

Riding the Sooner Range

By TED BEARD

It's late May, 1946! In administrative circles of O. U. the hustle and bustle is taking place, through regular channels, typical of the aftermath of war. The scramble is on to annex the valuable 7 million dollar North Aviation Naval Base as an outlet to University's ever growing pains incident to "over population." Hurried administrative conferences, the dingling of L. D. bells, the rushed wire dispatches are the order of the hour.

The door swings open—a distinguished visitor is announced at the Alumni headquarters. There he stands, supported by his cane—yes, another *who had paid* (paid dearly) in those five long eventful years overseas! A HUMAN AFTER-MATH OF WAR!

A war records clerk is requested to bring in the files we have established on this one of the thousands of Sooner sons. And *WHAT* that record reveals!

"First Sgt. SID J. STEWART, JR., (O. U. former student '37-'38, of WATONGA)"—and the record states: "This sergeant was in the death march from Bataan. The War Department reports he is the only man alive of the whole outfit with which he went to Bataan. Was overseas 5 years. ASN 38021621. Citations and Decorations: Presidential Unit Citation *with 4 clusters*, earned by Medical Unit No. 1 on Bataan. Silver Star, Soldier's Medal, Victory Medal, Combat Medal, Combat Medal Insignia (authorized for service with 31st Infantry), American Defense *with 1 star*, Philippine Defense *with 1 star*, Asiatic-Pacific Defense *with 1 star*, Philippine Liberation, Distinguished Service Cross, Purple Heart *with 2 clusters*, hip injury and later leg wound on Bataan, leg and back injury on famed HELL SHIP sunk by AMERICANS December 15, 1944. Was liberated by the Russian Army in Manchuria on August 18, 1945. Returned to the United States for hospitalization October 15, 1945. Disability discharge from the U. S. Army at Army and Navy General American Theater Hospital, Hot Springs, Arkansas, April 1, 1946."

There it is—that's the record! WHAT A RANGE this boy has ridden. Here he is back—back home! Let's close shop for a couple of hours and visit again—and here is the five year story:

On July 12, 1944, we were again loaded on boats and taken back to Manila. And from there we were sent to Cabanatuan Prison Camp. It was here on September the 21st, 1944, that we first saw American planes, and we at last knew our liberators were close by. This was one of the greatest thrills we had, and we knew then that the shackles of slaves and prisoners could not be too much longer curbing American Citizens!

In October, the Japanese decided to move us to Billibid Prison in Manila in an attempt to get us to Japan. For two months, imprisoned in the heart of Manila as we were, we could watch the daily destruction of the city by the American planes in the air. We could see these planes destroying every ship in the Bay, and the men were happy because they knew the Japanese could never get us out, and we had heard that already the Yanks had had landed on Leyte. But as so often is true, we failed to count in Mother Nature. A typhoon blew up and blanketed Manila for three days, in which no planes could fly. On the third day, December the 13th, 1944, we were taken down to the Bay and loaded on board the Oryku Maru, known as the Japanese Hellship. There were 1,610 American prisoners in our group. This ship was so crowded with evacuating Japanese that we were crammed in the depths of the holds in such a manner that we could not sit, and because the ceilings were so low, we would only stand in a half crouching position. Within a few minutes many men began to suffocate. Because of these conditions panic broke

out, and men, in their desire for air and moisture, began to attack their own friends, cutting their throats, drinking their blood, drinking their own urine, and much worse! In a few minutes the Japanese guards began firing into the holds, and the screams of the mad and dying men were horrible.

Within a few hours, just as we left the Bay of Manila, we were attacked and bombed heavily by American planes. That night the crippled and sinking ship pulled into Subic Bay. The night was spent in unloading Japanese equipment and personnel. The next morning the American planes were overhead early, bombing and strafing. *Even with their danger to us, there was not one man that did not experience a certain amount of pride in their accuracy, and among the group could be heard the muffled cry—"Come on Yanks."*

The ship was already on fire and sinking rapidly before we were informed that we could come out of the holds and swim ashore. However, the Japanese guards had not been informed by the interpreter and in panic opened heavy fire on the men as they began climbing the ladders from the holds. The firing continued at the men after they had slumped into the water. Overhead the American planes, not recognizing who we were, strafed and machine-gunned the men as they made feeble efforts at swimming. Along the shores were Japanese soldiers firing at us to keep us back into the water for fear that we might escape into the undergrowth surrounding the shore. As it was considerable distance to the shore, many of us who were able, made extra trips to and from the ships, bringing in men who could not swim or were too weak to do so.

When we were finally rounded up on the shore, we were marched into Olongapo and we were crowded into a wire enclosed tennis court. There were nearly 1,000 survivors. If you but visualize the area of a tennis court, you can understand how crowded we were.

WE REMAINED ON THIS TENNIS COURT FOR NINE DAYS. AS MOST OF US WERE NAKED, THE HOT TROPICAL SUN AND COLD NIGHTS WERE NEARLY UNENDURABLE. WE WERE NOT FED FOR FOUR DAYS, BUT ON THE EVENING OF THE FOURTH DAY WE WERE GIVEN A SACK OF UNCOOKED RICE. WHEN IT WAS DIVIDED, EACH MAN RECEIVED ONLY ONE SPOONFUL OF UNCOOKED RICE PER PERSON. THE WEAK AND WOUNDED BEGAN TO DIE RAPIDLY. FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE NINE DAYS WE RECEIVED NO MORE THAN THIS ONE SPOONFUL OF UNCOOKED RICE.

On the morning of the tenth day, all that the Japanese considered too ill to continue were bayoneted and killed. We were loaded on trucks and taken over the mountains to San Fernando. The next day we were loaded into box cars. We travelled all that day and most of the night. Christmas morning we were unloaded at San Fernando La Union, on the northern tip of Luzon. Here we were herded into a deserted school yard. In our extreme hunger, we devoured both grass and leaves of the trees like human locusts. The day after Christmas we were taken out into the Bay and loaded aboard another ship. On this ship, crowded down into the lice and flea infested hold, we lost all sense of time. We received a small handful of rice and a few spoonfuls of water each day. *Constantly you could hear the men crying for water. There were many dying every day, and as the Japanese had nothing with which to weight the bodies, they refused to lower them over the sides of the ship for fear they would float, and by these floating bodies our course would be detected by submarines.*

At last we arrived at Takao, Formosa, and our crippled ship was tied up to another in the middle

of the harbor. Here we were again bombed by American planes. *One bomb landed in the crowded hold of 500 men, killing 268 outright.* After this bombing, no one came near us for three days; *finally we were told that as our own planes had bombed us, they were not responsible for our wounded and cared little if we lived or died.*

When we were at last allowed to remove the dead, they made our men load five barges with the bodies, which were taken ashore and burned on the beach. We were finally loaded aboard another ship and here began the longest nightmare in an utterly incredible series of nightmares. The men suffered from dysentery, starvation, and the extreme cold in our naked condition as the boat progressed north toward Japan.

When we at last arrived in Japan, we were taken off the boat at Moji. It was January the 30th, 1945, and a cold, sleeting rain was falling. We walked or crawled through the streets, wet with mud and slush, while civilians along the road threw rocks and mud at us. Finally in an old building we huddled together on the cold cement floor in futile attempts to keep warm. When the roster was checked, we found that there were slightly under 400 left alive. At Moji we were separated into three groups, but before we left that night, over fifty men froze to death. In my group of 120, which were considered in poor enough shape by the Japanese to be sent to an old evacuated insane hospital, we were separated into three groups in different rooms. In my room there were forty-eight of us. We slept on cold, wet floors of a half window-less building in many degrees below freezing weather. We were there until March. At that time I was the only one left alive in my room. When I was taken from this room I weighed about eighty-five pounds. The small handful of men left were sent to Fukuoko, where we were expected to work in the coal mines. But as we were too weak to work, the last of May they decided to send us to northern Manchuria. I was carried on the back of two English officers through Korea up into Manchuria.

Finally I was liberated by the Russian Army toward the last of August, 1945; I weighed only ninety pounds at this time. I am six feet three inches tall and normally weigh around 200 pounds. I was flown almost immediately to Chungking, China, and then to Kunming and from there to Manila, where I was hospitalized for one month before being flown back to the United States.

Back when freshly made G. I.'s were singing, and that was five years ago, "I'll Be Back in a Year, Little Darling," and some were even talking about isolation, the unconstitutional possibilities of the peace time draft, and a private only made twenty-one dollars a month, I came in to do my year. To "do" a year and get the damned thing over! Now, five years later, I am still hopeful! Hopeful as I sit here this May, 1946, afternoon—in the calm and quiet and peaceful, cultural surrounding of my state university, with Sooner Range Rider Ted, and rehash events as they have unfolded since I left the O. U. Campus.

The start of it all? Well—on April 3, 1941, after four hours of indecent exposure, I passed my medical exam and was shipped off to Camp Grant, Illinois, Replacement Center, to learn the difference between my left foot and my right foot.

After my training, I was sent to Hamilton Field, California, and two months later was "exiled" to the Philippines. I arrived three weeks before the War and was assigned to the Sternberg General Hospital.

The day War started, I was sent to Clark Field, because of the great number of casualties. After watching our meager Air Force destroyed, we finally evacuated to Bataan to be assigned to the 31st Infantry.

Here, associated with a group of determined and hopeful Americans, we fought and discussed how long it would take the U. S. to get help to us. Not knowing the extent of damage to Pearl Harbor, but knowing that the Japanese were not taking prisoners on the line, after finding the mutilated bodies of our wounded friends, we held out against an army five times our own strength. We had bombers overhead twenty-four hours a day, but we never saw an American plane. Fighting

as Infantry were the untrained Air Corps men, the sailors who had seen their ships destroyed in Manila Bay, and every man that could be spared to do the job of more than one man, and we never heard the word replacement. All we knew was America could never let us down and if we could possibly hold out long enough, help would surely reach us!

No one can know what it is to fight a war, unless he was there, with equipment of 1918 vintage made up of outmoded guns and ammunition, with little medicine, and bandages so old they would go to dust in your hands when you tried to dress the wounded, with very little food and no means to prepare it and get it to the fighting men. The Japanese used every method to break our morale. They bombed our hospitals constantly, and when we were finally crowded into a twelve kilometer area, the wounded men felt they had no place that they could lie in safety.

Perhaps the greatest tribute I could pay to any particular group would be to say, "THE FINEST SOLDIERS THAT I HAVE EVER KNOWN WERE THE AMERICAN WOMEN WHO WERE THE NURSES WE HAD ON BATAAN." These women, who slept on the ground, bathed in the streams, dipped blankets and sheets in mud to hide the wounded men from planes in the air—they were the American soldiers who should be recorded in the pages of history. Through it all, these "feminine" U. S. G. I.'s were a constant source of inspiration to all of us. I never knew one girl to "break" under the strain!

Finally, after six months of fighting under these conditions, on the night of April the 9th, we knew the line could hold no longer. The men were sick, tired and completely discouraged. Within a few hours absolute chaos broke loose; the Japanese were coming through all of the passes and we had no further place to retreat. A few small groups of men banded themselves together into suicide squads to go back and attempt to hold back the Japanese until the American nurses could be evacuated to Corregidor, where we felt they would have more protection and perhaps a means of getting out to the States could be found for them. That night many men attempted to make it, either by swimming or otherwise, to Corregidor. But Corregidor, like a lifeboat that can hold only so many men, sent word that they could shelter no more, and we were left to our fate! Crowded on the beach and in the woods was all that was left of our Army. No longer was there any military discipline. What was once the Army of the U. S. was now just mobs of men waiting for their individual fates. Even though we had sent word to the Japanese that we would surrender, and one of our generals had gone forward with the white flag, the Japanese continued to bomb us and hand to hand fighting was going on in many sections. *During the night I saw our officers and non-coms group themselves together, and with tears in their eyes, burn our American flag, rather than let it fall into the enemy's hands.*

Just as morning was breaking on April the 10th, word came through that the Japanese had accepted our surrender! Within a few hours the Japanese moved in, and we were officially prisoners.

The men were beaten and stripped of all their personal possessions. Their helmets and in many cases their clothing, were torn from them. Soon they were grouped together in squads of a hundred men in columns of fours and each squad separated by about fifty yards from the others, and the long March out of Bataan was begun.

The Death March was about 120 miles in length. In the hot tropical sun, with most of the men stripped to their waists and barefooted, walking on a gravel and coral road—the March of Death was on! This march was made without rest, without water, and the men were beaten most of the way, and if a man dropped, he was shot where he fell. *In many cases men were forced to kill their own buddies when they could no longer walk.* It has been estimated that 17,000 Americans and Filipinos died or were killed in the March. At San Fernando the March was ended, and the men were loaded like cattle so tightly in box cars that many of the men suffocated in being transported to Camp O'Donnel Prison Camp.



Just out of uniform (24 hours before calling at the O.U. alumni headquarters), First Sgt. Sid Stewart, '37-'38 executes his World War II O.U. biographical blank and steps out as Civilian Sid.

At Camp O'Donnel the men began to die like flies. Due to the strain of the March, and because of the filth in which they were forced to live, and many because of a broken heart, thinking they had been deserted by the country they so greatly believed in, they began to die much faster than dying men could bury them. Within two months 30,000 Filipinos and Americans had perished. Their emaciated bodies were stacked like cords of wood awaiting burial days later. When they could, their friends took them out and stacked them fifteen to twenty at a time in holes not over two feet deep. At night vultures and wild dogs preyed on the burial ground, which was but a few yards from the camp. At all times the odor was unbearable. After one-half of all the prisoners in the camp had died, they decided to move us.

A group of us were sent to Manila by truck and later crowded into boats and taken to Mindanao. Fifty miles out in the middle of the jungle from Balboa at an old Philippine penal colony was our destination. Here we worked, were beaten and starved. For over eighteen months we worked as coolies in rice fields and coral pits, and many of the men were made to build military installations.

Perhaps no greater tribute could be paid to any man than the faith and undying Americanism which these survivors possessed. Dressed only in rags, with no shoes, and working from sun-up until sun-down, most of the men were suffering with malaria, beri-beri, pellagra and scurvy. One example of this Americanism stands out in my mind: One day we had been forced to work in the rain in the rice fields until about 11 o'clock at night to finish our job. When we were through, we had nine miles to walk back into camp. The men were tired, downhearted, and discouraged, and we had been prisoners for two years. As we walked along in the cold rain, the men slouched with their heads down, but

suddenly someone began to hum and to sing softly, and very soon it was picked up by the entire crowd of prisoners, and they marched into camp singing at the top of their voices, with their heads high, "God Bless America"! The Japanese administered the usual beating, trying to make us stop—but the refrain rang out in the darkness of that "Jap night"! Tired, as we were, no man lay down to sleep without a renewed faith in his country—and a prayer on his lips that night!

Lt. Curtis Receives DFC

First Lt. Oliver William Curtis, '38-'40, U.S. M.C.R., Sapulpa, has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, it was announced by Eighth Naval District headquarters at New Orleans, Louisiana. He was cited for participation in one strike and four combat air patrols, completing his 20th mission against the Japanese on Okinawa during the period from April 29 to May 9, 1945.

Lieutenant Curtis previously had been awarded five Air Medals, the Navy Unit Citation and a Letter of Commendation with the Commendation Ribbon for his outstanding services during 12 months in the Pacific with the Second Wing, Marine Air Group 31. While there, he had participated in the invasion of the Marshall Islands and Okinawa.

On June 18, 1945, Lieutenant Curtis returned to the States. He was released to inactive duty in the Marine Corps Reserve the following October, but returned to active duty at his own request to make a career of the regular Marine Corps.

Wanted: More Teachers

Unlike conditions found in many fields, schoolmarm and schoolmasters are still in demand. Ninety requests for college and high school teachers for next fall have been received in recent weeks by the University of Oklahoma placement service.