

SGT AVERY WILBER

Memorial Bridge

The Highway 156 bridge spanning the
Shioc River in the Town of Navarino
in Shawano County has been designated
as a memorial in honor and in recognition
of Sgt Avery Wilber a World War II POW and
survivor of the Arisan Maru Tragedy

Bridge Dedication & Bill Signing November 13, 2007

ON CORREGIDOR (1941) BY AVERY WILBER

As we approach the twenty-first century, many of us
Remember the Korean War and the Vietnam War
And practically all of us remember Desert Storm.
But how many remember or recall the BIG ONE.
Historically known as World War II. Here are
The memoirs of a soldier of that war—not a
Graduate of Annapolis or a West Point cadet
but a regular GI Joe. The type of soldier who
risked life and limb so we could have freedom
and be proud to say, “We’re Americans.”

We had been out of our barracks about two weeks and were dug in ready for battle about 2:00 am the morning of December 8, 1941. It was then that we got the news about the attack of Pearl Harbor. When daylight came, we too, were greeted with bombers. The Japanese planes came back day after day, sometimes several times a day.

This is when I realized that I could run much faster than I would have believed possible. I could also jump in foxholes and never touch the sides.

About January 1st, the Japanese had most of Luzon Island to the south of us. They set up big guns and shelled us every day now in addition to the bombing, so we had two problems...bombs and shells.

This went on until Bataan fell on April 9, 1942. After that they shelled us from the Bataan area. This continued until May 6, 1942. Early in the morning of May 6, the orders came from General Jonathan Wainwright that we should all march down to the bottom side of the island, as the topside would be severely shelled. It was from there we watched as our flag was lowered and the Japanese flag was raised. It is a sad situation to find yourself at the complete mercy of the enemy forces.

We were marched down to a place called the 92nd Garage. There we were kept for about two weeks, with very little food or water and very poor sanitary conditions.

They moved us in two sea-going freighters and used them to haul us to an area south of Manila. We had to wade ashore in about 5 feet of water. Some of the men were already in such a weakened condition that they drowned trying to wade to shore. Then began the march to Manila on the hot blacktop road. Being barefoot it was a torturous trek of seven miles Manila.

There we were taken to a Bilibid prison, and an Old Spanish prison. We spent one night there and the next day we were taken to the railroad station and loaded on small boxcars, 100 men to a car. We were packed in something like sardines in a very hot can. It took most of the day to get to the town of Cabanatuan. Here we were rounded up into a large field for the night, with nothing to eat.

The next morning we marched about twenty miles to a Philippine Army Camp, called Camp No. 3. A Japanese officer stood on a platform to give us the camp rules. His first words to us were in very plain English, "There isn't anything that would please me more than to see all of you dead, but to show you that we are a civilized nation, we will keep you prisoners of war." Then he went on with his many rules that were not very nice to hear.

We were at this camp for about four months before being moved to Camp No.1, a much larger camp. Here is where we were joined with the men from Bataan. They had just arrived from Camp O'Donnell, where about half of them died.

Shortly after we arrived at Camp No. 1, men began dying in large numbers, sometimes as many as one hundred a day. A U.S. Marine colonel suggested that they start a farm project near the camp. The Japanese also thought it was a good idea, so every day large numbers of starving men had to march to work in the farm area. The turning of the

sod was done with hand tools; in fact, all the work was done by hand. I left the area before it produced very much but it seemed to benefit the Japanese more than the prisoners.

I was moved from this camp in January 1943, along with about 50 others. We traveled by truck and train to San Fernando, to join a work party of about 30 other POW's.

Our job was to salvage cars, trucks, and tanks that the Bataan troops had left when the Japanese had overpowered them. This work party had no name and as I recall, we lived in a part of one of the hospitals on the lower end Bataan Peninsula. We worked very hard loading trucks with heavy junk.

It was at this place that two of us were working one day when we were approached by two Filipinos who were trying to steal tires and anything else that could get, about eight were arrested and tortured to death and the rest were taken to an isolated place beheaded or shot.

At one time we found a 1936 Ford sedan in very good condition. One of the Japanese wanted it loaded on a truck. He put his bayonet on his gun and said to eight of us, "Pick it up and load it on the truck." We had our doubts, but the looks of the bayonet must have helped because we put it on the truck with no trouble.

Food and water were not plentiful at this place. Several of the men began to get sick and were sent back to Cabanatuan.

About May 1943 we moved to a little place near Manila called Calloocan. There we had regular barracks to live in, but life was more difficult. We were working on vehicles and had to push them from one place to another to repair them. It seems we were pretty bad mechanics even though it was the trade of many of us back home. We suddenly forgot all we knew and most of the vehicles we worked on weren't good for much after we worked on them a while.

Our lives got more hectic as time went on, sometimes for morning roll call we had to run about five miles before breakfast and then were given very little breakfast.

Our footwear began to fall apart and the rainy season was upon us, so from then on we were barefoot in the mud day after day.

We hauled many vehicles to Manila and so we got to see where a lot of their war materials were stored. Our group got smaller as every few days someone would be sent to Cabanatuan and would not be replaced. In January 1944, there were only about 25 of us left.

Sometimes after working all day, they would make us go down to the port area and unload ships, which gave us an opportunity to steal a few bags of rice for camp. We ate better for a few days, at least.

At this camp, they would give us Sunday off, but then the Japanese wanted to play baseball or volleyball most of the day. We surely didn't get an over amount of rest. We worked at this camp until about the middle of September 1944.

One day we had to move to Manila and we were put in Bilibid Prison waiting for removal to Japan. About nine o'clock in the morning, the sky was full of U.S. Navy planes, flying in all directions, dropping bombs at the anti-aircrafts guns in many parts of the city including verrrry close to our prison walls. Japanese planes were falling allover the place and anti-aircraft flak fell through the roof and over the prison grounds. The next day these planes were back most of the day, a very nice sight to see—U.S. Navy planes! It was good to see the Japanese on the other end of the battle although we weren't sure what was going to happen to us. But our hopes were high and it was a wonderful feeling!

On October 11, 1944 it was time to move out. We lined up and walked through Manila to the port area, and loaded on a troop ship. There were about 1800 of us and they crowed 1200 into one hold and 600 in the forward hold, a coal bin. Manila Bay was a mess, with sunken ships all over the bay area, evidently from the bombings we had seen earlier. This ship was at the top of all the dirty things the Japanese dished out. For the past two and one half years I though I had seen about everything—but this was the worst. Men were so close together there was no room to lie down to sleep. Daytime heat was terrible, the stench so bad it was almost impossible to breathe. We received on canteen of dirty water nearly every day and a mess kit of rice. Men who died were not taken out for days. Everyone was dehydrating. Five gallon buckets were toilets, passed down on long ropes and many times these would run over and spill as they were being pulled up.

October 24, late in the afternoon, a torpedo hit our ship mid-center. The rear half of the ship fell in the water with the deck under water. The Japanese left the boat for us and took off in lifeboats. Most of them I imagine were picked up by passing Japanese ships. Any Americans that approached those boats were beat off with long poles.

When I got up on the deck, I walked down the rear deck and into the water, grabbed some boards and floated away. Many men were still on the deck of the boat the last time I saw it at dusk.

I floated for several hours when a lifeboat drifted right into me. I crawled aboard. Robert Overbeck of Baltimore was already in the boat wrapped in a canvas, which was actually the sail for the boat. This sail had come floating along in a box and Overbeck had upped in aboard, ropes and all. I wrapped myself in it too, and we floated along for some time before we heard someone yelling. We called back and forth and finally located Anton Cichy and pulled him aboard. When daylight came we also found Calvin Graef and Don Meyers and took them aboard.

Then we began to look alive! We had the sail, ropes and the mast was tied in the boat. There was a gallon size bucket in the boat and we began bailing out the water, which was a real job as the boat was nearly full of water. There was a sealed container of hard tack and part of a keg of water aboard. After we got all the water out of the boat, we rested and got acquainted a bit. As we were trying to decide where we should head, we saw a Japanese destroyer coming so we just laid quietly in the boat and although they came within 100 yards of us the made no attempt to help us. We watch it move out of sight before we began to put our boat in order for sailing. We raised the mast, repaired the rudder a bit and began to sail on a northwest course.

We sailed the rest of that day, all night and the next day. Late in the afternoon of the second day, we came upon two Chinese fishing boats. After some discussion we decided to take a chance on getting help from them, so we upped up alongside of them. They helped us aboard their boat and were very friendly. They gave us food and water and dry clothes. Later in the evening they fed us again and then put us to bed for the night. That was the best nights sleep I had in three years. The next morning, October 27, they took us to shore to a small village and turned us over to the American people in the area. That is when it finally dawned on us that we had escaped from the Japanese and their tortures and that hell-ship. We later found that it was the only coastal area of China that Japan did not have.

We were put up in a school for two nights and then began to move out. We walked about 30 miles in the first day, the next day we made another 30 miles in a sedan chair. On the third day we went by bicycle with a coulee peddling, about 40 miles. That was a real experience. The fourth day we reached a U.S. Weather Station manned by Navy personnel. There for the first time in two and a half years we saw three U.S. flags flying...what a great sight.

We spent the night there and the next day we were taken about 200 miles by a small truck. Spent the night in a Chinese village and the next day made another 200 miles. There was a small airport there and waited a couple of days for a plane to come and fly us over enemy-held territory to Kunming, China, a distance of about 800 miles.

We spent about two and a half weeks in Kunming, being interviewed nearly everyday. One day we went for a trip on part of the Burma Road. We spent Thanksgiving at Kunming, with the 14th Air force. On November 28, we started our flight home.

The first flight was from Kunming over the Himalayan Mountains to an airport in Eastern India, then to New Delhi, Karachi, Pakistan, Abadan, Iran, Cairo, Egypt, Casablanca, Morocco, the Azores, Bermuda, New York and finally Washington D.C.

Nearly every one of these flights had some little problem, but the one over the Himalayas was a very cold one with no heat working in the plane. At Abadan we had to turn back because of engine trouble. It was a very rough landing and we had to take a different flight. On all three flights, across the Mid-east and Africa we had two very large airplane engines as cargo, going to the U.S. for repair. Every time the plane got into any turbulence those engines would shake and quiver. We sure hoped they wouldn't break loose. Our pilot flew low enough over the cities of Baghdad, Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Palestine so that we got a good look and it was most interesting...but the best sight of all was our own good ol' U.S.A.

We arrived in Washington D.C. on December 3, 1944 and were interrogated there concerning all that had gone on in the Philippines'...who we knew were dead, etc. This went on for ten days. While there I was awarded the Purple Heart by General George Marshall.

Avery Wilber
Navarino, WI

