



## **American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Memorial Society**

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### **STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

to the

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and House Veterans' Affairs Committee**

**Joint Hearing**

**To Receive Legislative Presentations of Veterans Service Organizations**

By

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### ***AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR OF JAPAN TIME FOR A CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL***

Chairmen Tester and Takano, Ranking Members Moran and Bost, and Members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, thank you for allowing us to describe how Congress can meet the concerns of veterans of World War II's Pacific Theater. The American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Memorial Society (ADBC-MS) represent the POWs of Japan, their families, and descendants, as well as scholars, researchers, and archivists. Our goal is to preserve the history of the American POW experience in the Pacific and to teach future generations of the POWs' sacrifice, courage, determination, and faith—the essence of the American spirit.

This year, 2021, is the 80th anniversary of the first American battles of World War II. I testify today to encourage your efforts to remember the American men and women who became POWs of Japan after fighting the first desperate battles of WWII in the Pacific and suffering some of the War's worst consequences. Nearly 30 percent did not return home.

For all, the home front was their third battle--after surviving warfare in the Pacific and enduring atrocities as a POW. Forced to sign gag orders about the horrors they witnessed and unable to explain the after-effects of torture, abuse, starvation, and trauma, the POWs of Japan first focused, as do today's veterans, on obtaining healthcare, disability benefits, survivor benefits, caregiver support, mental health access, and education. As you have heard from other veterans' groups who have testified, these same challenges remain.

The final and fourth battle for the American POWs of Japan is for them not to be forgotten. Current and future generations can be inspired by their “victory from within.” There are still lessons to be learned. Most important, Congressional advocacy for the POW’s legacy reassures today’s fighting men and women that their service and sacrifice will be remembered.

**To ensure that the POWs’ unique history is appreciated and retained, I ask Congress to:**

1. Award, collectively, the American POWs of Japan the Congressional Gold Medal.
2. Instruct the U.S. Department of State to prepare a report for Congress on the history and funding of the “Japan/POW Friendship Program” that began in 2010 and how it compares with programs for (i) other Allied POWs and (ii) the Takahashi people exchange program in the United States.
3. Encourage the Government of Japan to continue the “Japan/POW Friendship Program.”
4. Encourage the Government of Japan to expand its “Japan/POW Friendship Program” into a permanent educational initiative.
5. Request the Government of Japan to honor its 2015 promise to include the “full history” of Japan’s UNESCO World Industrial Heritage properties of the *Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining*. The history of POW slave labor at many of these sites is not included at either the locations or the new Tokyo Information Center.
6. Encourage the Government of Japan to create a memorial for the Allied POWs of WWII at the Port of Moji on Kyushu where most of the POW hellships docked and unloaded their sick and dying human cargo.

### **Our history**

On December 7, 1941, Imperial Japan attacked not only Pearl Harbor but also the Philippine Islands, Guam, Wake Island, Howland Island, Midway, Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Starting with 300 China Marines on December 8th in Peking and Shanghai, Americans throughout the Pacific became prisoners of war.

Three days later, Guam became the first American territory to fall to Japan. In mid-December, 400 Marines on Wake Island held off a Japanese Armada for nearly two weeks. At the same time, the U.S. Far East Air Force in the Philippines was destroyed. By the end of December, Manila was declared an open city and American forces retreated to the Bataan Peninsula. By March 1942, Imperial Japanese armed forces had crushed the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in battles off Java. Although the aim of the December 7th surprise attack on Hawaii's Pearl Harbor was to

destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet in its home port and to discourage U.S. action in Asia, the other strikes served as preludes to full-scale invasions and brutal military occupation.

Only in the Philippines did U.S.-Filipino units mount a prolonged resistance to Imperial Japan's assault. They held out for five months. Help could not and would not be sent. On April 9, 1942, approximately 10,000 Americans and 70,000 Filipinos became POWs with the surrender of the Bataan Peninsula. The same day the 65-mile Bataan Death March began. Thousands died and hundreds have never been accounted for from the March and its immediate aftermath.

By June 1942, most of the estimated 27,000 Americans ultimately held as military POWs of Imperial Japan had been surrendered. The rest were airmen and members of the merchant marine. If American civilians in Japan, the Philippines and throughout the Pacific who were held as POWs or internees are also counted, this number is closer to 36,000. Nearly all remained captives until the end of the war. The Japanese paroled surviving Filipino soldiers starting in June 1942. By the War's end, 30 percent or more than 12,000 Americans had died in squalid POW camps, in the fetid holds of "hellships," or in slave labor camps owned by Japanese companies.

Surviving as a POW of Japan and returning home was the beginning of new battles: finding acceptance in society and living with serious mental and physical ailments. In the first six years after the war, deaths of American POWs of Japan were more than twice those of the comparably aged white male population. These deaths were disproportionately due to tuberculosis, suicides, accidents, and cirrhosis. In contrast, 1.5 percent of Americans in Nazi POW camps died (as noted above the mortality rate for POWs of Japan was 20 times greater) and in the first six years after liberation Nazi POW camp survivors deaths were one-third of those who survived Japanese POW camps.

### **Progress toward Remembrance, Reconciliation, and Preservation**

An essential element of showing respect and acceptance to today's servicemen and women is to ensure that they are not forgotten. This is the primary mission of the ADBC-MS. To this end, we have had several significant achievements in the last decade.

In 2009, the Government of Japan, through its then-Ambassador to the U.S., Ichiro Fujisaki, issued an official, Cabinet-approved apology to the American POWs of Japan. In the following year, 2010, Japan initiated the "Japan/POW Friendship Program" in which American former POWs visit Japan and return to the places of their imprisonment and slave labor.

Thus far, there have been 11 trips, one each in the fall of 2010 through 2019. In 2015, there were two trips. In 2016, 2018, and 2019, due to the advanced age of surviving POWs, only widows and children participated in the program. In all, 46 former POWs, all in their late 80s or 90s, as

well as nine widows and 18 children have made the trip to Japan. A number of the caregiver companions were wives, children, and grandchildren. There was no trip in 2020.

On July 19, 2015, the Mitsubishi Materials Corporation (MMC) became the first, and only, Japanese company to officially apologize to those American POWs who were used as slave laborers to maintain war production. This historic apology was offered to the 900 Americans who were forced to work in four mines operated by Mitsubishi Mining, Inc., the predecessor company of MMC. The apology was followed by a \$50,000 donation for research and documentation.

Earlier in 2015, in April, a former National Commander of our organization, Lester Tenney, a Bataan Death March survivor and slave laborer at Mitsui's Omuta coal mine on Kyushu (one of the UNESCO World Heritage sites), attended Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's historic address to a joint meeting of Congress. Dr. Tenney was also invited to the official banquet where the Prime Minister personally greeted him. That same year, Abe included in his war anniversary statement on August 14th, his recognition of "the former POWs who experienced unbearable sufferings caused by the Japanese military."

President Barack Obama's iconic hug on May 26, 2016 of Hiroshima atomic bomb survivor Shigeaki MORI was also a nod to Mori's passion to identify and track down the families of the 12 American Naval and Army aviators who died in the August 6, 1945 attack. In December 2016, the President invited ADBC-MS vice president Nancy Kragh and me to witness Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo ABE's historic visit to Pearl Harbor.

In August 2018, a historic ceremony was held in Hawaii remembering the 400 American and Allied POWs who died on January 9, 1945, when bombs dropped by American planes sank the hellship *Enoura Maru* in Takao Harbor, Formosa (today's Taiwan). Unknown to their families until 2001, their remains had been retrieved in 1946 and moved to Hawaii. The ceremony marked the placement of a memorial stone in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific for these POWs who were buried there as "unknowns."

### **Success should encourage more action**

The benefits of Japan's long-awaited acts of contrition have been immeasurable for former POWs and their families. The visitation program is a great success. It has given the participating veterans a peace of mind and their families a connection to their fathers' challenges. For the Japanese people touched by these visits, it is often their first introduction to the non-Japanese victims of the Pacific War.

But we are concerned for the future. There is no formal agreement between the U.S. and Japan to continue the visitation program, and Japan's Foreign Ministry must request annually its line item in the budget. We know that despite the tens of millions of dollars being expended by Japan on

“Takahashi” exchange programs in the United States, the funds for the POW Friendship exchanges have been slashed.

The American visitation program was an afterthought. Since 1995, the Japanese government has had visitation and research programs for POWs from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The American program was first negotiated by the Obama Administration in 2010 by then-Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell. Today, there is the possibility that the program may end.

This is profoundly shortsighted. And it is something that should worry members of Congress. Our relationship with such an important ally can only strengthen through reconciliation efforts. History does not end when the last witness dies. The proliferation of revisionist history in Japan is cause enough to encourage greater work to tell a complete and accurate history of the Asia Pacific War.

We have been especially alarmed by how the Government of Japan treats the sites of Japan’s “Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining” on the UNESCO World Industrial Heritage list. Despite a signed promise to UNESCO in 2015 to report the “full history” of the properties, there is no mention of POW slave labor at any of the locations or at the new Tokyo information center. Requests by visiting POW groups to meet with the government official in charge of sites have been met with silence.

In five of these eight new World Heritage areas there were 26 POW camps that provided slave labor to Japan’s great industrial giants including Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, Aso Group, Ube Industries, Tokai Carbon, Nippon Coke & Engineering, Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation, Furukawa Company Group, and Denka.

### **What we ask Congress**

We ask Congress to encourage the Government of Japan to keep its promises and responsibilities by preserving, expanding, and enhancing its reconciliation program toward its former American prisoners. As trauma is now understood to be intergenerational, we feel it is important for the trips to Japan to continue.

To encourage reconciliation, we ask Congress to encourage the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to publicize the program, its participants, and its achievements. A commitment to remembrance is essential. We believe that both countries will be stronger the more we examine our shared history.

We ask Congress to encourage Japan to turn its POW visitation program into a permanent fund supported by Japanese government and industry. This “Future Fund,” would not be subject to the Ministry of Finance’s yearly review and would support research, documentation, reconciliation

programs, and people-to-people exchanges regarding Japan's history of forced and slave labor during WWII.

Part of the Fund's educational programming would be the creation of visual remembrances of this history through museums, memorials, exhibitions, film, and installations. Most important, the Fund would support projects among all the arts from poetry, literature, music, dance, and drama to painting, drawing, film, and sculpture to tell the story to the next generation.

We ask Congress to instruct the U.S. Department of State to continue to represent vigorously the interests of American veterans with Japan. It is only the U.S. government that can persuade Japan to continue the visitation program, to create a Future Fund, and to ensure that the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution include the dark history of POW slave labor.

We ask Congress to instruct the U.S. Department of State to prepare a report for Congress on the history and funding of the "Japan/POW Friendship Program" and how it compares with programs for Allied POWs established in 1995 by the Peace, Friendship and Exchange Initiative and current Takahashi exchange groups. This report can provide a metric to evaluate the POW program, highlight its success, and assess how to expand it into a more permanent course of remembrance and learning.

We ask Congress to encourage the Japanese government to create a memorial at the Port of Moji, where most of the POW hellships docked and unloaded their sick and dying human cargo. The dock already features memorials to the Japanese soldiers and horses that departed for war from this port. Nowhere in Moji's historic district is there mention of the captive men and looted riches off-loaded onto its docks. This tells an incomplete history of the landmark.

### **The Congressional Gold Medal**

In this historic year, the 80th anniversary of the beginning of World War II for the United States, we most importantly ask Congress to approve an accurate and inclusive Congressional gold medal for the American POWs of Japan. It is a long overdue symbol of the country's commitment to our veterans to "never forget."

Over the past few years, there have been Congressional gold medals given to groups that included American POWs of Japan. Eight members of the Doolittle Raiders were POWs, at least one Nisei member of the Military Intelligence Service was a POW, a number of Merrill's Raiders were captured and beheaded as Japanese POWs, hundreds of merchant marine suffered in Japanese POW camps, scores of Chinese Americans including a member of the Texas National Guard became POWs, and nearly all the officers of the Filipino troops who were awarded Congressional Gold Medals were American.

Unlike previous WWII-focused Congressional Gold Medal awards that honor specific service units or ethnicities, the American POWs of Japan are men and women from many ethnic groups, races, religions, military services, and regions. They come from all American states, territories, and tribal lands. The American POWs of Japan are the most inclusive and diverse cohort to be considered for a Congressional Gold Medal.

Eighty years after the start of the War in the Pacific, it is time to recognize all Americans who fought the impossible and endured the unimaginable in the war against tyranny in the Asia. Moreover, as I have described above, the Gold Medal would also recognize that the POWs are the only American wartime group to have negotiated its own reconciliation with the Enemy.

### **High price of freedom**

The American POWs of Japan and their families paid a high price for the freedoms we cherish. In return for their sacrifices and service, they ask that their government keep its moral obligation to them. They do not want their history ignored or exploited. What they want most is to have their government stand by them to ensure they will be remembered, that our allies respect them, and that their American history is preserved accurately for future generations.

Our history is one of resilience, survival, and the human spirit, good and bad. And it has become an example of a path toward reconciliation and justice between Japan and its former victims. We ask Congress for support and to help our veterans in their unique quest for justice and remembrance. Congress must encourage Japan to do more toward reconciliation and considering its past truthfully.

**Congress can cement our victory into national history with a Congressional Gold Medal.**

### **Ms. Jan Thompson**

President

American Defenders of Bataan & Corregidor Memorial Society

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