**John F Vernon**

**Ensign, U.S. Navy Medical Corps**

***~ my memories***

***A Prisoner of the Japanese***

I was on duty at the Naval Hospital, Canacav, P.I., at the outbreak of the war. Most of us knew at the time it would be impossible to defend the islands, especially after the disaster at Pearl Harbor. Then during the first week we saw our small air force wiped out, Cavite Navy Yard destroyed and the enemy established at several beachheads on Luzon. It was only a matter of weeks, though I expect the Japanese having been held up that long, helped prevent their advance into Australia.  
  
      From the time of my capture until December 1944, I was imprisoned in Old Bilibid Prison, Manila, where a group of Navy medical personnel were permitted by the Japanese to establish a hospital for the prisoners.  
  
       We tried to run it as nearly like a regular Naval Hospital as our meager equipment, and Jap regulations would permit. We averaged more than one thousand patients during the time I spent there.  
  
 We were very happy in December of 1942 to receive a shipment of Red Cross food, drugs, and clothing, which were really a lifesaver. The Japs fined us a small share, I would estimate about 75%. Again in December 1943, we received another shipment, even larger than the first.  
  
 Finally on September 21, 1944, dawned the day we had long awaited. It started out like any other day. The Japs were having a bit of test firing with A.A. guns; one plane was up on which they were sighting. Suddenly we heard a great wave of planes; it was the largest flight any of us had ever seen. Some of us joked about them but I don’t think a single one realized it was our own planes. I know our guards did not as they were watching, pointing and laughing about the great number there were.  
  
 All of a sudden, it seemed every A.A. gun on the island let loose and about that time the first   
bombs started dropping. I will never know who was the most startled: the guards or us.  
 After than we knew it would not be too long until we would be back in American hands. Where heard of the landings on Leyte. Then came a dark cloud to mar our happiness; The Japanese announced that all officers and Navy medical men would be moved to Japan. We waited and waited until most everyone thought they would never be able to get us out but finally on December 13, 1944, they marched 1,650 of us to the docks of Manila, put us in the three cargo holds of a large passenger vessel, and the following morning steamed around Corregidor into the China Sea.  
  
 Soon after daylight we heard a great commotion on deck. The guns started barking and several dive-bombers swooped down upon us. They swept us with machine gun and cannon fire but the bombs were misses. None of us were able to get to the topside so we don’t know what damage was done to other ships in the convoy. We had at least six more raids during the day and several hits were registered, setting the ship afire, though it was quickly put out. Apparently we were in no condition to continue our trip as the Japanese decided to abandon ship. They pulled onto Subic Bay about 30 miles north of Manila. We heard barges alongside taking off all the passengers and part of the crew.  
  
 They told us we would leave the ship at daylight. When that came, we found they had left one boat, which would carry 25 men. It would have taken the whole day for us to disembark in that manner. The first boatload left the ship at about 7 A.M. They had just left the side when a flight of planes dived in, dropped bombs and strafed us. They killed off practically everyone on the topside, leaving us in the holds with the ship afire, and about four Japanese guards. These guards told us to dive in and swim ashore.  
  
      There was just one ladder from the hold; I was among the last to reach deck. As I got to the rail, four bombers were circling. I threw off my clothes and dived in. The planes turned and left. Apparently they had already completed their mission. I am not able to swim more than a few feet, so decided to climb back aboard and look for a life jacket. I couldn’t find one, but did obtain a small raft made of three pieces of bamboo lashed together.  
  
 By this time, the fire was burning quite briskly, so I abandoned ship for good, walking down the gangway like a gentleman. I wrapped my arms about the raft and started kicking myself toward the beach. When diving in the first time, I had left my clothes and my old pistol belt, holding my empty canteen and mess kit on deck. Now I floated right into it and picked it up. It was sure a lucky break, probably saving my life later on.   
  
The Japanese on the beach fired a few shots at us in the water, but never saw them hit anyone. When I finally reached shore, they headed us all into the old tennis court at Olangapo Naval Station, which was about the only thing there left standing.  
  
 There were now about 1,200 of us left, and we were quite crowded (in Bilibid Prison); no clothes, no shade from the tropic sun, one water hydrant, no sanitary facilities, no first aid or medical equipment and no food for three days. Then we had a feast. They issued us one mess kit spoonful of raw rice.   
 They then hauled us in trucks to San Fernando, where we stayed until December 24, then loaded us in box cars so full we couldn’t even sit down. They carried us north to San Fernando La Union on Lingayen Gulf. They gave us two meals of rice there and left us on a sandy beach for two days and nights. Then on the morning of December 28th, we were again loaded on two ships and headed out.  
  
     After several days we arrived at Takao, Formosa. We had been attacked twice by subs, but somehow they missed us. In Takao, we were again attacked by dive-bombers, and they again moved us all together on one ship. The ship sank in Shallow water. Several hundred men were killed in the bombing or died of dysentery or starvation. They left us alone with the bodies for a week with no first aid for the wounded, no medical supplies and very little food or water.  
  
 Finally they moved the living to another ship and sailed. There were now about a thousand left. We followed the China coast north, anchoring in some harbor or cove every night. I believe every night and every morning of the trip we had a sub attack, and though they sank numerous other ships, they never hit us.   
  
Then on the 31st of January, we anchored in Moji on Kyushi Island. It was bitter cold, a light snow was falling, and few of us had any clothes or shoes. They moved us off the ship to the dock. Later that afternoon they gave us clothes and blankets and divided us into groups. There were now less than 400 men. Ninety of us were marched to the railroad station and into a passenger coach. We left the train at midnight in Omuta, a coal-mining city.  
  
 The camp they took us to was known as camp 17. They left us rest for about a month, and fed us quite well. Upon arrival I weighed less than 90 pounds.  
  
 The first of April those of us who were able were put to work in the coal mine. I’ve never been in one of our coalmines, but I can imagine the Japanese method is much more primitive.  
  
 There were a few air raids up until this time, but each month they increased in frequency. Finally during July, the mine was hit but not damaged greatly. But half of our camp was destroyed.  
  
 Then on the 15th of August, we were working as usual, lunch time cam and passed, we returned to our work, but the Japanese seem uninterested. They were gathered in groups talking. Suddenly, one of the supervisors appeared, and announced that the Americans would be returned the camp at once.  
  
 That evening they issued us a bit of Red Cross food they had stored in camp, the following day they issued us new clothes and shoes. We all knew what had happened, but the Japanese would not admit it. I believe it was the 20th when they lined us all up on the parade ground and informed us the war was over and we would soon be returning home.  
  
Finally on the 19th of October, I reached San Francisco and in a few hours was reunited with my whole family, who were all living close by.

The following is a transcription of a letter dated November 3, 1944. Bilibid Prison, Manila, P.I.

My Darling Wife,

After having been imprisoned here for nearly three years, now that the time has come when the chance of release is in sight, these barbarians are going to attempt to remove us from the Philippines, in an effort to hold us as long as it is possible. Or perhaps it is just another of their ideas of torture. We have seen our own planes bomb this area, and we have talked with the survivors of other prison ships, which have been sunk by our forces, so it seems to us that there is small chance or our ever reaching our destination.

I will leave several letters to you with different persons who are staying here, and who have the best chance of reaching our own forces, though it is evident these savages do not intend to ever permit very many Americans to be released alive.

This past three yeas has been a nightmare, my Darling. My whole world, my whole life is gone. With the exception of you, every ideal I have ever had has been shattered. If none of us prisoners ever reach home, it will be for the best. After what we have seen and been through, we could never again pick up the thread of our past life.

I love you my Darling, just as I loved you the day I left you in Honolulu, though it seems a million years since I last saw you, I can remember you and everything about you, everything you used to do, or say, the way you looked and talked and walked. I could never forget you or stop loving you even if I lived a billion years, and, my Darling, I know that I will see you again some day, perhaps in some other world.

I have been so happy to receive the letters, and notes you have sent me, am sorry these savages would not permit me to write you, they have only let me send you a few cards.

Was most happy to receive the two pictures of Johanna. (photo left) She is a sweet lovely little darling, everyone who has seen her pictures has fallen in love with her, and I haven’t missed showing it to many people hereabouts.

I am so proud of her and of you, Sweetheart. One can look at her and see the love and care and affection which she has received. She favors you a lot, especially her smile. And don’t you boast too much, a lot of people here think she takes after me some too. I was disappointed that I received no photo of you, but I have the old ones, and anyway I know you haven’t changed much and I can remember you clearly.

After my capture I have worked very hard, at my regular trade, harder than ever I worked before. It has helped to pass the time for me, and I trust I have done my duty, and helped to relieve the suffering of many people who have passed through this prison. Though we have weakened considerably, through lack of food etc. my health generally has been good, have never suffered any serious ailment. It seems regrettable that our country which saw fit to leave us to our fate, 10,000 miles from home with no means of defending ourselves and with no means of escape, has forgotten us completely and could not or would not send us any relief. I am no longer as bitter as I once was, I rather pity them. We, through our suffering, have only now learned how to live, now when it is too late. They can never learn, because none of our people have ever suffered. One can not learn how horrible war can be until he has been through it. The Filipinos know and after the next war, our people will know, because the next war will be brought home to them.

Everything I have or own, all money and allowances owed me by my country, I want you to have, for yourself, and in order that you can take care of my baby. I want you too to look after my mother and my father. Help them all you can. The monies I have coming and the insurance I have left you should amply permit you to do so. My only request of you is that you bring up our daughter to be as sweet and good as her mother was.

I have not been paid since November 30, 1941. I took the exam for C.Ph.M. in Oct. 1941, and by authority of AlNov, number unknown, of January 1942 my Commanding Officer Captain R.G. Davis, U.S. Navy, advanced me in rating to C.Ph.M as of 2-1-42.

On 2-1-43 my Commanding officer, Commander L.J. Sartin <or Sortin>, U.S. Navy recommended that I be issued permanent appointment to C.Ph.M., as of that date. BuNov approval could not be received at that time. As soon as you receive this, notify the Bureau of Navigation of this information.

Goodbye my Darling, I would like to see you again, and I am looking forward to the time when I will see you again. You were a wonderful wife to me, and you gave me a sweet little girl. The happiest times of my life, were the times I spent after I met you. I have always loved you my Darling, and I always will.

For ever and ever, John  
Letter continued…..

Jo Harder-John’s daughter writes, *My dad mentions writing several letters, but this one was the only one to get through. It was addressed to him in care of his sister, and was mailed to her address on April 4, 1945, by a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps, to whom it had been entrusted. The accompanying note indicated that this was not the only letter smuggled out by this gentleman. His note reads:*

#### John F. Vernon, c/o Mrs. Wm. H. Feldhake, Concord, California

Dear Sir:

The enclosed letter was left with me at Bilibid prison, Manila, P.I. by one of the prisoners of war last December, and I was requested to forward it. Since there is no return address

I do not recall the individual who gave it to me, however, if you will communicate with me after reading this letter I may be able to give you further information.

Sincerely yours, Warren A. Wilson, Lt. Col. M.C

*The family wrote him immediately. The response came later:*

2235 N. Catalina St., Los Angeles, California, July 9, 1945

Dear Mrs. Vernon,

My sincerest apologies for the delay in answering your letter, however, I have been on duty for over a month at the hospital. In regard to your son, C.P.M. John Vernon, I last saw him December 13, 1944 when he left for Japan. He was in excellent health and fine spirits at the time. I know that certain people from that ship load have recently been reported to be in Japan and I hope that you have had news of your son.

Your son was in charge of the Pharmacy at Bilibid from June of 1942 till he left last December. He did a fine job there and was always most conscientious in his work. You can be proud of him.

Sorry I have no further information for you.   
Sincerely yours, Warren A. Wilson, Lt. Col. M.C.

**PHOTOS, next page**



