



American Legion Post 11-11
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Welcome Home--June 2014
Battling Belles of Bataan.
Part 2 of 2, Santo Tomas Prison & Aftermath

When we last left the Army and Navy nurses, they were interned into Santo Tomas Prison camp. The first week in camp, the women worked on healing themselves. A score were suffering from malaria, dysentery, arthritis, hepatitis, stomach cramps, leg ulcers and dengue fever. The ladies did not suffer severe beatings in the prison camps as the men did, but they were literally starved rendering future ailments.

This sixty acre campus on Santo Tomas became home to the nurses for the next three years. The nurses kept busy administering medications to patients, reading books, and building tents for living quarters outside of the main buildings. The Japanese guards would give strict orders one day, then reverse themselves the next day, so the nurses would never know what to expect from them. Anyone attempting an escape would be shot, as three soldiers found out for themselves.

Breakfast would normally be a ladle of mush, or a vegetable ragout with possibly a few slivers of Caraboa (a type of water buffalo) in the soup. In the evening, the ladies would subsist on a banana, a cup of Caraboa milk, or a little rice. Any loose animal was fair game, and usually wound up in a soup pot for a meal. Even a few of the monkeys ended up as a meal. The nurses would have to sleep two to a cot even with all the physical ailments that were affecting the bodies. Eventually, the nurses came down with Beriberi, swollen limbs, dysentery, malaria of which there was not any Quinine. Most of the physical problems came from malnutrition. (being starved to death.) The dietitians in the nursing corps figured out that the nurses would be lucky to consume about 700 to 900 calories per day. Each day became a death watch, four to five personnel would succumb to malnutrition ending their lives. This treatment went on for three years until Feb. 3, 1945 when American troops, some 750 soldiers with tanks and howitzers crashed through the front gates of the Santo Tomas prison camp.

The nurses returned to America to great dinners, toasts, and keys to their respective cities. All the nurses were promoted and received a Bronze Star for their services, one nurse remained in the Army, Ms. Ruth Bradley, she later became a full colonel and retired as such. Unfortunately all of the nurses suffered tremendously from the malnutrition, no doubt shortening their lives. Some spent months in stateside hospitals recovering from the aforementioned diseases. The Government would use the returning nurses to extensively encourage young women into the Army & Navy. This campaign worked with numerous young ladies entering the Armed Forces .

The nurses all remained close friends, having reunions until old age took its toll and the physical maladies also prevented the group of nurses to join the annual reunion dinners. I am thankful I could share a small piece of their story with our readers, for their service is full of bravery, & complete dedication to our servicemen and women in the Armed Forces. They suffered bombings, diseases, misery, starvation and finally victory with the rest of America. They deserve our utmost respect for their sacrifices & commitment in the service of our Great Country.

Reference Credits:

Wikipedia , "The Battling Belles of Bataan"

Book Credit:

"We Band of Angels" by author Elizabeth M. Norman

