

Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath

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For the first four months of 1942, U.S., Filipino, and Japanese soldiers fought what was America's first major land battle of World War II, the battle for the tiny Philippine peninsula of Bataan. It ended with the surrender of 76,000 Filipinos and Americans, the single largest defeat in American military history. The defeat, though, was only the beginning, as Michael and Elizabeth M. Norman make dramatically clear in this powerfully original book. From then until the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, the prisoners of war suffered an ordeal of unparalleled cruelty and savagery: forty-one months of captivity, starvation rations, dehydration, hard labor, deadly disease, and torture - far from the machinations of General Douglas MacArthur. The Normans bring to the story remarkable feats of reportage and literary empathy. Their protagonist, Ben Steele, is a figure out of Hemingway: a young cowboy turned sketch artist from Montana who joined the army to see the world. Juxtaposed against Steele's story and the sobering tale of the Death March and its aftermath is the story of a number of Japanese soldiers. The result is an altogether new and original World War II book: it exposes the myths of military heroism as shallow and inadequate; it makes clear, with great literary and human power, that war causes suffering for people on all sides.

"No aspect of this battle or the infamous march that followed seems to have been overlooked. It is possible to buy volumes devoted to Bataan's nurses, its military chaplains and, in Hampton Sides's best-selling 2001 book, "Ghost Soldiers," the men who rescued its survivors. It was not clear that this wall needed another brick. But then you pick up Michael Norman and Elizabeth M. Norman's calm, stirring and humane "Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath," and you think: yes, we needed another brick. "Tears in the Darkness" is authoritative history. Ten years in the making, it is based on hundreds of interviews with American, Filipino and Japanese combatants. But it is also a narrative achievement. The book seamlessly blends a wide-angle view with the stories of many individual participants. And at this book's beating emotional heart is the tale of just one American soldier, a young cowboy and aspiring artist out of Montana named Ben Steele. . . . Mr. Norman is a Vietnam veteran and formerly a reporter for "The New York Times"; Ms. Norman's books include "Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam." In this book they step back, at regular intervals, to explain dispassionately what it was like to undergo the experiences these men went through. What are the physics of suffocation? How does a bomb blast actually kill a person? What exactly does lack of water do to a human body? "Tears in the Darkness" is a grim and comprehensive catalog of man's inhumanity to man. In the end, though, "Tears in the Darkness" is a book about heroism and survival. All along you are glued, out of the corner of your eye, to one story, Ben Steele's. If you aren't weeping openly by the book's final scenes, when he is at last able to call home and let his family know that he is still alive after more than three years 'missing in action,' during which time this thin young man lost 50 pounds, then you have a hard crust of salt around your soul." - Dwight Garner, "The New York Times" "Ben Steele, a young cowboy on his home range in Montana who had enlisted as a soldier in World War II, was caught up in the battle for Bataan in the Philippines, then in the ensuing death march as a prisoner of the Japanese, which he barely survived. Beginning with harrowing sketches of that experience, and in the course of various adventures and misadventures, he continued to draw and paint, and has since become a truly distinguished artist of the West. "Tears in the Darkness" is a well-told, well-researched, and moving narrative." - Peter Matthiessen, author of "Shadow Country" ""Tears in the

Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath," by Michael Norman and Elizabeth Norman: A new account of the Bataan Death March, in which more than 70,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war were victims of appalling barbarism - a particularly grim episode of World War II following Japan's invasion of the Philippines. Driven from Manila into the hills of the Bataan peninsula, the combined Allied forces fought without hope of reinforcement or escape until they had no choice but to capitulate. The largest surrender in U.S. military annals was followed by a forced 60-mile march along Luzon's main highway during which more than 10,000 of the POWs were summarily murdered or died from torture, wounds and disease. For Americans the Death March was a first encounter with the brutality that would define Japan's military behavior, and the fact that the story has been told many times before does not dissuade Michael and Elizabeth Norman, both professors at New York University, from another effort. The result is an extremely detailed and thoroughly chilling treatment that, given the passage of time and thinning of ranks, could serve as popular history's final say on the subject. The Normans spent a decade in research and writing, interviewing more than 100 surviving American veterans and relatives of scores of others, and traveling to Japan to track down the most elusive and difficult sources - some 20 former soldiers who were involved in the march and a guard from one of the miserable camps where more captives died from sickness, torture or starvation. The authors also find an ideal protagonist in Ben Steele, a former Montana cowboy who in 1940, at 22, joined the Army Air Corps and was sent to the Philippines. Steele survived the Death March and prison camp, and his personal story is the thread by which the authors spin their harrowing narrative, also using Steele's sketches to illustrate it. They find some sympathy for Gen. Masaharu Homma, the Japanese commander in the Philippines. His 1946 trial and execution as a war criminal showed how the Imperial Army was driven to excesses by right-wing racist fanatics who intimidated its senior officers, Homma among them. But as with other latter-day critics, they have little admiration for Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the U.S. commander in the Philippines who was being glorified at home in 1942 as the greatest American military hero since Ulysses S. Grant. On Jan. 15, the authors report, McArthur sent his beleaguered troops on Bataan a would-be morale booster, promising them that reinforcements in the form of troops and planes were on the way from the United States. 'It was a lie, a Judas kiss,' they write. 'The Philippines was cut off. Washington knew it and so did MacArthur.'" - Richard Pyle, The Associated Press

"Assiduous account of the Japanese conquest of the Philippines in World War II and the fate of the American garrison there. The 'death march' after Bataan fell in April 1942 has been a byword for the worst warfare can bring to a soldier. Some 76,000 American and Filipino soldiers surrendered, and their Japanese enemies despised them for doing so. The surrender was, write the Normans, 'the single largest defeat in American military history.' The subsequent forced march of the prisoners, many of them ill and wounded and all of them malnourished, led to more than 10,000 deaths. By the authors' account, the Americans were a mixed lot, poorly equipped, trained and led-which does not square with many other accounts of the early war in the Philippines, and which will doubtless excite discussion in military-history circles. What is certain is that the Japanese soldiers were little better off, short on rations, beaten and abused by their officers and marching everywhere, since, their doctrine stated, 'a drop of gas is as precious as a drop of blood.' . . . [The Normans'] story says a great deal about the inglorious-and rightly unglorified-aspects of war, from the sense of shame that settled on the American commander at the moment of

surrender to the terrible years that lay ahead. Drawing on the memories of participants on both sides, the Normans provide a careful history of a ghastly episode that still reverberates. Highly recommended for students of the Pacific War."- "Kirkus Reviews""Unlike historians who have spotlighted the titans-MacArthur and Wainwright, Yamashita and Homma-who matched strategies in the Philippines in 1942, the Normans focus on the ordinary soldiers who bore the brunt of the wartime savagery. At the center of this searing narrative stands Ben Steele, a Montana cowboy remarkable for the fortitude that sustains him through fierce combat, humiliating surrender, and then the infamous Bataan Death March into imprisonment: four years of unrelenting slave labor, starvation, torture, beatings, and disease. Because Steele went on in his postwar life to capture his wartime ordeal in harrowing drawings (here reproduced), readers confront in both image and word the brutality of war and the desperation of captivity. Readers learn how news of Japanese atrocities inflamed an American passion for vengeance and justified horrific bombing raids - incendiary and then nuclear - against Japanese cities. But readers will find it hard to view such raids as fitting punishment of a bestial enemy after reading the Normans' chronicle of the bitter experiences of very human and often guilt-wracked Japanese soldiers. The narrative even humanizes the anguished Japanese commanders condemned by a victors' justice that held them accountable for offenses of out-of-control subordinates. An indispensable addition to every World War II collection."- Bryce Christensen,

"Booklist" (starred review) "The battle of Bataan in the Philippines in 1942 resulted in the Japanese taking about 75,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war, America's worst military defeat ever. The prisoners were transferred across the Philippines, and treated horrifically in the process, in what became known as the Bataan Death March. The authors conducted 400 interviews with survivors and have put together an exhaustive narrative. They focus chiefly on Ben Steele, who survived the Philippine battles, the march, and 41 months in the slave labor camps. As much as a military history, this is the biography of a Montana cowboy transformed by great events."- Edwin Burgess, "Library Journal"Michael Norman, a former reporter for "The New York Times," teaches narrative journalism at New York University. Elizabeth M. Norman, the author of two books about war, teaches at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education.

Other Books

The British National Bibliography.

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