

Remembering World War II

Milo Mortensen, A Hero at Cabanatuan

by Jay M. Jones

Seventy Five Years ago marked the concluding events of World War II. This is the first in a series of articles highlighting some of the contributions of Iron County to the successful termination of the war.



Former POWs from the Cabanatuan prison camp celebrate their release in the town of Guimba, Luzon, Philippines. Milo Mortensen of Parowan was part of a combined force consisting of the Sixth Ranger Battalion, Philippine guerrillas, and Alamo Scouts that freed the prisoners. www.soc.mil photo.

On 30 January 1945, Milo Mortensen of Parowan was part of 124 men from the 6th Army Ranger Battalion that went 30 miles behind enemy lines to free over 500 American and British prisoners at Cabanatuan, the first group of American prisoners freed in the Philippines. He was disappointed that Austin Halterman, a Parowan native that had been reported as a POW in the Philippines, was not among those rescued.

Of the freed prisoners Mortensen wrote to his parents, "I have never seen such a happy, or more grateful group of men as they were upon their release. Some could hardly believe they were free. They were treated badly in the prison and told many tales of Jap brutality."

Most of the POWs had been in captivity since the defeats at Bataan and Corregidor in 1942. Details of the Bataan Death March were then revealed for the first time.

Continuing, Mortensen wrote in the letter that was shared with the Iron County Record: "It was a sight to see the procession of [carabao] carts loaded 4 and 5 each with prisoners who were unable to walk. The number of carts eventually reached 50 before we were safely within our lines. Yet it was amazing the number who reached safety under their own power even though some were without shoes and few had more than just underwear for clothes."

In addition to the Army Rangers, 300 to 350 local Philippine guerrillas and a 13 man team of Alamo Scouts participated in the mission.

Mortensen relates: "As we proceeded, it seemed each Barrio (village) among the never ending rice paddies knew of our approach and greeted us silently with baskets of rice fresh from the ovens, together with eggs, cane or anything else they might possess. They would walk alongside the caravan as it passed and whisper to each individual with their offerings lest they should betray our presence by their voices. They were masters in keeping our route back secret.

"The Philippine Guerillas were of great value and assistance. They fed us, hid us, spied for us and fought for us."

While the American Rangers were engaged in the rescue at the prison camp, the Philippine guerillas fought off and delayed Japanese troops and tanks on their way to reinforce the overwhelmed prison guards.

"The night before we released the prisoners we entered a village and were greeted warmly. The girls presented us with leis as a token of welcome. They asked permission to sing. We gathered around and eight young girls sang softly and beautifully the 'Star Spangled Banner', 'God Bless America' and 'God Bless The Philippines'. It was quite touching."

The combined Allied forces freed 516 prisoners, killed at least 530 Japanese soldiers, destroyed twelve enemy tanks and a large number of trucks.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Henry A. Mucci, the commanding officer of the 6th Ranger Battalion, friendly casualties were 26 guerrillas and 2 Rangers killed. Two of the rescued men died of heart attacks on the way to safety.

More details of the Cabanatuan prison raid can be found at the web site https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/articles/v14n2_cabanatuan_page_1.html .

Milo Mortensen did not return home from the military. He died March 31, 1945 from wounds suffered in action on Luzon in the Philippines. Prior to his death he received the Bronze Star for his participation in the POW rescue.



Rangers and former prisoners pose with the carabao cart used to transport rescued POWs to Guimba on January 30 and 31, 1945. www.soc.mil photo.

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