

Oral Histories

U.S. Navy Nurse Prisoner of War in the Philippines, 1942-1945

Recollections of LT Dorothy Still Danner, NC, USN, captured by the Japanese in Manila and imprisoned at Santo Thomas and Los Banos in the Philippines.

Adapted from: "Dorothy Still Danner: Reminiscences of a Nurse POW." *Navy Medicine* 83, no. 3 (May-June 1992): 36-40

I never had any childhood dreams of being a nurse. I thought I wanted to be a dress designer, but along came the depression. I became a nurse because my mother liked nursing and the LA County General Hospital paid the nurses a little stipend. She took me there and the next thing I knew I was a student nurse. I really loved nursing and found it a very satisfying profession. That was in 1932 and I was 18 years old.

After graduating from nursing school I worked in two hospitals before joining the Navy in 1937. At that time, there were only 400 nurses in the Navy. I really didn't expect to be hired so I was really surprised when I got my orders to go to the San Diego Naval Hospital for a physical. The next thing I knew I was in the Navy.

My first assignment was at Balboa Hospital in San Diego. Oh, it was beautiful! From the pink building sitting up on the hill, you could look down over the harbor and see all those Navy ships out there and feel very important as part of Uncle Sam's Navy. I spent 1938 and 1939 in San Diego.

In 1939 I was sent to the Canacao Naval Hospital in the Philippines. I traveled across the Pacific on the [transport USS] *Henderson* [AP-1]. It was a festive trip. We first stopped at Honolulu. I can still see the people on the dock there with their leis and the hula dancers. Then we spent 2 or 3 days going around the islands.

Although the Philippines was not quite as spectacular as Hawaii I became very fond of the base there anyway. The Navy Yard was just across Manila Bay about a half mile away. It was a very active social life. There were always parties and, of course, the nurses got involved along with everybody else.

Our social concerns were put on the back burner when the dependents were sent home around the first of 1941. While we heard about the rape of Nanking, nobody thought the Japs would be silly enough to try and do anything to Uncle Sam.

War

Pearl Harbor shocked me as it did everyone else. I and the other nurses were awakened in the middle of the night and told that Pearl Harbor had been hit. We were sent to the hospital as soon as we got dressed. Since the hospital was right in the target zone, we sent all the ambulatory patients back to duty and the rest to Manila. Arrangements were made to admit the patients to what had been a dependents ward at the Sternberg Army Hospital.

On Wednesday the 10th, the Navy Yard was bombed. It was wiped out. This raid lasted about an hour. After the raid, we rushed to the hospital, and patients were all over the place. There were Filipino women, children, and men and our own people from the Navy Yard. It was really a shocking scene. The power to the hospital was knocked out. It was a pretty hectic afternoon. Triage was impossible. You just tried to find out which were the worst ones to go to surgery and so on.

Sternberg Hospital too was quickly swamped. The only place that was available was Estado Mayor, an old Army base; we used the barracks as a temporary hospital. In the meantime, they decided to set up joint surgical teams (with Army and Navy Medical Corps) throughout the city. I was with the group assigned to the Jai Alai Club. Our purpose was to care for anyone that was hit - civilian or military - that would come into these emergency centers. We set up a little receiving station near the front of the building, but didn't get any patients.

After spending a few weeks there, we were told to move to the Santa Scholastica school, also in Manila. The Army had already converted it into a hospital. Actually, we had more hospital personnel than patients. On December 31, the Army evacuated all the Army patients on a hospital ship and took them to Australia.

Meanwhile, the Army was retreating toward Bataan to make a stand there. The military declared Manila an open city and retreated, but the medical personnel remained.

On 2 January, the Japanese came into Manila, but didn't come to Santa Scholastica until a few days later. At first the Japanese were not hostile and mostly left us alone. But then they started taking quinine from us. Then they took our beds and mattresses. They also began to slap around and beat up the men. But they ignored us - the nurses.

Internment

When the Japanese came they rounded up all the Allied civilians and sent them to the University of Santo Tomas. Although there were some 66 classrooms in the main building, there were still too many people. It was just a mess. The toilet facilities were overwhelmed and sickness began almost overnight. With Japanese permission, the civilians formed an administration committee and appointed a leader. Soon the civilians set up a school for the children, entertainment, and a newsletter, among other things. Santo Tomas was used as a model by the Japanese. They allowed the Swiss delegates to see Santo Tomas, not the POW camps or the other civilian camps.

I was sent to Santo Tomas on March 8, 1942. However, the medical facilities there were still lacking. There was a little hospital set up in what had been a mechanical engineering building. The doctors brought in medicine from their offices. A lot of lab technicians and pharmacists apparently had their own means of bringing drugs in then through Red Cross funds. By the time we got there, they had revamped the rest rooms and had put in showers.

Soon Santo Tomas became too crowded as the Japanese kept bringing people in. They decided to move part of the camp out of Manila. Therefore, they selected a site near the town of Los Banos to house some of the overflow.

"The Country Club"

In May 1943, the Japanese sent 800 men to Los Banos to set up the camp. Two doctors who were going asked our chief nurse if we would go down and help them set up the little hospital. Los Banos was about 60 or 70 kilometers south of Manila. We weren't needed at Santo Tomas anymore due to the influx of Army nurses after the fall of Corregidor.

We went to the agricultural college outside Los Banos which had been a part of the University of the Philippines. The Japanese took a plot of about 55 or 60 acres and put a barbed wire fence around it. Our hospital was a small 25-bed unit. The nurses lived in a dormitory that had plenty of space - two or three nurses in a room.

At Los Banos our first order of business was to get our 25-bed hospital functioning. We initially had two American civilian doctors, but they were repatriated in August 1943. In their place we got another American doctor, Dr. Dana Nance. He was a young fellow, one of those charismatic characters who got out there with the baseball teams and was very concerned about his patients. He was a surgeon and brought his own instruments. Patients who had been sent back to Manila for surgery were now handled in our hospital. We also had a dentist.

Initially, there were only the men and nurses at Los Banos. The dependents were supposed to come in July, but did not arrive until December. When they did, they changed the whole outlook of the camp. They brought touches of civilization with them - tablecloths and salt and pepper shakers, etc. Life itself was not that bad. People had the opportunity to exercise, to go out and cut wood, and do chores that needed to be done to keep the community going. People had recordings they played at the bandstand. And they had baseball games. It was really country club living compared to the other camps.

While food was not plentiful, at least at this time, starvation was not a problem. Since we lived in an old agricultural college we had limited access to meat. We had carabao mainly, and some pigs. We also had a garden in which we grew mostly eggplants and camotes, a sort of sweet potato. Of course, there was rice as usual and mung beans. Duck eggs were occasionally available.

A Change in Lifestyle

Life began to change in late 1943 when the Japanese military took over the camps. Before, the camps had been run by Japanese civilian administrators. But now there was a supply officer, LT [Sakaadi] Konishi who had made life miserable for the internees in Santo Tomas - he apparently wanted to starve the internees. He came to Los Banos in 1944 to make life miserable for us too. Moreover, our lifestyle worsened appreciably in early 1944 because the Japanese brought many more civilians into Los Banos. Many of the new civilians - the sick and the elderly - had previously been allowed to stay in their homes in Manila. There were few able-bodied men to take care of this load. Life had really become hard in Santo Tomas.

By March 1944, the whole spirit at Los Banos changed. There was no more country club living. The camp just kind of fell apart and the food situation began to deteriorate. The nurses were moved into a much smaller apartment in tight quarters. However, Eldene Paige and I moved into the barracks across the street from the hospital which gave a little more space.

Living conditions for the others also worsened. The Japanese cut off the south end of the camp and crowded the internees into the remaining portion. By this time, the Americans had invaded the Philippines, so as life got worse for the Japanese, they made life worse for us. We were only getting two meals a day, skimpy meals at that. We mainly had rice, diluted to a pasty lugao. There was practically no meat in the stew; it was very watery. And, of course, we used to have coconut milk, but the coconuts had gotten so expensive they were no longer available. We began to lose weight.

It looked like Christmas 1944 would be very gloomy, but a songfest by the priests and sisters livened things up. On Christmas Eve they had a midnight mass and practically the whole camp turned out. It was the most spectacular mass I've ever seen. There were no gifts involved on Christmas Day, just spirit of friendliness between people. I had more meaning then ever before. It was a beautiful Christmas!

Camp Freedom

On January 9, 1945, American troops landed at Lingayen Gulf. The Japanese awakened us in the middle of the night and told us they were leaving. They turned the camp over to the administrative committee and advised us not to go outside.

The administrative committee then called us to attention: "Today at this time we're announcing you are free. This is Camp Freedom." An American flag was sent up the flagpole and we sang the national anthem. Tears were running down everyone's face. It was a very emotional moment.

Unfortunately, our freedom only lasted a week. Then the Japanese came back. However, MacArthur's troops came down toward Manila and on February 3rd liberated Santo Tomas. After learning about Los Banos, MacArthur assigned the 11th Airborne Division to rescue the internees. [MacArthur had good evidence the Japanese would soon execute the Los Banos prisoners.]

Liberation

The rescue plan was complicated because it was out of the ordinary. Thus far, the Americans had only liberated prisoners in their line of advance. But a Los Banos rescue meant going far behind enemy lines to rescue a little over 3,000 people. Paratroopers themselves were to be dropped over Los Banos and attack in conjunction with infantry who would come ashore in amtracs (amphibious vehicles) from a nearby lake. These amtracs would then evacuate many of the civilians. The raiders already had a map of what the camp was like given to them by an escapee, Pete Miles. Miles and the Filipino guerrillas would act as scouts and guides for the troops. The plan was to sneak up behind all the guard houses in the camp and at the specific moment everything would happen at once.

We didn't know the rescue was going to happen, so we were all feeling pretty low. I was on duty that night. There was a newborn baby and I was trying to feed her with what little powdered milk was left. The mother could hardly nurse the baby. She hadn't had enough nourishment herself. It was just about 7 in the morning [23 Feb. 1945]. I had the baby in my arms when I noticed smoke signals going up. Nobody paid any attention to them. Then, all of a sudden we saw a formation of aircraft coming over. As the paratroopers started jumping out, the guerrillas and soldiers around the guard houses began killing the Japanese there. Then the amtracs came in, crashing through the swali-covered fence near the front gate.

I was holding the baby and covering her ears so that the noise wouldn't affect her. An amtrac pulled up in front of the hospital and the American troops jumped out. Oh, we never saw anything so handsome in our lives. These fellows were in camouflage uniforms wearing a new kind of helmet, not those little tin pan things we were used to seeing. And they looked so healthy and so lively.

They were to take the internees out and any that could walk were to go back with troops in the trucks that came overland with the diversionary force. The internees were not military-minded and they just went in all directions. They didn't want to leave anything. The firing was mostly over in about 15 minutes but it took awhile to evacuate the internees. In fact, the American troops actually had to set fire to the barracks to get the internees moving.

Eventually, the troops were able to get about 1,500 people on the amtracs and the rest overland, I left on an amtrac in the second wave. Remarkably, I think there were only two soldiers killed and one internee injured. This whole thing went off with just the most amazing precision that you could imagine. [In retaliation for the raid, the Japanese murdered 1,500 inhabitants of the nearby town of Los Banos. For this and other crimes, LT Konishi was later tried as a war criminal and executed.]

Homecoming

After being liberated from Los Banos, we were flown to Leyte. We were taken to Admiral Kinkaid's [VADM Thomas C. Kinkaid was Commander, 7th Fleet and Southwest Pacific Force] headquarters, where we ate dinner with the Admiral. They

served us beautiful steaks, which of course we couldn't eat because our stomachs had shrunk so much.

It was surprising to see how much publicity we got. On Leyte we began to see the flashbulbs going off and then as we got closer to home, more flashbulbs. When we landed in Oakland there was quite a reception for us, including a lot of photographers and media. Then they gave dinners for us. It was quite an affair.

We also had a very thorough examination in Oakland and went on 90-day recuperative leave. My health had been good, but while I was in Los Banos I developed the dry type of beriberi, as had many others. It was very uncomfortable because I ached all over and my knees buckled. There was nothing I could do for it because it was caused by malnutrition. Our diet was not very good, especially during the last few months before our rescue. But I quickly recovered once I was able to eat good food again.

**DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY -- NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER
805 KIDDER BREESE SE -- WASHINGTON NAVY YARD
WASHINGTON DC 20374-5060**