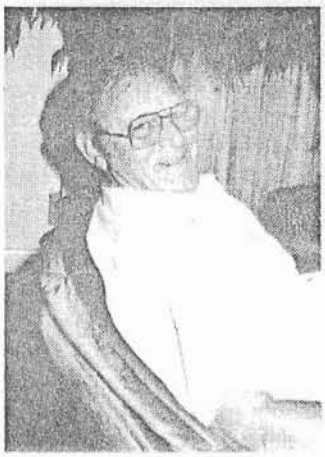
USS POPE Sailor To POW

by Don (Big Mat) Mathews



Aftermath of the Sinking of our Ship and Ordeal of Being Taken Prisoners of War

After the USS Pope went down, all the enemy ships left. They did not make an effort to shoot us or to pick us up, they just left. As I paddled around the thought struck me how big that ocean looked now that there wasn't a ship "laying to" to climb on. A big, vast, empty body of water.

My momories flashed back momentarily to my boyhood and I thought, if only my mother could see me now in all this water; remembering the trouble she had with me as a boy trying to get me into the bathtub to take a bath. Here now, I was in one of the biggest bathtubs in the world, the Java Sea, well over 200 feet deep. The water was warm, as the Java Sea is very close to the equator. I thought, it took more than my mom to get me to take this bath, it took a war.

Back to reality; one of the men took a B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle) over the side with him when he abandoned ship. He started firing at the cruiser's planes as they would swoop low over us. The planes circled around and came back over us - strafing. They made three or four passes over, strafing us in the water. In the meantime, some of the guys had grabbed the Browning from the guy and deep sixed it (dropped it in the sea). After the gun was disposed of, the planes would fly over, bank on their sides and the pilot would wave and smile. The planes and ships finally all left and we were just left to the sea.

I've made many mistakes in my time, but I'm sure one of my worst ones occurred in Great Lakes when I was in Boot camp. Before any man was allowed to go to sea, he was made to qualify in swimming. Each man was required to swim three lengths of the pool before being passed.

One of the men in our company wanted to be shipped to sea with the rest of the men in the company, but couldn't swim. His name is U.W. Lembeck, a good friend of mine. I went to the pool and said my name was Lembeck; I swam the required number of laps of the pool and so qualified Lembeck. He was shipped out with the rest of the company.

When the ship went down, I felt obligated to see that he didn't drown. This turned out to be quite a chore for me as well as for many of my shipmates. It is my firm belief that prior to any man being shipped to sea, he should learn to swim.

After the planes and ships had left, we resigned ourselves to remaining afloat. We just bobbed around in the ocean with the sun beating down on us and the salt water irritating our skin where the kapok life jackets made contact. We tolerated our miserable condition until about 2100 hours. At this time, about an hour after night had fallen, we spotted four ships silhouetted against the night sky. We were very quiet as we could tell from their silhouettes that they were Jap ships. They passed silently by us like four grey ghosts.

Back to the misery of our predicament; we took turns holding each others head up in an attempt to get some sleep. We continued this throughout the balance of the night and then came the dawn and the hot tropic sun. The thoughts of facing another day in the sea was quite demoralizing.

The motor whale boat had a small cask of brackish water and a small tin of hardtack for emergency rations. From my understanding prior to abandoning ship, survival rations should have been put in the motor whale boat, but somehow this had not been done. The above mentioned survival rations were all we had. Today we each received three small swallows of water per man and one hardtack biscuit.

We encountered a sea snake about 1400 hour this afternoon. Their venom, so I've been told, is about four times more deadly than that of a cobra. Regardless, before anyone was bitten, it was killed by hitting it with the oars.

By evening, the sun had burned us quite bad and we were a pretty miserable group. Several of the men said if they saw some Jap ships tonight, they would hail them. Well, about the same time as last night, four ships were again spotted, possibly the same ones. They steamed past us in a column as they had last night. All hands, even though suffering from the elements, were as quiet as church mice. I guess the thought of being taken prisoners outweighed the miseries as no one hailed the ships. The ships continued on and we were relieved at not being detected.

We spent another miserable night holding each others head out of the water while we tried to sleep. Because of being sunburned so bad, the night air seemed so cold and the water seemed very cold also. It was a miserable, horribly long night, but somehow we managed.

With the coming of the dawn and the sun, our miseries were about to be compounded. As the day wore on and the sun got hotter, our suffering just increased. My lips, as well as those of several of the other men, were burned, swollen, cracked open and bleeding. The top and back of our ears were burned very bad, as well as our cheeks under our eyes. The bottom of our ears, jaws and chins had been rubbed raw from the constant irritation of the salt water and our life jackets rubbing against them. Our armpits were raw also, from the constant irritation. Even the nipples on our breasts were now just two big sores. The nipples had been worn away by the salt water and the canvas in our life jackets. We were a very sorry looking group of miserable former sailors.

At about 1600 this afternoon, we spotted seven dorsal fins knifing through the waters around us. I though; this is all we need, sharks. We all hollered very loudly, slapped the water with our hands and the oars. A 45 caliber pistol was fired several times (one that was salvaged from our sinking). All this commotion must have scared them as they left the area and we never saw them again.

We suffered out the rest of the day and nearly to the man we said that if we saw ships tonight, we would hail them.

I did learn one thing, the men that were in the whale boat and the wherry got very thirsty. Those of us who were in the water seemed to get less thirsty. It seems our bodies absorbed water from the sea.

Just after darkness, at about the same time as the previous two nights, we saw the silhouettes of four ships. Even though we had said we would hail them tonight if we saw them rather than suffer another day, we were all very quiet again. The ships appeared to be passing us when the second ship in line threw a searchlight on us.

A Jap on the ship hollered something at us in Japanese. One of our officers could speak Japanese, so he answered him. They asked who we were, what ship we had been on, etc. The Japs finally said they would take the officers and the wounded. From this, we assumed they would probably shoot the rest. Our officer said, "You will take all of us or none of us". As if he were in a position to be dictating terms. Anyway, they finally agreed to take us all. Before they agreed to this, I thought they would probably shoot us all, so I turned my back to the ships. I didn't want to look into the eye of death.

They manuevered one of the ships closer to us, then threw Jacob's ladders over the side of the ship for us to climb. Most of us, in our attempt to climb the ladders, found because of our weakened condition and the additional weight of our water logged life jackets, that we lacked the strength. We would drop back into the water, remove the lifejacket and then were able to climb the ladder.

Though the lifejackets afforded a certain amoung of bouyancy, even water logged, when we shed them they would slowly sink. It appeared in many cases that we were holding the lifejackets up.

At this point I should mention that we had been in the water for fifty-six hours. Our skin was shriveled up, we were badly sunburned, rubbed raw in several places and several men were suffering, as I was, from swollen and cracked and bleeding lips. The only thing on the positive side of the ledger, that we could be thankful for, we were alive.

After boarding the ship, a destroyer, we were stripped of any belongings we possessed. Our keys, jacknives, which we had attached to our belts, wristwatches, wallets, rings and dog tags were also taken. The chain I had on my dog tag was just big enough to go over my head. In their haste to get it over my head, they almost tore my ears and nose off.

I also had a Monel ring on the third finger of my left hand. I hadn't been able to get it off for a couple of years. They couldn't get it off either. One Jap got out his bayonet and I'm sure intended to cut off my finger to get the ring. A Jap officer stopped him and I was allowed to keep the ring. I'll tell you, I was a little concerned about that finger for awhile.

After being stripped of our few remaining worldly possessions, we were made to sit down on the deck of the ship. The deck was over the

ship's boiler room and it was quite hot. They covered us with a tarp to keep us warm. The deck proved to be too hot. By gesturing our discomfort, they finally let us move to a cooler part of the deck.

After the officers had been stripped of their possessions, they were taken to the Jap wardroom on this ship, where they were questioned extensively.

On the officers' return to the group, they told us that we had been picked up about 40 miles from the spot where the ship had been sunk. They also said one of the Jap officers had remarked to them "We finally got the U.S.S. Pope." From that remark, it seem we must have been of some concern to them.

The Japs gave us some cigarettes and a small amount of warm water to drink. They told us cold water was not good for us after having gone without water for so long; also that large amounts of water were not good for us. After getting the water and cigarettes, we got some much needed sleep.

After having slept awhile, we felt quite relieved from the ordeal we had been through. We were constantly watched over by ten or twelve Japs with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. Surprisingly enough, they had to this point, treated us quite well.

At dawn we were given a glass of warm water per man and a couple of hardtack biscuits. At about 0800 hours, they let us take turns (two at a time) going to the head (toilet). About 1000 hours we were given some corned beef. We spent the rest of the forenoon seeking shelter from the sun.

At about 1300 hours, we rendezvoused with another destroyer which then came alongside. As the two ships neared each other, the crewmen on both ships used long bamboo poles to fend the other ship off to keep them from colliding. The ships stood apart about ten feet. Some planks were laid down from the deck of one ship to the deck of the other as a gang plank.

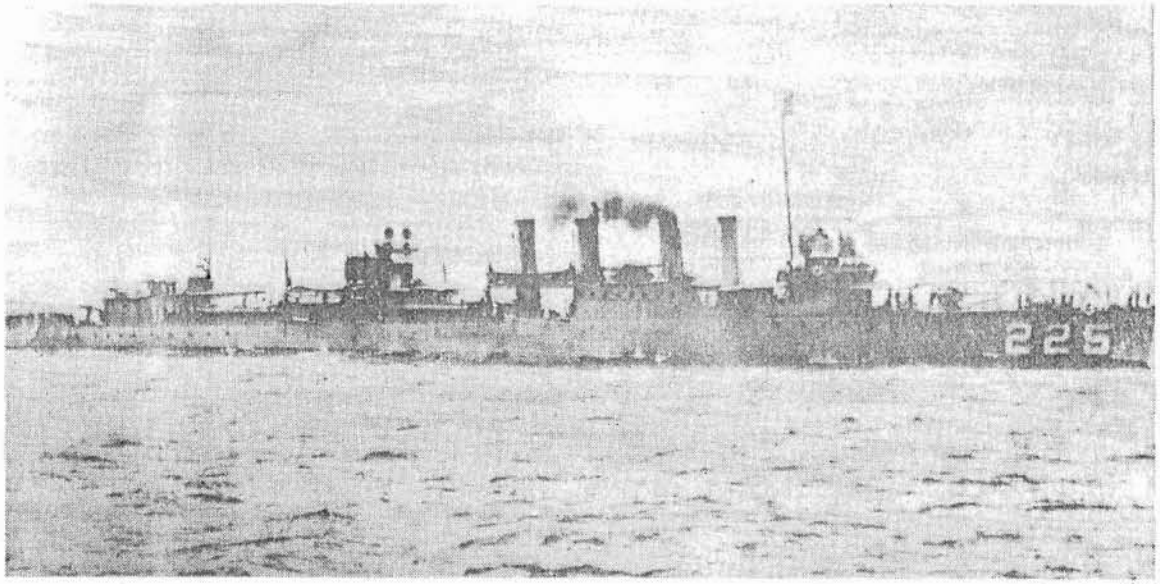
We were then transferred from one ship to the other by walking across the planks. The sea was not rough but the ships were moving up and down independent of one another. It was not the easiest thing to do; walking the planks without falling in the water, though we all made it o.k.

After the transfer, we all settled down again. They gave us some hardtack and all the cold water we wanted to drink. This was followed shortly by some warm milk, come corned beef and some tea with saki in it. We didn't get very much but it sure tasted good. It had been a long three days since we had had much to eat.

At about sundown, we arrived in the bay off the city of Makassar on the Island of Celebes in the Dutch East Indies. The ship dropped anchor in the bay and two landing barges were brought along side.

Aboard the ship we had been lined up in two ranks. A Jap officer who could speak fluent English, walked down the ranks and at the halfway mark, split the ranks in two groups. Where he split the ranks was just one man to my right. The man mentioned to me that he didn't want to be the first man over the side. I offered to swap positions with him as I couldn't see what difference it would make if you were first or last over the side.

The Jap officer came back and explained to us,



thoroughly, just how he wanted us to load the barges. He said after we climbed down the ladder, to run across the inboard barge and board the second, then go all the way to the front. The second group over was then to fill the inboard barge.

I descended the Jacob's ladder, ran across the first barge and was about to board the second, when a Jap hit me with the butt of his rifle which had a fixed bayonet. He knocked me down the ramp into the inboard barge, ran up and was thrusting at my chest with the bayonet when the Jap officer on the ship saw what was happening. He hollered down and, I guess, told the Jap what our orders had been. The guy with the bayonet backed off, grunted at me and motioned for me to get up and go to the outboard barge. For a few seconds, I thought I was a goner. After both barges were loaded, we shoved off for the docks. On disembarking from the barges, we were made to form up in ranks five deep. Again turmoil - none of the Japs could speak English and we sure couldn't understand Japanese. They finally got us to form in ranks five deep. They pushed, shoved, knocked us around, jabbed us with bayonets and, by bellowing at us, made us understand.

After being formed up, we were made to march about the distance of three city blocks where we were put in what appeared to be a jail of some kind. By now it was about 2100 hours and we finally laid down on the cold concrete floors and went to sleep.

By now, we were thoroughly aware that we were prisoners of war. We were far from beaten men; we knew we had done our best to serve our country and carry out our duties.

Hopefully we will not be prisoners very long and will again be back on a new U.S.S. Pope or some other fighting ship where we can again endeavor to do our small part for the continued existence of the good old U.S.A.

ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF A POW

This story is an excerpt from a daily diary that I kept during three years and seven months as a POW of the Ashagari Marines (Japanese) during WWII. I kept the diary clandestinely, after having been threatened with decapitation if caught with any written material on any of the things that took place in the camp.

During an episode of a working party being caught by the Jap Gestapo selling or trading cigarette papers to the natives. We would sell the cigarette papers and use the money to purchase food with later or swap them for food on the spot. This type of transaction took place while

the working party was working in the city of Makassar, on the Island of Celebes, in the Dutch East Indies.

After having been caught, and after returning to camp that evening, we were summoned to the main gate of the camp, by the Bugler sounding "quarters". We thought oh-oh, it looks like we're in for a beating for the infraction. After falling in, the Japs told us there was some cummunicable disease among the natives and they wanted their doctors to check us to make sure we had not eontracted it. They assured us there would be no beatings for this infraction of camp rules. They wanted all the names of the men that had participated in the exchange. They were so convincing that nearly to the man, we gave our names.

As day after day went by, they never did have their doctors check us. By then we assumed that the incident had been forgotten. In this span of time, none of us had experienced any ill effects from anything even remotely associated with a communicable disease. Incidently the above related incident took place on April 16, 1944.

On the first day of May, "May Day", we again heard of the incident. Shortly after we had returned to camp from our respective working parties, the bugle was sounded summoning us to quarters. We assembled in the big field, in the center of the camp, where we always assemble for quarters. We were formed up into ranks of five. The Jap Gestapo had three natives at the main gate and they brought them out to the assembly area. We knew then that we were in for trouble. We knew before this day was through, the theme for today would be, "sour news and sore asses".

On the arrival of the Monk, (one of the names we had given to the Jap in charge of the camp), whose real name was Yoshida, the gestapo Nip and the three natives, walked up and down the ranks of us Yanks. We had been ordered into an open rank formation, enabling them to walk between the ranks. They had the natives point out the men that they had done business with at the earlier date. They pointed out four of the men that they were sure of: G. E. Taylor, J. Greco, E.V. Plantz and R.W. Osborne. These four were ordered to waukaree (fall out). After our return to the barracks, we looked out the door and saw the four standing at attention by the gate. They stood there for about an hour; then they were put in a jail cell at the main gate, gate house.

After having had our evening rice ration and sitting around the barracks, it was now time for evening muster. At 2000 hours, evening muster was sounded on the bugle. All the Yanks were made to fall in, outside the barracks. Those that were too sick, and some were very sick, were ordered to fall in also. Some of them couldn't walk without assistance. A buddy of mine, A.W. Bryan, assisted me with a cubicle mate of ours, E. G. Wynne, who was suffering with malaria and dysentery, and was too weak to walk.

The whole yank contingent was then made to march up to the main gate. Once there, all the men whose names were on the list for having sold cigarette papers, were told to step out as their names were called. After the separation was made, those not on the list were allowed to return to the barracks. I'll say this, at the time the list of names were taken, we were all of the opinion that it must be on the up and up, as we felt the Japs would never beat this many men at one session. We felt there was safety in numbers.

It didn't take us long to realize that we were wrong when a squad of Japs, about a dozen, came through the gate at double time. We realized that this many of them could easily beat the number of men in this group, fifty one.

Clubs and buckets of water were brought out of the gate house by the Japs. The Monk proceeded to remove his side arm, bayonet and belt. He then removed his coat and called out the first name on the list. I noticed that the four men that had been fingered by the natives, were not brought out, they remained in the jail cell. In any case we knew that a mass beating was about to take place.

The Monk beat the first man; I think this was to show the other Japs how he wanted it done. He directed the other Japs to form four beating stations, in this manner four men could be beaten at the same time. As each name was called out, a man would approach the beating station just vacated, and receive his beating. There seemed to be no uniform amount of licks each was to receive, just what ever each Jap thought was enough.

As Bryan and I had been supporting our buddy Wynne, I was left to support him when they called out Bryans name for his beating. Wynnes name was called out next, I couldn't see how he (in his condition) could possibly take a beating, without it killing him. I don't want to sound as if I was trying to be heroic, but I thought it might save his life, so I volunteered to take his beating. For my effort, I was knocked around. I was kicked in the legs several times, hit in the jaw, hit four or five times across the back and got one hell of a lick on the head, believe me I saw stars from that blow. The Japs then dragged Wynne to the beating station, sprawled him across the back of the bench, and gave him twenty six licks. He passed out several times, each time he was revived with a bucket of water being thrown on him. He was then dragged back to the ranks and left lying on the ground until the beating session was over. I don't know how Wynne took it without it killing him.

My name was then called and I took my turn at being beaten. I received thirty five licks across my ass and back. I then returned to ranks. As I

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watched the men being beaten, both before and after I got mine, I thought how this was undoubtably the most brutal, barbaric, wicked, inhuman, and disgusting sight I'd ever witnessed. During a mans beating, if he did not assume the proper beating position or didn't attain it fast enough, he was slapped, socked, thrown to the ground, or mistreated with any other form of cruelty they could think of.

To give you some idea of what constituted a beating station, four parktype benches were placed end to end, about six feet apart. Each man was made to approach the bench from the back, grasp the bench back, then at arms length move his feet back from the bench until his body assumed an angle of about 30 to 45 degrees from the ground. It was very difficult to maintain this position when the club came down across your back. The blow would knock you to your knees. Imagine someone swinging a baseball bat with enough force to hit a home run and hitting you across the back with it. The pain you realize is excrutiating.

On many occasions men would pass out from the pain, they would be revived by a bucket of water being thrown on them. They were then made to again assume the position, and their beating would continue. Some would pass out six or seven times before their beating was completed.

Getting back to this beating of Wynne and how sick he was, there were two other men that were equally as sick that also were shown no mercy, they too were beaten.

After the beatings had all been administered, the camp commander had all the officers, of all nationalities, fall in. He told them how he felt about these beatings. He said, "If it was up to me these men would not have been beaten, the order came from those higher in rank than I. If the men wanted things such as they traded or sold cigarette papers for, they should have come to me and I would have done my best to get them even though things are hard to get". After hearing this, my thoughts were, bullshit.

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216 pages of graphic pictures of those grim days prior to the liberation in 1945. (Picture captions printed in Japanese, with English translation included.)

Listed below is a list of the names of those that were beaten and the number of licks each received.

Bryan - 20	Falucca - 38
Belcher - 18	Parkin - 62
Byrnes - 31	Taruino - 30
Imlay - 40	Wynne - 26
Shelton - 33	New - 32
Temple - 46	Eaton - 28
Seward - 56	Artz - 34
Riffle - 30	G.W. Smith - 35
Monnett - 38	LaFauci - 27
Haas - 35	Hansen - 23
Yates - 14	Netter - 12
Earlywine - 35	Gillen - 15
Slone - 21	Fortner - 30
Martinez - 38	Simpson - 36
Mills - 33	Jhonson - 17
Osborne - 35	Keeler - 10
Mathews - 35	Lentz - 15
Roarke - 28	Anderson - 10
Matilla - 10	Brazzi - 1
Stafford - 19	Greco - 33
Estes - 14	Plantz - 70
Singelton - 34	Taylor - 35
Moraski - 8	Officer)
Winger - 28	Fisher - 15

After the beatings were completed, with the exception of the three sick men that were too weak, we were made to run one lap around the perimeter of the camp, about a half or three quarters of a mile. We were then allowed to return to the barracks. I'll say that I, along with all the others, are pampering some sore asses and backs. Beatings were the topic of conversation for the rest of the evening until taps were sounded.

The following day the Monk (Yoshida) made sure that every man that had been beaten was assigned to a working party, with the exception of the three men that were sick. He actually did us a favor by making us go on a working party, because in the past when we have been beaten, we are able to work the soreness out. Those that didn't work were sore a lot longer. We were all made to work at the place where we are building our new camp. This camp, incidently, is made entirely of bamboo and nepa, with dirt floors.

I would like to let the reader know that during the time you are being beaten, if you should yell, holler, in fact make or utter any noise, other than a low grunt, at the time the club contacts the body, your punishment is increased.

This story covers just one day of the three years and seven months that we spent as prisoners in that camp at Makassar. Not all were as bad as this, yet some were even worse.