Bataan Death March

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The Bataan March of Death began at dawn, April 9, 1942, after the three-month Battle of Bataan and against the orders of Generals Douglas MacArthur and Jonathan Wainwright. Major General Edward P. King, Jr., commanding Luzon Force, Bataan, Philippine Islands, surrendered more than 75,000 (66,000 Filipinos, 1,000 Chinese Filipinos, and 11,796 Americans) starving and disease-ridden men. King inquired of the Japanese colonel in charge if the prisoners would be well treated, to which he responded, “We’re not barbarians.”  A month later, General Wainwright was forced to surrender Corregidor.

The prisoners-of-war immediately were forced to give up their belongings and to endure a 75-mile march to captivity at Camp O’Donnell. Thousands, already weakened by lack of food and medicine during their defense of the Philippines, died en route from disease, starvation, dehydration, heat prostration, untreated wounds, and random execution. If an item “Made in Japan” was found in their possession, they were immediately executed. To the Japanese military for whom surrender was not an option, the captives, surrendered by their commander, were considered cowards (“dogs”).

Anticipating 25,000 prisoners, the Japanese were not at all equipped to handle the numbers they encountered. Prisoners were beaten randomly and were often denied promised food and water. Those who fell behind were usually executed or left to die. The sides of the roads became littered with dead bodies and those begging for help.

Along the Death March, approximately 54,000 of the 75,000 prisoners reached their destination. The death toll of the March is difficult to assess. Approximately 5,000-10,000 Filipino and 600-650 American prisoners of war died before they could reach Camp O'Donnell.

On June 6, 1942, the Filipino soldiers were granted amnesty by the Japanese military and released while the American prisoners continued to be held. Camp O'Donnell was hell. They would line up once a day for water. Men were weak and dying from dysentery and beriberi. Eventually they were transferred to camps outside of the Philippines.

This process began with American prisoners moving from Camp O'Donnell to Camp Cabanatuan or to prison camps in Japan, Korea, Formosa (Taiwan), and Manchuria in transports known as "hell ships." Thousands were drowned because the ships were not marked as prison ships, a violation of the Geneva Convention, and were attacked.

The 511 prisoners-of-war who still remained at the Cabanatuan Prison Camp as of January 1945 were freed during an attack on the camp led by U.S. Army Rangers known as “Raid at Cabanatuan” or “The Great Raid.”

The Bataan Death March is commemorated during annual ceremonies in Santa Fe and Albuquerque because of the valor of the New Mexico National Guard. As the first state National Guard to be federalized and sent to defend the Philippines in the fall of 1941, they were the first to fire at the Japanese planes and the last to lay down their arms. Since 1989, a Bataan Memorial Death March, or Bataan marathon, is held every year in March at the White Sands Missile Range near Las Cruces, New Mexico.

“Riveting accounts of the Bataan Death March...”  
  
~ Mike Wismer, member of the Los Alamos County Council  
Major, USAF Retired Operation Desert Storm Veteran