

Rescue Mission to Kyushu

by Charles Sterling Berry (1919-1964)

On August 8, 1945, the United States exploded a nuclear bomb called "Fat Man" over the Japanese city of Nagasaki, prompting Emperor Hirohito's official surrender--and the end of World War II--on September 10. Just a few days after Japan's surrender, a team of Allies entered Nagasaki Harbor to liberate prisoners of war from the Japanese camps on Kyushu island. Charles Sterling Berry, a young Naval pharmacist and crew member of the USS HAVEN, took photographs of the atomic bomb's devastation in Nagasaki, and subsequently wrote a journal chronicling the visit to Kyushu.

Aboard the USS HAVEN (AH12) - Nagasaki Harbor, Japan

15 September 1945

With the rescue of approximately 10,000 persons who have been held as prisoners of war and internees by Japan in Kyushu as its goal, a naval task force under the command of Rear Admiral Frank G. Fahrion, USN, arrived in the narrow harbor of Nagasaki on Sept. 11 at 2600 (East longitude date, local time). Headed by the USS WICHITA, veteran heavy cruiser which carries Admiral Fahrion's flag, the task force, consisting of the Navy hospital ship, HAVEN, two destroyers, the MUGFORD and SMITH, seaplane tender CORSON and destroyer transport WEBER, threaded its way through a minefield at the entrance of the harbor under a leaden sky and drizzling rain which restricted visibility.

A Japanese pilot, Lt. Comdr. Tauchi Hisao, Japanese Imperial Naval Reserve, was taken aboard the *WICHITA* about 20 miles from the entrance to the harbor to guide the ships through the minefield and narrow channel. Due at 0800, he arrived at noon, during which time minesweeps circled the task group. One of the destroyers sunk a mine by machine gun fire about 1000 yards from the *WICHITA*. The ships had made their way from Buckner Bay, Okinawa, uneventfully, having left at 0600, 10 Sept. 1945.



After reaching the entrance to the thin river-like harbor, the ships proceeded slowly in single file between high hills, dodging hulls of ships sunk by bombing raids and passing ship yards and a few launched but no completed merchant ships. Several Japs in nondescript fishing boats of various sizes gazed apparently impassively at the ships. From their battle stations, for all ships were at General Quarters--just in case--the ship's crew could see some midget subs in one yard. Looking toward the hills, one could see the terraced agricultural plots typical of all Japan. Vertical victory gardens, was the term given them. Below the farming area, there were many clusters of closely grouped thatched roofs, rising in steps from the water's edge. Two small boys were the only Japs to give any welcoming gestures, waving at the ships.

As the small task force 'walked a tight rope' up the channel, more and more damaged buildings began to appear. Later it was learned that practically all the damage in the whole area was caused by the atomic bomb. Eventually, the cruiser drew even with the relatively undamaged docks and the anchor was dropped, while the Haven drew along side to moor and tie up for the big job that lay ahead. Immediately a Marine detachment of 70 men was disembarked and sent ashore. Veterans of landings under fire on other islands in the Pacific, they were prepared for any eventuality. The landing was made without incident, several groups of Japs watching with no indication of their feelings being apparent. The Marines quickly cleared a three square block area of Nips and inspected the vicinity.

Materializing from the lengthening shadows to greet Admiral Fahrion as he inspected the dock area where General Taniguchi, commanding Japanese forces in this area, and Wakamatsu Nagano, Governor of the Nagasaki prefecture. They asked if they could be of assistance and in turn were queried if they knew why the Navy was present. "To release unfortunate prisoners of war," was the reply. Actually they wanted to surrender formally but were discouraged by the admiral.

Shortly after the Marines landed, the hospital ship USS HAVEN was moored to the Dejima Wharf ready to receive evacuees with equipment rivalling the most modern hospitals. Within a few hours a flight officer from a B-29 which crashed recently while on a food dropping mission to prison camps was taken aboard. The only survivor of 14, he had been carried from a mountain side by natives and was taken to a prison camp on the edge of the city. In need of medical attention he was brought to the HAVEN, where it was discovered both his legs were fractured. Interviewed at his bed side, he reported considerate care on the part of the natives who rescued him.

Early Wednesday morning, Sept. 12th, a conference was held with local public health, railroad and military officials, with Colonel Owen Griffin of the US Army and Commodore M. D. Willcutts (MC) USN, outlining to the Japs the plans for evacuating the prisoners. The local persons pledged their full aid. All camps to be evacuated, except the first one, are within two miles of a railroad, and a few hospital cars will be used to supplement regular coaches. Also present were representatives from Australia, Netherlands, East Indies and Canada who came to assist in handling their own nationals.

While the conference was being held, some 200 Jap workmen began clearing up the dock area. Under the enthusiastic guidance of Canadian army officers, the natives wasted no time, once they started working. They had waited patiently, quietly and almost motionlessly in columns of four for an hour. Most of them were ex-soldiers, judging from their garments. At the same time, a working party from the HAVEN began to install double rows of showers made aboard the ship during the previous night. By late afternoon the rubbish and rubble had been cleared, the showers were ready and a modern building which had formerly housed the dock offices was thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.



The task force was strengthened Tuesday by the arrival of the USS CHENAGO, an escort carrier, which put in with four other ships. The CHENAGO, stripped of her fighting planes, has been converted to a transport and can accommodate 1500 evacuees.

Late Tuesday afternoon 20 Naval officers and enlisted personnel, most of them photographers, were driven in a highly polished Buick Century sedan with white side-wall tires, and a Chevrolet truck, to inspect the area devastated by the atomic bomb. The transportation was furnished by Captain Yadomi, chief of the military police [and] interpreter. Despite a weak battery which made it necessary for the truck to push, the Buick was in excellent condition. Gasoline was being used on this trip, although in common with most of the few other vehicles seen in the city, it had a charcoal burner in the luggage compartment at the rear. Gasoline is very scarce and is not available for civilian use.

Driving north from the dock area, the completely ruined section starts about one mile from the harbor and extends along a two mile wide valley for approximately four miles between hills about 1500 feet high. There is no disintegration of matter. However, the area is flattened. Only a few reinforced concrete walls, and one lonesome Japanese arch stand in the midst of a vast amount of rubble. The great Mitsubishi Iron Works, nearly a mile long and four blocks wide, is a mass of twisted and tangled steel girders. In one block which formerly housed a factory, only the seared lathes, drills and other machine tools are standing.

Natives who saw the bomb first saw a ball of fire in the air, then a rumbling, thunderous roar reverberated for several minutes, during which time the ball broke into many smaller fiery parts. The fires caused directly or indirectly burned intensely for ten days. Very little fire protection has been noticed in the city; only two light trucks and several small wagons resembling children's toys [having] been seen.

The only places seen carrying on normal operations were the post office, and a tire shop. Several offices of various types are open but little activity goes on. Small overcrowded ferries cross the harbor taking people to work making plows at a former war factory.

Early Thursday morning, September 13th, eight amphibious landing craft left the anchorage on a mission completely different from that for which they were originally designed. Instead of being loaded with armed marines or soldiers ready to storm ashore, there were almost empty. The leading craft did have a 20 mm. machine gun manned, just in case, but the little flat-bottomed, snub-nosed boats, other than the first one which carried several officers in charge, were empty save for their regular three men crews. Their destination was the first POW camp to be evacuated, on Koyaki Island, three miles south. When they reached there, the ex-prisoners had been already given identification tags by an Army rescue team and were ready to leave the place where they had been incarcerated for nearly three years. A total of 492, only two of whom were stretcher cases, were taken off the island. Most of them were British, Dutch and Japanese who had been captured when Java fell in 1942.

The camp buildings were fairly decent, although small dog-house like structures, where a person could neither stretch out while lying down or stand up erectly, were used for solitary confinement. A total of 72 deaths had occurred here over a period of three years. The maximum population was 1500. Men here had worked at a nearby shipyard, and their diet had been approximately that of the natives.

Several large piles of colored parachutes were noticed. These were why the men had gained on an average of 15 pounds in the last month, having been dropped by B-29s, or flying grocers, as they are affectionately called by the evacuees.

On the trip back to the anchorage, the men pressed on their rescuers gum and cigarettes, claiming they had more than they could carry. Many of them thought they should save the rations they couldn't eat and it took considerable persuasion to get them to believe there was more and better food awaiting them. Much of the material they carried was good breeding ground for insects. One Scotchman, however, hung on to six cartons of American cigarettes. They told how the Japs had experienced much difficulty actually completing any ships due to lack of knowledge in launching and because of sly sabotage on the part of the ex-POWs. One Englishman was anxious to learn when the SARATOGA had been sunk. "We heard it had gone down several times," he said. When told the dowager queen of the flat-tops was still afloat, he replied, "Well, we didn't really believe it, but it was told to us so blooming often."

Back at the harbor, the men were speedily sent through a continuous production line processing, questioned, examined physically, cleaned, given new Navy clothing, and perhaps most welcome of all, doughnuts and good coffee, ice cream, chocolate malted milk and sandwiches by the Navy. They also received Red Cross kits, and as one limey dug into his he pulled out a pipe, exclaiming, "Blimey, a proper pipe at last."

At the end of the first day's processing, 683 persons, including 5 Americans and 16 women had been given attention. The first man to be assigned to the CHENAGO was a Brooklyn born Irishman who had gone to the ould [sic] sod when 6 years old. Several of the first day's group were survivors of the British cruiser EXETER, sunk Feb. 28, 1942, when the US destroyer POPE went down. Three US Navy officers from the POPE were at the Koyaki camp until about three months ago, when they were transferred. "The guards made special attempts to make the Americans look ridiculous before us," one evacuee reported.

A group of seven British merchant seamen did not wait for a formal rescue but hitched a ride on a train from a camp north of here. The survivors of the tanker PETALLA and the freighter JEMSTONE, sunk in the South Atlantic by two armed German raiders in April 1942, they were taken aboard one of the raiders, the MICHAEL. Also sunk were five other ships, including the American ships CONNECTICUT and STANVAC CALCUTTA. A total of 200 survivors were picked up by the MICHAEL which was equipped with underwater torpedo tubes, a seaplane bearing American markings and a motor torpedo boat.

Their trip to Japan was by way of the South Atlantic around the cape through the Antarctic up to Java, thence to Yokohama, being transferred to a German tanker and a German cargo ship en route. This took nine weeks. When they arrived in the Jap harbor there were nine other German ships there. In their camp, they were awakened every morning by a slap in the face with the butt of a rifle.

The second day's group was brought here by train from camps north of the city and were greeted by a 10 piece Navy band playing "Hail, Hail the Gang's All Here", and "California, Here I Come". Visibly affected by the music, the men also showed the strain of their imprisonment and torture much more clearly than the first day's group. Included in this group were survivors of the Bataan death march, Wake Island, and the sinking of the USS HOUSTON. When they finished the processing, they were given Army clothes and durable Army shoes and boots. Many of them arrived wearing the Japanese glove like slipper with a space between the big and second toe. A few had saved complete, or almost so, of their old uniforms and proud was a Dutch sailor who had a spotless white uniform.

The hell through which all of the evacuees have gone was even more evident in the third day's group. Fifty-two stretcher cases, many of them living skeletons, others with one or both legs gone, were the first to be taken from the train which arrived two hours late at 1400. Most of them were British, Dutch, and Javanese with a few Americans. Among the latter were two doctors in the US Army and part of a medical detachment captured in the Phillippines. They had been kept there until late in 1943 when they were brought to Kyushu. Most of the other nationals had been part of a large group sent to Thailand to work on a railroad where some 30,000 died from diseases. After leaving Thailand, they were in a convoy attacked by American planes and several were survivors of the resultant sinkings. These men had worked in coal and zinc mines and had suffered brutally at the hands of their prison commander, whose favorite punishment was to make the men kneel in snow and then have water poured over their naked bodies. This commander is alleged to have beaten at least one man to death in the guard house.

Even though many of the ex-POWs appear in fair shape once they are cleaned up and in new clothes, all of them, on close inspection, show in one way or another the [effects] of their long captivity. Their eyes are sunken, and after a few minutes of talking, many lapse into almost incoherent speech. There are tales that many of them beat up their guards when the war ended, and that others have been on tours of the countryside commandeering cars, and ordering the Japs around. One story has it that several were lavishly entertained by Count Mitsubishi for several days. The general pattern, however, goes something like this--in one or more ways, they have suffered and suffered horribly, their diets have of

course been insufficient by American standards, they were not quite sure when they arrived here that they were at last free and need worry no more about food or beatings, and that in the near future they would get back to their families from whom many of them have had no mail at all for three or four years. Those who have already left here, some 1500, and those on the ships who will leave in a day or two, are gradually realizing what has happened.

Aboard the HAVEN the men were given the medical treatment that they so badly needed. All men were immediately put on a vitamin routine. Those who needed more intensive vitamin therapy were given special care and extra vitamin preparations intravenously. There were many who were given blood transfusions and special types of intravenous injections to begin the task of rebuilding their long starved bodies. That food was their main thought was soon apparent. At each meal they would clean their trays of each particle of food and go back for helping after helping until they could no longer force their stomachs to hold more. For the first day or so there was many a man sick from overeating. As soon as this became apparent the medical officers started to adjust their diet and instead of permitting them to overeat they regulated them to be fed smaller quantities at more frequent intervals. Bread was a novelty to these men as some of them had not seen or eaten real bread for three or four years. That they could have all they wanted to eat and a varied selection of food didn't seem real. Many were heard to remark, "I'm dreaming. I must be. I'm afraid I'll wake up and find myself back in a dirty camp with the slant eyes looking at me."



USS Haven aan de kade in Nagasaki

As the days passed the HAVEN filled up. The doctors, nurses, and corpsmen worked with a feeling of gladness, doing all in their power to make the patients more comfortable. On Saturday, September 24, the last trainload of prisoners arrived and were quickly processed. The last count showed that 9,200 ex-POWs were processed during our two week stay at Nagasaki. We had cleared the island of Kyushu of prisoners and were to start them on their long awaited homeward journey. On Tuesday, Sept. 26th we left Nagasaki and headed for Okinawa, arriving there the following morning. By late afternoon all the patients were transferred to the beach hospitals for evacuation by air except those too sick to be transferred and a few Americans.

We of the USS HAVEN were glad of the opportunity to take part in this rescue mission to Kyushu, but pray to God that such a scourge shall never befall upon humanity again.

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Bron: <http://www.usshaven.org/Rescue%20Mission%20to%20Kyushu%20page%201.htm>