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JAVA AND AFTER

The Project in Outline

The project in question is a book which has for its general background the war against Japan in World War II. More specifically, it has to do with the loss of Java in the early days of the war, and with what befell such of its American defenders, on sea and land, who had the misfortune to be taken captive there. Since the picture during the fighting and, afterwards in the prison camps, is a somber one, I propose adding to "Java and After", the title I have chosen for the book, the subtitle, "A Study of Americans in Adversity". And I submit that the events, which the book records, amply justify such a subtitle.

Some 885 American troops were captured by the Japanese in Java. With the exception of a few strays from the Air Force, who couldn't get out in time, they were entirely Navy and Army troops. The Navy troops were from the U.S. heavy cruiser Houston, flagship of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, which had to withdraw to Java when the Japanese struck at the Philippines. The Army troops were from the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, a former Texas National Guard unit, which was landed in Java and left there when it was no longer possible to get them through to the Philippines.

These troops not only fought in defense of Java and were captured there, but most of them shared their years of captivity together. In practically every prison camp where sailors and marines from the Houston were to be found, Texans of the 131st Field Artillery were also there as part of the same group. The men had the same hard road to travel and they travelled it together.

How the ship with the Texas name and the battalion recruited in Texas came to fight in Javan and how its people came to be captured there is an absorbing story in itself. As I plan it now, that story will form the introductory portion of "Java and After".

The story begins with the Houston, a 10,000 ton, 8" three-turret cruiser, whose keel was laid in 1927 and which was launched in 1929. The Houston was a colorful ship about which stories gathered even in peace-time. Certainly its close ties with the Texas city, for which it was named, are noteworthy. Not only did the city of Houston give the ship its magnificent silver service, its pianos, its trophies, and a heroic portrait of Sam Houston (framed, if you please, in heavy monel metal), the city fathers of Houston were in the habit of declaring a civic holiday and putting the whole city en fete, literally for days, when the Houston was in port. President Roosevelt had taken several cruises on the ship in the 30's, and, as the expression went at the time, took great delight in using it as his "yacht". Assigned as flagship

of the Asiatic Fleet in 1931, the Houston was relieved by the U.S.S. Augusta, in 1933, and relieved the Augusta, in turn in 1940, when it again became flagship of the fleet.

The Japanese attack in December 1941 was no real surprise to the Asiatic Fleet which had been expecting the attack, though not necessarily at that precise time. Fearing trouble, Admiral Hart, the fleet commander, in late November 1941, ordered the Houston out of Cavite Naval Yard where its anti-aircraft system was being modified and sent her to Iloilo in the central Philippines, fuelled, provisioned and ready for anything. The ship got out of Iloilo harbor just as the Japanese struck and, two weeks later, put in at Soerabaja, Java, where it became part of an Allied fleet operating out of Java, with a Dutch admiral in command.

The 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, the Texas National Guard unit which had started out for the Philippines and had been landed in Java instead, was made up of troops from Abilene, Amarillo, Decatur, Fort Worth, Jacksboro, Lubbock, Wichita Falls and other, smaller Texas places. Called into federal service in November 1940, as part of the 36th Division, the battalion had participated with the division in the Louisiana maneuvers. At their close, it was detached from the division and assigned as part of a composite force then being assembled to reinforce the Philippines. This force left San Francisco in November 1941 but never reached its destination. On the high seas near the Japanese mandated islands on 7 December 1941, the movement was diverted to Australia, and the Texas battalion, alone of the entire force, was let off in Java. It was landed there on 12 January 1942 -- the only U.S. ground combat unit to reach the Netherlands East Indies before their fall.

Landing the battalion in Java was a mistake. It had been planned to land the Texans at Darwin, Australia, where they were to be stationed with the artillery brigade of which they were a part. The Dutch skipper of the transport on which they were sailing balked at discharging them at Darwin, and insisted that, as his next stop was Soerabaja, he would let them off there. There was a showdown with the Netherlands government which held with its ships captain, and the battalion was landed where no one had planned it should be -- in Java. When this was realized, it was proposed that the U.S. Navy take it back to Darwin as soon as possible, but no real attempt was made to do so. Soon, with the Dutch talking of a last-ditch defense of Java, it became impolitic even to try.

Time was indeed running out for the Allies in the Indies. The Japanese were already closing in on Java, and the force to stop them was simply not at hand.

At sea, the story was one of unrelieved adversity. The Houston fought a series of desperate engagements as part of the Allied fleet against an enemy who was not only there in vastly superior force but who had virtually absolute control of the air. Of the three American cruisers in Java, the Houston was

soon the only one left. The other two, the U.S.S. Boise and the U.S.S. Marblehead had to be sent home when they were most needed -- the Boise because she ran aground and damaged her bottom; and the Marblehead because of damage done to the steering mechanism in a Japanese air attack. The Houston's after turret was damaged beyond repair in early February, in the same action in which the steering gear of the Marblehead was damaged, but her captain held that she could still fight and she was allowed to remain in the fray. Nor was the departure of her two sister ships all loss to the Houston, since she was able to replace her 5" ammunition, all of which had been found to be defective, with good 5" ammunition left behind by the Boise.

Then, a little over three weeks later, the Allied fleet, under command of Admiral Doorman, a Dutch rear admiral, was virtually wiped out at the Battle of the Java Sea. It was a heartbreaking action, made the more so by Doorman's maneuverings which played right into the enemy's hands. In the end, when the battle was over, only two cruisers remained -- the Australian light cruiser Perth, and the Houston.

The final tragedy was played out the following night. Returning to Soerabaja, which by this time was untenable and under constant air attack, the captains of the two ships were told by intelligence officers ashore that Sunda Strait, which they would have to pass to get to Tjilatjap, on the other side of the island, was known to be clear of the enemy. This was welcome news since the Houston was short of ammunition, and the men on both ships, who had been at general quarters for days without proper rest, were worn out, and, in some cases, were literally reeling from exhaustion.

The intelligence was bad. The truth was that the Japanese fleet was in Sunda Strait covering troop landings at Merak and Bantam Bay. And when the Perth and the Houston, the Perth leading, reached the Strait late at night, it was to find themselves surrounded on all sides by enemy ships. In the ensuing melee, the Perth which was the first to open fire, soon went down, and the Houston was left to fight on alone. This it did in one of the most heroic sea fights in history, a fight which will forever be one of the glories of the American heritage.

It was fortunate that the ships went down in sight of Java. Of the approximately 1,000 men aboard the Houston when the battle began, a little over a third survived and reached shore. Since the Japanese were landing at various points in the area and were patrolling it, there was no escape; and within a matter of days, all of the Houston's survivors were in Japanese hands as prisoners of war.

The 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, had meanwhile been playing out its role on land, and a hopeless and melancholy role it was. Until the 19th Bombardment Group, U.S. Army Air Forces, had to evacuate Java through lack of bases from which to operate, the battalion provided it with everything it could from mechanics to tail gunners. And when the Japanese landed, and the Air Force had to leave just one jump ahead of the advancing enemy, the Texans

fought their 75's and lighter weapons well. The main effort was at Leuwiliang, near Bandoeng, where the battalion, less Battery E, fought under Australian command as part of "Blackforce", and had the satisfaction of holding up the enemy advance for several days. Battery E, the unit principally responsible for support of the Air Force, as long as there was an Air Force to be supported, fought in defense of Soerabaja, an action that, in retrospect at least, gains piquancy from the fact that the battery had to set up its final positions in the municipal zoo. But with the Japanese on the island in overwhelming force, the end could not be far off; and the battalion, still virtually intact, had to surrender to the Japanese when the Dutch capitulated to them on 8 March 1942.

The first interest of the Japanese when Java fell, was to take full control of the island's 48 million inhabitants, and its apparatus of government. That done, they turned their attention to the prisoners of war who had surrendered to them. As regards the relatively small group of Americans their policy seemed to be to try, as far as possible, to keep them together. It took the Japanese some time to get the dispersed U.S. Navy and Army elements in one place, but by mid-May, practically all of them were behind wire at the 10th Battalion Bicycle Camp, a former Dutch Army cantonment in Batavia.

Food and sanitary arrangements in this and earlier camps had been quite poor, and the first POW deaths from dysentery took place in Java. The men were continually harassed by the guards, and there were the usual beatings for minor infractions of discipline, and sometimes the men were beaten for no reason at all. But bad as things were it was possible most of the time, to buy a little supplementary food, and to get money for it by selling watches, cameras and fountain pens to the Japanese. The time would come when many of the American POW's would look back on their captivity in Java as a relatively bearable interlude, for much worse was to come.

Months went by, and the Americans captured in Java were still there. Finally, after keeping them on the island for more than eight months, the Japanese began moving them out. The great bulk of them, 650 men, were sent to Burma, and put to work on the Burma-Thailand Railway, on which construction was then just beginning. The rest (except for a few who never left Java, and a few others who only got as far as Singapore) were sent to various prison camps in Japan.

The more than 200 men who were sent to Japan were more fortunate than they knew. True, their lot was a hard one. Beatings were frequent, and they suffered (as indeed all Allied POW's in Japan suffered) from cold, sickness and hunger. But even so, there was no comparison with what befell their fellow captives in Burma, whose experiences during the construction of the Burma-Thailand Railway -- better known because of its cost in human lives as "Death Railway" -- is a story of suffering and adversity almost without parallel in World War II.

The Japanese began the construction of a railroad linking the railway systems of Burma and Thailand as a strategic necessity -- to help improve the logistic support of their troops in Burma. The railroad was meant to supplement their supply by sea which was severely strained by the long haul around Malaya and the need to divert ever-increasing tonnages to the south Pacific where things had begun going very badly indeed for the Japanese.

That the railroad would have to run through some of the foulest, most impenetrable jungle in the world, and that most of the work would have to be done in the middle of the monsoon did not deter the Japanese. Nor were they particularly perturbed that they had no mechanized equipment with which to do the job. They had only a temporary, hastily constructed railroad in mind, built with pick and shovel and other hand tools which they had in great abundance. They had experienced engineer troops to supervise construction, and thousands of Allied POW's to do the work. Not only were the Japanese sure they could do the job, and do it well, they were sure they could do it in record time, and laid their plans accordingly.

Once the Japanese made their decision to build the railroad, they pressed on with the task relentlessly. A Thai POW headquarters, with a major general in command, was established in Thailand, with branches there and in Burma, to house, feed and guard the prisoners. In addition, two crack Japanese railway regiments were assigned to supervise construction -- one in Burma; the other, in Thailand.

In Burma, Thai POW headquarters had two branches: one under a lieutenant colonel; the other, under a major. And it was to them that the 650 Americans (and a much greater number of Australian and Dutch POW's) were assigned. The work camps, numbered according to their distance in kilometers from the rail-head at Thanbyuzayat, moved forward with the work, and the farther away they got from it the worse things became for the prisoners. Occasioned in part by the collapse of transport during the monsoon, a supply and administrative breakdown developed in the work camp system. The breakdown in these two vital areas had extremely serious consequences. On the one hand, it encouraged the camp staffs and guards to take for themselves most of what little came through in the way of food and other necessities. On the other, it left them in such complete control of the POW's that they had to answer virtually to no one how they treated them.

In practice, the work camp commanders -- lieutenants, sergeants and even corporals -- had almost unlimited powers over the POW's. The guards -- Koreans, for the most part -- could beat them and maltreat them virtually at will, and most of them took a special delight in doing so. Not only that, but the Japanese engineer troops, under whose supervision they came while on the job, had orders to push the work at all costs. They took their orders literally, and, if anything, outdid the Koreans in the brutal way in which they beat and otherwise mistreated the prisoners working under them.

Barefoot, and clad only in ragged shorts or loin cloths, the men were starved, beaten, and all but worked to death. Starved, sick and horribly emaciated, they had to do pick and shovel work in the mud and pouring rain of the monsoon, sometimes for 18 hours and more a day. Nor was this for a few days only; at some of the camps in Burma, it went on for weeks without a break. Early in the morning, after the POW bugler sounded reveille, the men would be marched out to the job, which could be three, five and even eight kilometers away. Guarded by the Koreans and supervised by the Japanese engineer troops, they would work there till midnight, and sometimes till after midnight. Then, through the mud and darkness, the guards would march them back to camp, and, early the next morning, would march them back to the job again -- an experience that even the strongest could not endure for long without breaking.

Nor were the camps fit habitations for human beings. The men were housed in foul, dilapidated bamboo huts, with open sides and leaking atap roofs, and they slept -- when the rain and the guards let them sleep -- wedged in, side by side, on rough uneven platforms of bamboo, which were sometimes two and three tiers high to accomodate everyone assigned to them. Because they were usually so badly sited, the POW huts, which were without floors, were often inches deep in mud, and this at a time that the numbers of sick were steadily increasing. In one of the camps, the American hut had a stream flowing through it during the rainy season. This made it possible for the sick to spend their time trying to catch fish right in the hut, an effort which was sometimes successful.

But if living conditions in the camps were frightful, the food situation was, if anything, even worse. There was an official Japanese ration scale for POW's. At best, this scale left much to be desired since the food authorized under it was, by western standards, insufficient even to maintain health. But even this meager scale was flagrantly disregarded in the issue of food to the prisoners, who never received even a close approximation of it during the entire time that they labored on the construction of the railroad.

The principal food (and sometimes the only food available) was dirty, low grade rice that was often crawling with weevils and maggots when the POW's received it. The prisoners did the best they could with the rice. They boiled it; fried it; and cooked it with meat, when they had meat which wasn't too often. The difficulty was that even when there was meat, so little of it was issued to the POW's that when they boiled it with rice, the only visible effect was to make the water greasy. When a Burmese cow, a poor, skinny thing weighing about 250 lbs., was driven into one of the work camps to be slaughtered, the 30 or so Japanese and Koreans in camp would take the best half of the beast for themselves, and the prisoners, between 1,800 and 2,000 men, would get the rest. And so it went. The camp staffs and guards always took more of everything than they really needed (especially if it was in short supply), and the prisoners were literally left to starve on what remained.

The plain fact was that, for long periods of time, the POW's received scarcely enough food to sustain life, let alone do the heavy manual work

required of them. The senior surviving officer of the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, recalls that at one of the camps, there was so little food that, as he puts it, "We ate dogs, snakes, bugs and rats". And this was by no means an isolated case. The same thing happened at other camps in Burma.

Small wonder that the men fell prey to tropical ulcers, dysentery, diarrhoea, beri beri, pellagra, and, indeed, almost every deficiency disease known to man. Yet, notwithstanding an ever mounting toll of fatal sicknesses, the Japanese failed to provide the POW's with adequate supplies of medicines and drugs. Indeed, their supply of these things was on such a preposterously limited scale that, at no time during the construction of the railroad, was there ever enough medication to deal with more than a very insignificant fraction of the sicknesses contracted by the POW's working on it. The results of this failure were appalling. Men died needlessly for lack of medical supplies that the Japanese had available but failed to distribute.

In such circumstances, the transition from health to sickness to death was chillingly swift. To give an example. Scratched by bamboo and cut by flying rock, many of the men contracted tropical ulcers on their legs. For lack of proper medication, the ulcers festered and spread, and, in a very short time, ate away the flesh until the very bones stuck out. Gouging out the ulcer to remove the pus (usually done with a spoon for lack of a better instrument) was an ordeal so agonizing that the men had to be held down by main force while the gouging was going on. If, as was all too often the case, things got no better, the doctors (POW's like the rest) had no choice but to amputate, and, as often happened, without anaesthetic and with butcher knives and handsaws. Nor did the amputations always save the men's lives. Many were too sick, too exhausted and too undernourished to undergo the operation and failed to survive it.

That the men were in this condition was not surprising. The Japanese practice when POW's fell sick was to cut their already inadequate ration, the assumption being that only men who were actually working on the railroad were entitled to be fed. And when the fit men started sharing their rations with the sick, one of the branch commanders established a camp for the sick only, to make sure that they got no more food than he was willing to allow them. The POW doctor at this camp had nothing but his bare hands to work with, and had to use the sick as orderlies, since no fit men were allowed in the camp under any circumstances. As a result, the less sick had to perform camp duties, attend the more sick, and with their remaining strength bury the dead. Several score Americans died in this camp, all of them needlessly.

And yet in the midst of these horrors, the small group of Americans present displayed qualities of character verging on the sublime. Perhaps the most moving part of the story has to do with the patience and fortitude with which these men endured the beatings, privations and brutalities which were their daily lot; and how, with death and disease all around them, they drew closer together, and became, in very truth, a band of brothers, intent only upon helping each other in the extremity in which they found themselves.

There can be little doubt that few of the Americans would have survived had construction gone on much longer. Those who were still on their feet when the railroad was completed, were in such bad shape that the Japanese, realizing that they could make little further use of the, sent most of them to Thailand to recover their health. Things were better in Thailand, but, even so, the men kept dying there from the after effects of what had happened to them in Burma.

The Japanese, meanwhile, had failed to acknowledge that the men had been captured. Since there was no way therefore of knowing what had happened to them, the crew of the Houston was given up for lost, as was the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery. To Texans, the battalion became "The Lost Battalion", with all the emotional connotations that that kind of a name implies. The Lost Battalion is still a name to conjure with in Texas, but it means more now than it did when it was first coined. When liberation came and the battalion was disbanded, the Lost Battalion Association became not only an association of former members of the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery, but also of the survivors of the Houston, so close had the bond forged in the prison camps become.

This then, is what the project, I have in mind, is about. It is not meant to be a horror story nor an atrocity story. It is rather a story of fortitude in the face of adversity -- a fortitude so great, it is its own best reason for being told.