

BY MICHAEL E. KRIVDO

# RESCUE AT CABANATUAN



Former POWs from the Cabanatuan prison camp celebrate their rescue in the town of Guimba, Luzon, Philippines. They were rescued by a combined force consisting of the Sixth Ranger Battalion, Philippine guerrillas, and Alamo Scouts.

On 6 May 1942, Lieutenant General (LTG) Jonathan M. 'Skinny' Wainwright IV surrendered the last American forces in the Philippines to the Imperial Japanese Army. With that capitulation more than 23,000 American servicemen and women, along with 12,000 Filipino Scouts, and 21,000 soldiers of the Philippine Commonwealth Army became prisoners of war (POWs).<sup>1</sup> To add to the misfortune, about 20,000 American citizens, many of them wives and children of the soldiers posted to the Philippines, were also detained and placed in internment camps where they were subjected to hardship for years. Tragically, of all the American prisoners in World War II, the POWs in the Philippines suffered one of the highest mortality rates at 40 percent. About 13,000 American soldiers captured in the Philippines died, and many thousands of them were shipped throughout the Japanese Empire as slave laborers.<sup>2</sup>

The fate of the Americans left behind in the Philippines weighed heavily on the senior leaders who escaped. General of the Army (GEN) Douglas A. MacArthur's staff closely tracked the status of Allied POWs on the islands. Headquarters, Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) (MacArthur's Headquarters in Australia) asked several guerrilla units to pinpoint the locations of POWs and

internees in the Philippines. They were to establish contact with them and report. This information would be used to develop rescue plans.<sup>3</sup>

In late 1944, reports of the Palawan POW Camp Massacre traveled quickly to SWPA (see article in previous issue). The initial information came from the guerrillas who assisted survivors after escaping. The horrific details prompted SWPA to dispatch amphibian aircraft to recover the escapees. Once in Australia, eyewitness accounts of the mass execution caused military leaders to swear to prevent other atrocities. Thousands of other prisoners were still held by the Japanese, including the thousand or so still believed held at Cabanatuan, on Luzon Island.<sup>4</sup>

This article incorporates reports and accounts from the 6th Ranger Battalion, Sixth U.S. Army, Alamo Scouts, and various guerrilla units that supported the rescue of 516 POWs from Cabanatuan. It chronologically merges these

A POW in Cabanatuan Prison drew this sketch of an inmate giving water to a sick POW. (*Library of Congress*)

Japanese Army soldiers force marched American prisoners to camps in the middle of Luzon during the 'Bataan Death March.'





LTC Henry A. Mucci (L) and CPT Robert W. Prince (R) of the 6th Ranger Battalion.



Map depicting the rough area of operations for Major Lapham's Luzon Guerrilla Armed Forces (LGAF).

accounts into a single narrative history and concludes with an operational analysis. The reader is immersed at the tactical level to appreciate the detailed planning and coordination behind this textbook raid. One will see events as they unfold. Having the participants speak makes the history personal. Although the mission was well-executed, the article reveals weaknesses as well. The outcome of this operation influenced similar ones afterward in which more allied lives were saved.

After MacArthur's forces landed at Lingayen Bay, Luzon, on 9 January 1945 and fought towards Cabanatuan, Major (MAJ) Robert B. Lapham, leader of the Luzon Guerrilla Armed Forces (LGAF), had renewed hope for of freeing the Cabanatuan prisoners.<sup>5</sup> In light of what had recently happened on Palawan, a prison rescue merited reconsideration.

## Planning the Rescue

Soon after the successful Lingayen landing, GEN MacArthur attached Lapham's LGAF to Lieutenant General (LTG) Walter Krueger's Sixth U.S. Army. MAJ Lapham became Krueger's senior guerrilla advisor. He assigned his 'squadrons' to each of the major subordinate commands in Krueger's Sixth Army. "I raised the question [of a rescue] again," Lapham recalled. This time it prompted action. On 26 January, LTG Krueger listened to the guerrilla reports about the prison camp. The Sixth Army commander "assigned his G-2, Colonel [COL] Horton [V.] White, and White's [deputy], MAJ Frank Rowale, to consider the whole venture and make appropriate plans" for a rescue.<sup>6</sup> COL White centralized planning at the headquarters of the 6th Infantry Division, in the town of Guimba on the forward line of troops (FLOT).

LTG Krueger assigned the rescue mission to Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Henry A. Mucci, the commanding officer of his 6th Ranger Battalion. He directed Mucci "to furnish one reinforced company . . . from his battalion" as the central element of the raid force. The 6th Rangers had already made several successful raids, which reassured Krueger. Mucci, a short, stocky former West Point athlete, jumped at the mission and left for Guimba to join COL White.<sup>7</sup>

Mucci began his preparations. He had selected Company C, commanded by CPT Robert W. Prince, as the core of his force and reinforced it with 2nd Platoon, Company F, led by Second Lieutenant (2LT) John F. Murphy. Because preliminary intelligence indicated a high probability of encountering enemy tanks or vehicles, Mucci "borrowed some bazookas and AT [antitank] grenades from the 6th Infantry Division." With his men alerted, LTC Mucci and CPT Prince left for Guimba in the early hours of 27 January.<sup>8</sup>

As soon as they arrived, Mucci and Prince discovered that other elements had been attached to the raid force. LTG Krueger had directed MAJ Lapham to provide the



6th Army Rangers WWII Shield patch (L) and the 6th Ranger Battalion Scroll (WWII theater-made) (R).



# MAJOR ROBERT B. LAPHAM

## Guerrilla Commander

*“Early in 1945, [Major Lapham] conducted offensive operations against the enemy, cutting communication lines, ambushing troop convoys, and attacking garrisons and supply dumps. This fighting continued until the Americans had passed through the area occupied by the guerrilla troops, after which his entire force of approximately 12,000 men was made available to the Sixth Army.”<sup>5</sup>*

— Distinguished Service Cross Citation

**B**orn in 1917 in the rural town of Davenport, Iowa, Robert B. Lapham grew up during the Great Depression. He attended the University of Iowa and completed a two-year Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) program to get a reserve commission as a U.S. Army Second Lieutenant. After graduation in 1939, Lapham went to work for the Burroughs Corporation in Chicago as a sales trainee.<sup>1</sup>

In May 1941, First Lieutenant Lapham volunteered for active duty and got orders to the Philippines. He was assigned to the Philippine Scouts, a 10,000-man unit with both U.S. and Philippine soldiers. Although technically part of the American Army, the Philippine Scouts were equipped with few vehicles, obsolete equipment, and aged weapons. Despite those deficiencies, the Scouts worked hard to train for the looming war. Lapham learned the art of working alongside the “cream of Filipino soldiery” in the 45th Infantry Regiment (Philippine Scouts).<sup>2</sup>

When the Japanese attacked the Philippine Islands on 8 December 1941, CPT Lapham was the Executive Officer of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 45th Infantry (Philippine Scouts). After the Japanese landed at Lingayen Gulf on Luzon, he became head of Military Police detachment and saw combat while delaying the enemy advance. As Japanese invaders pushed the Americans and Filipinos deeper into the Bataan Peninsula, Lapham and others found themselves

behind Japanese lines. Determined to continue the fight, these men (and some women) organized guerrilla units.<sup>3</sup>

Lapham spent the next three years in the central plains of Luzon, north of Manila, as the guerrilla leader. Unsuccessful guerrilla leaders did not live long. By the time MacArthur returned to the Philippines in late 1944, CPT Lapham commanded several regimental-sized guerrilla units and had a very effective network of intelligence agents. When American forces landed at Lingayen Gulf on 6 January 1945, they were greatly assisted by Lapham's more than 12,000 guerrillas who provided them with the enemy's strength and dispositions. The Sixth U.S. Army commander, GEN Walter Krueger, made MAJ Lapham his guerrilla advisor. He advised Krueger on courses of action for rescuing prisoners of war and detainees and arranged for some of his guerrillas to assist the 6th Rangers.<sup>4</sup>

For his actions as commander of guerrilla forces in Central Luzon, GEN MacArthur awarded Lapham the Distinguished Service Cross. And after the war, the Government of the Philippines presented him with the Philippine Legion of Honor and the Philippine Distinguished Service medals. Lapham returned to active duty in 1947 to serve as a consultant to the U.S. Army's Guerrilla Affairs Section in Manila, documenting Filipino participation in guerrilla activities during the war to settle claims.<sup>6</sup>

Rangers with guerrillas familiar with the area around the POW camp. "I was able to contribute two excellent officers, [Captains (CPTs) Eduardo L.] Josen, and [Juan] Pajota, and some four hundred men to the venture," stated Lapham. All lived within ten miles of the camp and were intimately familiar with the area. "I immediately sent a note [by runner] to [CPT] Pajota," Lapham recalled, directing him to meet the Rangers at Balingcari (today Balangkare). Pajota's men would bring fifty land mines that had been delivered by submarine.<sup>9</sup> The mines would help isolate the objective against enemy reinforcements.

Successful raids require detailed enemy information. The best reconnaissance unit in the theater was Krueger's Alamo Scouts (see sidebar), who worked for the G-2. COL White selected two of his best teams to support the mission, Team NELLIST and Team ROUNSAVILLE (named for their respective leaders, First Lieutenant [1LT] William E. 'Bill' Nellist and 1LT Thomas J. 'Tom' Rounsaville). Those teams had done several small prisoner rescues in New Guinea.<sup>10</sup> White designated Bill Nellist as the Scout lead. Another Scout would be the 'contact officer' (or liaison) to Mucci's Rangers. 1LT John M. 'Jack' Dove, an experienced

Alamo Scout team leader, had led a dozen missions behind Japanese lines. His job was to manage the flow of information to the Rangers. With the recon element mission settled, White sent the two Scout teams to Cabanatuan that same afternoon. The Scouts needed time to collect the information Mucci needed to complete his plan. Since the Rangers planned to depart Guimba on the afternoon of 28 January for a tentative attack time the afternoon of the 29th, the Scouts had only a twenty-four hour 'head start' to gather the information.<sup>11</sup>

One final addition to the raid force was a four-man detachment from Combat Photo Unit F, 832nd Signal Service Battalion. They were to document the historic rescue. Led by 1LT John F. Lueddeke, the detachment was to take photographs and 'motion picture' footage, where practical.<sup>12</sup> Within the SWPA, significant events were captured on film to show the American public how the war was going. GEN MacArthur's landing at Leyte Island several months earlier epitomized that strategy. It was rehearsed and filmed several times, then widely distributed at home and abroad. Sixth Army and SWPA staff officers hoped to capitalize on the raid's success.

## RAID FORCE TASK ORGANIZATION

Based on their early analysis of the mission to rescue over 500 POWs from the prison camp near Cabanatuan, the Sixth Army assigned the following elements to the raid force.

### 6<sup>TH</sup> RANGER BATTALION: 124 men

LTC Henry A. Mucci, *Raid Force Commander*

#### C Company

CPT Robert W. Prince

#### 2<sup>ND</sup> Plat, F Company

LT John F. Murphy

#### Det, Combat Photo Unit F, 832nd Signal Service Bn.

LT John F. Lueddeke

### ALAMO SCOUTS: 13 men

LT John M. 'Jack' Dove, *Liaison Officer*

#### Team NELLIST

LT William E. 'Bill' Nellist, *Scout Commander*

#### Team ROUNSAVILLE

LT Thomas J. 'Tom' Rounsaville

### PHILIPPINE GUERRILLAS: 300-350 men

#### LGAF Squadron, Balingcari: 90 armed/160 bearers

CPT Juan Pajota

#### LGAF Squadron, Lobong: 75 men

CPT Eduardo L. Josen

\*LGAF= Luzon Guerrilla Armed Forces



CPT Juan Pajota,  
LGAF guerrilla commander,  
Balingcari.



(B) Philippine guerrillas of  
CPT Pajota's Squadron.



# ALAMO SCOUTS



Weapons training and LTG Walter Krueger, commander of the U.S. Sixth Army, aka 'Alamo Force.'

**U.S.** Army Lieutenant General (LTG) Walter Krueger, commander of the U.S. Sixth Army (also known as the 'Alamo Force'), established the Alamo Scouts in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) in late 1943. With an area of responsibility composed more of water than land, Krueger realized that he needed a small unit of skilled men with specialized reconnaissance expertise to provide him with information needed to defeat the Japanese. As a result, on 28 November 1943 he directed that select soldiers be trained in the special skills of amphibious reconnaissance, jungle warfare, and clandestine operations behind enemy lines.<sup>1</sup> They would become Alamo Scouts.

An Alamo Scouts Training Center was established that utilized an innovative assessment and selection process. An evolving program of instruction (POI) incorporated both internal and external evaluations throughout the course to ensure that only the best soldiers were selected to be trained as Alamo Scouts. Combat veteran volunteers for the course were given intensive training in weapons, communications, intelligence reporting, physical conditioning, amphibious reconnaissance skills, and extended patrolling techniques. Students also learned to infiltrate enemy territory employing a variety of means, ranging from swimming and operating rubber boats to PT Boats, submarines, and Catalina

floating boats. Students trained for six weeks, unaware of their status until they graduated. Of the several hundred students who attended the course, only 138 were selected as Alamo Scouts.<sup>2</sup>

After graduating, Alamo Scouts were organized into ten teams of five-to-ten men and assigned to tasks that ranged from special reconnaissance to direct action and prisoner/hostage rescue. Their patrol reports contained valuable information that higher units used in the field. By war's end, the Scouts conducted over 100 missions behind enemy lines, a remarkable feat.<sup>3</sup>

The Alamo Scouts were to provide amphibious reconnaissance on Kyushu Island for the invasion of mainland Japan when the dropping of two atomic bombs forced Japanese surrender. After a short time as security for key officers during the occupation of Japan, the unit was disbanded in Kyoto in November 1945.<sup>4</sup>

Several members of the Alamo Scouts found their way into the ranks of Army Special Forces later in their careers. One such member, CSM Galen Kittleson, had the distinction of being in four POW rescue missions in two separate wars. Alamo Scout training, including their use of peer evaluations during training, found their way into the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC).<sup>5</sup>

During the planning, LTC Mucci and CPT Prince voiced several concerns. All reports indicated that there were significant numbers of Japanese forces near the camp capable of reinforcing the Cabanatuan garrison. Exact numbers were uncertain, but estimates ranged from 500 to 7,000. The Rangers wanted air support but were concerned about operational security (OPSEC). “The success of this mission depends on surprise and a large amount of luck,” Mucci pointed out. He needed “luck that enemy traffic along the highway in front of the camp will be light,” that “the final half-mile approach to the camp over largely open terrain can be crossed without discovery,” and that “no one will tip off the Japs that an attack [is] pending.”<sup>13</sup>

COL White promised that “There’ll be NO security leaks. I’ll guarantee that.” He continued, “No one – absolutely no one, except those of us right here – knows what’s coming off.” COL White stipulated that, “only those taking part will be briefed, and only at the last possible moment.” The Sixth Army G-2 emphasized: “The Navy has no need to know, and the Air Force will be kept in the dark unless you initiate a call for emergency air cover during the last stages of withdrawal.”<sup>14</sup>

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AFTER THE PLANES HAD  
PASSED BY.”<sup>19</sup>**

— CPT Juan Pajota, Philippine guerrilla commander

The mention of the word ‘dark’ triggered a thought. “That,” said Mucci, “is another point that bothers me. I’m all for doing the clean-up business under cover of darkness, but we’re going to need at least fifteen minutes of last daylight to see what we’re doing at the most crucial time - when we move in on the camp and round up all the poor bastards we’re going in after.” That is why Mucci set the time of attack for 1945 hours, fifteen minutes before dark. But, he noted, even that timing had a weakness; “how we’re going to infiltrate the area around the POW camp - even if it’s twilight - when the approach has about as much cover as a billiard table?”<sup>15</sup>

MAJ Rowale, COL White’s assistant, offered a suggestion. CPT Pajota had noticed that when U.S. aircraft overflew the prison that the captors became transfixed and watched the sky even after the planes had passed. Rowale proposed that, “We might arrange for something like that to distract the guards at the camp while you rush that last short distance right up to the stockade.” The idea was well received.<sup>16</sup>

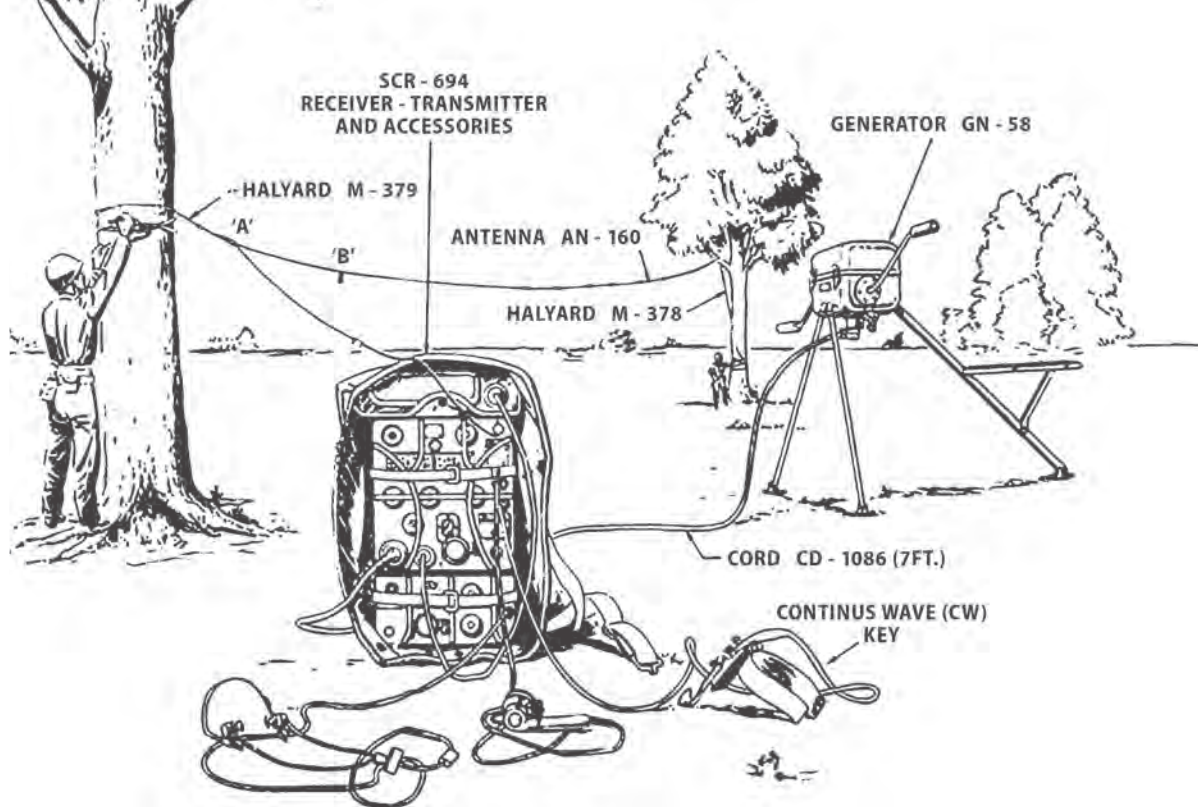
LTC Mucci agreed, but he still had OPSEC concerns. “Bringing in the Air Force would violate the security blackout, which could be worse. And we’re talking about time getting command approval, the briefings, coordination, and the usual inter-service [issues],” Mucci pointed out. MAJ Rowale proposed bypassing the normal process to “lay this [directly] on the 547th.”<sup>17</sup> The 547th Night Fighter Squadron operated out of an expeditionary runway on the Lingayen landing beaches, a short drive from the Sixth Army headquarters. He could drive to the squadron, brief the pilots and aircrew in person, and emphasize OPSEC.

MAJ Rowale’s proposal had the added advantage of providing Mucci’s men with support from adept night-fighting pilots. COL White agreed to coordinate the



LTC Henry A. Mucci (L), and CPT Robert W. Prince, 6th Ranger Battalion, review a map after the successful Cabanatuan POW Camp rescue.

Drawing of the various components making the SCR-694 radio functional.



mission personally with the 547th Night Fighter Squadron. As a bonus, the unusual shape and size of the aircraft (see sidebar on the P-61 'Black Widow' aircraft) would distract Japanese attention while the Rangers crawled into their assault positions.<sup>18</sup>

With all his concerns satisfied, Mucci confidently agreed to begin the assault at 1945 hours. With all decisions made, the planners left, and the assault leaders went to prepare their units. LT Dove, the Scout liaison officer, would accompany the two teams until the passage of lines was complete, then join the Rangers. COL White and MAJ Rowale went to the 547th Night Fighter Squadron. MAJ Lapham radioed link-up instructions to his guerrillas.<sup>20</sup>

Back with his Rangers, LTC Mucci told "all the men who were going on this expedition that we would all go to church. When I got there, I made a little speech in which I asked every man to swear he would die fighting rather than let any harm come to the prisoners of war under our care. I did that because I believe[d] in it: Everybody on the mission took that oath," Mucci stated.<sup>21</sup>

The Rangers would travel light for speed and mobility. The raiders had to march 22-24 miles from Guimba to Balingcari in one night to stay on the schedule. The Rangers wore soft caps and left their packs behind. They carried little food or water, planning to acquire both from the Filipino natives whose villages they would be traveling through. The guerrillas would assist in this. "About all we did carry was arms, ammunition, and some cigarettes and candy to give to the prisoners when we got to them." In addition to the bazookas and anti-tank grenades they got from the 6th Division, the Rangers were armed with their standard M1 Garand rifles, M1 Carbines, and M1911 pistols. For heavier firepower they carried .30-06 M1919 Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs) and .45 cal. M1928A1 Thompson

submachineguns. Extra ammunition for the BARs and Thompsons was spread throughout the formation.<sup>22</sup>

In the field the Rangers would rely on the use of guerrilla runners for internal communications. To talk with Sixth Army headquarters and allied aircraft, Mucci's men carried two 'long-range' SCR-694 radio sets (see sketch). The SCR-694 could transmit voice communication 15 miles and 30 miles with continuous wave (CW/ Morse code). It took five Rangers to carry the various components, hand-crank generator, antennas, and ancillary equipment for the 192-pound SCR-694 sets. The two radio sets gave LTC Mucci the ability to establish a relay site near Guimba just for that purpose.<sup>23</sup>

## Movement to the Objective

Though they were given very little 'prep time,' the Alamo Scouts relied on experience and their standard operating procedures (SOPs). LTs Rounsaville and Nellist issued final orders before personally inspecting their men and equipment. In addition to the Scouts' weapons (a mix of M1 Garand rifles, M1 Carbines, and M1928A1 Thompson submachineguns), LT Nellist had each Scout "carry extra ammo bandoliers, a .45 caliber automatic [pistol] with spare clips, a trench knife, and three hand grenades." The two teams boarded two-and-a-half ton trucks to get to the front line. Before crossing the lines, the men ate a quick meal of black beans and rice and napped until 2100 hours.<sup>24</sup>

Private First Class (PFC) Galen C. Kittleson (Team NELLIST) and two Philippine guerrillas took point for the Scouts 24-mile night movement. They moved in file through the underbrush, tall grass, and rice paddies "under a starry night lit by a half moon." Nine miles into the movement, Kittleson signaled for a halt. LT Nellist moved forward and Kittleson whispered to him, "Lotta' #!@? up ahead the way it sounds." The distant sounds of



# CABANATUAN RAID

## T I M E L I N E

### — 27 JANUARY, 1945 —

- 0630 Guimba - Planning begins (6th Rangers, Alamo Scouts, G-2 & Lapham)
- 1200 Planning session ends, units prep for mission
- 1400 Alamo Scouts move to departure point outside Guimba
- 1900 Alamo Scouts depart friendly lines.

### — 28 JANUARY —

- Dawn Alamo Scouts arrive Balingcari, meet CPT Pajota's guerrillas, begin recon
- 0500 Rangers move to Guimba departure point
- 1400 Rangers depart Guimba for Lobong, cross line of departure (LD)
- 1800 Rangers link up with CPT Joson's guerrilla unit (near Lobong)
- 1830 Rangers/Joson depart for Balingcari
- 2400 Rangers/Joson cross Talavera River

### — 29 JANUARY —

- 0400 Rangers/Joson cross Rizal Road
- 0600 Rangers/Joson arrive Balingcari, link up with CPT Pajota's guerrillas
- 1600 Rangers/guerrillas depart for Plateros, meet with Alamo Scouts
- 1800 Postpone attack 24 hours. New time on target: 1945 hours, 30 January

### — 30 JANUARY —

- 0930 Alamo Scouts/guerrillas reconnoiter camp and area
- 1500 Alamo Scouts/guerrillas return to Plateros with information
- 1700 Rangers move to Plateros and on to assembly area 1 mile from camp
- 1800 Rangers move to attack positions
- 1925 Attackers in position, ready for assault
- 1935 Aerobatics of P-61 'Black Widow' aircraft draws the attention of Japanese
- 1945 **ASSAULT OF CAMP BEGINS**
- 2015 CPT Prince fires 2nd flare to signal withdrawal from the camp
- 2030 Column arrives at Plateros, pick up 25 carts
- 2100 Raid Force departs Plateros for Balingcari
- 2400 Raid Force departs Balingcari for Matasna Kahoy with 40 carts (picked up 15)

### — 31 JANUARY —

- 0200 Raid Force arrives Matasna Kahoy, picks up 11 more carts (51 total)
- 0230 Raid Force departs Matasna Kahoy for General Luna *barrio*/Rizal Road
- 0430 Last man clears Rizal Road, column continues to Sibul
- 0800 Raid Force arrives at Sibul, pick up 20 more carabao carts (71 total)
- 1100 Trucks and ambulances meet column, transport POWs to Guimba
- 1300 **END OF MISSION**

Japanese tanks and vehicles moving along the Rizal Road was obvious. Kittleson and the two guerrillas confirmed their suspicions. Japanese vehicles and troops were moving to the northeast along the hard-packed dirt road. Though three Japanese tanks were guarding a thirty-foot bridge spanning a ravine, Kittleson was confident that he could lead the patrol undetected down a watery ditch under the bridge. Nellist approved. Clear of the danger area the Scouts picked up the pace. Four hours later, and two-thirds of the way to Cabanatuan, the Scouts faced another danger area – the Rizal Road. With the Japanese vehicle traffic more spread out, the Scouts could sprint across in groups of three-to-four men in the traffic gaps. Afterwards, 1LT Nellist increased the pace. Just at daylight, the Scouts reached Balingcari, CPT Pajota's headquarters.<sup>25</sup> Together, the Americans and Filipino leaders prepared for the difficult work ahead, reconnoitering the POW camp.

After a short rest and meal, the two Scout teams left for the village of Plateros. It was along the banks of the Pampanga River, a sizeable waterway that meandered through the district about a mile north of the POW camp. The Scouts, who had plenty of experience working with guerrillas, paired up with them. With the guerrillas as guides, the combined two-to-four-man teams split up for an initial reconnaissance of the camp and surrounding area. When each team had checked their designated area, they all rejoined to compare notes. They estimated that less than 200 soldiers were stationed in the camp. However, the lead elements of a Japanese division were marching along the road that fronted the prison. It appeared the enemy was withdrawing by echelons to the mountains northeast of Cabu. The presence of sporadic Japanese units marching past the camp's front hindered the collection of information.<sup>26</sup>

While the Scouts and guerrillas dealt with enemy movement through the camp area, LTC Mucci and CPT Prince continued to prepare for the operation. At 0500 on 28 January, MAJ Lapham gave LTC Mucci the latest intelligence. There were four enemy tanks in or around the camp and large numbers of Japanese moving northeast along the Cabanatuan to Cabu road. This information meant that the Japanese were withdrawing to the mountains of northeast Luzon to establish a new defensive line. Mucci and Prince then led the Rangers to their 'jump off' point outside of Guimba. After a late breakfast they rested until early afternoon.<sup>27</sup>

At 1400 hours the Rangers did a passage of lines and made for Balingcari, twenty miles to the east. The Ranger file was guided by Scout LT Dove and two Filipino guerrillas. "Once we left Guimba, we were in [Japanese] territory," Mucci said. "There were several rivers and ravines to cross before I got into CPT Joson's territory." They linked up with Joson at Lobong, a *barrio* (village) about two miles north of the town of Santo Domingo. There, the seventy-five men of the 213th Squadron joined the Rangers.<sup>28</sup>

The group quickly reorganized their march order and departed. "Under cover of darkness, we went northeast

... avoiding all barrios until we [were] 500 yards from the first highway," Mucci said. Scouting parties found a suitable crossing." "While we hid near [the road] in ditches and rice paddies, we saw ten enemy tanks go by heading north." As soon as they passed, "we got across the highway fast" despite an interruption by six Japanese trucks filled with troops.<sup>29</sup>

At midnight, the Rangers forded the Talavera River, a sizeable obstacle. Then, they double-timed for a mile to make up time but slowed down to sneak by a Japanese tank at an intersection. They reached the Rizal Road at 0400 hours, their point element reported sporadic, light enemy traffic. "We edged up to the road, crawling," and between gaps in the vehicle traffic, the Rangers rushed across. Mucci double-timed them for "another mile" to get back on schedule. Mucci reported "by 0600 . . . we reached Balingcari where we bivouacked." There, the Rangers met CPT Pajota and his force of 250 guerrillas (90 armed, and 160 unarmed men).<sup>30</sup>



The 6th Rangers move through tall grass enroute to rescue POWs from a Japanese camp near Cabanatuan.

## Reconnaissance of the Objective Area

At Balingcari LTC Mucci and CPT Prince met the Alamo Scouts who reported: "The camp is guarded by approximately 200 soldiers and up to 1,000 are bivouacked by the Cabu Bridge." LT Nellist confirmed the guerrilla report that an enemy division was moving past the camp

toward Cabu. The Scout leader suggested: "If we wait twenty-four hours, sir, they will move on."<sup>31</sup> Mucci agreed and slipped the attack until 1945 hours on 30 January. He radioed Alamo Force headquarters where COL White was standing by, to delay the air support 24 hours later.<sup>32</sup>

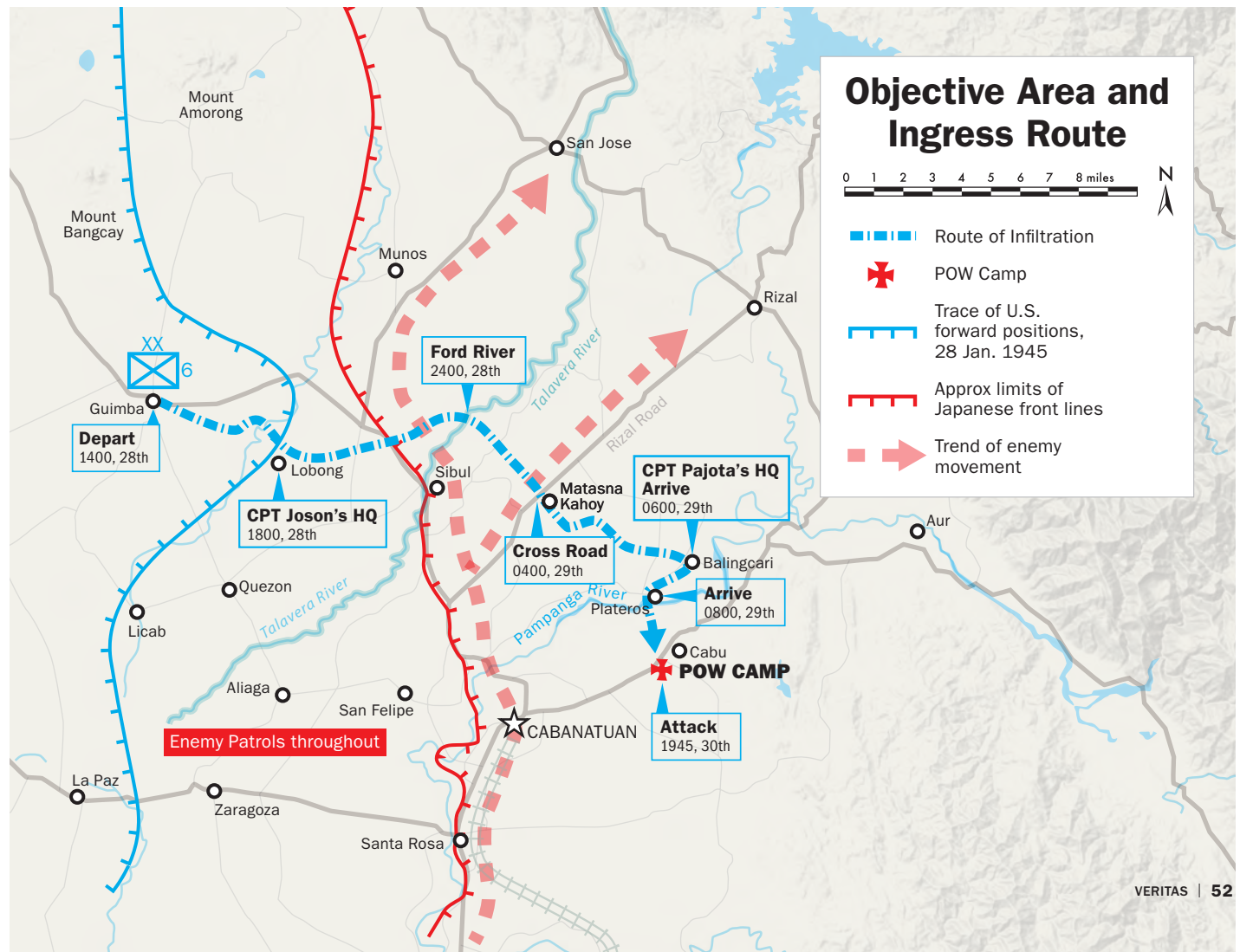




Photo of Alamo Scout Teams NELLIST and ROUNSAVILLE taken after the Cabanatuan rescue mission.

**Front, from left:** PFC Galen C. Kittleson; PFC Rufo V. Vaquilar; 1LT William Nellist; 1LT Thomas J. Rounsaville; and PFC Franklin B Fox. **Back, from left:** PFC Gilbert Cox; Tech SGT Wilbert C. Wisner; SGT Harold N. Hard; SGT Andy E. Smith; PFC Francis H. Laquier. **Not shown are:** PFC Sabas A. Asis; SSG Thomas A. Siason; PFC Alfred Alphonso; 1LT John M. Dove.

LT Nellist decided to pair up some of his shorter Scouts with CPT Pajota's men. Borrowing some farm clothing, they began moving about the area looking like locals. They took notes, sketched the camp, kept track of the guard routines, and became familiar with key parts of the camp. The combined Scout/guerrilla teams located the guard barracks, POW buildings, guard towers and bunkers, and transient troops housing. They discovered a shed with four light tanks and marked its location. The Cabanatuan-Cabu City road (Highway 5) ran directly across the northern edge of the POW camp.<sup>33</sup>

LT Nellist and PFC Rufo V. 'Pontiac' Vaquilar, a native Filipino in the Scouts, really got into the farmer ruse. They found a grass hut containing farm tools just 300 meters in front of the front gate of the prison that overlooked the entire camp. Dressed as native farmers with large straw hats pulled low over their faces, the two Scouts approached the hut. They stopped periodically to inspect the surrounding crops. Nellist walked stooped over and limped. Separately, and by meandering routes, the two entered the hut and then remained all day taking notes. As Nellist and Vaquilar took turns sketching and observing the camp, "the natives would get the appropriate people, bring them in to us, and we'd question them and find out just exactly what we wanted to know." With all that information, Nellist and PFC Vaquilar made detailed maps of the camp and annotated key elements on a G-2 aerial photo. At dusk the two returned to the rendezvous point with a wealth of information. "We knew which way the

gate opened. We knew how many guards there were, what time they changed, how many strands of wire there were, and the works," 1LT Nellist stated.<sup>34</sup>

The pairing of Scouts with guerrillas increased the effectiveness of both units. Pooling them together produced a synergistic effect and allowed them to maximize each other's capabilities. It combined the technical expertise of the Alamo Scouts with the guerrillas' keen knowledge of the area and ability to move freely. The guerrillas lived near the camp, and were familiar with it and the surrounding fields, rivers, and woods. The Scouts were well practiced in observation and reporting. They were able to discern the types of enemy bunkers, pillboxes, and guard posts, and were trained in determining their fields of fire and other specifics. The small combined reconnaissance teams covered a large area within a remarkably short time.

The guerrillas' ability to move freely facilitated their collection capability. An adolescent guerrilla rode a carabao (indigenous ox used for farming tasks and mobility) around the camp. He could estimate distances and see the Japanese defensive positions up close. A female guerrilla sold fruit to soldiers guarding the front gate, and then passed the information learned back to her leader. Each effort added another piece to the puzzle.<sup>35</sup>

The Alamo Scouts and guerrillas gathered at Plateros at 0300 hours on 30 January. LTC Mucci listened to their reports and was pleased that all his critical questions had been answered. "I had the camp mapped and, after drawing up the plan of action, we decided to attack that night."<sup>36</sup>

The Scouts confirmed the poor physical condition of the prisoners. It was apparent that many were not capable of walking twenty miles back to friendly lines on their own. Three years of harsh treatment had taken its toll. Mucci needed a plan to transport those in the worst shape. He leveraged the guerrilla influence on the locals: "I had the Number 1 man at a little Filipino barrio round up some carabao carts in which to bring back our American prisoners, who would be pretty weak – some would be sick and unable to make a march." Mucci asked the natives to stage the carts near Plateros south of the Pampanga River at 2000 hours. "I also asked our Filipino friend to bring along fifty or sixty unarmed men to help carry our prisoners who were sick." CPT Prince emphasized that: "the main thing is to get the prisoners moving. Herd them, shove them, carry them, I don't care. But we have to get them back to the Pampanga River" and the waiting carts.<sup>37</sup>

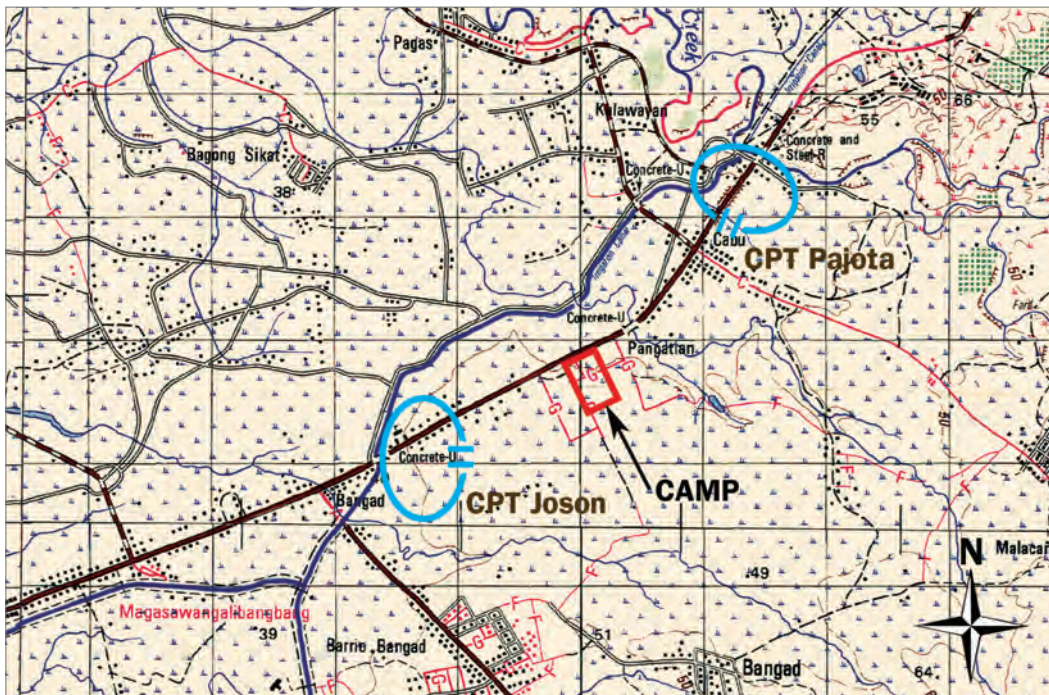
A major tactical concern was to isolate the camp from Japanese reinforcement. The most likely threat were the Japanese troops moving along the Cabanatuan-Cabu Road. Pajota was to "take his men to the south side of the bridge leading toward Cabu, where the main strength of the [Japanese were] and set up a roadblock there [see map "Blocking Positions"]."<sup>38</sup> The 50 landmines would help them in that task. Mucci directed Pajota to "keep the Japanese from breaking through until the prisoners were freed."<sup>39</sup> Once the guerrillas saw two flares from his Very pistol (signaling that all POWs were out of the camp and enroute to Plateros), they were to withdraw to the north, protecting the flank of the raid force as it fell back to the Pampangas River with the POWs.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, LTC Mucci directed CPT Joson to take his seventy-five guerrillas and "set up another road block about 800 yards south of the main gate." He was to block any Japanese attempting to reinforce from the south and west along the Cabanatuan-Cabu Road (see map). To meet the enemy's armor threat, Prince attached a six-man bazooka team led by Staff Sergeant (SSG) James O. White of the 2nd Platoon, F Company, 6th Ranger Battalion. When signaled, CPT Joson's unit was to withdraw towards Plateros to the north and west, thereby protecting the Rangers' left flank as it moved toward Plateros and Balingcari (see map "Exfiltration")<sup>41</sup>

CPT Prince gave detailed instructions on the infiltration, actions on the objective, and the exfiltration. He kept one squad from 1st Platoon, C Company as a reserve with him. When all was prepared, Mucci told everyone: "Remember, all of the prisoners go. No one is left behind."<sup>42</sup>

## The Assault on the Camp

With the attack scheduled for 1945 hours, 30 January, the raid force crossed the line of departure south of the Pampanga River at 1600 hours and maneuvered through tall grass toward the camp three kilometers away. The force moved in three columns: CPT Joson's ninety guerrillas were on the right; CPT Pajota's men were on the left; and the Rangers and Alamo Scouts were in the middle. Since 2LT John F. Murphy and his platoon from F Company had the greatest distance to travel to reach their attack positions on the far side of the camp, they were at the front of Prince's column. As concealment grew less, the men moved forward first in a high crawl, then dropped into a slow, low crawl until they reached their attack positions.<sup>43</sup>



Map featuring the two blocking positions set by the Philippine Guerillas (with some Rangers). The blocking positions sealed off the objective area, preventing Japanese soldiers from reinforcing the guard force at the Cabanatuan POW Camp. The effort was highly effective and killed more than 300 Japanese soldiers.



**RAID AT CABANATUAN**  
**30 January 1945**  
**1945 Hours**

- Structures
- Water tank
- Pillbox
- Guard tower
- Barbed wire fence
- Raid force movement



The command element moved to a slight rise about 700 yards from the main gate, from “where we could get a pretty good view” of the camp. “We could see there was only one tower with a [Japanese] sentry on it. The other guards had probably gone to supper,” he surmised. By 1930 hours the assault elements were in place and ready to attack.<sup>44</sup> Men sighted their weapons on Japanese soldiers as they waited for the signal to attack.

Right on schedule, a P-61 ‘Black Widow’ night fighter roared over the camp, drawing everyone’s eyes upward. The prisoners cheered and the guards froze, just as expected. Sharp-eyed watchers could read ‘Hard to Get’ written in large letters under the cockpit – right next to a colorful drawing of a reclining nude blonde woman.<sup>45</sup> If the plane alone was not sufficient to capture everyone’s attention, its painted lady clinched it.

The strangely-shaped P-61, flown by CPT Kenneth E. Schreiber and 1LT Bonnie E. Bucks as radar operator, had a hawk’s-eye view of the camp, and the aircrew could see some of the Rangers ringing the camp. Schreiber asked “Did we blow their cover?” 1LT Bucks replied “Negative.” However, his concern drove him to circle out and make another pass over the camp. This time, when right over the prison, CPT Schreiber cut his left engine and the ‘Black Widow’ shuddered in the air. Flipping the ignition back on, the engine made a loud backfire that glued all eyes to the spectacle in the sky.<sup>46</sup>

As CPT Prince later recalled, “While we were crawling across the open field, he was flying 500 feet above the camp, cutting his motor, doing every crazy thing he could to attract attention.”<sup>47</sup> Those Rangers not yet in position took advantage of the distraction and crawled forward. Schreiber again circled the camp with his engines sputtering and kicking, thanks to his skilled manipulation of the ignition. Once over the camp he waggled the wings, killed the ignition and again caused the craft to shudder in the air. After a few more seemingly distressed passes, he flew over the prison and headed for a tree-covered ridgeline on the horizon. All eyes on the ground followed the apparently troubled ‘Black Widow’ as it slowly disappeared over the trees, still popping and backfiring. Many of the watchers expected to hear the sounds of a crash and a ball of flame rising above the trees. Instead, Schreiber maintained a low and level flight away from the camp, his immediate task of serving as a diversion now completed.<sup>48</sup>

The assault from the Rangers began precisely at 1945 hours when 2LT Murphy’s platoon (2nd Plt, F Co) opened fire on the Japanese guards who were milling about outside their quarters at the far southern side of the camp (see camp map). Several Rangers also took out the solo guard in the watchtower. Concurrently, a six-man squad led by SSG James V. Millican hit the enemy pillbox on the northwest corner of the camp with a bazooka and a volley of rifle grenades, taking it out of action.<sup>49</sup>

On hearing Murphy’s platoon open fire, the other assault elements went to work. 1st Platoon, C Company (1LT William J. O’Connell) had responsibility for breaching

the main gate and neutralizing the adjacent guardhouse.<sup>50</sup> Ranger Sergeant Theodore R. Richardson ran to the gate and smashed at the lock with his weapon. One of the POWs sitting on a bench near the gate described the event: “This Ranger hit the padlock on the front gate with his carbine, dropped the clip, picked it up, and shot the guard.”<sup>51</sup> The rest of O’Connell’s platoon was stacked behind Richardson. When the gate was breached, they ran past him to shoot at the Japanese in the guardhouse and then killed enemy soldiers exiting nearby buildings to see what was happening. A bazooka team fell in behind the assaulters. In quick succession the bazooka gunners moved up and destroyed four tanks and two trucks, along with the enemy soldiers trying to get them into action. The anti-tank weapons were then employed to blast pillboxes and bunkers occupied by Japanese. 1st Platoon Rangers with wire-cutters furiously clipped strands of barbed wire to allow the 2nd Platoon to pass through to the POW part of the compound.<sup>52</sup>

Once the wire fences were parted, Rangers of 2nd Platoon (LT Melville R. Schmidt), quickly fanned throughout the POW section of the camp, efficiently killing every guard they encountered. They then prodded the still surprised POWs to move toward the front gate.<sup>53</sup> “The prisoners were like wild animals,” observed PFC Kittleson just outside the main gate. “They were running all over the place.”<sup>54</sup> CPT Prince’s reserve element then entered and helped direct

## Northrop P-61

### ‘Black Widow’ Night Fighter

- » Designed as a night fighter; unusually large for a fighter
- » Crew of three: pilot, gunner, and radar operator
- » “Devastating firepower:”
  - › Four 20mm Hispano forward-firing cannons in the belly
  - › Four .50 cal. machineguns mounted in an upper rotating dorsal turret
- » Guns were mounted aft of the cockpit to protect the pilot’s night vision from the muzzle flash
- » Powered by two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines
- » All-metal twin tail booms connected by a central horizontal stabilizer provide a stable firing platform
- » Tricycle landing gear, full-span retractable flaps
- » Fuel capacity of 646 gal (2,445 l) provided long range of flight and/or greater loiter time
- » Could also carry up to four 1,600 lb (725 kg) bombs or auxiliary drop tanks





Soldier firing the M1 2.36" Rocket Launcher ('Bazooka'). The M1s weighed 18 pounds and were widely used against concrete bunkers in addition to light tanks/vehicles.

## **"RECONSTRUCTING IT NOW I CAN SEE HOW WELL OUR SQUAD LEADERS CARRIED OUT THEIR ASSIGNMENTS"**<sup>67</sup>

—LTC Henry A. Mucci, Commander, 6<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion

the still-confused prisoners to freedom. Corporal (CPL) Milton A. Englin, a Marine captured at Corregidor in 1942, recalled, "I thought they were guerrillas at first, then some big Texan came to me and said, 'Head for the main gate.'"<sup>55</sup> U.S. Navy Warrant Officer Paul Jackson, captured at Mariveles Naval Base three years earlier, remembered that "When the firing started, most of us thought it was the Japs coming in to kill us."<sup>56</sup> "We had to talk many of the POWs out of their huts," Alamo Scout PFC Gilbert Cox recalled. "They were afraid the attack might just be a trick of the Japanese," he explained.<sup>57</sup> In quick fashion,

the former POWs were sought out in the growing dark and told to head to the main gate while the remainder of the assault force tracked down and eliminated the enemy.<sup>58</sup> POWs who could not move on their own were carried by stretcher-bearers to the designated staging area, twenty-five yards in front of the main gate.<sup>59</sup>

The only real opposition put up by the Japanese came while the Rangers were outside the main gate, sorting and organizing the former POWs for movement. As described by Alamo Scout leader 1LT Rounsaville, "We were all at the main gate and the [Japanese] got three rounds off with the mortars." 1LT Nellist continued, "We saw flashes [from the mortar tubes] and we shot at the flashes. The [Japanese] only fired three shots."<sup>60</sup> However, those three rounds were on target and inflicted a number of casualties. The Japanese mortar men mortally wounded the Rangers' medical officer, CPT James C. Fisher, who was treating the freed prisoners near the gate. The mortars killed one other Ranger, CPL Roy F. Sweeny, and four Rangers and two Alamo Scouts were seriously wounded.<sup>61</sup>

The mortar explosions added urgency to getting the freed prisoners organized and on the way to Platero. LT Schmidt's platoon was still searching and clearing the several POW barracks, aided by the light of a full moon and clear skies. While searching the camp, they had discovered a small group of Englishmen amongst the American POWs. With Schmidt's men shouting, "All American prisoners head for the main gate," a couple of British soldiers retorted, "we're not Americans, but we're coming too!"<sup>62</sup>

By 2015 hours, only half an hour after the assault began, CPT Prince had completed his search of the POW compound and determined all the POWs had been evacuated. He then fired off the second of his flares, signaling the guerrillas protecting his flanks that the force was withdrawing to Plateros. As a precaution, one Alamo Scout team (Team NELLIST) remained behind until daylight to double-check that all the prisoners had been rescued.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, the Rangers pushed groups of freed prisoners down the trail to the Pampanga River, where the carabao carts were staged. When he had fifty ex-POWs organized and ready, Mucci assigned Rangers to act as guides/escorts for the group and dispatched them toward Plateros. Mucci recalled, "Getting those prisoners out was quite a task. Some were dazed. Some couldn't believe it was true. Some tried to take their belongings . . ." which was immediately discouraged. "Many were barefooted," he continued. "Some of the Rangers gave their shoes and most of their clothes to the men who needed them." However, Mucci believed "the spirit of the old-timers was wonderful. There was an old man who could barely hobble," he related, "but he insisted on walking alone. He said, 'I made the death march from Bataan, and I can certainly make this one.'"<sup>64</sup> Each was determined to do their best to get out of there. "I had lost a leg while at the prison camp," Warrant Officer Jackson recalled, "and after going for half a mile or so on my homemade peg, had to give up and be carried by my rescuers."<sup>65</sup>

Those not so hardy were carried on stretchers or supported by Rangers until they met the carts just south of the Pampanga River across from Plateros. Soldiers helped the freed POWs cross the Pampanga, at that time waist-deep and free-flowing. Several of the carts had problems fording the river, but the Rangers were able to muscle them across. At Plateros, the raiders and the rescued were met by friendly Filipinos offering food and water. With security forces posted, the file halted to rest and reorganize.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, Pajota's and Joson's forces on the blocking positions entered the fray as Japanese Army units reacted to the attack on the prison garrison. Using the terrain and the factor of surprise to their advantage, the guerrillas withheld fire until the Japanese were deep into their kill zone. Like a well-oiled machine, the two blocking positions kept the objective area isolated from enemy interference. To the east, CPT Pajota's force was aided by CPT Schreiber's P-61 night fighter, which engaged the now-visible weapons flashes of the Japanese guns. Looking to join the fight after his earlier deception play, Schreiber's 'Hard to Get' P-61 rolled in again and again, sweeping the enemy riverbank with machinegun and cannon fire. Like 'shooting fish in a barrel,' the high technology craft easily discerned Pajota's men's positions from those of the enemy through muzzle flashes. The P-61

destroyed several tanks and cut down scores of Japanese trying to cross a bridge that Pajota's men had mined beforehand. The combined force from the guerrillas and the air pushed back the Japanese repeatedly. The Japanese lost over 300 troops, eight tanks, and many trucks before CPT Pajota began his withdrawal towards Plateros.<sup>68</sup>

## Withdrawal

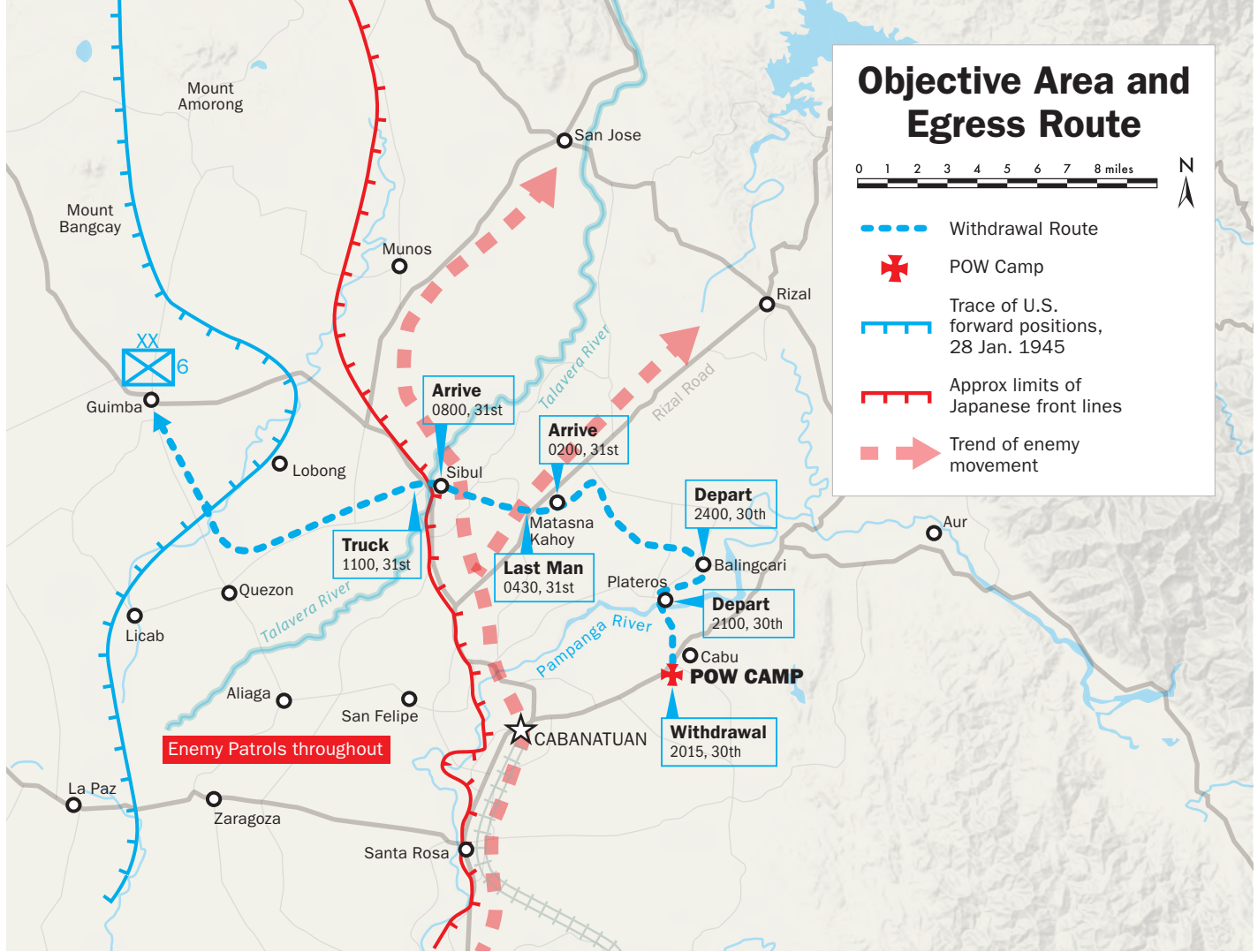
Having executed a textbook assault and rescue, LTC Mucci dismissed that he had greatly underestimated the physical condition of the POWs. In Plateros, with his own doctor mortally wounded, Mucci asked a local guerrilla physician, Doctor Layug, to treat the sick and wounded. While Layug triaged the worst cases and hastily treated them, Mucci decided to send the ex-POWs who would be able to walk "in groups guarded by Rangers to ... Balingcari, as fast as they could be organized. The first group left at 2100 hours on the 30th [of January]." He added, "About 115 men were moved from Plateros to Balingcari in 25 carabao carts." Concurrently, CPT Prince organized the rear guard to protect the column from Japanese action.<sup>69</sup>

Once at Balingcari, the villagers provided food and water to everyone. LTC Mucci met with village leaders to ask for 15 more carts. The 'walking wounded' had run out

From left to right, PFC Julius Cobb, Navy Gunner's Mate Clarence Hall, British Army SGT Robert Hall, CPT Robert J. Duncan (in cart), and two unidentified Rangers pose with the carabao cart used to transport rescued POWs to Guimba on 31 January 1945.







**“THE RAID AT CABANATUAN REPRESENTS PERHAPS THE BEST CONCEIVED AND EXECUTED RANGER MISSION OF WORLD WAR II.”<sup>76</sup>**

—Historian David P. Hogan Jr.

of strength. After another break and some rearranging of persons, Mucci reported that the group “left Balingcari at 2400 [hours] for [the village of] Matasna Kahoy [now Mataas Na Kahoy].” They arrived at 0200 January 31. “Here, we got 11 more carts, making a total of 51, and this lengthened our column to a mile and a half.”<sup>70</sup> Fortunately for the Rangers, they still travelled under a full moon, and the guides were familiar with the trails. By then, the Japanese seemed to have lost interest in the POWs.

After a brief rest for food and water, the column departed Matasna Kahoy at 0230 hours. In only a few miles they reached the Rizal Road, a major danger area. LTC Mucci directed that “The 1st Platoon, Company C, under

LT O’Connell, move ahead behind guerrilla scouts to set road blocks on the Rizal Road. One section with a bazooka and anti-tank grenades set up a road block 400 yards north . . . A second section moved south on the road to a point 400 yards south of where the column left the road.” Once security was established, it took over an hour to get all men across the road, with the last men crossing at 0430 hours.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout, the Rangers pushed the group forward. The rescued men were impressed by the endurance of the Rangers, Scouts, and guerrillas during the long march. WO Jackson remarked, “As if they had not done enough already, they further helped by pushing the carabao carts, holding back on the going down steep banks, and

deploying at every stop to cover any ambush – and never a complaint . . .”<sup>72</sup> Mucci kept the men moving for another hour before stopping the lengthening column for a brief rest at 0530 hours.<sup>73</sup>

The long night movement took its toll on the exhausted, sick, malnourished POWs. After three years of brutal captivity, even the fittest were unprepared for a 20 mile night forced march. At 0800 hours the exhausted procession reached the village of Sibul. There, Mucci borrowed another 20 carts to keep the group moving.<sup>74</sup> His caravan of **71 total carts** was three times his original estimate. Fortunately for the Rangers, the townspeople responded and supplied food and water.



American prisoners of war who were recently liberated from the Cabanatuan prison camp by the 6th Ranger Battalion wait on the porch of an aid station for transfer to a base hospital. (*National Archives*)

**“WE WERE SUCCESSFUL  
BECAUSE WE HAD ALL  
TRAINED TOGETHER AND  
KNEW EACH OTHER”<sup>82</sup>**

—Robert W. Prince



CPT Robert Prince (L) and COL Horton V. White (G-2, Sixth U.S. Army) discuss the rescue mission in Guimba, Luzon, 31 January 1945. (*Robert Prince Collection*)

After crossing the Talavera River, the column ground to a halt. The rescued POWs were exhausted. Just seven miles from friendly lines, LTC Mucci established security and radioed headquarters for transportation. After a brief discussion, COL White dispatched trucks and ambulances to the river to transport them back to Guimba. There, the rescued were met by LTG Krueger, who remarked: “Most of them were in pitiable condition and could not realize they were actually safe.”<sup>75</sup>

### **Accomplishments**

The Cabanatuan mission proved to be a major psychological victory for the Americans.<sup>77</sup> The combined force of Rangers, Alamo Scouts, and Philippine guerrillas freed 516 Allied prisoners and killed at least 530 Japanese soldiers.<sup>78</sup> Of note, the light infantry Rangers and guerrillas destroyed twelve enemy tanks and a large number of trucks. Friendly casualties were 26 guerrillas



Ten Rangers and two Alamo Scouts from the Cabanatuan Raid met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Oval Office of the White House, 7 March 1945.

and 2 Rangers killed, and two of the rescued men died of heart attacks during or right after the movement to safety.<sup>79</sup>

The overwhelming success of the mission prompted similar efforts against other prison camps throughout Luzon.<sup>80</sup> Some of these adopted the proven combination of Alamo Scouts and/or Philippine guerrillas working side-by-side to provide the raiders with the detailed information they needed. In less than a month, American forces conducted three more raids on POW camps or detainee facilities, rescuing over 9000 persons from harsh Japanese treatment.<sup>81</sup>

The Cabanatuan rescue operation remains relevant today because it is an excellent example of the sound application of the principles of raiding. The raid was characterized by solid, detailed planning throughout; sound execution; violence of action; the creative use of deception to maximize surprise; the capitalization of unit strengths; and the ability to adapt to situational changes. The Cabanatuan rescue highlights the importance of many tactical principles: conducting a proper reconnaissance; developing (and disseminating) a detailed plan of action; isolating the objective; and planning for contingencies. The actual assault took place in just six minutes, leaving the enemy forces thoroughly beaten. Within thirty minutes the raiders were able to locate, move to the front gate, and organize the movement of over 500 ailing and emaciated POWs in darkness. Enemy strengths (armor support and their ability to quickly reinforce the camp) were planned for and soundly defeated.

If there was one weak area, it was in the logistics planning for transporting the rescued to safety. This operation was the first major POW rescue operation in the Pacific theater, and the condition of the POWs after three years of captivity was grossly underestimated. Subsequent rescues in the Philippines benefited from that knowledge. But despite this issue, the raid force effectively assessed the problem and came up with a primitive solution. With the guerrillas help, the force was able to leverage the good will of the populace to use native transport. The Cabanatuan raid is yet another excellent example of what Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) can achieve with a little audacity and a bit of imagination.

### Epilogue

Twenty-five years later, U.S. Army LTC Joseph R. Cataldo, a medical officer, began an intense study of the physical conditions of POWs as encountered in rescues during WWII, Korea, and the few that were released early by the North Vietnamese. Since Cataldo was the chief medical officer for the Son Tay Raid force, his interest had profound applications. The Son Tay Raid was an attempt in November 1970 to rescue American POWs held at a rural camp in North Vietnam. Based on his historical research, Doctor Cataldo developed a profile to brief the raiders on what to expect when they encountered POWs in the camp. He predicted that the men would be in poor physical condition, malnourished, intolerant of cold, and incapable of ingesting food like that found in rations at that time. To alleviate those conditions, he arranged for the raiders to carry special rations developed just for the POWs, and he gained supplies of field ponchos and liners to deal with the cold while being air transported. Cataldo also arranged for the force to provide the POWs with loose tennis-type shoes in various sizes to use for footwear (see photo on next page).<sup>84</sup> In short, LTC Cataldo planned for ways to keep newly-freed POWs as mobile as possible and less of a logistical burden to the small raid force – a direct ‘lesson learned’ from the experiences of the Cabanatuan Rangers.

**“THIS RESCUE OPERATION WAS A BRILLIANT SUCCESS. CAREFULLY PLANNED, EFFECTIVELY RECONNOITERED BY ALAMO SCOUTS, DARINGLY EXECUTED BY THE RANGERS AND GUERRILLAS, THE SURPRISE ACHIEVED REFLECTED GREAT CREDIT UPON THE OFFICERS AND MEN INVOLVED.”<sup>83</sup>**

— Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, Commander, Sixth U.S. Army (‘Alamo Force’)

# RESCUED

## ◆ 516 POWs Total

- 489 Americans
- 23 British
- 2 Norwegians
- 1 Dutch
- 1 Filipino

### PROS/STRENGTHS

- Achieved mission success in a complex operation
- Excellent mission planning through the attack phase
- Outstanding use of deception to gain total surprise
- Exceptional use of reconnaissance assets to support enroute planning
- Achieved synergy by integrating the different capabilities of elements in an effective manner
- Violence of action on the objective overwhelmed the enemy guard force
- Effective isolation of the objective area
- Excellent execution of a detailed scheme of maneuver

Although the Son Tay Raid rescued no American POWs, research after the fact confirmed the pin-point accuracy of Dr. Cataldo's profile. The subsequent questioning of POWs released in 1972 verified those conditions and justified the time and effort that had been invested into the study of missions that had gone before. It is hoped that future missions go into action similarly prepared. ↑

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### Endnotes

1 Considered by many military historians to be the greatest defeat of U.S. forces in any conflict, the chaotic conditions following the fall of the Philippines make it difficult to accurately account for all American and Allied persons that became captives of the Japanese Army. The problem of accountability was compounded by incidents such as the 'Bataan Death March,' and similar acts of mistreatment, as well as the later Japanese policy of relocating prisoners throughout the Japanese Empire to perform slave labor tasks in support of its war effort. Moreover, few records of the early days of the Philippine Campaign survived the war. All these factors combined to make accurate personnel accounting of prisoners and detainees difficult. In addition to the figure of 23,000 American soldiers, sailors, and Marines taken captive in the Philippines, tens of thousands of American citizens, many of them dependent wives and children of the soldiers, were also detained and subjected to the same harsh conditions as prisoners of war. The figures cited are from: Office of the Provost

### CONS/WEAKNESSES

- Plan was highly dependent on the support of the indigenous population
- Underestimated the poor physical condition of the POWs
- Underestimated the transportation and logistical requirements to support the withdrawal
- Required headquarters intervention to cover the last seven miles of travel



POW Escape and Evasion footwear produced for use during the Son Tay Raid, based on Dr. Cataldo's research on the Cabanatuan Raid. (Courtesy of SGM (Ret.) John A. Larsen)

Marshal General, "Report on American Prisoners of War Interned by the Japanese in the Philippine Islands," 19 November 1945, copy on Internet at: [http://www.mansell.com/pow\\_resources/camplists/philippines/pows\\_in\\_pi-OPMG\\_report.html](http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/philippines/pows_in_pi-OPMG_report.html), accessed on 27 February 2017. See also: Louis Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines, The War in the Pacific* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1953), 454-55, 579-83.

2 Although accurate numbers are difficult to ascertain due to lack of documentation on the part of the Japanese, there have been some studies made comparing pre-war records with wartime and post-war accounting of survivors. The cited 40 percent mortality rate comes from: William P. Skelton III, "American Ex-Prisoners of War," Independent Study Course, Released: April 2002, Department of Veterans Affairs, Employee Education System, on Internet at: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/docs/vhi/pow.pdf>, accessed on 22 March 2017, 11. Robert E. Klein, et al, "Former American Prisoners of War (POWs)," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, April 2005, on

- Internet at: [www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/powcy054-12-06jmswrfinal2.doc](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/powcy054-12-06jmswrfinal2.doc), accessed on 22 March 2017, 4. The U.S. Army alone counted 25,580 soldiers captured or interned in the Philippines. Of that number, 10,650 died while a POW. Those figures do not include U.S. Navy or Marine Corps personnel, nor civilian detainees. The same source also soberly notes that 30 percent of the captives died in their first year of captivity.
- 3 A number of period documents highlighted the need to task guerrilla forces to gain information regarding American prisoners of war (POWs) and details on prison camps. For example, see Staff Study for the Chief of Staff, "Subject: Development of Contact with American POW in Japanese Camps," 11 December 1943, reprinted in Charles A. Willoughby, Editor-in-Chief, *Intelligence Activities in the Philippines during the Japanese Occupation*, Documentary Appendices (II), Volume II, Intelligence Series (Washington, DC: GPO, 1948), 2-6.
  - 4 For more information on the Palawan Massacre and its influence on increasing the need for rescuing POWs from similar fates, see the preceding article (Michael E. Krivdo, "Catalyst for Action: The Palawan Massacre," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* (14:1) in this issue. For good secondary source accounts from the survivors' perspective, see: Stephen L. Moore, *As Good as Dead: The Daring Escape of American POWs from a Japanese Death Camp* (New York: Caliber, 2016); and Bob Wilbanks, *Last Man Out: Glenn McDole, USMC, Survivor of the Palawan Massacre in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2004).
  - 5 Robert Lapham and Bernard Norling, *Lapham's Raiders: Guerrillas in the Philippines, 1942-1945* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1996),
  - 6 Walter Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon: The Story of Sixth Army in World War II* (Washington, DC: Combat Forces Press, 1953), 237; Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, 172-78, quote from 178.
  - 7 Quotes from Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, 237; David W. Hogan, Jr., *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), 84-86.
  - 8 Henry A. Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," *Saturday Evening Post*, 7 April 1945, 18; Henry A. Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," *Infantry Journal* (April 1945), 15, quote from text.
  - 9 Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, 179; Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18.
  - 10 Kenneth Finlayson, "Alamo Scouts Diary," *Veritas, The Journal of Army Special Operations History* (4:3), 1-17.
  - 11 Larry Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle: The Alamo Scouts Behind Japanese Lines in World War II* (New York, NY: NAL Caliber, 2009), 234-35, quotes from 234. According to Alexander's account, LT Rounsaville had been designated mission commander the last time Teams ROUNSAVILLE and NELLIST were paired up. As a result, it was LT Nellist's time to assume that responsibility. The Alamo Scouts often rotated duties as a way of 'spreading the load' across their ranks. The two Alamo Scout teams planned to depart at 1900 hours on 27 January. That would put them in the objective area 24 hours prior to the Rangers arrival, giving them time to collect the information requested by LTC Mucci so he could complete his plans.
  - 12 Document, "List of Participants," undated, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 7.
  - 13 George Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," *Air Classics* (Sept-Oct 1984), 23. The high estimate of enemy troops in the vicinity of the camp comes from Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, 238.
  - 14 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 23.
  - 15 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 23-24; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 18. Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, 238. Pames cites 2015 hours as the designated time to begin firing at the Japanese garrison guarding the POWs. Krueger and Mucci both cite 1945 hours as the time the attack began, based on their experiences and written records.
  - 16 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 24.
  - 17 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 24.
  - 18 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 24.
  - 19 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 24.
  - 20 Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, 237-38; Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, 179; Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18; Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 24; Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 234-35.
  - 21 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18.
  - 22 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18-19; Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 13.
  - 23 War Department, *Radio Set SCR-694-C, Technical Manual (TM) 11-230C, 15 August 1944* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office [GPO]), 1; Gordon L. Rottman, *The Cabanatuan Prison Raid: The Philippines, 1945* (New York, NY: Osprey Press, 2009), 29.
  - 24 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 235; Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 188.
  - 25 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 234-38, quotes from 234 and 35, respectively. PFC Kittleson remained in the Army after the war. He leveraged his experiences in Alamo Scouts to a long and very successful career in Special Forces that extended past the Vietnam War. When he retired as a Command Sergeant Major (CSM) in 1978, he was the one Special Forces soldier to have served in four POW rescue operations in two different wars (WWII and Vietnam). CSM (Ret.) Kittleson died in 2006 and was inducted as a Special Forces Distinguished Member of the regiment (DMOR) in 2009. See: Document, "Distinguished Member of the Special Forces Regiment, Command Sergeant Galen C. Kittleson, Inducted 9 July 2009," on Internet at: [http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/RegimentalHonors/pdf/sf\\_kittleson.pdf](http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/RegimentalHonors/pdf/sf_kittleson.pdf), accessed 12 November 2017.
  - 26 Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 188-89. Like the Rangers, the Alamo Scouts traveled light and planned on subsisting off the villagers as a way to lighten their individual load. Fortunately for them they were well-taken care of by the largely sympathetic, supportive Filipino populace. In other regions, this approach might not have proved as dependable, perhaps even leading to mission failure.
  - 27 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18.
  - 28 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18.
  - 29 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18.
  - 30 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 18, first quote; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 15, second quote.
  - 31 Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 189.
  - 32 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 15-16, quote from 16.
  - 33 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 238-40.
  - 34 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 238-40; Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 189-91, quotes from 190.
  - 35 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 238-40.
  - 36 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19.
  - 37 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," Mucci quotes from 19; Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 244-45, Prince quote from 245.
  - 38 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19.
  - 39 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 17.
  - 40 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19.
  - 41 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," quote from 19; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 17.
  - 42 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 17; Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, quote from 245.
  - 43 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 17; Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 245-46.
  - 44 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19.
  - 45 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 72.
  - 46 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 245-46; Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," quotes from 72.
  - 47 Quote from interview with Robert W. Prince in: Mike Barber, "Leader of WWII's 'Great Raid' looks back at real-life POW rescue," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 24 August 2005, on Internet at: <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Leader-of-WWII-s-Great-Raid-looks-back-at-1181340.php>, accessed on 14 March 2017.
  - 48 Pames, "The Great Cabanatuan Raid," 72-73.
  - 49 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 18.
  - 50 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 17-18.
  - 51 Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 191. Quote attributed to Don H. Adams, a survivor of the Bataan Death March and former Cabanatuan prisoner. Adams was very surprised at seeing the "big men" burst through the gate and take control of the camp, killing every Japanese soldier they encountered.
  - 52 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 18.
  - 53 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
  - 54 Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 192.
  - 55 Quote from Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 192.
  - 56 Letter, Warrant Officer Paul Jackson, U.S. Navy, to "My Dear Mrs. [Selma] Robbins," Long Beach, CA, 15 March 1945, copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 57 Interview, Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Gilbert Cox, 6 February 2006, copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 58 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
  - 59 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19.
  - 60 Zedric, *Silent Warriors*, 192.
  - 61 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19, 110.
  - 62 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19, 110.
  - 63 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 110. The decision to leave Team NELLIST behind proved fortuitous as they recovered one British POW from the camp the next morning. The British soldier had severe dysentery and was in the latrine during the assault. In addition to being seriously ill, he was also quite deaf. Team Nellist recovered him and helped transport the man back to Guinta. See: Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 251-52.
  - 64 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 19, 110.
  - 65 Jackson Letter.
  - 66 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 110; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
  - 67 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 110.
  - 68 Mucci, "We Swore We'd Die or Do It," 110; Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
  - 69 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19, quotes from text, **emphasis added by author to draw reader attention to the number of carts originally requisitioned for the task.**
  - 70 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19. Again, **emphasis added by author to the numbers of carts needed to support the growing logistical effort to transport more and more of the freed prisoners.** While the initial projection was only 25 carts needed to carry the invalid ex-POWS, the actual requirement became almost three times that – **71 carts.** That transportation effort not only extended the column to its limits of control but made the whole force far more vulnerable to enemy action.
  - 71 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
  - 72 Jackson Letter.
  - 73 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
  - 74 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.

- 75 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19; Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, 239, quote from text.
- 76 David W. Hogan, Jr., *Raiders, or Elite Infantry?: The Changing Role of the U.S. Army Rangers from Dieppe to Grenada* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 88.
- 77 The boldness of the operation quickly captured the heart of America. In early March, twelve Rangers and two Alamo Scouts were selected to participate in a nationwide War Bond drive across the United States. The representatives visited the White House and met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, took part in radio broadcasts, and met with celebrities such as the famous singer Bing Crosby.
- 78 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 235. Early reports listed a total of 512 or 513 prisoners rescued. These figures were cited verbatim in other accounts of the rescue and were not questioned. In actuality, because of the conditions those counts were taken (in the field, at night, and on the move), it took a while for a full accounting to be made. The 516 figure is likely the most accurate and based on actual rosters created after the rescue. Conversely, the estimates of Japanese casualties from the raid are most likely low, with some estimates topping one thousand dead. The estimates were made on the basis of actual counts made on site days later, and probably do not count Japanese casualties evacuated in the heat of the battle.
- 79 Mucci, "Rescue at Cabanatuan," 19.
- 80 In short succession, several other rescue missions were launched to recover American or Allied POWs and/or detainees throughout Luzon. The major ones were: Santo Tomas (3 Feb. 1945), Bilibid (4 Feb. 1945), and Los Banos (23 Feb. 1945).
- 81 See, for example, the chart in Michael Krivdo, "Catalyst for Action: The Palawan Massacre," *Veritas*, 14: 1 (2018), 35-41.
- 82 Quote from interview with Robert W. Prince in: Mike Barber, "Leader of WWII's 'Great Raid' looks back at real-life POW rescue," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 24 August 2005, on Internet at: <http://www.seattlpi.com/local/article/Leader-of-WWII-s-Great-Raid-looks-back-at-1181340.php>, accessed on 14 March 2017.
- 83 Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, 239.
- 84 U.S. Army Infantry School Library, Transcript, "Son Tay Raid Panel Discussion," USSOCOM Commanders' Conference, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, 29 March 1988. On Internet at: <http://www.benning.army.mil/library/content/Virtual/Documents/Hardcopy/paper/Son%20Tay%20Raid%20Panel%20Discussion.pdf>, accessed on 30 March 2018.

## MAJ Robert Lapham Endnotes

- 1 Robert Lapham and Bernard Norling, *Lapham's Raiders: Guerrillas in the Philippines, 1942-1945* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), xi-xii.
- 2 Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, 1-8.
- 3 Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, 8-22.
- 4 Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, *passim*; David W. Hogan Jr., 76, 86-88.
- 5 Citation, "Distinguished Service Cross," General Orders No. 9, 1945, Headquarters, U.S. Forces-Pacific.
- 6 Lapham and Norling, *Lapham's Raiders*, 222-31, 241-42.

## The Alamo Scouts Endnotes

- 1 Larry Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle: The Alamo Scouts Behind Japanese Lines in World War II* (New York, NY: NAL Caliber, 2009), 44. LTG Krueger created the 6th U.S. Army Special Reconnaissance Unit as a result of his frustration with the lack of timely, complete information during Operation DEXTERITY, the Sixth Army's landings on Western New Britain Island.
- 2 Lance Q. Zedric, *Silent Warriors of World War II: The Alamo Scouts Behind Japanese Lines* (Ventura, CA: Pathfinder Publishing, 1995), 40-41, 43-46; Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 51-66.
- 3 Alexander, *Shadows in the Jungle*, 5.
- 4 Zedric, *Silent Warriors of World War II*, 241-49.
- 5 Kenneth Finlayson, "Alamo Scouts Diary," *Veritas, Journal of Army Special Operations History*, 4:3 (2008), 17; Michael E. Krivdo, Text of Class on "History of Army Special Forces," Document, Class outline for Special Forces Qualification Course, 30 November 2016, copy in the USASOC History Office History Support Center, Fort Bragg, NC. The four POW rescue missions that Galen Kittleson participated in were the raid at Oransbari and the Cabanatuan Raid during World War II, and both the attempted rescue of U.S. Army Special Forces Captain James N. 'Nick' Rowe, and the Son Tay Raid during the Vietnam War.

## Northrop P-61 'Black Widow' Source

Website, "Northrop P-61 Black Widow," *The Aviation History Online Museum*, on Internet at: <http://www.aviation-history.com/northrop/p61.html>, accessed 10 January 2018.



POWs freed from the Cabanatuan prison camp marching towards the American lines. Those unable to walk rode on carabao carts.