

BOOK REVIEW

Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath¹

Alice A. Booher²

It is often difficult to equitably address either tangible or intangible residuals of war without having some practical, factual historical foundation. This premise may be particularly valid in understanding those who experienced the exigencies of being a prisoner of war (POW), as well as in impartially adjudicating U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims relating thereto. This is reason enough for those with a veteran-oriented constituency to read *Tears in the Darkness*, although it is not the only reason for doing so. While Bataan POWs may be an older subject in the annals of relatively recent history, the authors' treatment is fresh and persuasive and unequivocally well worth the read whatever one's purpose or constituency.

During World War II, captured and interned American POWs numbered 130,201, of which 14,072 died as POWs.³ Over 20,327 of these former POWs were alive at the end of 2007.⁴ After the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, the first quarter of 1942 in the Pacific Theater was a bloody and perfectly dreadful time to

¹ MICHAEL NORMAN & ELIZABETH M. NORMAN, *TEARS IN THE DARKNESS: THE STORY OF THE BATAAN DEATH MARCH AND ITS AFTERMATH* (2009).

² Alice A. Booher is Counsel with the Board of Veterans' Appeals. She received her undergraduate degree from Butler University (1963) and her LLB and JD degrees from Indiana University (1966,1967). A former foreign service officer, she has been an independent book reviewer and journalist for national print media for many years. She has been published in *Stars and Stripes*, *The Military Advocate*, *The OSS Society Newsletter*, *The OSS Society Journal*, *Ex-POW Bulletin*, *Naval History*, *The Alliance Advocate*, *Proceedings*, and *On Point: The Journal of Army History*.

³ U.S. DEP'T OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, FACT SHEET: VA BENEFITS FOR FORMER PRISONERS OF WAR (2008).

⁴ *Id.*

be in the tiny Philippine peninsula of Bataan, regardless of one's country of origin or allegiance. From the surrender of some 76,000 Filipinos and Americans until the Japanese surrender in August 1945,⁵ “[a]s battlegrounds go, Bataan was more brutal than most.”⁶ During their forty-one months of captivity, the POWs experienced unbelievable disease, torture, cruelty, starvation, and savagery, for which, as veterans, they now may well be entitled to compensation for their residual impairments.⁷

Tears in the Darkness fully and articulately covers Bataan from 1942 to 1945 with a steadfast gaze, crisp confidence, and linguistic élan. Both aggregate and individual details are extraordinarily compelling. The writing is evenhanded but never dispassionate, moderated by a remarkable thread of crosscurrent, nondiscriminatory empathy, and coupled with stark, often shocking realism.

This is neither the first nor last book on World War II Pacific Theater POWs, including on the Bataan Death March and those it impacted, but it must be counted among the most professional, archivally all-encompassing, insightful, and skillfully written books on the subject. The historical information is consistent with that otherwise in print, including by historians and survivors, and when feasible, the Normans comprehensively referenced the former and re-interviewed the latter. All such resources, including analyses and comparisons of some contradictions, are meticulously collected and listed in myriad sources contained in the Notes and Selected Bibliography sections.⁸

⁵ NORMAN & NORMAN, *supra* note 1, at 47.

⁶ *Id.* at 71.

⁷ See 38 U.S.C. § 1112 (2009), *amended by* Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-389, 122 Stat. 4145 (2008); American Former Prisoners of War -- Benefits, <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/Benefits/POW/POWbenefits.htm> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009) (indicating that former POWs may be entitled to a wide variety of VA benefits, some of which are special presumptions based on their POW service).

⁸ NORMAN & NORMAN, *supra* note 1, at 399-436 (providing special acknowledgements to numerous archivists and historians, such as Stanley Falk, author of *The March of Death*, and survivors, such as Richard Gordon, author of *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*).

Tears in the Darkness is unique in that the Normans take the time to explain the idiosyncratic nature of both warriors and non-warriors involved in the Filipino fighting units. From a practical viewpoint, and a judiciously tangential perspective, this explanation is not only helpful in understanding what went on but is downright pivotal to grasping seemingly inequitable or difficult post-war distinctions made by Congress with regard to the adjudication of payable VA benefits. In general, with regard to the Filipino fighting units, Congress has recognized service in four groups as qualifying for VA benefits: Regular or “Old” Philippine Scouts, Commonwealth Army of the Philippines, Guerrilla Service, and New Philippine Scouts.⁹ In February 2009, Congress also recognized a new benefit for Filipino veterans with a one-time cash payment of \$15,000 for U.S. citizens and \$9,000 for non-citizens, authorized via the newly enacted American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.¹⁰ *Tears in the Darkness* sheds some light on Congress’ decision to make veterans of certain Filipino fighting units eligible for benefits, for example, by describing the efforts of the New Philippine Scouts in Bataan, who challenged enemy tanks while on horseback in 1942.¹¹

The Normans also deeply investigate the unique cultural heritage of the involved parties, which helps explain a great deal. The integral use of occasional Tagalog or original Japanese phrases, always translated and in context, greatly enhances the overall impact. For instance, when faced with untenable options for dealing with the battle as ordered, Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma’s countenance was observed by one of his aides as seemingly filled with *anrui*, translated as “hidden grief, tears in the darkness.”¹² The Authors’ Note further explains that *anrui* (pronounced on-RUE-ee)

⁹ U.S. DEP’T OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, FACT SHEET: VA BENEFITS FOR FILIPINO VETERANS (2008).

¹⁰ American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-5, 123 Stat. 115 (2009); see Stimulus Bill Provides \$198 Million for Filipino Veterans, <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=1654> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009).

¹¹ NORMAN & NORMAN, *supra* note 1, at 47.

¹² *Id.* at 113.

is a literal translation of the Japanese ideograph or *kanji*, and “[t]he word and the image it conveys are meant to explain the kind of pain and sorrow that, literally, cannot be seen. Among English idioms, the metaphor that best expresses this is ‘a broken heart.’ It is true that some men—men of greed, ambition, or raw animus—love war, but most, the overwhelming number who are forced to bear arms, come home from the killing fields and prison camps with *anrui*, ‘tears in the darkness.’”¹³ In much the same vein, the later segments addressing “[those] defeated, called to accounts,” including the descriptions of Homma’s trial and his family at the war’s end, are quite extraordinary.¹⁴

As way of background, Michael Norman, a former Marine whose own Vietnam comrades were the focus of his book, *These Good Men: Friendships Forged From War*, is a former columnist for The New York Times’ national, foreign, and metropolitan desks.¹⁵ Elizabeth M. Norman is the author of *Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam* and *We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese*.¹⁶

Together, the Normans have poured a decade of exhaustive research into this book, including interviewing with more than 400 people, a trip to Japan, three trips to the Republic of the Philippines, forays across the country interviewing Bataan veterans, and utilizing more than 2,800 documents and books, many previously undiscovered in English, Japanese (purportedly recorded on-site, contemporaneously translated, and then translated again for accuracy and content), and various Filipino dialects.¹⁷ They interviewed 100 of

¹³ *Id.* at xiii.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 343-85.

¹⁵ Faculty: Michael Norman, <http://journalism.nyu.edu/faculty/norman.html> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009); Authors, <http://www.tearsinthedarkness.com/authors> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009).

¹⁶ Faculty: Elizabeth Norman, http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/faculty_bios/view/Elizabeth_Norman (last visited Sept. 14, 2009); Authors, <http://www.tearsinthedarkness.com/authors> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009).

¹⁷ NORMAN & NORMAN, *supra* note 1, at 399-443; *see also* Alice A. Booher, *Capturing Bataan Perspectives*, 66 EX-POW BULLETIN 22 (2009) (for additional information on the research behind *Tears in the Darkness*).

the men who made the Bataan Death March, and included recollections from two of the twenty female nurse POWs interviewed earlier for *We Band of Angels*.¹⁸

The Japanese took some 20,000 Americans as POWs, and from day one of capture used them as slaves.¹⁹ The book contains all of the aspects of the fall of Bataan, including incarceration at facilities like Bilibud Prison and labor camps,²⁰ work in the mines,²¹ and transport by the “hellships” wherein POWs were shipped from the Philippines to Japan where many died.²² Clearly there was enough misery to go around.

Utilizing a somewhat unusual writing technique, the book accentuates history and culture from the perspectives each of the American, Japanese, and Filipino participants and has benefited from newly available Japanese materials. *Tears in the Darkness* is unique in that it juxtaposes documented details with exquisitely personal cameos of senior and junior, young and old, and experienced and neophyte officers and enlisted soldiers (infantry for the Americans, *hohei* or “step-soldiers” for the Japanese²³) and their families through diaries, letters, and interviews.²⁴

The cultural and historical data transitions smoothly throughout the book with vignettes about many people, as well as an integrated ongoing series of more substantial segments relating to a single primary American, U.S. Army Air Corps POW, Private Benjamin Charles Steele, born in November 1917, a

¹⁸ NORMAN & NORMAN, *supra* note 1, at 19, 29-30, 400 & n.15, 402 & n.33 (referencing interviews with Rita Palmer and Helen Cassiani Nestor).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 293.

²⁰ *Id.* at 266-97.

²¹ *Id.* at 318-19.

²² *Id.* at 305.

²³ *Id.* at 57-58 (detailing a personal cameo of the *hohei*).

²⁴ *See id.* at 399-443.

Montana cowboy known as “Ben” to his comrades and “Bud” to his family.²⁵ Steele and his buddy Quentin Pershing “QP” Devore of Colorado met onboard ship in October 1941²⁶ and, nearly seven decades later, remain friends. Steele as a personalized focus serves well to illustrate all facets of the situation, not only because of his unique personal charm and insights, but because he was held in virtually all pertinent Pacific Theater venues starting at Clark Field and throughout captivity (working while a prisoner as a road builder, stevedore, farm hand, wild beast meat dresser, and coal miner). The numerous pen and ink drawings and caricatures by the also talented, introspective, Ben Steele are a special surprise.²⁷

Tears in the Darkness is a vigorously powerful book. The publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, is quoted as calling the book’s new literary reportage style as “Narrative Portraiture.”²⁸ However it is described, *Tears in the Darkness* is a commanding and valuable tool for historians as well as pretty much anyone else who wants to know how things came to be thus.

²⁵ *Id.* at 8-11; Meet Ben Steele, <http://www.tearsinthedarkness.com/ben-steele> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009).

²⁶ NORMAN & NORMAN, *supra* note 1, at 13.

²⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 157; Meet Ben Steele, <http://www.tearsinthedarkness.com/ben-steele> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009) (providing images of some of the drawings and caricatures of Ben Steele).

²⁸ Faculty: Michael Norman, <http://journalism.nyu.edu/faculty/norman.html> (last visited Aug. 18, 2009).

