

The Raid at Cabanatuan: Securing the Road; Crossing the Rice Field; the Black Widow Diversion; the Raid; 510 POWs Rescued; the Evacuation; Epilogue

THE RAID: TUESDAY NIGHT, JANUARY 30

The task before the three contingents approaching Camp Cabanatuan was chancy at best. A little over 400 men were about to attack a well-guarded compound, surrounded by barbed wire, and staffed by 300 armed Japanese soldiers with a thousand more bivouacked a mile away and 8,000 more only four miles away. If detected, the prospect of a slaughter was in the offing. Nevertheless, secrecy had been maintained to this point, and at 5 o'clock on the afternoon of January 30th, the Rangers and guerrillas marched out of Platero for the two-mile journey to the camp.

At the Pampanga River the three forces separated, Pajota's north to the Cabu River Bridge and Joson's south to roadblock the highway from Cabanatuan City. Mucci noticed that the size of the Pampanga's floodplain was hundreds of yards wide but the river itself was not much more than a stream. Heavy rains would have engulfed the area but divine protection had kept the skies blue over the area for several days.

The Rangers had used the one-day delay to grab about six hours of sleep, the first they had had in the sixty hours since leaving base camp on the twenty-eighth. The extra rest was another divine provision for the job that confronted these men. It took fifteen minutes for the Rangers to cross the river and after a half-mile walk through the trees they emerged on the cusp of a rice field. From that vantage point they could clearly see the target they had been thinking about for three days.

The compound itself did not present much of a challenge to the Rangers, but the mile of open space was a major concern. There were no undulations of any significance between them and front gate. Other than the camp itself the only thing that reached above ground level other than brambles and brush was the nipa shack used by Nellist to survey the camp.

After a hundred yards of stooped marching, F Company broke off and began a wide angle march, circling around to the east side of the camp. At 5:45, the Rangers of C Company and Alamo Scouts resumed their crouched creep forward but Prince, fearful of detection, soon gave the signal for the men to begin a low crawl. They now had three-quarters of a mile to go and they had to do it on elbows and knees while managing their weapons and ammunition.

After a thousand yards and an hour later, the men were experiencing pain in neck, shoulders, arms, and legs. They were scattered over a hundred-yard area and although it was late afternoon there was plenty of light for an alert guard to spot their advance. Divine protection again provided cover for them as they continued to inch forward.

Their advance put them so close to the highway that Prince became convinced they would be seen if they continued on. His fears were then allayed by the sound of prop engines. The requested flyby was being fulfilled in the form of a single P-61. It was officially designed as a night fighter but its appearance had earned it the name Black Widow. Completely black, it had a bullet-shaped nose with an L-shaped antenna pointed downward that appeared to be a stinger. Underneath the craft's belly were Lucite housings that gave it a bulbous appearance and two tail fins. The pilot's first pass was low enough for the Rangers to see blazoned the nose of his Black Widow a well-proportioned nude with the name *Hard to Get*.

The plane had been requested by General Krueger from the 547th Night Fighter Squadron. By luck of the draw the pilot of the welcomed diversion was Kenneth Schrieber who put on quite a show. The Japanese were predictably panicked. The ominous Black Widow made pass after pass over the astonished soldiers of Cabanatuan. Schrieber exercised wheeling maneuvers, allowed the plane to stall, feigned a crash, and returned time after time to buzz the camp. If the Rangers were detected he had orders to strafe the Japanese with his 20 millimeter canons.

Schrieber's air show went on for twenty minutes while the Rangers slowly moved forward to occupy a ditch running alongside the main highway. Once safely ensconced, Schrieber flew away into the twilight.

Captain Pajota and his men were all set at the Cabu River. The bridge was set to explode at 7:40. The road was embedded with land mines. The mission was to hold that bridge after the attack started at the camp so the thousand-man reinforcement couldn't come to their comrades' aid.

To the south of the camp, Captain Joson's men were in irrigation ditches lining both sides of the road.

In the meantime Lieutenant Murphy's F Company had worked its way around to the eastern side of the camp, the advance also assisted by the Black Widow's distractions. To take their positions, the Rangers had to unknowingly crawl over the unmarked graves of hundreds of executed American POWs.

Once the men had secured their positions on the east and north sides of the compound they were set to strafe the nipa barracks that housed over a hundred Japanese who inside were undressed and preparing to retire for the night. They were sitting ducks.

The circular trip around the camp had taken longer than expected and by the time Murphy was ready to take the initial shot it was 7:40. When he squeezed that first round all hell broke loose setting off Prince's "organized confusion."

Instantly the perimeter of the camp was ablaze with the flash of weaponry. The Japanese areas of the compound were awash in ordinance from M-1s, Browning, carbines, machine guns, and grenades.

The Japanese were caught totally unawares. The element of surprise had been retained and it paid magnificent dividends. The guard towers and pillboxes were neutralized in about fifteen seconds. Once the front gate was breached the Rangers charged from the ditch and sprinted down the main thoroughfare to the camp's headquarters where they opened relentless fire into the officer corps' residence.

Next came the utility shed where the bazooka team, led by Staff Sergeant Manton Stewart, set up to fire the tube's three-and-a-half-pound rocket. Suddenly out came a truck filled with men attempting an escape. Their trip was short ending in a ball of flame and smoke. Reloading, Stewart then fired at the tank shed. Several rounds resulted in the building's collapse. Two tanks, now exposed, were then dutifully put out of service.

With the Japanese sections under control and the tanks no longer a threat, the next wave of Rangers entered the area containing the POWs. Almost to a man, the prisoners assumed the Japanese were involved in killing them. They had for so long been in captivity with no hope of escape that they could not comprehend that friendly forces were there to set them free.

Some thought it was a trick. Even though the Rangers were speaking in English, the prisoners thought the Japanese were trying to lure them out into the open for execution.

Bert Bank from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who was virtually blind because of malnutrition, was trying to convince his buddies not to show themselves when a Ranger grabbed him by the arm and said, "Come on, we're here to save you." Bank didn't move. "What's wrong with you? the Ranger asked. "Don't you want to be free?"

Bank recognized something in the man's accent and said, "Where you from, boy?"

"Oklahoma" said the Ranger.

Bank extended his hand and said, "Oklahoma's good enough for me."

For those who could see, the Rangers were hard to identify. They had no markings on their uniforms and some of their weapons were unfamiliar to the men who had been incarcerated for almost three years. And these Rangers were recruited for their size and up against the emaciated prisoners they appeared to be giants.

It took longer than the Rangers had planned to extricate the prisoners because of their confusion and fear of double cross. With thousands of Japanese potentially advancing on the camp, the Rangers were anxious to get everyone out of there and head for the woods. When the men told the POWs that they were Rangers they didn't understand the word. "Ranger" was an unknown designation in the Pacific Theater when the men were captured in April of 1942.

The hardest case was Colonel James Duckworth who was commanding officer at Cabanatuan. Unwilling to surrender his authority to people he did not know, Duckworth harassed the Rangers by pushing them around and shouting, "I'm Colonel Duckworth, and I'm in charge here. Who the hell are you? You can't do this! You're going to get us killed. The Japanese told us no escapes! No one leaves here until I say so."

To which a Ranger responded, "You go tell that to Captain Prince."

Similar but less belligerent exchanges plagued the Rangers as they tried to hustle the men to the front gate. As the process proceeded the Rangers became aware that many of the men were bedridden. These prisoners were so frail that they had to be carried and some were so thin that one Ranger could carry two men on his back.

The poor physical condition of the POWs was more severe than the Rangers had expected even after having been given a heads-up. The prisoners included amputees, those with peg legs, some suffering from consumption, those without teeth, some men in their twenties were bald, most were dressed only in G-strings, and their shoes if they had any were made of pieces of wood attached to cardboard. A few, like Bank, were blind. One was deaf. Almost all were infested with lice. All were way underweight. None had a decent haircut. And a few were mentally deranged. One prisoner in sick bay was so near death that when a Ranger tried to move him he died.

Ranger August Stern was carrying Chaplain Hugh Kennedy on his back when he stumbled into an open ditch filled with sewage. Stern let out a stream of curse words until embarrassed apologized to the chaplain for taking the Lord's name in vain. Kennedy said to Stern, "Son, you are forgiven. There's a time a place for everything, and this is the time and place."

When this procession of desperate men was accumulated at the front gate their ghastly appearance brought the big, tough Rangers to tears.

As two hundred Rangers escorted 510 POWs to safety across the rice fields they left behind Camp Cabanatuan in flaming ruins. Then it was through the woods to the banks of the Pampanga River. There waiting were Pajota's carabao carts.

Sides describes the crossing of the river in biblical terms:

To some, Pampanga was both a literal and a metaphorical line of demarcation; crossing it was to cross over into freedom, for many prisoners doubted that the Japanese would elect to give further chase beyond the river. One POW thought the train of prisoners approaching the banks of the Pampanga looked like the Hebrews of Exodus "waiting for the Red Sea to part before Pharaoh's warriors arrived in hot pursuit."

Once the carts were loaded, the carabao with their plodding slow-motion pace but without apparent effort, began pulling the ill and wounded across Pampanga and then on up toward Platero and freedom.

After everyone had crossed over, Prince shot a second signal flare into the skies. The raid on Cabanatuan was completed. Two Rangers of the 128 lost their lives: Captain Jimmy Fisher who was the medical officer and Corporal Roy Sweezy of F Company. Two POWs died during the extraction: one inside the camp and one the next day just after his transport crossed into American lines. Neither Pajota nor Joson's guerrillas suffered any deaths although a few of Pajota's men were injured.

Minus these four, the entire group was intercepted at Guimba and transferred over to Army trucks. From there they headed back to base camp near Lingayen Gulf where they were welcomed by the Sixth Army. Along the way the convoy passed a tank with an American flag waving from its turret. All the men in the trucks stood at attention and saluted. Then came the tears. "We wept openly," said POW Abie Abraham, "and we wept without shame."

One of the POWs was Lieutenant Henry Lee who was the Cabanatuan's poet laureate. During his time in captivity he wrote numerous poems which were recovered in an after-action survey of the camp. This one is poignant:

*Westward we came across the smiling waves,
West to the outpost of our country's might*



"Romantic land of brilliant tropic light"
Our land of broken memories and graves.
Eastward we go and home, so few
Wrapped in their beds of clay our comrades sleep
The memories of this land are branded deep
And lost in the youth we knew.

EPILOGUE

This story, briefly told, describes the greatest rescue of prisoners of war in the history of the United States. Every one of the men associated with the raid was called upon to do his duty to perfection in order for it to be a success. The Sixth Ranger Battalion's C and F Companies, the Alamo Scouts, two guerrilla forces, Filipino civilians, and a Black Widow pilot each coordinated to pull off the impossible by completing a mission that no one thought could be done with so little loss of life.

Colonel Mucci and Captain Prince received Distinguished Service Crosses, the six other officers were awarded Silver Stars, and the one-hundred and twenty noncommissioned officers received Bronze Stars.

Freed were 510 POWs who thought they had been forgotten by their country. They were the bare remnants of the 54,000 that survived the Bataan Death March. All were provided the medical care necessary to return them to good health and a trip home.

POW Tommie Thompson said of the Rangers, "We regarded them as heroes. They regarded us as heroes. It was a mutual admiration society."

Captain Robert Prince said after the mission was completed, "We all felt a glow of satisfaction that in the midst of the fighting we had participated in a life-saving operation."

Even so, over a thousand lives were lost among the Japanese Imperial Army who fell into the sites of a group of men who, encapsulated by divine protection and provision, carried out a successful operation to relieve the suffering and save the lives of those left behind.

As we conclude our service here today, shall we remember with gratitude those soldiers who performed so valiantly in the raid at Cabanatuan and the 510 of its survivors whom they led to safety and renewed freedom. And may we remember in our prayers those who are currently in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan. As combat continues upon the visible battlefields of a half a world away, we here at home remain challenged by the struggles accompanying the Invisible War.

May a merciful God continue to provide the protection and provisions necessary for both armies to be victorious in their assigned campaigns.

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