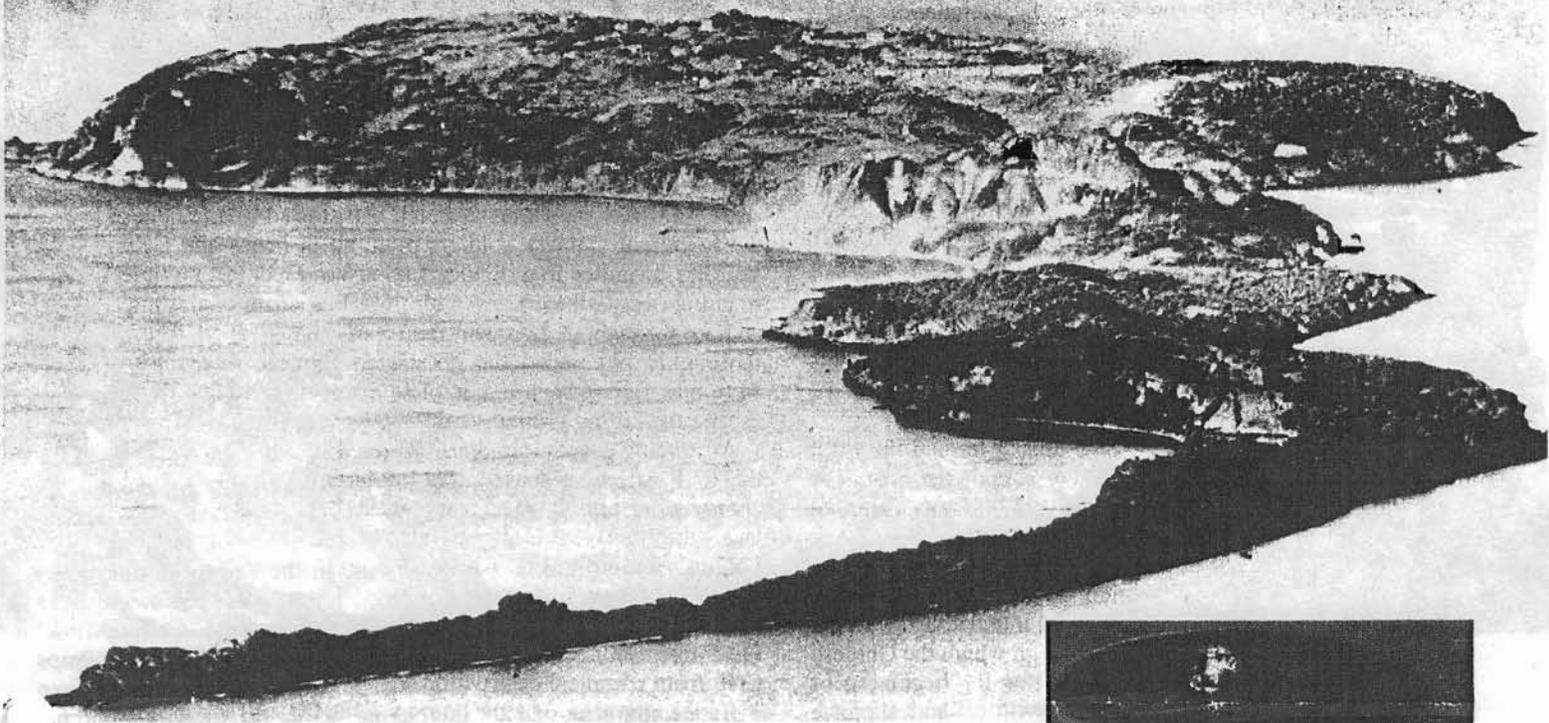


Guest of the Emperor

A Marine POW's Odyssey



Story by Dick Camp • Photos courtesy of the author

Surrender on Corregidor

Twenty-one-year-old Private First Class Lee Montgomery, bandsman-turned-Browning Automatic Rifleman, sat in his makeshift foxhole waiting for orders. Scuttlebutt from the Marine in the adjacent position was that the Japanese had landed, which would explain the heavy shelling and pyrotechnics in the east sector of the island the previous evening. It had been extremely heavy all night, finally tapering off about midmorning. The last order he had received was brief: "Man your position and be prepared to defend it."

Montgomery intended to do just that, as his foxhole had excellent fields of fire down to the water and he was armed to the teeth—BAR with ammunition belt, several spare 20-round magazines and 12 grenades. He also claimed, tongue in cheek, that he had his own direct support artillery. Battery "Hamilton," a 155 mm gun battery manned by Philippine scouts, was located just to his rear—damned inconvenient. He had to move every time it fired because it drew Japanese counterbattery fire. His "alternate"

position, around a bend in the road, was a square concrete culvert almost big enough to sit upright in without exposing himself and afforded excellent protection from shrapnel.

As far as he could see, nothing out of the ordinary was happening in his immediate vicinity; no surface ships and certainly no invasion fleet were in sight. Hours passed and still no word, although the rumors were flying fast and furious—Japanese landing thrown back with heavy casualties, no landing at all, just a feint. It was obvious that no one knew what was going on.

Late in the afternoon a runner from Company E, 2d Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment appeared on the road and shouted that Major General Jonathan M. Wainwright, USA had surrendered the island—and the regiment along with it. All Marines were to stay in position and wait for further word.

As the messenger turned to go back, he blurted out, "Destroy all weapons!"—an unheard of sacrilege for a Marine. Montgomery was shocked. Surrender, he hadn't even seen any Japanese, much



COURTESY OF MRS. EVELYN MONTGOMERY

Top: Corregidor Island as it stretches across the mouth of Manila Bay (Leatherneck file photo)

Inset: PFC Leland H. Montgomery, serial number 271B90, suffered along with thousands of others as prisoners of war interned in Japanese camps during WW II.

less fired his weapon—what a blow!

At dawn, after spending a sleepless night full of anxiety and apprehension, Montgomery heard Japanese voices which, in badly accented English, ordered him

to go up to the road. With hands in the air, he joined several other men. They were all forced to turn over their valuables—watches, rings, anything the victorious Japanese infantrymen wanted. Those who were a little slow or seemed to show signs of anger were pushed, shoved and generally treated roughly. Within a short time the Marines were stripped of their valuables and, more importantly, their dignity.

China Marine

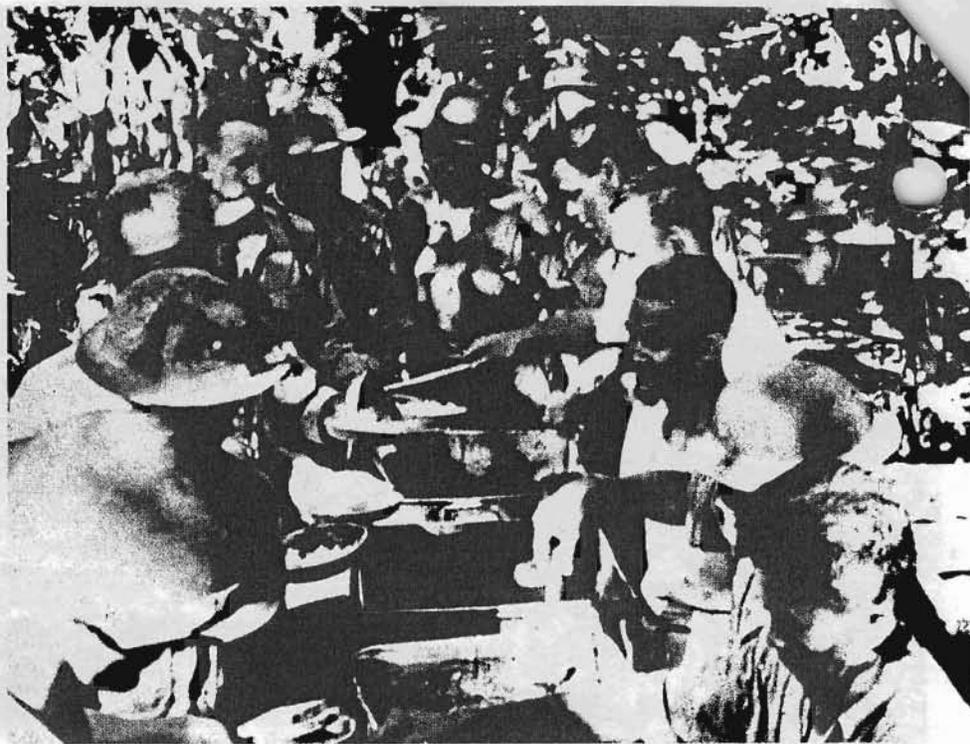
Leland H. Montgomery joined the 4th Marines, then garrisoning the International Settlement of Shanghai, China, in January 1940 right out of boot camp. He was assigned as a clarinet player in the Regimental Band and for the next two years experienced the “happiest, most exciting and rewarding years” of his life, but storm clouds were brewing.

The Japanese, having captured the city during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937, completely surrounded the International Settlement and looked upon it as an alien enclave and the Marines, in particular, as a thorn in their side. As Montgomery observed, “The Jap Army had concluded that the presence of the Marines had become intolerable.”

Japan’s increasingly anti-Western militancy brought it into direct conflict with the United States. The understrength 4th Marines was caught in the middle, becoming increasingly vulnerable as the Japanese built up their forces in and around Shanghai. The regimental commander, Colonel Samuel L. Howard, estimated that by the summer of 1941, Japanese forces exceeded 60,000 men, while the Marine “foxhole” strength added up to a little more than 800.

The senior commander, Admiral Thomas C. Hart, Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet, was desperately trying to get his forces out of China, but was stymied by the State Department. State acknowledged the danger with the comment: “No one can predict with absolute assurance that continued acceptance of this risk will not result in some highly unfortunate encounter,” but it stood firm against withdrawal. In the meantime, tensions in the settlement reached epidemic proportions. Incidents involving Marines and Japanese increased dramatically—liberty brawls, armed incursions into the American Sector, and it was even rumored that the Japanese had placed a price on “capturing” a Marine.

Finally, on 7 Nov. 1941, the President authorized their withdrawal. The regiment was told to be prepared to depart on 72-hours notice, which was shortened to 48



During a break in preparations to defend the island, leathernecks of 4th Marines hit the chow line at James Ravine on Corregidor.

hours, and then 24 hours. By this time the troops were living out of sea bags, liberty was canceled and most of the men were caught up in working parties, frantically loading the regiment’s equipment and supplies. The first contingent—2d Bn and a portion of Headquarters—left on the 27th, and the remainder—1st Bn and Regimental Headquarters—left a day later.

Call to Arms

The regiment reassembled at the Subic Bay Naval Station, Philippine Islands by 2 Dec. and immediately prepared for field operations. The band was broken up and its members were assigned to Co E, 2d Bn, 4th Marines. Montgomery joined the battalion as a BARman and found that “it was an effortless transition because all Marines were trained to be infantrymen.”

He spent the next few days digging a line of foxholes just north of Olongapo, a small village north of the naval station, to block the main north-south highway. It was hard work, especially to men who were used to the garrison routine of Shanghai. Montgomery lost weight, not only because of the work, but also due to reduced rations. “Our food supply appeared to be tight. Since our arrival, we received a morning and evening meal from the field kitchens, but only a sandwich and a cup of coffee at noon.”

Worn out by the routine of work and guard duty, Montgomery fell into exhausted sleep by “Taps” on most duty-

free nights. In the early morning hours of 8 Dec., he was startled awake by a Field Music sounding the “Call to Arms.” He distinctly remembered “goose bumps tinged with fear racing up and down [his] spine” as he scrambled to find his gear. Grabbing his cartridge belt, rifle and helmet, he ran to join the platoon formation. Montgomery recalled that an officer switched on a flashlight and read from a sheet of paper: “Information has just been received that Japan’s navy has made a surprise attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor; the attack was airborne and in force. Capital ships of the fleet have been sunk or damaged, and casualties among officers and men were believed to be heavy.” He ended by saying, “A state of war now exists between Japan and the United States.”

The next hours passed in a frenzy of activity. Men were pressed into working parties which took on a new impetus, spurred on by NCOs. Rumors flew, passed by word of mouth from young men excited by the prospect of action. Montgomery remembered that he “couldn’t get the disaster of Hawaii off his mind” and kept wondering, “How could it have happened? Why weren’t they prepared?” Then word started circulating about another disaster: Clark Field had been bombed and the planes destroyed!

Montgomery was “amazed that such a thing could occur. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was making sense, and in my inability to understand, I got more and more anxious.”



Corregidor's beach defenses were well-positioned to repulse the Japanese.

That night the battalion packed its gear, and elements began tactically repositioning to better meet Japanese attacks. The men initially traveled by "shanks' mare," some pulling carts loaded with crew-served weapons. Before leaving, however, working parties piled all their personal possessions—footlockers and sea bags—in mounds, saturated them with gasoline and set them to the torch. Montgomery and the rest of the men lost everything they owned except what they carried on their backs.

On 14 Dec., the battalion moved to a position at Tia Juana, 5½ miles east of Olongapo. However, during this time, Co E continued to man a 3-pounder gun near Kalaklan Point north of Olongapo.

The war was getting closer; on 22 Dec., the Japanese landed unopposed at Lingayen Gulf on northwestern Luzon. Japanese forces then made a second landing at Lamon Bay, 60 miles southeast of Manila. Their intent was to capture Manila and prevent American and Filipino forces from retreating into the Bataan Peninsula.

For the Marines, it was a time of trial—meager rations, sleep deprivation—and of anxiety fed by the constant rumors of Japanese attack. Montgomery noted, "It was painfully obvious that our light weapons and World War I-era equipment were totally inadequate."

Finally, on 24 and 25 Dec., the 2d Bn was met by trucks and taken to Mariveles, on the southern tip of the Bataan Peninsula at the entrance to Manila Bay. During the road march they passed through the defensive lines occupied by American and Filipino troops. Thousands of civilians fleeing the Japanese advance contributed to a scene of chaos.

On the evening of 27 Dec., the 2d Bn, 4th Marines was loaded aboard barges and transported to the island of Corregidor as beach defense. By 29 Dec., most of the regiment was in place on Corregidor.

The Final Stand

Montgomery's position was located along Corregidor's South Shore Road, about 60 feet or so east of Geary Point. He was on the extreme left flank of Co E, 2d Bn's beach defense line, which extended from Wheeler Point, a distance of approximately 1,500 yards. When he first constructed the position, the area immediately around him was covered with lush junglelike growth, as was most of the island. However, within the next four months, it was almost totally denuded by the constant bombing and shelling.

Toward the end, huge dust storms, churned up by shell fire, obscured visibility, blocking out the sun and adding to

the misery of the place. In one particularly bad shelling, Montgomery's foxhole was bracketed by Japanese 105 mm shells and literally torn apart.

"Only shrapnel-holed and burned pieces of burlap sand bags were left," he said. The hole was filled in by the detonation of close explosions, starting a fire which burned everything in the area, including his reserve ammunition which exploded in the flames. Fortunately, Montgomery wasn't "home." It was one of the few times he was glad to be on a working party.

Days were spent in foxholes and tunnels under constant bombing and shell fire. Night brought forth working parties to repair damaged beach defenses and gun emplacements. Food rations were cut to two meals a day or less and were served during lulls in the shelling. Wire communication systems were knocked out, so runners had to be used to pass the word—a dangerous job.

The constant bombardment and poor diet, coupled with the surrender of American and Filipino forces on Bataan in April, played hell with morale. Finally, the Japanese landed on Corregidor on the night of 5 May 1942. It was all over the next day when MajGen Wainwright sent out a Marine captain under a white flag to arrange a meeting to surrender.

Guest of the Emperor

After stealing their valuables, the Japanese marched Montgomery's group along the shell-blasted road to the 92d Coast Artillery garage, a four-acre site located on the eastern end of the island where they joined the rest of the garrison of several thousand men. Along the way, they passed through areas of utter devastation—the ground covered with shell holes, emplacements torn up, upended guns, destroyed buildings. In the area of the heaviest fighting, bodies were lying unclothed and the air was thick with the cloying smell of rotting flesh.

Arriving at the garage, Montgomery was shocked to see their ghastly living conditions. Seven thousand men were jammed together on the concrete parking apron with hardly room to move. There was no shade from the brutal sun, except scraps of canvas and wood the men scrounged from the ruins of nearby buildings. Water was in short supply, as there was only a small trickle from a hose. Long lines of men waited their turn, often for hours, many overcome by dehydration. It became obvious the Japanese were not going to provide food, which further weakened the men. Sanitation facilities were poor to nonexistent, and hundreds suffered from dysentery.

The deplorable living conditions coupled with the humiliation of defeat caused serious morale problems, resulting in a breakdown of discipline and unit cohesion. Buddies and friends stuck together, trying to survive by sharing scarce food, water and encouragement; loners didn't make it.

Survival often depended on getting on a working party which the Japanese used to "clean up" the island—bury the dead, salvage equipment and sort through captured documents looking for anything of intelligence value.

Montgomery volunteered, after learning there was a good chance of finding food that was still scattered around the island. He returned with enough to share with several buddies, but on a second trip someone stole the remaining supplies. He went without food for two days until, by blind luck, he found a few tins of C-rations by a destroyed artillery position. This time he jealously guarded the supply until, without warning, the Japanese herded the prisoners aboard *Hoku Maru* and two large freighters for a trip to Manila for a carefully staged propaganda stratagem.

Arriving at the beach, the prisoners of war were ordered into the water where they had to wade ashore. Then, prodded by the bayonets of their guards, they were marched through the streets of the capi-

tal under the watchful eyes of the Filipino residents who had been ordered to watch. The ploy backfired, for the bond between the Americans and the majority of the Filipinos was unbreakable. Many in the crowd were overcome by emotion at seeing the emaciated condition of the POWs.

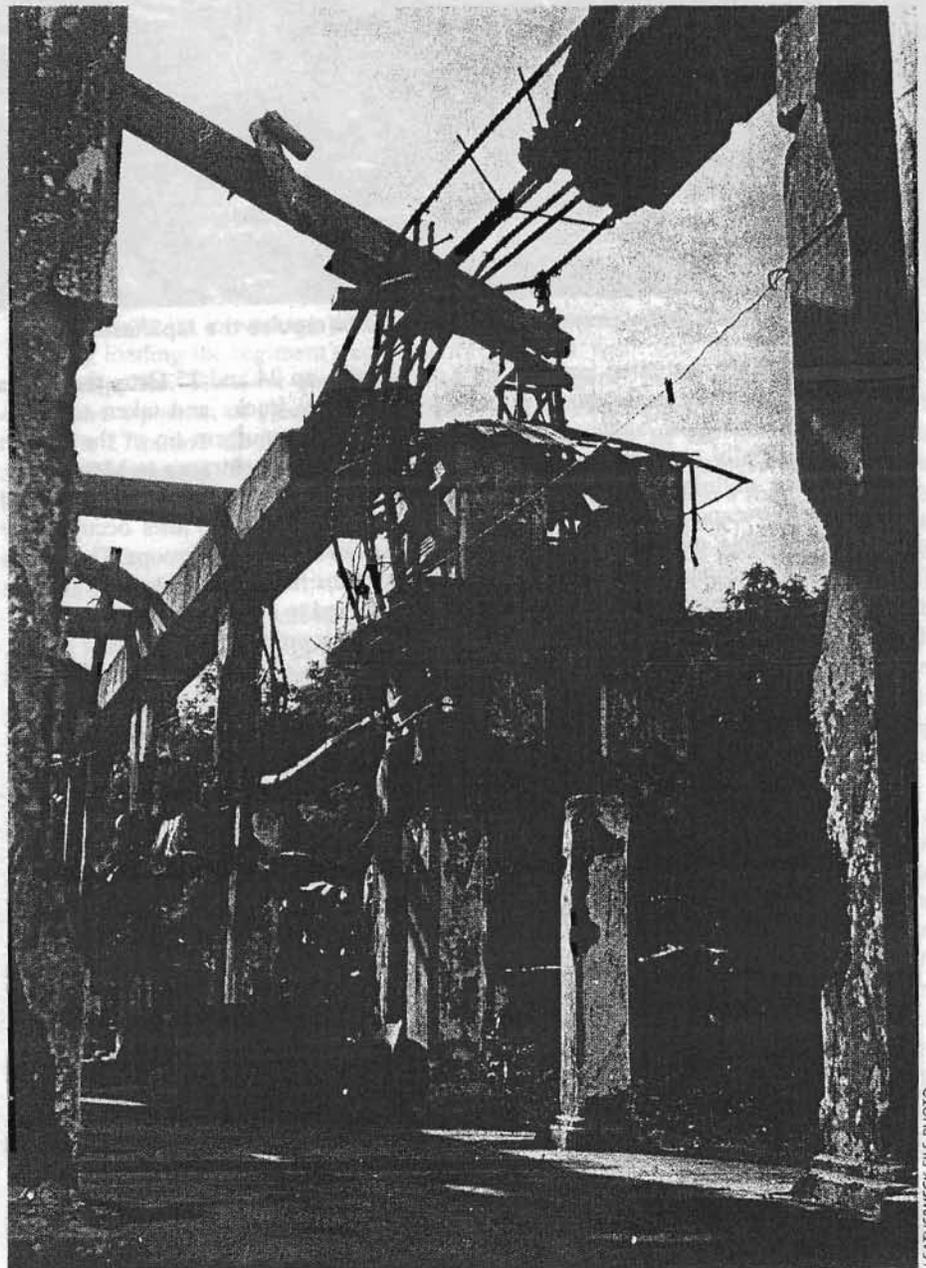
Montgomery and hundreds of others were taken to Bilibid Prison. Almost immediately he was transferred to Cabanatuan Camp #1 located in central Luzon, notorious for its inhumane treatment and high prisoner death rate.

Hundreds died of malnutrition, vitamin deficiency and a variety of contagious diseases which could have been prevented with a proper diet that was readily available, but kept from them by the Japanese. Additionally, many prison-

ers were executed by their brutal, sadistic guards for a variety of trumped-up charges.

Montgomery contracted yellow jaundice, had obvious signs of scurvy and pellagra and "was in a badly weakened state." Fortunately, he was able to "escape" by being assigned, in the fall of 1942, to the stevedoring camp in the Manila Port area. On his departure from Camp #1, "the death rate, while on a downward trend, was still 12 to 15 men a day."

Conditions at the port were considerably better, but most of the same illnesses—malaria, dengue fever and yellow jaundice, including wet and dry beriberi—affected many of the 400 men in the camp. They were so weakened that even a small scratch or a mosquito bite could



The effects of the Japanese bombardment of Corregidor in 1942 were still evident when the island was recaptured in 1945.



POWs enjoyed American chow after being liberated on Formosa (Taiwan today) after 3½ years of imprisonment. (USMC photo)

turn into a running tropical ulcer, never healing because of a lack of medicine. Nutrition was somewhat better, but it was still badly unbalanced and insufficient.

Responsible for loading and unloading ships, the POWs became adept at stealing food, at the risk of a severe beating or worse if caught. It was simply a matter of survival, for without the extra calories they could not survive. Montgomery gained strength, recovering from the jaundice attack, but still remained "on the edge" physically.

Despite their physical weakness and the close scrutiny of the Japanese guards, the POWs found ways to sabotage the cargo and sometimes the entire ship. Montgomery related that "damaged cargoes must have given the Japs fits," as he and the others would cut or rip sacks of rice, sugar and bagged cement, spilling the contents all over the hold and then covering it with succeeding layers of bags.

Old freighters were particularly susceptible because often their crews were conscripted and lacked diligence in supervising the loading. The POWs would

stow heavy cargo so it would shift at sea and would drop wooden ammunition boxes so that they would break, scattering the rounds in the hold.

In one case, they loosened the caps on several dozen 55-gallon drums of gasoline, allowing a thin trickle to come out. By the time they had loaded five or six tiers, the gasoline vapor in the hold had built up and begun to affect their breathing. More importantly, it created a very explosive situation. Fortunately, they finished loading without blowing the thing up. For some reason or other, this ship did not leave with the regular convoy, but anchored about a quarter-mile offshore, causing great consternation for the men who loaded her. If anything happened, they could be blamed and suffer the consequences.

For three of four days nothing happened. Then a great explosion rocked the port area, and the ship was engulfed in flames—a huge fireball rising high above the water.

Several members of the *Kempetai*, Japanese Secret Police, arrived on the scene and immediately arrested the three

surviving crewmembers, thinking they had sabotaged the ship. Montgomery was absolutely terrified. His stomach tightened as a surge of fear came over him that the Japanese would figure out who was really responsible and take retribution, but there was no further action.

In late July 1944, after almost two years, the camp was closed down and the POWs loaded aboard the infamous "hell ships" for transport to Japan, so named for their inhumane conditions. Hundreds of men were jammed into pitch-black holds so crowded they ran the risk of suffocation when the Japanese covered the hatches.

Temperatures rose alarmingly, overcoming men in the furthest reaches of the hold. Water was so scarce that men fought others for a few mouthfuls of the precious liquid, some drinking urine, so great was their need. Sanitation facilities, buckets lowered into the hold, could not handle the need, as dysentery was rampant. The smell of excrement and vomit poisoned what little air was available. Men started dying almost immediately, others literally losing their minds

under the terrible strain. Montgomery went aboard *Nissyo Maru*, suffering the same horrific conditions.

Between the Philippines and Formosa, the convoy came under attack by American submarines, unaware that the ships carried POWs as the Japanese "neglected" to mark them. This violated the Geneva Convention, which was not unusual for the Japanese. Several ships were sunk with a loss of hundreds. Montgomery's ship was lucky, as an oil tanker a few hundred feet off the port beam was torpedoed; it exploded with a great resounding "boom" and sank almost immediately.

By the time Montgomery reached Japan, he was physically in bad shape, unprepared to face the hard work conditions in the next camp, a lead mine owned by the Mitsui Mining Company.

Located high in the mountainous region of Honshu, the American POWs worked underground in conditions that steadily eroded their health, until the men realized they couldn't make it through one more winter.

Housed in rough, unheated, two-story wooden barracks, the men received two handfuls of charcoal a day, even in the dead of winter. The cold was pervasive, sapping what little strength the men had left; 70 men were to die in the next few months. Compounding the difficult conditions, the winter of 1944-45 was the most severe that Japan had experienced in decades.

The camp commander, an ignorant, vain man, exercised authority through subordinates who brutalized the POWs for the slightest infraction of the rules. Under his orders, two machine guns were set up to bring the American barracks



Marine Sergeant Major John B. Kelly (left) and Master Technical Sergeant Eugene C. Commander were liberated on Luzon after three years as POWs in the infamous Cabanatuan Prison.

under fire, which may have been a precursor to a directive from the Japanese Deputy Minister of War: "In any case, it is the aim not to allow the escape of a single one [POW], to annihilate them all and not leave any traces."

Montgomery wrote that "had the war not ended in August 1945, it is likely that I could not have survived two more months."

On the morning of 15 Aug. 1945 as the working parties were lined up to go to the mine, the Japanese unexpectedly canceled them, which had never happened before. The same thing happened the next day, but as the POWs were dismissed, the senior officers were called to the guard house where they were told the war was over. Within moments, the entire camp buzzed with the excitement of the glorious news—they had survived!

Within days, American bombers dropped food and supplies, giving the men their first rich food in more than three years. As the red, white and blue parachutes drifted to earth, there wasn't a dry eye in the camp and it was, as former POW Jim Kerns expressed, "one of the most emotional events in my life." Montgomery noted that with the supply of nourishing food, everyone gained weight, some a pound a day.

Montgomery was repatriated via Okinawa and the Philippines, departing from Pier Number 7, the one he worked as a prisoner. He arrived in Seattle aboard a U.S. Coast Guard troop transport, 44 months after leaving to join the 4th Marines and six years since he last saw his parents.

Author's note: Lee Montgomery stayed in the Corps until medically discharged as a staff sergeant because of tuberculosis, which he contracted as a POW. He went on to college through the GI Bill and graduated from San Diego State College. He joined the California Highway Department, retiring as a Senior Right of Way Agent. SSgt Leland H. Montgomery, USMC (Ret) died 22 Dec. 1998. His experiences as a POW are representative of thousands of other Americans who were captured by the Japanese.

Editor's note: Retired Col Dick Camp is the author of "Lima-6," a story of a Marine company commander in Vietnam, and he is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck.

The assistance of Richard A. Long, former head of the Oral History Unit of the Marine Corps History and Museums Division of HQMC is acknowledged and appreciated.

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