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MICHAEL J CAMPBELL
1515 COOLIDGE ST
SAN DIEGO, CA 92111-7505

The "Shoe Incident" at Yodogawa
Bunsho (POW Camp) Osaka, Japan

I
Such was our pattern of living during the winter of 1944, and soon it was spring again. The date was May 23, 1944. I will never forget it. I was working at my job with ONISHI SON, testing the drum lids late in the morning. Suddenly we were called off our jobs at 11:00 A.M.. That never happened before and I wondered what took place. I soon found out. We were herded back to our living compound by gruff and angry Jap guards. They did not allow us into the barracks but set us up in a formation outside. The entire camp was there with all the guards. Several weeks previously, a new cadre of Jap guards had come in with a new camp commander. The staff was younger and no officers were assigned. The new commander was a corporal. His face was livid with rage and he shouted at us in Japanese (by then most of us could readily understand it). He was furious at us because someone or somebody had stolen a dozen pairs of GI shoes and sold them to the Japanese workers.

Now I must digress from my story to report on a shipment of shoes received several months before the change of camp staff. The shoes were heavy duty US Army Service shoes. They were better than any that the Japs had and surprisingly were well fitted. I received a pair of size 6 EEE, which was my exact size. However, we were given strict orders not to wear them outside of the barracks and then only on our rest days. We were ordered to place them on the shelf at the head of our bunks. I placed mine there and promptly forgot about them.

These were the shoes that the Japs were talking about. On one of their unannounced inspections, they discovered that 12 pairs were missing. Further investigation revealed that there was a black market ring going on between our POW and the factory workers. So their anger was understandable.

The Jap corporal kept bellowing at us at the top of his lungs and he demanded that the guilty ones step forward. Of course, no one did. This served to anger him even more. He continued to scream at us and lost his temper entirely. He barked out an order for us all to disrobe. So we all did, including our officers. It was nearly noon, but it was a grey cloudy day and the wind was coming from the marshes at the rear of our factory area and blowing hordes of mosquitoes before it. They descended upon us with a fury. They were a large fuzzy type and very hungry. We started slapping at them. The Jap corporal noticed them too and ordered us to stand still at the soldier's position of attention. We watched the mos-



MICHAEL J CAMPBELL
1515 COOLIDGE ST
SAN DIEGO, CA 92111-7505

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quitos land on our naked skins and bury their snorkel-like beaks into us. It was sheer torture to watch the mosquitoes draw our blood until they fell away bloated. Some of the POW could not stand it and swatted the mosquitoes away. The Jap guards immediately clubbed them with their rifle butts. There was nothing to do but to stand there and take it.

However, this torture brought no confessions and only served to make the Jap corporal even more angry. He ordered us to get down on our knees and remain in an upright position. This turned out to be a very torturing ordeal because the whole area was filled in with large cinders reclaimed from the blast furnaces in the factory steel mills. The cinders soon cut into our bare knees and the pain became almost unbearable. For me it was a throwback to my childhood days when my father meted out similar punishment by forcing me to kneel on raw kernels of corn. I could not help but reflect on the similarity of the two cruel punishments. The mosquitoes were drinking their fill of my blood and the cinders were grinding into my bare knees. I wondered what I did to deserve this treatment; worse yet, why did I volunteer for enlistment in the Army? I did not have the answers. Many of the POW fainted away and were revived when the guards threw cold water on their prostrate bodies.

I was getting faint and fought the dizziness off. My knees became numb and I could not feel the pain. I could see the blood oozing down and the mosquitoes bathing in it. It was a horrible experience for us all and I wondered when it would end. No one confessed and the corporal stomped off into his office. The afternoon shadows began to fall. It was getting colder. I began to shiver and shake violently.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the gate. A big black sedan came in and a high ranking Jap Army officer bounced out. All the guards clicked to attention. He barked some commands at them and they sprang into action. They released us immediately and ordered us upstairs to our dormitory! The matter was dropped and I never knew who the guilty culprits were!

I tried to rise up off my knees and fell over. I put on my clothes that were lying at my feet and slowly stretched my limbs, working the circulation back. Finally I could stand up. I laboriously made my way to the wash room and found some strong laundry soap. I made a paste of the soap and worked it into my lacerated knees. The lye in the soap really pained



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me and I nearly passed out. The pain soon eased up to where I could tolerate it. I crawled upstairs and got into my bunk. I slept quite soundly; within a few days, the wounds healed but left bad scars. The doctors told me that my simple home remedy saved my knees from serious infections. Many of our POW did lose the use of their legs and were crippled. Some even had their legs amputated. It was a very cruel deed and the Jap Army officer relieved the corporal as camp commander. He was replaced by a more mature sergeant (Akamatsu). Rumor had it that S/Sgt. Tracer, Pfc. Sontag, and Lt. Lancaster were the key men in the shoe black market ring. However, no charges were ever made. But they were guilty of causing all of us much suffering and pain.

During the last year at Yodogawa Prison Camp, the Japanese issued each of us a small piece of cloth that was supposed to be a hand towel. It was very thin and would not absorb water; therefore, it was useless as a drying towel. A fellow POW, Pfc. Stackhouse, hit up on an idea to use the towels as paper to draw on. He developed several designs and drew pictures with colored pencils. I noticed him at work drawing and liked his artistic efforts. I therefore commissioned him to draw one for me for the price of a package of Japanese cigarettes. He worked on the project for several days under strict secrecy; I stood guard while he drew the designs. I decided to have the picture reflect our previous combat and would serve as a tribute to my fellow soldiers of the 31st Infantry in general and for Melvin (my brother) in particular. The 31st Infantry Regimental Crest (Polar Bear) was superimposed on a cross that was a symbol of men that were killed in action, with our national flag in the background. In the foreground was Manila Bay with Corregidor in the middle. I was very pleased with the result and thanked Stackhouse for his fine work.

After the surrender, I managed to smuggle the picture through both the Japanese and American authorities. (I turned it inside out with the picture next to my skin and tied it around my crotch as a loin cloth; no one ever questioned me about it). In November, 1945, I went to Marshall Fields in Chicago to get it framed. The clerk offered me \$500.00 for it. I refused his offer.