

FEAR OF FREEDOM?

American prisoners of war at the Cabanatuan camp are perhaps the most famous prisoners of World War II. These were the men abandoned by MacArthur when he fled the Philippines in Jan. 1942. They were the ones who suffered the infamous Bataan Death March. Hundreds had already died from torture and starvation but hundreds still survived.

On Dec. 14, 1944, just a few days before MacArthur returned to the Philippines, the Japanese decided to kill all 150 POW's at the Puerto Princesa Prison Camp in Palaw, Philippines. When the prisoners were ordered into a ditch Navy signalman C.C. Smith refused to go. Lieutenant Sato brought his sword down on the top of his head with such force that it cleaved his head in two, stopping mid way through his neck. The rest of the men were covered with gasoline and set on fire. Those who fled were gunned down. Remarkably, Eugene Nielsen survived. In spite of his burns and two bullet wounds, the emaciated hero swam several miles across the bay and was rescued by Filipino guerillas. Miraculously, four other Americans also survived and were able to verify the massacre of prisoners before the advancing American Army.

Fear mounted that the prisoners at Cabanatuan would be next, and a daring plan was conceived to set them free. Hampton Sides, in his excellent book *Ghost Soldiers*, considers this as World War II's most dramatic mission. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Mucci led the mission and demanded that no atheists participate. He knew that they could never achieve their goal without the help of God. The mission was so successful that all the prisoners were rescued, over 1,000 Japanese soldiers were killed, and only four Americans lost their lives. One Ranger was killed by a mortar, another by friendly fire, and two prisoners died en route to freedom from starvation and disease.

But now, let us consider the remarkable phenomenon of "fearing freedom". The American attack on the prison camp

came with such speed and precision that it was a total surprise to friend and foe alike. **Colonel Duckworth** was the American commander at Cabanatuan. The shocked commander refused to leave the camp. He got in the face of Ranger Alvie Robbins and demanded to know who he was. When Robbins said they were Americans who had come to set them free, Duckworth replied: "You can't do this! You're going to get us all killed. The Japanese told us no escapes! No one leaves here until I say they do". When Duckworth reluctantly decided to leave he fell into a ditch and broke his arm. To the prisoners, the scene didn't make sense. Prisoner **Bert Bank** thought it was a trick. He thought the Japanese were using English to lure the Americans outside so they could more conveniently gun them down. **Dr. Ralph Hibbs** was another prisoner who needed some convincing. Three rangers approached him firing tommy guns from their hips. "What the #%%# is going on", he demanded. Ranger Lester Malone got tired of arguing with camp veterinarian **Herbert Ott** ,, he pointed him at the gate and kicked him in the rear end. Prisoner **Bob Body** was also combative. He saw a huge form looming over him he shouted: "Who the #%%# you think you are?" The reply was: "Never mind. We're U.S. Army Rangers, get out of here". Body responded: "What's a Ranger?" Ranger Marvin Kinder was leading a prisoner by the arm to freedom when he tried to return to the squalid barracks to get some of his "possessions." Strangest of all, however, is the story of **Edwin Rose**. He was sixty-five years old and deaf as a post. At the time of the rescue he was asleep in the outhouse. He heard nothing, not even the grenades and bazookas. Finally, he woke up, stumbled back to his barracks in the dark, and went to bed. Fortunately, some brave Filipino guerillas returned for him the next day.

Let us, however, be merciful to these heroes. Many were amputees without hair or teeth. They were starved, half naked, bare footed, dull eyed, and louse infested. In addition to the lesions and battle scars that marred their skin some had tropical

ulcers as big as dinner plates. After years of brain washing and torture, their reluctance and confusion was perhaps to be expected. But what about us? Jesus also came for us through much hardship and suffering. He beckons us to freedom with blood stained hands. He promises that those who follow Him will be free indeed. Do not refuse Him! Do not be afraid of freedom!