



MacArthur Memorial Education Programs

Investigating Sources: The Bataan Death March and the POW Experience

Overview:



Ben Steele

In 1940, Ben Steele, a young man from Montana, joined the army. He was stationed in the Philippines when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Nine hours later, the Japanese attacked the Philippines. Weeks later, they invaded. Steele spent the first months of the war fighting on the Bataan Peninsula. When American forces on Bataan were surrendered, Steele was forced to go on the Bataan Death March. He spent the next three and a half years as a POW. During captivity, he suffered from beriberi, dysentery, pneumonia, blood poisoning, and malaria. He also had limited contact with his family.



Bataan Death March

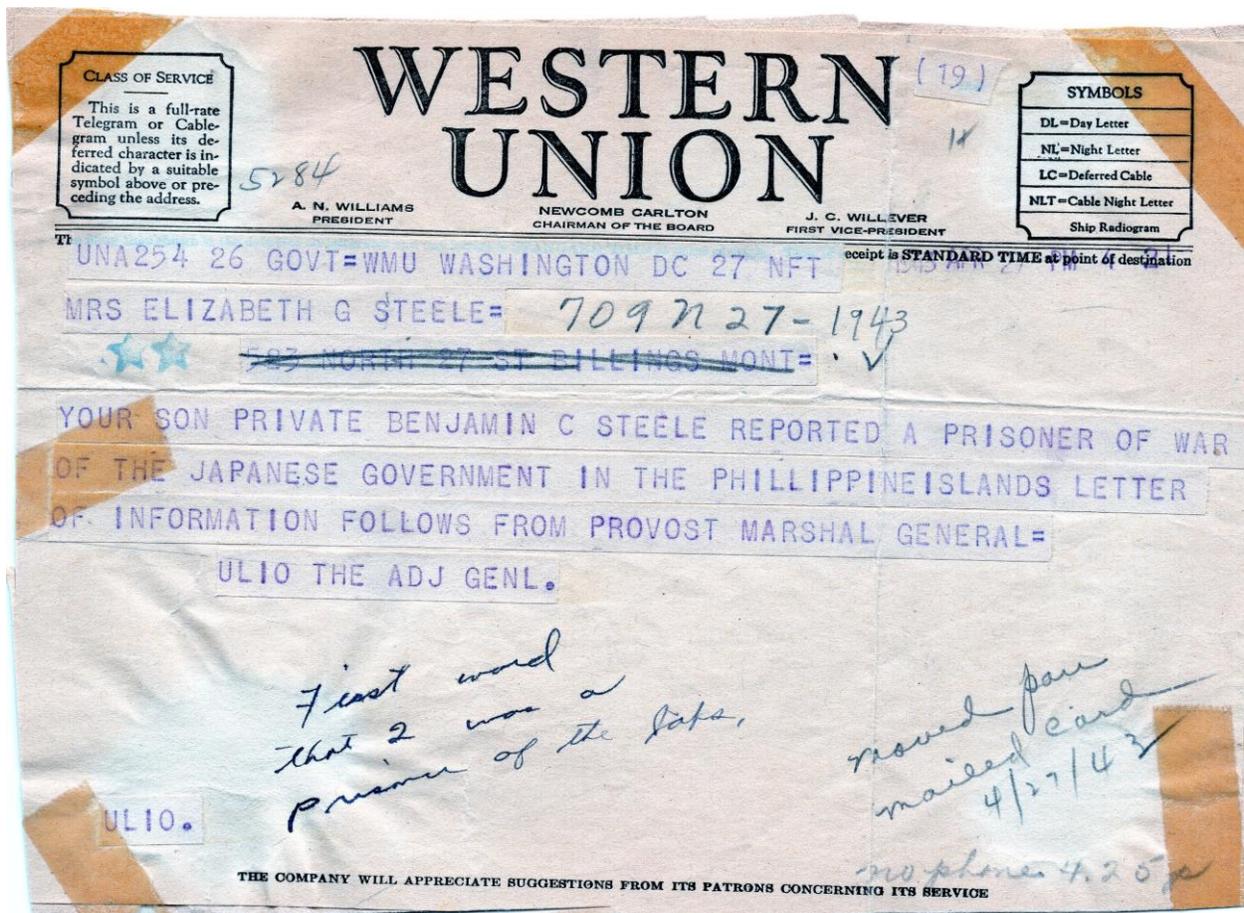
After the surrender of 75,000 Filipino and American troops on Bataan, the Japanese Army forced these POWs to march 65 miles from Bataan to San Fernando. More than 10,000 died on the march. Despite the intense heat, the POWs were given no food or water. They were subject to physical abuse and random executions.

Concentration Camp

A concentration camp is a guarded compound used to detain or imprison groups of people - typically members of ethnic minorities, political opponents, prisoners of war (POWs) etc. The prisoners are usually used to provide forced labor or to await execution. The term is most strongly identified with camps established in Europe by the Nazis between 1933-1945. The term can also be used to identify a number of POW camps during World War II. Due to the poor conditions in Japanese POW camps, it is estimated that 1 in 4 of all American POWs in Japanese custody died before the end of the war.

Directions:

Use the following documents to complete each activity below. The documents include Red Cross Postcards sent from Mr. Steele to his family in the United States, accounts by escaped POWs that were written during the war, and a telegram from the War Department to Mr. Steele's family.



War Department Telegram to Ben Steele's Family April 27, 1943

IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

1. I am interned at HEADQUARTERS FOR MILITARY PRISON
CAMPS OF P. I., #3.
2. My health is — excellent; ~~good~~; ~~fair~~; ~~poor~~.
3. I am — ~~injured~~; ~~sick in hospital~~; ~~under treatment~~; not under treatment.
4. I am — ~~improving~~; ~~not improving~~; ~~better~~; well.
5. Please see that _____
_____ is taken care of.
6. (Re: Family); Love to the family and don't worry.
7. Please give my best regards to everyone.

776 2 1/2 ct
IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

1. I am interned at—Philippine Military Prison Camp No. 3

2. My health is—excellent; good; fair; poor.

3. Message (50 words limit)

Dearest Mother, Received several letters and box. Certainly
thank you. Am looking forward to brighter days at home. Feeling
fine, hoping this finds you all likewise. Give everyone my
best regards, your loving son, Ben.

4/26/44

Benjamin C. Steele
Signature

Red Cross Postcards from Ben Steele to his Family, 1944.
The content on these postcards was carefully monitored by the Japanese Guards.

"The march of death" began when thousands of prisoners were herded together at Mariveles airfield on Bataan at daylight on April 10, 1942, after their surrender.

Colonel Dyess, in a middle group, gave this description of "the march of death":

"A Japanese soldier took my canteen, gave the water to a horse, and threw the canteen away. We passed a Filipino prisoner of war who had been bayoneted. Men recently killed were lying along the roadside, many had been run over and flattened by Japanese trucks.

There were virtually no water facilities at Camp O'Donnell. Prisoners stood in line for six to ten hours to get a drink. They wore the same clothing without change for a month and a half.

The principal food at Camp O'Donnell was rice. The prisoners received meat twice in two months, and then not enough to give as many as a quarter of them a piece an inch square.

One dilapidated building was set aside and called a hospital. Hundreds of men lay naked on the bare floor without covering of any kind. There was no medicine of any kind. The doctors had not even water to wash human waste from their patients. Some afflicted with dysentery remained out in the weather near the latrines until they died.

Men shrank from 200 pounds to 90. They had no buttocks. They were human skeletons.

By Oct. 26, 1942, 3,000 of the 12,200 Army, Navy and Marine Corps prisoners at Cabanatuan had died. There were 2,500 in the hospitals, and the American doctors doubted that any of them would live.

The chief cause of death was starvation. This was definitely established by autopsies performed by both American and Japanese doctors. After it was determined that the men were starving to death, the Japanese answer was that there was no food available. There was a great abundance of food available in the Philippines at the time.

Other diseases caused indirectly by starvation were wet beri beri (in which the feet, ankles and head swell to twice their size), dry beri beri, dysentery, diarrhea, malaria, scurvy, blindness, diphtheria, yellow jaundice, and dengue fever. Several men went completely blind.

Excerpts from Accounts of Escaped POWs, *Newsweek*, February 7, 1944.

Questions:

War Department Telegram and Red Cross Postcards:

1. After reading the Red Cross postcards from Mr. Steele to his family and the telegram from the War Department to his family, describe life as a P.O.W. under the Japanese.

Death March and P.O.W. camp accounts from escaped POWs:

2. After reading the accounts by escaped POWs, write another description of life as a P.O.W. under the Japanese based on these sources.

War Department Telegram and Red Cross Postcards:

3. Return to the Red Cross postcards and War Department Telegram. After reading the accounts of escaped POWs, what information do you think is missing from the Red Cross Postcards and the War Department Telegram? Why might this information be missing?
4. Revise your initial description of life as a P.O.W. under the Japanese.

