



After the Allies liberated the Philippine island of Palawan, in March of 1945, Americans came ashore to investigate claims that a massacre had taken place at the POW camp the prior December.

What investigators found corroborated the stories of survivors who had managed to escape.

About 139 soldiers, sailors and airmen—less-fortunate than the survivors—died after all 150 American prisoners of war (146 enlisted men and 4 officers) were ordered into the camp's three air-raid shelters. The POWs had previously constructed those shelters—designated A, B and C—which were nothing more than trenches, covered with wooden logs and dirt, reachable by a narrow tunnel.

Once the servicemen passed through the entrance tunnel, and were securely inside the shelters, Japanese soldiers doused them with gasoline before setting them on fire.

Some individuals who managed to escape the air-raid-shelter inferno died when they were shot or bayoneted by the Japanese guards. A handful of others were able to flee, with the help of local Filipinos, and reported the disaster after they were safely in American hands.

Lt. Rothberg took this photo on March 20, 1945. The U.S. War Department provides this description of it:

Palawan Island: Picture shows Puerto Princesa's former air raid shelters and the charred remains of American military prisoners of war. (From "Report on the Destruction of Manila and Japanese Atrocities: February 1945," at [page 129 of the PDF report.](#))

Later, during the war crimes trial held in Yokohama, near Tokyo, the Allied prosecutors targeted Lt. General Seiichi Terada. As commanding general of Japan's 2nd Air Division, headquartered in the Philippines, Terada had radioed instructions to kill the American prisoners of war at Plaza Cuartel (as the POW camp, near the town of Puerto Princesa on Palawan, was known).

The message had been sent to Japan's 131st Airfield Battalion at Palawan.

Captain Nagayoshi Kojima, the camp commandant (whom the Americans called "The Weasel"), issued instructions to Lieutenant Sho Yoshiwara, who ordered his men to fix their bayonets and load five rounds of ammo into their infantry rifles. The Japanese then carried-out the massacre.

The Yokohama-based trial began on August 2, 1948. Many of the individuals who were responsible for carrying out the atrocities—including Kojima and Yoshiwara—had disappeared following Japan's surrender.

Although most of the men responsible for the atrocity were not tried, we can gauge at least one man's reaction to the massacre from a diary which Americans, who liberated Palawan, found during their camp search.

Written by a Japanese soldier, the diary includes these two entries, one from the day after the killings and another written a few weeks later:

December 15—Due to the sudden change of situation, 150 prisoners of war were executed. Although they were prisoners of war, they truly died a pitiful death. The prisoners who worked in the repair shop really worked hard. From today on I will not hear the familiar greeting, "Good morning, sergeant major."

January 9—After a long absence, I visited the motor vehicle repair shop. Today, the shop is a lonely place. The prisoners of war who were assisting in repair work are now just white bones on the beach washed by the waves. Furthermore, there are numerous corpses in the nearby garage and the smell is unbearable. It gives me the creeps.

Terada was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the massacre. Others, who were responsible, were never brought to justice.

Credits:

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