

(Image: The National WWII Museum, 2008.354.553\_1.)

# SURVIVING IMPRISONMENT IN THE PACIFIC: THE STORY OF AMERICAN POWS

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12 | TIME REQUIREMENT: 1-2 CLASS PERIODS

## INTRODUCTION

In 1929, the Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War occurred in Geneva, Switzerland. As a part of the broader Geneva Conventions, this particular convention dealt specifically with the treatment and rights of prisoners of war (POWs). Such rights remained the standard expected by American servicemembers captured in combat during World War II. The Empire of Japan initially signed, but ultimately did not ratify, this 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. Because Japanese leaders saw this lack of ratification as exempting their forces from the protections outlined in Geneva over the treatment of POWs, thousands of prisoners captured by the Japanese during World War II endured horrific conditions, forced labor, starvation-level rations, and brutal physical punishments. Japanese forces also engaged in **summary executions**, either shooting or even beheading POWs without any form of a trial. In this lesson, students will learn about the conditions American POWs in the Pacific faced through first-person accounts recorded by two POWs held at Cabanatuan in the Philippines. The students will analyze this treatment in the context of the rights established by the 1929 Geneva Convention designed to protect prisoners of war. They will conclude the lesson by connecting this history to the Tokyo Trials that followed the end of the war and by assessing the charges of **war crimes** faced by Japanese military leaders.

## MATERIALS

- + “If You Should Be Captured These Are Your Rights” **digital booklet**, available online at [ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org)
- + Excerpts from the Geneva Conventions
- + Selection of primary accounts from American POWs in the Pacific
- + Copies of the “**War Crimes on Trial**” **overview essay**
- + Copies of the **Student Worksheets**

## OBJECTIVES

By reading primary sources outlining the rights of prisoners of war, along with the primary accounts of American prisoners of war held by the Japanese, students should critically assess the nature of violations committed by the Japanese forces during World War II. Through this assessment, the students should be able to determine the specific ways Japanese forces violated the rights of American POWs. Students should also consider how the Geneva Conventions, and Japan’s lack of ratification, apply to the debates that surrounded Japanese **war crimes** at the postwar Tokyo Trials.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.5

Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

[ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org)



Wanda Damberg Oral History



“If You Should Be Captured These Are Your Rights” digital booklet

## CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

## CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

## CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

## NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

## HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3B

Explain the financial, material, and human costs of the war and analyze its economic consequences for the Allies and the Axis powers.

## HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 2

The student comprehends a variety of historical sources; therefore, the student is able to demonstrate the following:

- Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage by identifying who was involved, what happened, where it happened, what events led to these developments, and what consequences or outcomes followed.
- Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses and the purpose, perspective, or point of view from which it has been constructed.
- Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved—their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Appreciate historical perspectives—the ability to (a) describe the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, diaries, letters, debates, arts, artifacts, and the like; (b) consider the historical context in which the event unfolded—the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place; and (c) avoid “present-mindedness,” judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

## PROCEDURES

1. Have the class prepare for this lesson by reading the **overview essay** on “**War Crimes on Trial**,” focusing on the section on the Tokyo Trials. Open the lesson with an overview of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Explain what the Convention intended to do and inform the class that the Empire of Japan initially signed, but did not fully ratify, the Geneva Convention.
2. Ask the class the following questions: Did the lack of ratification mean the Japanese were exempt from adhering to the protections outlined in Geneva? Why or why not?
3. Have the class read the excerpts from the “Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War” from 1929. What kind of protections did the Geneva Convention outline for POWs? Why do the students think the Convention included these specific provisions?
4. Accessing The National WWII Museum’s classroom website at [ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org), have the students look over the digital booklet, “If You Should Be Captured, These Are Your Rights.” Ask the class the following questions: What, specifically, were prisoners of war required to do? What were they not required to do? What kind of protections did different kinds of servicemembers have if captured? The class can read over and discuss this booklet either as a full class or in small groups.

## TEACHER

5. If the class has not yet split into groups, separate them for small-group discussion at this time, and have them read the included segments from the following American POWs: Commander Melvyn McCoy, Lieutenant Colonel S. M. Mellnik, and Lester Tenney. As they read and discuss the excerpts, ask them to fill out the included **Student Worksheet**.
6. Once the groups have completed the worksheet, have them return to a full-class discussion. Ask the groups to share what they read in the excerpted passages and explain what different aspects of the POW's experiences included violations of the Geneva Conventions. Have them conclude by connecting their analysis to the Tokyo Trials and what conclusions they reached regarding the ongoing debates about Japanese **war crimes**.

## ASSESSMENT

Through reading and discussing primary source materials, students should demonstrate analytical interpretations of the experiences of the American POWs in the Pacific. Comparing the protections prisoners of war expected to have to the experiences of Americans captured by the Japanese, students should draw connections to the broader history and debates surrounding the Geneva Conventions, the rights of POWs, and the trials that charged Japanese military leaders with committing **war crimes**.

## EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

1. Captivity and liberation in the Pacific theater differed in numerous ways from liberation in Europe. In this extension exercise, have your students watch the oral history by Wanda Damberg, available as an online resource at [ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org). Ask the students to write down a brief description of Damberg's experience of liberation from Santo Tomas internment camp, making sure they note the specific details of her memory that stand out the most to them. Have the students then compare that memory to what they understand about liberation in Europe. What factors created the distinct differences between the two theaters of war? How would the students place the story of liberation in the Pacific within the broader historical narrative of liberation in World War II?
2. Prisoners of war held during World War II encountered unique hardships, whether they were in the Pacific or European theaters of war. Looking online at the digital learning project, "Guests of the Third Reich" (located at [guestsofthethirdreich.org](http://guestsofthethirdreich.org)), have the students discuss what American POWs experienced while held captive in Europe. In a written response, ask the students to cite specific examples as they discuss the ways Germany either adhered to or violated the Geneva Conventions. Students can add an additional layer of research and analysis by comparing the experiences of American POWs in the Pacific and Europe to the treatment of Axis POWs held in the United States.

**EXCERPTS, “CONVENTION RELATIVE TO THE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS OF WAR.”  
GENEVA, JULY 27, 1929.**

Quoted in: D. Schindler and J. Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflicts* (Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, 1988), 341-364.

**PART I: GENERAL PROVISIONS - ART. 2.**

“Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or formation which captured them.

They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity.

Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden.”

**PART III: CAPTIVITY, SECTION I; EVACUATION OF PRISONERS OF WAR - ART. 7.**

“As soon as possible after their capture, prisoners of war shall be evacuated to depots sufficiently removed from the fighting zone for them to be out of danger.

Only prisoners who, by reason of their wounds or maladies, would run greater risks by being evacuated than by remaining may be kept temporarily in a dangerous zone.

Prisoners shall not be unnecessarily exposed to danger while awaiting evacuation from a fighting zone.

The evacuation of prisoners on foot shall in normal circumstances be effected by stages of not more than 20 kilometres per day, unless the necessity for reaching water and food depôts requires longer stages.”

**PART III: CAPTIVITY, SECTION II; PRISONERS OF WAR CAMPS, CHAPTER 2,  
FOOD AND CLOTHING OF PRISONERS OF WAR - ART. 11.**

“The food ration of prisoners of war shall be equivalent in quantity and quality to that of the depot troops.

“Prisoners shall also be afforded the means of preparing for themselves such additional articles of food as they may possess.

“Sufficient drinking water shall be supplied to them. The use of tobacco shall be authorized. Prisoners may be employed in the kitchens.

“All collective disciplinary measures affecting food are prohibited.”

**PART III: CAPTIVITY, SECTION II; PRISONERS OF WAR CAMPS, CHAPTER 8,  
TRANSFER OF PRISONERS OF WAR - ART. 25.**

“Unless the course of military operations demands it, sick and wounded prisoners of war shall not be transferred if their recovery might be prejudiced by the journey.”

(CONTINUED)

**EXCERPTS, “CONVENTION RELATIVE TO THE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS OF WAR.”  
GENEVA, JULY 27, 1929.**

Quoted in: D. Schindler and J. Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflicts* (Martinus Nihjoff Publisher, 1988), 341-364.

**PART III: CAPTIVITY, SECTION III; WORK OF PRISONERS OF WAR, CHAPTER 1, GENERAL - ART. 27.**

“Belligerents may employ as workmen prisoners of war who are physically fit, other than officers and persons of equivalent status, according to their rank and their ability.

Nevertheless, if officers or persons of equivalent status ask for suitable work, this shall be found for them as far as possible.

Non-commissioned officers who are prisoners of war may be compelled to undertake only supervisory work, unless they expressly request remunerative occupation.

During the whole period of captivity, belligerents are required to admit prisoners of war who are victims of accidents at work to the benefit of provisions applicable to workmen of the same category under the legislation of the detaining Power. As regards prisoners of war to whom these legal provisions could not be applied by reason of the legislation of that Power, the latter undertakes to recommend to its legislative body all proper measures for the equitable compensation of the victims.”

**PART III: CAPTIVITY, SECTION III; WORK OF PRISONERS OF WAR,  
CHAPTER 2, ORGANIZATION OF WORK - ART. 29.**

“No prisoner of war may be employed on work for which he is physically unsuited.”

**PART III: CAPTIVITY, SECTION III; WORK OF PRISONERS OF WAR,  
CHAPTER 3, PROHIBITED WORK - ART. 32.**

“It is forbidden to employ prisoners of war on unhealthy or dangerous work. Conditions of work shall not be rendered more arduous by disciplinary measures.”

## EXCERPTED ACCOUNTS FROM “DEATH WAS PART OF OUR LIFE: HOW 5,200 AMERICANS AND THOUSANDS OF FILIPINOS DIED IN [JAPANESE] PRISON CAMPS”

As told by Prisoners of War, Commander Melvyn McCoy, USN, and Lieutenant Colonel S. M. Mellnik, USA. *LIFE Magazine*, Vol. 16, No. 6, February 7, 1944.

### LIEUTENANT COLONEL S. M. MELLNIK, AFTER BEING CAPTURED AT CORREGIDOR

“Two days after the surrender the 7,000 Americans and 5,000 Filipinos were awakened at night and ordered out of the tunnels on the Rock. We did not know where we were going, but were prodded along in the darkness at the point of [Japanese] bayonets.

We soon saw that we were being concentrated in the Kindley Field garage area. This was now only a square of concrete, about 100 yards to the side, with one side extending into the water of the bay. The 12,000 of us were crowded into this area. All the wounded who could walk also were ordered to join us, many with broken bones or serious injuries.

For seven days we were kept on this concrete square without food. There was only one water spigot for the 12,000. A 12-hour wait to fill one canteen was the usual rule.

The heat was at its worst. Men fainted by the score and were passed from hand to hand to the waters of the bay. Each morning a hundred or more unconscious were taken out of the area back into the tunnel. I do not know what happened to them. We were covered by clouds of black flies, and dysentery had already begun to spread among us. Our dead, their bodies bloating, lay on the Rock for several days.

After seven days we were given our first food—one mess kit of rice and a tin of sardines.”

### COMMANDER MELVYN MCCOY

“I heard the story of the death march from Bataan to Camp O’Donnell from many responsible officers at Cabanatuan, but I heard it most often from the officer I had recognized on my arrival at the camp.

After the fall of Bataan, approximately 10,000 American and 45,000 Filipino prisoners were marched to San Fernando, Pampanga, a distance of about 120 miles **[note: the Bataan Death March covered a distance between 60-69 miles]**. These prisoners were marched in different groups. In most cases they went for days without water. My friend the Army officer—I shall call him Gunn—said he went for many days without food; he did not remember the exact number, as he had lost count, but it was ‘more than a week.’ Then he was allowed one mess kit of rice.

‘We often passed running streams,’ said Gunn, ‘but the [Japanese] seldom allowed us to drink. A few prisoners tried it, mostly Filipinos. They were shot down and left dying where they fell. If we drank from muddy carabao wallows, though, the [Japanese] didn’t seem to mind. That’s where so many hundreds of us got dysentery, I suppose.’”

(CONTINUED)

## EXCERPTED ACCOUNTS FROM “DEATH WAS PART OF OUR LIFE: HOW 5,200 AMERICANS AND THOUSANDS OF FILIPINOS DIED IN [JAPANESE] PRISON CAMPS”

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### LIEUTENANT COLONEL S. M. MELLNIK

“The death rate at O’Donnell, we learned had been frightful. After the death march there was hardly a man who was not clearly a hospital case by the time he reached O’Donnell. Officers who survived place the number of Americans who died there in April and May at 2,200. The problem of burial of these bodies became extremely acute. The [Japanese] would not help with this work. The Filipinos and Americans were so weak that there were not enough healthy men to dig the graves. As a result, the camp became so littered with bodies that it was sometimes hard to tell the living from the dead.

The death rate at O’Donnell finally became so alarming that the Japanese began to discharge the Filipinos as soon as they became ill, hoping that they would die in the bosom of their families and thus free the [Japanese] of responsibility. Americans officers say that, of the 45,000 Filipinos who started out from Bataan on April 9, fully 27,000 had died by the end of May, when the surviving Americans were transferred to Cabanatuan.”

### COMMANDER MELVYN MCCOY

“The problem of food at Cabanatuan was always a pressing one. For breakfast at Cabanatuan we were rationed one mess kit of lugao, a thin concoction of rice and water. At noon and at night we received one mess kit of steamed white rice, with about one-half a canteen cup of a greenish-colored soup, usually with no substance in it... In the five months I was at Cabanatuan, the only piece of meat I ever received was a half-inch cube of carabao which had died on the prison confines. This great event happened once.

[...]

After my escape and return to the States, I was shown Japanese propaganda statements which declared that American prisoners of war in the Philippines are given the same diet as that received by the Japanese soldier. *Nothing could be further from the truth.* For breakfast the Japanese soldier has a vitamin-ized mush with his rice. At noon he has fish, pork or chicken and vegetables with his rice. At night he has his biggest meal, and meat is always served with it. Such menus to the American prisoners now in the Philippines would make every day seem like Christmas.

The diet we received at Cabanatuan would not sustain normal life. This was amply proved by the neat rows of bodies placed outside the barracks each morning.”

## **EXCERPTS OF INTERVIEW WITH LESTER TENNEY, WWII POW IN THE PHILIPPINES, ON THE BATAAN DEATH MARCH AND JAPANESE “HELL SHIPS.”**

Conducted December 3, 2013, Washington, DC. Part of the “Voices of the Manhattan Project,” *The Atomic Heritage Foundation*.

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Then the march started to take us to prison camp. It became known as the Bataan Death March. It was called the Bataan Death March not because of how many died, although out of the 12,000 Americans only about 1700 lived to come home at the end of the war. But, the reason it was called the Death March was because the way they killed you. If you stopped walking you died. If you had to defecate, you died. If you had a malaria attack, you died. It made no difference what it was; either they cut your head off, they shot you, or they bayoneted you. But you died if you fell down. So, that was why it was called the Bataan Death March, because the bodies were strung along the side of the road. A man would die, they would kick the body onto the side of the road or put him on the road and let a Japanese truck roll over them. It was barbaric slaughter. It was just— nothing else to say. That’s what happened on Bataan until we got to your first prison camp.

We had no food or water. The temperature was about 106, 108 degrees. We were all sick. We all had malaria, dysentery. We had gunshot wounds, bayonet wounds. We were in no position to walk and yet we had to do that. We were on 1/3 rations from July 13th. We were on 1/3 rations. We were eating iguanas, monkeys, and snakes. That was our diet. So, we were in no position to really make a march. And, that’s what happened to us.

[...]

So, when we arrived at that first prison camp, some of the men that were alive, they died within the next thirty days just from the dysentery that they had contracted. It was just plain slaughter all along the way. If you lived through the first prison camp, then they took—in my particular case, they took 500 of us and put us in the hull of a ship and gave us 1/2 cup of water a day and 1/2 ration of rice a day, ball of rice. We went on our way to Japan. It took thirty-two days and we were in the hull of a ship. The men who died on the ship, the survivors would sort of hold an auction for the ration of the rice and the water of the dead men. It’s not the kind of thing you want to even think about, but it was there.

We lived on the ship, going to Japan. We ended up in Japan. Our particular ship with 500 men got there alright. But, in the total picture, there were twenty-six ships that had American POWs—Americans that were captured on Bataan, Corregidor, and other islands in the Philippines. Of the twenty-six ships that went, twenty-six ships went down in the water with the prisoners in it because the Japanese refused to put POW markings or Red Cross markings on the ships. So, the Americans bombed the ships—torpedoes and bombs and submarines. Twenty-six ships went down. We lost about 10,000 men just in the water. So, we’re talking about a horrific situation that we had to live through.

Now, once we lived and got to Japan, our group—my 500 men and myself—we ended up being sold to Mitsui Coal Mine. Mitsui bought us from the Japanese military at so much a head and we ended up shoveling coal. I shoveled coal in a Japanese coal mine twelve hours a day, every day, for three years. The only way you got out of work is if you got hurt, and sometimes you had to get hurt by doing it yourself. So, we broke our own bones. We broke our own hands, legs, arms, foot, whatever we could break to see if we could get a couple of days out of work in the mine. That’s how we lived for the next three years.



NAME:

DATE:

**Directions:** Fill out the following worksheet as you complete your class reading and discussion of the primary source excerpts from American POWs held by Japan in World War II.

1. In a few words, note what rights and protections American POWs expected to have if captured by the enemy in combat.
2. Summarize in a few words what the American POW you read about experienced while held in captivity.
3. What particular details does this POW emphasize?
4. What specific protections and rights did the Japanese violate in their treatment of this POW?
5. Looking at the debate surrounding the Tokyo War Crimes Trials discussed in the assigned overview essay, do you think Japan's military leaders put on trial were guilty of committing **war crimes**? Or were the trials a form of "victor's justice" as critics claimed?



View of a prisoner of war compound in the Pacific theater. Large lettering on the roofs reads "thanks Lex—food—doing swell," "POW," "Cigs please," and also a bull's eye in the camp courtyard. Prisoners are waving on roofs displaying an American flag. (Image: The National WWII Museum, 2009.365.062\_1.)