

A Soldier's Long March Back From Hell

Bataan Death March Shaped 91-Year-Old Lester Tenney's Life



Bataan Survivor Lester Tenney, 91

Seventy years ago in April, a young GI was among the 76,000 Americans and Filipinos forced to surrender to the Japanese on a Philippine peninsula, Bataan. Ordered to lay down his arms, Staff Sgt. Lester Tenney — already wounded and suffering from malaria and dysentery — experienced an odd sense of peace.

“It was a feeling of relaxation,” recalled Tenney, now a 91-year-old La Costa resident. “Like a relief in a certain way.”

He paused. “We were not expecting anything as bad as it was.”

Tenney’s next eight days were a nightmare of unrelieved horror. He battled hunger, thirst and captors who regarded their prisoners as a subhuman species, unworthy of life. The Bataan Death March, as the grim episode is now known, tested Tenney’s courage and intelligence. On the 80-plus-mile trek, he realized that every step could have been his last.

“I remember yesterday like it happened today,” Tenney said. “I’ll never forget. I’ve learned to forgive, but I’ll never forget.”

It’s often said that World War II defined a generation of Americans. Yet even as this “Greatest Generation” vanishes — in the United States, one veteran of this conflict dies every two minutes — this war has been handed down to their descendants as a cultural heirloom. World War II still inspires popular books (today, Laura Hillenbrand’s “Unbroken,” about an Olympic athlete’s ordeal in a Japanese POW camp, marks its 74th week on The New York Times best seller list), movies (“The

King's Speech" won four Oscars including Best Picture in 2011) and TV series (HBO's "The Pacific" won eight Emmys in 2010, more than any other program).

Beyond these stirring tales, though, what is the legacy of these veterans?

That question has special resonance in San Diego County, where an estimated 20,000 current residents were WWII veterans — and where the entire 3.1 million population occupies a region remade by that conflict. Starting in 1940, as the nation prepared to meet the Axis threat, new military camps appeared on the San Diego landscape. Existing naval bases expanded. The city, home to 203,000 people in 1940, ballooned to 390,000 residents by 1943 thanks to an influx of sailors and Marines, plus factory workers churning out military aircraft.

New residents needed housing; homes were built, streets paved, schools opened and neighborhoods created in Linda Vista, Kearny Mesa and other parts of the city.

You can still see physical landmarks of the era. But there are invisible landmarks, too. For many veterans, the war was the central episode in their lives. Lester Tenney, for instance, found that this crucible molded his views on work, politics, international relations, life. His past continues to inform our present.

Descent into hell

Even as Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, imperial forces were moving against other U.S. outposts in the Pacific. By late December, a Japanese army had invaded the Philippines, battering U.S. and Filipino troops.

For four months, the Allies retreated. Falling back on the Bataan peninsula, they eventually ran out of food, ammunition and room to maneuver. On April 9, Major Gen. Edward P. King ordered his command of 60,000 Filipinos and 15,000 Americans to surrender. Tenney, a 21-year-old tank commander, was among them

"General King told us, 'I want you all to remember — you didn't surrender. Instead, you were surrendered,'" Tenney said.

The men may have taken some pride in that, but they were able to take little else into captivity. Historians estimate that 76,000 prisoners started on the Bataan Death March. By the time the last man staggered to their destination, a prison camp roughly 80 miles away, they had left behind as many as 11,000 dead.



Tenney's ordeal began when his captors ordered his four-man crew to wait on a roadside lined with thousands of defeated men. Japanese guards gathered 100 or so at a time and marched them away. The men had no idea where they were going. There were no announcements. No explanations. No rules except the ones you learned by observing — or by dying.

"If you fell down, you died," Tenney said. "If you stopped walking, you died. You were not allowed to talk. If you started to talk, they'd beat you or kill you."

The first four days, there was no food or water. Temperatures rose past a humid 112 degrees. Some men, crazed, began screaming. They were killed.

One day, Tenney filled his canteen at a pipe leading from a well. The next man bent low to sip directly from the pipe; a guard thrust a bayonet through his neck, killing him.

Initially focused on his own predicament, the young GI gradually became aware of his fellow captives' plight — and they of his. Midway through the march, a Japanese officer on horseback swung a sword at Tenney, slicing open his left shoulder.

Tenney staggered, but two friends supported him, keeping him upright even as a medic stitched up the wound.

Determined to survive, Tenney set short-term goals. He fixed his eyes on a grove of trees: “I have to make it to the trees.” He did. Then he spotted a cluster of water buffalo: “Nothing is going to stop me from getting to that herd of carabao.”



Staff Sgt. Lester Tenney, before going to war

Over the next three years and four months, Tenney would be beaten, starved and worked as a slave in the Philippines and Japan. His life was in constant danger, but nothing ever approached the horror of his first eight days in captivity.

“It was awful,” he said of that 80-plus-mile walk on Bataan, his voice breaking. “It was awful. It was inhumane, It was barbaric.”

Rebuilding a life

Tenney came home from the war with eight teeth in his mouth — the rest had been knocked out by his captors — and a case of malaria that he's never quite shaken. But perhaps the greatest pains he suffered were emotional. His wife, believing that Tenney had died in the war, had remarried.

Nightmares haunted his sleep, shame his waking hours.

“I wasn’t so proud of being a prisoner of war,” he said.

Slowly, though, he rebuilt his life. In 1959, he met the love of his life, Betty Levi. They married the next year. He earned a doctorate in business from the University of Southern California. Professor Tenney taught insurance and finance at Arizona State and San Diego State, retiring from teaching in 1993.

In 1968, a mix-up at his son’s school left the Tenney’s playing host to a foreign exchange student — from Japan. This led to a lifelong friendship between Tenney and Toru Tasaka, a friendship that brought Tenney back to Japan for a series of peacetime visits. There, he’s discussed his wartime experiences with school children and reporters. He’s also attended signings of the Japanese edition of his 1995 memoir, “My Hitch in Hell.”

“I’ve learned to forgive the Japanese,” he said, “and have a lot of Japanese friends.”

But Tenney still has some unfinished business with his former captors. Among the companies bidding on California’s multi-billion-dollar high-speed rail project is Mitsui, the conglomerate that used Tenney and other POWs as slaves during the war. While the Japanese government has formally apologized for the horrors it inflicted on its captives, Mitsui never has.

“That’s my final mission,” Tenney said. “So far, I’ve had no response.”

This week, when he and Betty are in Washington, D.C., he’s sure to bring up this topic with a new friend. The Tenneys have been invited to have breakfast with Ichiro Fujisaki, ambassador of Japan to the United States.

Lasting lessons

For Tenney, the war was a cruel and unforgiving school. But he still remembers the lessons learned there.

Later in life, when confronted with a large project, he would think back to Bataan and how he would focus on the next grove of trees or herd of water buffalo.

“I still set goals for myself — I’ve done that all my life.”

Not surprisingly, this man who worked 12-hour days in Japanese coal mines does not shrink from long hours. “I’m never afraid to work.”

The war also instilled in him a lifesaving respect for education. When Tenney arrived in Japan as a POW in fall 1942, he was beaten by guards who had issued commands that were — to him — unintelligible. “I swore I would never be beaten again because I didn’t understand them. So I made it a point to learn Japanese.”

Tenney has shared these lessons with his university students, as well as the classrooms and veterans groups he still addresses. The war made him the man he is today, but he prays no one will again be molded in this savage fashion.

“I’m hoping that society learned that there is nothing good that comes from a war, A war means that young people are going to die — that’s it, young people. The older ones aren’t going to die. They sit behind a desk some place.”

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