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The Fate of a Good Doctor

Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Feuer, A.B., ed. *Bilibid Diary: The Secret Notebooks of Commander Thomas Hayes.* Hamden, Conn.: Archon Press, 1987. 288pp. $27.50

Thomas Hayes was born on 8 February 1898, became a physician, and was commissioned in the Medical Corps of the U.S. Navy in 1924. A reflective dreamer and thinker, he was later to write in these prison camp memoirs that he sensed his life taking an irreversible turn in the summer of 1940 when, as a senior lieutenant commander, he received orders to sea aboard the cruiser U.S.S. *Milwaukee.* "I had known happiness—real happiness. I had found the life I always wanted. But I knew when I left on this cruise that I was done, washed up as a happy wanderer." He was never again to see the wife and son he left in Tidewater Virginia.

After a year aboard ship (during which he "never did adjust," he later wrote), he made the promotion list for commander and was transferred to the staff of the Sixteenth Naval District, Philippine Islands. Pearl Harbor came four months later. Bombed out of Cavite on 10 December, he made his way to the Fourth Marine Regiment where he became its chief medical officer, and on New Year's day, 1942, his date of rank as a three-striper, his new command became a part of the American holdout garrison on Corregidor. Captured by the Japanese on 6 May 1942, he was put in the old Spanish "Bilibid" penitentiary in downtown Manila on 2 July. He remained there for nearly 2½ years, until, at the age of 46, he was swept up in the frantic Japanese effort to remove all their prisoners to the Home Islands for service in their factories and mines. But like 1,300 other American prisoners, he died a horrible death, under despicable conditions, en route in the hold of a northbound ship.

Hayes' extensive diaries were discovered hidden in Bilibid prison soon after World War II. There are gaps in his chronology (notably a nine-month one

President of the Naval War College from 1977 to 1979, Admiral Stockdale is now at the Hoover Institution. He knows a great deal about life as a prisoner of war in a communist country.

from 2 January 1943 to 1 October of that year), but he leaves us a vivid picture of POW life in Manila during the war. Thanks to his reflective nature and candidness, Hayes also tells us much about the captives' frame of mind during those years. More is different than the same in comparing POW concerns as prisoners of Japanese Imperialists and Vietnamese Communists. But contrary to popular lore about the difference between soldiers' attitudes in "popular" vs. "unpopular" wars, Hayes' reminiscences and skepticisms could just as well have come from a similarly cynical and strong-willed American POW in Vietnam.

For a veteran of Hanoi's central and "clearing house" prison (the French-built Hoa Lo) to review these precious, unspoiled first-person accounts of life in Manila's central and "clearing house" prison (the Spanish-built Bilibid), and not digress on the differences of captors' style and philosophy, would seem to me to be a waste of knowledge. In a nutshell, while to Japanese Imperialists a POW prison was a bother, to Vietnamese Communists it was a propaganda farm.

The purpose of a modern communist prison is the breaking of prisoners' wills in an effort to squeeze secrets and propaganda performances out of them. The purpose of a World War II Japanese prison seemed to be just keeping people locked up and feeding them as little as possible. Stories of these Japanese prisons are chronicles of dietary deprivation, dysentery, fever, recreational prisoner bashing, and high death rates. Communists aren't "good feeders," but their wear and tear is not so much on the prisoner's physical plant as on his nervous system. Every prisoner is considered to be in "workup" for propaganda exploitation; the commissar has deadlines to meet, and that means he must discipline his guards to *never* engage in personal conversations with prisoners, to demand strict obedience of a myriad of "trip wire" laws, and to engage in "prisoner bashing" only as scripted by the boss. His prisoners must be prevented from communicating with each other, and his political cadres are schooled to bear down on them with solitary confinement, one-on-one intimidation sessions, and repeated, emphatic, controlled, and purposeful physical torture sufficient to gain total submission. Prisoners are valuable assets, and their deaths are practically limited to natural causes and torture overshoots.

So it is with surprise, knowing in advance of the horrible death rates, that a prisoner from a communist "pressure cooker" reads of hundreds of American POWs almost totally without threat of solitary or torture and in direct contact with English-speaking Japanese and Filipino nationals (military and civilian) who had the run of the city. The result is a relatively disciplineless prison, open to smuggled notes from the outside, newspapers, espionage contacts, intrigue—a place where senior prisoners like Hayes (chief of surgery and later senior medical officer of the prison) are in semi-social contact with

their jailer counterparts, taking meals and drinks in their quarters on occasion and sometimes at Manila restaurants.

To be sure, these jailer (Japanese medical officer) counterparts were seldom the vicious caricatures we used to see in war films of the 1940s, but as the story unfolds it becomes clear that their second and third-level functionaries were capable of heinous terrors (like ordering the murder of the fifteen sickest Americans on their way to the hell ships bound for Japan). But to a person used to the total silence and solitude of a "clamp down" prison, day-to-day life as a captive of the Japanese in Manila reads more like being caught in a treacherous web of intrigue in a semi-civilian atmosphere.

This "civilian atmosphere" has roots. The Japanese professed great interest in the "Geneva Treaty" with regard to the treatment of prisoners. That, of course, was the Geneva Convention of 27 July 1929—the last one of that series to have been ratified before World War II. Since their inception, Geneva Conventions on treatment of prisoners of war have been phrased in terms that takes the prisoner out of the military context to the maximum extent possible and puts him in a category of "benevolent quarantine," with minimal residual national ("home country") obligations, "answerable only to himself and humanity." They don't speak of the senior prisoner being commanding officer of his countrymen incarcerated with him. They refer to "prisoners' representatives," subject to a prisoners' vote where possible, and in the case of the 1929 Convention also "subject to the approval of the military authority"—which the Japanese obviously presumed to be Japanese military authority.

Accordingly, the Japanese selected the American prisoners' representative of their choice ("camp warden," they called him), who, so far as they were concerned, commanded the American contingent in prison. In the case of Bilibid, that designated commander was an alcoholic chief warrant officer (machinist) who had his own private liquor supply and mess, played favorites, worked deals, had a free gangway to and from town, ruled like a despotic potentate, buttered up the Japanese, and throughout his term of office told American commanders and colonels, such as Hayes, what to do. This camp warden (the "field marshal," as many Americans called him) was given real power by the Japanese. If an American prisoner wanted a few hours alone out in town, he, and only he, could set it up with the gate guards. Hayes would not trust the "field marshal" with sensitive material like escape plans and had reason to believe that to make his muster lists come out right, he had forged at least two American death certificates. "[He is] crooked, untrustworthy, characterless, and dumb," wrote Hayes. "The most disgusting and unforgettable fact [which has typified his regime] . . . is the toadying, backslapping, handshaking, and condoning of his acts which has marked the conduct of so many of our officers. They feared him and hoped to feather their nests by playing up to the bastard."

It wasn't until after the Korean War that President Eisenhower issued the American military man's Code of Conduct, which clearly and specifically overrode all Geneva Convention biases against Americans' national obligations behind bars. His Code of Conduct established the position that the regular American chain of command holds in or out of captivity, and that for the American POW the war continues behind bars. Under this code and the instruction now attendant to it, American prisoners would have known in advance never to obey the orders of an American set up as a puppet governor by the captor power.

This bogus chain of command which the American prisoners let stand played no small part in generating the "me first" mood Hayes' commentaries repeatedly complain about. He describes a prison population who grew to let personal interests override the greater good of the community: "It is a constant fight against personal selfishness, a continual battle against individuals who would sacrifice their comrades for personal gain." Another catalyst for this self-centered attitude, also triggered by the Geneva Convention, were the provisions for a more or less independent economic life for each of these "obligation-free, citizens of the world" prisoners. Prisoners, said the Geneva rules, are supposed to be able to buy things in stores, and they are supposed to be paid by the captor power. The Japanese allowed a store to be run by a U.S. Army clerk, who bought items of food out in town, first with collections from prisoners who arrived with pocket money and eventually from the "pay" the Japanese started printing up for them. This led to endless squabbles which came to dominate much of prison life, and eventually put the American prisoners in the position of being partially responsible for their own starvation.

Neither the flavor of the times in Manila nor of the mind of Hayes can be had without a few last quotes from his diaries:

On the run-down physical condition of Americans. 9 June 1942 - "Conspiracies are at work" (under the food distribution system worked out by the "field marshal"). 22 July 1942 - "The Japanese couldn't understand why we were in such a state of starvation and malnutrition at the time of our surrender, and yet there were tons of food stored on Corregidor. That's something we would all like to have explained to us."

On the plight of prisoners taken at Corregidor. 30 July 1942 - "We have every reason to believe that our country has scratched us off their list as a lost cause. Certainly, if they made no attempt to help us while we were fighting, they surely won't consider it worthwhile now." 23 August 1942 - "It was one year ago that I arrived in the Philippines. . . . It was expected of me to come out here and be captured. . . . Great going, F.D.R."

Insights into Bilibid life. 10 August 1942 - "The observation of all who pass through this camp is that we are the poorest fed prisoners in the Philippines."

25 September 1942 - "The Japanese are now offering us two bottles of beer for every can of dead flies."

On home. 13 May 1944 - "It's a hot sultry night and walking back from the upper compound, I paused for a moment under the mango tree and looked up at the stars. My eyes fixed upon an old familiar constellation that always seemed to free the night over Williamsburg and Yorktown."

Hayes' body was incinerated on Formosa in January 1945.

The principle laid down by military writers, that an army advancing far from home should establish a second base near the scene of operations, on the same principles that determine the character of the first, and with sure communications knitting the two together, holds good here; only it must be remembered that secure communications at sea mean naval preponderance, especially if the distance between the home and the advanced bases be great.

Naval Strategy
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