

# HE GREW UP IN A JAPANESE PRISON CAMP

Frank Saunders Jr. Remembers WWII – Part II

By Edie R. Lambert



Los Baños Internment Camp on the former grounds of the Agricultural College some 40 miles south of Manila was encircled by two forbidding six feet high barbed wire fences. Along the fences were pillboxes and 10 guard towers each manned with at least two machine gun armed guards.

Two miles east, a Japanese infantry company of 200 men was armed with 105mm and machine guns. Twenty soldiers guarded nearby Mayondon Point; a unit at Los Baños wharf had two three-inch guns; and the Japanese Tiger division just south of Santo Tomás in San Pablo was 9,000 strong.

Nevertheless, defying danger, 12 year old, Frank Saunders Jr., made nightly scavenging forays out of Los Baños Internment Camp bearing whatever 'treasures' his family had to exchange with the Filipinos for whatever food they had. Time after time, the skinny youth slithered under the barbed wire fences, evading Japanese sentries and nearby troops. Clad only in shorts, he skittered through dark, dense jungles seeking Filipino villages tucked away in high hills. He was risking his life for his mother, Emma, whose health, on the camps' starvation diet, was rapidly deteriorating.



Map of Manila under US siege February 1945

Of his daring exploits, Saunders says, "I was 12 going on 21." He also developed skill at building out of bamboo and *nepa sawali* (matting), and bartered with fellow prisoners for whatever he could get in exchange for erecting cookhouses and additional shelter. Once, in early 1944, the Japanese allowed prisoners to scavenge an abandoned camp nearby. Saunders rigged up a rack on which he piled bamboo and dragged it back to Los Baños for use in building more cookhouses and additions.

When he couldn't get food for his construction efforts, Saunders traded for other treasures. One of the best was a baseball signed by the New York Yankees, but he didn't keep it long – someone stole it.

Like all prisoners, Saunders also had jobs assigned by the prisoner administration committee (PAC), a group of seven elected by the prisoners. Saunders's job was grave detail, spending hours in the sweltering tropic heat burying dead prisoners.

"On a good day, only two died; on a bad day, four or more died," he remembers.

The death rate increased so that by early February 1945, prisoners' wooden dining tables were appropriated to make coffins. On February 15, Dr. Dana Nance, the prisoners' medical director reported that a

number of his patients were past saving.

Food allotment consisted of two eight-ounce cups of gruel a day (one part flour and 12 parts water). Struggling to survive, many resorted to eating weeds, flowers, bugs, salamanders, and banana tree pulp. Seventy percent of the prisoners suffered from malnutrition, scurvy, beriberi, and dysentery.

But Saunders's nightly foraging for food kept his mother alive.

"I was a little old kid, and I learned how to survive," he says.

One day in late December, the prisoners awoke to find that the Japanese soldiers had disappeared, but the PAC warned people not to venture outside the camp. They'd learned that intensifying Allied activity had scared the Japanese away, but PAC warned that they could return.

A week later, they did, but the survivors will always remember that week of freedom.

The Japanese were far bolder and crueler when they returned, surrendering leniency and common decency. The slightest infraction elicited harsh treatment. Prisoners were beaten just for looking up when airplanes flew over. One of the worst atrocities occurred early on January 28.

A guard shot George Louis, an American who had stolen out during the night to forage for food for his family.

Seeing that Louis was still alive, George Gray, the committee's secretary, standing nearby, moved to carry Louis to the hospital, but guards stopped him.

Minutes later, the camp commandant, Major Y. Iwanaka summoned the PAC to his office and informed them that Louis would be executed. They protested that withholding medical attention or executing Louis violated articles of the Geneva Convention, which Japan



Filipinos flee Santa Cruz district as Japanese set fire and dynamite buildings before Allied invasion, February 1945



Santo Tomás University in the background nearly, obscured by smoke, just hours after thousands of internees were liberated by the First Cavalry, February 3, 1945

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had signed. And they pointed out that Louis had been returning to camp, not escaping.

Meanwhile, Louis lay bleeding where he'd fallen.

Despite their protests, the committee heard the commandant order soldiers to shoot Louis until they killed him.

Louis was tossed onto an improvised stretcher and carried to

## Far Reaching Consequences

Dear Editor:

Bud has always been reluctant to really discuss this period of his life; he really seemed to ignore it for the most part. For my mother, it was the worst event in her life, and she didn't mind sharing how awful it was to lose three years of your life. This event (being imprisoned not knowing what would happen to you and your family for 3 years) altered her outlook on life and forever changed my mother, Norma Saunders Baker. My mother died in August of 1998. But it seems like only yesterday she was sharing the horrors of the concentration camps and the life of a 15-17 year old that was taken away from her. Not to mention losing her mother shortly after being released from the concentration camp. I only wish I could have known my mother before her family was imprisoned. I know she was a very different person.

Seeing this article from your magazine brought tears to my eyes. I was glad to see Uncle Bud was talking about the past. And it made me remember my childhood when my mother spoke about how tough her life was compared to mine. I can't imagine, nor would I want to, step into their shoes on Dec 8, 1941 (The Philippines are across the international date line, so this event took place on Dec 8, 1941, not Dec 7). They were liberated on February 23, 1945 but the horror of what the Japanese did to Buddy and his family lives on forever. It also disappoints me greatly to learn that the US government would not grant exit visas back to the US. However, as you noted in your story, Aunt Dorothy was allowed to leave because she was military personnel.

I do hope you say something about Buddy's dad, my grandfather...he is something to behold. He lived the life of a hobo, traveled the world, and lived beyond 100 years. He was quite the character. If you look closely at Bud you will see him.

Bud's sister, Norma Saunders married Robert J. Baker some 50 years ago. He is 81 and still working full time running his company. They produced four boys, Bret, Bruce, Brad and Kurt Baker. We have produced the following grand children, Amy, Brandi, Morgan, Benjamin, Luke, Adam, Lainie and Alyssa. They have produced great grandchildren, Jake, Zack and Kobe. All of this was made possible by the rescue of my mother from the Civilian POW camp. It is amazing how rescuing one civilian from a POW camp can have such far-reaching consequences.

Well, I have rambled on enough; I just wanted to express how much I appreciate reading these types of articles. So many US citizens just do not understand nor appreciate freedom in the United States, nor the sacrifices everyone has made to make us the great nation that we are today. I appreciate your efforts to spread the word.

Thanks again,  
Kurt D. Baker, Joplin

a clump of bamboo just outside camp. Second later, there was a shot.

Nance, who later examined Louis's body, reported the first bullet had only grazed his collarbone, striking no vital organs.

"The other bullet entered the skull in the right frontal region and blew his brains out in the left occipital region" Nance wrote.

A month later, Los Baños Internment Camp was liberated.

Weak with starvation, prisoners were stumbling to morning roll call February 23, 1945 when they saw nine Douglas C-47's on the horizon and, amazingly, paratroopers floating to earth.

Across the road in the soldiers' compound, most of the skivvy-clad, unarmed Japanese were doing morning calisthenics.

Stunned, the prisoners heard and felt ground-shaking rumbling. Mortar fire exploded, and the Japanese scattered. American recon units and Filipino guerrillas began closing in.

In minutes, the camp was liberated.

"It was a very dramatic rescue," Saunders says emotionally.



Japanese set fire to Manila as Allies advance, February 1945

The US 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division began evacuating the camp amid heavy fire. They lead prisoners to waiting amphibious tractors (amtracs) on the shore of nearby Laguna de Bay, but it was slow going. Many of the prisoners were too weak to walk to the amtracs positioned a kilometer away, but speed was imperative because the daring rescue was staged 25 miles behind enemy lines!

Crowded in with 50 caliber guns blasting, the prisoners were terrified when they headed toward the water. "We didn't know there were tanks that could go in water," Saunders admits.

That day, the prisoners learned that the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division risked their rescue because intelligence sources had advised them the Japanese planned to execute the prisoners at roll call that morning! The next day, General MacArthur sent this communiqué to the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division: "Nothing could be more satisfying to a soldier's heart than this rescue."

Across Laguna de Bay in Mamatid, the prisoners were at last behind American lines. They boarded trucks to New Bilibid Prison at



Norma and Frank Saunders, Jr. (in the center) with rescuers from the US 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division and a Filipino child at New Bilibid Internment Camp, March 1945

Muntinglupa where they stayed for several weeks awaiting evacuation to the States. Meanwhile, the Red Cross was notifying relatives. On March 9, Dorothy

American soldier at New Bilibid Internment Camp serves American, British, Canadian, and French internees liberated from the Japanese on February 23, 1945.



Saunders Bass received a wire through Washington, DC that her family had been rescued. In a Hallmark™ Easter card she addressed to them through the Red Cross, Dorothy wrote, "Dear Mama and Daddy, About one hour ago had wire about rescue. Anxious to hear from you."

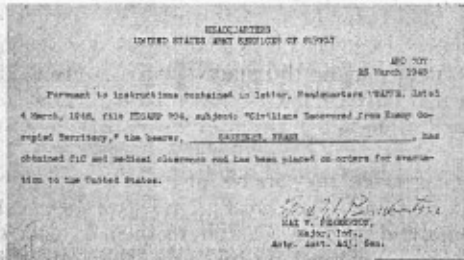
Saunders reports the biggest problem at New Bilbid was preventing the starving people from eating themselves to death.

"There were big vats of food, army food, and it was good. There was even chocolate candy, but we all got sick at first," Saunders recalls. The internees underwent physicals that pronounced Frank Sr. to be in good health. Emma was only in fair health, and Saunders was healthy though he had a cavity in every tooth, had twice contracted malaria, and was undernourished.

Within weeks, the Saunders family was sailing home aboard the USS Admiral E. W. Eberle. Since Dorothy was in Kansas City, they decided to

settle there, too. By May, they were on American soil, but Emma was barely hanging on. "She was very bad," Saunders says. Emma died two months later.

Frank Sr. took a job managing the Saunders (no relation) Manufac-



US Army clearance for Frank Saunders, Sr. to return to America, March 23, 1945

Frank Saunders, Jr. back in the US after having survived 3 years in a Japanese prison camp prepares to start eighth grade at Northwest Junior High School in Kansas City, KS, September 1945



turing Company in Atchison, and for a time, Saunders lived with Dorothy and started eighth grade at Northwest Junior High School in Kansas City, Kansas. But he was deemed a problem child and sent to Frank Sr. in Atchison.

"I was a teenager going on 35," Saunders recalls. Not only had he endured ordeals that broke war hardened soldiers, but he had also lost his beloved mother. Saunders had a lot to cope with. But gradually, he readjusted.

When Saunders graduated from Atchison High School in 1950, he enrolled at Ottawa University where he earned a BA. The year before graduating in 1954, he married Wynona Piersol. They're still married and have three children. After he graduated, the US Army drafted Saunders for the Korean War. Stationed in Darmstadt, Germany, he served overseas as a radio Teletype operator, earning National Defense Service and Good Conduct medals.

"I sent and received Morse code at 30 words per minute." Saunders returned to the States in 1956 and was honorably discharged from the army on November 30, 1962.

In 1960, he founded Saunders, Austin, Brown & Enochs Chartered that he says became the largest law firm in Kansas with 78 lawyers in four offices.

In the sixty years since he left the Philippines and his remarkable ordeal, Saunders has returned only once. In 1972, he went back for an emotional reunion with Johnny whose family included wife, Fely, daughters Thelma, Irma, and Edna, and son Danny.

In a letter acknowledging Saundser's pending visit, Johnny wrote on May 17, 1972, "Your letter was handed to me in Baguio (sic) City by my son Danny and I almost could not hold myself when tears rolled from my eyes with happiness..."

When Saunders and Wynona landed in Manila, a banner 50 feet long with letters 10 feet high was stretched across the front of the airport. It read, "Frank Saunders is back." Though he wanted to revisit the sites he'd seen as a child, Saunders found many off-limits. The Filipinos were hostile to Americans, and Saunders admits that his safety might have been threatened

had he not been with Johnny. Times had changed. Many of the Filipinos blamed America for involving them in the war with Japan. But for Saunders and Johnny, it was a happy reunion.

Retired from law since 2000, Saunders isn't idle. As past president of the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce, he's still a member, and he sits on area hospital boards. Drawing on the construction skills he honed as a resourceful child prisoner of war, he builds houses for Habitat for Humanity two days a week.

Frank Saunders Jr. planted the seeds of hope for his fellow prisoners in erecting structures that made their lives a little more bearable long ago on an island in the middle of a war he was too young to understand. He's still sowing hope in the hearts of those who long for a home of their own.



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