



CHARGING AHEAD TO FREE POWs

ROBERT PRINCE, STANFORD 1941, LED THE 1945 RESCUE OF 512 PRISONERS OF WAR FROM A JAPANESE-CONTROLLED CAMP IN CABANATUAN IN THE PHILIPPINES DURING WORLD WAR II. THE POWs HAD ENDURED THE EARLIER BATAAN DEATH MARCH, A MILES-LONG TREK TO A PRISON CAMP DURING WHICH MANY DIED. THEN AMERICANS GREW SUSPICIOUS THAT THE JAPANESE WOULD MURDER CABANATUAN PRISONERS, LIKE THEY DID TO POWs AT A CAMP IN PALAWAN. THAT'S WHERE PRINCE STEPPED IN.

By Susan Lorimor

"We didn't know at the time how bad their treatment was until we rescued them (the survivors at Cabanatuan)," says Robert Prince.

Robert Prince, 87, speaks vividly of the rescue he led in World War II to free 512 men from a Japanese-controlled POW camp in the Philippines. He remembers it is as if it happened yesterday.

He explains from his Kirkland, Wash., home that there have been a couple of books written about the escape, as well as a movie, *The Great Raid*, so he has to be up on details. Prince collaborated with makers of the 2005 flick so they could tell the story with accuracy.

Prince, like many soldiers, has the it-was-all-in-a-day's-work mentality about his brave efforts. Lt. Col. Henry Mucci appointed Prince in 1945 to lead the raid, after it was speculated that torture of Americans was likely happening inside the Cabanatuan camp in the Philippines. Participating in the raid were Prince's company of U.S. Army Rangers; the Alamo Scouts, an elite fighting force; two Filipino guerilla groups, Filipino villagers and the U.S. Air Force.

Getting in

Prince enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps while he was a student at Stanford. "I could see from 1935 on that we would be at war (in coming years)," Prince says.

And so he was inducted into the Army a few weeks after his 1941 graduation. Months later, on April 10, 1942, the Bataan Death March occurred. The Japanese led 75,000 American and Filipino POWs to a prisoner camp in Camp O'Donnell, which was in the province of Tarlac in the Philippines. The Japanese had only expected to take about 25,000 POWs, and were not prepared for the large number of men they needed to transport.

As a result, many of the POWs were forced to march most of the 65 miles to the camp. About 22,000 of the men starved, died of malaria, or were shot or bayoneted to death by the Japanese on their way to Camp O'Connell. The Japanese later granted the Filipino POWs amnesty, while the

Americans were transferred to Cabanatuan. Many prisoners were later sent to camps in Japan, Korea and Manchuria. Inside the camps, men died from starvation, disease and abuse.

Prince says that he had good friends from the ROTC who died following the Death March because they did not receive adequate care from the Japanese. "We didn't know at the time how bad their treatment was until we rescued them (the survivors at Cabanatuan)," Prince says.

Planning the attack

Americans were tipped off to the abuse within POW camps when Eugene Nielsen escaped on Dec. 14, 1944 from a massacre at a camp in Palawan. Amazingly, Nielsen was able to flee from the Japanese after they forced him and other Americans into a trench, doused them with gasoline and threw in a match. Then the Japanese machine-gunned the troops. One hundred-fifty prisoners died.

Nielsen escaped the inferno and made his way to the beach, where he was shot by prison guards. He swam for miles in the sea and trekked through the jungle to reach Filipino guerillas. He told them of the execution and abuse within the camp.

"That's how (American) powers-to-be knew about the atrocity," Prince says. "The officers were afraid that would happen at Cabanatuan."

Working swiftly, a plan was created to storm the Cabanatuan camp and free the POWs. Prince met with Filipino guerilla officers in a hut in the small town of Guimba to plan how the soldiers would get to the Cabanatuan camp. Once the details were set, Prince's 127 Rangers set out on the mission. First they marched to Belincarin, running across two, two-lane concrete highways that were in a territory controlled by the Japanese. Prince says energy pumped through his veins as he and others hiked through forests and across grasslands.

The 1945 film, *Back to Bataan*, starring John Wayne, **Southern California 1929**, opens by retelling the story of the raid.

However, the 2005 film, *The Great Raid*, focuses solely on the events of the raid.



Retired U.S. Army Ranger Robert Prince, **Stanford 1941**, recounts the rescue of Allied POWs that were believed to have been marked for death by the Japanese.



Photo by Paul Joseph Brown of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

From Belincarin, Prince and the men were to march on to Cabanatuan and storm the camp. But the actual raid was delayed 24 hours because guerilla officers had information that if the soldiers pressed forward, they would march into Japanese troops and be bushwhacked. While in Belincarin, 14 Alamo Scouts who were with Prince and his men went into the village to talk with Filipinos and get a layout of where the Japanese were stationed at Cabanatuan.

The men moved onward to the village of Platero, which was along a river about a mile away. When

night fell, Prince's soldiers set out to Cabanatuan, hoping that a sheet of darkness would conceal them from the Japanese. The men crawled 300-400 feet on their stomachs across the grounds and up to the camp. "We had to crawl across lots of open ground, and they (the prison guards) could have spotted us," Prince says. "We were fairly evident."

But to distract the Japanese who manned the two guard stations, the Air Force buzzed a P-61 Black Widow night fighter over the camp. "The prisoners told us later that they were all watching the (night fighter)," Prince says.



The villagers supplied the men with carabao carts so they could make their way to freedom. "We could carry five to six men in (one cart)," Prince says. Through the night, the Filipinos supplied the Americans with 50-60 carabaos.

Storming the camp

Prince's men were to attack the main camp and escort the prisoners out, while men from another company were to go around the left side of the camp and storm in from behind. The raid was set to begin at 7:30 p.m., and Prince said he grew anxious at "10 minutes past the ideal time." He quietly waited in a ditch across from the guard's station for the other company to fire a shot that would start the raid.

"I was beginning to start without them," Prince says. "(Then) a guard saw the other company and he shouted and our guys shot him."

One of the men went up to shoot the lock off of the prison gate, and a platoon stormed the camp. There was about 20 minutes of intense firing in which Americans killed the Japanese in their barracks. A couple of mortar rounds were dropped and fortunately the telephone wires in the camp had been cut, so the Japanese could not report the raid.

Prince's men rushed in to release the POWs. Many of the prisoners had to be carried out of the camp because they were too sick or weak to walk. It had been just 30 minutes after the first shot was fired, and Prince and the soldiers left with the POWs. The men were led down a road to the Cabu River, where Filipino villagers met them. The villagers supplied the men with carabao carts. "We could carry five to six men in (one cart)," Prince says. Through the night, the Filipinos supplied the Americans with 50-60 carabaos.

The men marched onward, not knowing if word would reach the enemy that the POWs had escaped. Along the way to Allied lines, a POW who was a doctor stayed behind in the town of Televar with battalion surgeon Capt. James Fisher. Fisher had been shot in the liver, says Prince, who lauds the

courageousness of the POW's actions yet does not boast about his own.

Prince believes he was just doing his job when he led the raid. Yet when the POW stayed behind to care for Fisher, Prince says "That took a lot of courage, because he had been a POW for years. The Japanese could have come in (and killed him)."

It wasn't until the next day that the Japanese discovered that the raid had taken place.

Going home

After the raid, Prince and 11 other soldiers were sent to Washington, D.C., where they met Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt. Prince says it was an honor to meet the president, who died five months later. Prince and the men were split into groups and sent to organizations and factories, where they told Americans the war was almost over.

Prince left the Army in 1946. He was excited to become a civilian again, because he was ready to get away from the Army's regimented way of life.

"I did my job and I survived," Prince says matter-of-factly.

Prince was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army's second-highest military decoration, for his efforts. Looking back, he says he did not know he had the leadership skills to plan the raid and carry it out until he was in the midst of it. "You don't know until it happens and then you hope you have (what it takes)," he says.

The same goes for courage. "You react to the situation and hope you perform well."

—Melissa Gerst, Assistant Archivist, contributed to this story

69.

as is evidenced by the fact that several o'clock
came round before we realized that the
driver time had passed. The down in there
was enthusiastic interest.

The following Sigs were present.

H. E. Meyer	Epsilon 1911
Roland A. Seavelle	Eta 1912
B. P. Eldred Jr	Alpha Zeta 1918
H. M. Conrad	Alpha Lambda 1913
A. E. May at	Beta Tau 1916
Richard W. D. Weap	Zeta Zeta 1915



Sigs from the Manila
Chapter gather in the
Philippines during WWII.