

**Statement for the Record  
to the  
House Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Joint Hearing  
To Receive Legislative Presentations of Veterans Service Organizations**

**By**

**Jan Thompson**

**President, American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Memorial Society**

**3 March 2016**

**AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR OF JAPAN  
PROTECTING THE MEMORY OF WORLD WAR II VETERANS  
OF THE PACIFIC**

Chairmen Isakson and Miller, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Brown, Members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, thank you for allowing us to present the unique concerns of veterans of World War II's Pacific Theater to Congress. The American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor Memorial Society (ADBC-MS) represents surviving POWs of Japan, their families, and descendants as well as scholars, researchers, and archivists. Our goal is to preserve the history of the American POW experience in the Pacific and to communicate its enduring spirit and inspiration to future generations.

Today, I would like to review the history of the American POWs of Japan, describe some of the incredible progress that we have made, and show what still needs to be done.

This year is the 75th Anniversary of America's entry into World War II. It began in Asia. As Japanese bombs rained down on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, so they also did on the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, Howland Island, Midway, Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong and Shanghai. On December 8<sup>th</sup> nearly 300 American Marines, sailors, and diplomats stationed in China became the first American POWs of Japan.

By the beginning of 1942, there were more than 2,000 American POWs. In March 1942, over 900 sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marines were captured in Java—survivors of the sinking of the USS Houston CA-30, a Texas-based U.S. Army Field Artillery battalion, and a U.S. Army Air Corps squadron. On April 9, 1942, another 10,000 Americans became POWs with the surrender of the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines. And in early May 1942, over 11,500 Americans were surrendered on Corregidor, a fortress island in Manila harbor, and in the Southern Philippine Islands. The surrender of American and Filipino forces on the Philippine Islands was the largest

surrender in United States military history. Over 26,000 Americans were ultimately held as POWs of Imperial Japan. Nearly 11,000 died in squalid POW camps, aboard fetid “hell ships”, or as slave laborers. Tragically, only 15,000 returned home to their families.

### **To remember all our veterans**

Last year, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, the leaders of both Japan and the United States recognized the American POWs and their contribution to the steady relationship between two countries. In his September 2<sup>nd</sup> VJ day statement, U.S. President Barak Obama remembered “those who endured unimaginable suffering as prisoners of war.” Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in his war anniversary statement on August 14th recognized “the former POWs who experienced unbearable sufferings caused by the Japanese military.”

Yet, there was no recognition from the U.S. Congress. The ADBC-MS was dismayed in 2012 when none of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of historic battles at the beginning of World War II were officially recognized. Surprisingly, December 7, 1941, “a date that will live in infamy,” has not been commemorated with a Congressional resolution for many years. Nor have the April 9, 1942, Fall of Bataan and the start of the infamous Bataan Death March been remembered as in past Congresses. And few in Congress note the annual Prisoner of War Remembrance Day in April or the National POW/MIA Recognition Day in September.

We hope that future Congresses will correct this oversight and not forget our POW veterans. We hope the events that started American involvement in World War II will be remembered with resolutions memorializing the simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines Islands. We would like to see the Battle of Wake Island commemorated. For nearly two weeks in December 1942, 400 Marines and 1,500 unarmed civilians held off an invading Japanese armada—the defense of Wake is still taught in our military academies as an example of brilliant tactics, heroic command, and tenacious effort. We hope too that the 98 Americans who the Japanese kept on Wake as POW slave laborers, only to massacre them on October 7, 1943, before American forces liberated the island, will be memorialized.

### **Meet the special needs of all veterans**

We applaud the efforts of all the veterans’ service organizations to fight for adequate medical care and disability benefits. We support the DAV’s efforts to pass S. 425, the Veterans Homeless Programs, Caregiver Services and Other Improvements Act of 2015, which contains provisions to make veterans of all eras eligible for the VA’s Comprehensive Caregiver Support program. Surviving POWs of Japan know well that their caregivers—their families—were instrumental in their reintegration into their communities and their ability to achieve the highest levels of recovery and quality of life. Family caregivers are critical members of every veteran’s health care.

The incidence and intensity of post-traumatic stress for American POWs of Japan is believed to be the greatest of any World War II veteran and possibly of any American war. These veterans had to survive the sordid POW camps, unimaginable and capricious torture, “hell ships” to Japan or its colonies, and years of brutal imprisonment and slave labor. Upon returning from the Pacific War, they found a government reluctant to recognize and treat the mental and physical effects that were consequences of the deprivations suffered while POWs of Japan.

At the time, PTSD was not yet a medical category and VA doctors limited the POWs' access to disability benefits by dismissing the after-effects of years of abuse, disease, and malnutrition. That should not happen to any veteran, and thus, we strongly support the legislative goals of our fellow veterans service organizations to ensure medical and mental health care, as well as to expedite disability claims, to provide rehabilitation, and to establish job-training programs for all American veterans. The American POWs of Japan and their families know intimately the difficulty of re-incorporation into civil society with little support.

### **Progress Toward Remembrance, Reconciliation, and Preservation**

An important aspect of showing respect and acceptance to returning service men and women is to ensure that they are not forgotten. This is the mission of the ADBC-MS. To this end, we have had a number of significant achievements.

In 2009, the Government of Japan, through its then-Ambassador to the U.S. Ichiro FUJISAKI, and again in 2010, through its then-Foreign Minister Katsuya OKADA, officially apologized to the American POWs of Japan. These Cabinet-approved apologies, first established as a Cabinet Decision on February 6, 2009, were unprecedented. Never before had the Japanese Government apologized for a specific war crime nor had it done so directly to the victims.

The Japanese Government further initiated the "Japan/POW Friendship Program" that sponsors trips for American former POWs to visit Japan and return to the places of their imprisonment and slave labor. Thus far, there have been seven trips, one each in the fall of 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and two in 2015. In all, 43 former POWs, all in their late-80s or 90s, have been able to travel to Japan along with three widows and two descendants.

On July 19, 2015, the Mitsubishi Materials Corporation (MMC) became the first Japanese company to officially apologize to those American POWs who were used as slave laborers to maintain war production. The historic apology was to those who were forced to work in the mines operated by Mitsubishi Mining, Inc., the predecessor company of MMC. This apology was followed by a \$50,000 one-time donation to the National American Defenders of Bataan & Corregidor (ADBC) Museum, Education & Research Center in Wellsburg, West Virginia.

### **Success should encourage more action**

The benefits of these long-awaited acts of contrition have been immeasurable for former POWs and their families. The visitation Program is a great success. It has given the participating veterans a peace of mind and strengthened the bonds between our two countries. A former POW who was forced to be a miner in a dangerous, Mitsubishi copper mine declared it "a glorious day" when he accepted the company's apology.

But we are concerned about the future. There is no formal agreement between the U.S. and Japan to continue the visitation program and Japan's Foreign Ministry must request annually a line-item budget for it. One cannot help but get the impression that some in Japan count on time and the POWs advancing years to end the program. We view this as shortsighted.

The Program should not end with the ability of the nonagenarian POWs to visit Japan or with their deaths. A POW's captivity has multigenerational effects on families. The wives, children,

and siblings of those who died suffered irreparable loss. The families of those who survived suffered from the long-term physical and mental health problems caused by the ex-POW's years of cruel captivity. The original understanding was that the former POWs, their widows and their descendants would be invited to participate. Widows, children, and other descendants have all been profoundly affected by the POW experience of their relatives, and they too should be eligible for future programs.

We want this program to include funds to create visual reminders of history through educational groups and monuments. We want national memorials to the POWs who slaved and died on Japanese soil and territories as well as aboard the "hell ships." We want to see a Japanese government-funded memorial at the Port of Moji, where most of the "hell ships" delivered their sick, dying, and dead human cargo to the Japanese mainland.

### **Concerns with moving backwards**

To our dismay, there appears to be backtracking in Japan regarding the American POWs history. It was not until last month that the 2014 biographical film *Unbroken* about American Olympian and aviator Louis Zamperini's ordeal as a POW was shown in Japan. It was preceded by a venomous campaign of misinformation and slander denouncing the scenes of abuse and torture and declaring them impossible. In contrast, surviving POWs believed the film to not show the full depravity and squalor of their imprisonment.

We are concerned by last year's inscription of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In five of the eight new World Heritage areas there were 26 POW camps that provided slave labor to Japan's industrial giants including, Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, Aso Group, Ube Industries, Tokai Carbon, Nippon Coke & Engineering, Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation, Furukawa Company Group and Denka. Californian Lester Tenney, the American POW of Japan who was honored at the President's Veterans Day Breakfast last year, was a slave labor at one of the new UNESCO sites, the Miike Coal Mine.

Japan stated on July 4, 2015, that it "is prepared to take measures that allow an understanding that there were a large number of Koreans and *others* [emphasis added] who were brought against their will and forced to work under harsh conditions in the 1940s at some of the sites." However, we do not know how the Japanese government interprets "others" and U.S. government officials have not asked. Frankly, we have not seen any effort toward including the history of the 13,000 Allied and American POWs held at the UNESCO sites.

Ironically, a prefectural government recently reported plans to submit records from a POW camp to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register as a token of bilateral friendship. The Bando Camp in Tokushima Prefecture, however, was where German soldiers were treated humanely during World War I. It stands as a stark contrast to all Japan's POW camps during WWII. Not far from the remains of Bando is the World War II Zentsuji POW camp that held Allied officers and enlisted men from Guam and Wake, including five U.S. Navy nurses and an American woman with a newborn.

### **What we ask Congress**

We ask Congress to encourage the Government of Japan to hold to its promises and responsibilities by preserving, expanding, and enhancing its reconciliation program toward its American former prisoners. We want to see the trips to Japan continued and extended to include widows and descendants. We want Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to publicize the program, its participants, and its achievements.

We ask Congress to have Japan turn its POW visitation program into a permanent Future Fund supported by Japanese government and industry for research, documentation, reconciliation, and people-to-people exchanges that are not subject to the Japanese government's yearly budget review. This Future Fund would spearhead the creation of visual reminders of Imperial Japan's war history through museums and monuments. These would include national memorials to and public exhibitions about the POWs who slaved and died on Japanese soil and territories as well as aboard the "hell ships."

We ask Congress to encourage the U.S. State Department to continue to vigorously represent the interests of the veterans' community. It is only the U.S. government that can persuade Japan to continue the visitation program, to create a Future Fund, and to ensure that the stewards of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution take seriously the UNESCO mandate to produce meaningful educational materials at the Heritage sites that will include the history of forced and slave labor during World War II.

In April, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is expected to become the most senior American official to visit the memorial for the atomic bombing victims at Hiroshima. It is rumored that this will prepare the way for President Barack Obama's journey to Hiroshima in May. We suggest that if President Obama or his successor were to visit Hiroshima, the trip would be inappropriate without first the memorialization of POWs at the Port of Moji, where most of the "hell ships" docked and unloaded their sick and dying "human cargo," and a remembrance for the POWs at the UNESCO World Industrial Heritage sites where so many toiled and died.

### **High price of freedom**

The American POWs of Japan and their families paid a high price for the freedoms we cherish. In return for their sacrifices and service they ask that their government, even after 70 years, keep its moral obligation to them. They do not want their history ignored or exploited. They do not ask for further compensation. What they want most is to have their government stand by them to ensure they will be remembered, that our allies respect them, and that their American history be preserved accurately.

The ordeal of the American POWs of Japan is not just another facet of war history. Nor is it simply another saga of WWII suffering. It is a history of resilience, survival, and the human spirit, good and bad. And it has become an example of a path toward mutual understanding and justice between Japan and its former victims.

We ask Congress for support and to help our veterans in their unique quest for justice and remembrance.

In the United States this history is being forgotten, and in Japan it is being revised. We cannot let this happen, on either side of the Pacific.

Thank you for this opportunity to address your committees.

**Ms. Jan Thompson**

President

American Defenders of Bataan & Corregidor Memorial Society

Daughter of PhM2c Robert E. Thompson USN, Bilibid, Fukuoka 3B, & Mukden, POW# 2011

<http://dg-adbc.org/>