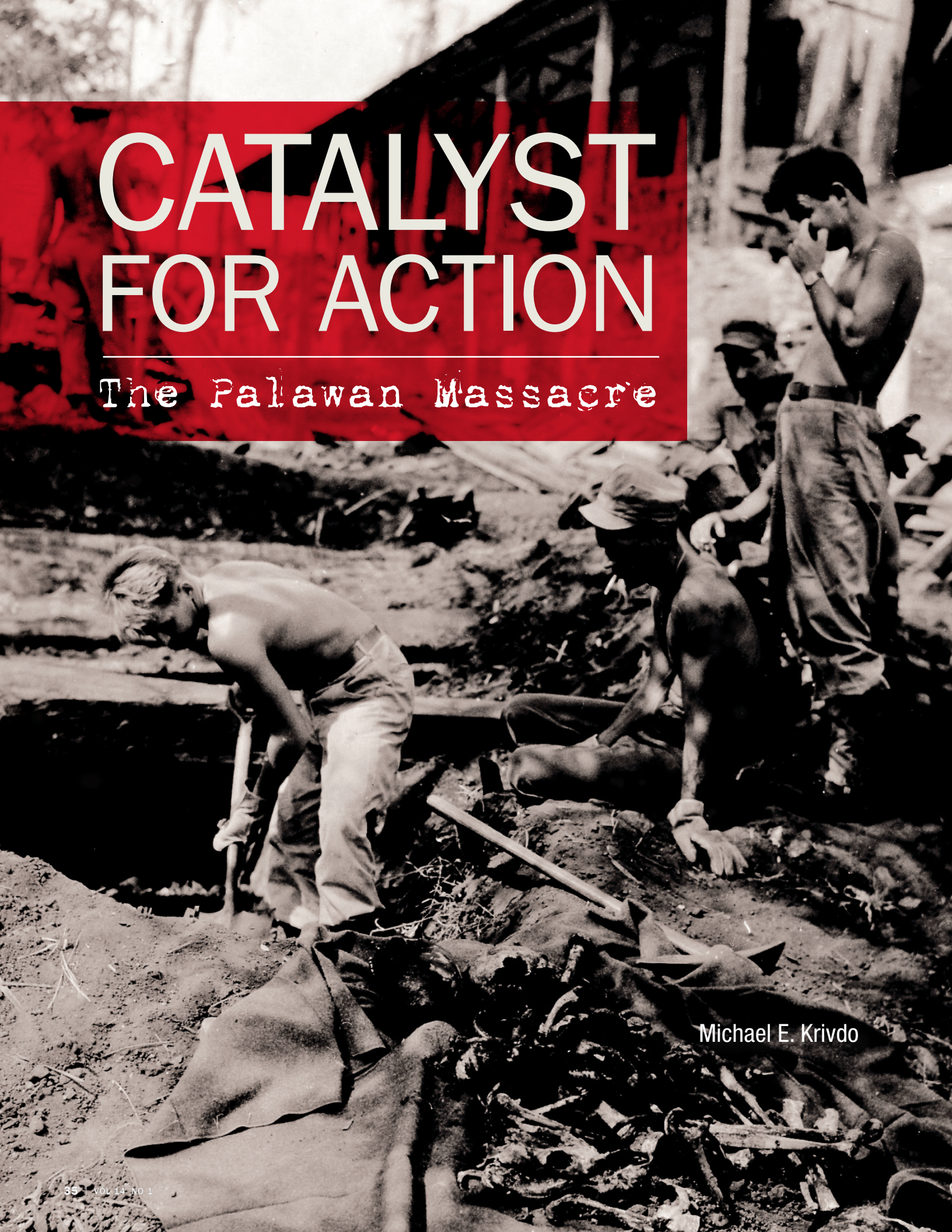


CATALYST FOR ACTION

The Palawan Massacre



Michael E. Krivdo

After three years of brutal captivity under the Japanese, the 150 American inmates of prisoner of war (POW) Camp 10-A on the western Philippine island of Palawan had developed an instinct for recognizing the abnormal. For several months in late 1944 the Palawan POWs had worked hard to build a runway for the Japanese Army. Lately, their duties included repairing damage caused by almost daily U.S. bombing attacks.¹ As 1944 came to an end, many of the prisoners noticed changes in the demeanor of their guards. The Japanese had become increasingly short-tempered and imposed cruel punishments for the slightest of infractions. On the morning of 14 December 1944, the POWs' sense of dread reached new heights.²

This short article reveals the details behind an incident that pushed military leaders in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) to plan action to prevent similar occurrences. The Palawan Massacre so horrified senior leaders that references to the atrocity were kept classified to maintain high morale among the forces preparing to invade the Philippines.³

Despite these precautions, word spread quickly as evidence of the incident and others just as grisly. Leaders decided to act and to rescue prisoners, detainees, and internees from similar fates.

On that fateful morning of 14 December the guards roused the prisoners at 0200 hours, far earlier than normal. At the airfield before work the POWs saw more guards than usual. Many chalked it up to pre-invasion jitters because the Allies had been bombing Japanese bases in preparation of an invasion. The laborers were ordered to repair damage and improve the airstrip. As he was working to fill a bomb crater, Marine Corporal (CPL) Rufus W. Smith turned to his long-time friend, CPL Glenn W. McDole, and said, "Something is going on, Dole. What the hell do you think is happening?"⁴ As they labored under the rising hot sun, other POWs wondered as well.

At 1100 hours the guards signaled a sudden halt to work and began roughly herding the prisoners toward one side of the runway. There, atop a small wooden box stood a familiar Japanese officer, Lieutenant Yoshikazu

Signal Corps photo of the entrance to Camp 10-A, Puerta Princesa, Palawan, Philippine Islands, taken after the island had been retaken by American Forces. Camp 10-A was the site of a brutal massacre of 139 American prisoners of war (POWs) on 14 December 1944.



View from inside the camp looking out to the main entrance. Prisoners were often tied to the 'torture trees' that lined the road.



**All photos in this article are from the National Archives.*



View of the inside of one of the POW barracks at Camp 10-A, Palawan. Photo taken after U.S. occupation of the island.

Sato. Sato, known to the prisoners as the 'Buzzard,' waited until his guards had formed the prisoners in ranks. Then, he ominously announced, "Americans, your working days are over!" With that abrupt announcement, the guards herded the prisoners onto waiting trucks.⁵

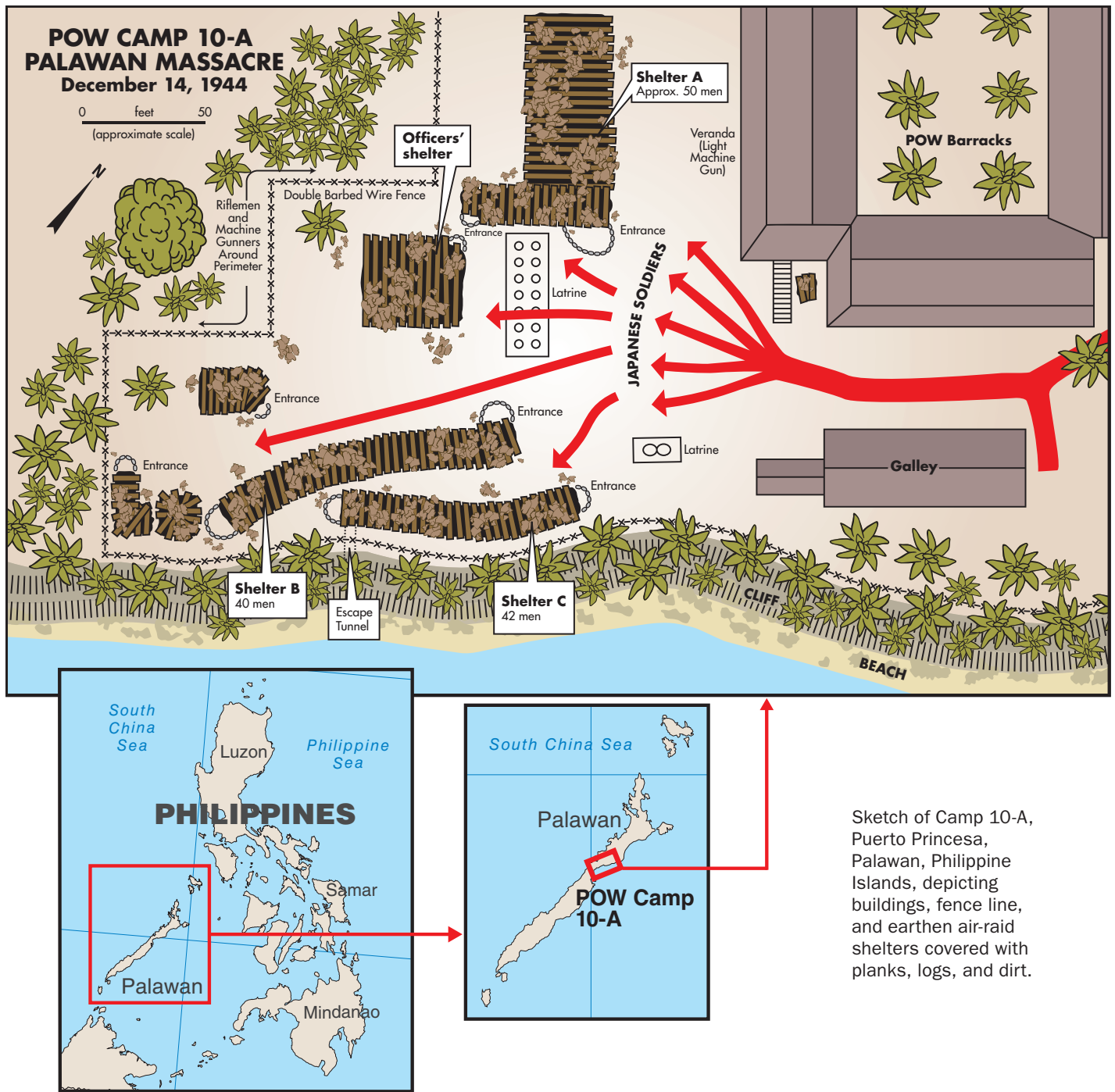
Shortly after arriving at Camp 10-A an air raid alarm sounded. As sirens wailed, armed guards shoved and prodded the POWs into three long, shallow trenches covered with coconut logs, palm fronds, and earth. The prisoners had been forced to build these bunkers several weeks earlier to protect themselves from allied air attacks. The shelters had small openings at each end and held about 40-50 men. In earlier attacks the prisoners casually occupied the makeshift shelters and stayed until the 'all clear' was sounded. This time the guards roughly herded the prisoners into the covered trenches though there was no sign of air attack. Everything seemed more chaotic than before. The guards seemed very stressed and short-tempered. For more than an hour angry sentries stood guard striking any prisoners attempting to look out. They used rifles, bayonets, and swords to club them back.⁶ Marine Corps Sergeant (SGT) Douglas W. Bogue said, "This was the first time that they ever forced us under cover...in [previous] air raids they never bothered about us."⁷ Clearly something was up.

Then, all of a sudden five guards carrying buckets hurried to Shelter A (see map) and poured gasoline into the tunnel entrances. Two others threw lighted torches into the opening and the tightly packed POWs were trapped in a raging inferno. Incredulously, seven of the POWs broke

free. With skin and clothes afire, they screamed and clawed their way to the open air. A Japanese officer ordered a machine gunner to fire on them. Then other guards moved forward and fired their rifles into the shelter. Dead and dying prisoners blocking the entrances trapped the others in the flames.⁸ At the entrance of Shelter C, Marine SGT Rufus W. Smith saw what was happening and shouted: "They're murdering the men in 'A' Company pit [Shelter A]!"⁹ Horrified prisoners watching from the entranceways of the other trenches relayed that information to those jammed inside.

As the Japanese guards moved to set fire to Shelter B, the prisoners in Shelter C used their hands and fingers to dig furiously into the rocks and dirt at the end of the hole nearest the perimeter fence where cliffs dropped to the beach. Fortunately, the POWs who built that shelter had dug the trench close to the fence, stopping just short of the cliff abutment that dropped fifty to sixty feet to the rock-strewn shore below. Some far-sighted POWs with escape in mind had loosened the dirt and gravel at that end of the trench near the fence. The doomed men dug like crazed moles since their very lives depended on breaking out. The agonized screams of their dying comrades in other trenches drove their efforts.¹⁰

As described by U.S. Navy Radioman First Class Fern J. Barta, "Three soldiers, one Marine, and I crawled out of the shelter and under the fence. After I had gotten out I looked back and saw a Jap[anese] soldier throw a lighted torch into our shelter. Another [Japanese soldier] threw a bucket of gasoline on top of the torch. This set fire to the entire shelter."¹¹



Sketch of Camp 10-A, Puerto Princesa, Palawan, Philippine Islands, depicting buildings, fence line, and earthen air-raid shelters covered with planks, logs, and dirt.

By the time the Japanese gave full attention to killing the occupants of Shelter C, more than two dozen prisoners had gotten out and slid down the cliff face to the beach. Although outside the camp, they were not safe. As the Japanese systematically fired into Shelter C, they discovered that some of the Americans had escaped. Several guards were sent to hunt them down.¹² The soldiers pursued the escapees, sadistically killing all they found. Nonetheless, eleven POWs successfully escaped. Most survivors were wounded or injured. Sympathetic Filipino citizens and/or Philippine guerrillas came to their aid.¹³

The horrible, deliberate murder of these American prisoners forced action by the Allied headquarters. Accounts of the massacre from those that survived were quickly relayed to General of the Army (GEN) Douglas A. MacArthur's headquarters. The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Major General Charles A. Willoughby, sent aircraft to collect the known survivors.¹⁵ A PB5Y-5 'Catalina' amphibian 'Flying Boat' with fighter escort linked up with the guerrillas and flew six of the survivors to safety.¹⁶ The guerrillas "took us from Brooke's Point [Palawan] to Morotai [now in Indonesia]. We were questioned on

“They’re murdering the men in ‘A’ Company pit [Shelter A]!”

— Marine Sergeant Rufus W. Smith



1



2

- 1 Medical personnel excavate bodies of American soldiers from Shelter A.
- 2 Photo of recovery effort as the bodies of murdered soldiers were excavated from Shelter B.

“The first six men out of the Palawan camp had helped save more than thirty-six hundred other POW lives.”

— Stephen L. Moore, Palawan Massacre researcher and author¹⁴



Recovery operations underway at Camp 10-A. U.S. officers and medical personnel examine remains of American POWs killed in the Palawan Massacre. The investigators are looking for anything that might help in the identification of the victims.

everything and gave out all of the information we knew," said Marine CPL Eugene Nielsen.¹⁷ Other survivors were later delivered by guerrilla forces.

As befitting a massacre on this scale, the Allies thoroughly examined the site. On 28 February 1945, troops of the U.S. Eighth Army conducted an assault landing on Palawan during Operation VICTOR III. By 2 March American forces controlled most of the island and hunted down Japanese stragglers with the enthusiastic help of Philippine guerrillas.¹⁸ It is believed that many of the massacre perpetrators died in that fighting.¹⁹ Of the sixteen Japanese soldiers brought to trial for the massacre after the war, six were acquitted and ten received sentences from five to thirty years in prison. However, all were released in a general amnesty granted in 1958. As researcher Stephen L. Moore lamented, "the end results could not have been more lenient."²⁰

Most importantly, because eleven men survived the massacre to confirm the ordeal, American military leaders realized the imminent threat to other POWs and detainees. Senior commanders were determined to prevent more atrocities. With several thousand American and Allied lives at stake, the rescue of POWs and internees became a high priority.²¹ And after the overwhelming success of the Cabanatuan rescue (article in the next issue), three more raids were done in short

succession, freeing over 7,000 POWs and detainees in less than a month.²² †

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Endnotes

- 1 According to Stephen L. Moore, *As Good as Dead: The Daring Escape of American POWs from a Japanese Death Camp* (New York: Caliber, 2016), 137-42.
- 2 Interview with Eugene [Peter] Nielsen, *Utah World War II Stories*, interviewed by Geoffrey Panos, 24 January and 20 April 2006 (hereafter "Nielsen Interview"), Salt Lake City, UT; Bob Wilbanks, *Last Man Out: Glenn McDole, USMC, Survivor of the Palawan Massacre in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2004), 111.
- 3 Initial reports of the massacre were classified at the Top Secret level, and survivors were cautioned not to publicly disclose any details of the event until properly authorized by military investigators.
- 4 Quote from Wilbanks, *Last Man Out*, 111. Corporals McGone and Smith had served together since before the attack on Pearl Harbor, were captured with the 4th Marine Regiment at Corregidor, and survived the 'Bataan Death March.'
- 5 Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 154; Wilbanks, *Last Man Out*, 111, quote as noted in Oral History Interview with Glen McDole (OH 1317), 10 October 1996, interviewed by William J. Alexander hereafter "McDole Interview"), University of North Texas Oral History Collection, Denton, TX.
- 6 McDole Interview; Wilbanks, *Last Man Out*, 112-14; Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 154-56; Document 2869, General Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces, Pacific, Staff Judge Advocate, War Crimes Branch, "Subject: Report of War Crimes Branch on Atrocities," 18 August 1945, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC.

General of the Army (GEN) Douglas A. MacArthur and members of his staff visit the site of the Palawan Massacre. The mass execution at Palawan triggered several rescue operations to ensure similar massacres did not take place.



Major POW/Detainee Rescue Operations Luzon, Philippines / 1945

Cabanatuan Rescue	30 January	516 POWs
Santo Tomas Prison	3 February	3,500 detainees/275 hostages
Bilibid Prison	4 February	700 + POWs/ 500 internees
Los Banos Rescue	23 February	2,147 Allied POWs



The Army reinterred 123 of the soldiers murdered in the Palawan Massacre with full military honors. In 1952, the bodies were relocated from Palawan to a communal grave in Section 85 of the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis, MO.

- 7 Statement of Sergeant Douglas W. Bogue, U.S. Marine Corps, Document No. 8259, Washington, DC, 17 February 1945, Folder, "Palawan Massacre"; Box 2, Entry 3, Record Group (RG) 125, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD (hereafter "Bogue Statement"), 1.
- 8 Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 159-61; Wilbanks, *Last Man Out*, 114-15.
- 9 Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Area, "Escape and Evasion Report No. 23," 15 February 1945, Folder, "Palawan POW Camp," Box 5, Entry 10, RG 24, NARA, College Park, MD, quote from statement of Corporal Glenn W. McDole, 14.
- 10 McDole Interview; Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 161-63; Wilbanks, *Last Man Out*, 115-16; Nielsen Interview.
- 11 Statement of Fern Joseph Barta, RMIC, 15 February 1945, Folder, "Palawan POW Camp," Box 5, Entry 10, RG 24, NARA, College Park, MD (hereafter "Barta Statement"), 1.
- 12 McDole Interview; Nielsen Interview; Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 163-69.
- 13 McDole Interview; Nielsen Interview; Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 165-69, 173-240.
- 14 Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 251.
- 15 Bogue Statement, 2; Statement of Sergeant William J. Balchus, Staff Sergeant Edwin A. Petry, Corporal Eugene Nielsen, and Sergeant Alberto D. Pacheco, Document No. 8258, Washington, DC, 17 February 1945, Folder, "Palawan Massacre"; Box 2, Entry 3, RG 125, NARA, College Park, MD (hereafter "Balchus, et. al. Statement"), 1.
- 16 Barta Statement, 1-3; Balchus, et. al. Statement, 2; Bogue Statement, 2.
- 17 Memorandum, "Subj: Naval Casualties at Japanese Prison Camp, Puerto Princesa, Palawan Island, undated, Enclosure (A), "Eugene Nielsen," Folder, "Palawan POW Camp," Box 5, Entry 10, RG 24, NARA, College Park, MD, 1.
- 18 General Staff, comp., *Reports of General MacArthur, Vol. 1: The Campaigns of MacArthur in the Pacific* (Facsimile printing: 1994; Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966), 328-33.
- 19 Stephen J. Lofgren, *Southern Philippines, The Campaigns of World War Two: A World War Two Commemorative Series* (Washington, DC: GPO), 10-11. In the Army's official history of the battle (see previous cite), it notes that the last few survivors of the massacre linked up with American troops soon after the landing. Not being under the same restrictions to telling their story that the previous rescued survivors were, these men freely passed on details of their ordeal, "which only hardened American resolve to end Japanese rule over the island" (Lofgren, *Southern Philippines*, 10). That zeal may account for the unbalanced number of casualties from the Palawan operation: American forces had 12 KIA, 56 WIA, while the Japanese lost more than 900 killed – about one half of all their troops stationed on the island.
- 20 Moore, *As Good as Dead*, 276-278.
- 21 As the horrific details of the Palawan Massacre became more widely known due to publication of eyewitness testimonies of the survivors, commanders became sensitized to the situation and took steps to rescue victims of Japanese maltreatment.
- 22 The successful Cabanatuan rescue in January 1945 spurred similar missions in quick succession. Commanders within both the Sixth U.S. Army and Eighth U.S. Army directed rescue missions to free U.S. and Allied POWs and detainees from Japanese reprisals.