



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 DEFENDERS OF THE PACIFIC TIME FOR A CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL & MEMORIALS IN JAPAN

Chairmen Tester and Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, 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 in the Pacific.

The American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor (ADBC) was founded in January 1946 at the Fort Devens, Massachusetts hospital by former POWs of Imperial Japan. The ADBC represented the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces in the Pacific who participated in the early resistance to, and defensive battles against, the armed forces of Imperial Japan from December 8, 1941 to June 9, 1942. Nearly all the survivors endured four years of merciless imprisonment by Imperial Japan throughout the Empire.

Our Memorial Society now represents 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.

Background

The common perception of an American POW of Imperial Japan is as a casualty of the infamous Bataan Death March 82 years ago next month. The fall of the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines and the start of the March, April 9, 1942, is National Former POW Recognition Day and is recognized with a Presidential Proclamation.

In fact, Americans—Marines, sailors, and merchant marines in China and Japan—became POWs of Imperial Japan starting with the first day of the War on December 8, 1941. Over the following months, Americans unprepared for war in outposts throughout the Pacific were surrendered *en masse* often after furious, unaided battles—Wake Island, Guam, Java, Sunda Strait, Luzon, Corregidor, Mindanao, Kiska, Attu—against the invading Japanese.

As POWs, the Americans were subject to torture, abuse, starvation, and neglect. Significantly, they were used as slave laborers for Japan's military and private industry. The men toiled on the Thai-Burma Death Railway; built airfields with their bare hands—such as at what is now the Antonio Bautista Air Base on Palawan, Philippines; died constructing military projects such as the Soto Dam in Nagasaki Prefecture; and slaved in Japanese corporate mines, mills, and factories. For example, Nippon Steel, which is now attempting to purchase U.S. Steel, used more than 6,000 American and Allied POWs as forced labor with ten percent dying in the process.

I testify today to encourage a greater effort to remember and to advocate for these American men and women who gave their all under desperate conditions and who demonstrated determination and resourcefulness against a ruthless enemy. And all this against the backdrop of a long-decided U.S. and British policy to prioritize the war in Europe. The result was that thousands of these soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen became POWs of Japan and suffered some of the War's worst consequences. One-third did not return home.

Our asks

To ensure that the sacrifices and unique history of our fighting men and women in the Pacific during 1941 and 1942 are not forgotten I ask Congress to:

1. Award the Congressional Gold Medal collectively to the American defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, as defined in U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich's and Representative Teresa Leger Fernandez's forthcoming bill. This group represents every U.S. state, territory, tribe, and military service. It is the most diverse World War II Congressional Gold Medal cohort.

2. Call on Nippon Steel and other Japanese companies to acknowledge their history of using American and Allied POWs as slave laborers and to establish an educational foundation to support research and learning about the POW experience in Imperial Japan. Respect for the sacrifices of American veterans should be fundamental to Nippon Steel's acquisition of a U.S. company. It is the only way that trust can be established.

3. Ask the Government of Japan, to create two central government-funded memorials in Japan, as none exist, to the Allied POWs of WWII. One would be in Tokyo and the other at the Port of Moji on Kyushu, Japan where most of the “hellships”—floating dungeons where POWs were denied air, space, light, sanitation, water, and food—first arrived in Japan to unload their sick and dying human cargo. Currently, the only monuments at Moji are to Japanese war horses, Japanese soldiers, and bananas.

4. Instruct the U.S. Department of State to prepare a report for Congress on the history and funding of the 2010-2023 “Japan/POW Friendship Program.” The report should include (i) how other Allied POW reconciliation programs initiated by the Government of Japan in 1995 compare both in funding and programming with the one for the Americans; (ii) how the U.S. program compares with its “kakehashi” people exchange programs in the United States funded by the Government of Japan starting in 2015; and (iii) a breakdown of the budgets of these various exchange programs and the types and ages of participants.

5. Ask the Government of Japan to reestablish and institutionalize the “Japan/POW Friendship Program.” Inaugurated in 2010 as a reconciliation visit to Japan for former U.S. POWs and family members, it was modeled after ones initiated in 1995 for British, Dutch, and Australian POWs. Japan ended the visitation program for Americans in 2023. Instead of stopping reconciliation efforts, Japan should transform the American POW program into a permanent educational, remembrance, and exchange initiative that encompasses history, justice, and democratic resilience.

6. Ask the Government of Japan to publish in Japanese, English and other Allied languages on the website of the Foreign Ministry of Japan the 2009 Cabinet Decision making a formal apology to all the prisoners of war of Japan and the text of Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki’s May 30, 2009 speech to the final convention of the ADBC offering an apology to the POWs.

7. Ask 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*. Despite the government’s written commitments to UNESCO, the history of POW slave labor at many of the Heritage sites is not included at those locations or at the Tokyo Information Center. Two of these locations are owned by Nippon Steel.

High price of freedom

By June 1942, most of the estimated 27,000 Americans ultimately held as military POWs of Imperial Japan had been surrendered. By the War’s end, roughly 12,000 Americans POWs had died in Japan’s squalid POW camps, in the fetid holds of “hellships,” or in slave labor camps owned by Japanese companies. This was a death rate of 40 percent. In contrast, 1.5 percent of Americans in Nazi POW camps died putting the mortality rate for POWs of Japan as 20 times greater.

Eighty-three years after the start of the War in the Pacific, it is time to recognize the Americans who fought the impossible and endured the unimaginable in the war against tyranny and fascism in Asia. The American men and women in the early months of the war in the Pacific fought with limited and outdated weapons and no hope of reinforcement or resupply.

Current and future generations can be inspired by their “victory from within.” As President Franklin D. Roosevelt said in August 1943, when the outcome of WWII was still uncertain, “The story of the fighting on Bataan and Corregidor—and, indeed, everywhere in the Philippines—will be remembered so long as men continue to respect bravery, and devotion, and determination.”

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 Japanese allies respect them, and that their American history is preserved accurately.

Ms. Jan Thompson

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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)

*See previous testimony to the Veterans' Affairs Committees for a fuller background
on the history and efforts of the ADBC-MS.*

<https://www.adbcmemorialsociety.org/>