



SURVIVING BATAAN and BEYOND

Colonel Irvin Alexander's Odyssey
as a Japanese Prisoner of War

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rank of major on July 1, 1940, he was reassigned as assistant post quartermaster, Detachment Quartermaster Corp, Post of Manila and Fort Stotsenburg. It is here that his literary journey begins.

While the majority of what occurred on the Philippines during Colonel Alexander's tenure will be covered in the following pages, it is important to place in proper perspective his duties and the chronology of events leading up to the war.

Major Alexander, his wife, and their young son were living comfortably at Fort Stotsenburg when rumblings of war darkened the sky over the South Pacific in the spring of 1941. In May, seeing that war against the Imperial Japanese Army was inevitable, the U.S. government returned military dependents to the continental United States. Lucile and Sammy, unaware of the turmoil that was in store for Irvin, Sr., departed Fort Stotsenburg on May 14, 1941.²⁴

Alone and facing the possibility of war, Alexander focused his energies on working and accomplishing his missions as the assistant post quartermaster. The post quartermaster, Lt. Col. W. E. Durst, known as "Poppy," rated Major Alexander as "very well informed; has necessary intelligence [and] judgment to make decisions with force to accomplish them." Brig. Gen. E. P. King,²⁵ the post commander, indicated that Major Alexander was in the "upper third; quiet, unassuming, capable, loyal, [and a] gentleman . . . especially desirable [for the] next grade . . . rated very satisfactory on physical endurance."²⁶ These qualities, recognized by his superiors, would become evident in the demanding months and years to come and, in the short term, earned him a promotion to lieutenant colonel on September 15, 1941.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was a somber day for the American forces in the Philippines. With the destruction of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had their sights on the Philippines, attacking the islands en masse the next day. The capture of the islands was crucial to Japan's effort to control the Southwest Pacific, seize the resource-rich Dutch East Indies, and protect its Southeast Asia flank. Its strategy called for nearly simultaneous attacks on Malaya, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and American-held Guam, Wake, and Hawaii.²⁷

General MacArthur defined the Allied plan for the defense of the Philippines on December 3, 1941, four days prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, by assigning the forces under the U.S. Army Forces Far East (USAFFE) command in the following manner.

He listed four major tactical commands defending the islands. The North Luzon Force, under the command of General Wainwright, had the responsibility to defend the most critical areas of the Luzon Island, includ-

dived off the truck to crawl under it. Not stopping to consider the problem further I followed them, but by the time I hit the ground all space under the truck had been taken. It seemed to me that it was almost a minute after the explosion occurred before fragments and particles began to fall. After they did start we were treated to a generous serenade of them pattering on the metal roofs nearby. None of them quite reached us, which was a help to me in getting the men back to work. When I talked to the ordnance officer later he told me that the big explosion had been the destruction of six or eight two-thousand-pound bombs.

As soon as we knew we were headed for Bataan, we invited all organizations to come and see what we had.³⁰ Many supply officers did come, so that by the time we were ready to leave the post, all of the food and clothing were gone. We had given away every drum of gasoline our visitors could haul off, but even so Pop had to destroy part of our supply the morning we left. Of the supplies we had to start with, nothing of value had to be destroyed except gasoline, and nothing of value was left for the Nips. The last thing Pop and I did on Christmas morning before we left Stotsenburg a few days later for a new camp [was] to visit the post cemetery for a final farewell to Kelly, the one member of our household we were leaving behind.

BACK TO THE INFANTRY

Traveling by night, and staying in concealed bivouacs during the day, we reached the heavy jungle of Bataan on the thirty-first of December [1941] without losing a man or a food laden vehicle. My job on the journey was to conceal our camp, men, kitchens, and vehicles before dawn. All day long, every day, there were enemy aircraft overhead, but we escaped their notice for the entire trip.

While we were at breakfast on New Year's Day [1942], I told Pop that I had had enough supply experience and that I would like to get back to an infantry outfit. Immediately he took me to Headquarters Philippine Department to see the commanding general, who at the time was in charge of coast defenses of the southern tip of Bataan.³¹ When Pop told him my story he replied, "You are just in time." Then he told us about the Philippine Army regiment on the west coast of Bataan between Mariveles and a point a few miles south of Bagac.³² He said the regimental commander was a Filipino colonel who had been an aide-de-camp to Mr. [President] Quezon and, while he did not know him personally, he was convinced that he would need plenty of guidance.³³

order that poorly translated, poorly printed document was posted at various prominent places in the camp, more for the purpose of showing the power of the commandant than to prevent individuals from committing offenses.

For about a week after I had been welcomed at O'Donnell, another contingent of Americans arrived each day. Pop came with the last group, in much better condition than I had been when I arrived; in fact, except for his hair, he did not look his almost sixty years.

The incoming men were lined up for inspection⁴ as we had been, and then marched to the platforms where they were to be greeted by the commandant. At the end of inspection, one of the civilian interpreters, a Japanese boy of sixteen who had been born and raised in the Philippines, came into one of our storage rooms asking for a match. He then proceeded to burn a handful of Nip money, explaining to us that he was burning it secretly to save the life of the POW on whom he had found it.

The day after Pop arrived, dysentery overtook him. His barracks building was only twenty-five yards from the latrine, but it was too far away. When a spasm of pain overtook him he was unable to control himself until he could reach the latrine, and he got back to the shack only to start the run again. He became so weak that he had to take his blanket to the *nyon* grass twenty feet from the latrine. With a little bush for shade, there he lay, when not visiting the latrine, for three painful days.

On the second day I persuaded a doctor to go look at him. When we were out of Pop's hearing, the doctor told me that there were hundreds of cases of dysentery in camp with not nearly enough medicine to go round. He said that Pop's age was against him, which made him doubt the wisdom of giving him any medicine that might be better utilized by a younger man. He finally did agree to provide Pop with about one-third of the amount of sulfa pills he should have had.

Pat and I actually gave him the pills at the proper intervals with amazing results, for he was sitting up showing an interest in life the next day. Alas, we were too optimistic, for on the following day he had a relapse. The doctor provided a few more pills, which he insisted were the last he had. That time fortune smiled on Pop, for he recovered completely to resume his normal prison life. Although we did not think much of his chances at the time, he survived the hardships of our prison years to return home, where he now leads a pleasant peaceful life.

After the war started, the Nip civilians in Manila had been apprehended and placed in a detention area with Sherry in supervisory charge.⁵ He had performed that unpleasant duty so efficiently that he had won the