The Legacy of an American Patriot

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Thanks, Dad……

…..for everything.

Chapter 1
The Last Letter

...75 years ago.....As the war clouds rolled on the horizon in 1941, Dad was in the Army Air Corps at Hamilton Field located just north of San Francisco. That October, all furloughs and passes were cancelled, they were ordered to pack up, "we're movin' out"...to where, they did not know. With a group of about 2,000, they got aboard a converted passenger liner and slipped out of San Francisco Bay and headed out to sea. As they slid under the Golden Gate Bridge it was to ultimately be the last glimpse of their homeland for many of the men. Less than one in three would return. For those who survived, it would be another 4 years before they were to see this bridge again. The rumor mill had them going to South America, but once they were underway they learned that their destination was Manila, the Philippines. The trip was uneventful except for a brief few hours in Honolulu, and once they got to the Philippines, the squadrons were assigned to the various airfields around the Manila area. This was a big adventure for most of the guys. Travel, as we know it today, was uncommon to these young men, many who had rarely gone more than 25 miles from their homes. To journey to such an exotic place as the Philippine Islands was beyond their wildest imagination.

However, much of the excitement was dampened once they arrived at the assigned airfield. Actually, "airfield" was not quite the correct description. Mostly these "airfields" were dusty strips of flatness with few buildings, and....no airplanes. The airplanes were to be crated and put aboard another ship to arrive within the next few weeks. They would then have to be unpacked and reassembled before they could fly. So, they had their work cut out for them.

Back at home, it was Thanksgiving. For many families, the season would be a bit less festive with the boys being overseas and not home for the holidays. But, all were proud of their sons. Cards and letters were being written to give the latest news, and as was the custom with soldiers away from home, they would often

write letters in their spare time. There was no international telephone, and the only other option was a Western Union telegram.

My dad was not considered a great letter writer. It was not an issue of the quantity of mail that he would send, it was the content. There just didn't seem to be much there. Usually he would say that he was busy, everybody was busy, the weather was really good/good/bad, he was busy, the weather was rainy. Only on occasion would he give any details. But, at least he was communicating with his family back in Texas and letting them know a bit of what he was doing, and that he was generally enjoying the adventure.

Thanksgiving was a day of rest for the men, and dad took the opportunity to write home. They were still continuing to work to get the bases set up and ready to receive their airplanes from the states, and all in all, he thought it was a very nice place. Dad made a special point to let his mom know that they were safe and not near any fighting. For the past year the newspapers had been full of reports detailing the British and Germans fighting in North Africa (Rommel and Montgomery just didn't seem to get along), the Battle of the Atlantic was heating up and American ships had been torpedoed by German U-Boats, and in the late summer the Japanese had invaded and occupied the oil fields in Southeast Asia resulting in an oil embargo issued by President Roosevelt. Dad told his mom, "...don't worry, it's a big place." His Thanksgiving letter also mentioned his girlfriend back home. He had not written her since he had left Hamilton Field back in early October, so he needed to drop a line to.....Hortense (Hortense?.....Dad, really?). Finally, he told his mom that the letters home might be fewer....only about one a month. Mail by boat was very slow, often taking a month or two to make the trip. Therefore, he explained that he would send his letters air mail via China Clipper out of Manila, but it was expensive. The only remaining option was a telegram, but at 40-cents a word (today's equivalent of about $40 a word), the telegram was a last resort to communicate. Dad's Thanksgiving letter was the last letter his family would receive until after the war ended.

The Japanese struck Pearl Harbor on Sunday morning, December 7th. A few hours later, they bombed Manila and Singapore, and within the week, they had landed on the northern beaches of Luzon and were quickly making their way to engage the American and Filipino forces around Manila.

The attack had thrown everything into chaos. Dad was able to get a telegram to my grandmother at Christmas to let her know he was ok, but by then all communication to and from the Pacific had ended. Her letters sent to him in early December were returned "Letter Not Claimed". Weeks turned into months, and still no word from dad. In early April 1942, the reports of a US surrender started to get back home. Still no word from Dad. There were a few letters and telegrams from the War Department telling them..."we don't know". All that anyone knew was that the US forces in the Philippines had been defeated. The mothers of the missing boys began to write other mothers in a desperate attempt to learn anything they could. Any word of hope. "We have not received any letters from our son. Have you heard from your son?"

A side note: In 1989 I stopped in San Antonio to see Ferron Cummings, one of my Dad's buddies from his unit on Bataan. As we sat in his living room visiting, he suddenly jumped up and said, "I've got something for you!" and dashed to a back room. He soon returned and handed me two letters that my grandmother had written his mother. She was looking for any news about Dad. Mr. Cummins told me that his mother had saved these letters in the hope that someday they would make their way to Dad's family.

By the fall of 1942, life at the home front started to settle into ration stamps, shortages, and war bonds. The country was at war. And Dad's family was beginning to come to grips with the possibility that he was killed in action, and not coming home. The Christmas of 1942 came, and went. Most of the hometown boys were now in uniform and on their way to fight in Europe or the Pacific. And....no word from Dad....and no word about Dad. The War Department had given my grandparents all the news they had, and nothing had changed. Dad was now officially listed as Missing in Action. The

winter of '42-'43 rolled into spring, and spring into summer. By July of '43, we had begun to fight back, albeit slowly. Guadalcanal was finally taken in the Pacific, and the Allies had landed in Sicily. It was going to be a long, painful, war. The local newspapers started to have more and more articles of the boys killed in action. Gold Stars were beginning to be seen in the windows of homes. Now, in the late summer of 1943, it had been 20 months since receiving any news from Dad.

Very early in the morning of August 16, 1943, the phone rang at my grandparent's home in Texas. It was the postmaster at the local post office and he had something that my grandfather needed to see. Without disturbing my grandmother, he made his way to the post office, and waiting for him was a post card from Dad. It had no message other than he was alive and in "good" health, along with his signature. The story from my granddad was that he carried that card all over town that day, showing it to all his friends and telling of the good news that Dad was still alive. Unfortunately, my grandmother was the last stop of the day, and she was the last to hear. Granddad never told me exactly what she said, but I got the impression that she was not exactly pleased with the late notification. Until the end of the war, they would periodically receive these cards, but never any letter...no direct message from Dad. And finally, in late September of 1945, they received the first letter from Dad. He was free and back in US hands. By Christmas, he was back home. As for Hortense, she had died from an attack of appendicitis sometime during the war.

All the brothers were now home safe, and the family started to get back to normal. Life was moving on. But those four years.....how could Dad begin to tell of what had happened to him?

Chapter 2
The Battle of the Points

….75 years ago……By the end of December 1941, the fortunes of war had changed dramatically for Dad and the rest of the men in the Philippines. What had started in San Francisco as an “adventure” was now showing signs that there may be difficult times ahead.

The December 8th attack by the Japanese on Manila was not technically a “surprise”…tension between the US and Japan had been rapidly escalating throughout 1941, and Washington had placed the US commanders across the Pacific on alert, advising them of the diplomatic breakdown and the high probability that Japan would strike….they just didn’t know where the Japanese would strike. The Americans had a radar installation at the western coastal town of Iba on Luzon, and they were able to observe the incoming Japanese air attack headed for Manila. They were also able to detect a large fleet leaving Formosa and sailing for northern Luzon.

The shipment from the US of their crated P-40 fighter aircraft was scheduled to arrive in January 1942, but with the presence of the Japanese throughout the south Pacific, the ships were diverted to Australia and all hope of getting the airplanes disappeared. Dad’s unit, the 34th Pursuit Squadron, finally inherited about 20 obsolete P-35 fighters, but the pilots had never flown them nor had the mechanics ever worked on them. The runway was a dry, dusty dirt strip that had been cut out of a sugar cane field and the flight crews were having difficulty seeing through the clouds of dust kicked up by the propeller wash. Several of the fighters either ground-looped or slid off the runway, and the maintenance crews, with very few spare parts, were having to remove components from the worst of the damaged aircraft to use for repair to keep the remainder of the fleet flying. And then there were the combat losses. Early in the conflict the commander of the 34th, Lt.

Samuel Marrett of Arkansas, was killed when his airplane was destroyed while strafing a Japanese ship.

Dad was trained as an “armorer”. His responsibility was to maintain the machine guns on the airplanes as well as to load the belts of cartridges for combat missions. However, with the frantic activity after the Japanese attacks, all the men were pitching in where they were most needed to keep the airplanes flying, but by the end of December 1941 all of the aircraft being flown by the 34th were either destroyed in combat or damaged in other flying mishaps. The maintenance and support crews no longer had any flyable aircraft to support, so in early January 1942 the 34th was assigned to the 41st Infantry Division to fight as infantry. This was to ultimately be the beginning of a long, terrible nightmare of which there was no end in sight.

The New Year of 1942 began to bring more changes for the men of the 34th. All of the US and Filipino forces had been ordered to retreat back into Bataan Peninsula with the hope of being able to hold off the Japanese assault until help could arrive from the states. General MacArthur himself was to have said that help was on the way. However, the anticipated reinforcements needed to get there soon because the Allied troops were starting to run short of food, ammunition, and medical supplies. The various Air Corps squadrons, now formed as infantry companies, were assigned to guard the southwestern beaches of Bataan peninsula just north of the coastal town of Mariveles, and the 34th was given a small area called “Quinauan Point” near the village of Aglaloma. Quinauan Point was an area of about 1 square mile that jutted out into the South China Sea. With a lush emerald green jungle canopy, white sandy beaches and clear aqua-blue ocean, it was difficult to imagine that they were at war. But the rumble of artillery on the eastern side of Bataan reminded them that the main struggle remained just a few miles away.

Once the 34th arrived at Aglaloma, they started setting up camp in the jungle and began look-out duty. Day and night the men did their shift

of staring out to sea in anticipation of sighting the enemy, but they were also looking in anticipation for the relief convoys that would bring the desperately needed men and supplies. By mid-January, food was starting to be a significant issue as the troops were placed at half rations (regardless of the claim by General MacArthur that there were ample supplies). The cavalry had sacrificed their mounts and pack mules to the butcher to help sustain the approximately 50,000 soldiers on Bataan. (yes, there was a regiment of mounted US cavalry…..and the last mounted cavalry charge made by the US Army was on the plains of Luzon against the Japanese). The airmen soon started looking elsewhere for provisions, and soon all the caribou, cattle, and chickens were consumed. Then began the search for wild pigs, followed by snakes, then iguana ("taste like chicken"). Being by the ocean, fish was often part of the diet until they ran out of dynamite. Finally, there was monkey….but monkey was not at the top of their food list, and by late February they were glad to get that. The availability of water was not a problem as they were bivouacked close to some fresh water streams. But, as the months moved into late February and early March, and rations were becoming even more scarce, the soldiers were beginning to suffer from the lack of food.

And to add to the miseries of hunger there was the lack of shelter. There were no barracks and only a few tents, and malaria was starting to take a toll. Quinine had been the standard remedy to fight the disease, but that was soon depleted along with a shortage of mosquito netting (Dad would carry the malaria bug the rest of his life, and never seemed to be able to shake it off completely). The men of the 34th were literally living off the land.

As the Japanese began to push into Bataan, they made several attempts to land soldiers on the western coast behind the main battle front with the objective to seize the main north/south coastal road, and thus allow easier movement of the Japanese forces toward the southern tip of Bataan. In late January the Japanese were able to land about

1,000 soldiers on the rocky shoreline of Quinauan Point…within a few hundred yards of where the 34th had set up their defenses. The Battle of the Points was about to begin.

The air corps troops were able to contain the Japanese landing party to the shore area….but just barely. These men had not been trained in the art of infantry warfare….they were mechanics and aviators and were not familiar with unit maneuvers, fields of fire, and defensive positions. A few of the men were familiar with firearms, but many had to be taught the basic skills, such as how to reload their WWI vintage Springfield bolt-action rifles. The Japanese were not able to move off the point, and the airmen were not able to overrun them, so for a few weeks the opposing forces were at a stalemate. The Japanese were desperate to break the tie, and landed an additional 1,500 troops on the point. The US ground commanders rushed some additional units into the fight, and between the US and Filipino soldiers pushing from the shore, and US Navy gunboats firing from the sea, the trapped Japanese forces were wiped out….all 2,500 dying on the rocky cliffs at Quinauan Point. Officially known as “The Battle of the Points”, the fierce fighting around Aglaloma was considered a victory, but it only delayed Japan’s final push down the peninsula.

With the landing of Japanese forces repelled, the 34th went back to guarding the coast, but the men were hungry, weak, and sick. Having lost several of their men in combat, the morale of the 34th was starting to waiver. In March came another blow. General Douglas MacArthur had escaped Corregidor in mid-March for Australia, and the Allied forces in the Philippines were on their own. Although the General had been ordered by President Roosevelt to evacuate, it was of little comfort to the men of his command that were now doomed. What was viewed as an act of betrayal, the survivors would carry this bitterness for many decades. Nicknamed “Dugout Doug” by the men on Bataan, his declaration of “I shall return” fell on deaf ears. General MacArthur left

Corregidor with orders to “fight to the end”, but to the men doing the fighting, these were easy words from one who was leaving the battle.

As the month of March 1942 moved into April, the men were in critical condition. Battered and injured in battle, weak from the lack of food, and sick from malaria, it was just a matter of time before….what? On April 9, 1942, the men of the 34th received a message that the American and Filipino forces on Bataan had been surrendered to the Japanese. All were hopeful that they would be fed and treated humanely, but what began as hope quickly became almost four years of terror, beating, starvation, and for many, death.

Quinauan Point (Center top) where the Japanese landings were repelled

The remains of a 34th Pursuit Squadron P-35 on Bataan

Chapter 3
Out of Bataan: The March of Death

….75 years ago……..The surrender on April 9, 1942, of the American and Filipino forces on Bataan caught the Japanese commander, General Homma, by surprise. He had expected his opponents to fight a desperate battle to the end. But suddenly, as the Japanese were beginning to gain momentum and prepare for a final push, the American commander, General King, came forward under a white flag of truce to surrender. However triumphant the surrender of Bataan was for the Japanese, General Homma began to realize he now had some logistical problems. His intelligence staff had been telling him that there were approximately 30,000 Allied troops on Bataan….a number he considered manageable….he would have to quickly move the POWs out of the area in order for his soldiers to get positioned to take Corregidor. General Homma soon discovered that his intelligence guys were not so intelligent, for the truth was that there were almost 80,000 uniformed American and Filipino troops that had retreated back into Bataan. And, the physical condition of the captured soldiers was much worse than what was originally thought. With ration restrictions having been started in January and continually being reduced, by April the men he had captured were starving. Many of the frontline troops were so weak that they could barely crawl out of their foxholes for a “meal”. General Homma had barely enough supplies to feed his own men much less an additional 80,000 hungry mouths. As for medical care for the captives, there was none to be given…..the Japanese had no medical supplies to spare.

As the American general and the Japanese commanders gathered around a small table in a thicket of trees, General King had made it clear that there were buses and trucks available with which to move the POWs out of the battle zone to wherever the Japanese would instruct them to go. However, to the Japanese, this man had disgraced himself and his

soldiers by surrender, for to the Nipponese soldier and his solemn warrior's code of *Bushido*, death, rather than defeat, was the only honorable response. In their eyes, these prisoners were worthless….an object of contempt. And any words spoken by this detested prisoner were to be ignored. The prisoners would be moved out of Bataan in the manner that would be decided by the Japanese….and thus the stage was being set for the March of Death out of Bataan. (Ultimately, the actions of the men under the command of General Homma during April 1942 were to cost him his life. He would be found responsible for the Bataan Death March and guilty of war crimes to be executed by a firing squad in April 1946.)

For Dad and the men of the 34th Pursuit Squadron, the news of their surrender to the Japanese was received with very mixed emotions. Mostly, they were just glad that the fighting was over. The American-Filipino forces had fought with WWI weapons and ammunition against a strong, battle-hardened enemy that was well-supplied and motivated, and they had held the enemy at bay for as long as they could. But the superior forces against them had ultimately prevailed, and now that the fighting was over the overwhelming goal of the captives was to get out of Bataan. What had originally been a land of tropical plants, beautiful beaches, and friendly people had quickly become a place of misery, sickness, and death. To these men, anyplace would be better than Bataan, or so they thought.

Later in the afternoon of the 9th, orders had come down for all the American and Filipino forces to assemble at the coastal town of Mariveles, about 20 miles down the road from Quinauan Point. Dad and the 34th gathered their gear and joined the mass of men moving south down the main road. Trucks, buses, cars, and on foot, the troops converged on Mariveles. Arriving at the assembly point, they found absolute, total, complete confusion. There was no command structure, no one in charge, and no orders for the POWs.

Some of the men decided that there was no benefit in surrender, and with all of the confusion at Mariveles, they slipped into the hills to take their chances with the Filipino underground. Others thought that there may be salvation on the rocky island fortress of Corregidor just a short 3-mile boat ride from the Bataan shoreline. There were still significant forces there, along with food and tunnels in which to hide. Every boat and canoe available had been hired or confiscated to make the trip.

The first encounter with their captors was a bit unusual. As the initial Japanese convoys rolled into Mariveles, the assembled men moved off the road to let them pass, and stared as the tanks and trucks rumbled by. The Japanese soldiers stared back, and a few of them waved and smiled. This may not be too bad. The conquering Japanese forces were moving to get positioned for the next battle and really were not too concerned with the mass of Americans and Filipinos crowded alongside the road. They still had a war to fight and Corregidor needed to be taken.

Soon the Japanese infantry started to find their way into Mariveles, and the fortunes of the captured forces on Bataan started to take a fateful turn. Weak and exhausted, they watched the passing parade of tanks and trucks filled with soldiers pulling artillery pieces. Many of the POWs were listless and shuffling down the road, trying to stay out of the way of the convoy. As a column of 8 or 10 Japanese tanks were making their way down the crowded road, suddenly a Japanese guard grabbed a staggering American soldier and flipped him out in front of the lead tank, which promptly ran him down, followed by the remainder of the line of heavy vehicles. When they had passed, and the dust had cleared, there remained only the flattened uniform of the soldier embedded into the street cobbles. It was then that the captives realized that pain, terror, and death were to come at the hands of the Japanese.

The shakedown of the POWs by the Japanese at Mariveles started almost immediately. With their personal belongings out and open for

inspection, the Japanese were then free to take what they wanted and, in general, wreak havoc. Watches, rings, money, fountain pens and such items were quickly lost to the “inspectors”. And soon, lives were taken as well. Prisoners with Japanese money or Japanese war souvenirs in their possession were immediately executed on the spot with the assumption that the holder of such items had taken them from a dead Japanese soldier. Word of the executions quickly spread up and down the ranks telling everyone to get rid of such items.

The next day, the Japanese started moving the POWs out of Mariveles on foot, and the Bataan Death March was underway. Often the March has been perceived to be a long, continuous column of men walking along the flat, coastal highways, but such was not the case. Actually, the POWs were divided into groups of 100-200 men and driven along by 3 or 4 Japanese guards. Additionally, most of the terrain they traveled was not a flat paved highway, but 65 miles of dusty dirt roads through steep, rolling hills. For young men in good physical condition, this would be considered a rigorous workout. But for the Defenders of Bataan, weakened from battle, sickness, and starvation…..and with their ranks full of older men, this transport was shaping up to be one of tragedy. Dad’s group had to wait at Mariveles for 3 days before moving out on April 12. The 65-mile march north to the railway station at San Fernando would take 8 days, and they would finally reach Camp O’Donnell on April 28th.

In the 75 years since the Bataan Death March, a multitude of books, articles, and documentaries have detailed many of the brave and heroic acts of the captives, and the many cruel and inhumane atrocities of their Japanese captors. An attempt to describe all of the witnessed acts of terror in this story would be inadequate to explain what had happened to Dad and his friends on this March of Death. A nine-day forced march of men in terrible physical condition, in a hot, humid, tropical climate, with very little food or water, driven on by those who

detested these prisoners and considered them as disgraced cowards, would come to be known as one of the great inhumanities of WW2.

Men who fell out or could not keep up were shot or bayoneted, left to die on the roadside. With no water to drink, men would often break ranks and run for muddy pits or caribou wallows, only to be shot and left face-down in the mire. The casualties of earlier groups would be sprawled alongside the road, having laid for several days in the sun, and the stench of death followed the groups along the entire march. In the early miles, some men started counting the bodies they passed only to quit counting when they just could not stand to look at another dead man in the ditch.

And the starting and stopping……the waiting in the sun, many with no headgear to protect them. This was not an orderly excursion. With 80,000 men trying to move in the same direction on a narrow road, there was the constant start, stop, wait, start again, stop, wait again…..defeated men being beaten and defeated even more.

The marchers were also having to struggle against the convoys of Japanese vehicles headed south. Many of these trucks were carrying Japanese troops that were making a sport of trying to strike a POW with a stick or a rifle butt as they passed by. The prisoners learned to keep an open eye when these convoys were passing by and get as far off the road as they could. As they passed through the villages, the road would often be lined with civilians trying to pass food to the marchers as they staggered by. And it was not uncommon for the civilian's act of kindness to be repaid with his or her life when a guard would quickly dispatch them with a bayonet.

The sun would start to set, and the men would be herded into fenced enclosures for the night, and when morning came and it was time to continue the journey, those that had died in the night would be left lying on the ground. The lack of sanitation was quickly becoming a serious issue with deadly impact. It was when the men were herded into confined areas that the effects of dysentery were starting to be felt.

There were no Porta-Potties available, nor were there “rest periods” for the marching POWs…. and the dysentery began to spread like wildfire. Imagine a severe case of diarrhea under these circumstances, and multiply it by tens of thousands. When crowded into the fenced areas in the evenings, the filth and stench became overwhelming.

The men of the 34th had tried to stay together…..but in all of the confusion and disorganized chaos in Mariveles, many had gotten separated and were strung out in the various groups moving out of Bataan. Dad and two other friends had decided that they must stick together, and as each day of the March passed, they quickly realized that those who had not found a group of buddies to travel with were in trouble. Those who marched together were able to keep an eye on one another, to help each another when one was struggling…help carry his pack, or provide a shoulder to lean on. Early on, the three found that there was not enough canteens to go around, and a canteen was a lifeline when they were able to get a little fresh water. One of the guys had found a gallon can in which they could use to gather some water, but they quickly discovered that there was a small hole in the bottom of the can. But, it was the only thing they had…..they had to figure out a way to be able to keep some water. The only solution was for them to take turns holding their finger against the hole. So, for 8 days and 65 miles, someone had their finger against the bottom of the can.

The fear of falling behind was always present. Officers were typically marching in the front ranks with the enlisted men following, and all the men were aware of their position in the group. Being in the last 10 or 20 meant that they were only a few steps ahead of death. When they felt like they were slipping, Dad and his friends would kick up the pace to try and move up the line a bit. But this would take energy, of which there was precious little left.

For a few of the POWs on the March, they had seen enough bad stuff to decide that this was not going to end well, so they decided to slip

off the road into the underbrush when the Japanese guards were not looking. A handful joined the Filipino underground fighters in the jungle.

Somewhere along the 65 miles, Dad slipped and fell….all the way down. With his weakened condition, he was slow getting up. He managed to get to his hands and knees and paused for a few moments while he tried to catch his breath. The next thing he knew, his face was in the dirt, having just been kicked in the butt by a Japanese guard. He struggled to get up on all fours and started to rise, but once again, the kick and the dirt. A third time, Dad struggled to his knees, more slowly, and a third kick came. As he again tried to get up, a Marine marching a few ranks behind him called out to some of his men: “A couple of you men pick that guy up before he gets killed!” From behind, two sets of hands reached under each arm and lifted him up out of the road. As he was being picked up, he looked back over his shoulder, and saw the Japanese guard with his rifle raised to club him in the back of the head with the butt of his weapon. Those Marines had saved his life.

On April 20, 1942, they finally reached the railway depot at San Fernando. They were to be placed in small railway boxcars and transported another 20 miles to the town of Capas, and then make the final 6 mile walk to Camp O’Donnell on foot. However, there were only a few boxcars available, and once the cargo had been delivered up the line, they had to return back to San Fernando for another trip. As was expected, the Death March groups continued to arrive, only to wait for their turn to be loaded and shipped. So….they sat…..for 7 days….and again the crowded, confined areas only made the dysentery worse. Certainly, they could use the rest, and at least they were not marching in the sun, but as they would soon find out, the train trip was not going to be any better than the March.

The railway boxcars were basically roofed wooden enclosures on wheels. Without windows or vents, the cars were approximately 30 feet long and 8 feet wide with a single sliding door, and the POWs were shoved into the small space in groups of 100. There was no room to sit

or lie down, and therefore all the men had to stand in the cramped area. Those that died in the railway cars…..and there were many……died standing up, for they could not fall. And there was always the dysentery.

The trip by rail from San Fernando to Capas was only 20 miles, but for the POWs crowded into the boxcar oven, it would seem like they would never arrive. Then, the last leg of the Bataan Death March….6 miles from Capas to Camp O'Donnell. Camp O'Donnell was to be worse than the Death March…more men died there than on the 65-mile trek out of Bataan. In later years, Camp O'Donnell was to be called "The Andersonville of the Pacific" after the infamous Confederate POW camp in Georgia during the Civil War. For Dad and the men of the 34th Pursuit Squadron, the struggle to remain alive was just starting, and Camp O'Donnell was to be another nightmare. The will to survive was to undergo a great test at O'Donnell, and with no end in sight to the horror, many good men would lose the fight to remain alive.

No one really knows how many men died on the Bataan Death March. Estimates show that as many as 1,000 American soldiers and as many as 10,000 Filipinos perished…..about one for every 10-15 paces on the 65-mile journey. Of the men in the 34th (according to Dad's records), 2 had not survived the March. By Christmas 1942, many more were to pass into the arms of God.

The Bataan Death March. April 1942

Chapter 4
The Summer of Despair

….75 years ago……..April 28, 1942……Dad and his group of surviving Defenders of Bataan staggered into Camp O'Donnell after having completed the last 6 miles of the Death March from the railway station in the Central Luzon town of Capas. Coming through the main gate of the camp, they assembled in the open area in front of the Japanese headquarters building for another shakedown by the guards. Those standing in this formation had survived the Bataan Death March, but they were in terrible shape both physically and emotionally. The men had started the 65-mile forced march out of Bataan hungry and sick, having been on reduced rations since January with most suffering from malaria and dysentery. The horrors suffered at the hands of their Japanese escorts had taken their spirits to a place that was darker than they could have imagined, but the next 6 weeks at Camp O'Donnell will take them even lower still.

Prior to starting the March at Mariveles their possessions were searched by the guards. And, as had happened at Mariveles, the guards at O'Donnell looted what they wanted and executed those prisoners with any Japanese articles. By now it was clearly understood by Dad and his friends the deadly consequence of having any Japanese money or items in their possession, yet there were still a few men that were carrying such items. Whether they had been "lucky" that the contraband wasn't found earlier, no one knows, but they were instantly removed from the formation and shot. Once the shakedown was completed, the group continued to remain in ranks under the beating sun while they waited to be welcomed to O'Donnell by the camp commandant, Captain Tsuneyoshi (pronounced Soon-ee-oh-she….or something like that…must be the East Texas pronunciation). For American military men across generations, the application of witty nicknames was a refined skill, just as mechanics or weaponry. And for each of the Japanese

guards and officers at O'Donnell, the American captives were quick in naming each one. Captain Tsuneoshi was dubbed "Baggy Pants" by some….others called him "Whistling Britches" for the rumpled, loose hanging uniform and trousers he wore. However, his alternate title did not reflect the punishment that he was to rain down upon his new command. "Baggy Pants" would be responsible for the death of some 12,000 American and Filipino POWs within a few short months. His welcoming lecture to each newly arrived group set the stage for what was to follow.

As was Captain Tsuneoshi's ritual for each incoming group, he let them remain standing in the hot sun….sometimes for hours, and often within sight of the commandant taking his time to eat a meal while the prisoners watched….and smelled….with empty stomachs. Baggy Pants was doing this for effect, and the POWs knew he was doing it for effect. And, finally….casually….with great ceremony, the Japanese captain would put on his uniform coat and sword, step out of his quarters up onto a high platform and address the men through a Japanese interpreter. His speech: They were not Prisoners of War, they were captives. America was the sworn enemy of Dai Nippon, and the Imperial Japanese forces would fight America for 100 years until the United States was defeated. He and his Japanese garrison cared not whether the prisoners lived or died, and any infraction of the rules he had established was to be punished by death….quick and sure. Lecture over. Dismissed.

Dad and the rest of the new arrivals were then assigned to an area in the camp according to their unit. Air corps, infantry, artillery, marines…..and off they went. They were now officially part of the Camp O'Donnell community.

Once Dad got to the Air Corps area, he and his group started to wander the camp looking for friends and to get the low-down on their situation. They were trying to assess just exactly what it was going to

take to survive this place….food, water, shelter. The first impressions of Camp O'Donnell left them even more discouraged. As with the Death March, they knew that they must help one another if they were to survive. The three men that walked the Death March would now continue to stick together at Camp O'Donnell. They were all from Texas, and being Texans, they had been raised in that rich Lone Star State culture where an independent spirit was a cherished character trait, and giving a helping hand to one's neighbor was lived with deep conviction. Dad was from Taft, Texas….a small community near Corpus Christi. Corporal Robert Allen Bailey of the 28th Material Squadron was from the farming town of Italy, Texas…..about 75 miles southeast of Fort Worth. Finally there was Private Thomas Young of the Gulf Coast town of Texas City, Texas. Together they had fought in the Battle of the Points and had struggled out of Bataan on the Death March, and now they had to once again join together to fight for survival.

Food was at the top of their list. For the past 4 months these men had not just been hungry…..they were starving so their first inquiry was about the chow, and what they learned was not encouraging. The meals (or rather….meal) at O'Donnell consisted mainly of "polished" rice which is a smooth, white-grained rice that has been milled to remove the nutrients (husk, bran, germ) to prevent spoilage and extend the storage life. Most often it was served as lugao…..a watery rice soup, and only on occasion would there be any added vegetables or salt. And even less frequently any meat. The quality of the rice was extremely poor and contained weevils and rocks. A heaping spoonful in your mess-kit….bon appetite…have a good day….see you tomorrow, maybe…..next man.

The facilities at Camp O'Donnell were not much better than the food. Construction of the roughly 1-square-mile camp area had been started in late 1941 as a camp for the Filipino army, only to be halted when hostilities with Japan commenced in December. Just a handful of bamboo-framed buildings had been completed when the Japanese

decided to use it for a POW compound. The split bamboo floors were about 3 or 4 feet above the ground to prevent the intrusion of water during the monsoon season ….split bamboo platforms for beds…nipa thatch roofs. The initial arrivals of POWs were crowded into their assigned barracks, and with men from Bataan continuing to come into the camp each day, they had to find a spot to sleep anywhere they could. For some, it was under the floors, and for others it was out in the open. As for the latrines, they were primitive ….a few uncovered slit trenches that were beginning to fill to overflowing.

But water, that most critical of resources, was in very short supply. Although there was a small stream about 1,000 yards away (a little over a half-mile), it was mostly mud and heavily polluted with sewage runoff. The mucky water had to be gathered and carried to the camp each day in 5-gallon tins by the POWs. The only source of drinking water was a single artesian well with only one spigot in the camp. The flow from this single faucet was sporadic, and when it did flow it was just a slow, casual stream. Day and night, there was a line of haggard men waiting to fill canteens, and with only one water outlet, many of the prisoners would be in line for up to 20 hours. The constant mournful tink-tink-tink of empty canteens bumping against one another drifted across the camp. (Many years later, the survivors of Camp O'Donnell would remember where they were whenever they heard a cowbell or a windchime). And with so little precious water available, the Japanese commandant had banned the use of water for bathing.

By the first week in May, all the Bataan captives had arrived, the Death March was completed, and Camp O'Donnell now held approximately 9,300 US POWs and another 48,000 in the Filipino camp.

Then the dying started. The first to be taken were those who were in the worst shape….they had not been able to recover their strength from the Death March. With starvation came weakened bodies, and, along with the dysentery, pneumonia started to be seen in many of the

men. Americans and Filipinos were losing the fight for life until it reached a peak of about 400 per day. The “hospital” area was overcrowded and the POW medical staff decided to create an area in the building called “St. Peter’s Ward” or “Zero Ward”. Those who were about to die and had no chance to live were sent there to lie in their waste until they expired. When St. Peter’s Ward was full, the worst patients were placed underneath the building’s elevated floor.

The great test of survival was now underway. Dysentery and malaria had infected most of the men…all were starving and severely dehydrated, and some were carrying the wounds of battle. Many would not be able to effectively fight what was to come. The dysentery would be the great killer. With no water to keep the men and buildings clean and in order, the filth became uncontrollable. The material was more delicately referred to as “Night Soil”, and it was E-V-E-R-Y-W-H-E-R-E ….. clothes, floors, beds, hair, hands, feet, under the buildings, out in the open areas. With no water to wash the men and the floors, it seemed impossible to stop this disease…and it was spreading. The Night Soil and the open latrines brought millions of large green flies which in turn carried the disease. It was a vicious, cruel, perpetual cycle. As one Camp O’Donnell survivor recalled, “It was easier to die than it was to live”.

In early May, the Japanese started asking for “volunteers” to participate in work details back in Bataan and Manila. The POWs were to be used to repair bridges (that they themselves had destroyed during the retreat into Bataan), repair vehicles, re-build facilities, and pretty much any manual labor chores the Japanese were not real keen in doing themselves. For the prisoners, their motivation was not so much to work for their captors, but to get out of O’Donnell. With the conditions in the camp continuing to deteriorate, most felt that the work details may be a way to avoid the death pit of Camp O’Donnell. Anything had to be better than that. So, Dad volunteered for a detail that headed for Clark Airfield.

Their chores were to try and rebuild what the Japanese had bombed earlier in the year. Now that they were no longer inside a fenced enclosure, the natural thought of escape started to creep in. After all, they knew that the POW camps were no paradise, and perhaps they might be able to slip into the jungle and hide up in the mountains until the American forces returned. But, the Japanese had anticipated that escapes may be in store, so they divided the POWs into groups of 10 men, and promptly told them that if any of the group escaped, the remaining men would be lined up and shot. Within a few days, there were 2 of the detail workers that escaped into the hills. The next morning at roll call, the Japanese discovered the missing men, and, true to their word, they pulled the remaining 8 men out of ranks and lined them up to be shot as the other POWs looked on. Among the 8 condemned men was one of Dad's squadron mates, Corporal Staunton Betts of California. His brother, Edwin, was in the ranks, watching as the Japanese executed Staunton.

For many of those that volunteered for detail duty, it was indeed an opportunity to get away from the horror of Camp O'Donnell, but for some of the work details they were literally worked to death and many died. For Dad and the Clark Airfield workers, their chores were completed in about 2 weeks and they were returned to Camp O'Donnell. However, things were not going well for Dad….he was sick…..very sick. Pneumonia had settled in and upon his return to O'Donnell on June 1, he went into the camp hospital. Also awaiting his return to O'Donnell was the sorrowful news that his fellow Texan, Thomas Young, had died that very day.

When Thomas had arrived at Camp O'Donnell he had started trading his rice ration for candy and cigarettes that had been smuggled into the camp. The trading of one's rice ration was not uncommon in O'Donnell……the majority of the men had very little money and very few possessions…the rice was the only thing of value that they had. And

among the American POWs were those who seemed not to be able to grasp the essentials of what it was going to take to survive. Some of the men had determined that they could not, and would not, eat the rice lugao. For men who had spent their lives at the dinner table of the American farmer, where food was plentiful and rich in nutrients, the mindset of "I will not eat this stuff" motivated them to trade the meager portion of rice for the contraband candy and cigarettes. Although Dad and Robert cautioned Thomas, and encouraged him to eat the lugao, he fell prey to the underground traders and never recovered.

Thomas was to be buried in the O'Donnell cemetery located just outside the camp fence. The story of the burial details at Camp O'Donnell were to become one of the most tragic of all the horrible events of that summer of 1942. Each day the bodies were collected throughout the camp and placed under the Zero Ward building to await burial by the men assigned to this dreadful task. They were then placed on a stretcher and carried out the back gate to the cemetery, to be "stacked like cordwood" until their fellow prisoners could dig a long shallow pit and place them side by side, 10 to a grave. This was a very physical process, and often the men would have to stop digging to rest. They were never quite able to keep up with the demand, for the sick men were dying faster than they could be buried. Late May or early June was when the monsoon rains would generally start, and thus the burial pits would quickly fill with water, making this task extremely difficult for the weakened men who were trying to bury their comrades.

Starting in June, the Japanese started relocating the POWs out of Camp O'Donnell to Cabanatuan….another large Filipino military facility located in the eastern section of Luzon. This time the Japanese transported the POWs by truck, and on June 5 Dad left Camp O'Donnell and would not return. Twenty Eight men from the 34th Pursuit Squadron remained at the O'Donnell Cemetery including his friend Thomas

Young. All told, about 12,000 American and Filipino soldiers would die at Camp O'Donnell.

Upon arrival at Cabanatuan, Dad was sent directly to the hospital, for the pneumonia was getting worse. By mid-summer, my father was at his lowest point of the 42 months he spent as a prisoner of the Japanese. The fighting and starvation in Bataan, the Death March, the horror of Camp O'Donnell, the loss of friends and comrades, and now he was losing his fight to stay alive. His condition had deteriorated to the point where the Cabanatuan medical staff could do no more for him, and he was transferred to the Zero Ward where he was expected to die.

But for a miracle…….and the Grace of God Almighty…….Dad would be buried in a mass grave in a country not his own, having died at the hands of a cruel enemy who cared not whether he lived or died. But……there was a miracle, and the hand of God was on him, for in early August of 1942, his strength started to slowly return, and he was removed from the Zero Ward and placed back in the hospital area to recover. One of the few possessions he was able to keep hidden from the Japanese during the frequent shakedowns was a pocket New Testament bible that was a standard issue to all American servicemen. Dad had hung on to the Scriptures at great peril, for books and written material, if found by the Japanese, would be rewarded with an instant beating. Many years later, my Dad would thumb through this bible and point to a few scriptures he had underlined with a pencil. He would pause and say, "I was almost dead in the hospital at Cabanatuan when I underlined these verses."

Dad was to stay in the hospital at Cabanatuan for another 6 months recuperating from the pneumonia that almost took his life. The early months at this place were no better than Camp O'Donnell, and by Christmas of 1942 another 42 members of the 34th would die at this place called Cabanatuan. With each death, dad would record the passing date and place in his New Testament. Not only was this bible

one of the few still in the hands of an American POW, but it was one of the very few records documenting the fate of the men of the 34th Pursuit Squadron. Each man had a page with his name and address, and for those not to return to their homeland, there would be a note on the page close to the binding that told their final story.

The Summer of Despair had seen the lives of 81 of the 213 men of the 34th taken at the hands of the Japanese, and for the hand of God reaching down to preserve his life, Dad would have been the 82nd. The first Christmas in captivity came with him in the Cabanatuan hospital, but he was still alive. Secret radios hidden by the POWs would tell them of the news of the American advances against Japan, but could they hold on to life long enough? Only God would know…..

Burial Detail – Camp O'Donnell
Painting by Ben Steele

Coming into Camp O'Donnell

Camp O'Donnell

Camp O'Donnell Cemetery

Chapter 5
The Shores of Dai Nippon: On to Japan

….75 years ago……..The Christmas of 1942 was the first holiday season in captivity for Dad and the Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor. All of the surviving Americans at Camp O'Donnell were moved to Cabanatuan. Left behind were a few bamboo buildings and cemetery overgrown with weeds that held the bodies of almost 1,500 American soldiers including Dad's friend and fellow Texan, Thomas Young. The horror of Camp O'Donnell didn't end when the Japanese moved the POWs to Cabanatuan…..the disease and death just moved from one camp to the other, for along with an outbreak of diphtheria, another 2,000 men died at Cabanatuan by December of 1942. Dad was still in the hospital recovering from a bout of pneumonia that had almost killed him, but God's grace and favor was on him……

On Valentine's Day of 1943, Dad was released from the Cabanatuan hospital and moved to the air corps area of the camp.

Back home, the United States was now on a total war footing, but the decision had been made long ago that the focus of America's effort was to be to the east against the Germans and Italians. England and Russia had been locked in a struggle against Herr Hitler and Benito Mussolini for over 3 years and the outlook was not encouraging. Had it not been for America's help in providing badly needed supplies to both nations, the Hitler war machine would have prevailed long ago. This did not mean that the Pacific Theater of War was being ignored, it just wasn't at the top of the hit parade list.……but President Roosevelt and the Chiefs of Staff had to make some difficult decisions, and for several years Winston Churchill had been burning up the communication lines to the White House pleading for help.

A few months earlier in November, the US and Britain had made an important step in the fight to turn back the Germans by landing on the shores of French Morocco and Algeria (known as “Operation Torch”). Although future amphibious landings were to make Torch seem like a small exercise, the significance was the distance which the landing forces traveled. The American ships loaded in Norfolk, Virginia, sailed straight to North Africa, and unloaded the troops into the landing craft and onto the beach. A few days after Dad was released from the hospital in Cabanatuan, Rommel handed the US forces in Tunisia a sound defeat at Kasserine Pass. Having been stung sharply in the first real encounter with Germany, the Americans regrouped and along with their British allies, were able to defeat the Nazis. Rommel had been evacuated back to Germany with a bad cold, and would face the Americans and Brits later on the beaches of Normandy. Later that spring the Allies would begin to stage for another amphibious landing on the southern coast of Sicily, and thus would begin one of the great conflicts of the war in Europe……between Patton and Montgomery. And in Russia, the Soviets and Germans had been locked in a desperate battle over Stalingrad since September, where the Germans were finally surrounded and surrendered in February, having suffered over 800,000 casualties. With over 1 million casualties, it was a costly victory for the Russians.

In the Pacific, the advances moved at a slower pace. Douglas MacArthur was working his way back to the Philippines from Australia by way of New Guinea….there were solid naval engagements and American victories at Midway and the Coral Sea, and US forces secured the island of Guadalcanal after 7 months of jungle fighting. South Dakota native and marine pilot Joe Foss became an early war hero by winning the Congressional Medal of Honor for his courage at Guadalcanal.

After being at war for 15 months, the home front was fully engaged in supporting the effort. Rationing was now in place for food (especially meat, butter, sugar), gasoline, tires….all citizens were to share in the sacrifice to aid the boys overseas, and “Victory Gardens” were springing up across the country to help ease the shortages of fruits and vegetables. Automobiles had not been manufactured since the spring of 1942, and now Detroit was building airplanes and tanks.

Citizens from all walks of life had heard the call of their country, and the Armed Forces recruiting stations were full. From farmboys and movie stars to professional baseball players and future presidents, they were all wanting to serve. Movie legends Jimmy Stewart and Clark Gable were in the Army Air Corps…the Navy grabbed Henry Fonda and child-star Jackie Cooper. ..the Army got heavyweight champion Joe Louis and Joseph Yule, Jr. (known to his fans as Mickey Rooney), and Tyrone Power went to the Marine Corps. There were those whose names would become more familiar after the war……astronauts John Glenn and Alan Shepard, future senator Joseph McCarthy, and historian William Manchester. Also serving were future presidents Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush….and future presidential wannabes Barry Goldwater, George McGovern and Bob Dole.

The Swing Sound of legendary big band leader Glenn Miller was at the top of the charts, and “In the Mood”, Chattanooga Choo Choo”, and “Moonlight Serenade” were on all the radio stations. Headlining Miller’s orchestra was the smooth saxophone of a young Fort Worth guy by the name of Tex Beneke, who left Glenn’s band to join the Navy. Glenn Miller and the remainder of his group would join the Army Air Corp and travel to England to entertain the troops. Irving Berlin was touring with Kate Smith, and Americans would soon be tearfully singing “God Bless America”.

Home state pride ran high in the war. “Where you from, son?”…”Texas, Sir!!!” Texans were serving with distinction in high places….Admiral Chester Nimitz of Fredericksburg was the Navy’s guy in the Pacific, Dwight Eisenhower of Denison was the big guy in Europe, although he claimed Kansas as his home of record (born in Texas, his family soon moved to Kansas). Texan Gene Autry of Tioga was flying over the Himalayas (“The Hump”), North Texas native Audie Murphy had landed on the beaches of Sicily with the 3rd Infantry Division. Fort Worth native Fess Parker joined the air corps but was too tall to fit into the cramped spaces of the aircraft. Congressman Lyndon Johnson and his close friend John Connally were in the Navy. Both were deployed to the Pacific…..Connally as an Air Combat Director on aircraft carriers, and Lyndon spent 3 weeks in the South Pacific Zone (most of that time he was in the hospital with pneumonia), and flew one combat mission as an “observer”. In later years some of the aircraft crew members would disagree as to whether or not they were actually under fire that day when Lyndon flew with them, but for being “cool under fire” he was personally awarded a Silver Star by Douglas MacArthur. After returning to congress, Lyndon’s recollection of his combat record would grow as he campaigned for the Senate. Already known for his exaggerations during his college days, “Bull” Johnson’s lack of truthfulness was to take a terrible toll in his later career.

By the late spring of 1943, life at Cabanatuan had started to settle into a daily routine of waiting….waiting for the next pitiful meal….waiting for the American forces to rescue them….waiting for the sun to set so they could wait for the sun to rise. As with any group of American soldiers, the underground smuggling business was in full bloom at Cabanatuan. With the help of a Filipino Underground Resistance spy and smuggling ring, much needed medicine and food were able to get to the prisoners, saving many lives. The smuggling ring was headed by an American nurse named Margaret Utinsky, known to the POWs as “Miss U”, and Claire Phillips, a Portland night club singer who went by

the nickname of “High Pockets”. They were a familiar sight to the prisoners, and many owed their lives to these courageous women. Before the Japanese were pushed out of the Philippines, Miss U and High Pockets would be captured and tortured by the Japanese, but neither woman gave up their secrets.

Mid-way through July, a contingent of Japanese doctors came into the camp to evaluate the prisoners. They were picking men for work details (again), but this time it was to be a permanent reassignment to Japan. The news of the relocation to Japan was a terrible blow to men already defeated and discouraged since this would put them beyond the reach of the advancing American forces. It seemed like the bad news just kept coming.

Dad was put into a group of 500 other POWs and they were transported to Manila, and on July 23rd the group was taken down to the “Million Dollar Pier” at the shoreline. Alongside the pier was the freighter *Clyde Maru*….also known as the *Mate Mate Maru*, the ship was a 400-foot, 5,800-ton single-stack freighter built in 1920. This was to be a risky trip….both for the POWs and the Japanese, for the waters of the western Pacific were beginning to be patrolled by submarines from all of the Allied powers. Not just American subs, but Dutch and British boats were also hunting the area, and they were having success. The Japanese never developed the habit of marking vessels carrying Prisoners of War, and tragically, there had been some of the freighters transporting POWs that had been torpedoed.

The *Clyde Maru* was a sad sight…..rusty and worn….Dad and his fellow POWs filed up the gangplank, across the main deck, and then down into the dark cargo compartments of the ship. The freighter had previously hauled livestock and was still configured with wooden stalls and floors……and still held the waste from the last cargo shipment. Each man found a space within the dark ship and settled in for the journey. Within a few short hours the *Clyde Maru* cast off the moor lines, slipped

out of her berth and headed west out of Manila Bay, past the island fortress of Corregidor, and then north toward Formosa.

The conditions in the ship were, in many ways, worse than those experienced at Camp O'Donnell. The filth…the stench….the hot, rancid air…..suffering in darkness, for there were no portholes and the only illumination was the sunlight that came in through the hatch openings on the main deck. And once again, the men were given very little to eat, and as always, rice was the diet. Buckets for facilities, each day they were lifted out of the hold on a rope to be emptied.

A week later the *Clyde Maru* stopped at Formosa and anchored in Taipei harbor. So far, no deaths. This would be a rare fortune…hellship voyages in the fall of 1942 were to take the lives of over 500 POWs. Later in 1943 and 1944, the Japanese freighters would crowd 1,500 or 2,000 POWs into the horrific cargo holds, and with such crowded conditions the dying would start.

Down in the hold of the *Clyde Maru* there was one man who was not faring so well. Private Jerry Okonski of Toledo, Ohio, was in terrible pain, and after being examined by one of the POW doctors, Jerry was found to have been stricken with appendicitis. He must be operated on immediately or he would not survive. Dr. Hewlett, the POW doctor quickly sought the Japanese officer in charge of the ship and explained the need to get Private Okonski ashore for an emergency appendectomy. Dr. Hewlett's plea was ignored….the sick POW was not going to be taken off the ship. The Japanese captain didn't care whether the man lived or died, but he was not going to be taken ashore.

Time was slipping for Jerry Okonski, and without being able to go ashore for surgery the private was a condemned man. They now had to go to plan B: surgery on the ship. With the dim light down in the cargo hold, the only other option was to perform the surgery topside. Again, the doctor sought the Japanese officer and, miraculously, he allowed

Private Okonski to be brought to the main deck for the appendectomy. The POW was brought from up out of the cargo hold and laid on the wooden hatch cover. The only anesthetic available was a small amount of dental Novocain that the Japanese had allowed the POW dentists to keep. All Dr. Hewlett had at hand was a used razor blade, a needle and thread, and a syringe. The Novocain was injected into Jerry's spine and would give about 30 minutes of anesthetic….enough time for Dr. Hewlett to perform the operation. Operating without surgical gloves, the doctor was able to remove the inflamed appendix and sew up the wound. Now all they could do was to wait and see if he recovered.

The *Clyde Maru* pulled up anchor and resumed the journey to Japan, and on August 9, 1943, it arrived at the Japanese port city of Moji located on the northern coast of Kyushu. Dad and his fellow POWs, including Jerry Okonski, came up out of the retched cargo hold and bade the *Clyde Maru* farewell, and were marched a few blocks from the docks to a warehouse building where they would be examined by the local Japanese doctors. The Japanese citizens had lined the street as the Americans staggered to the warehouse, all along the way the men were pelted with rocks, sticks, and shouts of the angry Japanese. The next day they were placed on a train and headed south to the city of Omuta, where they would spend the next 2 years working in a coal mine.

They were now in the Empire of Japan, Dai Nippon…..no chance of escape…..and with what they knew about the character of the Japanese, their recovery would not be until the US forces had completely defeated the enemy on their home soil. And again they had asked themselves the same question they had asked during the summer of 1942……would they be able to stay alive long enough? The answer was the same…..only God would know.

Chapter 6
Sixteen Tons: The Darkness of the Earth

….75 years ago……..The hellship journey from Manila to Moji, Japan, had been a difficult one for Dad and the 500 Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, but then, it seemed as if everything since the Christmas of 1942 had been more than just difficult. With the war underway in 1942, the Japanese had begun to move the captured Allied soldiers into Dai Nippon for hard labor as their own young men went to battle for the Emperor. At Moji, the filthy, ragged and starved POWs were stripped, deloused, and issued a cotton shirt, pants, boots, and a strip of white cotton material that was to be cinched up with a piece rope as a loin cloth….Japanese underwear.

By now, this band of soldiers and sailors no longer had a squadron, a ship, or a regiment. Military units no longer held any significance, for all the Americans were now part of the mass, and the 34th Pursuit Squadron was effectively gone….it's members scattered across Asia in the various POW camps. Dad and 2 or 3 others from the 34th were here at Moji, along with Dad's friend from Bataan, the Death March, and O'Donnell….Robert Bailey. Together again they would continue to help one another survive.

August 10, 1943 found them shuffling through the main gate of Omuta Camp #17 for the first time. This was to ultimately be their home for the next 24 months, and they are the guests of Baron Takaharu Mitsui and the Imperial Japanese Army. When the group had initially arrived at the Camp 17 compound, it was a 200-yard square area surrounded by a 12-foot high wooden fence. The POW barracks were a group of wooden single-story buildings 120-feet long and 16-feet wide, 10 rooms per barrack….4 men per room. There were windows but no heat, and a single, bare, 15-watt bulb for illumination. Each man had a single blanket and a thin mattress on the floor. As more POWs were

transferred into the camp from the Southeast Asia and the Philippines, the compound was expanded.

Omuta was a city of about 100,000 located on the shore of the inland Ariake Sea on Japan's southern island of Kyushu, about 40 miles northeast across the bay from the city of Nagasaki, and since before Columbus had discovered the New World, the inhabitants had been harvesting coal from the earth around Omuta. In the early 1900s a residence compound for the miners was built at the edge of the city next to the shore, and the compound was now the prisoner's home.

These 500 prisoners, known as "The Old 500", were to be the first group of Allied prisoners to be moved into Camp #17. This camp, the largest of the POW camps in Japan, would eventually grow to about 1,700 American, Australian, British, and Dutch soldiers. Their job: work the coal and zinc mines owned by the Japanese industrial giant Baron Mitsui.

When Tennessee Ernie Ford's 1955 hit "Sixteen Tons" told about the miner having "a mind that's weak and a back that's strong"….he wasn't kidding. The process for mining coal requires strength and endurance on the part of the miner. It is a difficult, backbreaking task performed within the deep, dark confines of the earth….and it's hot down there. Inherently dangerous…..even with modern techniques, technology, and safer equipment…..coal mining is a risky business. Mining safety for strong workers is critical, but for weak miners, it can be deadly. Tired workers make mistakes and become targets for accidents. Their minds are not as sharp, instincts are dulled, reactions are slower. Thus for men already sick and weak….discouraged and defeated… coal mining was to be the worst imaginable fate.

The Miike Mitsui mine was an old, worn out mine that had long since given up it's coal to miners in the early years of the 1920's and 1930's. But being an island nation, Japan needed fuel and raw materials

from other lands, and by 1943 the squeeze on Japanese shipping by Allied submarines was being felt. So…..the old mine was opened up to try and glean what little coal was left. There wasn't much, and what remained was of a poor grade.

The ventilators were worn, the conveyors were without any safety guards, the illumination was almost non-existent. But the constant cave-ins were the worst fear of all. With unsupported ceilings giving way and walls blowing out….the men knew that the chances of losing an arm or a leg (or both) were high. More than one man had lost his life down in the darkness of the earth in this mine, and they knew the bodies of Korean miners were still in the mine from cave-ins during the earlier years.

Dad worked the day shift, and in the pre-dawn hours each morning, the men would stir awake and assemble in the camp yard for roll call, then, escorted by their Japanese guards, march the three miles to the mine in the darkness. Once at the entrance, the guards would turn their POW charges over to the civilian "overseer" (supervisor), and the miners would then begin the single-file journey down the 15% grade of the main shaft to the working area (a 15% grade means that there was a 15-foot drop for every 100-feet traveled). Another 1-mile walk from the entrance to the bottom of the mine, the men would start shedding their clothes on the march from the entrance. With moderate temperatures topside, the air would become warmer and warmer the deeper they went, until the only garment they were wearing was the loincloth they were issued upon arrival to Omuta.

Once they were finally at the coal vein located about 2,000 feet below the surface, the backbreaking labor would begin under the torment of the Japanese civilian overseers. This treatment was daily….constant….intense. Some of the overseers were restrained and seemed to treat the POWs almost as equals….they themselves were poor and uneducated. But more often, they were hardened men and

beat the captives with clubs, rods, or heavy wires. Coal dust was everywhere and got into every pore of their bare skin. Hot and sweating profusely in the damp air, they stood and worked in several inches of icy cold water that covered the floor of the mine.

Each shift down in the mine was 10 hours, and then would begin the long march up out of the mine. Only on a rare occasion would they be allowed to ride the coal cars up to the surface…..that was reserved for the Japanese. Here is where the 15% grade would become an almost impossible struggle. Carrying their mining equipment of jackhammers, shovels, and pickaxes, they shuffled in single file the one mile back to the top. Day in….day out….day after day…..with every 10th day off for "rest", the trip to the mine and back became a mind-numbing, dangerous, routine. They were more than bone-weary…..they were exhausted to the point of despair.

Those too sick or injured to work in the mine were sent to the camp hospital, and there was always pressure from the Japanese staff to get the POWs out of the hospital and back to the mine. The physical rehabilitation of the camp patients sometimes took on a strange face. One of the Japanese doctors, Lieutenant Murao, had an intense interest in the game of baseball and had always wanted to be a baseball coach. Nicknamed "The Grunt", Murao got a brilliant idea of forming a team made up of the American patients to play a team of Japanese civilians from Omuta. Who knew more about playing baseball than Americans? This would be a cakewalk…..his POW players would devastate the Omuta team! There was only one problem…..the American baseball players were so weak that they could barely lift a bat, much less take a swing. Running to first base was almost impossible, and stealing second would require the base runner to stop and lay down to rest…using the base as a pillow. For the players, it was torture. For the coach, it was an exercise in frustration. However, there was a pool of free agents gathering at the hospital that were eager to take the field ("You pray

basebawr?"). Word of the baseball team had spread to the POWs working in the mine, and they were desperate to do anything that would keep them out of the mine. As time passed, baseball practice continued but the increase of "volunteer" players from the mine were having an impact on coal production….and the new camp commandant, Captain Fukuhara, was not a baseball fan. Murao's theory that baseball was the ultimate physical therapy for the patients did not fly with Captain Fukuhara. Before long, The Grunt was gone, baseball practice was permanently cancelled, and the ball park was converted to air raid shelters.

Throughout the 2 years at Omuta, the situation with food had changed, but only marginally. At Camp 17, they were fed twice each day…..a small bento box (about the size of a cigar box) of rice and a pickled radish slice. The mess hall was under the command of navy Lieutenant Commander Edward Little. The commander ran a tight mess hall……and he had a very, very difficult job…..to make sure that the meager rations given to them by the Japanese were distributed equally and fairly. Each man getting the same….no more….no less. However, it appeared that Lt. Little had crossed a line somewhere, for he began to use food as a disciplinary tool. Come into his mess hall at the wrong time, loose a meal. Try to jump the line and get fed twice, loose two meals. Soon, the camp population began to grumble, and before long the grumbling became resentment. Food had been one of the elements with which the Japanese had tormented them for the past 2 years, and now one of their own turned against them using food as a tool. The main objective in the life of a POW at Omuta was to survive in order to get out of this place and get home to their families, and survival meant food. The pilfering and stealing of food became an accepted behavior…..no one could fault a hungry man. Yet not so with Lt. Little. On at least two occasions he had betrayed a fellow POW to the Japanese for stealing or trading for food. The fate of these men at the hands of the Japanese guards was as expected, but it was not a swift sentence…..it took

several days for the punishment to take their lives. This navy lieutenant then became a marked man. There were several prisoners who now stated that they were prepared to execute a similar sentence on the mess officer, and most of the American POWs would not stand in their way.

By the end of 1944, the POWs had been in the captivity of the Japanese long enough to take stock of the culture under which they slaved….and they often came away puzzled. They had mostly seen cruelty and torment, but from time to time something would happen that left them rolling in laughter. The POWs that had been captured in Java and transferred to Camp 17 told of the Japanese commander that one day issued a rather strange order to the POWs in the camp. They were to round up all of the 1,500 ducks being raised in the camp and have them assembled in the open area in front of his headquarters. The commander wanted to address the ducks. Baffled, the POWs knew not to question an order from the commandant, so they proceeded to herd the waddling, quacking mass out into the open area. I would imagine that herding ducks was quite like herding cats or grasshoppers, but a bit more animated (quack quack quack QUACKQUACK quack quack quack). The subject: egg production. It seems that the duck egg production had recently dropped significantly, and the Japanese commander wanted to take the issue directly to the ducks. What he did not know, and had not yet figured out, was that the Allied POWs were stealing the eggs. Once assembled, the commandant came out to speak to the camp's duck population. "Your egg production is down, do you understand??!!!", he shouted (quack quack?). "And why has it fallen? It is not for lack of food…do not tell me you are starving….you eat well!!!! But you are not like Japanese ducks. YOU ARE LAZY!!! You simply do not wish to lay. You are insubordinate ducks, obstructionist ducks! Well…I have a cure for that. For two days you will go on half rations…DISMISSED!!!" (quack quack!!)

In the mine, the work continued at the same dreary pace. The majority of the civilian overseers were still applying the daily beatings, but there were a few who made an effort to befriend the POW miners….even at their own peril. One of the Japanese civilians happened to love the movies of the Old West. He had seen them all….from William S. Hart to Roy Rogers…… and he was fascinated by the cowboys, trail drives, and the famous outlaws. So, he was nicknamed “Tom Mix” for the famous matinee movie star. Tom Mix was a gentle soul….a hard worker, and during a rest he could be found leaning up against the mine wall, eyes half-closed and dreaming of riding the open range, six-guns strapped to his waist, watching the herd amble along. Every now and then, Tom Mix would slip his boots into the stirrups of his imaginary mustang, climb into the saddle, and go after a stray doggie, lasso twirling. A flick of his wrist, a pull on the lariat, and he would bring the calf back to the herd. Or sometimes he would draw his pistols and take a bead on a pesky cattle rustler. For the POWs, he was “a Good Jap”….most often referring to a guard or a civilian who had shown compassion and kindness.

But with a Tom Mix, there were also more of the other kind…..those like “Flangeface”, or “The Sailor”, two Japanese camp guards who were known to have tortured and killed some of Allied prisoners at Omuta….or the guard named “Riverside” who was born and raised in Southern California. He was the most dangerous. Having been immersed in the American culture of California, he spoke the native language of the prisoners, and more importantly, he understood how these Americans thought. There were few Japanese guards that were worse….and there were those civilian overseers who would not hesitate to beat a prisoner with whatever weapon he could find, and most often for a POWs inability to perform a heavy physical task in spite their weakened condition. Such was the blow dad received when he could not lift a heavy ceiling support timber. He was too weak, and even when he was healthy the heavy load would be difficult. And yet, when dad struggled, the overseer grabbed

an axe and struck him in the hip with the blunt end, leaving a deep nasty wound that he would carry the rest of his life…..a reminder of the Miike Mitsui Mine in Omuta Camp 17.

Through the fall of 1943…and throughout the year of 1944….the trek to and from the mine never stopped. However, they were beginning to sense that there were changes on the horizon. The Japanese would proudly announce with great fanfare of the victories the Imperial Japanese forces won against the hated Allies. However, each "victory" was found to be moving northward, and the prisoners quickly determined that their rescuers were advancing. And in late 1944, airplanes were beginning to be spotted high overhead…..big, silver airplanes that they had never seen before (they were B-29s headed to bomb the cities to the north). What the prisoners did not know was of the order issued by the Imperial War Staff to all POW camp commandants to start making plans to "dispose" of their Allied POWs in the event of an invasion of the Japanese homeland. No prisoner in the hands of the Japanese was to be allowed to be taken by the Allies. They were all to be executed.

As dad and the day shift came up out of the mine on August 6, 1945, they observed a change in the behavior of the guards and civilian overseers…..they were almost docile. No excitement….no screaming….no beatings….something was happening. Three days later, on August 9, 1945, as dad came out of the mine at the end of his shift, he looked to the southwest toward Nagasaki, and saw the mushroom cloud that hovered over the city. He had a clear view across the bay, and beneath the cloud, Nagasaki boiled.

The days began to run together with the excitement and hopeful speculation of the prisoners. They were sensing hope, but with all of the devastating events of the past 4 years, they were afraid to even think about freedom….much less speak it. On August 15th, they went to the mine….again…but, when they arrived at the entrance they were turned

away and told to return to the camp…"rest day". Something was definitely happening, but….could it be?

Camp 17

The Miike Mitsui Mine

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P01662.002

Main Gate, Camp 17, Omuta, Japan

Chapter 7
God Bless America….Land That I Love

….75 years ago……..August 9, 1945 became a day of significance for Dad and the men of Omuta Camp 17, for the mushroom cloud they saw to the southwest over the city of Nagasaki was clear evidence that the war was soon to end. Once their work in the mine stopped on August 15, the spirits of the men lifted for the first time since early in 1942 when they were fighting for their lives on Bataan.

The next day, the entire camp was ordered to assemble in the open area in front of the camp headquarters. By now, the excitement over the possibility that the war had ended had given way to nervous concern. They began to question each other, and doubt began to creep in. What was next? If the war was indeed over, what are the Japanese going to do to us? No one knew…..based on the events of the past four years, the behavior of the Imperial Japanese Army was certainly unpredictable. As they stood in formation, the front gate to the camp swung open, and through it roared 7 trucks full of Japanese soldiers with a machine gun mounted on top of each truck cab. This could be serious…..The trucks pulled up short in the dust, and the camp commandant, Captain Fukuhara, stepped off the running board of the lead truck and positioned himself in front of the assembled POWs. He looked at them for a few moments, cleared his throat, and said, “America and Japan now friends. War is over.” He then jumped back on the running board, slammed his hand on the roof of the cab and yelled “Yuka!” (Go!). The trucks dashed back out of the camp in a cloud of dust, as quickly as they had arrived. It was over. THEY WERE FREE.

For a few moments the men stood in silence….and not a word was spoken. Then…..pandemonium…..they were really free. They were going home. They were going to see their families again. Laughing, crying, yelling, back slapping, thanksgiving. God had indeed seen that these men were to return to their homeland alive.

Once the commotion calmed a bit, Major Mamerow, the senior American officer in the camp, cautioned them to remember who they were….American fighting men….with a solemn responsibility to maintain the dignity expected of them.

It worked…..almost.

Most of the Americans heeded the words of their commander, but for a very few, the pain and suffering….the beatings….the death of their friends and comrades….a deep anger overcame them and they headed into town to search for the guards and civilians that had beaten them for the past 24 months. It was payback time. But the word had spread throughout the city that the war was over and some of the Allied prisoners were on the loose. Guards and overseers fled, but a few were caught and the sentence was delivered.

Although Captain Fukuhara had delivered the good news (and hightailed it out of town), the men were left with nothing else. When were they going home? Did the Allied forces even know they were there? What was next? So many questions….and so few answers.

Within the next two days a big, beautiful, silver B-29 came roaring in low, made a circle back over the camp, and proceeded to drop barrels and crates by parachute into the compound. The barrels and crates contained medicine, clothes, and….food food food. Also were messages from the bomber's crew instructing them to mark the roofs of the camp buildings with large white "PW" letters so that future aircraft would know where to drop supplies. It was pure joy.

The days were filled with excitement and laughter….and food, but POWs had been cautioned about overeating…..their digestive systems had been deprived for so long, and an excessive intake of the rich foods could be a serious problem. As the days passed, the men started to gradually regain their strength and gain back the weight they had lost. At his lowest point Dad weighed 90 pounds, and he, along with all of the men, were seriously under nourished at the time of the surrender of Japan. He was able to recover a few pounds since coming to Omuta,

but not many. Now, with food in their stomachs and a hope for tomorrow, they started gaining weight like crazy.

And they started to grow a bit impatient. (ok….more than a bit). On September 10, 1945, an outsider….an American correspondent walked into the camp alone and unescorted. This was George Weller, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and war correspondent, and he had been able to sneak past General MacArthur's security guys and ignore the General's orders placing southern Japan off limits to the press. The American camp commander called everyone together and Mr. Weller spoke to the assembled group telling them of the recent events….the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the formal surrender of Japan on the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay. And then the bombshell…..the American forces were landing at an airbase about 100 miles south of them. "It would be a shame if those airplanes flew out of the base empty!" Although cautioned by Major Mamerow that they were to stay put until relieved, some decided to strike out on their own and head south (like….what are they going to do? Put us in prison??). George Weller stayed at the camp for a few days and interviewed many of the POWs, as well as touring the mine and Nagasaki.

For Dad….he followed orders and stayed put at Omuta…and in a few days a recovery team from the US forces came into the camp and prepared them to depart. They walked out of the Camp 17 gate for the last time….not to journey to the Miike Mitsui Mine, but to the railway station and then on to Nagasaki where they would board a US naval ship. Nagasaki was one wide expanse of devastation. A few paths had been cleared through the rubble, and here and there the blank brick walls of a building would remain standing up out of the mass. The charred remains of many of the inhabitants were still to be seen, and those who were alive wandered aimlessly. What was to become of them?

From the remains of the port of Nagasaki, they were transferred to the aircraft carrier USS Cape Gloucester, which had been temporarily converted into a hospital ship. The hanger deck was wall-to-wall cots, and the mess was open 24-hours a day…..anything they wanted to eat, they could have.

On September 17 from the hanger deck of the Cape Gloucester, Dad was able to write his first letter home since the message he sent on Thanksgiving of 1941.

"Dearest Mother and All….

Thank God it is over. I am alive and in good health. I have had my bad days and they are all over now….."

Dad went on to explain where he was, and that he had no idea when he would be home, but he assured them that he would get there as soon as he could. And finally in closing…..

"Mother, please don't worry about me. I am OK. I am not holding anything back from you. For the first time we can say what we like.

I pray to God that you and dad and all of you are OK and will take care of you, and watch over us until we are all together again.

As Ever, Your Loving Son, Byron

May God Bless You All"

The Pacific POWs were shipped back to Manila for a few days of medical examination, debrief, and recovery. Some had speculated that the military senior command had been so alarmed at the sight of these starved men that they wanted to allow them a few weeks of nutrition so they could recover most of their weight. A good idea…..for mom's to see their sons in such condition would have devastated the families of those who had sacrificed so much.

And finally, the boat home…San Francisco here we come. A few days to Hawaii, and then the last leg from Honolulu to California.

It should have been just a few days sailing on to the states, but a day out of Hawaii, the ship lost the function of one of the two engines. Top speed was now about 5 to 7 knots, and they were starting to run short of fresh water on the ship.

Finally, finally, finally, they sighted the coast of the United States, and on November 1, 1945…. 4 years almost to the day they had traveled west to war, they slid under that majestic Golden Gate Bridge. This land that he loved….

Off the ship in San Francisco, they were housed at Letterman General Hospital at the Presidio for a few short days, then onto a train headed for the Brooks Army Hospital in San Antonio. Arriving in the pre-dawn hours at San Antonio just before Thanksgiving, there waiting for the train were his mom and dad and brothers, Otis and Preston. As the train pulled into the station, my uncles realized that it was going to be difficult to find Dad….each car was full of sleeping soldiers and those trying to gather themselves to disembark. So, Uncle Otis and Uncle Preston got on the train at each end and worked their way toward the middle, looking for Dad. Finally, they found my father and got him off the train to meet up with his parents….it was a joyous reunion.

It had been a long war….the months of not knowing if Dad was dead or alive, the years of newspaper articles of hometown boys being lost in Europe and Asia. The great sacrifice made by mothers, fathers, wives….this family was thanking God that all the Brock boys made it home.

Dad had explained to his mom in that first letter that he was the same as he was when he left the states….it was just 4 years later.

Well…..not quite. The world had changed in the years between 1941 and 1945. Roosevelt was gone and Harry Truman was in the White House (who was Harry Truman?). With Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nation had stepped into the atomic age, and there was no going back.

Douglas MacArthur had returned, and was now the supreme commander of all Asia forces and occupational governor of Japan. (and

reigned just a notch below Emperor Hirohito). MacArthur ruled as a wise and loving father, and the Japanese loved him for it.

The Soviet Union had finally entered the war in the Pacific a few days before Hiroshima, and for some reason decided that they were entitled to grab some of the northern Japanese territories.

The war in Europe had been settled back in May. Hitler and most of the his buddies were dead, and Berlin (at least, what was left of it….Berlin was one big pile of bricks) was jointly occupied by the Americans, the Soviets, the Brits, and the French. The American troops remaining in Europe (including Patton) had reluctantly settled into occupation duty and were trying to figure out how to get back home. Those not in Europe were on their way to fight in the Pacific when the whole thing abruptly (and joyfully) ended with Nagasaki. The Italians and the French were almost starving, their economy crippled by the war. The Brits were out of money and were still rationing most everything.

Back in the states, GIs were coming home and trying to find jobs. Many started to take advantage of the “GI Bill of Rights” that provided a college education….as a gesture of thanks from a grateful nation.

Dad decided to stay in the Air Corps, and was going to be home with his mom and dad for a couple of months of furlough before returning to duty at Fort Worth Army Airfield. It was a glorious time of recovery, but there were a few subtle habits that Dad brought home with him from the camps. Mainly, it was concerning the subject of food. Each week Dad would accompany his mom to the local grocery market to do the week’s shopping….Dad dutifully pushing the cart as my grandmother filled the basket. However, after a few trips, she started missing a few items. As she was putting the groceries away in the cupboard, she couldn’t find the rice she had just purchased. “What happened to the rice? I know I put it in the basket. That sack boy must have missed it!” ….Dad: “Gee mom…I don’t know what happened to it…..I don’t know how that could have happened.”

After a couple of trips with the rice mysteriously going AWOL, Dad finally had to confess to his mother that when she was not looking, he would quickly slip the bag of rice back onto the grocery shelf….he hated the stuff. In later years he would tell my Mom, “If we ever have to cut corners financially, it will never be at the table….we will always have plenty to eat.”

To help the returning POWs recover and relax, the US government was sending each returned prisoner and a guest on an all-expenses paid trip to Miami, Florida….two weeks of fun and sun with Uncle Sam picking up the tab. The details surrounding the excitement and anticipation of who Dad would be taking as his guest is not known, but Dad finally chose…..his mom!! The vision of my grandmother in a bathing suit strolling the walkway on South Beach would be worth seeing, but there are currently no known photographs of this event. All kidding aside, I know that my father was, as were all the Brock brothers, devoted to his mom and dad.

With Dad’s furlough ended, he packed up and headed for Fort Worth to start the rest of his life and to live in peace. The years started to move a bit faster now…and 1947 became a year of change for Dad. He met and married my Mom, Sue, on Thanksgiving Day of 1947 at Carswell Air Force Base. This coincidence of the anniversary date soon became a point of humor with Mom and Dad…..he always seemed to think that their anniversary date was Thanksgiving, and yet for Mom it was November 27th. It was easier to remember Thanksgiving as the key event and thus minimize the risk of forgetting (good move, Dad).

As for the Army Air Corps, it also made a big change in 1947. The Air Corps officially became a separate branch of the Armed Forces, and was now known as the United States Air Force. Dad was now a pioneer member of the new branch, and Mom was now an Air Force wife.

For many, the war was starting to be a distant memory, but Dad had one final duty to fulfill. After his return from Japan, Dad would make an effort to reach out to the families of his friends that had not survived,

and many were in Texas. If he was in the area, he would often stop and visit the families, especially the mothers of these young men who had given their lives. It was not a pleasant task, but my father knew that this was what needed to be done to help bring some comfort and closure to these grieving parents and wives.

In the summer of 1948, the mother of Thomas Young had requested that Thomas be returned home to be buried in Texas. Dad put on his dress uniform, and he and Mom went to San Antonio for the funeral. It was a tough one for Dad, and this ceremony was a hard reminder of the years of pain and struggle. Thomas' mother and family were indeed honored that my father was there with them. During the service, the pastor acknowledged Dad's presence and recognized him as a true hero, along with many of the friends and family that approached him after the graveside service and thanked him for his service and made mention of him as a hero. My father was a humble and shy man….and this outpouring of gratitude and attention, although appreciated, was difficult. He did not see himself as a hero….he knew too many of them….he only thought of himself as a survivor whom God had greatly blessed.

Dad had now fulfilled his duty to those with whom he had fought….the war was finally now over.

So many memories….so much had changed…..God had brought him home.

Dougout Doug MacArthur would continue to remain in Japan (he was 68 years old now). His ego finally caught up with him when he publicly got into a cat fight with the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff over how best to deal with the North Koreans. Truman finally relieved him and he came home and faded away after a failed attempt to get the Republican presidential nomination in 1954. When he passed away in

1964, Dad made no comment about the General. To most of the Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, MacArthur was not their friend.

Jimmy Stewart and Clark Gable came home….both returned to the silver screen, but Mr. Stewart remained in uniform to become an Air Force Brigadier General.

Fort Worth son Fess Parker donned a coonskin cap and became a cultural icon as Davy Crockett, starring in the Disney movie and releasing the mega-hit “The Ballad of Davy Crockett”.

Glenn Miller was killed when the aircraft he was in went down somewhere over the English Channel. Orchestra member and Fort Worth native Tex Beneke picked up leadership of the band and carried Miller’s legacy for many years. Glenn Miller’s tunes are still legendary hits.

Texans Lyndon Johnson and John Connally, and Boston native John Kennedy would move up in the political world of the 1950s….Johnson and Kennedy in the US Senate, and Connally as the governor of Texas. Soon, President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, and Governor John Connally would meet in Dallas on November 22, 1963, for a day to remember.

Texan Gene Autry came home and got back in the saddle again to make singing westerns and become a wealthy man. Also headed to Hollywood was North Texas native Audie Murphy. He had received a battlefield commission and won the Congressional Medal of Honor in France to become the most decorated soldier of WWII. Murphy was killed in a plane crash in 1971….he was 46.

George Weller’s dispatches and interviews with the men at Camp 17 never made it to his publisher, and they remained in a trunk to be stored with Mr. Weller until he died in Italy in 2002. When his son, Anthony, was going through his father’s records, he came across this trunk filled with yellowed type-written pages and notes. The notes and interviews became a book that was published in 2006, *First Into*

Nagasaki, and in those pages are a few short sentences from a young American air corps corporal from Taft, Texas.

Camp O'Donnell had been abandoned by the Japanese, and many of the buildings burned. All that was left on the rolling plains were weeds and the crosses made from scrap wood that filled the cemetery. The US Army came in and moved those buried at O'Donnell to a beautiful, lush green cemetery in Manila.

Many of the Japanese officers and guards that had been directly (and indirectly) responsible for those years of torment and death were tried by a War Crimes commission in Japan. General Homma and Captain Fukuhara, along with Camp 17 guards "The Sailor" and "Flangeface" were among those found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. Camp O'Donnell commandant Captain Tsuneoshi was also convicted and was to live the remainder of his life in prison.

Navy Lieutenant Commander Edward Little returned home from Omuta, and in 1947 was tried by a Courts Martial in Washington, DC. Dad was approached by the Navy prosecutors and asked if he would testify, but he declined. He had no desire to relive Omuta. After a 3-month trial, Lt. Little was acquitted of the charges that he had betrayed Americans to the Japanese resulting in their death.

My father was determined to put the war behind him, and now as a husband and father, he moved forward with his life. In the summer of 1957, Dad came home from work with some strange news….he had just received orders for a transfer to Clark AFB, Philippines. As the days of summer moved into fall, and the day to leave Texas came closer, Dad had made a casual comment to his squadron first sergeant about the transfer…..he had been to the Philippines once already, and he was not sure how he was going to react….besides, Camp O'Donnell was within just a few miles of the air base.

With just 2 days left before the moving van arrived, Dad came home at lunch to inform Mom that the transfer orders had been changed. We were not going to the Philippines, but to Puerto Rico. Apparently, Dad's

first sergeant knew someone…..we make our plans, but God orders our steps.

A few more years passed, and in 1961 Dad retired from the Air Force and moved us to Alvin, Texas, where we lived on a small farm next door to my grandparents. His brothers, Otis and Preston, lived but a few miles away, and now the years were filled with visiting brothers and growing families….it was a warm and joyful time together.

Outside the family, Dad's focus turned to a local Boy Scout troop in Alvin. He and his brother Otis had been Boy Scouts in Taft during the 1930s, and he had always acknowledged that the skills he learned as a scout helped him survive the tough years of WWII. Wanting to give back something to this youth organization that had given so much to him, he became the Scoutmaster of Troop 487. The troop was at the brink of being deactivated when Dad decided to take on the job, and with a lot of hard work and help from other fathers, the troop came back to life. Around the campfire, his scouts would plead with him to tell them some "war stories", and Dad would finally give in and tell a few, but he never shared the details of what he had to face. My father was proud of the young boys that passed through the troop on their way to manhood. He firmly believed in the character traits and practical skills that Scouting sought to instill in young men. Today Troop 487 remains a healthy, active troop, and has a great legacy of leadership.

Time marched on…..and in early 1972, as I was finishing my school work at Texas A&M, I came home to interview for my first career position with a company in Houston. After a successful interview, I stopped by Dad's workplace to tell him of my job offer. I sat and told him of the good news, and he listened and nodded his head. Finally, he said, "Well, you will make them a good hand." For me, this was a great word of encouragement. Dad was typically a man of few words, but when he spoke, he meant what he said.

As I was walking back to my car after the visit, I was thinking of what Dad had just said. I realized that the relationship with my father

had just changed. He would always be my father, but now I was no longer his son, the student….I was his son, the young man….and he was now my life's mentor. My heart was warm knowing the years ahead with my father were going to be good years….and this I was looking forward to with great anticipation.

Within the next few weeks, however, Dad and I would be at a different place for which I had not planned. He had the flu and couldn't shake it, and soon tests revealed that he had Leukemia. The next weeks passed with the family in a jumble of events and struggles. Hospital watches became the focus now, and one Friday evening found Uncle Otis and I sitting with Dad. Mom was exhausted and was at home trying to get some sleep. Dad was struggling….and in the night he slipped away as we sat with him. Dad was now in the arms of God.

Epilogue

All we've been given, by those who came before
The dream of a nation where freedom would endure
The work and prayers of centuries
Have brought us to this day

What shall be our legacy?
What will our children say?
Let them say of me I was one who believed
In sharing the blessings I received
Let me know in my heart
When my days are through
America, America
I gave my best to you
"*American Anthem*" Lyrics by Nora Jones

Husband, father, son, brother, friend…..and American Patriot. My father was a man who believed that one of his highest responsibilities to his children was to live as an example…..for this would speak much clearer than words. He believed in the simple, practical virtues of character. A faithful husband, a loyal son and brother, a man of uncompromising integrity, a firm work ethic. The years of struggle and hardship in the camps did not define the man he was. The legacy he gave us is what will remain for generations unending.

A few years back, I was performing my usual summer weekend duty of yard work….mowing, trimming, cleaning. When I do this task, my mind shifts gears, and I move into a rambling world of random thoughts….nothing important, nothing specific…my mind wanders. As I was working my way from the back yard to the front, I happened to look up and for a brief, quick instant….a fraction of a second….I saw my father walking up the driveway toward me. His eyes were fixed on mine….he was walking tall and straight, he was young and healthy…..and he had that big, wide grin.