

# Episode 36 – Curtis Beecher – Transcript

## Cold Open

[Narrator] Lt. Col. Curtis Beecher, a 44-year-old career Marine and veteran of WW1 action with graying hair, a round jaw line, and a pronounced Roman nose, looked out over Corregidor Island's tail stretching out in front of him.

He'd climbed to a vantage point on a late December day, where he could see over the jungle foliage and inspect the area his Battalion had been ordered to defend. Some areas had cliffs dropping to the water's edge. The beach areas, though – that's where enemy forces could easily land, and their troops come to shore.

[Beecher] "That's got to be around 2 miles of beach to defend."

[Narrator] Beecher lamented to his second in command.

[Beecher] "And we've got 350 Marines to do it."

[Officer] "Yes, Colonel,"

[Narrator] The younger officer replied.

[Beecher] "It's an appalling task, but what else could we do. We'll need barbed wire barriers. Bunkers and tunnels. And tank traps if, God forbid, the Japanese manage to land tanks here."

[Narrator] His second-in-command scribbled down Beecher's words.

[Beecher] "I don't think we'll have enough men or supplies to achieve this, so we'll have to get scrappy. Use our ingenuity to come up with other ways to defend these beaches."

[Narrator] Their initial plans made, Beecher and the other man climbed down from their perch, heading for the protection of the Malinta Tunnel, when Beecher thought of something else:

[Beecher] "And we'd better get the men into their field positions quickly, before another wave of bombers comes over."

[Narrator] Beecher rounded up the Marines of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and explained the situation. They had to get started, build quickly, and avoid enemy bombardment – working through the night if needed.

Because these 350 US Marines would be the first line of defense between a Japanese invasion and the fall of Corregidor Island.

This is *Left Behind*.

# Podcast Welcome

## *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.

Today’s episode covers the career of US Marine Curtis Beecher – who started out as an enlisted man fighting in the trenches during WW1 and ended his war-time experiences at a POW camp in Korea. During his 3.5 years as a prisoner of war, Beecher was the American camp commanding officer and responsible for the wellbeing and lives of his men.

We’ll get a look at how the US Marines – tasked with defending Corregidor’s beaches from Japanese landing forces – prepared for the daunting task and get a glimpse of life on Corregidor Island while the battles were raging on Bataan.

While researching Beecher’s life, I got in contact with his niece, Jane Cullins – who’s the daughter of Curtis’s youngest sister and who met him when she was very young. We’ll hear from her throughout the episode.

Let’s jump in.

## POW’s Life Story

### *Before the War*

[Narrator] In 1897, on October 28, Curtis Beecher was born in Chicago, Illinois. He was the oldest child (and only son) of Bryant and Grace Beecher’s six surviving children.

By 1910, when Curtis was 12 years old, the Beecher family had moved to Battle Creek, Michigan. Father Bryant worked as a farmer. Curtis’s niece Jane Cullins told me about the history of the Beecher family farm in Battle Creek. When she refers to “my grandfather,” she’s speaking of Curtis’s father Bryant. Also, “the mother” refers to Bryant’s mother, Curtis’s grandmother.

[Jane 1] “My grandfather was a newspaper writer. But my grandfather's father had a farm in Michigan near Battle Creek. After the mother died, [Curtis’s family] went to the farm. So [Curtis] grew up living on that farm.”

[Narrator] In 1914, Curtis was a sophomore at Battle Creek Central High School, where he played baseball and football. The school’s yearbook said that “Beech” was:

- [Yearbook] "A tackle worth of note, who received and delivered many a blow which was not soon dismissed from memory."
- [Narrator] But Curtis, even at that young age, wasn't a scholar. Here's Jane again:
- [Jane 2] "A very interesting thing about my uncle Curtis, he would have admitted himself, he wasn't a very good student. But my grandfather's sister was a very wealthy woman, and they traveled all over the world. She had a son the same age as Uncle Curtis. And so, he, for about two years, traveled the world as a teenager. He learned a lot of things and he went to school there and learned some languages, which came in real handy when he was in the service."
- [Narrator] As World War I swept across the globe, 19-year-old Curtis joined the US Marine Corps in April 1917. By fall of that year, he was in France with the American Expeditionary Force (that was the name for the US forces on the Western Front during WW1). By June 1918, he was a platoon commander in the 6th Marines. A couple months later, Curtis received a battlefield commission and promotion to 2nd Lieutenant, which must be a testament to his bravery and leadership.
- He participated in many of the most prominent WW1 battles, including in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, which lasted 47 days and was part of the final Allied offensive of WW1 – ending on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. It remains the deadliest campaign in US history, claiming more than 300,000 casualties, including Lt. Beecher, who was wounded in action.
- For his service in the Great War, Lt. Beecher
- [Summary] "was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with a Silver Star for bravery in leading his platoon and later received the Silver Star medal."
- [Narrator] I posted a picture of his WW1 helmet on Facebook and Instagram. The links are in the show description.

By 1920, Curtis, at 22, was back in the United States, residing with his family in near Chicago, and a year later was promoted to the rank of Captain.

He served with the Marines in Haiti from 1923 to 1926, then in Shanghai, China, from 1927-1929. Also in China at the same time was Frank Pyzick, a US Marine who I highlighted in Episode 1. Pyzick's and Beecher's service would entwine several times both before WW2 and during.

In May 1931, 34-year-old Curtis married divorcee Juanita Archambeau, in Las Vegas. She was a couple years older than Curtis. Together they spent the 1930s at various Marine posts throughout the United States, while Curtis climbed the Marine officer ranks. By 1940, 42-year-old Curtis Beecher was a Lt. Colonel and the couple lived at the Marine Reservation in Quantico, Virginia.

Lt. Col. Beecher returned to Shanghai, China, in August 1941, to serve with the 4th Marines, who had remained in the city since 1926, when Beecher first served there with them. He became commanding officer of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. (Frank Pyzick was also again in Shanghai, part of the Headquarters Company.) However, just a few months after Beecher arrived in China, on November 14, 1941, President Roosevelt ordered the US 4th Marines to The Philippine Islands.

Beecher later recalled:

[Beecher #1] “One could sense the tenseness in the air. There was a general feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty in the air.”

[Narrator] Beecher and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion boarded the ship USS Madison, which arrived at Olongapo Navy Yard on Luzon, which is The Philippines largest Island, on November 30, 1941. Historian J. Michael Miller wrote:

[Miller #1] “Unloading the 1st Battalion became a mass of confusion as every non-commissioned officer tried to be the first to get his unit's gear on the lighter. Lieutenant Colonel Beecher, commanding 1st Battalion, observed the scene from the railing of the Madison and sent for one of his non-commissioned officers. Beecher told him, "Duncan, go down and straighten that mess out. Get this stuff off and move it." Word of Beecher's displeasure was quickly passed, and the unloading progressed smoothly.”

[Narrator] While stationed in Shanghai, the 4th Marines went without regular field training, so the regiment’s leadership soon created a field operations training schedule, which called for Beecher’s 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion to take up residence at Mariveles on the very southern tip of Bataan Peninsula.

Early on the morning on December 8, 1941, a mere 9 days after arriving in The Philippines, Beecher led his men to the Olongapo dock. Here’s historian J. Michael Miller again:

[Miller # 2] “The 1st Battalion was awakened at 0300 to be ready for the daylight move to Mariveles at 0730. Power for the battalion's lights was cut with no explanation, and it readied for the move in blackness. ... The Marines were leaving the dock at Olongapo on board the USS Vaga when Beecher was formally informed of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The battalion sailed for the section base at Mariveles without air support. Beecher was concerned about a possible Japanese attack, but the 1st Battalion arrived without incident at 1130.”

[Narrator] And thus went day 1 of WW2 for Beecher.

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

[Narrator] 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion remained at Mariveles during the first few weeks of the war, doing field training and fortifying the naval base there, including constructing air raid shelters. In those first few weeks of war, Japanese air forces didn’t attack Mariveles, instead, as you likely already know, focusing on airfields and crippling the US air force presence on the islands. But the Marines weren’t completely immune from the symptoms of war. Historian Miller wrote:

[Miller #3] “On 10 December, a Japanese force was reported approaching along the Bagac Road within 20 miles of the Section Base. Lieutenant Colonel Beecher without delay deployed the 1st Battalion into blocking positions along the highway. Only two Marines were left behind, a cook and the battalion armorer, ... who guarded the camp with two .50-caliber machine guns. The reports turned out to be false alarms and the battalion returned to camp.”

“An average of six air-raid alarms occurred daily. Lieutenant Colonel Beecher at first ordered his men to scatter at the sound of the air-raid siren but had to rescind the order as no work could be accomplished under the constant sirens. Work continued, siren or no siren. Air-raid shelters were constructed, instructions issued in the event Japanese aircraft should appear, and blackout procedures were strictly followed.”

[Narrator] But no planes ever appeared over Mariveles. And, in late December, while most US forces on Luzon were withdrawing to Bataan Peninsula, Lt. Col Beecher and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion moved from Bataan Peninsula to the island fortress Corregidor, just a couple miles offshore from Mariveles.

Corregidor Island was home to the US Army’s Ft. Mills, which guarded the entrance to Manila Bay. The island is shaped like a swimming tadpole, with a rough circle (the head) on one end and a narrow tapering tail coming off it. The head is roughly 1-1.5 miles in diameter, and the tail is about 3 miles long. I explained the island’s topography in detail in the previous episode, number 35, and I’ve added a couple maps of the island to Facebook and Instagram.

Beecher’s Battalion 1 arrived on the Rock, as the men fondly called the island, on December 28, completing their transfer around 10 pm. Lt. Col. Beecher watched a young private carrying a 96-pound box of ammunition down the dock. He stepped up to the young, sweating Marine and took the box out of his hands. Beecher then turned and dropped the box into the water, telling the private:

[Beecher #2] “You’re carrying blanks. We’re not using them anymore.”

[Narrator] 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was joining the other two 4<sup>th</sup> Marine battalions, swelling Corregidor’s population to more than 10,000 servicemen and women. The 4<sup>th</sup> Marines brought 6 months of rations for 2,000 men, ammunition, a 2-year supply of clothing, and medicine and equipment for Corregidor’s 100-bed hospital.

While 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion’s enlisted men took up residence in the Middleside Barracks; Beecher likely found accommodations in the Officers’ Quarters in the area known as Topside, which also boasted an officer’s golf course and a movie theater.

At 11:00 am, the day after 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion arrived on Corregidor, an air raid sounded. The Marines, as well as the Coast Artillery men they now bunked with, ignored the warning, as had become habit. But soon Japanese bombers and fighters appeared and attacked the island for the next 2 hours.

The Middleside barracks and the officers' area were destroyed. (Episode 35 details this bombing attack on Corregidor.) Thus, the next day, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion found a new home: field positions on Corregidor's tail portion.

There is a large drop in elevation where the island's head and tail meet. This conjunction point is flat and at sea level, but then it climbs in altitude to form Malinta Hill. The US had built a labyrinth-like tunnel system into the hill, with a main tunnel cutting west to east directly through the bottom of the hill. From the eastern tunnel entrance to the island's tail end, it's about 2 miles. And 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was ordered to cover beach defenses for that entire portion.

Beecher wrote:

[Beecher #3] "The task confronting us was appalling. With 350 men there were 3,500 to 4,000 yards of possible landing beach to defend."

[Narrator] But the daunting task didn't stop Beecher, he got his men right to work. Historian Miller related:

[Miller #4] "Work began rapidly on construction of beach defenses. ... The Marines began to build barbed wire barriers, tank traps, bunkers, and trench systems. Working parties began at first light in the morning and halted only at noon for a rest period in place of lunch. The work progressed well, slowed only by Japanese shelling, bombing, and darkness."

[Narrator] The Japanese bombed Corregidor for 5 days straight, at least 2 hours per day, for the first few days of January. Thereafter through mid-March, they bombed the island only sporadically, allowing 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion to continue their beach-defense preparations more easily. Let's go back to Miller again:

[Miller #5] "Tools were carefully guarded. As [one] Lieutenant ... remembered, "We took care of our tools like gems." The Marines ran short of sandbags, so discarded powder cans from the coastal artillery guns were filled with dirt and used in their place. Bottles were filled with gasoline to make "Molotov cocktails," to be dropped over cliffs on the Japanese. Empty gasoline drums were filled with dirt and rock and set up as tank traps on trails leading from the beach. Each position was carefully camouflaged for protection and dummy positions were also constructed to attract enemy fire.

"Marines of Company B located Army aircraft bombs, and wooden chutes were constructed to drop the bombs on landing areas. A second line of defense and reserve positions were also built behind the front-line beach defenses, with the hope of eventual reinforcement."

[Narrator] The 4<sup>th</sup> Marines weren't the only ones fortifying the island, The Army Corps of engineers were hard at work reinforcing installations and other areas of the island where the bombing runs had shown weaknesses. They built defenses for a gasoline storage area with 2 feet of reinforced concrete, put protections around wells (vital sources of fresh water), and created tank obstacles – namely, concrete posts with steel rails.

The engineers taught the various gun batteries how to build tunnels – and the men got to work, perhaps even overeagerly so. One artillery battery commander observed his men hard at work on a protective tunnel and said:

[Commander] “We have to be at our gun practically all the time, so we may not be able to spend too much time, if any at all, in a tunnel.”

[Narrator] Even the Marines caught the tunnel-building fever and dug tunnels and made overhead protections in their beach defenses. An Engineer stated:

[Engineer] “It is safe to venture a guess that if all the tunnels constructed on Corregidor after hostilities commenced were connected end to end the resultant summation would not be less than two miles.”

[Narrator] Two miles of new tunnels – on a 4-mile island. And that didn’t include the maze of existing tunnels already in Malinta Hill and underneath the Topside portion of the island.

Beyond digging, there wasn’t a whole lot for the men on Corregidor to do during the war’s first 2-3 months. In addition, supplies – food, medicine, and other things – began to grow short, as was the case on Bataan. This was largely due to two factors: (1) the Japanese naval blockade of The Philippine Islands made getting supplies very difficult (although some planes and submarines survived the gauntlet, and we’ll talk about them in upcoming episodes.) (2) the Pacific fleet, of course, had been greatly damaged at Pearl Harbor, so there were few ships to send to fight through the blockade ... That is, if the US government had chosen to take that course of action, which it didn’t.

Pacific Theater historian Louis Morton wrote:

[Morton #1] “Life on the [island] settled into a dreary routine. When the men were not building fortifications or going about their daily chores, they had little to do. Complaints were frequent and often dealt with the subject of food. The ration had been cut in half on 5 January, at the same time it had been cut on Bataan. The more enterprising of the men found ways of their own to increase the amount and vary the monotony of the ration, but the opportunities were fewer than on Bataan. Sunken or damaged barges washed close to shore offered a profitable field for exploitation during the early days of the campaign. One unit filled its trucks with a cargo of dried fruits salvaged from one such barge...

“Some even managed to procure liquor in this way. One [barge] had been loaded with whiskey from the Army and Navy Club. It was sunk in shallow water and many of the men spent their off-duty hours diving in the oil-coated waters in the hope of bringing up a bottle. Before the military police took over to relieve the lucky divers of their catch as they reached the shore, a large number of soldiers had laid in a stock of the precious commodity. [The Philippines president’s] yacht is also said to have supplied at least one unit with a store of fine wine. When it was being unloaded one dark night, it is reported that an officer directed the dock hands to load two trucks simultaneously. When the job was finished, one of the trucks silently disappeared into the night with its valuable cargo, never to be seen again.

“Life everywhere on the [island] went underground and the symbol of the new mole-like existence was Malinta Tunnel. “Everyone who doesn't need to be elsewhere,” observed [a captain], “was in a tunnel—chiefly Malinta.” During the bombings it was always jammed with Americans and Filipinos who huddled back against the boxes of food and ammunition stacked along the sides to a height of six feet. ...

“Not all men were brave, and each garrison had its share of “tunnel rats,” the taunt reserved for those who never left the safety of Malinta Tunnel. Such men were said to have “tunnelitis,” a disease characterized by a furtive manner and the sallow complexion associated with those who live underground. For these men, those outside the tunnel had only contempt, tinged perhaps with envy.”

[Narrator] One serviceman – who obviously wasn’t a tunnel rat – wrote of his feeling toward the men suffering from “tunnelitis”:

[Serviceman] “We say ... they will lose tunnel-credit if they are seen outside the tunnel. And we josh them about the DTS medal (Distinguished Tunnel Service) ... if they gather plenty of tunnel credits. As opposed to shell-shocked, we say of confirmed 'tunneleers' that they are shelter-shocked.”

[Narrator] An anonymous Corregidor Marine referenced this subterranean life in alternate lyrics for the Marine’s Hymn:

[Hymn] “First to jump for holes and tunnels  
And to keep our skivvies clean,  
We are proud to claim the title  
of Corregidor's Marines.

Our drawers unfurled to every breeze  
From dawn to setting sun.  
We have jumped into every hole and ditch  
And for us the fightin' was fun.

We have plenty of guns and ammunition  
But not cigars and cigarettes,  
At the last we may be smoking leaves  
Wrapped in Nipponese propaganda leaflets.

When the Army and the Navy  
Looked out Corregidor's Tunnel Queen,  
They saw the beaches guarded  
by more than one Marine!”

[Narrator] As February turned to March, the tunneleers had more reasons to stay underground. Japanese artillery began shelling Corregidor Island from stations near Cavite, which was about 9 or so miles across Manila Bay. The shells could reach Corregidor, but they did not do significant damage. And, overall, the first 2 months of 1942 were relatively quiet on Corregidor.



Then, in late March, Japan's General Homma, who was over all Japanese forces in The Philippines, began a heavy aerial bombardment of Bataan and Corregidor that preceded his last infantry assault on Bataan. His plan called for heavy bombardment of Bataan and Corregidor starting March 24, and one of the major objectives of that bombardment was to cut the supply line between Bataan and Corregidor. The plan called for a small number of planes to bomb Corregidor every few hours around the clock

[Homma] "in order to demoralize the enemy and to boost the fighting spirit of our army."

[Narrator] In addition, Japanese artillery fired their large guns at Corregidor every half hour throughout the night. The Marines – especially those encamped on Corregidor's tail, and thus closer to the Japanese artillery in Cavite -- named the artillery cannon "Insomnia Charlie," and indeed that was the Japanese goal – to prevent the island's defenders from getting rest, thus furthering demoralization.

The air attacks began on March 24. An air-raid siren sounded at 9:24 am, a minute later, the first of 9 bombers flew over Corregidor, dropping 550- and 1,100-pound bombs. The first wave of attacks lasted nearly 2 hours. Five air raid alarms sounded that day, and all were followed by at least some amount of bombing. The final all-clear came at 10:34 pm – and then it started all over again early the next morning.

The pattern of bombing was similar the entire 9 days of aerial attacks. Not all the attacks were hours long or included massive bombs, small groups of planes flew over Corregidor every 2-3 hours, all day and all night,

[J. Leader] "to carry out the psychological warfare and destroy the strong points, without failure."

[Narrator] Historian Louis Morton wrote:

[Morton 2] "For the men on Corregidor it seemed as though they were living "in the center of a bull's-eye." During the last week of March there were about sixty air-raid alarms lasting for a total of seventy-four hours. Bombings begun in the morning were usually resumed in the afternoon and again at night. Since the Japanese planes were now based on Clark Field or near Manila, they were able to remain over the target for longer periods than they had during the first bombardment in December...

"The effect of so heavy a bombardment ... might well have been disastrous had not the men ... built underground shelters. They had also learned how effectively sand could cushion the blow from a bomb and had made liberal use of sandbags. "It used to be hard to get the men to fill sandbags," wrote one officer. "Now it is hard to keep them from laying hands on all the sandbags available and filling them when those to whom they are allotted aren't looking." The small number of casualties is ample evidence of the thoroughness with which the Corregidor garrison had dug in since the first attack on 29 December."

[Narrator] The damage from this week-long bombardment was not as extensive as it could have been – due to all of Corregidor’s tunnel-digging and bombproofing. But most buildings above ground were demolished.

Then, in the first days of April, the Japanese turned their full attention on Bataan – and Corregidor had a short reprieve.

But, after Bataan surrendered on April 9, the Japanese turned that full attention to Corregidor. They brought their larger artillery guns to the southern part of Bataan, where they could much more easily reach Corregidor (and were also in range of Corregidor’s guns.) And the final siege of Corregidor began.

During the last days before Bataan fell, Corregidor saw its population increase as Navy men and some Philippine Scout units, as well as anyone who escaped from Bataan to Corregidor, arrived on the island – most of them were assigned to Marine units to assist in beach defenses. (Episode 26 details two last minute escapes from Bataan to Corregidor, which included that of my own great-grandfather Alma Salm.)

With all these new additions, Lt. Col Beecher found himself commanding 1,024 men – 360 Marines and roughly 500 Filipino soldiers, 100 American sailors, and 100 American soldiers. These men were armed with pre-WW1 rifles, grenades, 12 machine guns, and a smattering of other weapons. The men had been able to scrounge a few .50-calibur machine guns off immobilized ships.

Historian J. Michael Miller wrote that by May 1:

[Miller 6] “The Japanese shelling caused serious damage to the beach defenses, and casualties among the officers and men of the battalion, but most of the heavy weapons were still intact. ... Far more serious was the loss of the water supply and a complete loss of the field communication lines. Caches of rations were buried or received direct hits from lucky shells....

“The area held by the 1st Battalion was heavily wooded when first occupied in December and dotted with coastal artillery barracks and other buildings. By early May the area was completely barren of vegetation and scattered with the ruins of shelled buildings. [One] sergeant ... later remembered, "there was dust a foot thick," covering the entire area.

“On 1 May, Beecher had reported to Colonel Howard that the beach defenses on the eastern portion of the island were practically destroyed by the Japanese bombardment and that repair under the continuing fire would be impossible. Beach wire had been repeatedly holed, tank traps filled in, and all the heavy guns of the 1st Battalion were in temporary emplacements as the initial ones had been spotted and destroyed by the enemy. The Japanese fire was so accurate that the men could be fed only at night.

“Colonel Howard told this to General Wainwright, who said only that he would never surrender. When Howard told Beecher this, he replied,”

[Beecher 4] "I pointed out to Colonel Howard that nothing had been said about surrender; I was merely reporting conditions as they existed in my sector."

[Narrator] 5 days later, on the night of May 5-6, 1942, Japanese ground forces landed at North Point on Corregidor – within Beecher’s 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion’s area of defense.

At 11:00 pm on May 5, Japanese landing boats were spotted offshore. With field communications completely down, Beecher sent a runner to all his company commanders alerting them of the landings. Soon, however, Japanese infantry were landed and moving inland, and the Marines needed more reinforcement to halt the advance. Beecher activated his reserve battalion of 30 Philippine Scouts, and Marines from the Malinta tunnel were sent to boost the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion’s strength.

I’m going focus on the details of this invasion in a few episodes from now, so to be brief here, the Japanese landing forces continued to push westward toward Malinta Hill. They landed their tanks around 8:30 am on May 6 – and that was pretty much the end of the beach defenses on Corregidor. The Marines – who had suffered heavy casualties in the ground combat – retreated to the relative safety of Malinta Hill. Historian Miller wrote:

[Miller 7] “Lieutenant Colonel Beecher moved outside the tunnel, shepherding his men back to Malinta hill. He knew his men would be thirsty and hungry and ordered [a sergeant] to "See what you can do about it." Duncan broke open the large Army refrigerators near the entrance to Malinta Tunnel, and soon was issuing ice-cold cans of peaches and buttermilk to the exhausted Marines.”

[Narrator] At 12 noon, the white flag was raised over Corregidor. Lt. Col. Curtis Beecher and what remained of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were now prisoners of war.

The Corregidor POWs were first encamped at a small coastal area on the island called the 92<sup>nd</sup> Garage located on the island’s tail. They were there for about 3 weeks, with little food and practically no water. They slept under scraps of canvas tarps, which also offered some protection from the sun.

From there they were shipped, trained, and marched to the Cabanatuan POW Camps about 85 miles/136 km north of Manila. Curtis Beecher became the American camp commander there from June 1942 through October 1944.

As the American camp commander, he was tasked with making sure that the POWs – who were mainly Americans -- followed camp rules. He also selected other officers to help oversee camp duties and needs, including Maj. Frank Pyzick, who was also captured on Corregidor and acted as the Statistical and Personnel Officer at the camp. Thanks to this organization, there are quite a few existing records about life at Cabanatuan, which was the largest of Japan’s WW2-era POW camps.

In October 1944, after nearly 2.5 years at Cabanatuan, Beecher, Pyzick, and around 1,500 other POWs – the healthiest and most robust of the 2,000 or so POWs remaining at Cabanatuan – were removed from the camp and sent to Manila to await transportation to work camps in Japan.

On December 13, 1,620 POWs were jammed into 3 holds of the transport ship Oryoku Maru. I’ve talked about this disastrous journey in several episodes. In fact, Beecher is the 9<sup>th</sup> POW I’ve highlighted who was part of this atrocious war crime. Only 3 of these 9 survived the journey: Beecher, Maj. Frank Pyzick, and Lt. Chet Brit (from Episode 34).

During the first couple of days, Lt. Col. Beecher was the American commanding officer in the Oryoku Maru’s forward hold. The men were packed in so tightly and the air so hot, humid, and rancid, that the men began to yell and scream and attack each other to get closer to air sources. As CO, Beecher tried to calm the men and maintain some semblance of order. But his work did little; no, it was the American planes attacking the ship that really quieted the men.

Those planes destroyed the Oryoku Maru, and the prisoners had to swim to shore. They were eventually loaded onto 2 other ships, bound for Formosa (present-day Taiwan). One of those ships was attacked by American planes while at a harbor there; and the survivors were transferred to a 3<sup>rd</sup> ship, the Brazil Maru.

The death rate for this trip was astronomically high, and by the end, Lt. Col. Beecher was the defacto commanding officer. A newspaper later reported that

[Newspaper 1] “Commanding his men, he believes, helped him keep his mental stability.”

[Narrator] And mental stability was absolutely something he would have needed on this 48-day journey – to be able to endure some of the most inhumane conditions imaginable.

As the ship finally neared Japan, Beecher, who by this time was, in the words of an aide, “gaunt, matted, grey, and weak,” was approached by a serviceman, who asked:

[serviceman] “What are you thinking about, Colonel?”

[Beecher 5] “I was remembering a fellow I heard talk ... after the last war. He described how the Armenians made their march of death with the Turks driving them along. I was wondering whether it could have been any worse than this.”

[Narrator] Their clothing – mainly rags used as loincloths by the end of the journey – offered no protection from the freezing temperatures as the ship headed north in mid-winter. And there were no blankets in the ship’s hold, so the POWs slept close together, holding hands with other men for additional warmth. Beecher later told a newspaper:

[Beecher 6] “When one turned over, we all turned.”

[Narrator] The ship arrived at Moji, Japan, on January 29, and the Japanese officials who met the ship there were themselves stunned by the appearance of the 550 (of the original 1,620) men still alive. A survivor stated:

[Survivor] “They tried hard not to show it, but you could see that they could not help being shocked.”

[Narrator] The Japanese officials asked to see the American commanding officer.

[Newspaper 2] “When Lt. Col. Beecher walked out, his shirt clotted with filth, a dirty towel wound around his brow, his beard and hair hanging down, and gave them a feeble sort of salute, you could see that the Moji officials were taken aback. ...

“It was midwinter, the temperatures just above freezing. The Japanese lined the prisoners up on the deck and ordered them to strip naked. They were then sprayed with disinfectant from blowguns—hair, face, beard and then the whole shivering body.”

[Narrator] Once in Japan, Beecher was sent to Fukuoka Camp #1. This camp, which the prisoners called the “Pine Tree” camp because of a grove of pine trees near the camp, was new, the buildings still under construction. Arriving in mid-winter, the POWs endured the winter weather in small, unheated barracks where they slept on sand.

Within months, however, American bombings of Japan soon forced yet another prisoner move.

On April 25, 1945, Lt. Col. Beecher and about 140 other prisoners left the Pine Tree Camp and were ferried to Korea. A train ride across the Korean peninsula brought them to the Jinsen POW camp near present-day Seoul, Korea.

Life at the Jinsen camp was probably the best Beecher experienced during his nearly 3 and a half years as a POW. Morale seems to have been better here than at other camps, and the Japanese official governing this camp was even later described as “kind” by former POWs.

Beecher spent 4 months at Jinsen, until it was liberated in early September 1945. Beecher, by now nearly 48 years old, had been a prisoner for 3 years and 4 months. He was soon on board a US ship and bound for home.

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

[Narrator] On 12 September 1945, Curtis’s wife Juanita received a telegram delivering the long-awaited news of his liberation. His father, waiting anxiously, joyfully welcomed Curtis home in Detroit later that month. The poignant moment was captured in a photograph. Jane told me:

[Jane 3] “It was a picture that won a prize in the daily news in Chicago with my grandfather greeting him when he did come back from World War II.”

[Narrator] The image proves that no one ever grows too old or too high ranking to not be their parent’s child. I’ve put it on Facebook and Instagram, and I think it’s absolutely worth seeing.

Curtis’s mother Grace, however, was not there.

[Jane 4] “My grandmother knew he was a prisoner, but she died before he came home, which was sad.”

[Narrator] Curtis and Juanita spent Thanksgiving with his sister in Olivet, Michigan. Indeed, there was much to be thankful for this year, and he couldn’t help but compare it to Thanksgiving Day the

previous year, while he was at Bilibid Prison in Manila waiting to be put on the Oryoku Maru. It was "just another day."

His internment had taken a toll, though, and during that trip he was on hospital leave because he was still suffering from Beri-beri and working to regain the 50 pounds he had lost during his captivity.

In June 1946, Curtis ended his 29-year career in the Marines. He had dedicated nearly three decades of his 48 years to military service, fought in two world wars, and served in locations around the world.

Juanita and Curtis settled near Roseburg, Oregon, in the late 1940s, where they would spend their retirement years. He remained active, though, in 1950 he was working 10 hours a week on a farm (I'm not certain if that farm was his or another person's). Side note – my brother, Paul, who read Beecher's words for this episode, lives about an hour south of Roseburg.

The rest of Curtis's family seem to have remained in the northern Midwest, and while Curtis and Juanita were removed from them, they were able to visit sometimes. The family had a summer home near Rhinelander, in northern Wisconsin. Here's Curtis's niece Jane:

[Jane 5] "They built a summer home in 1927. So, he spent a lot of time here when, of course, he wasn't off to war. And when I was just a baby, he would come here a lot, but after my mom died in 1960, I don't recall him ever visiting here and I didn't see much of him after that."

[Narrator] On February 27, 1984, at the age of 86, Curtis Beecher passed away in Oregon. The flags of Roseburg flew at half-mast that day. He rests at the Roseburg National Cemetery, with his wife Juanita, who had passed away about 5 years previous.

Curtis never had children of his own, but the extended Beecher family continues to honor his legacy. His niece Jane told me:

[Jane 6] "Everybody's very proud of him in my family. All the younger cousins, they've never met him, but they still were aware of what he did.

"One of the latest of the little babies born in the families has the middle name Curtis. My cousin Sarah apparently impressed her grandchild with enough talking about Curtis, that she chose to use his name for her little boy's middle names.

"There are lots of Curtis's. I had a cousin Kurt. And then the next generation, there were two Curtis's. So there, yeah. There were people named after him."

[Narrator] And there are tangible reminders of Curtis as well:

[Jane 7] "We're all aware of what he did. I have two daughters who have children now, and we'll pass on what we can say. I have his helmet. It's old. I keep it out. So, it's sort of part of this place forever."

"In my lifetime he was always a big hero. So, I guess he still lives in a lot of ways."

[Narrator] Truly, Curtis Beecher was a remarkable leader who dedicated so much to serving his country.

[Narrator] In April 1942, while Lt. Col. Beecher was preparing to defend the Corregidor beaches, a young serviceman was seriously wounded on Bataan – and just a couple days later, was immobile in a field hospital bed when US forces surrendered to the Japanese.

More on that next time.

This is *Left Behind*.

## Outro

Thanks for listening! You can find pictures, maps, and sources about Curtis Beecher’s story on the Left Behind Facebook page and website and on Instagram @leftbehindpodcast. The links are in the show description. If you’d like to know more about the Marines on Corregidor, I suggest the book “From Shanghai to Corregidor: Marines in Defense of The Philippines,” by J Michael Miller.

If you enjoy this podcast, please subscribe so you’ll know when I drop a new episode. And consider leaving a review wherever you listen to podcasts.

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

- Voice overs by: Paul Sutherland, Mike Davis, Tyler Harman, and Jake Harenberg.
- Special thanks to: Jane Cullen for her time, research materials, and pictures.
- Dramatizations are based on historical research, although some creative liberty is taken with dialogue.

And I’ll be back next time with life as a wounded serviceman in an enemy-controlled field hospital.

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