richard P. Beck, 14th - Survived.
5. Edmund Casey, 14th
6. Cawthorne, 19th Medic
7. Sgt. John L. Chandler, 14th - Executed at Dansalan, Lanao, 3 July 1942.
8. John F. Clark, 30th - Survived.
9. Jerry L. Coty - 14th
10. Virgil E. Haifley, 14th
11. William A. Knortz, 14th - Joined the guerrillas; killed in action, 11 September 1943.
12. Koontz, 19th Medic
13. McLaughlin, Medic
14. Victor L. Mapes, 14th - Survived.
15. Sgt. James A. Palmer, 14th - Died on the *Shinyo Maru*, 7 September 1942.
16. Peterson, 30th
17. James Price, 19th
18. Thomas Renick, Jr., 14th
19. Herbert L. Zincke, 14th - Transferred to Japan; survived.

NAVY

20. Lt. Commander Strong
21. David Goodman, PT Squadron Radioman, Boat 34
22. William H. Johnson - escaped and joined the guerrillas; survived.
23. James S. Smith - escaped and joined the guerrillas.

81ST DIVISION, PHILIPPINE ARMY

Headquarters

24. Brig. Gen. Guy O. Fort, Division Commander - Executed
25. Capt. A.H. Price, Field Artillery - Executed at Dansalan, Lanao, 3 July 1942.
26. Capt. Charles Wyatt, Engineer
27. Lt. Col. Barnes, Medical Department Doctor
28. Lt. Landis Doner, Quartermaster - Sent to Santo Tomas civilian POW camp
29. Lt. Robert Pratt, Finance Officer - Died following the Death March at Iligan, 4 July 1942.
30. Frederick M. Fullerton, Jr. TDY from 75th Ord - Survived

73RD INFANTRY REGIMENT

31. Col. Robert Hale Vesey, Regimental Commander - Executed at Dansalan, Lanao, 3 July 1942.
32. Capt. Steven M. Byars, Executive Officer
33. Lt. Albert Chase, 1st Battalion Commander - Died on the *Shinyo Maru*, 7 September 1942.
34. Lt. Jack Laro, 2nd Battalion Commander - Died on the *Arisan Maru*, 24 October 1944.
35. Lt. John Stephens, 3rd Battalion Commander - Died on the *Shinyo Maru*, 7 September 1942.

61ST INFANTRY REGIMENT

36. Col. Eugene H. Mitchell, Regimental Commander - Survived
37. Major Richard Hill, Executive Officer
38. Capt. Harry Katz, Regimental Staff - Died on the *Shinyo Maru*, 7 September 1942.
39. Lt. Donald Hanning, Regimental Staff - Sent to Santo Tomas civilian POW camp

PROVISIONAL BATTALION (84TH REGIMENT)

40. Major Jay J. Navin, Battalion Commander - Shot during the Death March

ENGINEERING COMBAT UNIT

41. Lt. John D. Stuckenberg, Company Commander - Died on the *Arisan Maru*, 24 October 1944.

NOTES

- ¹ M. Cherif Bassiouni, *Crimes Against Humanity in International Criminal Law* (The Hague, The Netherlands: Kluwer Law International, 1999).
- ² See POW Summation - Appendix B, Part II Summary of Evidence in Relation to Treatment of Prisoners-of-War, Civilian Internees and Inhabitants of the Philippine Islands Between December 1941 and September 1945.

- 3 Herbert Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a U.S. Army Air Corps POW in World War II* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2003), 45–51. Henceforth cited as Zincke.
- 4 Victor L. Mapes and Scott A. Mills, *The Butchers, the Baker: The World War II Memoir of a United States Army Air Corps Soldier Captured by the Japanese in the Philippines* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2000), 156–157. Henceforth cited as Mapes. See also Frederick Marion Fullerton, “Memoir of Frederick Marion Fullerton, Prisoner of War of the Japanese, May 27, 1942–September 2, 1945.” Frederick Marion Fullerton, Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/15785), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 82–83. Henceforth cited as Fullerton.
- 5 Fullerton, 78.
- 6 Zincke, 48–49.
- 7 Zincke, 48.
- 8 Zincke, 48–51. See also Mapes, 157 and Fullerton, Jr., 84.
- 9 Mapes and Mills, 158.
- 10 Richard Beck, Interview by Jansen Cock, see Richard P. Beck Collection (AFC/2001/001/54751), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.
- 11 Zincke, 51–52. See also Mapes, 157–158.
- 12 Fullerton, 83–84.
- 13 Fullerton, 85.
- 14 Mapes, 158–159.
- 15 Mapes, 159–160. See also Fullerton, 82–83.
- 16 Mapes, 161–172.

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