



OHASI POW Camp, c 17 August 1945 (Courtesy US Marines)

VJ DAY 1945 AND BIG FRIENDS

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BY GEORGE S. MACDONELL
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The Time: 12 noon on 15 August 1945

The Place: Ohasi Prison Camp in the mountains of Northern Japan

The Situation: Emperor Hirohito of Japan, had just announced to the people of Japan by Radio that Japan had surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Powers – the war was over!

To those of us at Ohasi, who had been Prisoners of War for nearly four years, our first reaction was that we were free.

Now in negotiations with the Japanese Camp Commander we needed to immediately

learn what being “free” isolated in Northern Japan meant. What did freedom mean to the 150 POWs in the camp including 68 Canadians? We may have won the war, but we were by no means free or out of danger with the Japanese military still in command.

We immediately began negotiations with our Japanese Camp Commander. What made these negotiations both dangerous and difficult, were several factors. The first was the Japanese Military code of “Bushido”, which demanded a Japanese Officer die fighting or commit

Seppuku rather than accept defeat.

Secondly we knew our Camp Commandant, Lieutenant Zenishi, had written orders to kill his prisoners “by any means at his disposal” if their rescue by any Allied forces seemed imminent. And thirdly, we knew that within a deep deserted mine shaft at the mine and some dynamite, he could easily dispose of all of us under thousands of tons of rock without a trace for eternity.

How would this Japanese officer accept defeat and surrender, and would he obey his Emperor or not? We were soon to find out.

We were in a serious predicament isolated in the mountains of Japan, with no access to a railway or a travelled highway, with no transportation of any kind and unable to speak the language.

We knew that the Allied command was not aware of a POW camp in this remote location and we had no idea of how to acquaint them with our location or of our existence.

We had no legal standing, we had no money, and we had no agreement that we could even remain in the camp.

Locked in the mountains we were nowhere near a Japanese residential area, but there was a very small village located about a mile away.

Because of the devastating American bombing of the past six months, Japan and its cities were reduced to rubble, its institutions were in chaos, and millions of Japanese in urban centers were both homeless and starving.

We had no guarantee of a food supply, our men after years were already close to starvation, and in the camp we had food supplies, such as they were, for 3 days.

The victorious American forces were

nowhere in sight and still had not landed in Japan. Despite the fact that our Japanese Camp Commander was angry, felt dishonoured, and humiliated he appeared to be willing to negotiate our status.

After some stressful hours we reached an agreement:

1. The Japanese guard and all their weapons would be dismissed from the camp.

2. The Kempitai, the much feared Military Police of the Japanese Army would provide temporary Camp security.

3. We could temporarily occupy and live behind the walls of the camp, and

4. The Camp Commander would stay in the camp in his office with us for an indefinite period.

With these understandings under

way we still had a massive problem. We had an urgent need to find food for our men and at the same time try to save those near death.

Despite the risk we decided we must find a way to feed our men. With trepidation we looted the Japanese stores in the camp for boots, clothing, soap, leather belts, umbrellas and a host of smaller items. We then sent out two teams of five men each, under a Sergeant, to see if we could barter our items for food with the local peasants. We feared this could provoke a dangerous backlash.

To our delight the Japanese farmers were not hostile and were happy to exchange food for our items. But the result of these daily excursions were not enough to feed the camp.

While this was going on we realized a secret radio we had been operating in the camp, might be our key to rescue. By careful monitoring of our receiving set tuned into Tokyo, we were informed that the Americans were going to



Corsair Aircraft from USS John Hancock, c 17 August 1945

conduct a grid search of the islands of Japan for prison camps from the air. We followed the broadcast instructions and immediately painted P.O.W. in eight foot letters in white paint on the roof of our biggest hut. This appeared to be our only hope – but could they find us in this isolated area of Japan buried in the mountains?

Two days later with all of our food gone at about 8 AM we heard a murmur from the sea.

In a few minutes the murmur increased to a distant throb of a single engined airplane flying at about 3000 feet.

Then suddenly we could see him high above us – a little blue navy fighter plane with the white stars of the US Navy painted on its wings and fuselage.

He was east of us and as he proceeded his engine noise began to fade – he had missed us. Please, God, let him see our camp!

Then all of a sudden the fading engine sound changed its pitch and we heard the roar of a fighter engine in a dive.

Around the adjacent mountain he came and then down the centre of the valley where the camp lay with his engine bellowing wide open. At 100 feet, he flew over the centre of the camp.

The camp went wild! Our prayers were answered. Contact at last – now maybe we had a chance!

He gained altitude to about 7000 feet, and he circled above us – we assumed he was radioing our location to his base.

Then once again around the mountain he came to fly over the centre of the camp with his canopy back, his wheels down and flying as slowly as he dared, he threw out a silver tin box on a long streamer that landed in the centre of

the camp.

In the box were fluorescent strips of cloth and a hand written note. The note read “Lieutenant Claude Newton (Junior Grade), USS Carrier John Hancock. Reported location.”

The written instructions for the cloth strips were simple:

“If you want Medicine, put out M”

“If you want Food, put out F”

“If you want Support, put out S”

We put out “F” and “M”.

Once more he flew over the camp to read our signals on the ground and wagging his wings, he headed straight out to sea to his floating home – The Carrier John Hancock.

We were joyous beyond belief and also stunned – now what’s going to

happen? Was that all? what’s next?

Seven hours later at about 3 pm that afternoon, 14 airplanes approached the camp from the sea. They were blue with white stars on their wings. While still flown from the Aircraft Carrier Hancock, these were much larger carrier planes called Torpedo Bombers.

They each made two parachute cargo drops in the center of the camp and left us with a ton or more of food and medicine. There was a wide range of items in these supplies from powdered eggs to tins of pork and beans and there was a large quantity of it.

Some of the medicine was called “Penicillin” with special instructions for its use since our doctor had never heard of it. This miracle drug and the food came just in time to save our sick. That night we had a feast and a mighty party. Despite the doctor’s warnings, the influx of calories nearly killed us.



*USS John Hancock, c 17 August 1945
(Courtesy USS Hancock Society)*

Now life had taken a turn for the better. Our men were gaining weight and the extra food and the new drug was rapidly removing our sick from the life endangered list.

Also we could see a pathway now to rescue and freedom. Command knew of our existence.

Time passed until one sunny morning we had another visitor from the sea. A little blue fighter plane with the familiar white stars on his wings circled the camp and dropped a note. The note read "Goodbye from Hancock and good luck. Big Friends Come Tomorrow."

The plane then flew over the camp once more wagging his wings as he headed never to return, out to sea to his floating home.

The next day at about 10 a.m., to our amazement, three giant B29 bombers flew in from the sea. Now we knew what "Big Friends" meant, and they were gigantic.

They circled the camp, flew up-wind a couple of miles and at a very low altitude began their run. We saw their giant bomb bay doors open and suddenly a wooden platform – upon which was loaded a number of 60-gallon oil drums – was dropped. To each oil drum was attached a coloured nylon chute, and each was packed with tinned rations and supplies of every kind including new uniforms and footwear. Soon the air was filled with 60-gallon oil drums, swinging leisurely beneath their chutes, coming to earth over an area of a square mile or so. In one pass they dropped several tons of food and supplies of all kinds. In the eyes of the nearby Japanese villagers, we POW's had gone from starvation and poverty to wealth beyond measure. It soon occurred to us that, since our new found wealth was scattered all over hell's half acre, we should ask the Japanese civilians in the village to find and bring our oil drums to the camp. They were happy to do if we let them keep the nylon chutes for their women and some of the food as payment. Our bounty was delivered by our hungry neighbours.

That night, we had another big party, only now everyone was dressed in a new uniform of his choice: Navy, Army, Marine. The next

morning, promptly at the same time, three lumbering four-engined giants from the Marianas Islands made their run and again deposited tons of supplies on Ohasi. Again the industrious Japanese dutifully, with much bowing, delivered the aerial bounty to their conquerors. By now the camp was beginning to look like an oil refinery, with unopened 60-gallon oil drums stacked on the square.

The next day dawned bright and clear, but with a high wind blowing from the sea. The bombers appeared on time, but this time when they dropped, some of the parachute lines were snapped in the high winds and the oil drums fell straight down as deadly missiles. Several hit the camp, went through the roofs of the huts, hit the concrete floor of the hut in question and exploded. One such drum was packed with canned peaches, and I can assure you that when it was over, you could not find a surface not smeared with peaches anywhere in that hut! There were several very near-misses of ours and Japanese personnel and several Japanese houses in the nearby village were damaged. On the next drop, the same thing happened and as I was fleeing for safety from the camp to a nearby railroad tunnel, I looked up to see that I was right under a cloud of falling 60-gallon oil drums now free from their parachutes. It was a terrifying moment. Was I to be killed after all? Not by a hated enemy, but by the clumsy kindness of my well-meaning American friends?

Again the camp was hit by drums full of food, clothing and even toothpaste. Something had to be done. We now had tons of food and supplies enough for months, and more was arriving.

Was there no limit to their generosity? The aerial supply chain that had saved us was now a menace. The camp had begun to look as if it had been shelled by artillery. So we immediately painted two words on the roof: NO MORE!

The next day, the big friends came from the Marianas and as we watched with bated breath from the safety of the nearby railroad tunnel, they circled the camp and, without opening



OHASI POW Camp, 15 September 1945 (Courtesy US Marines)

their bomb bay doors, flew back out to sea, firing off red rockets. It was great fun while it lasted, but it was getting to be too much of a good thing.

The immediate, organized action to drop so much food, clothing and medicine into the camp was typical of Americans. When you consider the cost of the delivery system and the amount of aid they provided and the speed with which they delivered it, you can only wonder. This generous and timely response to our needs and to countless other prisoners of the Japanese, saved many lives and it says a great deal about the values of our American allies and the mighty civilized nation that stood behind them. No Canadian, as he gazed in wonder at our American ally's rescue efforts, will ever forget their concern for us and their timely generosity.

Now we settled down to caring for our sick and to some serious eating. We began to gain a

pound a day.

At about this time, I decided to go back to the mine where we had worked so long. I especially wanted to say goodbye to my fatherly old foreman of the machine shop who had been kind to me on a personal basis. It was both a joyous and sad meeting between the old man and the departing soldier. We were happy that the war was over and we Canadians could go home and yet we were sad at the knowledge that this would be our last "sayonara." I promised my old Japanese foreman friend that I would take his earnest advice and return to school as soon as I got home.

"Hanchō, you go Canada now." These words, of explanation whispered to me on August 15, the day the Emperor spoke, will never be forgotten, nor will the good will of the old man who spoke them! I developed no hatred for the people of Japan. Most of them

were as kind to us as they could be under the rules of their brutal military dictatorship. The Japanese lost 2,900,000 servicemen and civilians during the war. Millions more were left starving, homeless and wounded.

At every level the war had been a unmitigated disaster for Japan.

The common people of Japan and their loyal soldiers were unwitting cannon fodder for their cruel and evil rulers who forced them to act out their crazy dreams of the military conquest of East Asia and, as usual, it was not just the Chinese, Philipinos and Allied soldiers, but also the common people of Japan who paid the terrible price for the military imperialism of their ruling elite.

We also visited the camp graveyard and sadly said one last goodbye to our comrades who had found their last resting place so far from home. It seemed to me an unjust reward for such brave young men.

On September 14, a naval airplane flew in from the sea and dropped a note to inform us that an American naval task force would enter the nearest harbour to evacuate all prisoners on the following day.

September 15 was a beautiful, clear, warm fall day in Japan. Early in the morning, an American fleet anchored in a nearby harbour.

Large tank-landing craft beached themselves and in haste disgorged a force of Marines and their armoured vehicles. Soon, a motorized column of Marines arrived inland at the Ohasi camp. They were led by a Marine colonel and they were armed to the teeth. These were veterans of the long Pacific campaign. They had survived many terrible encounters with the Japanese in their march across the Pacific and they looked the part. I never saw a more comforting sight. After our captain saluted the colonel, they embraced. The colonel then told us how he planned to evacuate us, and gave specific orders as to how this was to be done. After he issued his orders, he asked, "Are there any questions?" Our captain said, "Yes, I have one. Sir. What in the hell took you so long to get here?" That brought a smile to those tough, weather-beaten faces.

And then we mounted up, said "Sayonara" to Ohasi and after four years, began the glorious journey home to our loved ones.

From the rear of the last vehicle in the departing column, I saw a forlorn figure standing in the centre of the empty camp – it was Camp Commandant Lieutenant Zenichi.

George MacDonell
75TH ANNIVERSARY VICTORY IN JAPAN
AUGUST 15TH 1945-2020



*OHASI POW Camp 65 Surviving Soldiers of C-Force, George MacDonell back row, forth from left.
15 September 1945 (Courtesy US Marines)*

