



The American Soldier, 1945

Among the many internment camps for civilians set up by the Japanese in the Philippines during World War II was one near the little town of Los Baños, forty-two miles southeast of Manila. Here, several miles behind enemy lines and approximately two miles from the southwest shore of Laguna de Bay, on Luzon Island, was the second largest concentration of allied men, women, and children in the Philippines. Represented were ten nationalities whose citizens ranged in age from six months to seventy years. While many were missionaries, nuns, and priests of various orders, a few were U.S. Navy nurses who had been incarcerated since their capture on Corregidor in 1942.

In February 1945, the 11th U.S. Airborne Division and six Philippine guerrilla units operating on Luzon devised a plan to liberate the camp and for that purpose formed the Los Baños Task Force under Col. Robert H. Soule. The group consisted of approximately two thousand paratroopers, amphibious tractor battalion units, and ground forces as well as some three hundred guerrillas. The key to the rescue was an assault force consisting of a reinforced airborne company who were to jump on the camp while a reconnaissance force of approximately ninety selected guerrillas, thirty-two U. S. Army enlisted men, and one officer pinned the guards down. The remainder of the force was to launch a diversionary attack, send in amphibious reinforcements, and be prepared to evacuate the internees either overland or across the lake. The bulk of the Philippine guerrillas were to assist by providing guides and marking both the drop zone and beach landing site. This plan was based on intelligence provided by guerrilla observations of the camp guard locations and routines, supplemented by a detailed map of the Los Baños Camp which had been drawn by a civilian internee who had managed to escape. The group learned that eighty guards and a well-armed garrison maintained the camp and were backed by eight to fifteen thousand troops who were several hours' march away. Using this information, the reconnaissance force was directed to approach the area by way of Manila and Muntinlupa under cover of darkness on 21-22 February, in preparation for an attack on 23 February.

At dawn, just before the planes were within sight bearing the paratroopers whose chutes would signal the attack, an alert Japanese sentry spotted a guerrilla moving into position and fired a shot to alert the garrison. The attack was forced into motion as a guerrilla wielding a bolo knife quickly silenced the guard, while others in the reconnaissance force killed most of the sentries who remained. By the time the airborne company could join the assault, most of the guards had been either killed or driven from their posts. When the remainder of the parent airborne battalion and pack howitzers arrived by amphibious tractors, the remaining pillboxes were taken and the force turned its attention to the sole reason for the entire mission: the liberation of the 2,147 internees from almost certain death. By 1:30 P.M. that day, the last of the internees, paratroopers, and guerrillas had been evacuated from Los Baños. Casualties consisted of three guerrillas killed and six wounded and two U.S. paratroopers killed and four wounded. Apparently, the entire Japanese garrison was killed.

Clearly shown in the painting is a guerrilla armed with a bolo knife divesting a Japanese sentry of his rifle. Crouched behind the foliage and clutching U.S. issued .30 caliber M1903 series rifles, are other members of the force who wait to assist the 11th Airborne force landing in front of the camp.