



Beyond the Wire

CPOW

Civilian Ex-Prisoners of War
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From the Commander

This summer newsletter is finally on its way to you, our members. I'm running late, partially due to travel, but more so because of a constrained schedule. I have the honor of serving as Mayor of my city this year and the workload has been substantial, but it is also a privilege to serve and represent our residents. It was especially gratifying to have a part in helping celebrate America's 250th birthday in our community.

Although this is our summer edition, as you read through you will notice that two of the three "mini-memoirs"

deal with Pearl Harbor and the ensuing upheaval which changed the trajectories of the authors' youths. Of note, this year on December 7, 2026 is the 85th Anniversary Commemoration of Pearl Harbor and the entry of the U.S. into WWII. Our next newsletter won't be out until after that, so it's timely to include these memories now. I've included a link (www.pearlharborevents.com) to information about official activities at Pearl Harbor, and many of the ceremonies will be live streamed for those who will not be able to attend in person.

Please do continue to send your memories, whether of Pearl Harbor or other events to do with internment and its impact on your life, and we will continue to publish them.

Also in this edition, we have an update on the status of AT Lewis Films' upcoming documentary "The Last Reunion". Arden Lewis and her team were in the Philippines earlier this year on the National WWII Museum tour with James Scott, and we get an update on what they filmed and learned on that trip.

As a reminder, we are NOT collecting dues this year. I still have not had the bandwidth to facilitate a Board discussion about transitioning our Treasurer responsibilities so no need to wonder about whether your dues are paid or not, you are all current!

Happy reading and I'm wishing you a warm-but-not-too-hot rest of the summer.

Sally Meadows



What I did on My Extended December 1941 "Vacation"

By Martin Meadows

Introduction

This is a purely personal memoir of my experiences during the momentous month of December 1941, when the Philippines became an early focal point of World War II (WWII) in the Pacific. Excluding the "normal" first week of that month, it covers the tumultuous few weeks leading up to the Japanese occupation of Manila by early January 1942. Its purpose is simply to describe how one eleven-year-old youth reacted to a sudden and potentially dangerous change in his life.

December 1-7, 1941

Despite the occasional air raid drills that had begun recently, the first week of December 1941 in Manila passed in the usual fashion, with emphasis on the customary religious observances and on Christmas shopping. As for me, on the first weekend of the month (December 6-7) I was at home and, having no siblings or nearby friends to interact with, I was no doubt enjoying my favorite pastime, reading. That last carefree weekend of December marked the end of normality in the Philippines, and much more so in the capital city of the islands.

December 8 (December 7 in the U.S.)

And now to the day when the world suddenly changed — the day when WWII initially impacted the Philippines, or more precisely how I experienced that day. I remember almost everything about it, almost as if it were yesterday — or so I like to believe. In any event, obviously it was a day never to be forgotten, and literally impossible to forget.

I awoke about 6:30 a.m. that Monday to get ready for school. As was my routine, I then went into the living room to turn on the radio for the news, and then during breakfast to listen to the big band/swing music of that era

(December 1941, continued from page 1)

(still my favorite music). We usually listened to station KZRH — aka Radio Manila — mainly because it had the leading radio commentator/correspondent in the country, perhaps in the Far East; his professional name was Don Bell (real name Clarence Beliel, Sr.).

When I turned on the radio to hear Bell deliver the news, I was absolutely stunned to learn of the Pearl Harbor attack, which had occurred at about 2:25 a.m. Philippine time. After listening briefly, I hurried to tell my parents the news. My father was in the bathroom shaving, and my mother was getting dressed in their bedroom. My father seemed to be equally surprised, and he came out to hear the news, lather still on his face. My mother was shocked and most concerned by the news.

The breakfast atmosphere was grim, with limited conversation and no small talk. After eating, we got into our car and I was dropped off at the American School, which was not too far from our house. My father then drove to his business in the downtown area — the Manila Office Equipment Company (acronym MOECO), located just off the Escolta, the city's main drag. There my mother was the manager, handling the office while my father was off on business-related tasks — basically sales and service.

At the time I was in the sixth grade, and approaching my eleventh birthday. What I mostly recall of the school day is that the teachers had a hard time maintaining order in their classes, for the students of course were quite excited and wondering what was going to happen next. Not much got done on what turned out to be the last day of school, because later that same day classes were called off for the duration. So it was the last time my parents had to pick me up from school.

Dinner also was a mostly silent affair as we listened to the news, which included an account of the destruction of the sitting-duck planes at Clark Field, and which warned listeners that blackout conditions must prevail at night. There also were reports that Japanese bombers had attacked several locations near and around Manila, though not within city limits. Radio reports speculated that the initial attacks on city sites would begin soon.

Thus we were sitting in the dark, still listening to the news, when the bombing started that night; I do not recall the time, but it must have been well past 9 p.m. (Some online sources claim it was after midnight, but I did not think it was that late.) For some unknown reason we left the living room and went into my parents'

bedroom, where we huddled while the bombs were exploding and the too-late air-raid sirens were wailing.

Even though I did not at all feel scared (and I even remember congratulating myself that I was not afraid), I was plenty excited. But whether or not fear was the cause, I suddenly found myself unable to keep my knees from knocking — and I mean that literally. I had read about such a reaction to extremes of fear and related emotions, but I had thought it was just a figure of speech. After a few minutes, the knee-knocking stopped, and it never happened again. And eventually, after the bombing ended, the rest of the night passed without incident.

December 9

The next day passed as uneventfully as was possible under the circumstances. My parents again went to work as usual, perhaps in the belief that things should proceed as normally as possible — at least until further notice and/or until conditions changed. Since there was no school, I went with them to the office. I distinctly remember going out of the office at one point in order to look skyward to see if there were any enemy bombers around — there were none.

It was not easy passing time in the office, as I had not brought any reading material with me. I do not recall that any customers dropped in; I think there were a couple of phone calls, but those were from friends of my parents rather than business-related, as I recall.

When we finally returned home that day, to await the expected bombing, this time we did not have to sit at home huddled in the dark.

Earlier that day my father had arranged to have a bomb shelter constructed under our house; that was not done until a rush job was completed the next day (under the kitchen at the rear of our house). However, our neighbors on our right side (looking toward the street) came to the rescue. The family of Dr. Nicanor Reyes, the founder and president of the Far Eastern University, lived next door to us, on the far side of a large grassy area. Unsurprisingly, they had a sumptuous home, one which contrasted sharply with our own one-floor/five-room/one bathroom house. (Tragically, the Japanese killed all of the Reyes family during the Battle of Manila in February 1945.)

After we had returned from the office and were getting ready for dinner, Mrs. Reyes phoned. She said that they had a large bomb shelter and invited us to stay with them at any time. So when the air-raid sirens sounded that evening (this time before the bombing

(December 1941, continued on page 4)

The Teacher

By David W. Blackledge

During WW II in the Philippines, my mother, brother and I did not go into the internment camp (at Santo Tomas University, Manila, The Philippine Islands) until after Corregidor fell. By this time, it was a well-functioning community with internees assigned to tasks commensurate with their abilities. My mother, Helen V. Blackledge, a graduate of Indiana University School of Education with 10 years of teaching experience, found all those positions filled and was assigned to preparing vegetables in the communal kitchen.

My sixth-grade class met, in the morning, in laboratory classrooms on the top floor of the main University building (probably to limit damage in case anything blew up). These had stools lined up along long laboratory counters, which held a basin and faucet for each student, and were separated from the next classroom by blackboards which only went up halfway to the ceiling. Who could resist the temptation to fold a sheet of paper into a little receptacle, fill it from the faucet and, when the teacher's attention was diverted, fling the "water bomb" over the blackboard into the next classroom! This inevitably led to retaliation.

Thinking the teacher was looking the other way, I was often chagrined to hear "I saw that, David" as soon as I had flung my bomb. (I subsequently learned that this kindly old lady was cross-eyed). I actually felt guilty when she decided to seek other less stressful employment in camp and was replaced by a mild middle-aged man. He, too, found the class unruly. Fortunately, early on, he revealed a life-long interest in true crime stories. Recognizing that he finally had our complete attention when he told us one of these stories, he offered us a deal. If we would behave and concentrate on what he was trying to teach us, he would entertain us during the last half hour with one of his true crime tales. This worked fine until he ran out of stories. Reverting to our former chaos, we were not too surprised when he announced one Friday that we would be getting a new teacher next week.

Monday morning, in walked a husky young man who strode to the front of the class, gazed sternly at us, and threw down the gauntlet. He let it be known that there would be no nonsense in his class and that we had better behave or else! All was calm that week. I did notice that he had one idiosyncrasy; it clearly annoyed him to have to erase the blackboard which the previous afternoon's instructor invariably left covered with algebra problems.

A week later, as I went through the breakfast line, the bananas were fit only for garbage disposal. (Three years later, I would have welcomed one.) As I finished my cornmeal mush, this black, squishy bit of garbage inspired me! Hurrying up to the classroom, as

my classmates were filing in, I was busily at work. I had barely taken my seat when our nemesis strode in. Sure enough, he promptly grabbed the eraser and smeared the unseen banana pulp across the blackboard. As the class erupted in laughter, he turned angrily to face us. Turning purple with rage and clutching his fists he demanded to know "Who did this?" Some of my stunned classmates instinctively turned and looked in my direction.

The teacher stormed over, grabbed the boy sitting next to me (who happened to be the biggest kid in the class) and jerked him to his feet. As he shook him, and demanded to know if he had done it, the frightened boy denied the charge. The teacher finally released his grip and stormed out of the classroom.

Next morning, we all awaited our next adversary. In walked my mother! Walking calmly to the front of the class, she introduced herself and said that none of us knew how long it would be before we returned to a normal school situation. She pointed out that if we failed to learn while we were interned, we would be behind our more fortunate future classmates. She was here prepared to teach us; it was our choice whether we wanted to learn. We settled down, she had no disciplinary problems, she taught, and we learned.

As I told this story years later, my mother said that she wished she had a picture of my face when I saw her walk into that classroom. She also scoffed at my denial of playing any role in the disciplinary problems of her predecessors.

After the war, my mother resumed her teaching career, became a principal, president of the Indiana State Teachers Association, and was honored as a distinguished alumna of the Indiana University School of Education.

My mother, indeed, was a teacher!



Helen V. Blackledge

(December 1941, continued from page 2)

began), we hurried over to take advantage of their “safe room,” the walls of which were lined with sandbags.

Evidently they had correctly anticipated the coming of the war. That night there was no huddling in the dark in the Reyes family’s blackout-proof bomb shelter.

December 10

The major noteworthy development on December 10 was the rush-job completion of our own bomb shelter. And it proved its worth immediately, for the city was hit by another air raid that night. By the evening of December 10, the sirens and bombings had become almost normalized — part of the routine of everyday life (at least in my mind). Almost every night after dinner we would descend into our bomb shelter, a cramped space under the kitchen. Our cat always dashed under the refrigerator at the first wail of a siren and the dog would beat us into the air raid shelter.

In the stuffy, blackout-proofed shelter, which was lighted by a candle, we often passed the time (until the all-clear sirens sounded) by playing card games. My favorite was Poker — but only the Five-Card Draw version, as there was no room for a table or equivalent. My proudest “accomplishment” occurred the time I was dealt a pat-hand straight — 8 and 9 of Spades, 10 of Clubs, and Jack and Queen of Spades. I then did an inexplicable thing: I discarded the 10 of Clubs, and — this is the absolute truth — drew the ten of Spades. To me the bombings paled into insignificance compared to the incredibly lucky feat of having drawn a straight flush.

December 11-28

From December 11 until the Japanese Imperial Army entered Manila on 2 January 1942, the ensuing three weeks consisted of a succession of same-old same-old days, each one indistinguishable (to me) from the others. Whenever my parents went to the office I usually stayed home because I found it to be boring there. I was not “Home Alone” — also present were the household-help brother-and-sister duo of Lourdes and Saturnino.

They were from the province of Ilocos Norte in northern Luzon and had taught me a few words of the Ilocano language (some refer to non-Tagalog tongues as dialects).

As for my parents, within a week or so they had stopped the pointless effort of going to the office. They were home on my eleventh birthday (December 20), but I cannot even recall what they gave me on that

subdued occasion (books, I think). Then shortly thereafter came more or less the clincher that ended almost everyone’s hopes for the future, when General MacArthur declared Manila to be an open city on December 26, following the December 25 evacuation to the island fortress of Corregidor of all the important American and Filipino government officials.

December 29-31

Toward the end of December, as Japanese troops neared Manila, radio announcements advised non-Filipinos who lived outside of Manila’s main districts that it might be safer for them to move to those areas before the Japanese arrived. Most of my parents’ friends also lived beyond the main districts, except for one family in Ermita. That district supposedly would be safer than the Malate district where we lived, though I failed to see much difference between them.

The Ermita friends in question were members of the Rechter family, who had long since escaped from Hitler’s Germany. Some had settled in Japan, while three of them came to Manila. The latter group consisted of an elderly mother and her two adult sons, serious Joe and jokester Otto. It seems that Joe was away from the Philippines on business; thus the Rechters’ second-floor apartment had one vacant bedroom, and on December 29 they invited us to move in before the Japanese arrived.

After considering the pro and con arguments, my parents decided to play it safe and accept the Rechters’ generous offer. Since my precious collections of comics and books were at stake, I did not like the decision, but of course there was no other option. As for our household helpers, unsurprisingly they said they preferred to return to Ilocos Norte rather than to risk remaining in the house, subject to the whims of the vicious Imperial Japanese Army (e.g., see the notorious 1937 Nanjing Massacre).

On December 30 we hurriedly packed some essentials into the available suitcases — as I recall, one large suitcase for each parent and a smaller one for me.

It was not easy to abandon my accumulated possessions, and indeed it might have been close to impossible, had I known that my collection of perfectly-preserved comic books would be worth tens of millions of dollars in the distant future. (Incidentally, the only pre-war item that I still have is a Boy Scout knife.)

It was an extremely difficult moment when it came time to lock up the house and the garage. (Otto Rechter was to drive us to his place.) Out on the street,

(December 1941, continued on page 5)

(December 1941, continued from page 4)

we said goodbye to Lourdes and Saturnino and to our pets, who were standing around confused and uncertain.

We never saw or heard of any of them again (including even our house, blown up during the 1945 Battle of Manila that both destroyed and liberated the former “Pearl of the Orient”).

And the next day, as Japanese troops entered Manila’s suburbs, the historic month of December 1941 culminated with an unusually subdued mood in the Rechters’ apartment, as well as throughout the city. Nor, as midnight approached, did anyone attempt to dispel the gloom, not even the usually ebullient jokester Otto Rechter. The result was a joyless New Year’s Eve and the end of my lengthy vacation.

Conclusion

And so we come to the conclusion of this memoir of my unexpected, unwelcome and enforced December 1941 vacation. It was followed by a much longer sojourn — one that lasted more than three years; I

have recounted our experiences during that period in the Santo Tomas Internment Camp in coverage which has been posted over the years by the redoubtable Cliff Mills on his outstanding and all-inclusive website *Philippine Internment*.



Hyman Meadows (1946) at the ruins of the Meadows’ pre-war home.

Memories of Pearl Harbor

By Angus Lorenzen

Our family home was in Tientsin, North China, where my father was very close to the U.S. armed forces as a result of having received a battlefield commission during WWI. The Japanese declared war on China in August of 1937, and soon after, President Roosevelt pulled the American gunboats out of the rivers and recalled the battalion of 31st Infantry stationed in our city back to the Philippines, leaving only the Marine detachment assigned to the consulate in our city and the Embassy in Peking (Peiping).

In early December 1941, the Marines started packing up their gear and my father learned that they had chartered a ship to leave China on December 15. He knew that the Japanese army was prepared for war with the U.S. and decided that it was time to get my mother and his two younger kids to a safe place. My older brother was in college in Shanghai, so all he could do was warn him of the pending danger. He immediately got passage on a coastal ship about to leave for Hong Kong for us.

On December 8 at 4 AM on the day we were to arrive in Hong Kong he asked to see us. He told us that the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor (December 7 on the other side of the International Date Line). He advised us that his company had told him to reprovision in Hong Kong and immediately leave for the nearest friendly port. As we entered the bay, all ships were

streaming out of the harbor. He docked and loaded new supplies as the Japanese Army crossed into the Hong Kong New Territories towards the port. We were the last ship to successfully leave Hong Kong.

Three days later early in the morning we entered Manila Bay in the middle of a Japanese air raid. The ship ahead of us carrying a deck cargo of lumber from Oregon was hit and started to burn. The captain decided the Manila Harbor was not a safe place and took the ship to a small cove on the Bataan Peninsula where we anchored. For a week, we left the ship early in the morning and spent the day on the beach, returning in the evening so the cooks could prepare a meal, and we could sleep aboard.

Our captain noticed that the Japanese were bombing on a schedule – in the morning, then again in the afternoon. He decided to race into the Manila Harbor and discharge his passengers, then return to his hidden cove. When we reached the dock, my mother called the local office of my father’s company (today known as insurance giant AIG). The office manager picked us up and took us to the Manila Hotel, where he had made reservations.

We spent the next few days exploring central Manila and the Intramuros (old Spanish walled city). Then on January 2, we watched the Japanese Army enter Manila from our hotel window. Three days later, we were loaded on a bus and taken to the University of Santo Tomas, which became our internment camp for more than 3-years.

NEWS from Lewis-Films and the LAST REUNION TEAM

By Arden Lewis

The 2025 reunion photos keep coming up in my Facebook feed reminding me it is time for another update on the Last Reunion progress. We are in the arduous process of post-production. This means taking 40 hours of footage and getting it whittled down to 4 hours, then viewing it and cutting it again to 3 hours, then 2, then to about 75 minutes. While we do this, more people keep coming into our lives who are connected to the story.

During our marvelous and invigorating trip to Luzon with the National World War II Museum we had a young man find us on tour because he wanted to meet James Scott – who was our wonderful historian on our tour. He found us in Bamban, PI near the WWII Museum there. His name is

Elliot Bennett and his great grandfather was in Santo Tomas Internment Camp, but sadly died right after liberation. Our Education Director, Sarah Kirksey, invited him to join us when he could. Elliot came to our Santo Tomas visit in Manila and we interviewed him there on campus about his search for his great grandfather's story. Elliot is a world traveler and surprised me again in June at the last weekend of a play I created in Hollywood about the artist Mary Cassatt. It is

wonderful to meet a young descendent so determined to unearth his family's history.

Once we have a 2-hour version of the Last Reunion roughed out, we will begin to hold focus groups to view the rough cut and give feedback. Feedback from descendants will be a crucial part of the process. We are honored to add these stories we heard in the Philippines to all the CPOW survivors' stories we have captured. Email me with any questions: ardenteresalewis@gmail.com.



The Last Reunion team at Santo Tomas, February 2026.