

Excerpt from “Bataan – Corregidor – Prisoner of War”

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The Sacrifice of the 31st Infantry Regiment in World War II

No official roster of my father’s unit survived the chaos of the defense of Bataan and Corregidor. However, building on prior research I have identified over 2,260 men who were affiliated with the 31st Infantry from the first day of the war through the surrender of Bataan in April 1942. Included in this total are the medics and medical corps officers who comprised the regiment’s medical detachment, and most of the more than 400 men who were reassigned to the 31st as replacement troops on Bataan.

Of the 2,260 men of the 31st Infantry Regiment who I have identified thus far, fewer than 900 survived the war. The individual stories of those who lost their lives reflect the broader story of all the American defenders of the Philippines from the brief five months of combat through their years of imprisonment by the Japanese.

Over 140 men from the 31st were killed in action or died of their wounds prior to the surrender. They were involved in nearly every key engagement on Bataan from Layac Junction to the last stand at the reserve line of battle near Mount Samat. In fact, the first American death in the Philippines was a man from the 31st. Corporal Cecil Brand (E Company) was the victim of a Japanese air attack at Camp John Hay on December 8, 1941. Many of the 31st Infantry who escaped Bataan were among the last Americans to die in combat before the surrender of the Philippines, on Corregidor. Of the several men of the 31st who joined the guerrilla movement that remained active throughout the war, a number were killed fighting as guerrillas; no less than four were subsequently captured and executed by the Japanese. Two thirds of the 31st Infantry

combat dead are carried today by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) as 'missing in action' since their remains have either not been recovered or have not been identified.

After the surrender of the Philippines the men of the 31st Infantry were victims of nearly every atrocity inflicted on American troops during their captivity. They died both on the Bataan Death March and while confined in the 92nd Garage area after the surrender of Corregidor. Three hundred and fifty died at Camp O'Donnell; more than 430 died at Cabanatuan, including several from summary executions; six were victims of the Palawan Massacre. Close to 250 men of the 31st Infantry died on hellship voyages, with the sinking of *Arisan Maru* accounting for more than half that number. They lost no fewer than 50 men during the *Oryoku Maru* saga (including *Enoura Maru* and *Brazil Maru*); two were among those murdered at San Fernando after *Oryoku Maru* was abandoned. Over 70 died after surviving their hellship voyages, most in Japan with several more in Formosa and Manchuria.

Over 1,250 men who fought with the 31st Infantry Regiment died as prisoners of war – this equates to sixty percent of those who had surrendered to the Japanese. Well over ten percent of all of the American defenders of the Philippines who perished as prisoners of the Japanese had been attached to the 31st Infantry. Today, over 470 of the regiment's men taken as prisoners of war continue to be carried as 'missing' by DPAA. This number is driven primarily by those lost at sea on hellships and by the confusion resulting from the occasional use of communal graves at the Cabanatuan prison camp cemetery.

When combined with their losses in combat, over 1,400 members of the 31st Infantry Regiment lost their lives in World War II. In a sense, the impact of the suffering and death among the men of the 31st was shared

across the breadth of the United States of the early 1940s – each of the 48 states and the District of Columbia was represented by the deceased in this single regiment.

In the course of my research, I identified an additional 125 members of the 31st Infantry, both officers and enlisted, who were transferred out of the regiment just prior to the start of the war. In the main, these men were assigned to P.A. reserve units. Of the 80 enlisted men who transferred, 76 received battlefield commissions, becoming 2nd Lieutenants while leading Filipinos in the defense of their homeland. The fate of these former members of the 31st Infantry mirrored what I have described above with respect to their fellow soldiers who remained in the 31st: if they survived combat and became a prisoner of the Japanese, six in ten of them died prior to the end of the war.

After the war the remains of a relatively small number of the 31st Infantry Regiment dead were recovered and returned to the United States, allowing their families to lay them to rest at church cemeteries and community burial grounds. Several others are buried or memorialized at U.S. national cemeteries including at the Honolulu Memorial within the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (Honolulu, Hawaii) and Arlington National Cemetery. The remains of five of the six who were murdered at Palawan are interred at the Palawan WWII Massacre Memorial at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery (St Louis, Missouri). They are among the 127 POWs from Palawan interred there in a group grave.

The great majority of the members of the 31st Infantry Regiment who died during the war are interred or memorialized at three sites in the Philippines. The Capas National Shrine (Municipality of Capas, Tarlac Province) is a Philippine memorial to all who were imprisoned at Camp

O'Donnell – Filipinos and Americans – immediately after the Bataan Death March. It includes a small museum and memorial erected by the American POW group, The Battling Bastards of Bataan. At the Cabanatuan American Memorial (located on the site of Cabanatuan Camp One near Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija Province) they are among the 2,600 men who died at Cabanatuan whose names are inscribed on a memorial wall. Also, hundreds of men of the 31st Infantry can be found at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial among the graves of almost 17,000 World War II dead or among the names of the 36,000 listed there on the Tablets of the Missing.

The actions of the defenders of the Philippines, both Filipino and American, were the first expression of the resilience and spirit of the United States as it was pulled into World War II. For its contribution to the defense of the Philippines the 31st Infantry Regiment was among several units earning three different Presidential Unit Citations and the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation.

Less than a year after the end of World War II the 31st Infantry was reconstituted in Korea as part of the 7th Infantry Division which served as a post-war occupation force. Since that time the 31st has been engaged in many of the major combat operations of the United States armed forces through the present, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and more recently operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, the 4th Battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment – the 'Polar Bear Battalion' – continues in active service to the country as a component of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. It is based at Fort Drum, New York.