



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
THE YEAR 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) represents the prisoners of war (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, 2022, is the 80th anniversary of the first American battles of World War II. These were battles of fierce resistance and defiance against Imperial Japan, a stronger, better equipped invader. Today, in fact, marks the fall of the Dutch East Indies to Japan and the capture of a West Texas National Guard Battalion as well as two American aviators and one sailor too seriously wounded to be moved off Java. Barely a week before, the cruiser USS *Houston* (CA-30) went down in the Battle of Sunda Strait.

In April, after 99 days of constant warfare and no hope of resupply, the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines was surrendered and the infamous Bataan Death March began. Less than one month later, on May 6th, the Fortress Island of Corregidor and its associated commands defending

Manila were surrendered. The rest of American and Filipino units throughout the Philippines soon followed. And on June 7th, Japan invaded Alaska's Attu in the Aleutians, imprisoning 42 Native Americans.

I testify today to encourage your efforts to remember the American men and women who gave their all under desperate conditions to demonstrate determination and resourcefulness against a ruthless enemy and a long-decided policy of prioritizing the war in Europe. The result was that most became POWs of Japan who suffered some of the War's worst consequences. One-third did not return home.

For all, the homefront 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 fourth and final 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." These men and women were not losers but survivors and resisters. There are still lessons to be learned. Most importantly, Congressional advocacy for the POW's legacy reassures today's fighting men and women that their own 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 Imperial Japan the Congressional Gold Medal.** This group represents every U.S. state, territory, tribe, and military service. It would be the most diverse World War II cohort eligible for a Congressional Gold Medal.
- 2. Amend title 36, United States Code to include National Former POW Recognition Day among the days the POW/MIA flag is required to be displayed.** This is April 9th, which is the anniversary of the Bataan Death March. The President is already required to issue a proclamation for this remembrance day.
- 3. Instruct the U.S. Department of State to prepare a report for Congress on the history and funding of the "Japan/POW Friendship Program."** This visitation program began in 2010. Inquiry should include (i) how other Allied POW reconciliation programs initiated by the Government of Japan in 1995 compare both in funding and programming and (ii) how the U.S. program compares with the various Kakehashi people exchange programs in the United States funded by the Government of Japan starting in 2015.

4. Encourage the Government of Japan to continue and institutionalize the “Japan/POW Friendship Program” established in 2010. Initially established as a reconciliation visit to Japan for former POWs, the program has included widows and the elderly children of POWs. The program needs to transform into a permanent educational, remembrance, and exchange initiative of history, justice, and democracy.

5. Encourage the Government of Japan to publish in Japanese, English and other languages on the website of the Foreign Ministry of Japan the 2009 Cabinet Decision offering a formal apology to all the prisoners of war of Japan.

6. Request the Government of Japan to honor its 2015 written 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 the Heritage sites is not included at those locations or at the Tokyo Information Center.

7. Encourage the Government of Japan, to create a central government-funded 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. Currently, none of the memorials to Allied POWs are funded by Japan’s central government. In addition to the U.S. POWs, there were POWs from the UK, Australia, the Netherlands, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, Norway, Malta, Jamaica, Finland, Portugal, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, Estonia, and Czechoslovakia.

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. On December 8th, the U.S. declared war on Imperial Japan. Immediately, 203 North China U.S. Marines and Navy medics in Peking, Tientsin, and Chinwangtao became prisoners of war. The same day the 154 Merchant Marines from the SS *President Harrison* were captured near Shanghai.

Two days later, Guam became the first American territory to fall to Japan. In mid-December, 400 Marines, 1,200 unarmed civilian construction contractors, and 45 Chamorro Pan Am employees on Wake Island made an unprecedented defense against a Japanese Armada for nearly two weeks. At the same time, the U.S. Far East Air Force in the Philippines was destroyed. On December 26th, General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the United States Army Forces in the Far East (USAFEF), declared Manila, hoping it would be spared attack—it was not. American-Filipino forces retreated to the Bataan Peninsula.

By March 1942, Imperial Japanese armed forces had crushed the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in battles off Java. The Dutch East Indies soon fell, marooning a U.S. artillery battalion from West Texas and

several wounded American aviators. 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 our military units mount a prolonged resistance to Imperial Japan's assault. They held out for five months. As early as 1940, a decision had been made to delay the defense of Asia to first fight in Europe. Help could not and would not be sent in time. On April 9, 1942, approximately 12,000 Americans and 65,000 Filipinos became POWs with the surrender of the Bataan Peninsula. The same day the infamous Bataan Death March began. It was a three-part, nearly 100-mile trek by foot and train up Bataan to Camp O'Donnell. 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—they did *not* surrender. After the fall of the Philippines, most American POWs were airmen, sailors, and merchant marines. If you count American civilians held as internees in Japan, the Philippines, China, and throughout the Pacific, the total number of U.S. POWs is closer to 36,000. Nearly all remained captives until the end of the war. If the Japanese had not paroled in June 1942 the almost 100,000 Filipino soldiers who were under U.S. command that they had captured, the number of American POWs would have quadrupled.

By the War's end, roughly one-third 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. Sadly, of the 12,000 who died in Japanese custody, almost one-third (or 4,000) can be attributed to friendly fire although not so intended by the Americans. These 4,000 were aboard unmarked hellships targeted and sunk by American planes and submarines.

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). In the first six years after liberation, the mortality rate of those who survived the Japanese POW camps was three times the rate of the Nazi POW camp survivors.

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. Whether on a battlefield or in a prison camp, their service

mattered. 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 that reads: “a heartfelt apology for our country having caused tremendous damage and suffering to many people, including prisoners of wars, those who have undergone tragic experiences in the Bataan Peninsula, Corregidor Island, in the Philippines, and other places.” 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 in their 60s and 70s have made the trip to Japan. A number of the caregiver companions were wives, children, and grandchildren.

There was, of course, no trip in 2020 or 2021. It is unclear if one will be planned for this year. However, the Foreign Ministry has budgeted funds for the trips. These unused funds can be used to establish a permanent fund for activities toward remembrance and reconciliation.

On July 19, 2015, the Mitsubishi Materials Corporation (MMC) became the 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 and his wife personally greeted him. That same year, Prime Minister 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 Mr. 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 that had been buried onshore 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 "Kakehashi" exchange programs in the United States, the funds for the POW Friendship exchanges have been slashed and now lay dormant.

Moreover, 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.

Missing at Japan's UNESCO World Heritage Sites

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 the 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, Kawasaki, Aso Group, Ube Industries, Tokai Carbon, Nippon Coke & Engineering, Nippon Steel, Furukawa Company Group, and Denka. Nowhere is it acknowledged that Allied POWs were forced to maintain war production at these sites.

What 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 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to publicize its apology to the Allied POWs, the visitation 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.
- ★ To encourage Japan to turn its POW visitation program into a permanent fund supported by the 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.
- ★ To suggest that part of the Fund's educational programming should 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.
- ★ To instruct the U.S. Department of State to continue to vigorously represent 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.
- ★ 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 Kakehashi 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.

- ★ 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.

Most Importantly We Ask for the Congressional Gold Medal

In this historic year, the 80th anniversaries of the loss of the USS *Houston*, the Bataan Death March, the fall of the Philippines, the Mindanao Death March, Battle of Midway, and the invasion of Attu, 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 West 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 the 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-one 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 that they will be remembered, that our allies respect them, and that their American history is preserved accurately for future generations.

The history of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor is one of resilience, survival, and the American spirit, good and bad. In battle and at a death camp, our war was one of blood and resistance. We did not and would not give up. We, thus, ask Congress to support our Pacific War veterans in their unique quest for justice and remembrance.

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

Ms. Jan Thompson

President

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Daughter of PhM2c Robert E. Thompson USN, USS *Canopus* (AS-9)

Survivor of the hellships *Oryoku Maru*, *Enoura Maru*, and the *Brazil Maru*

Survivor of the POW Camps Bilibid (Philippines), Fukuoka 3B (Japan), & Mukden (China)

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