Ben Steele: From Bataan to Hiroshima
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Ben Steele was one of the American soldiers captured in the Philippines at the beginning of World War II. His three and one half years as a prisoner began with what is known as the "Bataan Death March" and he was later interned in several labor camps. His captivity ended after working in a Japanese coal mine less than 80 miles from ground zero of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima.

Benjamin Charles Steele was born in Roundup, Montana, in 1917, the son of ranchers. Life on the ranch was difficult but there were good times, too. Ben enjoyed hunting and fishing with his father, but didn't like going to school very much. He would rather be riding his horse. Often, he would raise his hand for permission to go to the bathroom (an outhouse). Once he was outside, he would saddle up his horse and head home. This wasn't very popular with either his mom or the teacher.

The stock market crash in 1929 coupled with a severe drought in the early 30's meant financial hardships for the Steele family. Unable to make enough money on the ranch or to find another job, Ben's father set up a still in the mountains and began to bootleg whiskey. The money from that operation kept the family going for about three years. After his father was arrested for bootlegging and was sent to jail, Ben and his mother kept the operation going from their house.

Ben graduated from high school in 1939 and in 1940 joined the Army Air Corps. He enjoyed his training as a recruit. Compared to the life on the ranch, it wasn't much of a challenge. He got to sleep in past 4:30 a.m., didn't have to work so hard, and the food was good. That was soon to change.

In late 1941, the 19th Bomb Group, to which Ben was assigned, was stationed at Clark Field in the Philippines. At their Thanksgiving dinner that year, their Commanding Officer, Major Davis, told them to enjoy their dinner, since it might be a long time before they had another one like it. It turned out that he was right. On December 8, those stationed at Clark Field received the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese. Later that night, Clark Field was bombed.
On Christmas Day, the soldiers at Clark Field were given the order to move to Bataan. There, they were on the front lines of the battle against the Japanese. Food rations were cut in half, and medicine was scarce. The soldiers killed and ate all of the domestic animals they could find, and stripped the fruit trees. They were constantly hungry. By April 9, when Bataan was surrendered to the Japanese, the soldiers were in poor shape physically and were disillusioned because of the lack of support from the U.S. government.

**The Bataan Death March**

Ben Steele was one of 8,000 American and 40,000 Filipino prisoners to make the long march off the Bataan Peninsula. The group at Clark Field joined POW's coming from farther south. They were told that trucks were waiting up the road to transport them, but they didn't believe it. It did turn out that there were trucks along the way, but none of them were used to carry prisoners.

It might not have been too hard for healthy men to make that trek, but most of the POW's were weak from exhaustion and lack of food. For the six days that Ben was on the march, the prisoners were only fed two cups of rice. The Japanese soldiers seemed to enjoy tormenting them, and they were not shown any mercy. They were forced to walk close together, and if they stumbled or fell they would be bayoneted or shot. At the beginning of the march, they walked all one day, all night, and all the next day without food or water or rest. On the third day they were fed a scanty cup of rice. They were not given water, and many men drank from polluted pools of water on the side of the road. Even if they were successful in getting a drink without being caught by the guards, they still might die from drinking the stagnant water.

Ben lost track of time on the march, and didn't know for years how long it really was. He did know that many prisoners died from starvation, disease, heat, and brutality. They lived with the constant fear that they might be killed, as many were. Some of the prisoners began to believe that the dead were the lucky ones.

**Camp O'Donnell and the Tayabas Road Detail**

They finally reached the town of San Fernando, where they were loaded into boxcars and taken to Camp O'Donnell, where more than 2,000 American soldiers died within the first six weeks of imprisonment. On the first of June, the Japanese told the American officers in charge at the camp that 325 men were needed for a work detail away from camp. Ben was one of the soldiers selected to go. The Tayabas Road detail was even more difficult than the March, especially since none of the soldiers knew when it would be over. For most, it would end in death. Out of the original 325 soldiers, Ben was one of only 50 who survived the work camp.

After working on the Tayabas Road Detail, Ben became so ill from beriberi, dysentery, pneumonia, blood poisoning, and malaria that he could no longer work. He was interned at Bilibid Prison for eighteen months. During that time he began to record with his drawings the extent of human degradation and cruelty prisoners were subjected to. He did
so at great risk. The consequences of being caught making these drawings could have resulted in severe punishment or death. He provides this record as a tribute to those who did not survive and as an expression of what he experienced.

The drawings were done before Steele had any formal art training. He did many drawings on whatever scraps of paper he could find and with whatever he could use to make a mark. The drawings were hidden and kept, but did not survive the sinking of a transport boat that was taking the prisoners to the Japanese Mainland. Steele later produced these drawings from memory. Two drawings that he did while he worked in a coal mine on the Japanese mainland did survive. Most of the drawings and 3 paintings are now in the collection of Montana State University -- Billings Foundation.