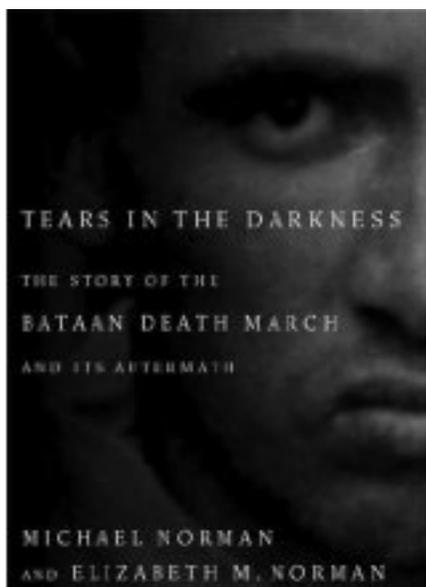


# *Tears in the Darkness* and Writing Narrative Portraiture

In June, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux will release *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath*, by Michael and Elizabeth M. Norman. The massive project took ten years to research and write, and because of its sheer scope posed unique problems for the authors. *Literary Journalism Studies* is pleased to publish exclusive excerpts from the volume. An essay, “Writing Narrative Portraiture,” by Michael Norman, follows. In it he discusses how they resolved the challenges of writing the volume, especially in structuring so a complex a narrative by means of “narrative portraiture.” *Ed.*



Michael Norman, a former reporter for *The New York Times*, is an associate professor in the Literary Reportage program at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University. This is his second book. His work for various publications has been nationally syndicated.



photo by Benjamin Norman

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The Normans have two grown sons and live in Montclair, New Jersey.

Permission from the Normans and Farrar, Straus, and Giroux to reprint the following passages from *Tears in the Darkness* is gratefully acknowledged.

Explanatory footnotes in the original have been eliminated.



Ben Steele, a survivor of the Death March, proved central to providing structure to the book. Here he is as a prisoner of war. The photo provided the basis for the cover design by Aaron Artessa to *Tears in the Darkness*. The picture is reprinted by kind permission of Professor Steele, as is a later sketch taken from his sketchbook. After the war, Steele spent six decades as an artist and teacher of art in Billings, Montana.

# TEARS IN THE DARKNESS

by Michael Norman and Elizabeth M. Norman  
New York University, U.S.A.

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## GHOSTS

THEY WERE stationed far from home when the fighting started—seven thousand miles across the Pacific from San Francisco in a large archipelago that stretches north and south for a thousand miles between Formosa and the Dutch East Indies in the warm tropical waters of the South China Sea.

Compared to some of its neighbors, the Philippines, an American possession since 1898, was a bit of a backwater. None of Singapore's sparkle or the hustle of Hong Kong, but the guidebooks of the day called the place "paradise," and the books were right. Manila was beautiful, palms leaning gently over the seawall along the bay, the night filled with the sweet scent of kamias.

Besides its charms, paradise had the best deepwater port in the southwest Pacific, and in 1941 that port, that strategic transit point, made the Philippines valuable to the Japanese and American generals and admirals who were furiously preparing for war, a war in the Pacific almost everyone in uniform believed was at hand.

On December 8, eight hours after it attacked the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Japan sent its bombers and fighters against American air, infantry and naval bases in the Philippines. Two weeks later, 43,000 Japanese troops invaded the islands.

Waiting for them was a large force of American and Filipino defenders, more than 130,000 men, untried and ill trained, most of them. The Japanese pushed them back and back again until they were forced to retreat to a small thumb of land on the west coast of Manila Bay, the peninsula of Bataan.

There, in jungle wastes and tangled woodlands, they dug trench lines and bunkers, an army of Americans and Filipinos preparing to fight for their lives, the first major land battle for America in World War II.

Starting in January 1942, the Japanese took the peninsula under siege and left the Americans and Filipinos cut off from all help and supplies. The two

sides fought for ninety-nine days, the Japanese taking horrendous casualties, the Americans and Filipinos falling back under the Japanese assaults from one “final” defense line to another. At last, on April 9, sick and starving, without an air force to protect them or a navy to relieve them, the men of Bataan surrendered.

More than 76,000 Americans and Filipinos under American command laid down their arms—the single largest defeat in American military history. The sick, starving, and bedraggled prisoners of war were rounded up by their Japanese captors and made to walk sixty-six miles to a railhead for the trip to prison camp, a baneful walk under a broiling sun that turned into one of most notorious treks in the annals of war, the Bataan Death March.

It is impossible, so the locals say, to walk the ground where this story takes place, the jungles and woodlands and savannas of the Philippines, without feeling the presence, the lingering tenancy, of the men who once fought there—Americans, Filipinos, Japanese. Perhaps that is why at night, Bataanese villagers in their nipa huts often think they hear history stumbling along in the darkness outside their doors.

Some nights it is voices they hear, voices begging for food and water, voices pleading for their lives. Other nights it is the sound of shuffling feet, thousands of feet heavy with fear and fatigue, dragging north through the dust mile after mile up the Old National Road.

All of this is memory, of course, the memory of the old ones who lived along the route, or their children and children’s children who tell and retell the stories of Bataan as if they were reciting from sacred texts.

As the events of 1941-1942 passed into the hands of historians, both the battle for Bataan and the death march became symbols, the former as a modern Thermopylae, a stirring last stand, and the latter as a crucible of courage, the courage to continue on a walk to the grave.

In some sense these conceits were true, but when the dross of propaganda and myth is skimmed from the surface of history, what’s left, in this case, is an example of the miscarried morality and Punic politics that underlie every appeal to arms—the bad leadership, the empty promises, the kind of cruelty that crushes men’s souls. Proof too that the instant the first shot is fired, the so-called rules of war, *guerre de règle*, give way to *guerre à outrance*, war without clemency or quarter.

So much suffering leaves any piece of ground spectral. Little wonder, then, the locals along the road hear voices, and the survivors of that battle and march, old men now, keep the company of ghosts.

BEN STEELE came of age as a cowboy, or an echo of a cowboy, which in his time, the early decades of the twentieth century, was probably the same thing. He grew up in a pine-log house by a crystal spring in the shadow of the Bull Mountains on Montana’s eastern plain. By the time he was eight he

could ride, rope, and shoot. He herded cattle, he drove horses, he tended sheep. Alone at night on the open range he slept in a circle of rope to keep the snakes out of his bedroll. In 1940 when he turned twenty-two, he joined the Army Air Corps and was shipped to the Philippines to fight the Japanese. After ninety-nine days of battle he became a prisoner of war and spent three years behind barbed wire and watchtowers. Every day he was starved or beaten by his keepers: “the Bug,” “Mickey Mouse,” “the Killer.” He never forgot those faces. They insinuated themselves in his psyche, permanent residents now, along with wild mustangs, shepherders, ambling cowboys, and antelope gamboling through the sage. This is all in his sketchbooks.

The sketchbooks are stacked on shelves and in closets, black buckram and hardbound, most of them. They date from his first days in art school, more than thirty volumes of trials and exercises—sixty-one years of sketching and painting every day, searching for the perfect line, the exact color, the proper balance and emphasis, proportion and perspective. At ninety years plus, a lifetime of trying, as artists say of their work, to “get the thing right.”

On occasion he works from models in a studio or tramps out to the prairie to sketch a scene. He likes to draw horses. He hasn’t been on a horse in nearly twenty-five years, but his respect and affection for the animals run deep, back to the blizzards of his boyhood when his horse would lead him through a blinding whiteout back to the safety and warmth of the pine-log house at Hawk Creek.

By and large, however, the leaves of his sketchbooks hold his ghosts: page after page of prisoners of war and the Imperial *hobei* who guarded them, the men who held Ben Steele captive for one thousand two hundred and forty-four days.

He cannot say why after six decades he still sketches the faces that followed him home from the camps, the faces of old comrades in prison rags, and the faces of the Japanese soldiers who herded them from place to place and kept them penned behind barbed wire.

These ghosts pop up everywhere in his sketchbooks, sometimes like rogues in a gallery but as often as not singly in quick profile or thumbnail, sometimes on the same page with bucking mustangs and cow ponies or, like interlopers, peering in from the edges of landscapes, intruding on the cottonwoods and sage.

In the early sketchbooks, the ones he filled after the war attending college and during his first decade as a professor of art, the drawings of his keepers and his comrades tend to be imitative, realistic, the faces filled with the meanness and misery of war, as if the artist’s aim was to document his experience.

After a certain point, however—ten years postbattle, perhaps fifteen—the drawings become simpler, less emotive. No longer are the faces rendered with the kind of shading and crosshatching that create tone and mood.

Most are simple line drawings in pen-and-ink, quirky enough to qualify as caricature. In his later work the prisoners look more hapless than hopeless, hoboes in bedraggled dress, and the guards appear more often than not as comic grotesques, a little lunatic or just plain goofy.

This is “perspective and proportion” of a different sort, and it has nothing to do with either the geometry or the grammar of art. Ben Steele, brown eyes aglint, almost always wears a smile, like a man who knows he finally “got the thing right.”

## ONE

HE ENLISTED on the advice of his mother, Bess. In the late summer of 1940, Ben Steele was working as a camp tender at a large sheep outfit east of town. It was hard, sometimes filthy work, but the freedom of it made him happy—on his own every day, riding a horse or driving a rig between the far-flung camps of the shepherders, delivering mail and supplies, sleeping in the open, wrapped in an oilcloth, staring up at a big sky dark with bright stars.

One weekend that summer Ben Steele’s mother and father drove out from Billings to visit. His mother had an idea. He’d been a ranch hand most of his life, she said. He was twenty-two now, grown up. Maybe it was time to consider something else. She’d heard on the radio that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had just signed a law creating the first peacetime military draft. The inaugural callup, she said, was scheduled for late October.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” she went on. “You really ought to get in before they draft you. Maybe if you do, you could, you know, do what you want in the army?”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to wear a uniform, but since he usually took his mother’s advice to heart, he tucked her suggestion away, and a while later, over a smoky campfire perhaps or riding the green hills and valleys, he remembered something; the boys he knew from Billings who had enlisted in the army were usually sent west for training to the golden valleys of California.

He thought, “Going to California—that sounds good. A little adventure.” And on a nice warm day in mid-September, he borrowed a ride into town, ambled over to the Stapleton Building on Twenty-ninth Street and into the recruiting station there, where he found a sergeant sitting at a desk.

“I want to go into the army,” he announced.

“Well now,” the recruiter said, looking up at the lean ranch hand standing in front of him, “we have the Army and we have the Army Air Corps, which one you want?”

Ben Steele knew nothing about soldiering, but some years earlier a couple of fellows up at the Billings Municipal Airport got themselves a Ford Tri-Motor (a propeller under each wing and one on the nose) and for a dollar

a head started taking people for a ride. It wasn't much of a ride—the plane took off from atop the rimrocks, circled the Yellowstone Valley below, and a few minutes later landed to pick up another load of wide-eyed locals. But that short hop stirred something in Ben Steele.

"The Air Corps?" he said. "That sounds real good. Give me that!"

A few weeks later, on October 9, 1940, a month shy of his twenty-third birthday, Ben Steele stood in a line of enlistees at the United States Courthouse in Missoula, Montana, raised his right hand, and repeated one of the republic's oldest oaths: "I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic . . . So help me God."

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, like every American who read the newspapers, listened to the radio, went to the movies and watched newsreels, Private Ben Steele of the United States Army Air Corps was convinced his enemies would be German. Japan was a threat, all right—that fall, in fact, America cut its shipments of scrap steel and iron to Japan—but Germany, threatening all Europe, was the menace of the moment.

The Germans had invaded Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. By the time Ben Steele arrived at the induction station in Missoula in the fall of 1940, the German Luftwaffe had been bombing Great Britain for three months.

Reading about all this in the *Billings Gazette* or listening to it on KGHL radio, the most popular station in that part of the West, most Montanans wanted no part of the trouble overseas. Like the rest of America, they were focused on finding jobs and recovering from the Great Depression, not crossing swords with the saber-rattling Germans. In a national opinion poll conducted the week Ben Steele enlisted, 83 percent of the those surveyed said they did not want to send American troops overseas.

Young men looking for a job or a little adventure don't pay much attention to opinion polls. The army was offering a paycheck, plus "three hots and a cot" and perhaps a chance to travel. Since they had no feel for the killing and dying in Europe, no sense at all of facing Panzer tanks and Stuka divebombers, the ranch hands, soda jerks, delivery boys, and railroad workers on their way to training camp with Ben Steele were full of brio and eager for action.

"If war's gonna come, I wanna be in it," Ben Steele thought. "Hell, I want to be over there where it's happening."

*Saturday, October 4, 1941, San Francisco*

Blue sky, bright sun, seventy-two degrees, a good day to set sail for paradise.

On a pier off the Embarcadero, the men of the 19th Bombardment Group, United States Army Air Corps, waited in long queues to board the United States Army transport *General Willard A. Holbrook*, a lumbering

troopship used to ferry men and materiel to American bases overseas. In the ranks on the wharf, moving slowly toward the gangway, was Benjamin Charles Steele, serial number 190-18-989, a newly minted private. He had been in uniform nearly a year now, and he liked the life of a soldier. The army had given him just what he wanted, a chance to cross the mountains and see the Golden Land.

California wasn't as golden as he'd imagined, but he liked it well enough. Training camp was a dusty tent city on the dry brown flats at March Field near Riverside. The boys from the cities and suburbs thought these accommodations "kinda primitive," but the men who had been ranch raised looked around and saw luxury: tents with wooden floors and gas stoves, hot showers nearby, latrines that weren't buzzing with flies, and a mess hall that served seconds if a man wasn't sated.

Air Corps basic training was short, just six weeks, long enough for men who would be working as airplane mechanics, gunners, ground crews, and supernumeraries. They attended classes on military courtesy and discipline. They reviewed army rules and regulations. They endured hours of close-order drill and the ritual of forced marches.

These little walks, as Ben Steele thought of them, were too much for many of the men. After one eight-mile hike the road was lined with recruits doubled over, gasping for breath, and grouching about their training. Ben Steele had never heard such bellyaching.

"Holy Christ!" he said, to no one in particular. "Eight miles is nothing. Back home I'd walk that far before breakfast."

"Oh yeah?" one of malcontents came back. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"I'm from Montana," Ben Steele said.

THE ARMY sent him to New Mexico after basic training and assigned him to the 7th Matériel Squadron, 19th Bombardment Group, Kirtland Field, Albuquerque. As soon as he was settled, he made inquiries about buying a horse.

A local stockman wanted fifty bucks for an old plug named Blaze. Not much of a horse, nothing like the spirited animals he was used to, but he missed riding, so he went to a finance company, borrowed the money (agreeing to pay five dollars a week against the balance), and made a deal with a nearby rancher to pasture his mount. His father shipped him a saddle, and every weekend Ben Steele rode out among the cactus and scrub grass. It was hot, sandy country but he didn't care—he was on a horse, and a horse reminded him of home.

The Air Corps made him a dispatcher, tracking flights, and after a month or two of this work he got it in his head that he wanted to be a pilot. Never much of a student, he found a math professor at the University of New

Mexico to tutor him privately in the algebra and geometry that he would need to pass the exam to become a cadet. He studied for several months and was about to take the test when word came down that the 19th Bombardment Group was being sent overseas.

“You can’t ship me out,” he told his commanding officer. “I’m fixing to take the cadet exam.”

“Oh yeah, we can,” the squadron commander said. “The whole outfit’s goin’.”

*October 3, 1941*

*Dearest Mother and Family,*

*Thought would drop you a few more lines before departing the U.S.*

*Am sailing tomorrow afternoon . . . We don’t know for sure how long we will have to stay in foreign service but hope it isn’t too long, but it may be alright . . . Will write you every chance I get so you will know about where I am at . . . Just heard we were going to the Philippines, but that is just a rumor not certain. Can’t believe a thing you hear around here . . . Don’t worry about anything, because everything is O.K. Will write as soon as I can make connections. It is possible we will stop at some port along the way, and if we do will send you a line.*

*Lots of Love to you all  
Bud.*

AMERICA REMEMBERS the attacks on its bases in the Pacific in 1941 as acts of treachery, but to label them “sneak” attacks is more propaganda than plain truth. For more than twenty years, a standing committee of admirals and generals in Washington had been planning against just such an attack. They looked at Japan as America’s chief antagonist in the Pacific, and they knew well the value of surprise and Japan’s history of success with this tactic. The military planners were sure that when war came, it would begin “with a sudden, surprise attack.” They did not know exactly where or precisely when, but they were convinced that the Philippines, just eighteen hundred air miles from Japan and sitting directly between it and the oil- and mineral-rich Indonesian archipelago in the southwest Pacific, would top Japan’s list of targets. So in the early fall of 1941, with war consuming Europe and with the Japanese Army on the march in Asia, American war planners—more in an attempt to deter an attack than defend against it—began to rush cannon, tanks, airplanes, and men to the Philippine Islands. The men of the 19th Bombardment Group, United States Army Air Corps, were part of that consignment.

The *Holbrook* set sail on the evening tide that October 4. In the ship’s galley cooks had prepared a greasy ragout of pork, and as the men passed through the mess line, stewards slopped the dinner on their trays. Later that

night the wind picked up, the waves began to swell and the *Holbrook* began to pitch and roll, and it wasn't long before all that greasy pork began to reappear. Soon the crappers were clogged and the sinks were overflowing.

*October 10, 1941*

*Dearest Mother and Family,*

*Have been sitting out on the deck this morning watching flying fish. They are about six inches long and sail through the air like a bird . . . The water has been sort of rough all the way . . . The ship is bobbing up and down and from one side to the other till I can't even sit still. Am sitting here on the deck and writing on my knee. Hope you can read this.*

AFTER HAWAII, the sailing was easy, flat water most of the way and light tropical breezes. Most men spent mornings topside, watching the water or staring at the horizon, absorbed by the vast vista of the sea. Some played cards on the hatch covers or spread out their towels and baked in the afternoon sun. In the evenings Quentin Pershing Devore of eastern Colorado came topside to listen to his Hallicrafter shortwave radio. One evening a dark-haired fellow with a friendly face eased over and sat down next to him.

"I'm Ben Steele," he said, holding out his hand.

"I'm Pershing Devore."

"What do you get on that thing?" the fellow asked.

"I get the news, sometimes I get music," Devore said.

Devore too had grown up outdoors, working the land and livestock in the rye- and wheat-farming country of Yuma County, a day's drive or so from the Nebraska border. He considered himself "a plain boy with no frills," and that's how this fellow from Billings struck him, too, "real plain."

"Where did you get that name, Pershing?" Ben Steele asked.

"Well, my name is Quentin Pershing Devore, but they call me Pershing."

"That's too complicated," Ben Steele said. "I'm just going to call you Q.P."

*October 18, 1941*

*Dearest Mother, Dad + Family,*

*Met a new friend. He likes hunting and fishing about as well as I do. We get together and talk over old times. It sort of makes me feel at home . . .*

They talked for hours, about farming and ranching and cattle and sheep, about the "hard-up" life on a Colorado farm and the hardscrabble days on a Montana homestead. Ben Steele often turned the conversation to horses—cow ponies, broncs and quarter horses, chestnuts, Appaloosas and bays.

Q.P. thought, "This guy is crazy about horses."

They talked about war as well. Their convoy was flanked by destroyer escorts, and at night the ship was blacked out, a shadow on the sea.

A week and a half out of Hawaii, their company commander called them together. They were going to the Philippines “to fight a war,” he said . . .

*[There are thirteen main or “war” chapters in the book and eight short interstitial chapters, “miniatures” the Normans call them. The interstitials are set between the first eight main chapters and deliver moments from the central character’s life. “Hawk Creek” is one of those interstitials.]*

## HAWK CREEK

THE OLD MAN told him, “You don’t point this at anything unless you’re going to shoot it.” Bud knew he meant kill it, of course. Then he handed Ben Steele his first weapon, a short-barreled twentytwo rifle. He was seven years old. He was taught how to use it: grip the stock firmly but not too tight, sight with both eyes open, and squeeze the trigger, don’t jerk it.

He learned to hunt, how to stalk a prey and finish it. He would set out traplines too (the boy could dress out anything that walked or flew, a handy skill in hard times), but out trapping or hunting, often as not he’d sit there for a while and stare at the trophy before he took aim.

Sneaking up on a pond of mallards, he’d admire their colors, the jade-green head, the chestnut breast, the snow-white wingtips. Stalking sharp-tailed grouse, he’d crouch in the rushes for long stretches listening to the birds’ comic cackle. When the time came, he’d always pull the trigger, get those cottontails his mother was waiting to make into rabbit pie, but it was almost as if he wanted to let his supper show him something of the world before he bagged it.

HE HATED school, played dumb, and his mother knew it. The Old Man cursed and grumbled about his bad marks, and Gert, his sister, a couple of grades ahead, thought him so stupid she was embarrassed to call him her brother.

Bess would listen to all this and say, “Just leave him alone. He’ll wake up someday and find out he doesn’t know anything.” He didn’t care. He sat there in a stone building in town or some drafty wooden school shack in the hills and stared out the window at the shape of a certain coulee or the way the

snow drifted against a fence, sat there taking note of things, though he could never say why or what for.

The best day of school was the last day of school. Final hour, closing minutes. "Have a good summer," the teacher would say.

He thought, "I'm free."

When his chores were done, when the work was finished, when the Old Man would finally leave him be, he could hunt, he could ride, he could roam Hawk Creek.

THEY HAD THE SAME STORY, the start of the family and the start of the ranch. Maybe that's why Bud loved the place so much. Hawk Creek was where he began, where he always felt he belonged.

At a cattle roundup in 1912 the Old Man, Benjamin Cardwell Steele (tall and strong in the saddle), met Elizabeth Gertrude McCleary (a pale Irish beauty in white lace). When they got engaged, the Old Man gave up running cattle on the open range and looked for a place to settle down. He'd always liked the Bull Mountains. Those hills weren't fit for farming, but a smart rancher who applied himself could make a profit there. Plenty of sweetgrass on the benches, plenty of water in the cool clear creeks.

He settled a section on the dry fork at Hawk Creek. "Prettiest place in the Bulls," he told Bess. And when she saw it, she knew he was right. Their vale was long and winding with a stream down the center. Sheltering the ranch front and back and running the length of the vale were ridgelines rising gentle and green.

With his brother James and a couple of hands, the Old Man set out to build a homestead. They cut trees in the hills, stripped off the bark, squared up the logs, raised the walls and the roof. A neat one-story, three-room bungalow, eighteen feet wide, forty feet long. Then came a barn and privy, storehouse, bunkhouse, icehouse, corrals, and a tack-and-equipment shed. Pretty soon there were chickens scratching in the yard and the cries of children coming from the house.

IN THE WINTER the vale turned gray and white. Bud was older now, just getting up, pulling on his boots. His father wanted him out before dawn to fetch some strays, and his mother got up early too to make him breakfast for the cold work ahead.

He finished his cocoa, stamped across the frozen yard, breath steaming ahead of him, to the barn, where he saddled and mounted his horse. He had far to go but paused in the darklight to look back at the house. Did the same thing each time he rode off early. Something about the way the smoke came out of the kitchen chimney and drifted slowly down the darkened vale.

*[After the interstitial chapters, or "miniatures," the story returns to the narrative of the Death March.]*

*from chapter SEVEN . . .*

APRIL 10, the day after surrender, the Japanese started their prisoners walking.

Groups of one hundred, two hundred, three hundred and more were herded into lines or loose formations (sometimes flanked by a brace of guards at either end, sometimes not) and told to get on the road. The ragged, disorganized groups of men set off at intervals. Half the 76,000 captives began the trek April 10 near Mariveles, at the tip of the peninsula, but every day for some ten days thereafter at various points along the thirty miles of road between Mariveles and Balanga, the provincial capital, roughly halfway up the peninsula, yet another rabble of Filipinos or Americans would come down from the hills or emerge from the jungle, and the Japanese would gather them into groups and head them north up the Old National Road.

To label the movement a “march,” as the men took to calling it, was something of a misnomer. During the first few days of walking there were so many men on the road, one bunch following closely behind another, they appeared a procession without end, prisoners as far as the eye could see, mile after mile after mile of tired, filthy, bedraggled men, heads bowed, feet dragging through the ankle-deep dust.

They walked the sixty-six miles in stages. For those who started at the tip of the peninsula, stage one was a stretch of road that ran east nine miles to Cabcabén. There the road turned north and proceeded along Bataan’s east coast some twenty-seven miles, passing through the town squares of Lamao, Limay, Orion, Pilar, Balanga, Abucay, Samal, Orani, and Hermosa. At Hermosa the Old National Road turned west toward Layac Junction, then northeast for eleven miles across a torrid, sandy plain to Lubao, then continuing northeast to San Fernando—in all from Mariveles 66 road miles, 106 kilometers, 140,000 footfalls.

Some days the prisoners trekked ten miles, other days fifteen, twenty, or more. And hard miles they were. More than half the Old National Road on Bataan was a rural road—its base stone and crushed coral, its surface fine sand—built for the light traffic of the provinces. Four months of army convoys had churned up the hardpan, leaving potholes and sinkholes that tripped them and shards of gravel that sliced up their shoes and boots.

They walked in the most torrid time of year, *tag-init*, the Filipinos called it, the days of dryness, the season of drought. From March to May the sun hung flame white and unshrouded in the Philippine sky, searing everything under it. By early afternoon the air was an oven, the hardpan as hot as kiln bricks.

LIEUTENANT SAMUEL GOLDBLITH of Lawrence, Massachusetts,

started walking at Mariveles with a full pack—an extra uniform, underwear, socks, blanket, raincoat, shaving kit, stationery, mess kit, canteen, and a pink cotton towel, a keepsake from his wife’s trousseau. It wasn’t long before he had pitched everything save his canteen, mess kit, and Diana’s pink towel, which he used as a mantilla to keep the sun from baking his head.

Goldblith guessed he was bound for a prison camp somewhere in the islands, but where he could not say. One rumor had them being interned in Manila’s Bilibid Prison, another had them bound for the railhead at San Fernando, but this information was of little use or comfort since few men were familiar with the local geography and had no real sense of the distances involved or the difficulty traversing them. They were walking, that’s all they knew, walking in the heat and dust, eyes burning and throats parched, wondering where they were going and when they would get there.

Richard Gordon happened to be walking in a group that included Brigadier General Clifford Bluemel. Gordon had seen Bluemel in action and remembered him as “a spicy little bastard.” Somewhere between Mariveles and Cabcaben, the Japanese had grabbed the general and started him walking, and along the way some of the guards decided to have a little fun.

They circled the general, then made him squat with his fingers locked behind his neck and started turning him in circles. When he lost his equilibrium and toppled over, they laughed—oh, how they laughed—and when he fought to keep his balance, his poise (“The man is a tough nut,” Gordon thought), they kicked his feet out from under him and howled that much harder.

The looting went on as well. Units of Imperial Infantry were encamped beside the Old National Road, awaiting new orders and watching the parade of prisoners. Though most prisoners had been stripped clean by the time they reached Cabcaben, now and then a *hobei* resting along the road would get curious.

Sergeant James Gautier, an Air Corps mechanic from Moss Point, Mississippi, felt a hand grab his shirt and pull him out of formation. Another shakedown, he reckoned. All he had left was his wallet, and the Japanese was flipping through the folds, looking for something of value when he came upon a snapshot of a woman.

“Waifu, Waifu?” the Japanese soldier said. Gautier nodded, then the soldier dropped the picture in the dirt, stepped on it, and ground it with the heel of his hobnail boot.

So this is what it meant to be a prisoner of war, thought Robert Levering, a Manila lawyer from Ohio who had volunteered to serve on Bataan. This is what it felt like to “come to the end of civilization.”

PAST MARIVELES that first day, the highway ran flat for a few miles, then rose sharply in a series of steep switchbacks that had been cut into the side of an escarpment. The precipitous switchbacks were known as “the zigzag.” Unfolded, this accordion section of road was less than a mile, but its angle

of ascent—520 feet in less than two-tenths of a mile—was so acute that the back-and-forth climb was a tough one, especially at the height of the hot season. And for men left weak and exhausted by disease, hunger, thirst, and fear, the ascent was torture.

One hairpin turn after another blocked the marchers' view and made the climb seem endless: another incline, another turn, another incline, up, up again, up some more.

On the outside turns, the road dropped off sharply into deep ravines, stories deep, many of them, with boulders, stumps, trees, and tangled underbrush waiting at the bottom.

The labor of climbing the switchbacks under a tropical sun left the men gasping with each step, and it was not long before some of them began to collapse and crawl to the shoulder of the road.

The guards accompanying the first columns climbing the zigzag seemed to ignore the dropouts, but prisoners in later columns began to spot bodies at the bottom of the ravines, bodies wearing familiar uniforms.

FROM THE TOP of the zigzag the road ran flat and east, seven and a half miles to the seaside town of Cabcabén on Manila Bay. Along this stretch the marchers now began to encounter an increasing number of Japanese trucks, tanks, and horse-drawn artillery, all moving south to stage for the invasion of Corregidor.

Many of these trucks carried troops, and as these vehicles passed the columns of prisoners, Japanese soldiers would lean out with a bamboo staff or a length of wood or the butt end of a rifle and, like a polo player bearing down on a ball, swing their cudgels at the heads of the men marching along in the crowded ranks on the road.

They fractured a lot of skulls, smashed a number of jaws, dislocated scores of shoulders. Now and then a truck would swerve sharply toward a column, and the Japanese riding shotgun would throw his door open to catch a marcher flush in the face.

"Let's stay on the inside row in the column," Humphrey O'Leary told his friend Phil Murray. "If we march on the other side, the Japs will bash us in the head."

Here came a truckful of soldiers holding lengths of rope as long as whips, lashing ladders on the road. One whip caught a prisoner around the neck, and the Japanese in the truck started to reel him in as the truck kept going. The poor man was twisting this way and that, dragging through the cinders. About a hundred feet later he was finally able to free himself, and he got to his feet, clothes shredded, skin lanced and bleeding, and looked back down the road.

"You bastards!" he yelled after the truck. "I'll live to piss on your graves."

A MILE beyond the top of the zigzag, the columns of prisoners passed the entrance to one of the large American field hospitals, part of the headquarters and service area that had been tucked in the American rear. The Japanese had bombed and shelled the service area often during their second attack, fire that left the hospital in ashes. Now wandering among its charred ruins were scores of wounded Filipino soldiers who had been treated there. Many were still in their hospital pajamas or bathrobes, grimy now with dirt and soot. Their wounds and stumps were beginning to suppurate and their bloody bandages and dressings needed changing.

Major William “Ed” Dyess of Albany, Texas, an Air Corps pilot in the line of march, watched Japanese guards herd the sick and wounded Filipinos out of the hospital grounds and set them walking. To Dyess these “bomb-shocked cripples” had a look of “hopelessness in their eyes,” and they stumbled along stoop shouldered for more than a mile before “their strength ebbed and they began falling back through the marching ranks” and to the side of the road.

Zoeth Skinner of Portland, Oregon, came astride a Filipino amputee hobbling along on crutches. Japanese infantrymen camped along the way yelled and laughed at the cripple, poked him with sticks, tried to make him stumble. A while later farther up the road, Skinner noticed a tail of white gauze dragging in the dirt ahead of him. At the other end of the tail, twenty feet forward, was a man with a bandaged leg, struggling against his wound, his dressing unraveling as he walked.

AT FIRST the marchers tried to keep their sense of society, their culture of comradeship, and help one another. The lucky ones, men like Humphrey O’Leary and Phil Murray, were able to “buddy-up” and watch out for each other, but in the chaos of the surrender and the first commotion of captivity, friends became separated, and men like Ben Steele and Richard Gordon and Dominick Giantonio of Hartford, Connecticut, found themselves in the ranks of strangers, lending a hand when a hand was needed.

“Get up!”

“Let’s go!”

“Don’t fall, they’ll get you.”

Against despair, however, each man had to struggle alone. Ed Dyess got a “sort of sinking feeling” every time he saw a Ford or Chevrolet truck bearing Imperial Japanese Army insignia, prewar American exports (or a little piece of home, as Dyess saw it) packed now with enemy troops that jeered at him as they passed by.

Colonel Richard Mallonée from Utah was a veteran of the old horse-drawn artillery, and when he felt low he distracted himself by studying the equipage of his Japanese counterparts. Each time a horse-drawn limber and caisson came along, Mallonée noted the condition of the animals—Were they in good flesh? Well-groomed and properly harnessed?—and the bearing of the men riding them.

Lester Tenney of Chicago set goals for himself. Make it as far as “the next bend in the road,” he thought, or up to that “herd of carabao in the distance.” He also had a dream—“Without a dream,” he figured, his “resolve would weaken”—a dream of home. He held hard to the image of his wife, Laura, his reason, he told himself, for living. And to keep his dream safe, he tucked a picture of her in his sock, telling himself it gave each step purpose.

THE SUN was inescapable. It blistered their skin, baked their shoulders and backs, beat on their heads. Some men had managed to keep their helmets, some wore hats or caps or took rags and handkerchiefs and knotted the ends to fashion a sort of cap, but many men had no cover at all and walked bare-headed under the blazing sun.

The sweat soaked their clothes and streamed down their faces. It mixed with the thick dust and created a kind of gray sludge that ran into their eyes, stuck in their beards, caked on their clothing. They looked like ghosts of themselves mantled in gray, tramping along in a pall.

As each ragged group of men reached Cabcaben, the southernmost town on the peninsula’s east shore and the place where the Old National Road turned north up the coast, they were halted and put in a holding area—a dry rice paddy, field, or section of runway at Cabcaben’s jungle airstrip. From what the men could tell, there were a number of these marshaling yards in Cabcaben, places where the disorderly processions of prisoners from Mariveles were reorganized.

In the holding areas, the men were made to sit feet to back for hours at a time before moving on (the “sun treatment,” they came to call it). At last, when they were ready, the guards rushed in among them, screaming, kicking, and flogging the men to their feet, then herded them onto the road where they were arranged into regular marching columns, three or four ranks across, a hundred to four hundred men in each column, with a handful of guards assigned to walk the flanks and bring up the rear.

By now the prisoners’ hunger was starting to gnaw at them. They had been half starved before surrender and most had not had a scrap of food since. Even more pressing was their thirst. In the chaos at Cabcaben, only occasionally did the Japanese allow the prisoners to fill their canteens from a nearby stream. Most went without water and they rapidly dehydrated and began to suffer heat exhaustion: their temples pounded with pain, their heads felt afire, they became disoriented and wobbly with vertigo.

Back on the road, the guards yelled at them to pick up the pace.

“Speedo,” they shouted, walking or riding bicycles beside the formations. “Speedo! Speedo!”

Some guards, laughing, started their columns running.

BEN STEELE was watching for socks.

Men were starting to blister. Big blisters, the size of a half dollar, blisters in clusters, breaking and bleeding with every step. Some men used sharp rocks to make slits in their shoes and boots, makeshift sandals, but their feet

were so swollen the skin just bulged painfully through the openings. Others removed their footwear and walked barefoot, wincing with every step.

He had to find dry socks or soon he too would be hobbled. Ben Steele pawed through packs and bags abandoned along the road. Finally, somewhere north of Cabcaban, he saw what he'd been looking for.

A corpse lay on the shoulder just ahead. The dead man was wearing garrison shoes, low quarters instead of work boots, and the laces were untied and loose.

Ben Steele removed one of the shoes, stripped off the sock, and was reaching for the other foot when, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a guard headed his way and dashed back to his place in the column.

"What the hell were you doing back there with that dead guy?" said one of his fellow marchers.

"You gotta take care of your feet," Ben Steele said, "or you're not going to get very far."

MEN HAD BEEN FALLING by the wayside since the zigzag, but the guards had been so busy collecting all the captives and getting them on the road that they had paid the dropouts little attention. After the prisoners were put in columns at Cabcaban, however, the guards in charge of each formation started watching their prisoners closely, and now when a man went down, a Japanese was soon standing over him.

*"Hayaku tate!"*

The order was unintelligible but the meaning of the kick that followed, the hard toe of a hobnail boot, was clear. Get up! Get up immediately or . . .

The fallen tried to raise themselves, tried to pull their knees under them, push up on all fours, but their heads, thick from fever, pulled them down, and their muscles, wasted by months of malnutrition, collapsed under them.

*"Hayaku! Hayaku!"*

THE JAPANESE type 30 bayonet was twenty inches long, overall, with a fifteen-inch blade. The weapon looked more like a Roman sword than a knife-bayonet, and when it was fixed to the end of a fifty-inch Arisaka rifle, it gave the *hobei* a kind of a pike, a five-and-a-half-foot spear.

The average Japanese foot soldier prized his bayonet. It was a symbol of his office, a twentieth-century warrior nodding to his Samurai forebears. He would wear his bayonet home on leave in a scabbard. No other modern force spent so much time practicing with cold steel or developing in its men the stone heart to use it.

If a prisoner was straggling, lagging behind the formation or slowing it down, most guards would just jab him in the lower back or buttocks, a quick poke deep enough to hustle him along and make him rejoin the formation. (After a guard stabbed Sergeant Ed Thomas of Knox, Indiana, in the right buttock, he told himself he could run "all the way to Manila" if he had to.) If

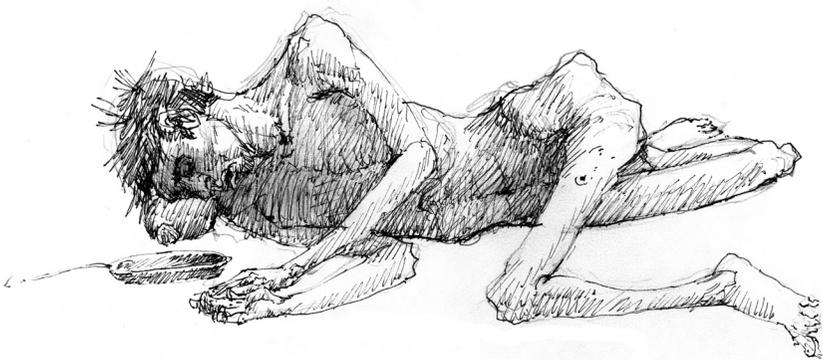
a man failed to raise himself, however, he usually got the blade to the hilt.

A young American in Sergeant Tony Aquino's group had fallen face-first to the gravel roadbed, and a guard at the rear of the column ordered the marchers to halt. He kicked the young American in the ribs and shouted at him to stand up, but the soldier got only as far as his knees before he collapsed again. The guard kicked him harder. (Come on compadre, Aquino thought, get up, get up!) The young American raised his head (Aquino could see blood spilling from the man's mouth) and reached out, as if to ask the guard for help.

The guard put his bayonet to the man's neck, shouted, and drove the blade home. The American rocked back on his heels and rose up on his haunches, then the guard jerked the blade free, and the boy toppled over in the dirt.

So it was going to be a death march, Aquino told himself, "death on the road to nowhere." Falter and fall, he thought, and "there you will stay."

When a sergeant in Joe Smith's column fell to the road, two of his comrades broke ranks to help. A guard from the rear of the column came running and shouting, and he beat the Samaritans back into line, then wheeled about and bayoneted the man on the ground. As Smith came abreast of the scene, the guard was struggling to free his weapon. He had driven the blade so deep that he had to put his foot in the small of the man's back and pull the rifle with both hands to wrest it free . . . .



*Prisoner-of-war sketch by Ben Steele.*