

“Too Many Unknowns: The Search for the Missing of Bataan.”¹

Gregory Kupsky
Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency

Society for Military History Meeting
Montgomery, Alabama
11 April 2015

Four months after American entry into the Second World War, on April 9, 1942, U.S. forces on the Bataan Peninsula laid down their arms in the largest surrender in American history. For the rest of the war, the American military and public received only scant information on the 16,000 U.S. troops who fell into Japanese custody. At war’s end, thousands of these “Heroes of Bataan” were still unaccounted for, representing one of the greatest challenges for the Army’s worldwide program to locate the missing. Attempts to learn their fate have continued, in some form, ever since.

This paper will detail the history of the effort to account for the missing of Bataan. It will outline the unique challenges that faced different groups in that effort, from the prisoners themselves to present-day researchers. Finally, it will discuss Bataan as a research problem, offering thoughts on the way ahead.

It is important to distinguish the larger story of Bataan captivity from its most iconic episode, the Bataan Death March. In reality, the March is best understood as an epilogue to the ill-fated defense of the Bataan Peninsula, and as an introduction to the horrors that the prisoners would face in three years of captivity. Having said that, an important piece of this research problem is placing the missing along a time line from their last days of combat through the liberation of survivors. The transition into captivity in April 1942, which includes the Death

¹ DISCLAIMER: The opinions, views, and conclusions expressed or implied in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

March, is the most problematic portion of the time line, and it thus deserves some special attention.

While this paper will focus on the American defenders of Bataan, it does not intend to diminish the importance of the Filipinos that stood alongside them. Six times as many Filipinos surrendered in April 1942, and in most episodes of captivity, ten Filipinos died for every American. The story of the Filipinos is well worth telling, and it is only for reasons of source material, time, and simplicity that they are not receiving more attention here.

To begin, it is worth providing a brief overview of the defense and captivity of Bataan.

General Narrative

MAP OF LUZON

Military planners had long assumed that, in the event of an invasion, Fil-American forces would dig into Bataan, on the island of Luzon, and await reinforcements. But in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and in light of a “Europe First” strategy, no reinforcements were forthcoming. Facing Japanese invaders, diminishing rations, and rampant disease, the Fil-American forces held out until April 1942, when they were no longer capable of mounting an organized defense. Nearly 70,000 surrendered, 12,000 of them Americans. Some escaped into the hills, or to the island of Corregidor, but that installation fell on May 9. Not until January 1945, nearly three years later, would U.S. ground forces return to Luzon.

In preparing for victory, the Japanese had sketched out a rough plan for moving the prisoners from Bataan. The plan was to consolidate all prisoners in the provincial capital of Balanga. From there, a different commander would take responsibility and move them to San Fernando, approximately 70 kilometers from the original starting point. Trains would ferry the

prisoners 40 kilometers to Capas, from which a ten-kilometer march would deposit them at Camp O'Donnell, a former Philippine Army installation.

Realities quickly overwhelmed the Japanese plan. First, rather than the anticipated 25,000 prisoners, they found themselves in custody of 70,000. Second, a march of 20-30 kilometers per day became a grueling task for the sick, starving prisoners. Finally, the Japanese command, anxious to clear a staging area for the invasion of Corregidor, pressured subordinates to speed the process. These factors injected chaos into the execution of the transfer.

More infamous, of course, was the violence that prisoners faced as they struggled to keep marching toward San Fernando. The various motivations—such as race, wartime emotions, and Japanese military culture—have been documented elsewhere, as have personal accounts of the horrors. For our purposes, it suffices to say that acts of violence, and outright atrocity, exacerbated the process.

Arrival at Camp O'Donnell was anything but an end to the horror. As with the march plan, the camp was unequipped for the masses who streamed in. The poor conditions contributed to the deaths of over 1,500 Americans and over 25,000 Filipinos in a matter of months. The death rate was so high that it evoked concern in Tokyo and became an embarrassment for the camp commander. In the summer of 1942, the Japanese closed the camp, transporting the Americans eastward to the town of Cabanatuan, and releasing most of the Filipinos.²

The death rate at Cabanatuan was lower, but conditions were hardly better. Here the O'Donnell inmates joined those who had stayed in hospitals on Bataan and those who had surrendered on Corregidor. The population of the camp hovered between 5,000 and 7,000, as

² See John E. Olson, *O'Donnell: Andersonville of the Pacific* (Lake Quivira, Kansas: John E. Olson), 1985.

work details departed for other parts of the islands.³ The bulk of the prisoners eventually made their way to ports, where they packed into the cargo holds of transports and headed for Japan, facing attacks by Allied planes and vessels that were unaware of the cargo. Only those prisoners deemed unfit for work—approximately 500—remained at Cabanatuan, where U.S. Army Rangers liberated them on January 30, 1945. The last survivors of Bataan came out of Japan in late summer 1945, having defied the odds for over three years. It now remained to account for those lost along the way.

The Accounting Effort Map of Bataan and Corregidor, with cemeteries indicated

In truth, the accounting effort had begun even before the surrender, with an active graves registration unit on Bataan. But considering the dire circumstances in which the Bataan force found itself, this work was not a priority. The unit operated at half strength (*114 Filipino and American soldiers*) and relied heavily on day laborers. It established four temporary cemeteries in Bataan, though it abandoned one of them—(*Limay (#1)*)—in late January because of Japanese bombardment. Wooden crosses marked each temporary grave, and the unit sent daily burial reports and personal effects to the headquarters on Corregidor. Graves Registration work continued until the April 9 surrender, at which point the graves registration unit escaped to Corregidor.⁴

The island fortress had its own cemetery, where burial details worked under the cover of night to avoid Japanese dive bombers. By their surrender on May 6, they interred some 300 individuals on the battered island. They stored burial records for both Bataan and Corregidor in

³ Heather Harris and Lisa Beckenbaugh, Memorandum, SUBJ: Casualties of Cabanatuan Prisoner of War Camp #1 and the History of their Burials,” Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, Revised 20 February 2014, 5.

⁴ Major A. L. Fullerton, “Report of Operations of the Graves Registration Service on Bataan,” NARA RG 407, Entry 427, Box 1160; Edward Steere, *The Graves Registration Service in World War II*, No. 21, Q.M.C. Historical Studies (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 31.

Malinta Tunnel, the massive underground fortification that housed the Fil-American headquarters. Before surrendering, graves registration officials sealed their records in a gunpowder can and concealed them behind a wall in the tunnel. The personal effects of the deceased rested in a large safe nearby. A few days into captivity, an officer returned to the tunnel on a work detail and noted that the Japanese had ransacked the personal effects. As for the Bataan records, either the Japanese confiscated and destroyed them, or they were lost when the Americans retook the tunnel in 1945. Back on Bataan, the graves not destroyed by the Japanese saw their crosses rot away during the occupation period. Any evidence of their identities was buried within them. Many ended up as unknowns, as will be discussed later.⁵

Recovery of the dead was now on hold, but the effort to account for the missing began among the prisoners at Camp O'Donnell. The American staff maintained daily figures on prisoner arrivals and departures and, consequently, began to develop a sense of who was missing.⁶

Shortly after the transfer of American prisoners to Camp Cabanatuan, the role of Graves Registration Officer fell to Captain Robert Conn. The collective accounting efforts of the prisoners gave him a partial list of some 600 individuals who had died between the last days of combat and Camp O'Donnell. In addition to managing the Cabanatuan cemetery, Captain Conn interviewed prisoners and penciled in basic data for each missing individual, such as name, rank, unit, and circumstances of death. Based purely on prisoners' memories, the list contains incomplete and sometimes incorrect information. If voluminous records had survived the Bataan

⁵ First Lieutenant Joseph Goodman, "Graves Registration Service, Ft. Mills, Corregidor P.I.," NARA RG 407, Entry 427, Box 1160.

⁶ Olson, 49.

peninsula, Conn's list would bear little weight. As it happens, his work constitutes one of the strongest documentary resources on the fates of the Bataan missing.⁷

Conventional American forces returned to Luzon on January 9, 1945, and the 38th Infantry Division retook Bataan in February. The Army Graves Registration Service could now take up the search for the missing. From 1945 to 1947, the AGRS claimed to have interviewed ninety-five percent of Bataan's inhabitants. Regardless whether that number is accurate, the search did bear strong results. A major sweep in 1947 recovered 121 Americans and over 2,000 Filipinos. For the first time since 1942, physical evidence found with remains could shed light on when, where, and how individuals had died. If not identified, at least the remains—designated as unknowns—received proper burials and provided additional clues.⁸

If the Army's worldwide recovery effort had one hero, it was Master Sergeant Abie Abraham. A boxing instructor in the 31st Infantry Regiment, Sergeant Abraham surrendered on southern Bataan in April 1942. He endured the Bataan Death March, then spent nearly three years in prison camps before being liberated at Cabanatuan. He soon received a personal invitation from General MacArthur to lead the recovery effort on Bataan. Abraham was to draw on his own memories of the Death March, combining them with witness statements and evidence on the ground to recover his fallen comrades. Abraham set up an office in the provincial capital of Balanga and threw himself into his new assignment for two years.⁹

For Abraham, a victim of the March, it was a tall order. He stuck to a grueling schedule, all the while suffering malarial attacks, flashbacks, and nervous breakdowns as he repeatedly

⁷ Harris and Beckenbaugh, 7-10.

⁸ Edward Steere and Thayer Boardman, *Final Disposition of World War II Dead, 1945-51*, Series II, No. 4, Q.M.C. Historical Studies (Washington: Office of the Quartermaster General, 1957), 445.

⁹ Abie Abraham, *The Ghost of Bataan Speaks* (New York: Vantage Books, 1971), 140; 149-50.

retraced the steps of the Death March.¹⁰ The combination of personal memory, witness testimony, and physical evidence led him to hundreds of isolated burials. In some instances, he even corrected what little record there was. For example, prisoner interviews had placed Private First Class William Beck on the first stretch of the March, recording his death between Mariveles and Cabcaben. Initial searches in this area failed to retrieve his remains. In 1946, Abraham's team found remains in Hermosa, approximately 50 kilometers to the north, that were ultimately identified as those of Private Beck.¹¹ Admittedly, at other times reviewers rejected field identifications because of mismatches in physical evidence. Nevertheless, by his count Abraham recovered over 300 Americans in a two-year period before a doctor ordered him out of the field due to exhaustion.¹²

Meanwhile, other AGRS teams fanned out across the archipelago. They cleared the camp cemeteries in Cabanatuan, recovering the remains of over 2,700 Americans, about two-thirds of whom could be identified. Due to the efforts of Abraham and other searchers, recovery work on Bataan concluded in October 1947, though recoveries continued in the Philippines through 1950.¹³ Identified remains either went to the United States for burial, in accordance with the wishes of the next of kin, or came to rest in the new Manila American Cemetery. Also buried in Manila were nearly 3,000 "unknowns," those recovered but not identified.

When the AGRS concluded its work, over 5,000 U.S. servicemen remained unaccounted for in the Philippines, the vast majority coming from the Bataan force. Some were on sunken prison ships or in isolated graves, while others were buried as unknowns in Manila.

¹⁰ Abraham, 172; 181-2; 199; 229.

¹¹ Memorandum, Subject: Recovery of Deceased Personnel, 10 May 1946, Individual Deceased Personnel File for Beck, William (06569712), RG 92, Washington National Records Center (WNRC), Suitland, MD; Abie Abraham memorandum, 1946, IDPF for Beck.

¹² Abraham, 210; 242.

¹³ Steere and Boardman, 452-3; 456.

In many cases, information was so scant as to prevent even a guess as to the location or date of death. Their personnel files often said simply that they were last seen before the fall of Corregidor in May 1942. A blanket memorandum in their files offered a terse explanation: “Due to the fact that no report has been received indicating that this personnel is alive, it is concluded that they may not ‘reasonably be presumed to be living.’” A letter sent to the next of kin offered little else: “The status of the great numbers [*sic*] of our personnel has been definitely established; however, no definite information has been received concerning your son.” In place of the missing date, usually May 1942, the War Department set an administrative date of death for the purpose of issuing benefits. As a result, approximately 120 American servicemen carry an official death date of February 1, 1946.¹⁴ It is very likely that they died on the Bataan peninsula.

Since the 1940s, efforts to account for the missing require picking up where the AGRS left off, and finding solutions that were elusive after the war. The first step in doing so is the purview of the historian: refining the available data.

Refining the Data

The postwar searchers left in their wake a vast accumulation of reports and personnel files with data of varying quality. As with the Army in the 1940s, researchers in subsequent decades did not have modern data tools, nor did they have the means to sift through all of the records and connect the dots. Today, the way forward is to condense the data into manageable forms.

Arranging the missing along a time line is the key to creating these subsets. Someone known to have arrived at Camp Cabanatuan, for example, does not necessarily need to be compared against an unknown recovered in southern Bataan. But the POW camp example is too

¹⁴ IDPF for Arledge, Garrett (38012197), RG 92, Washington National Records Center (WNRC), Suitland, MD.

easy; it is the transition period from combat to captivity, inclusive of the Death March, that requires the most attention.

In the past, the best that we could do was to work from two known benchmarks. These came from Colonel Floyd Marshall, Assistant Chief of Staff of G-1 on Bataan, who compiled a personnel report for Bataan after the war. His first benchmark was a total of 11,796 American servicemen counted as present on April 1, 1942, on the eve of the final Japanese offensive, or Good Friday Offensive.¹⁵ The second benchmark was the number of Americans recorded as arriving at Camp O'Donnell, the terminus of the March, by mid-May 1942. Marshall provided a figure of 9,172 arrivals. Between these benchmarks are 2,624 individuals “killed in battle or on Death March or in [the] Hills.”¹⁶

A 1962 book by Stanley Falk, who had worked on the Army's official history of the war in the Philippines, attempted to break down this number. Falk estimated that some 1,500 remained in hospitals on Bataan, perhaps 300 escaped to Corregidor, fifty fled into the hills, and twenty-five remained on work details on Bataan. Subtracted from 2,624, this leaves us with a total of 749 individuals who died in the final week of combat or on the March.¹⁷ But a book appeared in 2008 on the Fassoth brothers, German immigrants who took in Fil-American soldiers on their Bataan plantation. Because the monograph lists 104 individuals who passed through the camp, Falk has raised his original estimate.¹⁸ An unknown number of others, of course, struck out on their own without passing through the Fassoth plantation.

¹⁵ G-1 Report, 2; and G-1 Report, annex 2, 3, NARA RG 407, Entry 427, Box 1157.

¹⁶ Marshall gives the figure 8,000 enlisted men and 1,300 officers in the text of the report, but 9,172 in the accompanying table. G-1 Report, annex 2, 3.

¹⁷ Stanley Falk, *Bataan: The March of Death* (New York: Jove Books, 1983), 194-5. NOTE: The numbers in this paper eliminate mathematical and typographical errors made by both Marshall and Falk.

¹⁸ Malcolm Decker, *From Bataan to Safety: The Rescue of 104 American Soldiers in the Philippines* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008); Falk e-mail to Kupsky, 24 April 2014.

Falk's revised number stands at 695 who died in the Good Friday Offensive or the March. The benchmark strategy cannot get us any deeper because, at that point, Fil-American troops could not mount an organized resistance, let alone maintain records. Death reports, radioed to the United States via Corregidor, stopped in late March. In Falk's words, the number of combat deaths thereafter was "the biggest unknown factor in a computation already made difficult by too many unknowns."¹⁹ Still, despite the constraints of his source material, Falk made a series of plausible guesses that put us in the numerical ballpark. His estimate, 600-700, has been the standard ever since.

The way to build on Falk's number is to move to a micro-level approach and, in effect, count up from zero. At present, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency is working to compile basic loss data for every missing servicemember from World War II. This requires the consultation of each missing person's files, along with supplementary materials. The preliminary data thus gathered informs a central database.

The database, which is about a third complete, allows the filtering of individuals by date of death, unit, loss location, and other categories. For our purposes here it allows the grouping of the fallen of Bataan into subcategories on an individual level, in contrast to the macro approach employed by Falk. Combined with unit histories, scholarly works, and other compilations that did not exist in 1962, this aggregation of data creates a resource that Falk did not have, let alone the AGRS.

(Table demonstrations. We are already up to 71 having died in the Good Friday Offensive, suggesting one revision to Falk's numbers. We've confirmed 154 reported as having died on the March. Both numbers will continue to grow. The same limitations appear here, however. We will always have a range of individuals for whom no information is available. For

¹⁹ Falk, 194-195.

example, we have a margin of error for the 120 who received a death date of 1 February 1946. Another 20 with 6 May 42 but no evidence. We have at least 184 more to look at, based on unit and date of death.)

Of course, no amount of innovation is going to solve the core problem of insufficient source data from 1941-2. After a certain amount of building, we will be left with a range of individuals for whom no information is available. You will recall the 120 individuals that received an administrative death date of 1 February 1946. (*As an aside, the Fassoth brothers study provides data on 5 of them*). Thus, pending information from other sources, estimates will always be plus or minus that group. Nevertheless, establishing subgroups with a margin of error of a few hundred is a clear step forward from the initial figure of 2,600.

Prospects for Recovery and Identification

As historians, of course, we come at last to the dreaded “so what” question. What is the value of establishing better fidelity on the Bataan missing? Put simply, a broadened research base directly supports the multidisciplinary effort to locate and identify the missing. Any identifications made by forensic experts will then feed back into the research by providing new clues and reducing the number of missing. There are two potential avenues for this process.

The first is the pool of recovered unknowns from Bataan, Camp O’Donnell, and Cabanatuan. Some 1,700 remains recovered in these areas by Sgt Abraham and others received a status of “non-identifiable” after the war. Unfortunately, because of the rapidly deteriorating health of the prisoners prior to death, improper burial and recovery methods, and nonexistent records, the task is more difficult than it seems. In addition, some of these unknowns will represent Filipino or Japanese nationals, and others might actually be additional remains of

someone already recovered. Nevertheless, building a solid research base will allow researchers to compare recovery locations and physical evidence against the records of the missing.

The second avenue involves finding the remains that earlier searchers missed. In rare cases, historical documentation provides a likely burial location that can be surveyed and tested for evidence. In general, however, this effort relies on contemporary discoveries. It is not uncommon for construction, erosion, or even treasure hunting to unearth remains. Of course, the researcher has little control over the discovery of these individuals, to say nothing of the integrity of physical evidence. It is worth highlighting two major challenges:

- First, not all discoveries are related to World War II or the U.S. military. *When local residents find remains, they invariably assume that they're American, because the leg bones are too long to be Filipino. An archaeologist at the National Museum of the Philippines has theorized that disarticulated leg bones appear longer than when they are in the hip socket.*
- Second, discoveries are not always preserved, let alone reported. *For example, hundreds of Filipinos and Americans died in a Japanese air attack on Cavite Naval Base in December 1941, and most of the remains were hastily pushed into a mass grave. Today, the site is under several warehouses and a paved surface on a military base. I asked a base official what would have happened with any remains found during construction. Chuckling, he said simply, "Nothing."*

In light of the difficulties with both unknowns and unrecovered remains, the best that researchers can do is cast a wide net, and have enough research compiled to make a best guess on the information coming in.

From a research perspective, then, telling the story of the missing of Bataan is an exemplar of the historian's craft: creating a window into the past through scant and imperfect source material. In the context of the personnel accounting effort, the research offers additional value through the promise of bringing home the remains of the fallen.