

# Episode 32 – Richard Watt & Norman Thenell – Episode Script

[Narrator] A XX-year-old American prisoner of war stumbled through the Camp O’Donnel POW camp – searching for water.

In desperation, he prayed for help to find something to drink.

He’d been in camp only a couple of days – long, torturous days filled with malaria attacks that shook his body violently with shills, followed by sweating that left him dehydration.

He needed water ... now.

There was a water spigot in camp. He could see it. He could also see the half-mile long line of POWs waiting to fill their canteens. That one spigot was the water source for more than 14,000 prisoners, and the snaking line often was 2,000 men long. These POWs could wait a good 20 hours for their chance at a drink.

The young POW stood in that line for a good 8 hours, enduring the hot Philippine day. Then the camp’s Japanese authorities shut down the water pump that fed the spigot. He walked away, more dehydrated and with less energy than before getting in line.

He tried to sleep, but the wooden bunks with no matting dug into his back and hips, making rest impossible.

He begged his bunkmates to share their water.

[Ben] “Please, just a sip. What’s the hell’s the matter with you?”

[Narrator] Finally, someone offered him a couple sips from the canteen, but eyed him carefully while warning:

[Bunkmate] “Just a swallow or two, fella.”

[Narrator] His malaria worsened, and he fainted in the middle of camp, coming to only to find himself laying facedown in dirt with other POWs walking right over him. No compassion for yet another fallen soldier.

He crawled to the officer’s barracks. The men inside had water, he could hear the clank of canteens – and there was a rumor that the officers had 5-gallon cans of water. The young POW rested on the ground, his back against a wall under the officer’s window. He yelled with the strength he could muster:

[Ben] “Please, I need water. Can I have a drink. Please.”

[Narrator] No answer came. Could they even hear him? The POW passed out, came to, passed out again.

He awoke in the late afternoon and waited for dark before dragging his malaria-ridden and dehydrated body back to his barracks. There, finally, he saw a friendly face.

[Friend] “You look awful,”

[Narrator] That face told him.

[Ben] “I’m sick.”

[Narrator] The young POW replied. The friend left, returning soon with a few gulps of water and a quinine tablet. The young man took both with gratitude, and finally fell asleep.

This is *Left Behind*.

### **Podcast Welcome**

Welcome to “Left Behind,” a podcast about the people left behind when the US surrendered The Philippines in the early days of WW2. I’m your host and researcher, Anastasia Harman. My great-grandfather Alma Salm was one of the POWs, and his memoir inspired me to tell the stories of his fellow captives.

If you appreciate this podcast and believe it’s important for people to know this relatively unknown part of WW2 history, please consider sharing it with a friend. Word of mouth is the main way people find new podcasts, and by sharing, you’re helping to keep these important stories alive.

In this episode, we’ll enter Camp O’Donnell – which marked the end of the Bataan Death March. I was a rundown former Filipino military training camp designed to accommodate 20,000 men – soon it would be filled by more than 60,000. While the prisoners had access to more food than on Bataan or on the Death March, the camp didn’t have sufficient water or medicine.

Diseases ran rampant, and around 11% of the Americans who entered the camp died there during the 7 weeks they were there. The Filipino POWs remained there for 9 months, where they lost between 40-55% of the men who originally entered.

It was a literal hell on earth.

I’m highlighting 2 young Air Corps men – Dick Watt and Norm Thenell -- and their experiences at O’Donnell. The young POW I highlighted in the opening is not one of these men. I decided to start with his experience, because it illustrates a few points I’m going to make throughout the episode.

On a different note, while researching these two Air Corps men, I discovered geographical connections to both. And I always enjoy discovering that I share connections with the men I research.

So, with that, let’s jump in.

### **Before the War**

[Narrator] 4 days before Thanksgiving in 1917 – on November 25, to be exact -- Norman Paul Thenell was born in Door, Wisconsin – a county located on a slender peninsula that juts out into Lake Michigan, creating Wisconsin’s famed Green Bay.

Norm was the 5 of Alfred and Della Thenell's 6 children. By the time young Norman was 2, the family had relocated across Green Bay to Ford River, Michigan, where father Alfred worked as a farm manager. Both he and his wife were Wisconsin natives, with French Canadian and German roots.

But the westward migration of the Thenell family continued as, by 1930, they had again relocated some 900 miles/1450 km to Bennett County, South Dakota, which is on the border with Nebraska. The family own a farm, which Norm's father and eldest brother worked.

But, by 1935, the Thenell family had relocated once more, this time to Eugene, Oregon, 1400 miles/2250 km from their South Dakota farm.

In June 1937, 19-year-old Norm graduated from Eugene's St. Mary's High School. The local newspaper touted the "large" graduating class and featured school photos of all 20 graduates, including Norman. I've put that article on Instagram and Facebook. The links are in the show description.

In the late 1930s, Norm and his family moved about 100 miles/160 km north to a small farming town about 35 miles/56 km southwest of Portland, Oregon. It's a beautiful, green farming region which I travelled through many times on my way to the Oregon Coast, several years ago when I lived in the Portland metro area.

Norm attended a couple years of college and then, in April 1940, he enlisted in the US Army and became an Air Corps man.

4 months later, in August 1940, Norman's father, Alfred, passed away from a blood clot near his heart. And, within a couple years, Norman's mother had moved south again to Eugene, Oregon.

By June 1941, Norm – a oval faced young man with a high forehead, pointed chin, and slightly mischievous smile – found himself stationed at an Air Corps base in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A friend later described Norm as a delightful person who was eager to serve the people he worked with, in not the most technically competent person.

While in Albuquerque, Norm played third base on the Air Base's baseball team. But soon, world events would take him even further from his Wisconsin birthplace – to The Philippine Islands.

While Norman Thenell was enroute to the south Pacific Island nation, Dick Watt had already been in the tropic paradise for nearly a year.

Richard Golden Watt (who went by Golden as a child) was a Utah native, born to Utah natives William and Maybel Watt. His great-grandparents were Mormon pioneers who crossed the plains to Utah from the American Midwest in the late 1840s and '50s. One set of great-grandparents even crossed the Atlantic from England before setting out into the American frontier.

Golden was born on September 11, 1918, in the small town of Thatcher, in the very northwestern part of Utah, not far from the Idaho border. And – as a side note – my husband's

grandfather grew up in Thatcher. He was 10 years younger than Golden, so I don't know if they knew each other.

Golden spent his childhood on the family's farm. But when Golden was 9 years old, his 34-year-old mother died, leaving behind 5 children, ages 10 years down to 20 months. Within the next couple of years, Golden's father remarried, and that couple had 6 children together.

Golden graduated from Bear River High School in 1936, earning high honors. He was a devout Latter-day Saint and, after high school, served 3 years as a home missionary while also working on the family's farm. But, in August 1940, 21-year-old Golden decided to enlist in the US Army Air Corps. He was sent to training in California, an eventually assigned to the 20 Pursuit Squadron, as support staff.

In late October 1940, the 20 Pursuit Squadron was ordered overseas their training base at Hamilton Field, about 25 miles/40 km north of San Francisco. Pvt. Richard Golden Watt (who seems to have started going by the nickname "Dick" once he joined the Air Corps) lined up with the rest of the squadron assembled in front of the hangar, where the Field's commanding officer addressed them:

[CO] "Men, you are going to the Philippine Islands, some of you never to return. Goodbye, good luck, and God bless you!"

[Narrator] Then the men walked, single file, to waiting trucks, murmuring about the CO's strange words.

[Soldier] "What in the hell is this guy saying, 'some of you never to return'? If that's the case, by damn I'm goin' to change my mind about goin.'"

[Narrator] Sadly, with in a year, the 20 would understand the CO's words all too well.

On November 1, 1940, Dick Watt boarded a ship in San Francisco with the rest of the 20. He was now 22 years old with an oval face, slightly chubby cheeks, and brown hair that had a somewhat unruly curl on the front. He was away from home for the first time and ready to experience the world.

The ship stopped in Honolulu and Shanghai, the young air corps men having the time of their lives on what they came to call their "floating fun house" – especially after female passengers boarded the ship in Shanghai and the Air Corp men now had dance partners and dates. Although, from what I've read, Dick didn't have much experience recommending himself to the ladies.

The ship reached Manila on Thanksgiving Day, 1940, and Dick Watt got his first glimpse of Manila, the Pearl of the Orient. His unit was first stationed at Nichols Field, just outside of the city. At some point, and I'm not certain when this happened, he earned the rank of Staff Sergeant and became the Squadron's clerk.

Dick became friends with Gene Jacobson, a fellow Utahan who likely shared the same Latter-day Saint faith as Dick. When off duty, Dick, Gene, and the other air corps men enjoyed time in

Manila. But Manila was a far cry from the farms of northern Utah or even the streets of Salt Lake City, and the young, rather sheltered men found themselves in unmarked territory.

After eating lunch one day in a Manila restaurant, their waiter suggested they check out the Golden Gate Bar – and luckily he had a taxi waiting just outside to take them there. (Obviously, the restaurant, taxi driver, and bar had an arrangement.) At the bar, the boys ordered drinks, and each man soon had his drink delivered by a personal, attractive, scantily-clad woman.

[Dick] “I want to leave right now,”

[Narrator] Dick whispered to Gene. But Gene, suffering from a little FOMO, wanted to see if anything interesting would happen. And it did.

[Gene] “When one of our group and his lady friend began playing keep away with a prophylactic that I agreed with Dick we should leave. He was actually shaking with fear, and I was plenty nervous. It was clear we knew we shouldn’t be in that place. Both of us grew up in a culture where such behavior was totally unacceptable. We concluded the shaking was a message to us that we were in the wrong place and had better make a hasty exit.”

[Narrator] That quote was from Gene Jacobson, who wrote a memoir of his time as a POW. He’ll pop up several times in this episode, and I’ll feature him in an upcoming episode. Also, to keep this episode as PG as possible, I’ll let you look up what prophylactics are, if you haven’t heard that term.

The 20 Pursuit Squadron moved to Clark Field (about 60 miles/96 km north of Manila) in summer 1941. They remained there until the start of the war, which happened when Japanese aircraft attacked the field on December 8, 1941. Also at Clark Field that day was Staff Sergeant Norman Thenell, from Oregon, who was with the 19 Bombardment Group. He was a supply clerk for the material’s squadron for the airfield’s B-17 bomber group.

### ***During the War***

[Narrator] Staff Sergeants Dick Watt and Norm Thenell retreated with the majority of the Air Corps men to the very south of Bataan Peninsula, to the town of Mariveles. The US aircraft fleet all but destroyed, Air Corps men joined infantry units on Bataan.

Norm sent a cable to his mother the day after Christmas 1942. He told her:

[Norman] “Safe and well, Mom, don’t worry.”

[Narrator] But “safe and well” wouldn’t be Norm or Dick’s status for very long.

When the peninsula fell on April 9, 1942, after three months of battle, Dick Watt became a prisoner of war and endured the looting by Japanese soldiers that it seems most every POW encountered. Dick urgently attempted to keep his glasses. That attempt resulted in a severe beating.

He and his comrades were then taken to the unfinished Mariveles airstrip, where they sat for 3 days in the scorching hot sun, without food or water. The Japanese officials said they were waiting for trucks to transport them out of the battle zone. You see, despite the surrender of Bataan, Allied forces on Corregidor Island had not. And the island's artillery was constantly barraging southern Bataan.

When the group finally started marching across the southern part of the peninsula to the eastern road, they got a first-hand taste of the accuracy of those Corregidor guns. The Japanese guards hurried the marching prisoners along, wanting to get out of the impact zone as quickly as possible. But shells would hit the groups of prisoners, leaving many dead and others wounded. Able bodied men tried to carry their wounded fellows, but after a while, the wounded had to be abandoned. They were likely then killed by the guards. Some of the marchers began to resent the Americans on servicemen as much as they did the Japanese.

From Mariveles, Dick Watt marched about 70 miles/110 km to the town of San Fernando. They were crowded into thatch huts where the guards gave them a canteen cup full of cooked rice and water. It was likely more food than they'd eaten during the entire march. Dick and the rest of the group remained in that hut for 2 more days – without food or water.

On the third day, the Japanese guards marched the men through the town of San Fernando to the railroad station. Filipino civilians cautiously waved to the Americans and flashed them the V for victory sign. They also attempted to slip food to the prisoners when the guards weren't looking.

Here they were stuffed into WWI-era, wooden and metal boxcars that were about 20 feet long and 7 feet high inside—and designed to carry 40 men. The Japanese pushed 100 men into each boxcar, then closed the doors. The men were bunched so closely together that there was no chance for sitting down. The air was thick and stifling. The average high in this area in April is 92 degrees Fahrenheit with high humidity. Inside the boxcars – conditions were even worse.

Some men began panicking, screaming at and begging the guards to let them out. The Japanese guards banged on the sides and the roofs, yelling at the POWs to shut up.

A survivor later wrote:

[Survivor 1] “The train consisted of six or seven World War I-era boxcars. ... They packed us in the cars like sardines, so tight you couldn't sit down. Then they shut the door. If you passed out, you couldn't fall down. If someone had to go to the toilet, you went right there where you were. It was close to summer and the weather was hot and humid, hotter than Billy Blazes! We were on the train from early morning to late afternoon without getting out. People died in the railroad cars.”

[Narrator] It took a while to load the entire train. Finally, after at least an interminable hour baking in the hot sun at the station, the train finally made its very slow 3-hours journey 22 miles/25 km north to the town of Capas. The stifling heat, stench, and rancid air only increased during the ride. Men sick with dysentery had no bathroom facilities and went where they stood; soon everyone

stood in human waste. Men in the middle clawed and punched, trying to make their way to the train door sides where they could attempt to get some air through the sidewall cracks.

At Capas, Watt and the other POWs exited the boxcars. Only then did they realize that several men had died from dehydration and suffocation – and had remained in a standing position (their deaths unnoticed) due to the tightly pressed-together mass of men.

[Narrator] As soon as Watt was out of the boxcar, he walked with other men for several hours in 2 columns to Camp O'Donnell, about 9 miles/15 km away from the rail station. Upon reaching the camp, Watt and the other men were herded into the camp and stood before a platform. A Japanese officer mounted the platform and yelled, in Japanese, for several minutes. An interpreter then translated:

[Interpreter] “You are prisoners of the Imperial Japanese Government! You will be severely punished for what you did on Bataan, and if anyone attempt to escape, he will be found and promptly shot to death! Japan is prepared to fight the Americans for one hundred years if it takes that long! In the end, America will be ours!

“You Americans are nothing but cowards! Japanese soldiers would never surrender to America. You have dishonored your country, your parents, and yourselves. Japanese soldiers would take their own lives before they would surrender! You have shown yourselves to be cowards, and you will be treated with contempt and dishonor!”

[Narrator] In this speech we see that the Japanese intended retaliation on the prisoners for the high numbers of Japanese troops killed on Bataan.

The Japanese were also holding the American and Filipinos to the Japanese standard of honor, which was basically a perverted form of the Samurai code Bushido. Japanese soldiers did believe death preferable to surrender, and that is one of the reasons casualties were so high on Bataan – units literally fought to death rather than surrender when outnumbered.

There definitely was a huge mindset difference between Japanese military philosophy and Allied. Also, the Japanese were making it abundantly clear to the American and Filipinos that they had no intention of abiding by the Genva Convention's rules of warfare.

Also welcoming the men to Camp O'Donnell was Major General Edward King, who was the commander of all Allied forces on Bataan and who had personally surrendered the peninsula. Gen. King had been appointed the American “prison commander.” He was responsible for camp maintenance and the American prisoners' behavior. King met the first arriving groups at O'Donnell with a short speech:

[King] “You men remember this—you didn't give up, I did. I did the surrendering. I surrendered you; you didn't surrender. I'm the one that has the responsibility for that. You let me carry it. All I

ask is that you obey the orders of the Japanese so we do not provoke the enemy any more than he already is.”

[Narrator] These weren't idle words; King blamed himself for what his men had and would endure. He had surrendered Bataan peninsula – without orders from higher ups – in an attempt to save all fighting forces under his command from utter destruction and certain death. He had no idea what fate he was surrendering his men to. And he blamed himself for the rest of his life for what the American POWs suffered because of his decision.

Episode 24 shares details of King's surrender decision and the guilt he continued to carry.

Camp O'Donnell was an over 600-acre, abandoned Philippine Army training camp that was in disrepair. A road split the camp in two. One side had two sections: One for Japanese guards and one for Filipino POWs. The other side was for the Americans and was split into four sections: one each for Army men, Navy men and Air Corps men and the 4th section for the sick, a hospital of sorts.

The camp was designed for 20,000 troops. Eventually, about some 60-67,000 American and Filipino POWs would be housed here. (Exact numbers don't exist because records of deaths during the final days of Bataan fighting weren't kept, so it's not known exactly how many men were captured. And records of Bataan Death March Deaths weren't created at the time of deaths, either. So, historians have to estimate the numbers of fatalities and survivors. The best estimates I've seen put the O'Donnell arrival numbers at 60-67,000 men, Filipino and American.)

There were some barracks with bunks – basically open-air huts made from bamboo and woven roofs and half walls made from plant leaves. The structures provided protection from the harsh sun and other elements, for those lucky enough to claim a spot inside one. A POW recorded in his diary:

[POW] “Shortly after mid-night a storm broke... The rain came down in sheets. The men who were able, ran into the various barracks, while the rest just laid on the ground. Each time the wind died down, you could hear the men coughing and moaning.”

Once they'd arrived at the camp, Watt and the other exhausted POWs slept – stretching out in any spot they could find in the open ground of their assigned camp section. The next day, Watt found his two best friends: Norman Thenell and Gene Jacobson. Gene later wrote:

[Gene] “The three of us entered into a solemn agreement that we would make every effort to stay together and would help each other as much as we possibly could. This agreement and the fact we were together as friends helped to give us the reassurance we needed at that particular time.”

[Narrator] The threesome found a small area they claimed as their own – it was on the ground, underneath an abandoned building. They had no mats to sleep on, but they felt their area was a luxury with room enough to stretch out.



And they finally had food – regular meals with enough food to almost satisfy them. It was monotonous fare – rice and eggplant twice a day with a watery rice soup for breakfast – but it filled their stomachs and gave them strength. Their cooking water came from a nearby, muddy stream, which POW work details collected water from every day.

Drinking water...was harder to come by. The camp had 1 or 2 water spigots. A long line of POWs waiting to fill canteens from the spigot was present all day and night. The line would often be a half mile long, snaking around the camp as a good 2,000 POWs waited up to 20 hours for a drink of water. Some men died while waiting in that line. And sometimes the Japanese would turn off the water pump that supplied water to the spigot, in an effort to save on fuel that ran the water pump.

An Army medic described watching the men in the line:

[Sidney]

“They [stood there looking] at the ground, shuffling their feet. None of them talked. ... Out of their blank eyes came a stare of detachment, of receding within themselves, trying desperately not to be part of all that was around them.”

Around camp, men fainted from malaria, dehydration, and other maladies, only for other POWs to walk over or around them, basically disregarding others in need. The situation at O’Donnell quickly became every-man-for-himself survival, as was illustrated at the very beginning of the episode.

Most men in the camp were sick – at least in some way. Many had scurvy – which made their gums recede, their teeth loosen, and their noses bleed. Malaria, dysentery, and other infectious tropical diseases ran rampant. Medicine was scarce. Many men were too sick and weak to obtain food and water on their own.

Which is why strong groupings – like that of Norm, Dick, and Gene – were so vital for survival. In grouping, one man could wait in that long line for hours with his fellows’ canteens, fill them all, and let another man wait in line the next time. Thus fewer 20-hour line waits and sick friends could be helped.

One day, about two weeks into their Camp O’Donnell stay, Dick, Norm, and Gene were assigned to the daily rice work detail. The able-bodied prisoners at camp were assigned to daily tasks that kept the camp running. Rice detail was a favorite – because it could offer POWs the opportunity to obtain extra food.

The three men boarded different trucks, which took them back to the town of Capas. They then hauled 110 lb/50 kilo bags of rice from warehouses and loaded them onto boxcars or trucks. The trucks took rice back to camp; the boxcars distributed rice to Japanese troops throughout the island and elsewhere.

The POWs were all too weak to pick up a bag alone, so two prisoners would boost the heavy bag onto another POW’s back. If the bag was unbalanced, the POW could fall, the bag landing on top of him. Japanese guards would sometimes kick the fallen man as he struggled to his feet.

At noon, Dick gathered with Norm and Gene to eat their midday rice and eggplant. As they sat, a Filipino woman offered Gene a bottle of Ketchup, and another gave Norm a can of corned beef. This was exactly why they had so wanted to come haul rice – gifts from the Filipino civilians and extra food!

That night, the three men ate the entire can of corned beef, topped with Ketchup. But not all of the ketchup – that was a commodity to be used sparingly to help ease the monotony of the daily rice and eggplant. Gene recalled:

[Gene] “We ate all of the corned beef but limited ourselves on the catsup, thinking of future meals. The meal wasn’t as good as hamburgers smothered in onions, pickles, catsup, and mustard, but it wasn’t bad after just rice and eggplant. We weren’t experiencing any hunger pangs right then, that’s for sure.”

[Narrator] I smile a bit at the American-ness of a good old-fashioned hamburger – somethings never change.

A couple days later, Dick remained at camp with a bad cold, while Gene went on Rice detail again. Norm was picked for guard duty.

Low barbed-wire fences surrounded the camp. They weren’t meant to keep POWs from escaping, rather to just mark the boundaries. Guard towers dotted the camp perimeter, but the Japanese especially relied on American officers to guard the camp – with threat of death.

The American officers assigned enlisted men to walk the camp’s inside perimeter. If anyone escaped on their watch, the enlisted men were told, the man on guard duty would be shot. The American officers further told all the American POWs not to attempt escape – because the Japanese guards would retaliate against the men remaining in camp. Eventually, at other camps, the POWs were put into groups – and if anyone from that group escaped, the rest of the group would be executed. The barbaric strategy definitely discouraged escape.

At day’s end, Gene had a handful of money to share with Dick and Norm – and an interesting story to go with it. Sometimes “rice detail” meant staying at camp to unload trucks full of rice. That day, Gene and 20 other POWs were assigned that part of the work detail.

Taking a break after several hours, Gene noticed men going into a storage building one at a time. He learned that in the back corner was a store of sugar cakes – brown sugar molded into 4-5” “cakes.” The lure of such a treat was too much, and Gene snuck in and took several.

Outside the building, he hid in the shade by the fence shared with the Filipino part of camp. He greedily stuffed sugar into his mouth. A Filipino officer on the other side of the fence called to him, saying he’d pay Gene for the rice cakes. Gene at first declined, until the Filipino officer pointed out that his fellow POWs had thrown caution to the wind and were now basically storming the storage shed to steal sugar cakes. If Gene was caught with the contraband – he would be punished. Hastily, Gene stuffed the cakes through the fence, exchanging them for a wad of bills.

It was just in time, too. As predicted, the Japanese guards discovered the thefts and lined up the men on rice detail. Taking the cakes was stealing from the Japanese Imperial Government; a crime punishable by death, the POWs were told. The guards searched the POWs and, I guess showing some kind of mercy, only severely beat the POWs caught with sugar cakes.

Gene had hidden the money in his shoe, so it wasn't found or confiscated by the guards. And he returned to Norm and Dick with a story and money that he divided between the three of them.

The next day, the three friends were assigned to wood-hauling detail. Wood-hauling detail consisted of loading trucks with bundles of firewood for the camp kitchens.

The truck transports often stopped in nearby towns, so that Japanese soldiers could purchase items. And sometimes, guards would be sympathetic enough to allow the POWs to trade with the civilians. (Of course, if guards back at camp decided to search the returning prisoners, those items would be taken and the men beaten. But...the chance for more food was worth the risk.)

On this day of wood-hauling detail, Norm, Dick, and Gene decided to ride on different trucks – to increase the possibility of having a “kind” guard. It was an extra-large wood order, and the 3 friend worked longer than usual. As they loaded, the Filipino civilians would smile or wink at them, offering what moral support they could without bringing Japanese retribution upon themselves.

Their trucks loaded, the men climbed back into the trucks, perching themselves on top of the wood, and headed back to camp. Their split-up strategy worked, because Gene came back with 2 cartons of 20 packs of cigarettes. Gene paid 4 pesos for the lot; but they could sell each pack for 2 pesos – which means quite the profit.

By this point, money was becoming plentiful on the American side of camp, due to trading with the Filipino side. The Filipino POWs seemed to have a never-ending stream of money coming into their side of camp – I'm assuming from friends and family on the outside. They'd then turn around and buy items from the American POWs, who could obtain items on their work-details out of camp that the Filipino POWs couldn't.

These transactions had to be quick and subtle. When American work details arrived back at camp (in the road area that separated the American side from the Filipino side), Filipino POWs would line the fence, calling to the Americans to find out what the men had. The exchanges were faith based – in the sense that the Filipino had to believe the American was passing over the item they claimed to possess and the American having to believe the Filipino was giving them a fair amount of money. Often these exchanges were too fast to settle on a price. And it all had to be done before the guards got wary and began to punish POWs.

Dick and Norm both came back from that wood-hauling detail with food – a few cans of food and bottles of ketchup. They ate well that night, while Gene divided his cigarette earnings.

The next several days, however, brought a much more unpleasant work detail for Norm, Dick and Gene: the burial detail. The hospital section of the camp was...more like a house of horrors. One O'Donnell survivor said:

[Survivor 1] "Of all the buildings in the camp, none was regarded by the captives with such awe and fatal fascination as was the Hospital...if it couldn't be called a 'hospital,' it was merely a place for men to go to die."

[Narrator] The "hospital" was an empty building, where sick men lay on the floor, which was covered with filth and human waste. Many of these men were sick with dysentery, which causes extreme diarrhea, but the sick men were too weak to get to the latrines. The rancid air in the building was thick with flies. There was little medicine or medical care. Another O'Donnell survivor described:

[Survivor 2] "The men in the ward were practically nothing but skin and bones and they had open ulcers on their hips, on their knees and on their shoulders...maggots were eating on the open wounds. There were blow flies...by the millions...men were unable to get off the floor to go to the latrine and their bowels moved as they lay there."

[Narrator] The POWs took to calling the hospital the "Zero Ward" – because once a man was placed in the "hospital," there was pretty much zero chance of survival. These men, however, were spared the presence of Japanese guards – who avoided the place like the plague. Some POWs waited like vultures to claim dead men's belongings.

Burial detail was not a sought-after work detail, although many men did volunteer because they wanted to bury their friends. The group of men would go out in the morning and dig a large rectangular hole—about 20 feet long and six feet wide and 3 or 4 feet deep, in the hard ground. It was backbreaking work for the already weakened men, and digging was slow. In mid-afternoon they stopped digging. The men would shoulder litters made from doors or shutters or blankets and go to the hospital building.

Once at the building, they left the litters at the door, then, hesitantly, went inside to find the dead. The sick and dead men in the building lay so close together on the floor, which was covered in human waste, vomit, and blood, that there was little room for the burial detail to walk. Finding the dead men was sometimes difficult – many sick men were so near death that they already appeared dead.

Eventually, the open space under the hospital building became a type of morgue. Sometimes bodies would wait there days before being buried, and sometimes dead men waited days before being taken to the morgue. By the time some bodies were buried, they were decomposing, "yellow, balloon-like forms," an army medic described.

The burial detail men drug the dead bodies from the building, all the while worried about contracting the diseases themselves.

The bodies were stacked on the litters, then the POWs lifted the litters again onto their shoulders and stumbled back to the hole they'd earlier dug. The dead bodies were piled into

the grave. An American Grave's Registration Officer recorded where each body was placed. On occasion, members of the burial detail dropped dead from exhaustion.

When the rainy season began in May, the water table rose, and the holes would fill with watery mud before the body could be buried. Some bodies had to be weighed down with rocks to keep them from floating up before being covered with dirt.

Sometimes, when the new burial detail arrived the next morning, they discovered that wild dogs had dug into the graves...and gorged themselves.

The burial details couldn't keep up with the death rate. Approximately 1,500 American men died at O'Donnell. That's close to 40 men per day, although the death rates were higher at the end of May than when they first arrived at camp. On the Filipino side of camp, things were much worse. Some reports say upwards of 400 Filipinos died each day, at least through mid-summer 1942, when medical personnel were brought into improve the situation. In all, more than 22,000 Filipinos died at O'Donnell.

Witnessing this death and dying and the constant beatings for minor infractions angered the POWs. Gene Jacobsen wrote:

[Gene] "There were times when we were angrier at the American politicians for permitting this terrible tragedy to happen than we were at the Japanese for not providing help to those who were so sick and needed it desperately. We wished we could have taken pictures of the Death march and the subsequent conditions in Camp O'Donnell to show to the Americans back home. There were times when those responsible at home for allowing these horrible tragedies were perceived as the greater criminals.

"No government, and especially not ours, should have ever forfeited the lives of thousands of soldiers. Theirs was a crime committed against us and against our families at home. We felt we had served our country as well as we possibly could have under the conditions imposed upon us by those in authority in the United States. While we prayed that the Japanese who so horribly mistreated us would be made to pay, I included in my prayers a request for an accounting by those in our government who had, in effect, turned us over to the Japanese to do with as they pleased."

[Narrator] It angers and sickens me, too. I often say: wars are started with old men's words and paid for with young men's blood. This situation is a perfect example. And here's a couple things to add to that anger: The news of the Bataan Death March was not known to the American public until January 1945, when the first Death March survivors were liberated and started telling the story to the reporters. There was outrage in the US.

But...the US government knew about the Death March as early as September 1943 (about 16 months after it occurred). A march survivor successfully escaped a POW camp and was somehow rescued by a US submarine. This man told his story, but the government never released it.

You see, the US leaders had a “Europe first” strategy – they focused the majority of their resources on conquering Europe, and then would turn their full attention to the Pacific. This is partially why reinforcements were not sent to the men battling on Bataan. So in fall 1943, with war still raging in Europe, US leadership – going up the president himself, who declared the POW’s report “Top Secret” – smothered the Death March story, not wanting the general US population’s outrage to turn attention away from Europe.

So, yeah, the abandonment Dick Watt, Norm Thenell, and Gene Jacobson felt was even worse than they knew.

By now, roughly 6 weeks into their stay at O’Donnell, Dick, Norm, and Gene were filthy from dirt and sweat, with matted hair and beards. They hadn’t bathed since Bataan’s fall, nearly 2 months previous. Their clothing became increasingly tattered and thread-bare from their work details.

Sickness now ran rampant, and any man able to stand on his feet was required to go on the work details.

One day around this time, Norm and Dick were assigned to outside camp work details, while Gene stayed back on guard duty. When the 2 men returned, Gene was gone. He was nowhere to be found in camp, and they soon learned that while they were gone, Japanese guards rounded up 300 men for a special work detail. The prisoners, including Gene, had been loaded onto trucks and headed south for locations unknown.

Gene left word that he’d probably see Norm and Dick very soon. But, they never saw their friend again.

And soon the 2 friends would no longer be at O’Donnell themselves. On June 6, 1942, after about 6-7 weeks at Camp O’Donnell, the American POWs were transferred to the Cabanatuan POWs camps, where they were united with the American POWs captured on Corregidor Island. The Filipino POWs remained at Camp O’Donnell.

Disease and death followed the men to Cabanatuan, which had been opened with the arrival of the Corregidor POWs barely a week before the Death March Survivors arrived. This new camp wouldn’t see a death-free day until December 1942.

Sadly, Stagg Sergeant Dick Watt was among those men. He contracted dysentery at Cabanatuan and died on October 12, 1942, about 5 months after arriving. He was 24 years old. Other than his death date – which is at least somewhat disputed, I don’t have any other information about his time at this camp or of his death.

With Dick’s passing, Norm Thenell was the last member of the threesome from O’Donnell. He would remain at Cabanatuan for two more years. In August 1943, his mother received a form letter from him – stating that he was at Prisoner camp #1, was in good health, uninjured, and

sends his regards. These “letters” were basically fill-in-the-blank telegraph messages that were highly censored by the Japanese.

His mother Della believed her son was in Taiwan. A newspaper article reported:

[Newspaper] “Mrs. Thenell believes the prison camp No 1 to be on the island of Formosa, because of a radio announcement heard by a friend, which said 125 U.S. soldiers, prisoners of war, were being moved from the Philippines to Formosa, listing her son as one of the ten Oregon men in this group.”

[Narrator] But that report was incorrect, as Norm remained at Cabanatuan in The Philippines for another year. Then, on October 1, 1944, Norm was loaded on to a transport ship called the Hokusen Maru. It was a hell ship. Jack Aldrich was also on board this ship, and his description of the ship conditions is in episode 29. One survivor of the hell ship described:

[Survivor] “On October 1, 1944, we boarded a small steamer at Manila. Approximately 600 men were placed in each hold which was about 50x40 feet with coal on the bottom. ... We lost 39 men in all due to heat prostration and lack of water.”

[Narrator] 26-year-old Norman Thenell was among those men. He died on October 6, 1944, from exhaustion, dehydration, and (possibly) pneumonia. His body was placed in the South China Sea. And today his name appears on the Tablets of the Missing at Manila American Cemetery.

### ***After the War & Legacy***

[Narrator] A year later, Norm’s mother Della Thenell received official word of her son’s death from the military. But, by then, she’d already heard the news. A newspaper reported:

[Newspaper] “Mrs. Thenell said that she first heard of her son’s death through a friend of Norman who wrote from a convalescent hospital. The friend told Mrs. Thenell that her son had pneumonia, but was taken aboard the prison ship without regard for his condition and died while crossing the China Sea.”

A couple months after receiving the death notification, Della received her son’s final letter—written at least 16 months earlier. Norm said he was in good health and reported receiving his mother’s package. He concluded the letter:

[Norman] “hoping all are well, and love to all. God be with us until we meet again.”

[Narrator] Back in December 1942, two months after Dick Watt had passed away, his family received official word from the US Army that he had been captured and was now a Prisoner of the Japanese in the Philippine Islands. It was the first news they’d had about him since his last letter home had reached them in April 1942. All they knew is that Bataan had fallen and their son was on that peninsula.

On July 4, 1943, another telegram arrived at the Watt home, this one bearing the unbearable news of Dick's death at the Cabanatuan Prisoner of War camp in the Philippines. Several local newspapers reported his death date as June 29, 1943, mere days before that telegram had arrived at the Watt home. I'm not certain where this information came from, but that date became his official death date on all his military records.

That is, however, until 1945 when Dick's death date was updated in official military records to October 12, 1942. By 1945, the Army had access to the Cabanatuan POW Camp death reports and were able to update Dick's death date and cause.

More than 7 years after Dick's death, on November 10, 1949, his remains returned to Utah, arriving in his hometown by railcar. The community honored him with a memorial service, complete with full military honors from the American Legion and VFW.

Today Dick Watt rests at the Thatcher-Bothwell City Cemetery in northern Utah. His grave marker lists his death date a June 29, 1943 – which was done, according to the military's headstone records, at request of Dick's father, William. This detail makes me wonder whether William Watt was ever made aware of his son's true death date or if he simply chose to remember his son's passing as happening in the summer of 1943.

In 2004, Dick and Norm's friend Gene Jacobsen wrote a memoir of his war experience – which is where I found the stories about Norm and Dick. Without this memoir, I wouldn't have been able to tell their stories. And Gene I'll share the rest of Gene's war story in an upcoming episode.

While Dick Watt and Norm Thenell were sugaring through the Death March and Camp O'Donnell, more than 12,000 Filipino and American servicemen were under siege on the island fortress of Corregidor – the last bastion of freedom remaining The Philippines.

More on that next time.

This is *Left Behind*.

## **Outro**

Thanks for listening! You can find pictures, maps, and sources about Dick Watt, Norm Thenell, and Camp O'Donnell on the Left Behind Facebook page and website and on Instagram @leftbehindpodcast. The links are in the show description.

If you enjoy this podcast, please subscribe so you'll know when I drop a new episode and leave a review wherever you listen to podcasts.

*Left Behind* is researched, written, and produced by me, Anastasia Harman.



- Voice overs by: Tyler Harman and Mike Davis
- Dramatizations are based on historical research, although some creative liberty is taken with dialogue.

I'll be back next time with the story of the 4 Marines on Corregidor Island.

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