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Heroic Noncombatants

Chaplains of all services performed many acts of valor in combat during World War II.

By definition chaplains are non-combatants, yet in the Pacific Theater alone, more than 20 chaplains were killed in action while ministering to the spiritual and physical needs of the troops. One of the most notable examples of sustained heroism among chaplains was that of Robert Preston Taylor.

During the campaign to hold the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, Taylor spent many days in the battle area, searching out and caring for the physically wounded and disheartened, sometimes behind enemy lines. By his example, he brought hope and religious faith to those who had lost both and created a new faith among some who had none. These were hallmarks of his ministry throughout the war. He was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action.

During the death march that followed the surrender of Bataan, Taylor suffered many beatings and calculated torture for his attempts to alleviate the suffering of other POWs. At Cabanatuan, the largest of the POW compounds, the inspirational Taylor soon became the best known and respected of the officers. He volunteered for duty in the worst of all areas, the hospital, where the average life of a patient was 19 days. Many men could have been saved if the Japanese had provided a minimum of medication, of which they had ample supplies.

Taylor devised a plan for getting medical supplies from Philippine guerrillas and smuggling them into camp—an offense punishable by death. The plan was carried out largely by a corporal who was assigned work at railroad yards near the camp. The supplies could

be obtained by Clara Phillips, an American woman who had contacts with the guerrillas. As medication began to filter into the camp, the death rate among patients declined drastically.

Eventually the smuggling operation was exposed. Phillips was sentenced to life imprisonment and several participants were executed. Taylor was threatened with immediate death by the brutal camp commandant, Captain Suzuki, then confined in a “heat box”—a four-by-five-foot cage placed in the blazing sun—where he was expected to die. With barely enough food and water to keep him alive in the pest-infested cage, Taylor survived the box for nine weeks. His example encouraged others in the boxes to not give up. Near death, Taylor was moved to the hospital to die. Against all odds, he survived.

A new and more humane commandant replaced Suzuki. Conditions began to improve, in part due to Taylor’s influence over the new man. In October 1944, the Japanese ordered all American officers at Cabanatuan to be shipped to Japan. The Americans now were within 200 miles of Manila. Defeat stared Japan in the face. Some 1,600 officers were moved to Manila, where they were held nearly two months while the enemy assembled a convoy to take them and others to Japan.

Early in December, the hottest and driest month in the Philippines, the men were marched to the docks. The 1,600 from Cabanatuan were assigned to *Oraoka Maru*, which once had been a luxury liner. The men were forced into the ship’s three sweltering, unventilated holds. About two square feet of space was available for each man. There were no sanitary facilities. The first night, 30 men died in just one of the holds.

After an attack on the convoy by US bombers whose crews did not know there were Americans aboard,

only *Oraoka Maru* survived and it was anchored in Subic Bay. The next morning it was bombed and left sinking. Taylor was severely wounded but continued to help others out of the doomed vessel. As those who could swim neared the shore, Japanese troops opened fire on them, killing many.

Jammed into a succession of equally crowded, unsanitary hulks, and with the barest minimum of food and water, the officers from Cabanatuan finally reached Japan on Jan. 30 in freezing weather for which they were not clothed. Only 400 of the original 1,600 survived the horrible experience in the “hell ships,” as they became known. Throughout the long months at Cabanatuan and the terrible voyage to Japan, Taylor never ceased to encourage hope among the POWs and to enlighten their spiritual lives.

When Taylor regained some strength as his wounds healed, he was assigned to work in the coal mines at Fukuoka. Soon formations of B-29s began to fill the skies of Japan. For that country, the war clearly was lost. The POWs were moved to Manchuria until the war ended. Only two chaplains who were aboard the hell ships survived.

After the war, Taylor remained in the Air Force. He was assigned to wing and command chaplain posts at several US bases and ultimately was named Air Force chief of chaplains with the rank of major general. On his retirement in 1966, he returned to his native Texas to continue a life of service. Throughout his years that were marked by the horrors of war and by great personal suffering, he never lost the faith that sustained him and that he engendered in those whose lives he touched. He and the many chaplains who have devoted their lives to the service of others are a part of the Air Force tradition of valor. ■