

PART I



BACKGROUND FOR THE DIARY

INTRODUCTION

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Brig. Gen. Lewis C. Beebe was one of approximately 25,600 American military personnel captured by the Japanese in World War II. He was also one of only about 15,000 who survived their brutal prisoner-of-war ordeal.¹ His diary bears witness to the strength of character and genuine positive outlook that kept him alive during more than three years of grim and painful captivity.

American prisoners of war in Japanese hands were trapped in what one writer has aptly described as a “charnel house of atrocities.”² Captured for the most part during the early months of the war on Guam and Wake and in the Philippines, Netherlands Indies, and China, they suffered unimaginable cruelties before those strong or fortunate enough to survive were finally liberated in 1945. Their mere 60 percent survival rate contrasts significantly with the fate of Americans taken prisoner in Europe, 96 percent of whom were still alive at war’s end.

“Prisoners of War,” declared Japanese Prime Minister and Minister of War Gen. Hideki Tojo, “must be placed under strict discipline.” Commanders should “take care not to be obsessed with a mistaken idea of humanitarianism or swayed by personal feelings.”³

The atrocities committed by the Japanese against their American captives—as well as against thousands of other Allied POWs—were as unspeakable as they were completely unexpected from any modern nation. They far exceeded the brutalities common within the Japanese military system itself and reflected that system’s contempt and scorn for soldiers dishonorable enough to allow themselves to be captured.

General humiliation was the least of the cruel torments inflicted on the helpless prisoners. More painful were beatings, torture, and severe punishment for minor infractions of arbitrary rules or commands. Peremptory executions, including beheadings and even cannibalism, were not uncommon. Denial of food and medical care were standard

practices. Prisoners suffered in crowded, unsanitary holding areas, exposed to stifling heat or numbing cold, or pressed tightly together in jam-packed freightcars or on board equally horrifying “death ships.” These vessels were unmarked to indicate the presence of POWs, and thousands died when Allied air and submarine attacks destroyed the ships. Additional thousands perished in “death marches” or as slave laborers on backbreaking construction projects.⁴ Others died in callous medical experimentation projects or were murdered to prevent their liberation by Allied forces; only the war’s end prevented the Japanese from slaughtering most of the rest of their captives. Some were nevertheless killed even after hostilities ceased. Whatever their fate, all the prisoners were oppressed by fear, anxiety, stress, and a debilitating feeling of vulnerability and helplessness. Few survived without extreme physical and mental trauma and disability.

A great number of POWs kept diaries or journals to record their daily suffering, hopes and fears, relations with other prisoners, and a variety of other observations. Written on whatever few scraps of paper their authors could come by, they were carefully hidden from prying Japanese eyes, buried or otherwise concealed on their persons or amongst their few other possessions. It is not clear just how General Beebe secreted the journal in which he wrote his daily thoughts, but another officer held with him hid his own diary pages inside hollowed bamboo sticks that he buried underneath their barracks.⁵

From diaries such as these and from postwar testimony at war-crimes trials, oral histories, individual memoirs, and the broad secondary literature describing POW life, it is clear that no two prisoners suffered exactly the same fate or had the same reaction to what was happening to them. There are general patterns of POW experience, but much depended on when and where a prisoner was captured, where he was held, his rank, age, and physical condition, and sometimes the differences that can simply be attributed to good or bad luck. There was, in other words, no typical POW experience—which is why each individual account adds something of value to our understanding of this tragic chapter in the history of World War II.

For General Beebe, the key factor affecting his POW experience was his rank. He and his fellow general officers, as well as most senior colonels, were treated harshly but nonetheless not as severely as the lower-ranking officers and enlisted men who constituted the majority of American prisoners. Next in importance was the fact that he was captured on Corregidor, thus being spared the agony of those men who fell into Japanese hands on Bataan and were condemned to participate in the infamous “Death March” there. On Corregidor, also, Beebe enjoyed a

more generous food ration than that allowed the half-starved soldiers fighting on Bataan. He was thus in far better physical condition when he entered a Japanese prison camp than nearly half of all the Americans captured in the Philippines. His age at the time probably also contributed to his relatively good shape. While, at 50, he was twice the average age of all the American prisoners, he was one of the youngest of the generals captured and thus may have been stronger and more immune than others of his rank to the debilitating effects of Japanese captivity. And finally, his general optimism and positive outlook throughout his imprisonment may well have been the most important factor in his survival.

General Beebe's diary shows him to have been an intelligent, perceptive, and practical individual, who viewed his situation stoically yet optimistically. His strong character and high moral standards were reinforced by his religious faith and his ability to make the best of conditions that dismayed many of the prisoners. He seemed rarely depressed and kept busy with a variety of endeavors that his status as a general freed him to engage in: writing a novel, leading a singing group, conducting religious services, exercising, gardening, enjoying the company of his friends, and doing his best to improve the slim food ration the Japanese provided. His diary itself is well written in an unemotional, matter-of-fact style and is thus valuable as a fair and reasonably accurate depiction of his POW experience. On only one important point did he avoid discussion: the widespread physical abuse of the prisoners by the Japanese guards. While he himself may not have been physically maltreated, he could hardly have been unaware of atrocities inflicted on even some general officers and certainly on those of lower rank. Yet, as he plainly indicated, he did not like to write about unpleasant things, and this may well explain his silence on this point.

The diary is also valuable because it covers Beebe's activities during the five months of fighting that preceded the final American surrender. While this period is described in other memoirs and accounts, Beebe held important positions and, for a brief time, a key post in the American command hierarchy. His role during those difficult months is not fully described elsewhere, so the diary provides an intimate glimpse of his actions and observations during that tumultuous period. Finally, there are few published accounts by generals of the military campaign and subsequent POW experience; General Beebe's daily record thus offers new information and perspectives on both.

Beebe, then a colonel, actually arrived in the Philippines a good two years before the start of the war. An infantry officer highly decorated for his service in World War I, he was put in command of a battalion of Philippine Scouts, a crack unit of Filipino soldiers and American officers

then part of the regular U.S. Army. He commanded this unit until July 1941, when he was picked to be the chief supply officer in then Maj. Gen. Douglas MacArthur's newly established U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). As assistant chief of staff, G-4, Colonel Beebe was responsible for coordinating logistical support of the small but growing number of American forces in the Philippines as well as units of the hitherto poorly equipped and supplied Philippine Army then being organized and mobilized for service within USAFFE. Why MacArthur chose him for this important post is not clear, since Beebe had no background or experience in supply. But he must have come to MacArthur's attention and made an impression as someone who could get the job done. Beebe's diary, in any event, does not cover this important period, but it was a busy time and he must have been fully engaged in his new assignment.

He became even busier once war began, when his responsibilities were broadened to cover logistical efforts throughout the Philippines as well as attempts to bring in supplies through the growing Japanese blockade encircling the islands. His diary reflects his constant efforts—initially from Manila and then from the beleaguered island of Corregidor—to confront the growing supply shortages bedeviling the American and Filipino defenders.

Almost immediately he was faced with a major problem. The standard plan for defense of the Philippines had stipulated that in the event of a major Japanese invasion, American and Filipino forces would not attempt to defeat the superior enemy in a major engagement but instead would withdraw to the shelter of Bataan peninsula and Corregidor. From these positions, shielding the entrance to Manila Bay and denying it to the Japanese, the defenders would hold out as long as possible until the American battle fleet could break through with reinforcements. General MacArthur, however, considered this scheme to be a defeatist plan and instead determined to actively oppose the invaders wherever they landed. This meant that instead of stocking Bataan with supplies and equipment as called for in the original plan, all materials were to be moved forward to support a major effort to destroy whatever enemy forces managed to get ashore. On December 23, however, only one day after the main Japanese landing on Luzon, it was clear that MacArthur's overly optimistic plan would not work, and he was forced to reverse himself and order the withdrawal to Bataan. General Beebe, who until that date had been pushing and coordinating the forward movement of supplies, now had to turn around and try to rush everything to Bataan. This proved to be an all but impossible task and meant that for the rest of the campaign the Bataan defenders would be seriously hampered by extreme shortages that would leave them starving and ill-equipped to resist the ultimate Japanese assault.⁶

Other than a brief reference to the start of the movement of supplies to Bataan, the Beebe diary includes no discussion of MacArthur's decisions, but it is clear that they increased his workload tremendously. It does describe his frantic efforts to move supplies from Manila to Corregidor and Bataan, as well as the limited and largely ineffective attempts to bring shipments in through the Japanese blockade. In both of these undertakings, MacArthur gave stocking Corregidor a priority over Bataan. The Corregidor defenders would thus enjoy a larger and better balanced ration than the hungry men on Bataan, and Beebe's ability to benefit from this would strengthen him for the trials that lay ahead.⁷ This added strength undoubtedly helped him to ward off the effects of the various illnesses that began to plague him on Corregidor and continued throughout much of his captivity.

Despite the steady and increasing Japanese air and artillery bombardment of Corregidor, Beebe remained optimistic that somehow the war situation would be reversed and the Japanese sent on their way to defeat. Even the departure from the Philippines of General MacArthur and most of his staff in mid-March did not seem to shake his confidence. It did, however, leave Beebe in a new and difficult position.

Although MacArthur was moving to a distant location in Australia, he was still determined to retain close control of operations in the Philippines. To do so, he promoted Beebe to brigadier general and made him his deputy chief of staff in a USAFFE advance echelon, to issue orders in MacArthur's name. Unfortunately, he failed to notify Washington of this arrangement, and the War Department assumed that Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright, now senior in the Philippines, would command there. This left Beebe in an embarrassing situation, trying to obey both MacArthur's instructions and incoming orders from the War Department. His diary describes his confusion and his repeated efforts to get MacArthur to clarify the situation. Finally, after a week's delay, the War Department settled the matter. Wainwright would command in the Philippines, and he, in turn, made Beebe his own chief of staff.⁸

It was in this capacity that he had the unenviable duty of broadcasting to the Japanese General Wainwright's May 6 surrender message and of accompanying Wainwright to his meeting on Bataan with Lt. Gen. Masaharu Homma, the Japanese commander, to arrange the final surrender terms.⁹ On his way back to Corregidor, Beebe became violently ill—apparently a combination of seasickness and a return of the minor flu he had suffered earlier—and it was in this condition that he passed into Japanese captivity that evening.

Almost immediately, it was clear that Beebe's status as a general would make POW life easier for him than for the majority of the Ameri-

can prisoners. Beginning on May 7, most of the American and Filipino troops on Corregidor, other than generals and senior colonels, were herded together into a constricted area on the island. Fed only limited rations by their captors and subjected to random beatings and a single execution, they were otherwise not seriously molested. On May 23, however, they were loaded onto three small tramp steamers and ferried to Manila. There they were formed into a long, bedraggled column and paraded down the city's main streets in an obvious effort by the Japanese to display for the watching Filipinos the American prisoners' inferiority to their smartly uniformed captors. Their march ended at Bilibid Prison, an old Spanish jail. After a few days, the Japanese began transferring the prisoners to a POW camp complex near Cabanatuan, a town some ninety miles above Manila, where their treatment would become increasingly harsh.¹⁰

Meanwhile, a few days after Wainwright's surrender, Beebe and the other generals and senior colonels had taken a pleasant boatripe to Manila and had then been driven to comfortable quarters in the Manila University Club. There they remained for a month, well fed and courteously treated, until the surrender of American units scattered throughout the southern Philippine Islands had been completed. They were then driven to a small camp at Tarlac, in central Luzon, where treatment by their jailers was less gentle than it had been in Manila. Altogether fifteen generals, about one hundred colonels, and sixty or so enlisted men were held at Tarlac. Food was scarce, and the prisoners were constantly humiliated and sometimes beaten by their Japanese guards. On the other hand, with whatever money the Americans had managed to hide during earlier searches by Japanese soldiers, they were able to buy small quantities of food from Filipinos standing at the entrance to the compound. The officers were not required to work and were spared from even humdrum tasks since the Japanese had assigned American enlisted men as their orderlies. They thus had plenty of time to discuss and argue about the military defeat that had made them prisoners and to speculate about what the future might bring.¹¹

This was the first of several POW camps in which Beebe and his fellow generals were to be confined. They would soon learn to expect no consistency in their treatment. While overall Japanese prisoner-of-war policy was dictated by Prime Minister Tojo and codified by War Ministry directives, commanders in the field exercised considerable independence in implementing this policy. Throughout the Japanese POW system, noted one American officer, "administration and policies varied in detail in each camp. Policies were inaugurated and enforced at the whim, not only of the camp commander, but of any Japanese soldier," all of

whom regarded their captives as “not only subordinate, but inferior” to the lowest-ranking Japanese guard.¹²

In mid-August, Beebe’s group was moved from Tarlac to a camp near the port of Karenko in eastern Formosa. They sailed on a small Japanese transport, a pleasant two-day voyage for the American generals but not so pleasant for the other prisoners, who were jammed tightly together in the hot, stuffy holds of the ship. Nevertheless, the food was adequate, even tasty, and no one seems to have been seriously mistreated. The ship and its escorting destroyer zigzagged at night, but the Japanese still dominated the seas in that area, and there were no marauding American submarines present to attack the transport. This would not be the case later in the war, when American submarines and aircraft inadvertently killed thousands of POWs being shipped from the Philippines on board unmarked vessels.¹³

Treatment at Karenko was uneven and arbitrary, sometimes reasonably good but on other occasions grim and harsh. The prisoners began to receive pay, with which they could purchase food and other items, and they were allowed to hold church services and celebrate Christmas, read, or write. It was here that Beebe began to compose a long historical novel, despite intermittent bouts of illness, on which he would continue to work for the remainder of his time as a prisoner. He and the others began to receive some mail from home as well as occasional Red Cross packages. They were also somewhat cheered by the arrival, beginning in the fall of 1942, of senior British, Dutch, and Australian military leaders and civilian officials, greatly increasing the camp prisoner population and livening conversations with word of events elsewhere. Conditions in general seemed to improve slightly in early 1943.

On the other hand, the captives had been forced to sign a “no escape” pledge, to “volunteer” for garden work, and to endure the usual humiliations, beatings, and other forms of physical mistreatment. During the winter, they froze in their unheated barracks and, despite what food they could obtain, there was never enough to eat or provide sufficient nourishment. Many, like Beebe, suffered from malnutrition and other illnesses. Some died.¹⁴

There were several other Formosan POW camps where conditions were much worse, with enlisted men and junior officers in some cases forced to labor under inhuman conditions in deep, unsafe, and unhealthy mine shafts.¹⁵ But Karenko was bad enough, although there is little mention of most of the difficulties there in General Beebe’s diary. He discussed food shortages, winter cold, and his own illness, and complained from time to time about the selfish behavior of some of his fellow prisoners. But he said nothing about the humiliation and physical

mistreatment emphasized in other personal and secondary accounts. "I try to keep cheerful all the time and not grumble about things," he noted in December 1942 on the eve of his fifty-first birthday, and his unwillingness to write about unpleasant matters reflected this attitude. Certainly it distinguished him from other prisoners of the Japanese, whose testimonies are replete with instances of cruel and brutal treatment.

In April 1943, the American generals were moved briefly to Tamazato, a military camp just south of Karenko, where conditions were somewhat better. Their new quarters were more comfortable, harassment ceased, and no one was forced to work. Fortunately also, the quality and quantity of food was greatly improved by an increase in the amount issued, the distribution of Red Cross packages, and the appointment of General Beebe to supervise the kitchen. All this was apparently to show visiting Red Cross representatives how well the prisoners were being treated. In any event, the generals were forced to read prepared and edited statements testifying to their good treatment. Then, right after the Red Cross visitors departed, all the brigadier generals and colonels, including Beebe, were moved via Karenko to Shirakawa, a former Japanese military camp in southern Formosa. They were thus separated from General Wainwright and the other more senior American generals with whom they had been held together since Tarlac.¹⁶

Conditions at Shirakawa turned out to be significantly harsher than at Karenko. Initially, POW life seemed much like it had been at Tamazato, but the situation soon deteriorated and grew steadily worse. There were the usual restrictions, humiliations, harassments, and beatings. Medical assistance was virtually nonexistent. Labor at various tasks was compulsory, food was grossly inadequate, and the Japanese confiscated most of what little produce the prisoners could grow in the camp garden. Punishment, including solitary confinement and torture, for refusing to work or violating arbitrary rules was frequent. Gatherings of more than three prisoners at a time, sleeping during the day, and playing games and music on the weekdays were forbidden. Some of these were temporary restrictions or imposed only intermittently; others were continuous burdens. A number of inspections by the colonel in overall command of all Formosan POW camps and a few by Red Cross representatives in no way ameliorated the situation.

The camp was run by a captain or lieutenant, two other officers, several non-commissioned officers, and a number of privates. A single interpreter passed on orders and information. The commander had much greater disciplinary authority than an American officer in a similar situation would have been allowed. And all Japanese enlisted men, who fre-

quently acted arbitrarily, had to be respected, bowed to, and in some cases saluted without fail by their American captives.

That General Beebe was able to maintain his good morale and positive attitude under these circumstances, and while himself suffering serious medical and dental problems, is remarkable. There are numerous comments in his diary about food shortages and a few concerning some of the restrictions imposed on the prisoners, as well as his thoughts on the behavior of his fellow POWs. But, as before, it includes little discussion of the harsh and brutal treatment that all the captives endured. When he could, he continued to occupy himself by working on his book, leading a small singing group, and helping to conduct Sunday church services. It was only later, when he was reunited with General Wainwright, that he unburdened himself to his former commander with an account of the atrocities inflicted on the American prisoners.¹⁷

Beebe and the other senior officers remained at Shirakawa for sixteen months. Then, on October 1, 1944, they were suddenly put aboard half a dozen small planes and flown to Kyushu, southernmost of the four main islands of Japan. This move mirrored the transfer of other American POWs to Japan to prevent their recapture by American forces now advancing rapidly through areas formerly occupied by the Japanese throughout the Pacific. In traveling by air rather than by sea, however, Beebe and the others escaped the fate of so many other prisoners whose ships were sunk by attacking American submarines and aircraft. Furthermore, while almost all Americans who did reach Japan were forced to labor in Japanese shipyards, factories, or dangerous mineshafts, Beebe and the others were taken to the beach and hot springs resort town of Beppu, where they were billeted in one of five hotels that constituted this surprisingly pleasant prisoner-of-war camp. A few days later, while enjoying the hot springs and some very good meals, they were joined by General Wainwright and his group of senior generals who had also been flown up from Formosa.¹⁸

This idyllic interlude ended the next day. Everyone was put on board a crowded ship that took them to Pusan, Korea, from which they traveled by train to Chengchiatun in southwest Manchuria, where they spent a cold and hungry winter. Unlike hundreds of other American prisoners forced to labor under difficult conditions in Japanese factories elsewhere in Manchuria, Beebe and the others were not made to work or otherwise badly mistreated. They seem to have been mainly preoccupied with keeping warm and fed and finding ways to avoid boredom. In the spring of 1945, amidst increasing rumors about American victories encouraged by the sounds of American air attacks on nearby targets, they were moved

north to a POW camp at Mukden. There they remained, under essentially unchanged conditions, until the arrival of a half dozen American parachutists on August 16 signaled the end of the war and their final liberation.¹⁹

Gen. Lewis Beebe's more than three years of captivity constituted a period of great physical and emotional stress for him. While he suffered less than many others of lower rank, he nonetheless experienced a far crueler and more horrifying incarceration than he could ever have imagined possible at the hands of a supposedly civilized country. Yet despite the shock to his mental and physical well being, his spirit never flagged. He sought constantly to improve himself while deploring what he saw as the failings of some of his fellow officers. He emerged from his trying experience with the same positive outlook and optimism that he had displayed in better, earlier times. But the trauma and exhaustion of his excruciating confinement clearly affected his health and must surely have hastened his untimely death less than six years later at the age of only fifty-nine.