

Excerpt from “Bataan – Corregidor – Prisoner of War”

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Hellships and the Philippines

In the early summer of 1944 Japanese shipments of prisoners of war across the Pacific Theater began ramping up. Prisoners from Singapore were being shipped north for eventual transfer to Japan, stopping in Manila Bay for weeks (in some cases months) at a time. Bilibid Prison was again being used as the primary transfer hub for prisoners being pulled in from camps across Luzon, and from other prison camps on the islands of Palawan and Mindanao – all to be shipped to Japan. As noted previously the ships used to transport the prisoners had no special markings to indicate their human cargo. Prison ships sailing among Philippine islands and those heading to Japan from Manila had avoided attacks by American forces thus far. *Shinyo Maru* would break this streak of good fortune.

Having shipped prisoners from Luzon to Davao years earlier to level load the populations of the main Japanese prison camps in the Philippines, *Shinyo Maru*, a small freighter, was now assigned to take prisoners back to Manila for further transfer to Japan. Seven hundred and fifty prisoners were loaded at Davao on August 22, but the ship remained pierside for weeks. While awaiting orders to set sail, the prisoners were assigned to various work details close at hand, using the ship as a floating barracks. *Shinyo Maru* finally set sail for Manila on September 7. On its first day out of port it was attacked by the submarine USS *Paddle* off the north coast of Mindanao. Fewer than 100 prisoners survived the torpedo attack, and the rifle fire and grenades thrown at them by vengeful Japanese guards before the ship went down.

Next was the cargo ship *Hofuku Maru*. This ship and four others were carrying British and Dutch prisoners of war. They had convoyed north from Singapore in early July and anchored in Manila Bay awaiting orders to continue to Formosa or Japan. The other four ships eventually joined convoys in late July and early August and continued north. *Hofuku Maru* was delayed in Manila possibly due to continuing engine trouble – it had been left behind for this reason on an earlier leg of the trip north. Another factor was the declining health of the prisoners on board, and fears of bringing tropical diseases to the Japanese mainland. The prisoners remained in the

ship's holds in Manila Bay for nine weeks suffering in the heat, from their various maladies, and from inadequate nutrition. No less than 100 died while at anchor. Another 70 were taken to the hospital at Bilibid where several more died. A draft of Americans at Bilibid was sent aboard *Hofuku Maru* to return it to its original prisoner complement as it prepared to set sail.

On September 20, the day before the Camp Murphy prisoners arrived at Bilibid, *Hofuku Maru* sailed from Manila along with four other freighters and a cadre of small escorts. After anchoring near Subic Bay overnight, the convoy started for Takao, Formosa. It was almost immediately set upon by U.S. Navy aircraft from Admiral Mitscher's TF38 (Task Force 38 – the 'Fast Carrier Task Force') which were conducting raids, in force, across Luzon. Dozens of navy dive bombers and torpedo bombers took the convoy under attack. All the transports and several of the escorts were sunk or destroyed. Less than 250 of the almost 1,300 prisoners on board *Hofuku Maru* survived. Some were picked up by surviving Japanese escorts, others swam to shore where they were rounded up and sent to Cabanatuan or Bilibid. Most survivors would sail again on yet another hellship.

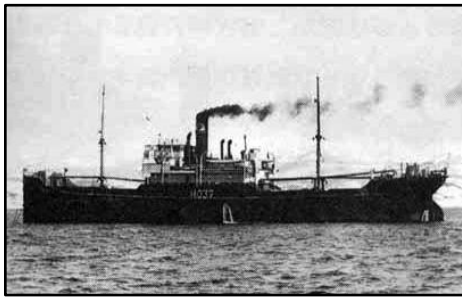
Hokusen Maru and Arisan Maru

On September 21 and 22, TF38 aircraft pounded both shipping and land-based targets on Luzon. In addition to *Hofuku Maru*, no less than 35 other Japanese ships were destroyed with many others heavily damaged. Admiral Mitscher then withdrew his task force to refuel, returning on the September 24 for a last go (for now) at targets on Luzon and the central Philippines. The next day TF38 withdrew to the southeast to refit and rearm.

As with Camp Murphy, the Japanese were closing most other prison camps in the Philippines with only Cabanatuan retaining a significant prisoner population. Over 2,000 prisoners flooded into Bilibid Prison by the end of September, but they would not stay long. Senior American officers at Bilibid were told to identify two groups of 1,000 men to ship out in early October. The final tally of the first group was 1,160. These men marched five miles to Pier Seven at the Port of Manila and boarded the freighter *Hokusen Maru* on the evening of October 1. What one prisoner called 'a small weather-beaten collier,' the ship was just over 2,200 tons, 250 feet in length, and 46 feet in the beam.

The prisoners packed into the cargo holds of *Hokusen Maru* included my father and over 200 of his compatriots from Camp Murphy. They were joined by men who had been shipped back to Manila from Davao and Palawan, by men recently pulled into Bilibid from various other airfield work camps on Luzon (Nielsen, Nichols, Clark), and by prisoners from Cabanatuan. Also, 150 prisoners in this shipment were British and Dutch survivors from *Hofuku Maru*. *Hokusen Maru* would soon join a convoy headed for Japan via Formosa.

In the process of boarding the freighter, my father became separated from his friends from Camp Murphy. He and about 700 other men, including Captain Coone (a senior medical officer that had also been at Camp Murphy) and several other doctors, were loaded into the forward hold – its previous cargo had been coal. The rest of the prisoners were loaded into the aft hold which had last been used to transport horses. The ship spent two nights at anchor in Manila Bay before joining a convoy on October 3. From the first night many men on the freighter were panicked by the crowded conditions and intense heat in the holds, and by the prospect of being attacked by their own navy. Many were in poor health, bringing with them diseases they had never quite conquered in previous prison camps, with lingering symptoms



The Hellship 'Hokusen Maru'

of dysentery, malaria, and beriberi among them. These men suffered almost immediately from inadequate hydration (no more than a canteen full of water per day, often less) and rice rations lacking any nutrition.

Although they were provided benjo buckets (benjo, Japanese slang for 'toilet') many suffering from dysentery could not maneuver quickly enough past, or over, other prisoners to use them. Soon, some did not have the energy to bother and soiled themselves. One of the doctors, Captain Howard Sabin, who had been with Dad and the others at Lipa and Camp Murphy, climbed to the top of the hold's access ladder and pounded on the hatch, shouting that the men needed fresh air and water. A guard opened the hatch and beat him severely; he died later that night. These conditions persisted throughout the voyage, during which only a few men were allowed out of the cramped spaces. Most were left in the heat and stench of the ship's holds, to wallow in fear, sickness, and their own

excrement. At the end of the first week, seven were dead. Most, in the view of Captain Coone, died of heat prostration.

Some of the deaths on *Hokusen Maru* were not the result of beatings or the severe conditions imposed on them by their captors. Some were killed by their fellow prisoners. There are multiple eye-witness accounts by prisoners who survived this voyage describing what had happened to at least a few of the men who died. Those who could not contain their fear or misery cried out, moaned, wailed, and thrashed about the hold. They could not control the outward manifestations of their suffering, even when prodded or threatened by fellow prisoners. To silence them, several were apparently beaten to death during the night. They were discovered with head trauma the next morning, probably from the repeated blows of a canteen. We will never know how many lives ended this way. When a lifeless body was discovered in the hold, a rope was used to hoist it out on deck, and it was unceremoniously dumped overboard.

Dad provided little insight into the specifics of his experiences over what became a 39-day voyage. When I asked him about it, he said that all he remembered was being packed in like a sardine, constant hunger and thirst, body lice, and thinking that if they were bombed or torpedoed, death was certain. Responding to a question regarding how he got through it, he said that in such a situation you ‘learn to just do what you can do.’ He added one other comment. In the holds of *Hokusen Maru*, you always wanted to keep control of your canteen – ‘you sat on that sucker – you guarded it with your life.’ He went on to describe this hellship voyage as his worst experience as a prisoner of war. Almost every survivor who has written or commented about his experience on *Hokusen Maru* said the same thing. Survivors of the Bataan Death March and Camp O’Donnell said their time on this hellship was the worst of the three experiences.

Once in the hold, Dad had found a space against a bulkhead for the entire voyage. He had no room to lie down but could lean back and catch brief periods of sleep. Those toward the middle of the hold sat back-to-back, leaning on one another to try to get some rest. My father told me he witnessed no assaults or murders on *Hokusen Maru*. However, he said this about his fellow prisoners in the forward hold of the freighter – ‘At times I was ashamed to be an American...in a situation like that they become cut-throat, dog-eat-dog...strictly a matter of survival.’ Clearly, there were certain

things about this hellship he simply did not want to discuss in any detail. My mother once told me that in the first several years of their marriage after the war, my father experienced what she called ‘night terrors.’ I wonder now whether it wasn’t the experience on *Hokusen Maru* that brought them on.

After leaving Manila Bay *Hokusen Maru* moved up the west coast of Luzon as part of a nine-ship convoy with three escorts. Wary of submarine attacks, the convoy slowly moved north during the day and anchored each night. On October 5, four more freighters and five additional escorts joined the convoy at the port of San Fernando, La Union. The next day, while continuing north and hugging the Luzon coast the convoy became the target of USS *Cabrilla*. The submarine dispatched two freighters with torpedo attacks. The remainder of the convoy pulled into a sheltered bay in north Luzon on October 7, pausing to consider its options. The Japanese escorts had been informed that U.S. Navy aircraft carriers were operating east of Formosa.

Given the operations of Admiral Mitscher’s TF38 since mid-September, the Japanese convoy was wise to be cautious. Returning to the Philippine Sea from its anchorage at Ulithi in the Caroline Islands, TF38 at this moment pushed north, bypassing Formosa to attack Okinawa. On October 10 it conducted multiple raids on land-based targets and shipping before turning southwest for the Luzon Strait. After attacks on North Luzon on the 11th, Mitscher turned his attention fully on Formosa. From October 12 – 14, TF38 air wings repeatedly attacked Japanese airfields on the island and went after shipping at Takao harbor. Here the American task force absorbed the first successful counterattacks by Japanese aircraft (several ships were damaged by torpedo and kamikaze attacks), but it continued the offensive. After sending a half dozen damaged ships back to New Guinea for repairs, TF38 turned its attention back to Luzon while it hunted for what remained of the Imperial Japanese Navy. On October 19, TF38 conducted a final strike on Luzon and moved south to support MacArthur’s return to the Philippines at Leyte Gulf.

Earlier, as TF38 sailed for Okinawa, the *Hokusen Maru* convoy split up, with some ships heading west for Hainan Island and away from the carrier-based aircraft threat. On October 9, *Hokusen Maru* and others pushed north into the Luzon Strait to make a dash for Formosa but quickly changed course northwest for Hong Kong. They too realized it was best to steer clear of the threat posed by Mitscher’s task force. However, almost immediately they

were set upon by a U.S. Navy submarine wolfpack. USS *Hoe* picked off one transport and *Sawfish* another. Prisoners who were topside on *Hokusen Maru* at the time claimed torpedoes were fired at the ship but missed the mark. Their ship and three others from the original convoy pulled into the Hong Kong roadstead the morning of October 11 and anchored. Within two days the cumulative prisoner death toll on *Hokusen Maru* stood at twenty-seven.

The transports still had to make their way to Formosa, but with TF38 on the horizon (and about to unleash three days of attacks on Takao and other targets on that island), it was safer for now to remain at Hong Kong – or so they thought. My father kept a crude log of the *Hokusen Maru* voyage, the basics of each day's events. He noted the submarine attacks on the convoy and their results. At Hong Kong he recorded *Hokusen Maru's* movements over several days while waiting to continue the voyage to Formosa. The first few days they remained at anchor but on the evening of October 14 moved 'upriver,' returning to the roadstead the next morning. This was repeated the next night.

After returning to the anchorage on the morning of the 16th, a new threat to their hellship emerged. U.S. Army Air Forces bombers attacked Hong Kong. That day, the 14th Air Force, its aircraft flying from bases in China, launched its largest attack on Japanese targets in Hong Kong and Kowloon up to that point in the war. The principal targets were the Kowloon Docks – a major Imperial Japanese Navy facility – and shipping. After avoiding Admiral Mitscher's task force and multiple submarine attacks, the prisoners aboard *Hokusen Maru* must have wondered whether their luck was about to run out.

From information provided by prisoners on deck at the time of the attack, Dad recorded the following in his journal: 'Returned to harbor at daylight. Afternoon air raid, 27 highfliers escorted by 15 fighters observed. Shore installations bombed; ships strafed. Moved upriver for the night.' We can forgive his fellow prisoners for not grasping the full strength of the attack. They were rushing to get below deck while the ships were being strafed, and the ship anchored nearby had taken a direct hit from a bomb. After the war Dad learned that the raid included 34 bombers (B-24/B-25) with 38 fighter escorts (P-51/P-40). The commander of the 14th Air Force, Lieutenant General Claire Chenault, reported significant damage to the Kowloon Docks



Results of 14th Air Force attack. Smoke from Kowloon and from ships in the harbor. The hellship 'Hokusen Maru' with its prisoner cargo is somewhere below. Note the interceptor airplane in the middle of the image.

and surrounding area, with eight freighters sunk and 11 damaged. However, the luck of the prisoners on *Hokusen Maru* had held.

In the aftermath of the attack at Hong Kong all Japanese shipping, for the moment, was forced to stay put. TF38 was still having its way, unchallenged, east of Formosa. Its aircraft had even ranged far to the west to sink a Japanese freighter just 120 miles southeast of Hong Kong. However, Mitscher's task force eventually had to move

south to support the landings at Leyte that began as scheduled on October 20. Perhaps informed of the major battle raging in the central Philippines, *Hokusen Maru* and others made a dash for Formosa on October 21, anchoring at Takao three days later. It seems General MacArthur's return to the Philippines – requiring the support of the wide-ranging aircraft of TF38 – had



14th Air Force bombers immediately after the attack.

indirectly benefited his former troops now confined in the holds of the Japanese freighter.

At Takao, *Hokusen Maru* unloaded a shipment of copra (dried coconut kernels), took on coal and a load of metal ingots, and made ready for the next leg of its journey to Japan. Before getting underway, four additional American prisoners came aboard. Though initially isolated from the others they were immediately recognized as having been in the group of prisoners that was to leave Manila on the next ship out after *Hokusen Maru*. After several days they joined the others in the forward hold. The men explained that they, in fact, had been on that ship – *Arisan Maru*. It initially left Manila Bay on October 11 but headed south to Palawan to avoid the continuing raids by TF38 aircraft on Luzon. The freighter returned to Manila briefly and on October 21 and joined a large convoy of 11 other transports and a navy supply ship, this time with a stout escort – three navy destroyers.

On October 23, the *Arisan Maru* convoy entered the Luzon Strait. The ‘wolfpack’ label is inadequate to describe what this Japanese convoy encountered as it headed north. Eight U.S. Navy submarines were waiting off Luzon, with another (USS *Tang*) operating still farther to the north. In the engagement, *Cobia*, *Icefish*, and *Blackfish* saved their torpedoes for future targets. *Snook*, *Sanfish*, *Drum*, *Shark*, and *Seadragon* pressed the attack, scattering the convoy. *Snook* and *Seadragon* did the most damage, sinking three freighters each. *Drum* and *Sanfish* sank one each. One of the last ships remaining was the slow moving *Arisan Maru*. Attacked by *Shark*, only nine of the 1,800 prisoners on board survived. Four of them had now boarded their second hellship – *Hokusen Maru*.

A large convoy, including *Hokusen Maru*, finally began the trek from Takao to Japan on November 6. However, within a day, apparently responding to some threat of attack, the convoy returned to port. On November 8, after 39 days on board the Japanese freighter, and after no less than 36 preventable deaths, the surviving prisoners disembarked. The men and their meagre possessions were first deloused. They were then taken to showers where they discarded their soiled clothes, bathed, and put on fresh clothing. They were then organized into groups and herded to a train station nearby. Most would spend the next two months in prison camps on Formosa. My father was in the group sent to the camp at Toroku.

For years, unaware of the actual name of their hellship, surviving allied prisoners spoke of *Hokusen Maru* derisively as the 'Benjo Maru' or 'Horror Maru' for obvious reasons. Beyond the emotional scars they carried with them when they disembarked (and must have carried with them for the rest of their lives) the immediate concern in Formosa was their physical well-being. Many survivors were now very ill, particularly those with malaria, dysentery, and beriberi. All suffered significant weight loss. Dozens of the survivors of the voyage would later expire from the lingering effects of the ordeal.

The Last of the Hellships

On December 14, just weeks before American landings on Luzon, the last ship carrying prisoners of war out of the Philippines put to sea. The saga of the more than 1,600 men who boarded *Oryoku Maru* would become one of the greatest tragedies of the war. Most of the prisoners were Americans, and most of them were officers. They included senior unit commanders; many were medical corps officers. In addition to the prisoners stuffed into the ship's cargo holds, about 1,500 Japanese troops, 550 Japanese women and children, and 1,100 Japanese survivors of previous shipping attacks were on board.

The *Oryoku Maru* convoy was just off the Bataan Peninsula when first attacked by aircraft from TF38. Strafing runs and bombing/rocket attacks



The hellship 'Oryoku Maru' off Olongapo Point after repeated attacks by U.S. Navy aircraft.

continued until just before nightfall when the ship entered Subic Bay and off loaded the Japanese civilians. The attacks started up again the next morning leaving the ship dead in the water just 300 yards from Olongapo Point. Prisoners scrambled over the side and swam or waded to shore. They were collected and

confined for several days in old tennis courts at the former U.S. Navy station at Olongapo. By this time over 300 prisoners were dead. Some died from exhaustion and disease prior to the first attacks; some were killed in the attacks by the navy aircraft; some were victims of fratricide, killed by their fellow prisoners fighting to escape the ships holds; some, allegedly attempting to escape, were shot by Japanese guards as they waded ashore. Others died of their wounds and injuries on the Olongapo tennis courts.

The Japanese looked for another ship to complete the journey to Japan. It found two, *Enoura Maru* and *Brazil Maru*, which the survivors would board at San Fernando, La Union, on the Lingayen Gulf coast. The men were first trucked north spending one night at San Fernando, Pampanga. The next morning American officers were ordered to identify 15 prisoners who were not capable of continuing the voyage due to illness, wounds, or injury. They were told these men would be taken back to Bilibid. They never made it. Instead, the men were taken to a local cemetery where they were murdered and buried in a mass grave.

The new convoy finally left port on December 27, arriving at Takao on the last day of 1944. The prison ships had made the sprint across the Luzon Strait unmolested. Thankfully, the only American success against the convoy was a Japanese destroyer escort, sunk by the submarine *Razorback*. Nonetheless, the deaths continued to mount – 21 prisoners died during the transit to Takao where the two ships remained at anchor for two weeks. On January 6 all the prisoners were consolidated in the holds of *Enoura Maru*. At this juncture in their journey, the death toll of the men who had originally boarded *Oryoku Maru* had grown to 330. That number was more than doubled within a week, the result of TF38 aircraft once again attacking shipping at Takao. On January 9, approximately 350 prisoners were killed on *Enoura Maru* from a direct hit by a bomb from one of the carrier-based aircraft. Days later the survivors, just over 900 men, were moved back to *Brazil Maru* which left Takao for Japan on January 14.

The *Brazil Maru* convoy moved slowly, taking a route as far away from potential U.S. Navy attacks as it could, hugging the China coast before jumping across to the coastal waters of the Korean Peninsula, then on to Moji in southern Japan. Though successful in avoiding attacks, the voyage took a heavy toll on the sick, injured, and wounded prisoners. The night before leaving Takao, 16 more died; the death rate climbed every day

thereafter. During the two-week transit to Moji a total of 450 men died from the residual effects of the previous attacks, and from their continuous mistreatment by their captors over the six weeks of this horrible saga.

Over 1,100 of the 1,619 prisoners of war who left Manila on *Oryoku Maru* were killed en route Japan. In all, over 4,100 prisoners who boarded Japanese ships in Manila in late 1944 were dead. U.S. Navy submarine and carrier-based aircraft had unwittingly and firmly imprinted the term 'hellships' on the Japanese craft transporting the defenseless allied prisoners of war.

From Formosa, just two more ships would carry prisoners to Japan. My father was on the penultimate voyage.

Enoshima Maru

Approximately 600 prisoners boarded *Enoshima Maru* on January 20, 1945, including Dad and the men from Toroku, and hundreds more pulled in from other camps. Several British prisoners joined the mostly American cargo. The transit of *Enoshima Maru* from Keelung to Moji was a night-and-day experience compared to Dad's voyage on *Hokusen Maru*, a vast improvement in accommodations and food. The freighter had been partially re-rigged as a troop transport – the men slept on bunks, not in coal dust and horse crap. But they were still the potential target of U.S. Navy and Army Air Forces bombers. Their first air-raid alert came the following day – navy planes in the distance – apparently headed for more important targets.

Before leaving port, forty-one men were taken off the ship, along with Captain Coone and several enlisted medics. It was feared these men had a form of encephalitis; the medical men would look after the patients at the local quarantine station.

The first American attempt on *Enoshima Maru* came the following day, January 22, while the ship was still at anchor. Navy carrier-based aircraft were back at it – one took aim at the freighter. A near miss rocked the ship and spooked the prisoners. In Dad's compartment an army chaplain got the attention of the men and provided a much-needed diversion through the telling of a long, slightly off-color joke. When the laughter subsided, calm prevailed.

After two more days at anchor and two more air-raid alerts, *Enoshima Maru* and its remaining cargo of 564 prisoners left Keelung and joined a convoy for Japan. Based only on the length of the transit, this group must also have

taken a route to the west in hopes of avoiding the American navy. Though always aware of the potential for being attacked, the prisoners luxuriated in their short stay on the ship. In addition to comfortable, roomy berths, they were fed two meals a day, both consisting of rice and soup. The evening meal usually included a protein as well, either pork or smoked duck. The prisoners were even allowed on deck to get some exercise and use the saddle latrines that directed their waste directly overboard. They made it almost two weeks before a U.S. Navy submarine sniffed out the convoy, attacking and sinking two of its number on February 6.

Along with the prisoners, the freighter was also carrying a cargo that included sugar and canned tomatoes. For years after the war the survivors, not knowing the actual name of the ship, referred to it as Sato Maru – ‘sato’ being the Japanese word for sugar. Of course, during the transit the prisoners figured out how to access the cargo holds. Dad recalled the ‘end’ result of adding far too much sugar and tomatoes to the prisoners’ fragile digestive systems. ‘Everyone got the shits!’ he laughed, as he described the wind-blown sheets of red diarrhea launched through the saddle latrines on the ship’s rail.

He recounted one foray into the sugar hold that was going well until he heard what he thought was an American submarine’s sonar pings. Not wanting to be in the bowels of the ship if attacked, he scrambled back to the berthing compartment. He discovered after the war that the last thing a submarine would do when hunting a target (or evading those intent on its destruction) would be to give away its location with active (pinging) sonar. In this case, Dad had heard the convoy’s escorts using their sonar to try to locate and attack an American submarine. He was wrong about the source of the sonar pings but wise in seeking higher ground with a submarine in the area.

The *Enoshima Maru* convoy pressed on, finally anchoring at Moji on February 10. Five men died during the voyage – three Americans and two British. All had previously sailed on *Hokusen Maru*, the delayed death sentences from that voyage continuing to come due. The ship moved to a dock the following day and offloaded the men. They took a ferry across the strait to the island of Honshu and boarded a train for Kobe, a port and industrial center west of Osaka. From there they were put on street cars for

a short ride to their new camp, Wakinohama, arriving there the afternoon of February 12.

The last hellship voyage from Formosa to Japan left Keelung two weeks later carrying 701 men. *Taiko Maru* arrived at Moji in early March; four men died in transit. Other than the men who were liberated in the Philippines by MacArthur's troops, the American defenders of the Philippines who had survived the multi-modal, life-threatening treatment of their Japanese captors for almost three years were now confined to hospitals and work camps in Formosa, Korea, Japan, and Manchuria. With respect to the broader use of hellships by the Japanese, only two more voyages occurred before the end of the war, far to the south.