Virginians at War
WWII: POWs - Japan
Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II: 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific theater.

WORLD WAR II
Prisoners of War
The Pacific Theater

NARRATOR: Over 20,000 Americans were captured and interned in Japanese prisoner of war camps during World War II. These camps were notorious for their brutality, and had a death rate in excess of 35 percent.

CAPTURED

LAMBAISO: I was picked up by fifth Kangs? Christmas day, '41. And by 12 o'clock the next day, they had us all lined up, painting numbers on our back. And we were festivators in Manila, and we worked there for 27 and a half months. We did nothing but... everything we touched while we were there, we sabotaged. Everything we could possibly sabotage.

CROSS: That's when our flag was pulled down, and theirs was pulled up. And there was about 12,000 of us, and they put us out there and we stayed there for three weeks with one little old spigot that drizzled water. I lived off of the canteens from dead Americans and dead Japs.

ZIMBA: The rank came out and gave us the first Japanese speech and said, “I want you people to know that you are prisoners of war of the Imperial Japanese Army and you are far lower than the lowest Japanese private in the Imperial Army.”

SEEGERS: They put us in a camp – my mom and my sister in one camp, my father and I went into another camp. I was 12 years old… 12, 13 years old… I was a kid.

TURNER: I don’t know how many depth charges they dropped. They were massive. But they beat us all up, knocked out the lights, but as long as they were hitting on top, all of the explosion went up, just about. So we were in the mud there. At about 10 o’clock that night, they quit. I know they busted airlines on the outside. And they left us alone, and we started trying to get out of there. At about 11 o’clock, 12 o’clock, we finally broke loose from the mud, and we were on our last bank of high-pressure air when we broke through. We were going to run across the Java Sea to the southern tip of Barnaul and go down in shallow water and work on it, and repair the ship, best we could and try to get out of there. Well, about 4 o’clock in the morning, here come a cruiser and two destroyers in on us. When they come in and started firing, the old man said, “Abandon ship.” And we threw all the code books and all, they were sunk with lead, and all that, sunk to the bottom, and started letting her go down. We had all got off of it, swam away from it. Well, when it got light enough, they could see that it was gone, and one of the tin cans come by, come up close. So they took us aboard, took us up to the southern coast of Borneo, went there, offloaded us there and marched us out to a Dutch Army camp out there.

BATAAN DEATH MARCH: PHILIPPINES

MERRITT: And then, Bataan fell on April the 9th. And that’s when they started the death march. And then they lined up their guns all along the Bataan peninsula; it was about 100 batteries, the Japs’ put them in, and they shelled us and they bombed us for 28 days until “Skinny” Wainwright wanted to run up the flag. On May the 6th, the runners, yeah, and that’s why I ended up on Corregidor.

IDLETT: We got off at McCafee Station and they were all just… I think it’s about five or six miles more up to Camp O’Donnell. And along the way there, the Filipino people tried to give us food. Tried… they were crying. It felt… sorry, but it kind of brings tears to my eyes. But they were throwing food to us. Some of them got killed

for doing it. I saw… bayonetted, killed for throwing, trying to throw a little ball of rice or something, to a soldier.

DAUGHTERY: Many of them Filipinos, later on, trying to get food and medicine to the American G.I.'s, were killed. Caught and killed for trying to help us. I had a young man that I had put through some boot camp, just like I did Jack, he came over when Jack came over. Come to me, he says, "Serge," he says, "I can't eat this rice." And I told him, I says, "Irwin, if you don't eat this rice… you see them guys they're carrying out up out the hill? That's where you're gonna go." I says, "Eat anything you can find to eat." In a week, he was dead. Just a young kid.

IDLETT: Our officers had found out where some food was, and they'd gathered it all up. Finally said, "Well, each man can have one can." So they lined us up and led us all by that pile and pick up one can of food to take with us. I picked up the biggest can I could see. It was a gallon can. No label on it, I had no idea what I was getting. You never – it was a big surprise to me, when I finally opened it later. It was a gallon can of prunes.

DOWNEY: We marched for five and a half days, and sometimes there was a little creek in there, you know, so just scoop up a little bit and even if the water's dirty – I had a white t-shirt, so I put that on my mouth first and then sip some of the water, see. Who knows where that water came from? And the Japanese, sometimes, you know, when you'd see somebody fall and they can't walk anymore, instead of shooting them, they'd just stick their bayonets in. It happened a lot of times. And that was terrible. I hate it. I'll never forget it, though.

PRISON CAMPS

TURNER: We had a spirit, that this wouldn't let them break our spirit. But I wasn't about to let them get me. No matter what they did. I got beat time and again. They'd beat you for anything in the world. If you fell down, now, you got beat for it. But I never fell down. Well the mosquitoes there were so bad, that you had a quarter of mosquitoes that you had to turn in every day. He told me, he says, "Turk, I quit. I give up." I said, "Willie, you can't! We're gonna get outta here tomorrow, they'll be here." "No, no." "They'll be here," I said. "They will be here tomorrow." He laid down in the bunk that night and when I woke up the next morning, he was dead. He – and he was not sick, as far as really sick – he just did not have the will to live.

IDLETT: There weren't individual graves. I mean, those back in O'Donnell would put 20, 40 men in one shallow hole, you know? We stripped them of everything – their clothes, anything else they had, so other people could use it. In the Philippines, they fed us rice, and it was full of rat droppings, weevils, little green worms, everything else. And I, I never took them out. I never took any of them out. I ate all those worms. Little weevils were kind of crunchy, but the little green worms, you couldn't even tell when you were eating them, but I thought, well, that's a little extra protein.

LAMBAISO: They beat the hell out of me. Eye cut open, welts on my head, nose was bleeding, they broke my nose, stripped me to the waist, tied my back of me, on my knees, facing the sun. Every hour and a half, two hours, marsh goes, get up, and turn into the sun. And when I got done, the sun set. Sergeant Guard come over and says, "Okay. Good prisoner. Let me help you up."

SEEGERS: My dad ended up in the hospital two or three months, and he was released, and I passed him in the barracks and I didn't even recognize him. He turned around and he said, "Frank!" And I looked up and I said, who the heck is that guy? Where's my dad? He had lost 30 or 40 pounds, he was just a skeleton.

DAUGHTERY: I saw him tie a guy to a coconut tree for stealing a can of corned beef, and he beat him. They beat him with a pick handle until he fell limp in the ropes. Well I didn't care about the Japanese rules. I was doing whatever was good for me to survive the situation.

MERRITT: And a lot of guys, they figured, "Well, the Americans are never gonna come get us." And so they just gave up. They just died. When they come out of the war, we had a death rate of about 60, 65 a day. And never was a man buried with his clothes on. They were always buried naked, because you had to have his clothes. They never gave us any clothes.

HELL SHIPS

MERRITT: They brought in one of those hell ships, and stacked us in the hold of a... the one we was on used to be a cattle holder or something, I don't know, they just packed you down in the hole. So one man could stand up, one man could sit down.

IDLETT: They took us down to the docks in Manila, loaded us in the hold of an old freighter, and we took off for Japan. We hit a typhoon. Saved our lives, probably. We

did have submarines in the area. I didn't know it, but I was later told that a torpedo did hit our ship, somewhere up around Taiwan, but it was a dud.

DAUGHTERY: We was gonna leave Taiwan. They put us on a new ship, but we was tied up at Taipei, Formosa. There's a ship here and a ship up here, being loaded with prisoners of war, and it's taking them off of Taiwan. Taking them all to Japan. Well, our planes come over to bomb us, and strafe us. And this ship up here, they had got a direct hit on them. Four in the hull of it, killed 600 men. 600 prisoners of war.

PRISON CAMPS: JAPAN

IDLETT: First year I was in Japan, 100 men died in our camp. When we got there, the camp commander said, "You're here to work or die." You had to want to live. You had to have the will to live. We did hard labor on, what our American doctors told us when we got back, was impossible to live on. Weighing about 100 pounds, I could carry 200 pounds of coal up those planks. It wasn't easy, but I could do it. We got one bath a month. 600 men took a bath in the same tub, and then when we finished bathing, we used that same water to wash our clothes in. I made two – what I consider – friends, of the Japanese. But for many years, I kept in contact with them. And they did very little, really, but they did something. The first one, I told him, at the very beginning I was beginning to learn a little Japanese, that my feet hurt. And he didn't say anything, but the next day I came back to work, and he came by, and handed me a bottle of vitamin B pills. A full bottle of Japanese vitamin B pills. Might have saved my life.

MERRITT: We ended up in Japan, and they lined us all up and marched us through the town, and Japs' were throwing rocks at us and spitting on us, and we were down blasting and picking and loading the cars, getting the copper out. And we were there, working 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in shifts, two shifts. We were working down about 2,400 feet. You could kind of figure out how the war was going as by the treatment you got. Started off, treatment wasn't real bad. But then, as the Americans took over these islands, and each island that they took, and the Japs' they killed… the treatment started getting worse. They started beating you more. We saw every day we were in camp, out in the mines, there'd be B-29's coming over. And they were fire-bombing Tokyo and Nagasaki, and all those places, you know. And them people didn't have anything to eat either! We were really lucky to get what we got, because they were starving to death themselves, the Japanese population. But they weren't ready to give up.

FREEDOM

ZIMBA: I worked in the Japanese copper mine for 16 months. Most of us did. B-29's came over one night, and they bombed a city out of existence. The next night, the Navy came up and shelled. He said to us, "Hey guys, I've got some news for you. I don't want you to raise your voices. The Emperor of Japan has surrendered." We didn't yell, or scream. We just cried.

MERRITT: One day, we came up out of the mines and we didn't have to go to work that day. And the next day, they just told us, there's "no more work, no more work." And they hadn't told us that the war was over until they got us all out of the mines, and then they said that the United States and Japan had signed a peace treaty, and that we were going home.

LAMBAISO: And then, one day, a bunch of Japs' came in and put "P.O.W." on top of our barracks, in big white letters. And we didn't even know what the hell that meant. But then, when the B-29's came over, we didn't even know what they were. We looked up there and said, "God, look at that thing!" And we had some Air Corps guys with us, and they said, "No, that's not ours, they're not Americans." But after everything got down, they started sending down American cigarettes and chewing gum... they were Americans!

SEEGERS: We were lucky to survive from day to day, because there was no end in sight. We didn't know where the war was, when it would end. "East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet." And he was right, because to us, life is the most precious thing on earth. To them, it doesn't mean anything.

DAUGHTERY: And I told them, the greatest place in the world is America. First. But it cost a great price to keep it free.

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