HOLY CROSS P.O.W.'S
IN THE PHILIPPINES - 1941-1945

1985 -4

BY

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(This Text Was Presented)

at the

1985 Conference on the
History of the Congregations of Holy Cross
May 25-26, 1985
King's College
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

PRISONERS OF WAR - 1941-1945

By Robert McKee, C.S.C.

This concerns a group of Holy Cross Sisters, Brothers and priests with three Lasalette priests on their way to India and Burma as missionaries in November, 1941, as listed below:

Father Jerome Lawyer	- Holy Cross	-	U.S.A.	-	for	Dhaka,	India	
Brother Theodore Kapes	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Brother Rex Hennel	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Father Robert McKee	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Sister Olivette	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Sister Caecilius	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Sister Gustave	- "	"	- Canada	-	"Chittagong	- India		
Sister Alphonse	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Sister Caecelia	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Sister Madaline	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Father Murphy	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Father Bleau	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Father Jarie	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Brother Constant	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Brother Nivard	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Brother Romain	- "	"	- "	-	"	"	"	
Father Julien	- Lasalette	-	U.S.A.	-	"	Burma		
Father Decoteau	- "	-	"	-	"	"		
Father Dogherty	- "	-	"	-	"	"		

Though this story involves these nineteen persons I have centered it around two of the group--Fathers Jerome Lawyer and myself--who have been associated for many years. Others would tell the story from their own point of view.

We had all gathered in San Francisco and met as a group for the first time, near the President Grant, the ship which was to take us to our foreign mission destiny. Some one with a camera snapped a picture of the group. That picture can now be found in one of the old issues of THE BENGALESE magazine in the archives with Father Fell at Holy Cross Missions in Beltsville, Maryland, and also in the archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame. It has been reprinted in the brochure for this conference.

Fr. Jerome Lawyer and I (Fr. Robert McKee) had known each other since 1927. We met in high school at Holy Cross Seminary (now Holy Cross Hall), Notre Dame, Indiana. Jerry Lawyer was one class ahead of me. We had been together through high school and college at Notre Dame and through our theology years at the Holy Cross Foreign Mission Seminary in Washington, D.C.. In 1939, Jerry Lawyer was ordained to the priesthood. Right after ordination he had been told that he was to study Arabic and Islamics at Catholic University in Washington in preparation for work among the Moslems in our foreign missions in Bengal, India. This news was a great disappointment to him after his long preparation to go to India immediately after ordination. I was ordained the next year, 1940. Six months before ordination I had been told that I was not to go to the missions, but was to work in the mission office in Washington. I, too, was very disappointed in not being sent to India right after ordination.

After about ten months of working in the office I was called by Father Goodall, our superior in Washington, and given some surprising and joyful news. He asked me if I was still interested in going to the missions. I told him that the missions apostolate had been my one hope all through my seminary days. He then told me that Mr. Thomas Curran, who was to be ordained in June, 1941, would not go to India for health reasons and that I could take his place. He also told me that Fr. Lawyer was supposed to go to Beirut for higher Islamics studies but that the war in Europe was stopping all civilian travel in that direction so that now he, too, was free to go to India. I was told by Fr. Goodall to telephone Fr. Lawyer, who was at that time temporarily in parochial work in Massachusetts, and to give him the news to get ready to go with me to India sometime in the fall.

And so, early in November, Father Lawyer and I were with the group of seventeen other new and old missionaries in San Francisco, happy to be on our way to India at last. On November 9, 1941, we were on board the President Grant on our way to Honolulu, the first stop on our way to the orient.

On November 15th we arrived in Honolulu. An accident on shipboard killed one seaman and injured another seriously, so our ship was to be held in port at least two days. Fr. Lawyer and I decided to visit an army chaplain, Fr. Spear Strahan, a former Holy Cross seminarian, now a priest of the diocese of Lansing, Michigan. While we were seminarians in Washington he had been posted at a fort near Washington and he had often visited priest friends at the Foreign Mission Seminary. He had recently been transferred to Fort Shafter in Honolulu. When we met him at Fort Shafter we were invited to stay with him for at least a day. He gave us a grand tour of the Fort. On that tour he pointed out to us Pearl Harbor and the sight of the U.S. fleet of battleships tied up two-by-two around the harbor. He also pointed out the feverish activity in the area to set up anti-aircraft guns remarking, "The army seems to be aware of some danger in the near future." (He wasn't very wrong.) On November 18th we boarded the President Grant at about 5:00 pm on our way to Manila, the second leg of our voyage to the orient.

The next morning, much to the surprise of all on board, we discovered that we were in a small convoy of four ships and a shepherding cruiser. The ship immediately behind us bore many red flags on its main mast. We were informed by an army captain, Robert Jones, that the flags indicated explosives, ammunition. That same day we were informed that there would be a strict black-out each night: no lights reflecting from the interior of the ship, no smoking out on deck at night. This caused much speculation about the possible danger ahead of us. If there was danger, why had the State Department issued us passports for travel in this area? (My father had commented in a letter I had received before departure in San Francisco that he feared we were going into a "hot spot.")

It took two weeks and two days to reach Manila. On that voyage, late one night, most of us were awakened by the silence of the ship's engines. We were completely stopped of all forward motion. Some of us were to learn later in the Philippines from Mr. Cassidy, the purser of the President Grant, that our shepherding cruiser had spotted Japanese ships. By blinker-communication our cruiser was told that a group of Japanese ships was on maneuver and that we were to proceed on our voyage. Were these Japanese ships part of the task-force on its way to bomb Pearl Harbor? Were they heading for the U.S. battleships we had seen in Pearl Harbor? On we went.

By the end of the two weeks we were approaching the Philippines, spotting many islands as we sailed through the San Bernadino Straits. Early one morning we passed the island of Corregidor on the right side of our ship and on the left side the tip of the peninsula of Bataan. These names, given to us by persons familiar with the area, meant nothing to most of us then but they were to mean much later on. Twenty-five miles later, we were across Manila Bay and moored to pier number seven in Manila. The date was December 4, 1941.

At the pier, the captain of our ship announced that the ship would be in Manila only a few days and that we should make the ship our home, because air-raid practices were going on in the city and there was danger of being picked up by the police if we did not find designated shelters quickly after an alarm. Why air-raid practices? On our ship was a group of forty-seven special engineers, under Captain Robert Jones. He had warned us to keep this to ourselves: they were on a mission to guard the Burma Road being laid by the British army between India and Burma. That group was immediately taken off the ship and taken to Baguio to a U.S. Army camp. I left the ship to visit an aunt of mine who was dying of cancer at St. Paul's Hospital near the port area. As I left, looking for a taxi, I met Mr. Murphy, foreman of the forty-seven engineers. He reminded me to say nothing to anyone about that group. Two days later, 6 December, Mr. Murphy was back on our ship. He told us that the group was leaving Manila the next day on a ship moored near ours. He told us that arrangements had been made to have our baggage transferred to this other ship, and that the change of ships could be noted on our tickets without any trouble. We argued that we wanted to see more of the city and that I wanted to see more of my dying aunt. On the morning of 7 December, we noticed that the other ship had left during the night.

On the evening of 7 December, Fr. Lawyer and I were having a meal with some Irish Columban priests at their rectory in Malate parish. After the meal we were listening to a Dutch news broadcast from Indonesia. The broadcast was interrupted by an announcement that all communications with Japan were severed as of that moment. One of the priests remarked very seriously, "That means war in this part of the world."

The next morning, 8 December, 1941 (7 December in the U.S.A.), I was on my way to a salon in our ship to celebrate Mass. A passenger flashed an early newspaper. I glanced at the big headline, which did not register immediately. Later, during my Mass that headline came back to mind with a blow: "PEARL HARBOR BOMBED BY JAPANESE PLANES!" That meant war between the U.S. and Japan! The comment of the Irish priest came back to mind: "That means war in this part of the world." Immediately after Mass I found the others of our group. Our anxiety was WAR! WAR!

The captain of our ship called all passengers together and told us to leave the ship and find homes in the city for the ship would be on zig-zag course in the harbor by day for fear of Japanese bombings and at the pier at night to off-load Manila-bound materials. So we started out to find a home, the Sisters in some convent, we men to find a place in some school or rectory. We visited a Jesuit house in the old Walled City. From there we were directed to a Jesuit college, Ateneo de Manila. By three in the afternoon we found ourselves at the Irish Columban church at Malate where Fr. Lawyer and I had been visiting the previous evening. A priest directed us to the college we were searching for. We were a weary and confused group as we confronted two Jesuits, Frs. Priestner and Kim, with our problem: strangers in a strange city in the midst of a war, several Holy Cross men and three LaSalette men. The Jesuits welcomed us very cordially. We were invited to a very welcome meal and given beds in the college infirmary. That night we were excitedly awakened by the first air-raid in Manila, as Japanese planes bombed Nichols airport, seven miles south of the Jesuit college.

The next morning, on our visit to the ship to gather our baggage, we met the Sisters of the Holy Cross and learned that the Americans had found a home with the Maryknoll Sisters who had gathered at Woman's College, and the Canadians at a Carmelite convent in the eastern part of the city.

The next day, 9 December, our second day in the war, we heard the air-raid siren, then watched some sixty Japanese planes flying directly over the city. We soon heard the explosions and saw the rising smoke as they completely destroyed the U.S. Navy Yards at Cavite, some ten miles away on the southern shore of Manila Bay. We had our first baptism of blood as we walked among the many Cavite victims brought in from that raid to nearby Philippine General Hospital. We were definitely in war. The following day, 10 December, we learning that the Japanese planes had fully destroyed a fleet of U.S. flying-fortresses on Clark Field, twenty miles north of Manila the previous day. From then, daily through December, the city of Manila was bombed. We were on alert, after each air-raid attack, among victims crowding that hospital. One day Fr. Lawyer told me that he had met a Fr. Ronan, chaplain to the Philippine army. Learning that Fr. Lawyer and I were not officially connected with any institute in the city he wanted us as chaplains with the American-Filippino forces.

On 22 December we learned that the armed forces were preparing to flee the city and go to the jungles of Bataan peninsula to take the fighting away from the city area. Fr. Lawyer and I immediately went to Fr. Ronan's office. He told us that with the move on for Bataan it was impossible to process our papers for induction into the army. We went to MacKay radio station and sent a message home that we were "Safe in Manila." (How we would laugh at that message years later--"Safe in Manila"!) Manila was declared an "open city" by MacArthur from Bataan or Corregidor. The city was now an open city for looters. The Japanese had landed on the island of Luzon and were fast approaching the city. The city was ringed by fire, ships in the nearby bay burning, buildings all over the city on fire. We waited for the Japanese, hoping for some sort of peace and order. Finally on January 2, 1942, in the dark of the night we heard trucks and tanks as the Japanese Army entered the city. What lay ahead of us? What did the folks at home know about what was happening in the Philippines? All at the Ateneo de Manila were in much apprehension concerning what life under the Japanese would mean for us.

At a meeting in the morning between officers of the Japanese Army and the Jesuit superiors it was decided that all of us would move to Santo Tomas University, the designated concentration camp for all Americans and Europeans. After a heated discussion it was finally decided that the final destination for us would be delayed until a future meeting with higher army officers. In the meantime we were to remain at the Ateneo college. All other Americans, with the exception of Sisters in their own convents, were to live in Santo Tomas. At a later meeting with the Japanese it was decided that all foreign missionaries were under the Religious Section of the Japanese Army, and that their convents or schools would be their concentration camps. There were two Japanese Catholic priests in the Religious Section. No doubt, their presence made it much easier for us. Living at the Ateneo we were permitted to leave the compound wearing red identity armbands to help in nearby parish churches, to buy food, even for walks. This was to be our status until July, 1944. Changes of residence could be made with permission from authorities at Santo Tomas University.

During our stay at the Ateneo, the Jesuits labored to feed and house the some 200 persons living there, Americans and Filipinos. The Jesuits even organized classes for the scholastics among them. We, in the early days in the Ateneo, planted and took care of vegetable gardens to help in the huge problem of food. During the Japanese occupation certain dates became fixed in our minds, pointing to radical changes in life for us all.

1) APRIL 8, 1942 - FALL OF BATAAN

The American-Philippine Army was waging a fierce battle with the Japanese on the peninsula of Bataan, twenty-five miles across Manila Bay. Without aid from America it was

impossible for our forces of about 75,000 to hold out in the tropical jungles against many more Japanese. After four months of dwindling man-power and supplies, of starvation rations and disease, the end was in sight. On the night of 7 April a severe earthquake struck Manila. We had to flee the building three times. In the midst of all this, terrible explosions from Bataan frightened us much. The next morning the U.S. radio station on Corregidor called "The Voice of Freedom" announced that the American-Philippine Army on Bataan had surrendered. The next day, 9 April, the "Death March of our surrendered men from Bataan 100 miles north to Camp O'Donnell began. Some 10,000 men died horribly on that march. Some did escape and fled into the mountains to try to organize a guerrilla force against the Japanese. Our question now was: could the small force now left on the tiny island of Corregidor, two miles south of the tip of Bataan, hold out until help would come from America?

2) APRIL 12, 1942 - LAST AMERICAN PLANES

On 12 April I visited the Sisters of the Holy Cross, now living at Assumption College just a block away from the Ateneo. This was the date of my mother's birthday, a day not to be forgotten. During our visit we suddenly heard plane motors, then saw two or three American planes. They came from the south. The immediate thought was, "American help on the way"! They quickly turned south again. We were to hear later that they had dropped a few bombs on the polo grounds near Nichols Field where Japanese troops were camped. Still later, we heard that they were part of the group escorting MacArthur from the island of Mindanao to Australia. (He had escaped from Corregidor on 11 March by PT-boat promising, "I shall return"!) These were the last American planes we were to hear or see until September, 1944, two-and-one-half years in the distant unknown future.

3) MAY 6, 1942 - FALL OF CORREGIDOR

The days dragged on. Each morning all of us eagerly awaited news from the "Voice of Freedom" radio station concerning the 15,000 U.S. fighting forces on Corregidor. It wasn't good. Daily we watched the Japanese planes heading over Manila Bay to bomb the island. And daily we were getting word of the "Death March," of troops dying on the way up Bataan to prison. A couple of escapees found their way to us in Manila and were fed and nurtured until they could make their way out of the city to the gathering guerrilla forces. Finally on 6 May we heard on the Manila radio the voice of General Wainwright telling the world that Corregidor had been forced to surrender, "but not in shame," to put an end to the merciless slaughter. He had been brought to Manila by Japanese guard under General Homma to make the broadcast and to command the complete surrender of all troops under him in the Philippines. A few days later I happened to be standing on Dewey Blvd. (now Roxas Blvd.) looking at a mob of men in rags, some on make-shift crutches, marching under Japanese guard. I was

told these were the surrendered troops from Corregidor on their way to old Bilibid prison in Manila. So, all organized opposition to Japan was finished in the Philippines.

In the lull of the war in Manila Fr. Lawyer and I were asked to help Fr. George Willman, S.J., chaplain of the Knights of Columbus. Through the Japanese Religious Section, Father Willman was permitted to reopen some activities of the Knights. He wanted to organize basketball leagues in two areas in the city to keep young men and boys off the streets, since schools were closed, and to get people interested in something other than war. Fr. Lawyer and I were asked to help in this work, one at St. Rita's Hall and one in Sampoloc parish. We were happy to get some definite work. Through the Japanese priests of the Religious Section we were able to obtain our private arm-bands and a temporary change of residence to carry on the work. For the next two years we were kept busy in this work and then later in parish work, moving from place to place. At one time during our athletic work Fr. Lawyer became very sick and was treated in the Philippine General Hospital for what was feared to be tuberculosis. He recovered, thank God, and was sent by the Jesuits to recuperate in their Novitiate. From there he was sent to the Australian Redemptorist house in Baclaran, at the south edge of the city, on Manila Bay. I moved to St. Rita's Hall to continue his work in basketball leagues in that area and to be closer to Fr. Willman in his central office.

During those days there were many experiences which kept us alert to the war, reminding us that we were far from home and from our missions in India. Next to St. Rita's Hall American military prisoners were used by the Japanese as laborers at an army office building. As I passed by I saw a big U.S. soldier often. One day, seeing no Japanese guards near, I asked the soldier if I could get him anything. He pointed to a peanut seller near the road and asked me to get some salt from him. I bought a bag of salt, and as I passed the soldier I held out my hand, slipping the bag into his hand. We knew this was one form of torture, refusing salt so needed by laborers in the tropics. One day a boy came to me from Santo Tomas, gave me two sheets of paper and two envelopes, telling me that the Japanese had permitted us to write two letters to friends in America. Fr. Lawyer was in Baclaran and I at St. Rita's Hall. The boy would return in an hour. I sat down and typed a letter to Fr. Steiner, our Provincial at Notre Dame, and one to my Family in Malone, N.Y. I signed Fr. Lawyer's name to the letter for Fr. Steiner, and my own name to the one to my parents. One year later I was summoned by note to a Japanese office. I went, fearing I was accused of some crime. At the office I was asked my name, the name and home address of my father. The officer than told me that I had received a letter from my father. I reached for it, but the officer held it and read it to me. So at least my letter had gone home and assured them that I was alive, not in prison. When in the league work in Sampoloc, one college-age player informed me that he was in a guerrilla outfit operating southeast of the city and that his commanding officer wanted me to join the

outfit as chaplain. I explained the danger I would put all other foreign priests into if I disappeared from the city. He agreed and told me he would explain to his commander. I went to another job in the room, heard someone using my typewriter, and rushed back to find my querrilla friend typing a note. It was to his commander. I tore the note from the machine, explaining that all typewriters were registered with the Japanese and that if the note were found by them it could easily be traced to this machine. I asked him the name of his commander. He replied "Ferdinand Marcos" (The future President of the Philippines!).

One day during those years the two priests of the Japanese Religious Section came to St. Rita's Hall and told Fr. Hughes (a Maryknoll priest at the Hall) and me that the Religious Section had been disbanded and that they would be given guns for active service in their army. This indicated a radical change of attitude in the Japanese Army toward the missionaries still at large in the city. Shortly after this I became quite sick and weak. I was removed from my work and went to live with Fr. Lawyer in the Redemptorist monastery.

After a few months we were again separated when Fr. Lawyer was asked to work in the parish of Tondo in north Manila. At the monastery I was able to see American military prisoners being marched to and from labor on nearby Nichols Airfield. I saw many being carried on stretchers, having collapsed in the heat. We continued to get news of the U.S. forces by clandestine radio as they fought their way north through the islands of the Pacific. At midnight we were able to hear a BBC broadcast from Dhaka, India, the mission to which we Holy Cross persons were destined, we and the radio covered by a big sheet of cloth. Finally, on 6 June, 1944, we received news that the Allies had invaded Normandy on the north coast of France. The war definitely was on its way to termination.

4) JULY 8, 1944 - LOS BANOS

I had gone to Tondo at Fr. Lawyer's invitation to give a retreat to the Legion of Mary girls of the parish. The afternoon of the last day of the retreat I received a telephone call from Brother Placid of the Redemptorist monastery that Fr. Lawyer and I must report to Santo Tomas with all the Australian Redemptorists the next day. This meant concentration by the Japanese. The next morning the two of us traveled eight miles south in a horse-drawn carriage to the Redemptorist monastery only to learn that a Japanese truck had taken the Australian priests and Brothers to Santo Tomas. So we started back into the city, transferring to a Japanese truck at LaSalle College, going the rest of the way with the American Christian Brothers. There we were herded with friends from the Ateneo, the Sisters of the Holy Cross, and many others. The next morning we were taken by covered trucks, so as not to excite too much public interest, and were loaded on a train at 4:00. We were on our way to Los Banos internment camp, forty miles south of Manila which had existed since 1943. On the way we

learned the Japanese's reason for this sudden imprisonment. At railway stations, people knowing who we were, pointed to newspaper headlines. We had to be careful for there were armed guards on each coach. But some persons saw and reported to us that the Japanese had discovered that the foreign missionaries were at the root of the guerrilla activities in the Philippines and they were being locked up at last.

At Los Banos we investigated the new barracks which were to be home for us. They were wooden superstructures with bamboo matting walls and thatched roofs, long structures pattitioned every twenty-five feet into cubicles holding six beds on a platform one foot high, with a dirt corridor running the full length of each barracks. In each barracks ninety-six persons could live. To the side of each barracks was a so-called open washroom. We immediately designated one barracks as the chapel. The next few months in these barracks were to be a life of starvation, death, prayer and hope.

Starvation. Writing this in 1984, years after the experience and in the light of the world's tragic experience in Ethiopia, we who survived in Los Banos can say that we know something of the meaning of "starvation." We received two cups of watery boiled rice per day, one at 7:30 am, the other at 5:30 pm. In our cubicle we augmented this with so-called "cheese" made of fermented shredded coconut and garlic, or with deep-fried banana skins, at times with grass said to have vitamin value. One day I found one of our Canadian Brothers frying something. He told me it was grub worms found beneath certain plants. Several times he invited me to a plate of these gritty but deliciously fatty worms. Discovering that we could trade watches for rice through an internee dealing with a Japanese guard, I succeeded in using Fr. Lawyer's and Brother Rex's watches for two kilos of precious milled rice. Again by joining searchers for casava roots I was paid one-half a kilo for four days of work. A few days before the end of our imprisonment Japanese guards deposited a sack (a bushel) of unhusked rice in each barracks, telling us "no more food in the camp." It took us a day of pounding the rice between small blocks of wood to prepare enough for seven of us for the next day's meals. We did have some coffee grounds. Each day we would dry them in the sun and preserve them for four or five weeks of brown hot-water each morning. I was a real banquet to share a cup of hot water poured over a rock of hardened nescafe-powder with Fr. McCarthy, a Maryknoll missionary with us.

Deaths. Many persons died of starvation. Our little cemetery was gradually filling up. Among the dead, marked by a rough wooden cross, was a Mr. Hell. He had escaped from camp one night trying to find food for his starving family. Early the next morning he was seen by internees as he approached camp. They signalled that there was a guard nearby. He kept coming. He was shot and carried on a stretcher to the camp commandant who ordered him executed as a warning to all of us. I was in the chapel when he was carried out

the nearby gate. I heard the two shots and later learned the story of this one execution among us. Fr. Joseph Mulry, S.J., was among those in our cemetery. He needed a stomach operation. Before the operation I visited him. He shared a cigarette with me remarking, "I hope the next cigarette will be a Camel." During the operation he was found filled with cancer. He died on the table, and was buried in our little cemetery. All told, at least 150 persons were buried there--victims of starvation and malnutrition.

Hope Always Present. In spite of discouragement we were in constant hope. One day in late September, we heard rumbling from the Manila area, forty miles north. Some thought it was a distant thunderstorm. But when we saw our bamboo walls vibrating we knew this was not thunder. We gazed north from a slight hill. Suddenly we saw many planes flying east out to sea. By the grapevine we learned that U.S. planes had bombed Manila, the first U.S. planes seen since April 12, 1942. After that we saw our planes closer from time to time. Some dipped low. We held up our empty plates. They would dip wings, understanding. Someday they would come to help, for sure.

On January 7, 1945, the Japanese left the camp, warning us to remain, because of the shooting out on the road. Guerrillas came in, sending people with meat and vegetables. Our engineers, finding a radio in the Japanese office, wired up a series of horns in the camp. On 9 January we heard a broadcast from San Francisco about the landing of U.S. troops in Lingayan Gulf, 200 miles north of us on Luzon. Evidently, the Japanese, fearing that U.S. troops would land at Batangas Bay near us, fled to the safer north. By a broadcast it was confirmed that MacArthur had landed on the island of Leyte on 21 October keeping his promise of early 1942, "I shall return"! There was much hope now. On January 14, 1945, the Japanese were back in the camp, an angry group of guards. Our rations were radically cut. More persons were dying. But we could now hear the noise of the U.S. troops shooting their way south. They came east of Manila then turned west and went north into the city to join up with the tanks which had driven into the city from the north to liberate Santo Tomas. Manila was liberated in early February, after vicious fighting from house to house. Daily, U.S. planes flew over us. Hope rose higher and higher, as we starved.

Prayer. Many times we were united in prayer for food and for freedom. Three rosary novenas to Mary were wonderfully answered. (1) The first had ended on 15 August. Two or three trucks of tinned foods, coconuts, wine and hosts from the Chaplain's Aid Society from Manila, were allowed in through the efforts of a Miss Lulu Reyes. (2) The second ended on 8 December. A few days later, more trucks from the same Society were permitted into the camp. (3) In February, 1945, another novena ended on 11 February. As days went on with no answer to prayer, our Bishop Jurgens called us together, telling us that we would have three days of public exposition

of the Blessed Sacrament and public rosary. This time our intention would not be for food, but for immediate liberation. This was to begin on 22 February. On 11 February the Japanese had given each barracks a sack of unhusked rice, the last food available in the camp. We were getting desperate.

On February 23, 1945, the second day of prayer for liberation, we were preparing for the 7:00 am morning roll call. An ominous pit had been dug near our barracks. The previous day we had prayed hard. Today we would pray harder. I happened to be standing next to Fr. Charlie Taylor as he prepared to hit the gong for the roll call. Both of us saw the nine planes coming from the north. I asked him to hold up for a moment to look at the planes. Suddenly our lives were completely changed. We saw on the fuselage of one of the planes the word "RESCUE" in big white letters against a dark green background. The next moment the sky was filled with opening parachutes. Fr. Lawyer, brushing his teeth outside the washroom yelled at me "Bob, do you see what I see"? We ran inside our barracks and dropped to the center ground corridor as firing began throughout the camp.

Later, we learned that when the first parachute opened a group of infiltrated troopers on land opened fire against the Japanese guard posts around the camp. Those jumping from the low-flying planes went for the Japanese barracks. As we said the rosary, fighting whirled all around us. Bullets zinged through our bamboo walls, hitting our tin plates and our bedsteads. Looking to the entrances we could see soldiers running. Fr. Hughes spied troops running down a nearby hill wearing what seemed to be Japanese helmets. He yelled that Japs were heading our way. One of them stuck his head into our barracks yelling, "Any SOBs in here"? We shouted back, "An American! American"! The firing was stopping. Looking out an opening I could see a soldier, eyes shielded by black circles, signaling with a rag to the very low-flying planes to head north. The fighting was finished.

Very quickly our soldiers entered our barracks, glanced at our flimsy shelters, threw packages of cigarettes on our beds, told us to grab our valuables, not a lot of books and clothing, and to assemble on the open field near the camp main gate where amtraks were waiting for us. These were the tanks we had heard at 6:45 in the morning, judging them to be Japanese tanks on a nearby road. Those of us who could walk fast were told to start down the road to Laguna-de-Bay (a huge lake). The others to wait for the amtraks which would take bed-patients on the first trip to the lake and north to trucks and ambulances waiting. Our barracks were on fire, being destroyed by the troops. Fr. Lawyer and Brother Rex started on the road, Brother Rex leaving his suitcase with me to bring on an amtrak later. I opened a tin of corned-beef (hidden away by Fr. Julien during starvation days, and parceled out to us after the fighting had finished) and began feeding some of it to Brother Theodore

who was very thin and weak. A soldier saw us and told us to start by foot for the lake. I asked him "Why the rush? You have captured the place; why the urgency to get away? We were told to wait for returning amtraks." He told me there was a batallion of Japanese in a quarry nearby, that they could reach us in a short time and that we had to travel twenty-five miles to get out of enemy territory. We started at once for the lake, some three miles away. A handgrenade lay on the ground near me. I asked the soldier if it was alive. He said, "It sure is." He picked it up and urged us on.

I met a Filipino I had known in my basketball days in Manila. He was in uniform among the soldiers escorting us on the road. He was a guerrilla who had been with the troops surrounding our camp the previous night. I asked him if he had eaten that morning. When he said "No," we sat on the roadside to finish the corned-beef in my tin. A small boy stood watching us, then ran to a nearby house and returned later with two plates of steaming rice from his mother. On the way, another boy came to us and gave each of us a couple of raw eggs. I knocked the tops off mine and swallowed the needed food. My friend carried Brother Rex's suitcase as we trudged on toward the lake. At the lake I quickly found Fr. Lawyer and Brother Rex. On the way to the lake, around a curve in the road, I had lost track of Brother Theodore. He arrived at the lake a little later, having had a meal along the way at a hut on the roadside.

Sitting on the lakeshore we became anxious about the shells landing in the lake about one hundred yards from us. Soldiers told us that a U.S. gun up in the hills was making sure that no Japanese would get near us. (Years later Fr. Lawyer and I learned from Colonel John Ringler, who had led the paratroopers into our camp, that those shells were Japanese guns and that if we had remained on that shore another hour there would have been a real fight with the Japanese there.) We could see the returning amtraks chugging toward us from north on the lake, having delivered their first load of internees to awaiting army trucks. Quickly they landed, picked us up, and started back north, planes flying over us all the way toward the trucks at Mamatid Point.

As we jumped on the trucks I found myself cut off from Fr. Lawyer and the two Brothers. I yelled to them that I'd tie a red bandana on my head so I could be spotted if our trucks passed on our way. In fact, as our truck drove into one town Fr. Lawyer saw the bandana and held out something to me as we passed near their truck. It was a length of sugarcane. I learned later that I was to break off a portion, but I took it all. At about 4:00 pm our truck drove into New Bilibid Prison in the town of Montinlupa, about fifteen miles south of Manila, the southernmost point occupied by the U.S. Army. As we drove through the gates we saw a big American flag on a pole welcoming us home. In a way we were home, secure from the fears and anxieties of three years and three

months under the Japanese. For us the war was suddenly over on this day which will live in our memories, February 23, 1945 (the day on which we were to be executed, as we learned many years later from Colonel John Ringler), the day on which the Lord answered our prayers to His Mother by sending the Eleventh Airborne troopers to snatch us home.

We were still hungry as we lined up to receive the first fruits of freedom, letters from home. The Red Cross, knowing of the possibility of an attempt to rescue us, had contacted our families, and now we received letters from mother and father, brothers and sisters. Then we were told by newspaper reporters that the news of our rescue and our names would be flashed to the Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, and to other papers. We were summoned to our first meal. As we lined up we heard the clapping as the last load of the Eleventh Airborne troops arrived safely from the Los Banos operation. Two had been wounded, one killed. Two hundred and forty-three Japanese had died. Every one of the 2,143 internees was safe under the Stars and Stripes.

The next day we learned what had happend to the last of our Holy Cross personnel, Brother Romain of Canada. During our imprisonment he had become very ill with cerebral malaria which deranged him mentally. He had escaped from the camp, but had been caught by the Japanese and locked in a guardhouse. The next morning he escaped from there and returned to his cubicle. Fr. Murphy, superior of the Canadian group, with the help of our camp doctors convinced the Japanese that Brother should be taken to the phychopathic hospital in Manila. There he had recovered and had written us that he could not return to Los Banos because of the fighting. One day just previous to the surrender of the city he was in a group of about eight persons wrongly accused of signalling by flashlight to American attacking troops. The group was marched to a wall of the hospital and executed by the sword, on February 8, 1945. He was a twelve-year veteran missionary in India.

The next day we learned of another tragedy, the slaughter of sixteen Christian Brothers (most of them German citizens) among a total of forty-one persons put to death at LaSalle College on February 12, 1945, eleven days before our rescue, during the horrible battle to liberate Manila. Fr. Francis Cosgrave, C.SS.R., who miraculously survived the slaughter, writes in brief:

> Hovering from the fierce battle for the city at the foot of the chapel stairs inside the college we were confronted by Japanese soldiers. The officer gave a command and at once the soldiers began bayonetting all of us. Brother Leo was the first to die. Some of the Christian Brothers managed to escape up the stairs. These were pursued by the soldiers, some of them being bayonetted at the entrance of the chapel itself. Inside the

> chapel the Japanese were at their fiercest. While a few soldiers were attacking those outside, others stormed in and confronted the Brothers there. Brother Lucian, who was standing near the entrance, tried to protect himself, going so far as to attack a soldier himself. The officer leading the charge cut him in two with his saber. Those inbetween the pews and others with Brother Lucian were slain mercilessly. On February 15th the American Army captured the college and took us survivors out.

Among the American troops was our own Holy Cross priest, Father Clement Kaslauskas, professor and councilor at King's College today. He can tell you of the horrible clean-up at LaSalle College in Manila.

In a couple of week of care by a military medical team we rapidly gained strength and weight. One day there was a call for 800 unattached males for a medical test. We easily passed the test and were told to assemble near the main gate of the compound early the next morning. There we were put on trucks and taken fifteen miles to Nichols Field near Manila. Planes would take us to the island of Leyte, the next stop on our way home to the U.S. For Fr. Lawyer and me this was our first air trip. As we rose in the air over the city we could see the Redemptorist monastery, our home for months during the Japanese occupation. We flew low over the city, staring at the terrible destruction by the war, so short a time ago. It has been compared as second to the destruction of Warsaw or Leningrad in Europe. A U.S. Army report in "Triumph in the Philippines" tells us in brief:

> The cost of retaking Manila had not been light. XIV Corps lost 1,000 men killed and 5,500 wounded in the Metropolitan area from the 3rd of February through the 3rd of March....
>
> The cost of the battle for Manila cannot be measured in military terms alone. The city was a shambles after the battle was over - much of it destroyed, damaged beyond repair, or repairable only at great expense in time and money....
>
> Millions upon millions of dollars worth of damage had been done and, as a final shocking note of tragedy, an estimated 100,000 Filipino civilians had lost their lives during the battle.

At Leyte, in a U.S. Army rotation camp near Tacoban, where MacArthur had landed, we were processed for travel on a troopship. In three weeks we were under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. On 12 April I was buying handkerchiefs in a store. The store was suddenly hushed as we

listened to a broadcast telling us that President Roosevelt had died that morning. On April 18th we got off a train at South Bend, back at Notre Dame. Shortly after that a train took me home to Malone, New York, where I told my family what I could remember of our life in the Philippines and read again the letter I had sent in late 1942 and a copy of my father's reply. I was fast forgetting what had happened since December 8, 1941. Time erased much of the past.

But it was impossible to really forget everything. In 1977, after thirty-two years in India, East Pakistan, Bangladesh, I was back in Manila, in fact, standing on the old concentration camp grounds. I was reading a plaque on a brick building which reads:

> Within these grounds up to three thousand Americans and other nationals were interned by the Japanese military, suffering great physical privation and national humiliation from May 14, 1943, until liberated February 23, 1945, by the American forces under General Douglas MacArthur.

On the camp grounds, on trees and walls were banners welcoming Japanese friends. What were these friends doing? They were unearthing remains of some of the 243 guards who died on the day we cannot forget, February 23, 1945. I stood silent among the Japanese. In mind I could hear again the nine planes. I could see the open parachutes floating down. I could hear the firing all around the camp. I saw the idling amtraks drawn up to take internees away. I could hear the exploding bamboos of our burning barracks. I silently prayed for those who had died, the one paratrooper, the 243 Japanese guards.

I prayed for one guard in particular. His name was Konichi, the guard responsible for the feeding of the internees, a person much feared and almost detested by us all. I recalled the day some of us were separating bananas which had come into camp for the internees. Konichi entered the hut where we worked. He took one bunch of four bananas, squeezed them in his hands, threw them on the ground and smashed them to pulp with his boots. Long after the war I learned of Konichi's end from Fr. Leo English, a Redemptorist internee companion still in the monastery in Manila. He wrote that Konichi had been captured alive by the U.S. Army. He was tried by a military court and sentenced to death by hanging as responsible for the 150 deaths by starvation. In prison at Canluban, near Los Banos, he was asked by a Protestant chaplain if he was interested in Christianity. He said he was interested in the many in Los Banos, men and women in long white robes praying daily in one of the barracks. The chaplain introduced Konichi to another chaplain, Fr. Wallace, C.SS.R. In the time left for Konichi in prison, Fr. Wallace instructed him and finally baptized him as a

Catholic. On the day of execution, Fr. Wallace started up the scaffold with Konichi. Konichi stopped Father, saying, "I am paying for my responsibility in the deaths of many, but I am at peace with my God." He climbed the scafford and died. I have told this story often, adding that the suffering we endured as captives in Los Banos was worth-while, if in the end God's love captured the mind and heart of Konichi.