



Archival Research Memo

Date: 13 October 2005
Revised: 2 March 2010

To: Philippines Geographic File

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Re: Casualties of the Philippines POW Camps O'Donnell and Cabanatuan and the history of their burials

I. Introduction

Thousands of United States soldiers, sailors, and civilians were taken Prisoner of War by the Japanese in the Philippine Islands between 7 December 1941 and 8 May 1942. The saga of the battle for the Philippines and the horrible treatment the survivors received in Japanese POW camps is the subject of hundreds of books and articles, but there are few resources that articulate graves registration operations, especially those focused on recovering and identifying the remains of U.S. servicemen who perished at Cabanatuan Prisoner of War Camp #1.

When the Fil-American (Filipino and American) Military Forces surrendered on the Bataan Peninsula on 8 April 1942, they had been fighting a defensive retreat across the Philippine Island of Luzon. For over four months the Fil-American soldiers and sailors held off the advancing Japanese troops all the while suffering from a lack of food, medicine, ammunition, and hope. At the time of surrender caloric intake was down to less than one thousand per day. Because of the poor quality of their diet, many of the men suffered from night blindness and a variety of jungle illnesses, including malaria, Dengue, dysentery, and hookworm. As the supplies of medicine ran out, it is estimated that over seventy percent of the men on Bataan suffered from malaria. Surrender to the Japanese seemed to bring the promise of relief.¹

The Japanese seriously underestimated the number of prisoners they would encounter on Bataan, almost 75,000 (65,000 Filipino and 10,000 American) surrendered. The Japanese also expected the men to be in good physical condition—not sick and starved. However, the Japanese interest lay in what was beyond Bataan—Corregidor Island—not the sorry state of the Fil-American prisoners. Corregidor Island was situated in Manila Bay and because the fortress had not surrendered with Bataan, it posed a serious thorn in the side of the Japanese. They were, therefore, in a big hurry to move the surrendered Bataan soldiers and sailors out of the way in order to begin the assault on Corregidor.

Depending upon where the men were captured, they either waited in temporary camps or were immediately moved to concentration points. After stripping the prisoners of all personal

¹ Louis Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines*, vol. 1 of *The War in the Pacific*, vol. 4 of sub series *United States Army in World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1953), 245, 254, 257, 355; John W. Whitman, *Bataan: Our Last Ditch, The Bataan Campaign, 1942* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990), 380-83; Calvin G. Jackson, *Diary of Col. Calvin G. Jackson, M.D.: Kept during World War II, 1941-1945* (Ada: Ohio Northern University, 1992), ii; and John E. Olson, *O'Donnell: Andersonville of the Pacific* (N.p.: John E. Olson), 14-15.

possessions, the Japanese sorted them into groups of one hundred and started them on an arduous forced march. Walking the men out of the area was the only way the Japanese could conceive of moving them quickly. When the Fil-Americans from Bataan began the long walk (the “Death March”), they were in a horrible physical state. For eleven days the marchers were forced to walk sixty-five miles to San Fernando, enduring abuse by Japanese guards and watching the deaths of thousands of fellow soldiers. At San Fernando the Japanese stuffed hundreds of men into steel-sided boxcars for a twenty-five mile train trip to Capas. The boxcars were packed so tight the men could not even sit down. For days they traveled under the scorching sun with no relief. Finally, the train arrived at Capas and the POWs were off loaded and marched a final nine miles to their new home—Camp O’Donnell.²

II. Camp O’Donnell

Camp O’Donnell sat about nine miles from Capas, astride the Capas-O’Donnell Road. The main road bisected the American and Filipino sections of the camp, with the Americans occupying the smaller northern portion. The first exhausted prisoners entered O’Donnell on 11 April 1942, with the last group entering on 4 June 1942. Once inside the camp the Japanese confiscated any personal items the men may have been able to retain during the march. Sometimes this also included identification tags.

Immediately a problem surfaced at O’Donnell – what to do with the dying prisoners. Initially the Japanese wanted to cremate any casualties, but because of pleas from American chaplains the Japanese agreed to allow the dead to be buried just outside the main gate north of the road to Capas. As the death toll increased another cemetery was added. The first deaths occurred on 14 April 1942. Throughout this entire time, the Japanese were selecting and transporting men on “work details” around the islands. This ranged from clearing bomb damage, to loading ships, to working on farm plots. Many times men would not return from the details, having died and been buried in proximity to the location of their death rather than in the camp cemeteries. So the numbers of men in O’Donnell fluctuated daily from work details, new arrivals, and deaths. By 31 May 1942 there were 5,679 men in the American camp and the death rate had soared to forty-four per day. May 29, 1942 had the distinction of being the deadliest date with fifty Americans dying on that day.³

Captain A. L. Fullerton, US Army Quartermaster Corps, assumed charge of the graves registration activities at Camp O’Donnell. A morgue was established for receiving, checking and holding the dead until the next burial detail arrived. Processing a body consisted of inventorying the deceased’s possessions. If the body had two identification tags, one was

² It has been estimated that as many as 62,000 Filipinos and 10,000 Americans endured the ordeal. Estimates of the death toll range from 7,000 to 10,000 Filipinos and approximately 600 Americans. Most were needless deaths, caused by heatstroke, exhaustion, and disease. E. Bartlett Kerr, *Surrender and Survival: The Experience of American POWs in the Pacific* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 52-60; Donald Knox, *The Death March: The Survivors of Bataan* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 151; Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994), 18-9, 74-90; James A. Cox, “The Infamous Bataan Death March,” *Marine Corps League*, 58, (Spring 2002): 36; Jesse L. Miller, *Prisoner of Hope* (Englewood, CO: Jesse L. Miller, 1988), 41-2; Hampton Sides, *Ghost Soldiers: The Forgotten Epic Story of World War II’s Most Dramatic Mission* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 91; Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army* (New York: Random House, 1991), 315; and Lester I. Tenney, *My Hitch in Hell: The Bataan Death March* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1995), 44-5.

³ Olson, *O’Donnell*, 43, 63, 235.

retained by the graves registration section, and the other was later put on the crude wooden cross that marked the graves. The name, rank and serial number, organization, place of death, date of death, cause of death, method of identification, name and address of nearest kin, place of burial (including plot, row, and grave), date of burial, age, race, remarks, and home addresses were, if known, recorded in a report of death. In many cases, very little was known of the deceased, particularly in the early days at the camp. Three copies of the death report were made, two for graves registration and one for the camp adjutant. Then the burial details would carry the bodies to the cemetery, where a previously dispatched detail would have already excavated the grave site. Ideally, the graves were ten feet by six feet and four feet deep, but in actual practice many of the graves were much shallower. During the dry season the soft clay was easy to work, but digging during the rainy season was problematic. Often the water would rise almost to the edge of the grave and the bodies would have to be weighted down with stones. Sometimes the digging details would encounter hard, dry, rocky soil in which they could barely scratch out a shallow grave. Prisoner Nicholas Fryzuik recalled that, "people were buried in mass graves and you could see legs, hands, or feet sticking out of the little dirt used to cover them."⁴

Over 1,500 Americans and 26,000 Filipinos died during the seventy-one days of O'Donnell's operation. One out of every six Americans who entered O'Donnell died. Because of the high death rates the Japanese ordered the camp closed on 16 May 1942. In early June, the senior officers relocated to Tarlac and the rest of the men moved to Cabanatuan or were assigned to work details around the islands. Camp O'Donnell, "Camp O'Death" to the men living there, finally closed on 20 January 1943. Left at the camp were the 1,547 Americans who perished there.⁵

III: Camp Cabanatuan

While the men died at high rates in O'Donnell, Corregidor Island fought the Japanese. They too fought a losing battle and surrendered on 6 May 1942. After Corregidor capitulated, the Japanese took over the island and forced the men to clear debris for two weeks. They finally left by ship, but unlike the men on Bataan, the Japanese allowed them to retain their personal effects. The nine thousand captives from Corregidor entered Bilibid, where they were able to purchase supplies. They had adequate water and even showers—much different from the conditions at Camp O'Donnell. From Bilibid, the men marched three miles to the railhead, and were stuffed into those same steel-sided cars that had transported the Bataan survivors. Finally, they marched ten miles to Cabanatuan, about sixty miles north of Manila.⁶

Cabanatuan, actually a series of three prison camps, housed most of the POWs in the Philippines. All three camps had been built or renovated when the Philippine army mobilized in 1941. The sick and wounded from Bataan arrived first at Camp #3, with the men from

⁴ One of set of the Death Reports was buried in the cemetery before the move to Cabanatuan. Olson, *O'Donnell*, 174-75, 181-85.

⁵ Edward W. Weiss, *Under the Rising Sun: War, Captivity and Survival 1941-1945* (Erie, PA: Edward W. Weiss, 1992), 233; Kerr, *Surrender and Survival*, 65, 80-1; Knox, *The Death March*, 198; and Olson, *O'Donnell*, xiii, 110, 163-72.

⁶ Kerr, *Surrender and Survival*, 52-3, 76-8; Richard M. Gordon and Benjamin S. Llamzon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW* (St. Paul: MN: Paragon House, 1999), xii, xxvii; William R. Evans, *Soochow and the 4th Marines* (Rouge River, OR: Atwood Publishing Company, 1987), 85; Donald LeRoy Versaw, *Mikado no Kyaku* (Lakewood, CA: Donald L. Versaw, 1998), 7; and Knox, *The Death March*, 199-200.

Corregidor arriving soon afterwards. The population of Camp #3 quickly swelled to over 6,000 men. The remaining 1,500 prisoners from Corregidor, mostly officers, moved to Camp #1 because no water facilities functioned in Cabanatuan Camp #2.⁷

In June of 1942, the men from O'Donnell began to stream into Camp #1, increasing the number of prisoners to over 7,300 men. Because of the poor health of the men from O'Donnell, the death rate at Camp #1 soared. By the end of the year 2,700 had perished, compared to 64 in Camp #3. It was not until 15 December 1942 that Cabanatuan Camp #1 celebrated its first "zero death" day. By the end of 1942, the death rate in all of the camps slowed. The weak and wounded had not survived. The death rate continued at a slower and steadier pace over the next two years. The Death March and life at O'Donnell took a heavy toll on the captives of Bataan. Former POW Lester Tenney estimated that one out of every three prisoners from Corregidor died, while two out of every three taken captive on Bataan expired. While the death rates at Cabanatuan Camp #1 soared, men were continuously being taken from the camp on work details. This makes it difficult to estimate the number of men in Camp #1 at any given time, but estimates show that in 1942 and 1943 between five and six thousand men were at the camp.⁸

The work details, which kept the camp population in flux, varied in scope and length. The two largest were the farm detail, which was set up to grow food for the prisoners and the Japanese. The farm was estimated to be about five hundred acres and a large detail of POWs worked there. The other large project was the Cabanatuan airport detail. Here men worked on repairing and enlarging the runway for Japanese planes. The other smaller and sometimes seasonal work details included gathering firewood, digging latrines, preparing military defenses, and digging foxholes. Men were also transported to various other parts of the island to work on other airports, bridge-building, or repairing buildings. Also, about one thousand men were shipped to Davao Penal Colony for additional farm work.⁹

This was not the only movement for work details the prisoners faced. In 1942 the Japanese experienced a serious labor shortage. Prime Minister General Hideki Tojo declared that all prisoners, including officers, were to work as laborers in Japanese industries. He ordered all prisoners shipped to Japan in every available returning vessel. Beginning in 1942 the Japanese transferred large numbers of POWs to industrial sites throughout their empire—

⁷ Kerr, *Surrender and Survival*, 52-3, 76-8; Richard M. Gordon and Benjamin S. Ilamzon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW* (St. Paul: MN: Paragon House, 1999), xii, xxvii; William R. Evans, *Soochow and the 4th Marines* (Rouge River, OR: Atwood Publishing Company, 1987), 85; Donald LeRoy Versaw, *Mikado no Kyaku* (Lakewood, CA: Donald L. Versaw, 1998), 7; and Knox, *The Death March*, 199-200.

⁸ In October of 1942, Cabanatuan Camp #3 was closed for American prisoners and all POWs were moved to Camp #1. Almost all of the deaths could have been prevented had the Japanese provided the basic necessities of food, shelter, medicine, and water. Captain P. L. Smith, "Report on Cabanatuan Camp #1" 17 September 1945, Legal Section, Administration Division, Miscellaneous; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP); Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II; Record Group 331; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; Knox, *The Death March*, 198-367; Sides, *Ghost Soldiers*, 135; Gordon, *Horyo*, 104, 107; William Paul Skelton, *The American ex-Prisoner of War*, 15th ed. (Tampa: University of South Florida College of Medicine and James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital, 1999), 14; Charles G. Roland, "Stripping Away the Veneer: P.O.W. Survival in the Far East as an Index of Cultural Atavism" *Journal of Military History*, 53 (January 1989): 92; and Kerr, *Surrender and Survival*, 79-81, 102-04.

⁹ Captain P. L. Smith, "Report on Cabanatuan Camp #1" 17 September 1945, Legal Section, Administration Division, Miscellaneous; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP); Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II; Record Group 331; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

Formosa, Korea, Manchuria, China/Hong Kong, Burma/Siam—but most of the prisoners were sent to the one-hundred-and-sixty camps within the Japanese home islands. The conditions on these ships were so bad that they were aptly nick-named “hellships.” Death due to extreme heat, thirst, or hunger was not the only problem faced on the voyage to Japan—death due to Allied action became a major source of concern. Of the twenty transports that sailed in 1942, Allied forces sank three. By 1944, with increased Allied activity in the area came increased sinkings. Overall, Allied forces sank twelve of the twenty-two transports. Men aboard the hellships suffered some of the worst casualties of the war. For example, on February 25, 1944, Allied bombs sank the *Tango Maru* killing 3,000 men. On September 18, 1944, Allied planes sank the *Junyo Maru*, killing 5,640 prisoners. Of the 68,000 Allied prisoners-of-war moved to industrial camps, over 22,000 died on hellships. American deaths on the hellships totaled 3,840. With all the movement out of Cabanatuan, there were only about eight hundred men left in Cabanatuan #1 by October of 1944. Five-hundred-and-eleven of these were transported to Fort McKinley near the end of the year and the remaining POWs in the camp were liberated on 30 January 1945.¹⁰

From the first arrivals at Cabanatuan Camp #1 until its closing men continued to perish. The first recorded burial at Cabanatuan was on the 2nd or 3rd of June 1942. After this date, and over the next 12 months, the death rate in the camp was high. The highest death day was July 12th when forty-eight men perished in the camp. Because so many men were dying, burial parties worked every day. Usually after breakfast the men would gather at the morgue and organize into four person teams and begin the march to the cemetery. The camp adopted a mass internment system, burying all that died in one day in one common grave. The day consisted of a period of twenty-four hours which ran from 12:00 noon to 12:00 noon or 5:00 pm to 5:00 pm after 26 September 1942. The burial party would deliver the dead to the cemetery and then dig the mass grave for the next day.¹¹

In the early days, the Japanese did not permit markers or a specific organization for the placement of the graves. After a few graves had been put in a section or plot, the odor would become so offensive that the Japanese sentry would select a new section and the burial details would dig at that location. The digging of large deep graves was impossible due to the high number of daily deaths plus the weakened condition of the men on the burial details. Heavy

¹⁰ The rest of the prisoners on the hellships were British, Australian, Indian, or Dutch. Captain P. L. Smith, “Report on Cabanatuan Camp #1” 17 September 1945, Legal Section, Administration Division, Miscellaneous; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP); Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II; Record Group 331; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese*, 284-87; Kerr, *Surrender and Survival*, 112-13, 117, 237; S. P. MacKenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II,” *Journal of Modern History* 66 (September 1994): 514, 517, 519; Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors*, 18; Waterford, *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II*, 37, 143-44, 167-68, 173; Linda Goetz Holmes, *Unjust Enrichment: How Japan’s Companies Built Postwar Fortunes Using American POWs* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 22; and Skelton, *The American ex-Prisoner of War*, 16-18.

¹¹ Mildred Trotter, “Notes: Historical in so far as the Cabanatuan burials and disposition has been made,” 24 October 1951, Mildred Trotter Papers, Special Collections of the Bernard Becker Medical Library, Washington University, St. Louis, MO; and John A. Glusman, *Conduct Under Fire: Four American Doctors and Their Fight for Life as Prisoners of the Japanese, 1941-1945*, (New York: Viking Press, 2005) 258; “1942,” undated, POWs, General Records-Cabanatuan, Philippine Archives Collection, Office of the Adjutant General; Record Group 407; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; and Major Robert E. Conn, “Transcript Outgoing Telephone Call,” 29 September 1950, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

rains with no drainage facilities also hampered digging. Many shallow graves were dug during the early period, some so shallow that it was not uncommon to see an arm or a leg protruding from a grave. Roving dogs and other wild animals tore at the exposed flesh. Because of the disorder in the camp and the high death rate, it is also very likely that many graves went unregistered, particularly during the first few weeks at Cabanatuan. This was confirmed by Major Robert E. Conn, who was the Graves Registration Officer at Cabanatuan. During an interview in 1951, Major Conn stated, "when we were trying to locate the exact boundaries of the grave, that on two or three occasions in digging I hit bodies, but I immediately covered that portion up and then showed the boundaries of the grave to include that body." These men had been buried there before any written record of the graves was completed, during the early weeks in the camp.¹²

Another problem encountered in Cabanatuan with regards to interment was the fact that very few men still had identification tags or other identifying personal property. So, according to Major Conn, if a deceased did not have identification tags, a piece of paper with his information, if known, was placed in his mouth. If the mouth was closed the paper would be placed between the deceased's fingers. It may be reasonable to assume that a biodegradable substance, like paper, would not last long buried in a humid, tropical environment such as that of the Philippines. The potential for degraded paper was even more evident in late 1945, when the Graves Registration Platoon assigned for disinterment noted that the cemetery was located in a low area often full of standing water after each rain, with the lower end of the cemetery being under standing water much of the time. Where men had been able to retain their tags, they often gave them to friends before they died, especially if they were in the hospital, in order to get the tags and information back to their families. This created a further problem when the receiver of the tags then passed away leaving only one set for identification, which was actually his buddy's tags, or two sets, his and his buddy's. This created serious problems when the camp graves registration officers attempted to identify a deceased for interment.¹³

For the early burials in the camp cemetery, the Japanese did not allow the prisoners to put up grave markers. As the burial parties departed camp for the walk to the cemetery with their

¹² Captain P. L. Smith, "Report on Cabanatuan Camp #1" 17 September 1945, Legal Section, Administration Division, Miscellaneous; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP); Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II; Record Group 331; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.; Glusman, *Conduct Under Fire*, 259; and "1942," undated, POWs, General Records-Cabanatuan, Philippine Archives Collection, Office of the Adjutant General; Record Group 407; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.; and Major Robert E. Conn, "Transcript Outgoing Telephone Call," 29 September 1950, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹³ Robert S. La Forte, Ronald E. Marcello, and Richard L. Himmel, eds., *With Only the Will to Live: Accounts of Americans in Japanese Prison Camps, 1941-1945* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994), 12-14; Major Robert E. Conn, "Transcript Outgoing Telephone Call," 29 September 1950, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; Maurice S. Beard, "Headquarters: 111 Quartermaster Graves Registration Platoon," 30 August 1945, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; "Notes on Conference in Washington Office with Mr. Robert E. Conn," 6-7 November 1950, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

Japanese guards, the guards would direct the men to the location of the burial plots, but in no systematic order. Since the graves were not marked at the time of burial it was almost impossible to later identify where these graves were located. It was not until late August, 1942 that the Japanese allowed grave markers to be placed on current burials and a systematic plan for burials was adopted. At this same time, Major Conn attempted to recreate the "Death Report" for those early burials and further document current deaths. The "Cabanatuan Death Report" is a numerical listing of camp deaths with unit, date of death, time of death, cause of death, birth date, age, and next of kin information. Grave number is NOT listed. Grave associations were made by using the date of death. So, for example, all who perished on 3 August 1942 supposedly would have been buried in grave 1015. Each POW was given a Death Report line number.¹⁴

Major Conn could not state who had been buried in which location for June or July of 1942. It was not until June of 1943 that all remains were placed in individual graves and beautification of the cemetery started. Anyone buried before that month would have been placed in a mass grave of doubtful location. Without grave markers it became a huge puzzle to Major Conn when, so long after the fact, he was attempting to locate and mark each of the mass graves. During beautification, Major Conn and a large number of the men who had been on burial details returned to the cemetery and tried to locate the graves they had dug and to recall the dates on which remains were buried. Major Conn acknowledged that this attempt to mark the graves was done only by sight and it was possible that some of the areas marked as graves were not actually graves, but just gave the appearance of being an area of disturbed ground. That would also make it likely that areas which were actually graves were not marked. Major Conn also noted that the growth of lush vegetation in the area hindered the finding of graves. Without regular maintenance the cemetery was not entirely clear and visible.¹⁵

IV. Post-War American Graves Registration Service Activities

Starting in December of 1945 through March of 1946 the Cabanatuan Cemetery was disinterred and the remains were moved to U.S. Army Air Forces Manila #2 Cemetery (twelve miles north of Manila). At this time, a tooth chart was prepared for each of the recovered remains. Matching these tooth charts with original dental records proved challenging. Camp Cabanatuan was lucky enough to have a dentist. Filings were prepared from old coins or other metals, but more often problematic teeth were simply pulled. Also, many of the malnutrition

¹⁴A big problem with the death Report is that it was buried when the camp was evacuated and it has suffered serious water damage making it unreadable in places. "Cabanatuan Death Report" Legal Section, Administration Division, Miscellaneous; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP); Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II; Record Group 331; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁵ Graves 304, 313, 413, 414, 1012, 1013, and 1108 have no records of internments in, or recoveries from and were from the June and July 1942 time period. Major Robert E. Conn, "Transcript Outgoing Telephone Call," 29 September 1950, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; "1942," undated, POWs, General Records-Cabanatuan, Philippine Archives Collection, Office of the Adjutant General; Record Group 407; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; Maurice S. Beard, "Headquarters: 111 Quartermaster Graves Registration Platoon," 30 August 1945, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

disorders caused the men's teeth to loosen and completely fall out. These factors combined to create significant changes in dentition, causing problems for those attempting to identify remains using pre-war dental records. Despite these problems, between December of 1946 and April of 1947 Graves Registration staff identified approximately three hundred of the unknown remains from Cabanatuan. Most of these identifications were done through dental comparisons, but unfortunately those comparisons were not made by trained dentists.¹⁶

At this time serious problems were identified with the numbers of remains recovered from the mass graves at Cabanatuan. A comparison of the total number of deaths recorded on the Cabanatuan POW Hospital Register, Death Roster, and Individual Death Reports with the total number of remains disinterred from the cemetery indicated that the remains of fifty-six [56] decedents had not been recovered during the initial disinterments from Cabanatuan. In 1947, 1948, and 1951, AGRS personnel returned repeatedly to the Cabanatuan Prison Camps to recover additional remains.

In April 1947, AGRS officers staffed newly formed Field Boards of Review established to approve identifications and laboratories were established to process all unidentified remains. If, after dental comparisons, the remains were still unidentified, they were buried in Manila #2 Cemetery as unknowns. Several hundred sets of remains received approved identifications during this time period and were buried according to the wishes of the next of kin, either in a national military cemetery or at a private cemetery of their choosing.

Beginning in the fall of 1947 and continuing through the spring of 1948, Manila #2 Cemetery was disinterred and moved to the AGRS Mausoleum at Nichols Field to create a permanent cemetery and establish a laboratory for the identification process. Here the remains from Cabanatuan were again processed and stored by embalmers. Identifications were again handled on an individual or group basis as recommended by the Field Boards of Review. Only a few identifications were completed at this time, and many of the recommended identifications put forward for review at the Memorial Division Headquarters in Washington D.C. were disapproved with the request that further study be completed on the remains. The grounds for disapproval were based upon differences in, and/or a lack of dental data for the unknown remains from the graves in which the casualties were reportedly buried. Sadly, the use of anthropologists to facilitate proper identifications was not deemed necessary by the commanding officer of the AGRS, Philippines Command at this time and the identifications put forward from the field were based upon the recommendations of licensed embalmers, who, while well trained in handling the dead, did not have the requisite skills for associating skeletal remains with the medical and dental records of deceased servicemen. It was determined that Army dental records of the decedents involved were "meager and incomplete" and presented a "marked similarity which would probably compare equally well with any cross-section of remains recovered from the Cabanatuan Cemetery." The Field Boards of Review continued to take the lead on identification until June of 1950, although, again the documentation of this process is very scarce. If identification could

¹⁶ Trotter, "Notes: Historical"; La Forte, *With Only the Will to Live*, 178-88; "Background Information Relating to the Identification of Remains from the Cabanatuan Prisoner of War Camp and the Reasons why the Current Project was not instigated at an Earlier Date," 25 October 1951, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD; "Notes on Conference in Washington Office with Mr. Robert E. Conn," 6-7 November 1950, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

not be determined, the remains were reburied as unknowns in the new Manila American Cemetery, Manila, Philippines.¹⁷

V. Cabanatuan Project

In 1951 the American Graves Registration Service initiated a review of the "Cabanatuan Project" to investigate past AGRS practices in the identifications that had already been made, and to determine whether or not additional identifications might result from yet another reprocessing of the remaining unknowns. To that end, the AGRS Philippines Command sent Captain John Shypula to the site of the former Cabanatuan POW Camps to conduct a final field investigation. While the Memorial Division of the Quartermaster General's Office (the parent command of the AGRS), sent a team to assess remains from Cabanatuan that were being held at the Schofield Central Identification Laboratory, in Hawaii and then on to the Philippines where they reviewed additional remains and assessed laboratory operations. Captain John Shypula conducted the field investigation while Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Abel and Dr. Mildred Trotter assessed the remains and the identification process. Colonel James Clearwater had assigned them the task, and had retained Dr. Trotter, a professor at Washington University, St. Louis, as an expert anthropologist with prior experience identifying World War II dead. Colonel Clearwater had asked for this review out of a growing sense of concern that all was not as it seemed where the Cabanatuan identifications were concerned. The Field Boards of Review referenced above put together identification packets suggesting both individual and group identifications for approval by the Memorial Division in Washington, D.C. The Memorial Division staff reviewed the paperwork, compared the dental and skeletal charts to the medical and dental service records of the individuals proposed for identification. Upon making this paper comparison, this staff would either approve the identification, disapprove it, or request a reassessment. For the Cabanatuan cases, the staff doing the paper records comparisons found themselves increasingly at odds with the suggestions put forward from the field. As the approved identifications dwindled and requests for reassessments grew, Colonel Clearwater determined that an experienced team needed to step in and review the Cabanatuan project.

Captain John Shypula returned to Cabanatuan City on 25 September 1951 to reinvestigate the cemeteries of the Cabanatuan POW Camps. Captain Shypula looked over the site of the cemetery with the mayor of the city, Mr. O'Campo, but nothing could be definitively established as the entire area had been converted into rice paddies and flooded with water. Captain Shypula then contacted Mr. Alejo Malcber who had been employed as a grave digger at the cemetery during disinterment operations, but Mr. Malcber had no additional information. On the following day, Captain Shypula returned to the cemetery and determined that the former landmarks within the cemetery had been obliterated and could not be reestablished. Since no test digging could be conducted nor anything further determined, Captain Shypula departed.¹⁸

¹⁷ Each unknown set of remains was assigned at least three different unknown X-file numbers during the attempted identification process. Trotter, "Notes Historical."

¹⁸ Captain John Shypula, "Disposition Form re: Cabanatuan Project," 27 September 1941, Declassified Classified Miscellaneous Files; Graves Registration Service; Office of the Quartermaster General; Record Group 92; National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, College Park, MD.

Lieutenant Colonel Abel and Dr. Trotter, both of whom had extensive prior experience in the identification laboratories of the Pacific theater, reviewed the Cabanatuan remains available in Hawaii and then moved on to the Philippines where they found that the identifications being put forward to the Memorial Division could not be further substantiated by studying the remains and the accompanying paperwork at the same time. Dr. Trotter was dismayed to learn the history of burials, disinterments, identifications, and reburials of the Cabanatuan casualties. She wrote:

During this entire period, I have learned some of the details of the history of these remains since they were first buried in 1942. This history includes a record of burial, disinterment, reburial, etc., etc., a series of processings with resultant papers for three or four or perhaps more successive years; signatures on the papers which do not carry weight scientifically; identifications made and the next of kin notified; questioning of the identification with recommendations for correction by personnel who study the papers at a distance of more than 8,000 miles from the remains.¹⁹

Dr. Trotter found the remains to be in a terribly eroded state, first from being buried and left in ground sodden with water for several years, and then from being handled too often during processing. She emphatically reported the remains to be “jumbled beyond belief,” “eroded much beyond a state that [could] be illustrated on a black-out chart,” and in “such a state of deterioration that evidence on which identification depends had been largely obliterated.”²⁰ Dr. Trotter and Lieutenant Abel declared the project a failure and recommended it be ended.

On the basis of these recommendations, and with the view that no further field work could be conducted, the Memorial Division ended the Cabanatuan project. Those families who had already been notified that the remains of their loved one had been recovered received remains for burial. The rest of the Cabanatuan POW Camp remains were permanently interred as “unknowns” in Manila American Cemetery, Philippines.

¹⁹ Mildred Trotter, letter to Col James Clearwater, 1 November 1951, Mildred Trotter Papers, Special Collections of the Bernard Becker Medical Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

²⁰ Mildred Trotter, letter to Colonel James Clearwater, 1 November 1951, Mildred Trotter Papers, Special Collections of the Bernard Becker Medical Library, Washington University, St. Louis; Mildred Trotter, letter to Charles Warren, 13 July 1982, T. Dale Stewart Papers, National Anthropological Archives, Museum Support Center, Suitland, MD.