TWO TOURS IN HELL
Bevilacqua, Allan C, USMC
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TWO TOURS IN HELL

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"I hated the Chinese Communists far more than I had hated the Japanese. The Japanese were brutal, but they had character. The Communists had none."
—WO Felix J. McCool, USMC

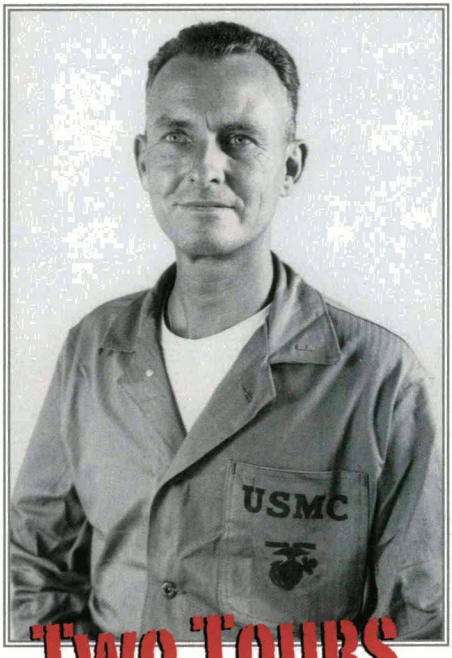
At 1330 on 6 May 1942, Lieutenant General Jonathan M. Wainright, USA, commanding the last remaining American and Filipino forces in the Philippines, surrendered the island fortress of Corregidor in Manila Bay to the overwhelming numbers of LtGen Masaharu Homma's 14th Imperial Japanese Army. Wainright's men had given their commander everything they had. Pounded relentlessly by massed Japanese artillery and totally unopposed air forces, reduced to a ration of 30 ounces of food per day and less than one canteen cup of water, they had fought heroically against all hope. Finally, there was no hope left.

In his last radio message to his Commander in Chief, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wainright said: "There is a limit to human endurance, and that point has long been passed." At the command post of the Fourth Marine Regiment, the island's primary infantry force, Colonel Samuel L. Howard, the regimental commander, ordered that the national and regimental colors be burned rather than surrendered. Then he and his pitifully understrength regiment joined the 11,000 prisoners of war marched into Japanese captivity.

In the sadly depleted ranks of Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, Sergeant Felix J. McCool, with the wounds he had received several weeks before still not completely healed, may have wondered what was coming next. If he did, it is unlikely he could have imagined that this was but the first of two tours in hell.

Hell wasn't long in arriving. Exhausted, malnourished, dehydrated and weakened by sickness and half-healed wounds, the defenders of Corregidor, now prisoners of the Japanese, were slapped, cuffed, kicked and punched into loose ranks by their captors. Japanese guards were quick to prod laggards along with bayonet and rifle butt. Personal possessions, watches, rings, photographs, letters and the like were stripped from their owners. Anyone who resisted found himself on the receiving end of a world-class beating.

Held briefly on Corregidor, the mass of prisoners was ferried to Manila and paraded through the streets while Japanese cameramen recorded what was intended to be their humiliation. The tactic didn't work. The citizens of Manila who were supposed to jeer at the prisoners driven along at bayonet point, instead cheered and applauded, some risking beatings or worse to bring water to the exhausted men.



COURTESY OF ALLEN MARCKMANN

Felix McCool, at Freedom Village, near Musan-ni, Korea, in September 1953, after being released from a Korean POW camp.

The following day, after an overnight stay in Manila's Bilibid Prison, a bad enough place in its own right, they began the nightmare journey to their destination, Cabanatuan Prison Camp. Packed in boxcars, 100 men per car in searing summer heat with no room to sit, they were given no water, there were no rest stops. Men suffering from diarrhea and dysentery voided themselves where they stood. Others, nauseated by the stench, added the acrid odor of vomit to the reeking atmosphere.

"If a man passed out," McCool would remember in later years, "he couldn't fall down. He was held upright by the other men crammed in about him. Several men in our car died and remained on their feet until we carried them out when the train finally stopped."

Cabanatuan was, if not hell itself, at least a suburb. Wooden shacks provided shelter of a sort, but the only bed a prisoner got was a space on the floor. Sanitation was nonexistent. An open trench provided the sole approximation to a head. For every 1,500 men there was one water faucet that was turned off every evening at 1900. Food consisted of rice with maggots in the morning and rice with maggots and vegetable tops at night. Scurvy, beriberi, pellagra, dysentery, dengue fever and malaria were rampant. There was no medical care. Men died at the rate of 40 to 50 a day. Their bodies were dumped into a pit and covered by a thin layer of dirt that all too soon was crawling with maggots and flies.

A man could be beaten senseless for the slightest infraction of camp rules, or just because a guard felt the urge to swing a club. That was how Felix McCool suffered the loss of one of his front teeth. A guard decided he wasn't answering up smartly enough at morning bango (head count).

Escape was not an option. Felix McCool saw brute evidence of this when two men who had escaped and been recaptured were beaten bloody and then decapitated as the entire prisoner population was forced to look on. After that the Japanese divided the prisoners into 10-man squads. If any member of the squad escaped successfully, the remaining mem-

bers of the squad would be executed.

While Felix McCool may have been a prisoner, he did not by any means consider himself defeated. He never thought of himself as anything other than a Marine: a Marine who still had a role to play in the war. By every means at his disposal he would do whatever he could to hurt the Japanese war effort.

Put to work on the construction of a new Japanese airfield, he and several fellow prisoners carefully concealed a large crater with bamboo poles and palm fronds, and then covered the whole with dirt, making it indistinguishable from the packed dirt of the runway. When the airfield became operational, he had the satisfaction of watching a multiengine Japanese transport airplane crash and burst into flame after hitting his field expedient tiger trap. "They [the Japanese] hauled out eight bodies," he remembered.

When not busy as a saboteur, Felix McCool "moonlighted" as a smuggler, bringing in medicine provided by Margaret Utinsky, a courageous American woman. Using her experience as a nurse and forged documents identifying her as a Lithuanian national, this brave woman risked her life setting up a network of equally brave Philippine citizens to send medical supplies secretly into Cabanatuan and the even worse Camp O'Donnell.

At Cabanatuan, Felix McCool served as an "inside man," using his assignment to the farm detail to receive small packages of medicines from Philippine children and secretly delivering them to the prisoner medical staff. Knowing he risked summary execution if he were discovered, he did it anyway. Felix McCool was a man who did not give up. He was determined to resist, determined to survive.

He saw what happened to men who lost that determination. "Guys who fold up quietly, lose all hope of ever seeing home and the people they love, and die very silently during the night. It wasn't the illness or the malnutrition. They would just stop fighting, lose the will to live. The next day you're stomping six inches of dirt down on them." That was one of the memories Felix McCool carried with him.

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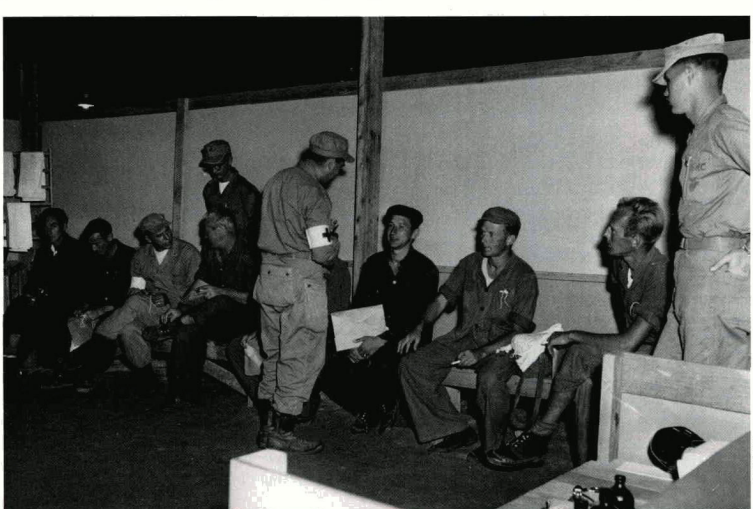
McCool never stopped fighting. Confinement under the most barbaric conditions never broke his will. That was a good thing because what was to come would be infinitely worse than the worst Cabanatuan had to offer. That was what he experienced in July of 1944 when he was among more than 1,500 prisoners herded aboard *Nissyo Maru*, one of the more than 100 deservedly named "Hell Ships" used throughout the war by the Japanese to transport prisoners to the Japanese home islands. *Nissyo Maru* was bound for the port of Moji on the island of Kyushu. Getting there would require every bit of a man's physical and moral courage.

Crammed into a cargo hold with scarcely enough room to move, with the hatch covers dogged down and no ventilation and fed once a day on moldy rice and no water, the prisoners endured torment beyond description. Men driven to madness by broiling heat and all-consuming thirst drank their own urine, slashed their arms to drink their own blood. The dead, and there were many of those, were dragged with great difficulty to one corner where the sickening stench of putrefaction mingled with the suffocating odor of urine and excrement. Fellow prisoner Donald Versaw, a 4th Marines bandsman, remembered: "And the stench! God! The stench!"

Through it all Felix McCool endured, doing what he could to assist fellow prisoners who needed a helping hand, channeling his hatred of his captors into an iron determination to overcome each and every effort to reduce him to a subhuman state. Somehow, someway, he would find a way to fight back and by every means he could manage to carry on the war. He would never give up. He would fight back.

The opportunity to do that presented itself at his ultimate destination in Japan. That was at Fukuoka Camp #7B at Futase, and the Nittetsu-Futase Tanko Kaisha coal mine. McCool was put to work mining coal used to make steel for the Japanese war effort. He and other like-minded Marines wasted no time doing everything they could to put a crimp in that. Several years later Felix McCool talked about that with *Saturday Evening Post* writer Ed Herron.

"Your mind becomes fixed on one point: No matter how little it is I can do to cripple this work, that much may save the life



TSGT JACK ELY

In September 1953, 1stMarDiv corpsmen speak with repatriated Marines awaiting physical examinations at Freedom Village.

"Your mind becomes fixed on one point: No matter how little it is I can do to cripple this work, that much may save the life of an American, keep him from this hell that has a hold on me."—WO Felix McCool

of an American, keep him from this hell that has a hold on me. So you lean hard on the air drill until the bit snaps, then you call the Japanese honcho, shake your head wearily and gesture to the drill. The Nips lose four hours of production while you go back up to the surface to get a new drill bit. That night, over a dinner of rice with weevils and a bit of mouse thrown in for flavor, you compare notes. What did you do today to screw things up? What were you able to do to make life miserable for the bastards?

"Tricks? You've got a hundred of them, and every one born of desperation and hate. Throw a false bottom of timbers into a mine cart; fill it with a shallow load of coal. The result? Lost coal and steel never made. Maybe an American life never lost. Pull links out of a conveyor belt; throw rocks into the gears as often as four times a night. Derail a loaded train of coal cars, short a dangling wire. Act stupid when the honcho comes to see what's wrong. Keep fighting every way you can."

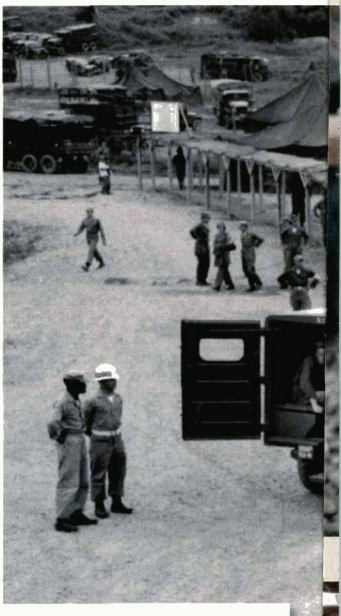
Working 12 hours a day, seven days a week, 1,600 feet under the ground in nothing but a loin cloth … it gets hot down that deep … that was the way Felix McCool continued to fight the war. Enduring the starvation diet, the recreational slappings, cuffings, kickings and beatings by guards known as "Mickey Mouse," "Smiley" and "The Skunk," the freezing nights above ground without a blanket, Felix McCool continued to fight the war.

After 13 months of grueling labor in a coal mine, on a diet barely capable of sustaining life, sweltering below ground and freezing above, Felix McCool was liberated from captivity. He had intestinal parasites and a chronic cough. He weighed 130 pounds. But when he walked out of Fukuoka #7B in September 1945, he went with his head held high.

Time moved on, to 29 Nov. 1950, high in those frigid mountains of North Korea. Did Felix McCool—Warrant Officer Felix McCool—reflect on the fact that eight years before he had been on his way from Shanghai bound for the Philippines and the beginning of a nightmare? Perhaps, but if he did, he never mentioned it. It may have had something to do with the fact that on that day Felix McCool began his second descent into hell.

The relief column commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas B. Drysdale, Royal Marines, attempting to fight its way through to the hard-pressed defenders of Hagaru-ri, was ambushed by an overwhelming Chinese Communist force. The head of the column was able to break through and reach Hagaru-ri. The rear elements successfully fought their way clear of the trap and returned to their base at Koto-ri.

For the center of the column, hemmed in on all sides with more than 50 percent casualties and all ammunition gone, it was a different story. The senior officer, Major John N. McLaughlin, USMC, had no choice but to surrender. The choice was made more compelling since the Chinese commander made it clear that all



In Operations Little Switch, April 1953, and Big Switch, August 1953, ambulance loads of returning prisoners traveled the 15 miles south from the Panmunjom exchange point to Freedom Village to be met by medical personnel. Stretcher cases received a priority. (Photos by TSgt Roland E. Armstrong)

the wounded would be killed on the spot otherwise.

Felix McCool was a prisoner again.

The Chinese were new to the Korean War in that first winter, and while they had infiltrated nearly a half million men across the Yalu River from Manchuria, they had made few, if any, plans for the confinement and control of prisoners.

The small remnant of Task Force Drysdale, little more than 100 Marines, Royal Marines and soldiers, was put on the road for a forced march northward, more than a few of them were barefoot because the Chinese guards had stripped them of their cold-weather shoe pacs. The march to the flea-bitten village of Kanggye, not far below the Yalu River, made almost exclusively at night in subzero temperatures, took four days. The prisoners received neither

food nor water during this time. Not all of them made it. Some, weakened by wounds, malnutrition, hypothermia and pneumonia, fell along the way dead or dying. Their bodies were thrown into a roadside ditch.

Kanggye turned out to be only a temporary stopping point, a miserably poor collection of mud-walled, thatch-roofed hovels from which the equally poor Korean farmers who inhabited them had been ejected. After a brutally cold winter, spent on a diet of the inevitable rice … one skimpy meal each day … when even the daytime temperatures seldom rose above zero, Felix McCool and his fellow prisoners were herded still farther north to their ultimate destination, Pyoktong Camp 5.

Located on a point of land jutting into the Yalu River, Pyoktong Camp 5 was another collection of vermin-ridden mud and thatch huts from which hapless Korean peasants had been evicted. The real assault on men's will began there. Physically degrading conditions, as bad as they were, came in a distant second to the relentless attempt to break men mentally and morally.

Seeing propaganda value in their captives, the Chinese devoted each day to a constant barrage of mandatory communist indoctrination, the objective of which was not to create willing Marxists, but rather to convert prisoners into useful tools through the signing of "peace petitions," highly publicized "voluntary denunciations" of "American war mongering" and "confessions" to "war crimes."

Prisoners were "encouraged" to become "progressives" rather than "reactionaries." They received no medical care beyond that which a small prisoner medical staff was able to provide, and subsisted on a starvation diet of rice. Other forms of "encouragement" included nonstop interrogation sessions, during which a succession of interrogators fired questions at their subjects for as long as two or three days while the prisoner was kept awake by frequent dousings with ice cold water. And there was always "The Hole."

Felix McCool learned about The Hole firsthand when he refused to "confess" to charges of "rape and pillage." The Hole was just that, a pit that was 3 feet square by 3½ feet deep, barely large enough for him to sit naked in a hunched-over position to keep from being speared by the sharpened steel spikes in the lid that was closed over him. Crawling with lice, he sat for three days in a semi-frozen bog of urine and

COURTESY OF AILEEN MARCKMANN

Above: MajGen Randolph M. Pate, Commanding General, First Marine Division, welcomes WO Felix McCool to freedom in September 1953.

Below: WO McCool, March 9, 1959, prior to retirement. Felix McCool had been imprisoned by the Japanese in WW II and by the Communist Chinese for a total of almost six years in his Marine Corps career.

COURTESY OF AILEEN MARCKMANN

fecal matter left by previous occupants.

Released from The Hole, he was once again taken before interrogators who repeated their demands that he "confess." When he refused, he was put back into The Hole. Fellow prisoners called their encouragement: "Keep your chin up, Mac," "Stay tough, Mac." For two more days in The Hole, Felix McCool concentrated on the horrors he had survived aboard the Hell Ship *Nissyo Maru*, determined to survive this horror as well, and stoked a burning hatred of communism that never left him.

In the end, after promising him "lenient treatment" if he informed on his fellow prisoners, which he flatly refused, the Chinese gave up. Upon his return to the main camp, fellow prisoners aided him with every form of assistance they could provide. Captain Clarence Anderson, an Army doctor, gave him clean clothes and the little bit of soap he had. Lieutenant Richard "Ding" Bell, USMC, along with three others, washed the stink and filth off him. A downed Marine aviator, Capt Gerald Fink, sat up most of the night with him while McCool talked and talked and talked, getting it all out of his system.

There were men like that in Pyoktong Camp 5, men like another Marine pilot, LtCol William G. Thrash, and the indomitable John McLaughlin, with whom this writer had the privilege of serving in later years. Never to be forgotten was a magnificent soldier-priest, Father Emil J. Kapaun, an Army chaplain, who risked the most severe reprisals by conducting clandestine religious services and secretly smuggling what little food and medicines he could into the enlisted compound. The chaplain eventually died from the complications of his own untreated wounds. And there was Felix McCool, the man who never quit.

Together they stood fast, resisting every effort of their captors to break them and turn them into propaganda tools against their own country. Together they shivered through the subfreezing nights when ice formed on the interior walls of the filthy hovels where they were imprisoned. Together they formed a bond that couldn't be broken.

In early September 1953, after almost three years of brutal captivity, Felix McCool was repatriated during Operation Big Switch, the prisoner exchange that followed the end of the Korean War. He continued on active duty, serving at posts and stations around the Marine Corps. He received a prize for a poetry book written about his ordeals as a two-time prisoner of war. Marine veteran Jerry Connors remembers him as an instructor in Supply School at Camp Lejeune, N.C., in 1957. In 1958, he was the guest of honor on Ralph Edwards' popular television show "This Is Your Life."

But the brutal physical punishment of confinement in subhuman conditions in two wars took an inexorable toll on his health. In 1960, he was transferred to the Marine Corps' Temporary Disability Retired List, a retirement that was made permanent in 1964.

Felix McCool, who lived through the horrors of Cabanatuan, the *Nissyo Maru*, Fukuoka #7B and Pyoktong Camp 5, died in Dade County, Fla., two days after Christmas 1972. Perhaps it isn't out of line to believe he went to a better place than those he had endured during his two tours in hell.

But the brutal physical punishment of confinement in subhuman conditions in two wars took an inexorable toll on his health.

Author's note: Once again thanks to my friend, Marine veteran Jerry Connors, for bringing to my attention the saga of yet another remarkable Marine. Thanks, Jerry. Special thanks also are due Felix McCool's niece Aileen Marckmann, who provided invaluable personal insights into her uncle's life.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck *contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean War and the Vietnam War. His book, "The Way It Was, A Seabag Full of Humor," is available from the Marine Corps Association book service: www.marineshop.net, or toll-free at (888) 237-7683.*