

## Book Review: Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath

Contributed by Dorian de Wind  
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Auschwitz, the Gulag Archipelago, the Killing Fields of Cambodia. These are names that immediately evoke images of some of the most horrific acts of cruelty and inhumanity.

In their new book, Michael and Elizabeth M. Norman take us to yet another place and another time when men and women "suffered an ordeal of unparalleled cruelty and savagery: forty-one months of starvation, dehydration, hard labor, deadly disease, torture, murder, and journeys on 'hell ships' to the enemy's homeland."

As so many of us have heard and read about, the place was the Philippine peninsula of Bataan; the time: immediately following what many consider the single largest defeat in United States military history---the 99-day battle for Bataan, that ended on April 9, 1942, with the surrender of more than 76,000 troops under American command.

However, that end would only be the beginning of one of the cruelest episodes in the annals of warfare: the infamous Bataan Death March and the ensuing imprisonment of American and Filipino soldiers by the Japanese.

In "Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath," the authors not only eloquently and meticulously describe and document the unspeakable horrors of that infamous 66-mile forced march, but also the mistakes and the sense of shame and failure that preceded that ignominious defeat and surrender, and the years of agonizing brutality that followed for the survivors of the march.

They do so by following the experiences of their protagonist, Ben Steele, a 23-year-old Montana cowboy and aspiring sketch artist who joined the Army Air Corps "to see the world." A year later, just prior to Pearl Harbor, Steele's unit is shipped to Clark Field in the Philippines, to deter Japanese aggression in the Pacific.

Barely a few hours after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan launches a devastating attack on Clark Field. Surviving the attack, Steele subsequently joins the forces that attempt to defend and hold the Bataan Peninsula, but is eventually captured and becomes part of the Bataan Death March, a march that left more than 2,000 American and Filipino prisoners dead.

Miraculously, Steele survives the march only to endure, and survive, three more years of brutalization and hard labor-- - he was twice given his last rites - in Japanese prison camps and aboard "hell ships," before being liberated in 1945.

(Of the approximately 25,000 Americans captured by the Japanese in the Philippines, only 15,000 came home alive at the end of the war).

Equally significant, juxtaposed against Steele's and other American heroes' stories, are "the heretofore untold accounts of a number of Japanese soldiers, the common hohei who struggle to maintain their humanity while carrying out their superiors' inhuman commands."

In fact, this may be the first American work to include an in depth exploration of the Japanese point of view in the war.

To write this superb historical account, the Normans spent 10 years taking a fresh look at the first major land battle for America in World War II. They conducted over 400 interviews with Americans, Japanese and Filipinos, and examined more than 2,800 documents to tell the story of the soldiers on both sides of the battle in Bataan.

The result is a spell-binding, emotive, harrowing and beautifully written book

Early reviews have called the book an important new historical work. Kirkus said the book would "excite discussion in military-history circles" and Booklist called it "an indispensable addition to every World War II collection."

Although the book is classified as history, reviews have noted that its focus on the struggles of ordinary soldiers on both sides, rather than solely on their commanders, makes the story equally relevant today.

Almost as a bonus, the book includes several drawings taken from the sketchbooks of Ben Steele--sketches that were made during his six decades as an artist and teacher of art in Billings, Montana.

The story behind those sketches is itself worthy of a book.

The original sketches were drawn by Private Steele during his years as an invalid prisoner of war in Manila. He made 50 such sketches.

According to the New York Times in "The Memorial of the Mind": "When Navy P.O.W. doctors noticed Private Steele's talent, they suggested that he secretly begin to document their experience. He made 50 such sketches, which an Army chaplain hid in the false bottom of a Mess kit. The chaplain was then shipped to a prison camp in Japan, and en route his vessel was sunk by American aircraft. Though the chaplain survived, Private Steele's sketches ended up at the bottom of the South China Sea."

Ben Steele, now 91, is a retired professor of art from Montana State University.

Michael Norman, a former reporter for The New York Times and a Marine Corps combat veteran of Vietnam, is now a professor of journalism at New York University. He is the author of "These Good Men: Friendships Forged from War, a memoir."

Elizabeth Norman, 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," is a professor of humanities at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

"Tears in the Darkness," according to Kirkus is a story that "says a great deal about the inglorious and rightly unglorified -aspects of war, from the sense of shame that settled on the American commander at the moment of surrender to the terrible years that lay ahead. Drawing on the memories of participants on both sides, the Normans provide a careful history of a ghastly episode that still reverberates."

"Tears in the Darkness" has just been published. It is available at amazon.com and should be available now or very shortly at your local bookstore.