

The Private War of Captain Winstead      by Hal Glickman

The night of May 5, 1942, seemed endless to Captain Elton Dewitt (E.D) Winstead. Exploding shellfire provided the only illumination as he trucked ammunition and small arms from an ammunition storage depot to a vital firing position of Corregidor's defenders.

"The Japanese had already landed so we had to drive by a circuitous route, bypassing beach areas held by the enemy. It took us three hours to go from depot to defense position, a trip that would normally take only half an hour."

Winstead, then a lean, taciturn 29 year-old who had enlisted in the Field Artillery at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in 1934, recalls the night before final surrender..

"What would happen the next morning was not really on my mind. I had my job to do – supplying small arms and ammunition to our defense positions on Corregidor and the fortified small islands around Corregidor. There was no thought of supper or sleep – the job was always in front of me, as it was to all my fellow Americans, and to our Filipino Scouts and civilians who made up the work force aiding my resupply mission."

Winstead points out that the 13,000 man force on Corregidor had been on a full alert status for ten months preceding Pearl Harbor. "We had reports of Japanese planes overflying northern Luzon for months before December 7. The fall of Bataan and the non-arrival of U.S. Navy relief told us what was in store for Corregidor."

What about thoughts of family and home? "Certainly my wife Jo and our son were on my mind. Because U.S. Army policy required the removal of all dependents

from zones under war alert status, Josephine and our son were shipped back to the States long before Pearl Harbor.”

Winstead, today, at 86, recalls that surrender of Corregidor met with diverse reactions among General Jonathan Wainwright’s battle-weary defenders. A few wept. Others railed at their commanders. Some tried to escape but were recaptured. So far as is known, just two escaped from the Rock and made their way to Australia. A fraction, including Captain Elton Dewitt Winstead, tightened their belts, worked to restore order, retained their self-discipline, and hunkered down for the worst yet to come.

“How is it that an officer who had served seven years in artillery billets was running small arms and ammunition to defense positions the night of May 5? Good fortune, I believe. The harbor defense ordnance department was authorized one coast artillery officer. I was assigned to fill this vacancy in September, 1941, a change that would ultimately save my life.” But a month of horrors transpired before his new status as assistant harbor defense ordnance officer could have a positive effect on his future.

Together with sixteen thousand others – officers, enlisted men, Filipino Scouts and civilians, Winstead was confined to a two-block area that was formerly the island’s seaplane station. There was no shade from the tropical sun. Vicious blue-black flies swarmed over the captives. Filipinos appropriated one of two shrapnel-riddled hangars. Five hundred officers occupied the second hangar. The remaining thousands blistered in the open..

“We officers were interrogated by the Japanese for two weeks., “ says Captain Winstead, from his residence in Durham, North Carolina, where he lives

alone. He travels to nearby Chapel Hill every day to visit his wife, Josephine, who is confined to a nursing home.

“In my case, the enemy was interested mainly in the quantities of munitions on Corregidor and the adjacent fortified islands – Forts Hughes, Drum and Frank. I believe they had four reasons why they wanted this information.

First, they thought our government had violated the Limitations On Armaments Treaty signed in 1921-22 with Japan and Britain. If the information supplied by me backed up this theory, this would help their worldwide propaganda campaign justifying their military operations. Second, they might find a match between our ammunition and their weapons that could save them resources in Japan. Third, they depended on extensive salvage operations for recyclable brass and steel from shell casings and projectiles to bolster their war machine in Japan. They also wanted to destroy gunpowder and stacked powder charges that might be used against them. And fourth, they looked for large-caliber weapons that could be reused against us.”

Winstead paused and his expression became deadly serious. “There was no way I was about to provide an ounce of information that would aid these enemy objectives. In my mind, the only question was the traditional soldier’s code established by the Geneva Convention that a prisoner of war was required to tell only his name, rank and serial number. I discussed this with our harbor defense commander, General George F. Moore.’

Moore’s opinion was that the Japs had done enough aerial reconnaissance before their invasion to know the location of the island’s ammunition dumps and gun batteries

"We knew they also had blueprints of our defenses. And in a legal sense, because they dragged their heels notifying our government that we had been captured, we were treated as captives, not as prisoners of war entitled to standards of treatment set up by the Geneva Convention. In fact," said Winstead, "It was another year before my wife was officially notified I had been taken prisoner. Believe it or not, I was considered an MIA, missing in action, and my wife and parents were so notified by our government."

His jaw tightened: "It was tough on my family, but they never gave up hope that I was alive. And when they were notified I was a POW, they were rewarded for their convictions."

"We got orders to stand down by noon on the sixth. What would happen next? We didn't kid ourselves. The reality was that we were under the control of the enemy. And General Moore reminded us that the Japanese showed their true colors in China, Malaysia and Pacific Islands conquests. We could expect them to operate on the same three objectives--slave labor, starvation and annihilation."

After two weeks in the hangar area, the prisoners were marched to Malinta Hill where they stood for hours in the broiling sun. From here they were moved dockside, lightered to ships anchored in San Jose Bay and packed in so tightly there was standing room only. Thus they spent the night -- no food, water, medical or latrine facilities. The next morning they sailed to Manila. The Filipinos were off-loaded at a dock, but the Americans were put into launches, then ordered into the waters of Manila Bay armpit deep, thence onto Dewey Boulevard where they were paraded barefoot in soaking wet uniforms before the populace, mostly Filipinos. Then they were shipped to Old Bilibid Prison. After a day, E.D. shipped out with the others to Prison Number 3 at Cabanatuan

in Central Luzon. Most were sent from this hellhole to work camps all over the Philippines. Others went into captivity in Formosa and Japan. What happened to Winstead?

"I lucked out. I was sent back to Manila.. How come? I didn't have to wait to find out. The next morning I was in the middle of another heavy G-2 interrogation This went on for two weeks as I was pressed for data on munitions recently received, and the locations of underground ammunition dumps The Japanese obviously had identified me as the island's ammunition manager. Yes, I was a prime target of the Japanese search for salvage, munitions and ordnance."

"They were very interested in the our stores of gunpowder and stacked powder charges, They sent test teams from Manila to establish the condition of these munitions. They made me Keeper Of The Warehouse Of Bullets and gave me a pass that insured my free travel over Corregidor and the fortified islands. This may have been a bargain with the devil in their minds – comparative personal freedom in exchange for my cooperation. Little did they know how I would cooperate.. I was fortunate that it was the rainy season. I unflapped the heavy brown envelopes containing the gunpowder so that the contents were contaminated by rain. I also made certain that the stacked powder charges were also exposed to the rain. So these munitions failed the test of the Japanese testing teams. I was ordered to destroy them, which I accomplished by burning them"

"The exhilaration I felt with my destruction of the gunpowder and stacked charges was, of course, concealed from both the enemy and my fellow Americans. What I was doing carried a death sentence if found out. The only life risked on my course of action would be my own."

Today, Colonel Winstead calls his private war against the Japanese "psychological warfare." He initiated a series of actions that unquestionably put his life on the line. "There were close calls, sometimes only seconds when I could do what I did without discovery. I had to develop a new skill of surreptitious behavior, backing off when the situation got tense, pressing ahead when the guards' attention was diverted or turned in other directions."

Winstead got creative on his assignment to find and salvage recyclable brass and steel from shell casings and projectiles. He salvaged the materials, loaded them in steel drums and then, before sealing them for the voyage back to Japan, he sprinkled live bullets throughout the drums.

Ordered to disassemble a huge 60-inch seacoast searchlight before transshipment to Japan, Winstead took the searchlight apart down to the last washer, nut and bolt, such a complete job of sabotage that "not even the original designers could reassemble the searchlight."

When the Japanese found two new 155mm cannon at Fort Frank, they ordered Winstead to move them to dockside for transshipment. "This was a bit scary. I had to deliver the cannon dockside. The only question in my mind was how to disable these brand new weapons so they could not be fired. I was fortunate -- the Japanese did not realize that when I dragged the cannon sideways down the hill to dockside that I was accomplishing the destruction of the recoil mechanisms. Almost any experienced artillery commander would know not to do what I did. But the Japanese had no such person on their guard details."

When a fellow officer asked Winstead if he could deliver a 45 automatic to him, Winstead found satisfying this request "really hairy. I tucked the weapon inside my jacket and walked past a dozen guards, any one of whom would shoot me on the spot if my concealment of the weapon was anything but perfect." Winstead smiled. "I delivered the weapon."

Captain Winstead even defied the traditional role of subservience to the conqueror. He told of his relationship with a brutal guard the Americans called Donald Duck, a name applied when the Japanese was not in earshot.. His mistreatment of the 30-man work detail commanded by Winstead called for retaliation.

"What could I do that would satisfy my men -- payback for the verbal abuse and incidents of food deprivation inflicted on my men? I believe I found his Achilles heel., I took away the radio on which he loudly played broadcasts from Japan. How did I do it? My original technical education was as an electrician. It was not difficult to disable the radio by wiring it with 115 volts of DC current. But Donald Duck didn't give up. He ordered one of my technicians to repair the radio. When he was about to start working on the radio, I said to him, "you don't fix it. 'Of course I can fix it,' replied the technician. I repeated, 'you don't fix it.' He got the message."

Disabling the radio wasn't quite enough punishment, according to my men. So, when Donald Duck ordered me to set up a way of taking hot baths, I found an opening. I designed a Rube Goldberg-like arrangement of a 55-gallon steel drum with water heated by burning gunpowder. I delivered the nice warm bath Donald Duck had ordered. He liked it so much he wanted more. The next bath was quite hot, but bearable. Then, the third time around, the fire under the drum produced the hottest, most scalding bath in

the Archipelago, a bath that put Donald Duck out of action for a pleasing length of time.”

The guard called Donald Duck was the most abusive of those guarding Winstead’s work detail. Sometimes it became necessary to intercede with higher-ranking Japanese. When the detail was ordered to salvage the three miles-plus of steel rails comprising the tracks serving the island’s electric railway system, the Japanese lieutenant ordered each heavy rail to be lifted and loaded on trucks by only four men. Winstead held out for six men, a request that was refused. So Winstead asked the officer to join the lift squad of four men, along with Winstead himself, to see how difficult it was to lift with four men. Winstead positioned himself and the officer so that the Japanese got the brunt of the trial lift.

“He was convinced. We got the okay for six-man lift squads.”

At this point, all the readily salvageable scrap metal, even rusted tin cans from mess hall dumps, had been harvested from Corregidor and the fortified islands. Every step of the way, Winstead had conducted his private war without being discovered.

“I believe the guards thought our salvage effort was going too slow to suit their commanders. But we were able to do our thing for six months without our mischief being brought to light. That was most satisfying.”

Winstead was imprisoned for the next two years at Cabanatuan Prison Number One sixty miles north of Manila in central Luzon. He was commanding officer of one of the barracks. They worked as laborers growing fresh vegetables for the Japanese on nearby farmland appropriated from their Filipino owners. When word came down that he and Lieutenant Roy Burke of New York City, an Army Air Force pilot, would be shipped to Japan in November, 1944, with 1600 other Cabanatuan prisoners, Winstead



and Burke, realizing that the move to Japan could be a death sentence, based on information about the high mortality of prisoner slave labor in Japan, the pair concocted an escape plan whereby they would overpower the four guard on the truck transport taking them to Manila. They shook hands on their plan, recalls Winstead, and mentally prepared themselves for the next day's ordeal.

During the night, Winstead came down with dysentery, was examined by the Japanese doctor and ordered to sick bay.

"That's how I missed the boat, the Oryoku Maru, which sailed for Japan in the morning with Burke and 1600 others." Winstead's eyes misted.

"Burke never reached Japan alive. The Oryoku Maru became one of a number of "hellships" attacked by U.S. dive bombers. About 600 prisoners died in the bombing, another 500 died aboard ship from disease and malnutrition. Only 400 reached Japan alive, and of these, only 216 were alive by V-J Day, September 2, 1945."

Winstead was promoted to the rank of major in February, 1945, to Lt. Colonel in December 1950, retired from the Army in 1957. His post-World War II service included two and half years as commander of an anti-aircraft battalion in the Panama Canal Zone.

Why did Winstead decide to break his 58-year silence on his private war against Japan?

"It's getting late in the game. I want to bear witness to the deprivation and suffering of the American soldier. I want people to know that preparation wins conflicts, especially when the conflict threatens our way of life; My parents prepared me for what I encountered on Corregidor just as much as did my military training. I believe we should focus our national attention on preparation for living life as it shows itself, the

unexpected as well as the expected. For this reason, I believe we should be reluctant to sign any international treaty that ties our hands in case the unexpected happens. Those in Congress know this, but the general public does not, I believe, understand that signing such a treaty overrules our own Constitution and any laws passed by Congress."

Winstead, who weighs a "normal" 150 pounds, lost 55 pounds in his 3-1/2 year POW ordeal, shrinking to 95 pounds when rescued by MacArthur's return to the Philippines in 1945.