

## Bataan Death March

A surprise air attack brought World War 2 to the Philippines at the same time as Pearl Harbor. However, this was quickly followed by a main island invasion of Luzon. Within a month, the Bataan Peninsula was barely defended by American and Filipino forces. The American and Filipino forces surrendered to the Japanese on April 9 after not being able to defensively hold the peninsula. Almost 76,000 prisoners of war were immediately marched north towards a POW camp; the march itself was a route of death. The public learned of the subsequent atrocities after 3 Americans were able to escape the camp. The march from surrender to camp was a 60 stretch now known as the Bataan Death March.

During the March, about 5,200 Americans died due to Japanese butchery, disease, exposure to the blazing sun, lack of food, and lack of water. Many were bayoneted, shot, beheaded or just left to die on the side of the road. "A Japanese soldier took my canteen, gave the water to a horse, and threw the canteen away," reported one escapee. "The stronger were not permitted to help the weaker. We then would hear shots behind us." The Japanese forced the prisoners to sit for hours in the hot sun without water. "Many of us went crazy and several died."

The POWs were on the march for between 5 and 12 days. The Japanese soldiers were raised to believe a soldier should die before surrendering. If one surrendered, he forfeited the right to be treated as a human being. That core belief was the root of the Japanese soldiers' brutality, although they were admittedly unprepared for the vast amount of prisoners that would be housed in the camp. General Masaharu Homma, the Japanese commander in the Philippines would eventually be held responsible and would be blamed. Tried for war crimes, he was convicted and executed by a firing squad on April 3, 1946.

### **"This was the First Murder"**

Captain William Dyess was a fighter pilot stationed on Luzon when the Japanese invaded. Captured when the American forces on Bataan surrendered, he joined the Death March and was interned by the Japanese. In April 1943, Captain Dyess was one of three prisoners able to escape from their captors. Captain Dyess eventually made his way back to America where his story was published. We join his story as he encounters his first atrocity of the March:

"The victim, an air force captain, was being searched by a three-star private. Standing by was a Jap commissioned officer, hand on sword hilt. These men were nothing like the toothy, bespectacled runts whose photographs are familiar to most newspaper readers. They were cruel of face, stalwart, and tall. 'The private a little squirt, was going through the captain's pockets. All at once he stopped and sucked in his breath with a hissing sound. He had found some Jap yen.'

'He held these out, ducking his head and sucking in his breath to attract notice. The big Jap looked at the money. Without a word he grabbed the captain by the shoulder and shoved him down to his knees. He pulled the sword out of the scabbard and raised it high over his head, holding it with both hands. The private skipped to one side.' 'Before we could grasp what was happening, the black-faced giant had swung his sword. I remember how the sun flashed on it. There was a swish and a kind of chopping thud, like a cleaver going through beef'. 'The captain's head seemed to jump off his 'shoulders. It hit the ground in front of him and went rolling crazily from side to side between the lines of prisoners.'

'The body fell forward. I have seen wounds, but never such a gush of blood as this. The heart continued to pump for a few seconds and at each beat there was another great spurt of blood. The white dust around our feet was turned into crimson mud. I saw the hands were opening and closing spasmodically. Then I looked away.' 'When I looked again the big Jap had put up his sword and was strolling off. The runt who had found the yen was putting them into his pocket. He helped himself to the captain's possessions.' This was the first murder. . ."

## **Oriental Sun Treatment**

As the prisoners were herded north they collided with advancing Japanese troops moving to the south, forcing a brief halt to the march: "Eventually the road became so crowded we were marched into a clearing. Here, for two hours, we had our first taste of the oriental sun treatment, which drains the stamina and weakens the spirit. The Japs seated us on the scorching ground, exposed to the full glare of the sun. Many of the Americans and Filipinos had no covering to protect their heads. I was beside a small bush but it cast no shade because the sun was almost directly above us. Many of the men around me were ill.

When I thought I could stand the penetrating heat no longer. I was determined to have a sip of the tepid water in my canteen. I had no more than unscrewed the top when the aluminum flask was snatched from my hands. The Jap who had crept up behind me poured the water into a horse's nose-bag, then threw down the canteen. He walked on among the prisoners, taking away their water and pouring it into the bag. When he had enough he gave it to his horse."

## **Drop-outs**

The parade of death continues its journey as its members inevitably succumb to the heat, the lack of food and the lack of water: "The hours dragged by and, as we knew they must. The drop-outs began. It seemed that a great many of the prisoners reached the end of their endurance at about the same time. They went down by twos and threes. Usually, they made an effort to rise. I never can forget their groans and strangled breathing as they tried to get up. Some succeeded. Others lay lifelessly where they had fallen. I observed that the Jap guards paid no attention to these. I wondered why. The explanation wasn't long in coming. There was a sharp crackle of pistol and rifle fire behind us. Skulking along, a hundred yards behind our contingent, came a 'clean-up squad' of murdering Jap buzzards.

Their helpless victims, sprawled darkly against the white, of the road, were easy targets. As members of the murder squad stooped over each huddled form, there would be an orange 'flash in the darkness and a sharp report. The bodies were left where they lay, that other prisoners coming behind us might see them. Our Japanese guards enjoyed the spectacle in silence for a time. Eventually, one of them who spoke English felt he should add a little spice to the entertainment. 'Sleepee?' he asked. 'You want sleep? Just lie down on road. You get good long sleep!' On through the night we were followed by orange flashes and thudding sounds."

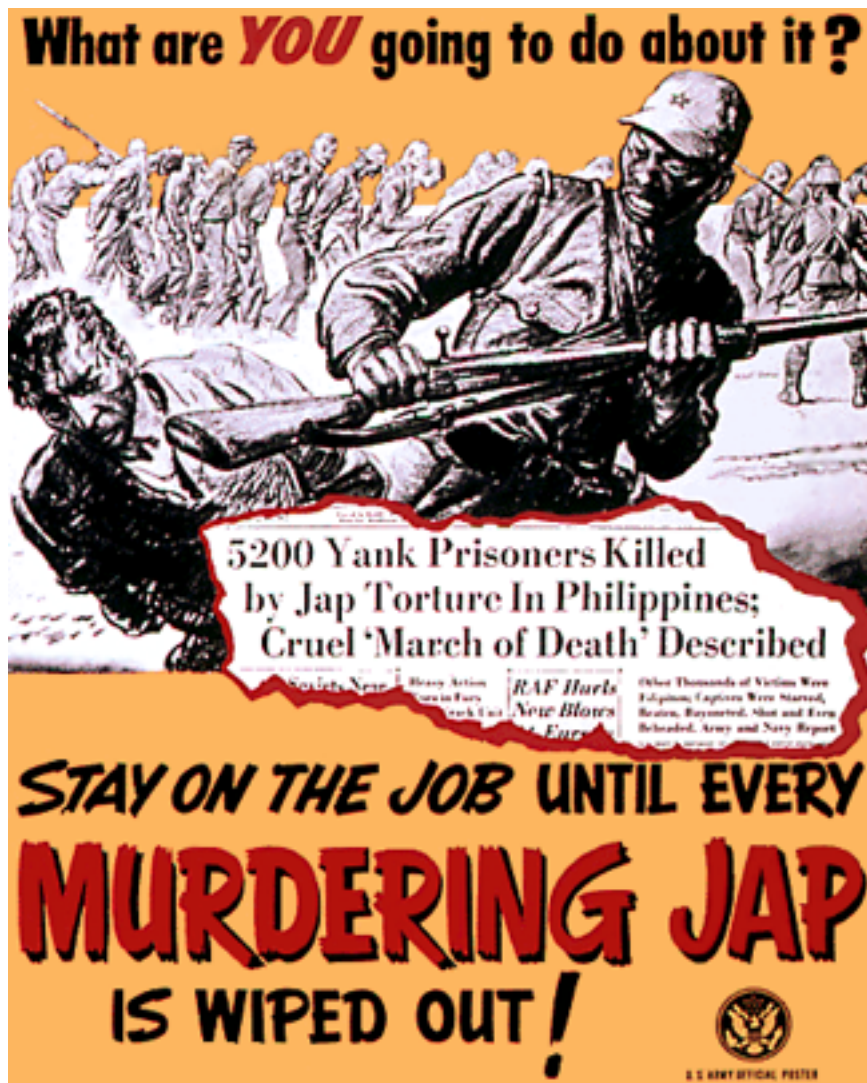
## **Arrival at San Fernando**

Finally, after five days without food and limited water, the dwindling column arrives at its destination: "The sun still was high in the sky when we straggled into San Fernando, a city of 36,000 population, and were put in a barbed wire compound similar to the one at Orani. We were seated in rows for a continuation of the sun treatment. Conditions here were the worst yet.

The prison pen was jammed with sick, dying, and dead American and Filipino soldiers. They were sprawled amid the filth and maggots that covered the ground. Practically all had dysentery. Malaria and dengue fever appeared to be running unchecked. There were symptoms of other tropical diseases I didn't even recognize. Jap guards had shoved the worst cases beneath the rotted flooring of some dilapidated building. Many of these prisoners already had died. The others looked as though they couldn't survive until morning.

There obviously had been no burials for many hours. After sunset Jap soldiers entered and inspected our rows. Then the gate was opened again and kitchen corpsmen entered with cans of rice. We held our mess kits and again passed lids to those who had none. Our spirits rose. We watched as the Japs ladled out generous helpings to the men nearest the gate. Then, without explanation, the cans were dragged away and the gate was closed. It was a repetition of the ghastly farce at Balanga. The fraud was much more cruel this time because our need was vastly greater. In our bewildered state it took some time for the truth to sink in. When it did we were too discouraged even to swear."

References: This eyewitness account appears in: Dyess, William E., *The Dyess Story* (1943); .



1. How did this propaganda poster mobilize Americans?

2. Should events of this nature be used as propaganda, why or why not?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions

1. How did war come to the Philippines?
2. Why did the Americans and Filipinos surrender (and to whom)?
3. What WAS the Bataan Death March?
4. From what came the Japanese soldiers' brutality?
5. Propaganda showed the Japanese one way, Dyess tells us something different. Why was there a difference AND what was that difference?
6. What was the first murder?

