

The Hayes Bolitho Japanese POW Story continues...

Back in 2001, when we started this newspaper, people were telling me about this older fellow, living on the Ranch, who had been captured by the Japanese during WWII and spent time in a POW camp. I finally was able to set up an initial interview where I met Hayes. I asked him if he had anything written down about his experiences, and he said no he didn't. I asked him if he would be willing to put a story together on just what had happened and he agreed. We decided to do it on the fly, so to speak. He would write some, we would publish it, and then he would write some more... sort of a series. He would write on a computer, using materials he had available, call me and say, Wilson the first one is ready, and I would drive by and pick it up. I would run it in the paper for my readers at the Ranch, who started calling me about when the next Bolitho piece would be out. They couldn't wait. It was the summer of 2001. W.C.

This is part two of a six-part series:

1. Early period up to America's entry into war.
2. America is attacked.
3. Surrender and Survival.
4. Escape.
5. Australia and return to U.S.
6. Back in school and civilian life.

The 2nd part of Hayes' story now continues, where we left off in the last issue, with the construction of the Del Monte Air Base (for Heavy Bombers)

Our equipment and supplies were on two small steamers tied up at the pier next to the Del Monte Cannery. We spent the next couple of days getting them loaded on trucks and traveling the eighteen miles up a climbing road to Del Monte. We pitched our tents alongside the field. It was a neat camp; the tents were beautifully lined up and you could have laid a straight edge down the entire row and wouldn't have been off one inch. Then we started on the airstrip.

It was the best natural meadow we had ever seen. The sod was on hard ground and would hold anything in any weather. No grading was necessary and all we had to do was cut the grass. Someone somewhere procured a tractor mower and the few farmers in the squadron took over. They refused to let anyone else help unless he was a qualified farmer.

Meanwhile our quartermaster contingent had been busy setting up a mess tent, field kitchen and all the necessary arrangements for sustaining a large group of men. Their "General Supplies" operated out of a large circus type tent closer to the proposed strip. We also began

preparing revetments to protect the planes and set about preparing emplacements for anti-aircraft 50 caliber machine guns.

Since Del Monte was to be a major extension of the Pacific Rim defense, more units were supposedly on their way. It all sounded so good. This then, is where we found ourselves in early December 1941 - on a primitive island, in a strange land, halfway around the world. We only had a few planes, a few vehicles, a few guns and a few bullets. This was PLUM.

On December 3d our Squadron Commander made the announcement that the B- 17s we had been expecting and also those of the 17th Bombardment Group, which was to have joined us at Del Monte had been diverted to Australia. We also learned that two Ordnance Companies, the 701st (Air Base) and the 440th (Bombardment) along with two ships loaded with ammunition and 110,000 gallons of aviation fuel in 55 gallon drums were expected. They all arrived without mishap. These two outfits built their camp at Tankulan. This spot became known as Camp 29 and most of our squadron and other Air Corp personnel were quartered there.

Tankulan was a little barrio about four or five kilometers east of Del Monte. The barrios normal population was about one hundred twenty-five but at this time most of its residents had evacuated to the hills for safety. There were two or three stores, a telephone office, a post office, a small Catholic Church and ten or twelve small houses built on stilts. There was a village pump at the center of town but no running water or sewer. There was also a school that was the nicest building in the barrio. This became our squadron headquarters.

About this time the decision had been made at Headquarters USFEAF (United States Far East Air Force) to send all 35 B-17s at Clark Field to Del Monte. Through a snafu in orders only 2 full squadrons of the 19th Bomb Group, 16 planes of the 14th and 93rd squadrons were sent. On December 6th the dawn sky at Del Monte was filled by the roar of airplane engines and before the night shadow was fully lifted from the airfield B-17s began dropping down to it one by one. They had left Clark Field hurriedly the night before and because they expected to stay only three days, they had brought very few supplies.

In the short time since our arrival Del Monte had changed; and now native Filipino help had come in to work on barracks and the airstrip. None of the barracks had been completed and, as there were not enough tents to house all the air crews, many of them slept in their planes. Del Monte communications with the rest of the world were still very uncertain and the men had little information of what was happening on Luzon (Manila - Clark Field).

Time hung heavy on their hands. The only diversion was a visit to the PX; a makeshift shack that had been put up almost on the day the base was opened. But all the PX had to offer was a single brand of beer called "San Migual Beer for Convalescent- Mothers". It was weak, black and mildly reminiscent of stout - horrible stuff. But the men of the 19 th Bomb bought it anyway.

On December 5 th six of us were picked as the crew for Lieutenants Tash and Kellar, pilot and co-pilot respectively, to take one of the B- I 7s to Clark Field for repair of a leak in a wing tank. Major O'Donnell, our Senior Air Officer was obsessed with the necessity of having every plane possible ready for combat. We took off about 8:30 a.m. and landed at Clark Field a little before 1:00 p.m. Clark Field by now had acquired something of the aspect of an armed camp. Tent areas had been added on the far side of the road leading to the strip. There were first-aid stations around the field and the whole place was honey combed with foxholes and slit trenches, most of them dug by mechanical ditch digger. It was operated day and night by a relay of Filipinos. Around the perimeter of the landing area, in their sandbag nests, were the antiaircraft guns of the 200th Coast artillery (AA). It was a mobile unit consisting of one battalion of three-inch guns and one 37 gun. Big revetments were being built for the B- 17s, which looked large enough to house a battleship. Two of them had been finished but even in them the big planes were open to strafing attack. Del Monte, in comparison had nothing. That was scary!

We parked our plane close to the hanger where it would be repaired. It was then that we found out 16 B- I 7s were being sent to Del Monte and there would only be 19 remaining at Clark Field but only 16 of these planes were ready for immediate combat service. Two were in the hangers getting a camouflage paint job and one was out of commission. We had to wait our turn. Our repairs were completed late on the 7th and we had clearance for departure on the 8th. We had lunch, came out of the mess hall and boarded our plane about noon. Tash and Kellar went through the normal pre-flight check and Tash said "let's get the hell out of here" and we began to roll down the strip. We became airborne at the exact moment of the Japanese high level attack. We could see the first bombs striking at the rows of quarters and watched incredulously at the string of explosives across the field. Tash, at full power, skimmed the treetops and the motors were screaming as we strove for altitude. As we leveled out, Bill Norden in the top dome reported three planes diving at us from 2000 feet above. They had peeled off from their original formation and came in singly from the rear (B- I 7s C and D had no tail guns) and banked away to the left as they finished their run. The leading Japanese plane came in so close on the B17's tail that the tracers from his wing guns were converging out in front of Tash and Kellar. The aileron cables were half cut through; so were the flap cables and the propeller on the right out-board motor was hit and the left inboard motor was smoking. Both had to be shut down. After that Tash had to fly the ship dead level for fear of spinning in.

As the first Zero finished his run the second took its place on the B-17's tail, where Jack Bradley and I, as waist gunners, along with the top gunner couldn't get a shot at it. This was repeated by the third Zero. After three passes when the third Jap peeled off Bill Norden, manning the top radio gun, caught the Zero in his sights and his tracers chewed right down the length of its belly from the prop spinner to the tail wheel. The Zero did not go down but he was flopping badly the last time we saw him. The other two Zeros left us alone after that and we had to feel our way between the southern Luzon Mountains.

We were flying 400 to 500 feet above the water and slowly losing altitude. It was obvious we couldn't make it back to Del Monte. Tash radioed our position and our problem to Headquarters on Mindanao and said he felt we could make it to the northern tip of Mindanao but that would be cutting it close.

When the north coast of Mindanao was spotted, our altitude was approximately 100 feet above the water. As we drew closer we could see smoke rising from an area just south of Surigao. This caused a little consternation because we would have to fly right into it and we didn't know how extensive it was. This proved to be merely a brush fire. The Japanese controlled the area around Surigao and it was imperative that we get as far south as possible before we came down. Lt. Tash had the nose gunner and co-pilot move to the center of the plane and we all braced ourselves as best we could. Just as we came upon the foothills of the Diuata Mountains he cut the motors and set the plane down on the edge of the jungle. We tore out a swath of trees, vines, and underbrush, lost a wing and part of the tail. The plane broke in half before we came to a complete stop. We climbed out quickly and moved as far away as possible. When we quit shaking we took an inventory - we were all out and only one man was hurt. Bill Norden, our radio gunner, had a broken left arm and a deep wound on his right arm. Someone had grabbed the first aid kit and with this Norden was bandaged so he could travel. Every one else had bruises, cuts and scratches but nothing too serious. Evidently some of the leaking fuel hit a hot cylinder and with a swoosh and loud explosion the plane was on fire.

We moved quickly down a path into the jungle. It became narrower and the jungle more dense the further we walked. Lt. Kellar and Bradley were leading and found a path branching off towards the coast. We were following this for 10 or 15 minutes when it broke into a clearing running parallel to the jungle. Now we could make better time and could put some distance between the crash site and ourselves. About an hour later we came to a lake, filled our canteens and rested for a while. We later learned this was Lake Mainit and we were only 35 to 40 miles from Surigao. We saw a nepea shack in the distance. There we found a Filipino, his wife and a 9 or 10 year old. The boy could speak English. By questioning him we found there were no Japanese soldiers this far south and that there were Americans at Batron about 75 or 80 kilometers south (about 60 miles). They fed us rice and fish and we spent the night sleeping on the ground. Early the next morning we started out and four days later we were in Butron. We

had been fed and cared for by the Filipinos all along the way.

Here we found part of the 19th and 17th bomb groups. They loaded us on a truck and took us back to Del Monte, about 75 miles down the road. We learned the Japanese had hit Clark Field with 54 Bombers and 50 Zeros. The high altitude bombing only destroyed a few B-17s but they destroyed all the buildings including the hanger area, the shops and left the field blazing. Then the pursuits came in only a few feet above the ground strafing the parked B-17s and letting go with their 20-mm cannon. They destroyed all but 2 or 3 and damaged those. There was not a single flyable plane on the base, including obsolete bombers like the B-18s, B-10s, A-27s; Stearman used for observation, and the P-40s of the 20th Pursuit Squadron. The casualties were high, about 250 wounded besides civilians and over 100 dead. Clark Field, as a tactical base, was virtually destroyed. The striking force of B-17s had been cut in half. But inefficiency their loss was much greater, for from now on all B-17s would have to be based at Del Monte and Clark Field was merely a staging area.

It took four days to get things under control at Clark Field. Both combat and service crews immediately embarked on the task of putting the least damaged B-17s back into commission and salvaging all usable parts from the ones that had been hopelessly destroyed. They could afford to let nothing go to waste. Three of the damaged planes were found to be capable of repair; but only two were evacuated to Del Monte and of the two one never flew a combat mission. In addition there were the 14 Fortresses at Del Monte, one of which was damaged. This meant that the Air Corp had only 15 planes left with which to carry the war to Japan. Taking everything into consideration, what had been a rather bleak outlook for us militarily, suddenly became even bleaker. The military significance of Mindanao was at once evident. We had little time to prepare and become operational and we desperately needed bomb squadrons, tactical units and support groups. Various Air Corp units were sent to Mindanao but mostly to places other than Del Monte. With the loss of our plane there were now fourteen B-17s left. These were ordered to Australia - six took off December 17th, four on the 18th, one on the 19th and the last three on the 20th. It was time because on the 19th at dusk six Japanese pursuit planes carried out a fairly extensive strafing raid destroying three B-18 bombers but missing three camouflaged B-17s. On December 20th the Japanese landed in force at Davao and two days later at Cotabao. They now had troops to the south, southwest as well as to the north. They were slowly encircling us. On the 21st Del Monte suffered its first bombing raid by a fleet of 33 bombers. Two of our men were killed and several were wounded. One of our Chaplains held a service for the two we lost and they were buried in the local Tankulan Cemetery. The holes in the field were filled in and we were back in business.

I was put in charge of the PX, which had nothing to sell, and was told to scrounge around and see what I could find. I was given a Jeep, took Jack Bradley with me, and we went from barrio to barrio looking for beer, cigarettes, Coca Cola or almost anything we could find. The only thing we came up with were cigarettes made with papaya leaves. They were terrible.

Opportunities for heavy drinking were scant. At first there was some scotch to be had for those who could afford it, later some Canadian Club and then some whiskey. Finally there was liquor labeled "Very Special Brandy". We had no idea where it came from; but it was the roughest stuff anyone in the outfit had ever had. One drink would have curled the hair on a sea cow. We learned about it when we got a few hours leave to spend down on the coast. Bugo was a way station, with just the Del Monte Cannery and the steamship pier and a few houses. We went down the road 10 miles or so to Cagayan where we could get fried chicken and pop at the "Moonlight Parlor". This was nothing but a two by four shack in the middle of the town. The

Filipinos who ran it treated us just great. If we had enough time we'd try to work in two meals at the Moonlight Parlor.

In between we'd go to the Cagayan Hotel for a bath. At Del Monte there was just a little creek to bathe in so a bath at the hotel was a luxury. It wasn't always possible, for the hotel had only one bathtub and sometimes there would be a long waiting line. Then, of course, we never knew if there would be enough hot water. After that we might get a haircut, but we always ended up going over to the brewery to check if any beer had come in.

Christmas day dawned bright and beautiful. Turkey and all the trimmings had been flown in from Clark Field the day before. We broke out clean uniforms and spent the forenoon in eager anticipation of a back home meal. It was a quiet, restful day.

We were brought back to the real world in short order, however. We were getting reports of heavy fighting at Davao where the Japanese had landed in force. Two days later they also landed at Cotabao. The various Air Corp units were busy developing alternate airfields in different parts of the island, some quite secret and well camouflaged.

On top of all the construction work we had to carry on the routine air base duties. Every plane was met, it's service performed and personal needs of the crew looked after as far as the air bases limitations permitted. No crew from Australia went off on a mission without a meal of hot coffee and sandwiches.

Things had begun to tighten up in February. Food was a problem so the latter part of the month we were cut to two meals a day - 10: 00 a. in. and about 3: 00 p. in. Noticeable also was the deterioration of variety and quality of the meals. By March we had had two air raids at the Bugo pier, one ship had been sunk as it was being unloaded. Air raids at Del Monte were spasmodic and were by Japanese pursuit planes.

One evening around 9:00 p.m. a destroyer came into Davao Bay and began shelling the Cannery and the pier. The beach was undefended at the time and it was felt this would be the next point of invasion and this would almost completely encircle Del Monte. In mid March about 150 Filipino infantry troops moved into the area between Davao and Del Monte. Bradley and I were sent to train these Filipino men primarily in firing a 30caliber machine gun. We were in for a big surprise. Some of these soldiers had never fired a rifle in their lives and had no military training what so ever. We began with the basics. We taught them how to hold a rifle, how to squeeze the trigger and how to load the gun. Ammunition was scarce so they couldn't actually fire their guns. We had 5 aircooled 30-caliber machine guns. We picked 10 men and put two on each gun. We showed them how to load the ammunition belt and how to squeeze the triggers. We ran them through this procedure every day for two weeks. It didn't appear that we made any

progress. Every day we had to start over and explain the same things and they acted like it was new to them.

At the end of March and late in the afternoon a destroyer shelled us and transport ships entered the Bay and began unloading troops and equipment. Very shortly they had artillery set up and began shelling our position. When the shelling stopped and we peaked out of the foxholes and could see their infantry advancing. We fired our machine guns until we ran out of ammunition and suddenly it was dark. Bradley and I looked for our Filipino troops and found we had maybe 30 out of the original 150. They had evacuated to the hills. We made a hasty retreat and headed for Del Monte. When we reached the field we found there was a skeleton crew and they were loading trucks ready to move out. Verbal orders given us by Captain Little was to proceed to Maramag Forest immediately. We dismissed the Filipinos, climbed on the trucks and moved out.

Moranag Forest was approximately 50 miles almost due south of Del Monte. A small runway had been built in the forest itself, was being used by a single P 40 primarily for reconnaissance. Our job was to keep the strip open and perform maintenance on the P 40.

We knew we were surrounded by the enemy and with no where to go Just sitting and waiting became wearing on the nerves. Finally, after several days, our commanding officer called us together and told us a radio message was coming from General Wainwrite on Corregedor which had fallen a couple of days before. He directed General Sharp to surrender all Visayan-Mindanao forces. We then were given orders to proceed, in essence to turn in all arms and ammunition. We were advised to dispose of all items that could be considered illegal contraband and anything that was stamped "Made in Japan". We were to await orders to proceed to Camp Casising outside of Malabalay. The surrender had become effective May 10, 1942. On May 12'h we proceeded to Camp Casising - one year, one month and two days after my enlistment. OUR FREEDOM WAS GONE. The next day all allied communication with the Philippines was severed.

Next issue is Part 3 of Hayes Bolitho's story: SURRENDER & SURVIVAL

Don't miss it!