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| **Charles Balaza** |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Date of Birth: 1921 - Place of Birth: Jersey City, NJ** | | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | Placeholder Image | **War: World War II, 1939-1946 Branch: Army Unit: Battery K, 59th Coast Artillery Service Location: Philippines; Panama; Alaska; Germany; Greenland Rank: Master Sergeant POW: Yes Dates of service: 1940-1962 - Army** [View Full Description](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/loc.natlib.afc2001001.11291) | | | http://lcweb2.loc.gov/natlib/afc2001001/vhp-stories/web/images/ex-war-card-bottom.gif |   **And don't miss Charles' book:**  ***"My Life as a Prisoner of War"***  **Photo right - Exert from his book…**  **Interview and Obituary below**  Credit: Page information courtesy of Veteran's History Project  http://www.loc.gov/vets | |  |  | | --- | --- | | http://lcweb2.loc.gov/natlib/afc2001001/vhp-stories/web/images/audio-icon.gif**Interview (Audio)** | | | **»** | **Complete Interview  (54 min.)  (**click on words to link to interview, if it will not play go to this external link) or read the interview below  http://www.lindavdahl.com/Bio%20Pages/Charles%20Balaza%20Book%20Page_files/image002.jpg | | |

# Interview with Charles Balaza -May, 24, 2003

# Thomas Swope:

Where did you grow up?

Charles Balaza:

Well, actually I was born in Jersey City in New Jersey.

Thomas Swope: Go on.

Charles Balaza:

I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Thomas Swope: Right.

Charles Balaza:

And then about the age of 17 I joined the CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps, and stayed in there for about a couple of years or so. And thereafter -- let's see. When I was just about one month short of being 19 years of age, I enlisted in the army there.

Thomas Swope:

And at that time you could enlist in the army before you were 21; is that right?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, yes. I enlisted on February the 12th, 1940.

Thomas Swope:

So where did you train?

Charles Balaza:

Well, actually I got my training right on Corregidor.

Thomas Swope:

Stateside -- You didn't train stateside at all?

Charles Balaza:

No. The only training I got there was how to wash pots and pans on KP duty there, and when -- That's about it. But my training was actually in the Coast Artillery, and I got that training right on Corregidor itself on the big guns.

Thomas Swope:

So when did you go to Corregidor? How soon after you enlisted did you go to Corregidor?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, I would say -- let's see -- within three months after I was -- Let's see. I enlisted on February 12th, 1940, and then about May 20th, I believe it was, I was on Corregidor in the Philippine Islands.

Thomas Swope:

Anything unusual or interesting happen during your training period on Corregidor?

Charles Balaza:

Well, the only thing that kind of had me going was how could I load a 1,070-pound shell into the muzzle of a -- what do you call it now? -- 12-inch gun there, the chamber, rather, of a 12-inch gun. And we used these what is known as shot trucks. We put these shells right on a shot truck, and then you had to adjust them according to the elevation or depression of the 12-inch gun. And then once the gun was loaded, you had a 240-pound black charge powder behind that that propelled the projectile.

Thomas Swope:

So that was mainly your job then at that point?

Charles Balaza:

Yeah. At that particular time, that was my job, load the gun. Then later on -- I stayed in there for a little while for about -- Oh, I forget how many months I was with what was \_\_\_\_. That was at Battery D in the 59th Coast Artillery. Then from there on I went, as a corporal, I helped establish Battery H, which was Battery Geary, a 12-inch disappear -- not disappearing but 12-inch mortar outfit. And I got in trouble with the first sergeant there, being that I didn't go along with what he had to say about one of the men during the inspection. And rather than cause any hard feelings, I decided to transfer out into Battery K, which was a 12 -- 60-inch searchlight battery and -- for harbor defense, and we \_\_\_\_+ to China Sea, the \_\_\_\_, like any vessel such as submarines, battleships or -- and as such are trying to get anyone coming -- trying to get -- coming towards the island doing sabotage work. But mainly those were, like, to put our own vessels through the mine channel coming into the Corregidor, and we had the little buoys out there. And that's how the operation went. And going to war, during the war, I was at searchlight number four, which was right on Battery Geary, and--

Thomas Swope:

What was life like on Corregidor before the war started?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, I thought I was on a vacation. I didn't actually think that, when the war was going on in Europe, I didn't think that we were going to be bothered by the war in any way whatsoever. But when Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was just leaving Manila after a three-day pass. I was in the middle of Manila Bay returning back to Corregidor when I heard a drone of planes, and I looked up, and there was 27 Japanese bombers flying overhead. And I mentioned to the men, I said, hey, look at that; they must be on a goodwill mission tour or something, not knowing at that time that Pearl Harbor was bombed. And when the planes flew between Corregidor and Bataan, the anti-aircraft guns opened up. And all that flank was going to land, and I was expecting to see plane after plane come down, but I didn't see any. But apparently some of them probably went down later on into the China Sea. But I couldn't honestly tell you that, I did not see it, being that the flank was pretty heavy.

Thomas Swope:

Now, were they attacking on that same day that they attacked Pearl Harbor?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, we were bombed and shelled from the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed. We were bombed and shelled for five straight months. And we held the Japanese off. We had equipment that was very, very poor from World War I, and it's -- some of the ammunition works, but others didn't. But actually by us holding off for those five months, we kept the Japanese from invading Australia at that time --

Thomas Swope: Right.

Charles Balaza:

-- and also giving America enough time to rebuild and recoup. There's one thing I would like to make clear, I mean, perfectly clear, and that is we did not surrender. We did not surrender at all. We were ordered to surrender. At that time we didn't know that men were dying from malaria and dysentery, well, just about anything, any kind of a disease going. Men -- We didn't have -- Ammunition was low. Food was low. As far as medical supplies, everything was low. We were just beat. And all we were promised that hold on, there were thousands of men coming -- no -- coming as reinforcements, planes, ships, and food, and ammunition, and all that. All that stuff went to Europe. We didn't get anything. And then before you know it, we got the word to surrender.

Thomas Swope:

Now, thinking back before the surrender, do you remember what you were thinking or feeling when you realized that you were under attack on that first day of the war?

Charles Balaza:

Well, to be perfectly honest, I -- it was like a dream. I really didn't think that there was a war going on. I was under the impression that America and Japan were very good friends, you know, that nothing would happen, you know, and I just couldn't believe it. It wasn't -- It just couldn't be believed. That's the way I looked at it.

Thomas Swope:

And so Corregidor, you were under artillery fire and attack for, oh, five months, right?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, yes, yes. What they would do, though, the Japanese would -- They had a routine that they would follow up like harassment. They would send a plane over, like -- They'd call them -- what do they call them? -- Charlie -- Oh.

Thomas Swope:

Washing Machine Charlie or something?

Charles Balaza:

Yeah, Washing Machine Charlie. That was it. Thanks for helping me out there.

Thomas Swope: Sure.

Charles Balaza:

And that was more or less to keep the men on their toes and, you know, and whatnot. But, anyway, at every noon, what would actually happen, they would send over bombers, flights of bombers over there, and they would bomb the whole island. And after they would get done bombing the island, they would wait for about 10, 15 minutes, or something like that, and before you know it, they would start shelling from the Bataan side, which was only about two miles away. And that was too much of a distance for artillery to be fired. But -- And that's the way it went. They would fire, and, by God -- And that's just to harass the men. As a matter of fact, this one particular day just before the invasion, I happened to catch -- oh, I had some bad cramps. I mean I had some severe case of cramps. And on the side of the hill facing towards Bataan, about 25 feet from the top of the hill, was a latrine. So I went up there to kind of relieve myself there, and as I was sitting on the latrine, the Japanese started to shell right down along the shoreline, and -- what do you call it now? -- as they started to shell, I'm looking at it like I was sitting in a movie or something. I was kind of hypnotized. And then suddenly the smoke started to get thicker and thicker, and I could smell the ammonia from it. And then I heard the zinging and the popping going around, and then a part of the latrine was hit, and I said you'd better get your butt out of here or you won't have any at all. So then after that, I went for my position over there, and when I went for the position, I felt like I got bit by a bee or something, stung by a bee. So I told the men, I said, boy, I got stung by a bee. That's kind of -- It's been \_\_\_\_. So they said drop your pants; let me take a look. So I laid down on the \_\_\_\_\_ in the little tunnel that we had there for the searchlight. And as I dropped my pants, they looked, they said, hell, you weren't stung by a bee; you were hit in the butt there and got shrapnel. Now, they could feel it, and they couldn't -- but they couldn't, you know -- They wanted me to go down to the medics, but the shelling was all too heavy. So they said, well, let's see if we can take it out over here. So the only thing they had was needle-nose pliers and some Merthiolate. And as I'm laying down, they -- they pressed down with the two fingers where the shrapnel was at, got the needle-nose pliers, which they're supposed to have sterilized by burning it, and they used that to pull the shrapnel out, which was about, I'd say, about an inch and a half, two inches long, something like that, the size of a -- like a fish hook with the barbs going the wrong way. As they pulled it out, they ripped me up pretty good there. And it must have been about a quarter of an inch wide, I believe. And that was bad enough. I was -- I went into a cold sweat. And after that, they put this Mer -- They said hold still, and they're going to put some medicine on it there, you know. So they went and put this Merthiolate on, and it was worse than iodine. And when they put that on me, by God, I thought I'd climb every tree in the island over there. And then after that, they got some -- the only thing they had for a bandage was Kotex, so I had to keep putting that on it. But that really cushioned it pretty good, though, I have to admit.

Thomas Swope:

Did they give you a Purple Heart for that?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, yeah. And, you know, it took me a long time to prove that I got hit, being that I -- Oh, I went down to the medics later on, and they were so busy there I was kind of ashamed to go down, being that it wasn't that much of a hit. I went down to the -- down to the Malinta Tunnel, and they were so busy there, and the nurses looked at it and patched me up a little bit. And before they can do any recording, anything like that, I walked out. So they didn't record it. But apparently -- Actually I reported this to my commanding officer, and about 40 years later -- it's a good thing this battery clerk was still alive and also a major from the medics that were in the prison camp, they had to write an affidavit there to be sent to the army there to get that Purple Heart  
 to have proof that I was actually injured. And I was also injured in the coal mine in Japan too –

Thomas Swope: Right.  
  
Charles Balaza:

-- and whatnot.

Thomas Swope:

Any other stories or incidents before the invasion came?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, the one thing I tell you, which I didn't like, that stuck in my mind quite a bit. Well, a couple of them. About two days after the surrender at Corregidor, we were ordered to surrender, the Japanese came around, and they got about -- I don't know if it was 150 or 200 of us, and they took us alongside of the hill at Malinta Hill. And they stopped us there, and I looked over the side of the cliff, and it must have been about 250 feet down into the Manila Bay. And they had us file in a single file. And I actually didn't like it. And there was a Japanese -- what do you call it now? -- privates that took it upon themself to take us up there. And it looked like they were going to execute us or something. The only thing that saved us was the Japanese officer that came up and came along at that particular time, and he questioned the Japanese privates. I didn't understand Japanese. But they had -- he had them lined up there. And you know how you bounce a yo-yo up and down? Well, this Japanese officer took his saber off, and he hit these Japanese privates there, and they'd fall down. One would go down, and then he'd hit the other one. And they kept bouncing up and down like that. And then as we came, we were told to go back where we came from, and another incident. So that kind of -- I think they were ready to execute us over there, believe me.

Thomas Swope: Yeah.  
  
Charles Balaza:

Another one was they kind of used us for human mine sweeper when they took us down to the point of invasion. As a matter of fact, my searchlight, I was in command of the invasion point before my searchlight was knocked out. And they were really gunning for us, believe me. We were getting shelled quite a bit. But after the Japanese came around and took us on a beach. I was under the impression that we were just going out on a work detail of some kind. It was a work detail all right. It was like a burial detail. But what they'd done was the guards would follow behind, and we were wondering how come that they were so far behind and we were so far ahead of them. And they used us that, if the area was booby-trapped in any way, that we would get it first. And as it worked out, a little later on as we were coming back to our camp there, if you want to call it that, happened to notice a Japanese officer across from us about 200 feet away or so. He was poking around with his saber over there. And before you know it, I don't know what he hit, but it blew. In the meanwhile, in the same area, they had the Japanese stacked up like cordwood. I'm telling you if you ever seen these Japanese stacked up, I never realized that there were so many dead people. I never seen so many dead people at one time. They had them stacked up one, two, three, or four rows that I know of. It must have been about 30 feet, 25, 30 feet or more in length. And then they had them stacked up as high as you can throw a body. And that was about -- let's see -- one -- about four or five men wide. And what they would do is pour gasoline or some fuel or something on them, and they would set them ablaze, you know, burn them up over there. But this Japanese officer, when he blew himself up, the other Japs came over to help him on out, and there was a Jap medic along with him. And he shook his head, and that's -- Whatever they were mumbling in Japanese I didn't understand. But before you know it, the other Japanese took something out of his pockets and whatnot, and then he picked him on up and swung him up on top of the pile with the rest of the dead. And that was it there. The other thing that I remember that the way we were treated going back when we were leaving Corregidor, they put us aboard these trans-steamers that -- what do you call it? -- when you were put in the hull, and, oh, my God, it was ungodly hot. It must have been about 100 or more degrees that day. And they put us in the hull over there. It felt like we were going into a furnace or something. And the only thing we got a little air was when the ship was -- The ship, \_\_\_\_ that was on a ship there, when the wind would hit there, we would get a little fresh air. But at that time, before they put us in the hull, they had just unloaded mules and horses, and all that horse manure was left in that hull there, and the ammonia smell itself would actually knock you for a loop. I nearly slipped and passed out on it \_\_\_\_+. But I seen one guy make a nose dive. Oh, what a hell of a mess he was in. But that's -- And then another thing that we -- That's how we traveled going along when we left the Philippines to Japan.

Thomas Swope: Right.  
  
Charles Balaza:

None of these ships were marked in traveling. None of those ships were marked in any way whatsoever, no marking as a POW, and you're used like cattle or even worse. The same thing that I remember that sticks in my mind is the way they transported us from, like, from Bilibid Prison, which was in the Philippines, to -- That's where -- Bilibid Prison is where they kept all the murderers and head hunters and stuff like that in there before they put the American prisoners in there. They took us out of there and put us aboard these Filipino trains. The boxcars were about half of the size, I would say, of an American car. And they -- One man, they loaded 100 of us in this car. One man was complaining that he couldn't get in there. The Japanese jabbed him between his legs, which someone pulled him on in. During our travel, now, what actually took place was they gave us, like, I believe it was a little more than a five gallon seaweed bucket or something. And this is what we were supposed to urinate and defecate in. And before it even got halfway to us, that thing was loaded. And when we'd try to dump it out the side of the door, the Japanese guard wouldn't let us do it. But, anyway, there we were. And the men had -- were packed in that had dysentery. They had the malaria and others, other diseases. I happened to be pressed up in the corner over there. I didn't know if I was -- what do you call it now? I don't know if I passed out or was held up by the pressure \_\_\_\_+. But I happened to see a little hole in the floor of the boxcar, and I went down to get a little fresh air. And at that time I seen the man alongside of me, not knowing that he had dysentery. And before you know it, you see all that crap come down the side of his leg. And I said, oh, my God, what am I going to do? The thing is I smell that, so I'm trying to get the fresh air. Do you follow me? And we had -- It was murderous, believe me.

Thomas Swope:

And this train ride was between two prison camps on the Philippines?

Charles Balaza:

Yes. That was between Bilibid Prison and Cabanatuan. That's where we were headed for.

Thomas Swope:

How long were you at each prison camp?

Charles Balaza:

Well -- Oh, that was hard to say. I can't remember. I don't know if it was -- some -- One place I think I might have been six months, and such. I think I might have been six months at one -- Bilibid -- not in Bilibid but Cabanatuan and then at Nichols Field. That's another place. We had the White Angel. Oh, he was --

Thomas Swope:

Tell that story about the White Angel.

Charles Balaza:

That White Angel, he was a sadistic -- let me put an SOB on it. He was a young guy. He looked about my age at that time. He looked like he just got out of high school or something. And he came, and he was very immaculate, and he had that superior look at him. But the thing was that saved me, I believe, was being that I was about his height, and, you know, I wasn't tall at all, and I'm kind of short. I'm only five seven, five eight, somewhere in there. And he was about the same height. And he would come down. He would actually stop at the tallest guy, and give that superior look, and talk to him in, like, kind of a sarcastic way. And when he came to me, he stood in front of me, and, believe it or not, we kept staring at, each other there. And then I said, oh, oh, he's probably going to work me over. And you couldn't raise a finger. If he decided to beat you up, you couldn't raise a finger, because if you raised your hand, you were dead. They would bayonet you right on the spot. That's just the same thing like on the marchers. And -- But he had us -- He came in one day. This White Angel came in. He was drunk. I mean, he had to be drunk. And he got all the prisoners up there in the school compound. This had taken place, I think, at Nichols Field at the time. Now, we were not supposed to work on an airstrip according to the Geneva rules there, but they didn't sign it, and, as I understand it, they didn't go by them. But we worked on this airstrip, and they quartered us in this little school house. I say school house. He came in about 2:00 in the morning, I think. That's a rough time, I'm just guessing. And he got all of us up, and they had us run around the compound of the school yard that was enclosed by the building. And after that, they had us run around like that for a little while. They dismissed us except for a few, maybe a half a dozen or so. And I looked around, and there he was. He was actually yelling and shouting at some of these prisoners. And then before you know it, the prisoners were being beaten up with either rifles or two-by-fours or the scabbards that they had, you know, and that's the standard procedure. And I don't know if they kept them out there all night or not, because they had us go in a room there and -- what do you call it now? -- close the doors and the windows and whatnot.

Thomas Swope:

Right, in solitaire.

Charles Balaza:

And there was another time he asked one prisoner there if he was going to go to work. The prisoner says no, he says, I'm sick. They took him on the outside, and he shot this prisoner. And the thing that got me was he come back a little later on, and he had some flowers, a bouquet of flowers, and he took them out. And I'm saying what the hell is going on here? And he come back. And then after he got rid of the flowers, he come back into the quarters over there, and they're, like, as if nothing happened. And then there was a marine that was taken out and also beheaded. And these people didn't fool around with you in any way whatsoever. As a matter of fact, we were on the airstrip working on the airstrip. This will give you a good example on how much regard they had for prisoners. Now, I had about ten blisters on each hand there, using a big crowbar, and -- in order to make holes for dynamite sticks that they would put dynamite in there to blast this clay in order to move this material to widen the airstrip. And when I got these ten blisters on my hand over there, I couldn't hold the bar anymore. So the next day I was put on -- they let me stay in the camp there. They needed somebody to bring rations out. So they had five-gallon buckets, you know, metal buckets with wire handles on them. And they had them filled up with rice. And we had to take them out to the airstrip there to feed, you know, to drop them off so the guys get fed. Then I had to walk, I would say, from the dropoff to where the men were at, oh, about a good 1,500 feet or so. That's quite a distance trying to carry those buckets. And here the wires on the -- I'm carrying them. I was cutting my hands, so I put them on -- put the bucket on my wrist, and that was cutting my wrist. And I'll tell you when I finally got to my destination with those rice buckets, I was never so happy. Oh, my God, I was in pain, as miserable as could be. And then -- Let me see. Oh, there's one time I says I got to get out of here, you know, and I did it because this guy was a sadist. But the thing is you don't mind doing any work. Well, you did mind doing work. But the thing was that no matter what you've done, you couldn't please them. They'd beat you constantly at all times, you know. But when we come back, let's see, I said I got to get out of here, so -- I had a bad case of diarrhea. I don't know what I got it from. I think it was from eating peanuts or something. I happened to get some peanuts. I don't know how I got them. But the more peanuts I ate, the more it aggravated me. And I had a bad case of diarrhea. So I always go up to the Japanese, say (in Japanese \_\_\_\_+). In other words, Mr. Bojemo (ph), I'm very sick; I have to go to the bathroom. And he'd say (in Japanese \_\_\_\_+), in other words, give me the okay on that. So I was thinking, I said, hey, listen, if I'm going like this here, they may think that I have dysentery, and they don't want guys around here with dysentery. So \_\_\_\_+ with the two peanuts that I had, going back to the school yard, I went and I take these two peanuts that I had, and it gave me a worse case of diarrhea. And when we started off marching, oh, good thing you weren't over there behind me. Here it started off out in the close ranks of marching. Before you know it, before we got back from the airstrip to the school house, they must have been about 20 feet behind me. And when I came to the school house and they check you on out like that, the guards didn't even bother checking me out. They said go, get in there and wash off over there. They let me go in there without being counted off. Well, they already counted me anyway. But the next day I tell you what. It worked. The doctor says: How many times you go to the bathroom? I said: I don't know. 15, 16 times or more. I lost count. I don't know. You better stay here. Well, before you know it, in a few days I was out of that camp, not knowing that when I went back to Cabanatuan, which was like the main \_\_\_\_+ they call it. They want men. They pick them out and ship them out. So it wasn't long before I was aboard a Japanese troop ship that was unmarked. And as we left Manila, there was another ship, \_\_\_\_. And I seen that ship about a day or two when we were traveling. And one morning I get up that ship was gone, and I didn't see it anymore. I didn't know if the submarines sunk it or what. I had quite a bit of excitement going on at that time too.

Thomas Swope:

Before we get too far, how did the White Angel get his nickname?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, because he was so immaculate. He was so immaculate. You'd think he was at Annapolis. He was so -- That's what -- That's how I often wonder how did he get a name as White Angel, as sadistic as he was? I could never figure that out. And -- But the only thing is he was so immaculate in his dress. This I have to give him credit for.

Thomas Swope:

He was in charge of a labor camp then?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, he was in charge of this Nichols Field.

Thomas Swope:

The Nichols Field, now that was a labor detail or labor camp?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There was about 500 of us there at this camp at the time, and we worked on the airstrip.

Thomas Swope:

Any other stories that you remember from your time in Cabanatuan?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, in the Cabanatuan, I have to tell you the time I had -- I had had a bad -- Again, I had another bad case of diarrhea. I don't know what it's -- I went to the latrine over there, and I'm sitting down trying to relieve myself. And then -- And we didn't have any shoes. We had these -- Well, we had wooden shoes that we made, and -- with the leftover leather from the GI shoes that we had. And I sat down on the latrine seat, and my feet were kind of mushy there. I said, jeez, what's happening here? And at that time the thing that -- Well, I seen that the ground was kind of mushy, and there I could see this stuff oozing out of the latrine. It was overfilled, you know. And here I had all the mess near your feet there. And then I see these maggots in front of me. So at first I got kind of -- I said, jeez, I'd better get out of here. And then I thought, oh, well, hell, I have to stay here anyway. So we kind of made a game of it trying to see which maggot would beat the other maggot in getting across a certain point, and we kind of made a game of it. And I stepped out of the latrine over there, and I headed back to my barracks. I felt like every bit of my strength had just left me, not knowing that I got hit with malaria. So when I got just barely -- With every step that I took, it felt like it was 100 feet away, like everything was done in slow motion, that my foot would never hit the ground again. Well, finally I got to the barracks over there, and I laid down and started to shake. Oh, my God, what a feeling that is. One minute I was burning up. The next minute I was freezing. So finally somebody went and got the doctor, and the doctor finally came in. And he looked at me, and he says he's too young to die. And what he gave me I don't know, but he gave me a pill that looked like a horse pill or something. And, well, I was there for -- Well, I managed to get by that case of malaria. Good thing I had not known -- Good thing I happened to have some quinine pills on me also that I was giving away. Believe me, I was giving that away. Good thing I held some back on me. But I hope nobody goes through that anymore there.

Thomas Swope: Yeah.  
  
Charles Balaza:

Any other questions?

Thomas Swope:

Well, let's see. When did you go over to Japan then? And you went over on a Hell Ship. So tell that story.

Charles Balaza:

Oh, they call that the -- The ship was known as the Mati Mati Maru. In other words, "mati mati" in Japanese means wait, I mean, wait, wait. Where they ever got that name, I don't know. To this day I don't believe that was the name of the ship, but that's what the guy said. And once again, like I said, this, when we left the Philippines, that's when we had another ship behind us, and that's a couple of days I seen it, and the next time I didn't. And that same troop ship that we got on, that also had the mules taken out of there, and they put us in that there in the hull of the ship that just unloaded the mules. But -- And, now, this is the way we sailed for -- oh, my God, I don't know what -- two, three weeks. I really don't remember. But, anyway, if you wanted to go to, say, to the bathroom, you know, and you want to relieve yourself, you had to climb a rope ladder, go into -- climb this rope ladder in order to get on the top side of the deck. But before you go up there, you had to get any permission from the Japanese that was up there. And if you didn't get permission, excuse me, if you didn't get permission from the Japanese that was up above to come up the rope ladder to go to the latrine, they'd shoot you. But, anyway, the latrine was actually set at the bow of the ship. That's where we were at. And it was set over the side of the ship, right on the starboard side. And it was lashed down with rope. And here, whenever you went, you held onto that rope for dear life, hoping that it wouldn't break, because otherwise you'd find you yourself with the latrine in the China Sea somewhere. But that's -- that's the one thing that I remember. The other thing is -- Well, the thing that I remember, not only being in the hull like that with all the horse manure and stuff like that, but we always used to get alerts that there were either Japanese, I mean, American planes flying overhead or submarines, something to that effect. They were always on an alert, although I had never seen them. Then when we got to Japan, they deloused us, and from there we marched through the streets of Omuta. And as we were marching through the streets of Omuta, people were kind of confused. I don't know if they wanted to jeer us or greet us or -- I couldn't give you an idea. Some were throwing obstacle -- stones at us. Others were throwing us cigarettes. It was a confusing situation. Believe me, I couldn't figure them out myself.

Thomas Swope:

Was that because it was nearing the end of the war, or why would they --

Charles Balaza:

Oh, no.

Thomas Swope:

-- possibly be nice?

Charles Balaza:

That was from the very, very beginning.

Thomas Swope: Really?

Charles Balaza:

There was some people that, you know -- Like I say, I was confused. I was actually confused. |  
You know that?

Thomas Swope: Uh-hmm.

Charles Balaza:

But, anyway, that was a coal mining town, and the people didn't know what was going on anyway. And -- Oh, I meant to tell you, getting back to the Philippine Islands, about these four men that were executed. They claimed that these four men was trying to escape. That was a sad case of execution. But before they actually executed these men, what they actually had done, they had them on display. They beat the hell out of them for I don't know how long. Then they put them on display. They tied them like a hog from their neck down to their arms and down to their legs. And they had them kneeling like that. And anytime the sentries would pass by, they would spit on them, push them, you know, and slap them. But they decided they were better off to be executed. They were given 72 hours without food or water, you know, or be shot. So they decided to be shot. These men, as they passed by, I never seen, honest to God, I never seen such a solemn mass of men pass by me. And -- what do you call it now? -- the men, I couldn't tell you, the prisoners themselves, I couldn't tell you -- They didn't have no expression on their face whatsoever. It was very difficult. I didn't know if they were happy that they were going to be executed or they were way out in space. There was no expression whatsoever. When the men were actually executed, that was a sad case. They had to shoot these men four different times before the Japanese officer pushed the last man into the hole and fired a round at the prisoner there.   
And when the Japanese started to come back, when they passed by us, I noticed that there was one young Japanese soldier. He was a very -- I don't know. He could have been 15 for all I know. He looked like he was crying or something. And the other soldiers were kind of sad too. I said I don't believe this. These are the same people that beat the hell out of us.

Thomas Swope:

Did they make the prisoners witness the execution?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, we -- Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, there was quite a few hundred. As a matter of fact, when the men were coming down to be executed, all the POW's, American POW's there, when they passed through the line, they went through the -- what do you call it now? -- went --

Thomas Swope:

To the firing line or whatever?

Charles Balaza:

I lost my train of thought here.

Thomas Swope:

Well, you said as they were taking the prisoners to be executed, the other prisoners --

Charles Balaza:

All the other prisoners there, they actually, the American prisoners saluted the men who were going to be executed, and they got -- that was the last salute they ever got. And --

Thomas Swope:

So how long were you on Japan, then, when you were taken over there to work?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, I think I must have been there a year or more, year and a half, something like that. About a year and a half I think it was.

Thomas Swope:

Were the conditions any better there than they had been in the Philippines?

Charles Balaza:

No. As a matter of fact, there was a man that he got beaten the same way over there. There was one man, his name was Pavalokus (ph), who came from Chicago, who was a marine corporal, got -- He was starved for 38 days. And there was another guy by the name of Miller. He was bayonetted. And there was another man that I know was. And that's just the way it is, a regular routine with them people like that.   
  
And you can -- If you happen to come across another POW from the Philippines, regardless of whether he was on Bataan or Corregidor, or anywhere in the world, if he was a Japanese prisoner of war, he will tell you exactly the same story that I'm telling you.

Thomas Swope: Right.  
  
Charles Balaza:

You know, because if you want to really get shot down in telling some war stories, tell something that's not true, and let these guys that were around at the same time see what happens. They'll put you down right fast, believe me.

Thomas Swope:

I have talked to two other Philippine prisoners, and the stories are very similar.

Charles Balaza:

Well, then you know that. But I have to say this. Now, there were many -- There were Japanese people who didn't know what was taking place there, and they'd try to help us out. The ones that tried to help us out got more -- they got severely beaten, believe me.

Thomas Swope:

So when -- Where were you then? Were you at this work camp when the war finally ended?

Charles Balaza:

I was at Camp Sendai. I moved to Japan. We were there, and the Japanese, one day the Japanese left the gates wide open. We didn't see no sentries. We didn't see anybody around, but the gates were open. It was our impression that they probably left the gates open that if we could get out there, that they would shoot us and claim that we tried to escape. Now, I didn't even know where I was at, let alone try to escape on an island, you know. And a couple of weeks later -- I think it was a week or two later -- news reporters from New York Times came by and also from San Francisco, all the big news stations. They came into the camp, and they say, what are you guys doing here? We said what do you mean what are we doing here? They said the war's been over for two weeks. So there we were. And so hearing that, we went in, a couple of other guys and myself, went into town, commandeered a fire engine, and went down to the train station. We were told that there's a train was headed towards an airstrip that the Americans had taken over. And those Japanese conductors were too happy to get us aboard the train to get us out of there. So they put us aboard the train, and where I was going, I didn't even know where I was going. But before you know it, I was aboard a B-24 flying out. We asked the pilot if he would -- what do you call it now? -- fly us over Nagasaki, which we witnessed being bombed. And when we flew over Nagasaki, that was a sad case there I tell you.

Thomas Swope: Yeah.

Charles Balaza:

And then we flew from over Nagasaki, I think, to Okinawa and from there to the Philippine Islands, and then we boarded a ship and came back home.

Thomas Swope:

Now, as far as Nagasaki, any way to describe what you saw there when you flew over that?

Charles Balaza:

Nagasaki in itself was just like you going down to the beach. You know when the ocean brings in driftwood and all that? That's just the way that thing looked. Everything was devastated. The thing that caught my eye -- (END OF FILE ONE; BEGIN FILE TWO.)

Charles Balaza:

-- going to bomb them, but I felt very sorry for them, believe it or not. I said even though they treated me the way they did, I felt sorry for those women and children because they didn't have nothing to do with that war.

Thomas Swope: Yeah.

Charles Balaza:

You know?

Thomas Swope:

Yeah. Do you still these days feel any bitterness toward any Japanese?

Charles Balaza:

As a -- Japanese, as a whole, no. I feel this way. I'm \_\_\_\_, and I'm Catholic. I feel this way. Many people believe in God. And when God was crucified, he said I forgive those who done me harm, you know, and I forgive those people who executed me. And I felt this way. If God can forgive those who crucified Him, why can't I forgive those who done me harm? But, on the other hand, although I have forgiven those people that done me harm, I can't forget what has happened to me. It's difficult to kind of put that -- sweep that under the rug, because you wake up with flashbacks, and these flashbacks are real. It's just like when you have a flashback, it's not just a dream in itself. It's just something you have all your senses. You wake up any time of the night in sweat, and you're looking at a blank wall over there, and you're wondering what's taking place. You're full of sweat. And during this time, whatever you're dreaming about, you can hear, see, smell, touch, and taste. You have all your senses. And it's just like it's actually taking place at that particular moment. And it's a strange feeling. And you have a little time getting back to sleep in itself too.

Thomas Swope:

So do you still have those dreams to this day?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, yes, believe it or not. After -- what was it? -- about 60 years, 61 years that went by, I still get those flashbacks like that, and some not often. But then again I might go on a couple of months without, and then I might get three or four of them like that at a clip. And it's strange the way that works. It doesn't work on you every, every day.

Thomas Swope: Right.

Charles Balaza:

It's like it's every now and then. And that's when it affects you the most too. I had a lot of trouble sleeping certain nights. And the thing is I keep one eye open, the other eye closed. Maybe it's because you think you're still in combat.

Thomas Swope: Right.  
  
Charles Balaza:

And the one thing that I believe, and not only do I feel this way but I believe every other veteran who had  
 men under him feels that he could have done something better to help his crew out.   
  
Thomas Swope: Right.

Charles Balaza:

And you keep blaming yourself for something that you're not responsible for. There's one sad case, this here Kazlowski (ph). He was my power plant operator just before the -- a week before the invasion took place. He happened to stop by me, was talking to me, and the air raid siren went off. And I told him, I said, stay with me over here, and he said no, I feel better at my position over there, in the bunker over there, even though four or five minutes later the guy was dead. So I felt kind of bad. I should have -- I keep saying to myself I should have, you know, insisted that he stay with me. But who knew at that time? I thought if he felt that he was better off at his position, that was okay. And that's about it on that.

Thomas Swope:

When you think about your experiences during the war, does one particularly vivid memory come to mind?

Charles Balaza:

There's many. There's so many it's hard to say. One like the execution or you're waiting to be executed. Oh, I'd like to tell you this, though. When the war first started up, I was out on my position, still not believing that the war was going on. I looked out toward the China Sea, and this is, like, the first day of -- when we were, you know, the war broke out. And I'm looking out toward the China Sea. It's a very dark night. And I happened to see this one star in particular, and for some reason, as small as that star was, it kept coming closer and closer and closer to me. And it finally got near me and formed into a cross about eight to ten feet high with a bluish-white glow. And I had a feeling of serenity that no matter what happened, I wouldn't have to worry, you know. And that cross followed me from the day I seen it until the day I got home. Believe me

Thomas Swope: Wow.

Charles Balaza:

I would be in the gray shack over there, and I'd say my prayers. I always said my prayers at night. And I said so many prayers that I would be ordained. But, anyway, when I prayed, I would see, like, a little pinhead, a bright pinhead. Then it would get larger and larger and formed into a cross about six inches high. And I felt much good, like I was taken care of. I'm a great believer in Footsteps in the Sand. I don't know if you ever read that poem or not.

Thomas Swope: Yes.

Charles Balaza:

Well, I'm a great believer in that, and, believe me, it works.

Thomas Swope:

And that's what helped you survive?

Charles Balaza:

Oh, prayer, you -- Prayer in itself. You have to have a lot of prayer and faith. If you don't have the faith within yourself or within the Lord Himself, the thing that you have, in order to survive, you have to stop and think no matter how bad things are, think -- stop and think what you have at home, your family, the type of life. Whether it's good or bad, you had something better at home than what you are going through.

Thomas Swope: Yeah.

Charles Balaza:

See, that's the main thing. You think of family.

Thomas Swope:

Right. Well, do you think that covers it for now?

Charles Balaza:

I would say so.

Thomas Swope:

I mean, obviously there is a lot more in the book.

Charles Balaza:

There's so much it's hard to say. I keep jumping around on that.

Thomas Swope:

That's quite all right. These always, whenever I do these oral histories, they always jump around, because there's certain things that will come to mind in certain order, so that's quite all right.

Charles Balaza:

As a matter of fact, I'm very happy that you asked, because I would -- Actually I would like the people to know about what had taken place on Bataan and Corregidor. And, you know, the strange thing is when I lecture, like, at the Grenier Air Base, that's a good example right there. These kids just come out of school. They're going in the military over there. And I say how many of you know where Bataan or Corregidor is at? Did you ever hear of Bataan or Corregidor? One person out of 50.

Thomas Swope: Right.

Charles Balaza:

And -- And I want the people to know what actually had taken place, you know. This is \_\_\_\_ -- I want also the people to know I'm not trying to spread hatred, because our country is established on all different nationalities. There are good, and there are bad. And these people in Japan at that time were misled. I have nothing against the Japanese people whatsoever, you know; however, only those who caused me harm and anguish. That's about it.

Thomas Swope:

Well, your camp, you were probably one of the camps that was scheduled for execution at the end of the war, right?

Charles Balaza:

As a matter of fact, my camp was right at the very beginning, at the tip of Japan. If Japan was to be invaded, we would have got it first.

Thomas Swope: Right.

Charles Balaza:

I mean, we were right there, and they were armed. Don't kid yourself. Men, women, children, everybody were armed. And we were at the very beginning of the island over there. We would have had it, believe me.

**Charles’ Obituary**

Charles Balaza, 95, of Yardville, passed away Dec. 10, 2016, surrounded by his loving family. Charles was born in Jersey City, NJ, on March 7, 1921, and resided in Hamilton for most of his life.

He was a parishioner of St. Vincent DePaul Church. He entered the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1937 and enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1940. Stationed in Corregidor in the Philippines at the beginning of WWII, he was assigned to the 59th Coastal Artillery.

After the capture of Corregidor, Charles was a prisoner of war for three and a half years in Japan. He was a recipient of the bronze star and a Purple Heart, among many other awards. After retirement from the Army in 1962, he was employed by the NJ Turnpike Authority for the next 20 years as a heavy equipment operator. During this time, he founded the Continental Chapter of American Ex POW's.

He helped veterans obtain all benefits owed to them. He lectured children in school on his war experience. Charlie was known for his generosity and always trying to help those less fortunate. One of his life's proudest accomplishments was when he started Operation Santa Claus to help needy children in post-war Germany.

He was the son of the late Joseph and Stephanie Balaza, and brother of the late John, Steven and Sophie. Surviving are his wife of 67 years, Marie (DiStaulo) Balaza; his children, Charles and Norma Balaza of Hamilton, Joseph and Carol Balaza of Doylestown, PA, Donna and Joseph Scarlata of Yardville, Judith and Donald Warner of Groveville; his grandchildren, Nick and Anthony Scarlata, Jason and Beth Scarlata, Andrea and Tony Briscese, Laura and Dan Vesey, Steven and Cole Warner; great-grandchildren, Kiera and Nathan Vesey; brothers and sisters, Edward and Gloria Balaza of Long Island, NY, Lucy and Joseph French of Nutly, NJ, and Carmella DiStaulo of Jersey City, NJ, and many nieces, nephews and friends.

Funeral Mass will be celebrated Thursday, Dec. 15, at 11 a.m. at St. Vincent DePaul Church, 555 Yardville Allentown Rd. Entombment with military honors will follow a the Greenwood Mausoleum.