

Intro: Bataan Death March; Operation to Rescue POWs by 6th Ranger Battalion & Filipino Guerrillas; Mucci & Prince's Plan of Attack; Divine Provision & Protection

CABANATUAN
JESUS CHRIST CONTROLS HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most dramatic events in US military history occurred near the close of World War II. It involved the rescue of 510 prisoners of war who were held by the Japanese at Camp Cabanatuan \kä-bä-nä-twän\, four miles north of Cabanatuan City and a mile south Cabu \cä'-bü\.

The site was one of three major prison camps used by the Japanese to house POWs captured in the Bataan \ba-tan\ Peninsula in April 1942 where US and Philippine forces were overrun after a four-month battle.

The Death March was a forced march from Mariveles \mä-rä-vä'-läs\ on the southern tip of the peninsula, northward fifty-five miles to Camp O'Donnell in Tarlac \tä'-läk\ Province in central Luzon. Of 70,000 prisoners, only 54,000 reached the camp. An estimated 7,000 to 10,000 died on the way, the rest escaped into the jungles of Luzon Island.

Later, some were removed from O'Donnell to Puerto Princesa \pwer'-tö prin-sä-sä\ on Palawan \pä-lä'-wän\ Island south of Bataan in the South China Sea. When American forces returned to the Philippines in December 1944, the high command in Tokyo issued orders to liquidate the prisoners at Palawan. On December fifteenth, 150 men were forced into underground bomb shelters and burned alive. Only eleven escaped.

Other Bataan survivors were transferred to Camp Cabanatuan in Nueva Ecija \nwä'-vä ä'-sē-hä\ Province to the east. Systematically over the three years between the end of the Bataan campaign in April 1942 and the return of US forces in December 1944, thousands of prisoners were removed to Japan and placed into forced labor while being held in some 150 prison camps there.

Other less well-known prison camps were spread all over the Western Pacific: 21 others in the Philippines, 28 in Sumatra, 16 in Formosa (Taiwan), 15 in Java, 14 in the Dutch East Indies, 10 in Korea, nine in the Philippine Islands other than Luzon, and a few more scattered among other islands.

By the time of the American invasion of Luzon in December 1944, only a little over 500 remained alive on the island. They were being held at Cabanatuan and were scheduled for execution as the Japanese army began its retreat to the north.

The initial target was Manila, the capital of the archipelago, and American troops went ashore at Lingayen \lin-gä-yen\ Gulf on January 9, 1945. US General Douglas MacArthur had fulfilled his promise to return to the Philippines following the defeat three years earlier at Bataan. His forces numbered 280,000 troops whose mission was to take on Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita's quarter-of-a-million-man army.

Once ashore it was realized that Yamashita had chosen not to join the battle at that time and MacArthur made the decision to take Manila to the south and pursue Yamashita to the north.

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In charge of the Manila campaign was General Walter Krueger who was in command of the Sixth Army. On January 26th, General Krueger was advised that sixty miles to the northeast over 500 American prisoners of war were being held at Camp Cabanatuan and that as the Americans moved northward there was a distinct possibility that the Japanese would execute them.

Advising the general was Robert Lapham, an American guerrilla who was leader of Filipino insurgents. In the course of the last three years, over 8,000 men had gone through the camp but thousands had been removed to join work details in Japan. Now only the very weak and sickly remained and they were surely to be eliminated within the next few days.

Complicating the task of trying to rescue these men was the fact that over 8,000 Japanese troops were concentrated between American lines some thirty miles northeast of Lingayen Gulf and Cabanatuan City thirty miles farther.

The mission before General Krueger was the defeat of the Japanese Army which began with the taking of Manila. However, he realized he had to do something to rescue the men at Cabanatuan. He decided that the best men available were of the Sixth Ranger Battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Mucci \mew'-see\, an officer whose flamboyant personality and omnipresent pipe had earned him the nickname of Little MacArthur.

In April 1944, Mucci was given the assignment of organizing an infantry battalion and he took to it with gusto, training his men in the fashion of Colonel William O. Darby, who organized the first Ranger battalion in 1942 and participated with the Big Red One in the invasion of North Africa.

Mucci conducted arduous training of his men that concluded with climbing Pike's Peak with pack mules. At Port Moresby \mōrz'-bē\, New Guinea, where the Allied forces had a base, Mucci's training intensified. He gave instruction in hand-to-hand combat, night warfare, jungle survival techniques, and amphibious exercises. And he constantly ran the men to the point of physical exhaustion.

Most of these Rangers had never seen significant action but all were in excellent physical condition, well prepared to do night assaults, and with knowledge of how to operate in stealth. Mucci didn't need all 800 of his men so he chose C Company, under the command of Captain Robert Prince, a Stanford graduate who was a brilliant tactician, and who, in stark contrast to Mucci, had a very low-key personality. It was Mucci's job to motivate the men for the mission and it was Prince's to pull it off under Mucci's guidance.

In addition, Mucci selected Company F under the command of First Lieutenant John Murphy, two teams of Alamo Scouts, and four combat photographers. Total strength of his force was eight officers and 120 enlisted men.

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The mission was to move undetected for sixty miles, the first thirty by transports, the last thirty on foot. Early in the morning of January 28th, the Rangers' convoy reached Guimba \gēm-bā\ which sat on the edge of the American lines and where they continued the mission on foot. From there to Cabanatuan it was a thirty-mile walk and then thirty back, the latter with hopefully over 500 freed but sickly ex-POWs.

What lay ahead was a twelve-hour march over countryside dissected by roads patrolled by the Japanese, bridges held by their tanks, and the danger of just one Filipino spy leaking their presence to the enemy based in Cabanatuan City. To guard their secrecy and the supreme importance of protecting the element of surprise once at the camp, Mucci had ordered complete radio silence.

The Rangers were armed with a variety of weapons: Garand M-1 rifles, M-1 carbines, Thompson submachine guns, Browning automatic rifles, Colt .45s, bazookas, and fragmentation grenades.

They headed out of Guimba choosing to cross open fields rather than taking the highways. Their first stop was the barrio of Lobong where they linked up with Eduardo Josen \hō-sän\, the leader of eighty Filipino guerrillas that were to assist the Rangers in the raid.

Joson was well-known to Major Lapham. The man had detailed knowledge of the terrain as did his guerrillas. They were volunteers who had engaged the Japanese in ambushes and raids for over three years.

The American-Filipino relationship was one of mutual respect. The Filipinos were not exactly happy with the presence of any foreigners on their islands but they shared a mutual dislike of the Japanese. Both had endured horrible physical abuse and murderous treatment from the Japanese Imperial Army and the idea of springing the American POWs was right down the guerrillas' alley.

That afternoon the two groups moved out as one, now totaling over 200 men, and they soon entered into a dense forest which, once traversed, surrendered to fields of tall grass. Soon they met their first challenge. These fields were bisected by the Talavera \tä-lä-vä'-rä\ Highway, one of Luzon's major north-south thoroughfares and on arrival it was discovered that the Japanese were in the process of moving men and equipment northward in retreat. They traveled at night to avoid detection by American aircraft but their presence created an unforeseen delay in reaching Cabanatuan.

Mucci decided to wait until the traffic subsided and as soon as the road was clear he began to move troops across two at a time. But only about half the men had made it to the other side when Mucci suddenly noticed a tank parked about a hundred yards north – its turret pointed right at them.

This was the first in a long series of events that threatened exposure of the mission to the Japanese. It was also the first event in which divine protection blinded the eyes of the enemy. The Air Corps had provided the Rangers with aerial photographs and Mucci and Prince used them to locate a ravine crossed by a bridge in the vicinity of the tanks location.

It was decided that the remainder of the troops would move to the ravine and sneak under the bridge. Once they arrived they found the tank parked right in the middle of the bridge, its operators, however, were inside.

As the men moved quietly, one by one, under the bridge, they could hear the men talking inside the tank. It took thirty minutes to get every man across and they soon reunited with the others in a rice paddy.

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Just past midnight on January 29th, the Rangers crossed a field of tall grass called cogon \cō-gōn'\ used for thatching and fodder but with a sticky substance on its blades that caused the Rangers' skin to itch. Next they crossed the Talavera River and resumed their trek through the cogon and the dangers of the darkness: krait, the venomous Elapidae of the Philippines, cockroaches the size of mice; feral dogs, wild boars. The Filipinos were unnerved since they believed that demons called aswangs lived in the cogon grass.

Unmolested by either beasts or demons, the Rangers arrived the next morning at Balincarin \bä-lin-kä'-rin\, a barrio five miles north of Cabanatuan. The village had just the week before suffered an attack by the Japanese because it was suspected of harboring guerrillas and over a hundred of its residents had been killed.

Mucci was shocked to learn that the people in Balincarin knew of his arrival ahead of time and feared his prized secret mission was now out in the open. However, news traveled fast among the Filipinos by what the Americans called the Bamboo Telegraph. All knew of the mission and all knew to keep what they knew to themselves – yet another example of divine protection.

Mucci chose Balincarin to allow the Rangers to rest. They had been awake twenty-four hours marching twenty-five miles including another river, the Morcan, and another major road, the Rizal \ri-zäl'\ Highway.

The latter had to be negotiated with care as it too was filled with another Japanese convoy headed north.

While taking the break at Balincarin, Captain Prince began to work out his plan to extract the prisoners. Colonel Mucci would be in charge of getting the Rangers to the camp but Prince would mastermind the operation. According to Hampton Sides in *Ghost Soldiers*, his excellent book on the raid at Cabanatuan:

(Prince) would oversee everything. With the help of platoon leaders, he had to figure out how to apportion the manpower and the firepower, how to choreograph the event so that bullets flew in the right direction at the right time as hundreds of men ran this way and that through the darkness. While Mucci would be somewhere in the outlying grasslands watching the carefully designed fracas unfold through binoculars, Prince would be where the action was, having to make the split-second judgment calls. It was Mucci's show in the end, but the main act, the incursion itself, was Prince's special predicament to solve or bungle. (p. 121)

What Prince realized is that even with aerial photographs, he didn't have enough information to devise a solid plan of attack.

- He could see the buildings but he didn't know what or who was in them.
- He knew there were Japanese soldiers in the camp but he didn't know how many or where they were quartered.
- He could see some guardhouses but he didn't know if there were others and in addition how many pillboxes rimmed the camp.
- He didn't know how many tanks, if any, were in the camp and where they were located.
- He needed to know the location of all the fences and how many strands of barbed wire enclosed them.
- Where, if any, were drainage ditches and ravines that could provide cover.
- He needed to know the condition of the prisoners, where they were located, how many could walk, and how many needed to be carried?

They could get to Cabanatuan, but Prince didn't have enough intel to know what to do when he got there.

Getting Prince the information he needed was the job of the Alamo Scouts, the Sixth Army's Recon Unit that was created by General Krueger in 1944.

Lieutenants Bill Nellist and Tom Rounsaville were the Alamo's squad leaders in charge of reconnoitering the camp but because the structure was positioned on a piece of flat land that stretched for hundreds of yards they were limited in how much they could learn. Mucci did not accept this as an excuse and ordered the men to find a way to get the needed information.

The detailed information they did possess presented another daunting challenge. Located just a mile north of Cabanatuan across the Cabu River Bridge, two hundred Japanese soldiers were bivouacked, well-armed and with several tanks at their disposal. The attack on the POW camp could be easily heard from that location and therefore they must be neutralized before the extraction could go forward.

It was at this point that the Rangers were joined by a surprise visitor. Captain Juan Pajota \pä-hō'-tä\, a notorious Filipino guerrilla leader who operated throughout Nueva Ecija province and knew its every nuance – topographically and politically. He had caused the Japanese army so much trouble they had a price on his head.

With the Scouts off to gather more intel, Pajota informed Mucci that even though his basic plan was solid, the Rangers could not make the attack that evening for three reasons: the Japanese bivouac at the Cabu River Bridge had been increased to more than a thousand soldiers. At Cabanatuan, the usual contingent of 100 troops had been increased to three hundred. Finally, intel to Pajota from Cabanatuan City revealed that that night the Japanese would move a convoy north using the road that runs directly in front of the camp.

Mucci didn't like the way things were developing and reluctantly postponed the attack until the night of January 30th. Using the time to examine maps and photographs, Mucci, Prince, Joson, and Pajota discussed every possible scenario of the raid. During their exchange the problem of evacuating the prisoners became the topic. Pajota insisted that most of the men in the camp were of poor health and that a large number would not be able to walk the twenty-five miles to safety.

Pajota turned out to be the next example of divine provision. He had lived in Nueva Ecija province all his life. After the Japanese took Luzon he organized a guerrilla group that opposed the insurgents. He was so respected by the local population that anything he asked of the people they would comply. His solution to transport the sick, decrepit, and frail out of Cabanatuan was carabao \kar-a-bow\.

Carabaos are water buffalo—big, strong, and very slow. They plod along and their drivers have to whip them into increasing their pace only slightly. But Pajota insisted that there was no other way to move the prisoners in an efficient manner. He promised that with the delay he could recruit carabao hitched to as many carts as Mucci thought necessary. It was agreed to recruit twelve.

Later on the afternoon of January 29th, the Rangers and the two groups of guerrillas moved out of Balincarin for the three-mile march over to Platero \plä-tä'-rō\, the barrio Mucci had selected as his headquarters for the operation. There the Alamo Scouts confirmed Pajota's warning of the Japanese troop movement. They were already leaving Cabanatuan City heading straight for the camp some four miles away on their evacuation north. The convoy would jam the highway well into the night.

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The morning of January 30th found the road in front of the camp empty of traffic. The Alamo Scouts were situated in the woods on the northwest side of the camp. Between them and the main gate was a mile of flat, open real estate made up of rice fields and brush. Without elevation and at such a distance it was impossible to get a more detailed evaluation of the camp's layout, what was inside its fences, and where they were located.

No topographic formation that could provide elevation was anywhere close to the structure. But Lieutenant Nellist spotted a nipa \nä'-pä\ shack just to the north of the camp. It was built on stilts so that it might possibly provide a bird's-eye view of the compound. The mystery was how to get to it?

It was decided that he and Private Rufo Vaquilar, a Filipino-American would take the chance of walking casually over to the shack. A Filipino guerrilla was sent to bring back farmer's clothes for each of them. Nellist slid his M-1 rifle down a pants leg which caused him to walk with a limp. The two men stepped out of the trees into full view of the guard towers at the camp.

They walked slowly and nonchalantly toward the hut, expecting at any moment to draw the attention of a guard, thus blowing the whole operation. Divine protection again prevailed. Not one effort was made to address the two "farmers" who made it to the shack and climbed up the bamboo ladder into the one-room outpost.

Not only were they protected from detection during their trip over but once inside they were gifted with another divine provision by what they saw. The entire camp was clearly visible. Nellist could count the guards on the towers and the layout of the streets. An expert marksman with years of experience in estimating distances between rifle and targets, Nellist used his gun's site to draw a map of the compound. His estimates turned out to be right on the money. He could see all the fences and where power and telephone lines ran.

The camp was 800 yards deep and 600 yards wide. The main road ran the entire length of the camp from the front gate to the rear. Most of the Japanese were quartered to the right of the main road and across the rear of the camp. To the left of the main road and at the front quarter of the camp was where the prisoners were housed.

Nellist noted that the main gate swung both in and out and was secured by a single padlock. There were three guard towers across the front and two pillboxes. Three-hundred yards down the main street was another road running from one side of the compound to the other. On the near right corner of this intersection Nellist noted a large metal building where, if tanks were inside the camp, they would be located. This is where the bazookas would be aimed.

Three Alamo Scouts were able to make it to the shack that afternoon, get Nellist's report, and spirit it back to Platero to the anxiously awaiting Colonel Mucci and Captain Prince. They were both amazed at the depth of detail Nellist had provided.

With intel in hand Prince devised his plan. The Rangers would move out toward the camp at 5 o'clock flanked on the north by Pajota's 200 guerrillas and Joson's eighty to the south. Pajota was to set up an ambush at the Cabu River Bridge. One of his men was to set an explosive under the main support beam of the bridge timed to explode at 7:40. If the bridge didn't completely collapse, then Pajota's men would cut down advancing Japanese soldiers with enfilading fire from positions on both sides of the road. Japanese attempts to use tanks to cross the river should the bridge not collapse were to be addressed with bazookas.

Joson's men were to set up a roadblock south of the camp to delay any Japanese troops coming up from Cabanatuan City. In addition, they were to cut telephone lines just before the raid began to prevent any distress calls for help coming out of the camp.

The Rangers would walk through the trees but upon entering the rice fields they would begin a low crawl toward the main gate. About half way to the highway, F Company would peel off to the left and go under the road through a culvert and follow a draining ditch around to the back of the camp. These Rangers would position themselves to take out the guards on the side towers and the pillboxes down below. Once in place Murphy was to snipe a sentry in one of the guards towers. The sound of his gun would ignite the operation.

On hearing this opening round the Rangers of C Company, positioned at the front, would charge the compound. The first targets would be the men in the guard towers along the main road. Once neutralized, they would then break the main gate's padlock and open both sides thorough which the first wave of Rangers would sprint down the main road, turn right, and begin strafing the Japanese headquarters and barracks with Thompson machine guns and Browning rifles.

Next the bazooka team would penetrate to the intersection and take out the tank shed and any tanks that were inside. Once these areas were secured the next team would move into the prisoners' area and begin the evacuation.

Once all were outside the main gate, Prince would fire a flare to indicate that the raid was over. Once all the POWs were across the Pampanga River, he would fire a second flare to allow the guerrilla teams to withdraw.

Prince estimated the entire action would take thirty minutes. He described the operation as "Organized confusion" and said, "We wanted all hell to break loose but to break loose precisely on our terms."

One major problem still concerned Mucci and Prince: the mile-long belly crawl in broad daylight. Again Pajota offered a simple but potentially effective suggestion. He explained how the Japanese were always excited, even panicked when American planes flew over the camp. They'd run around, look up, and point until the planes were out of sight. His idea was for Mucci to break radio silence, call Sixth Army headquarters, and request General Krueger to dispatch some aircraft to buzz the camp in order to distract the Japanese long enough so that C Company and the Scouts could make the final push to the main road undetected. Mucci thought it a chance worth taking and made the call.