

The Story of an American World War II POW

By: Dean A. Givens, Sr.

August 16, 1945. *"We in hut two of Sendai Prison Camp Number Two had just come up out of the mine from night shift. It was about five o'clock and we were partaking of our regular breakfast of rice and soup when the men remaining in camp (from) the previous night came in from roll call, jumping and shouting, 'The War's Over!'*

"What impression did it make on me? It's hard to put down in writing. For one thing, I suddenly lost my appetite, and that's something very rare in a prisoner of war camp. I had inhaled about half of my rice and soup and wishing to goodness I had about three times that much...when the news came in.

"After I finally realized what was taking place, a lump came in my throat. I could hardly swallow the mouth full of rice that I was pulverizing. My head began to swim a little as if I'd had one bottle too many. Everybody was shouting and raving and talking at the same time.

"Suddenly, one of my pals jumped up and started shaking my hand and saying, 'I told you it'd be over this month Gibby ol' boy, I told you so!'

"Was this a dream? I have had many such dreams since being a prisoner of war but none quite as this. It took some time to establish the fact that it was real."

With these memorable words began the personal diary of Army Technical Sergeant Bernard Whit Givens, an American Prisoner of War, as he first learned of the war's end and realized he had survived more than three years of captivity. For Sergeant Givens, who had grown up in a small farming community in Houston County, Alabama, incarceration as a POW had been a staggering tribulation. Nothing in his childhood had prepared him to cope with the everyday fear and danger, which was common for all American prisoners of war.

After joining the Army on October 18, 1939 at the age of 17 and completing basic training at Barksdale Field in Louisiana, he received advanced training as a radio operator at Scott Field in Illinois. In November 1941, he and other members of his squadron traveled from California for the Philippine Islands.

Once in the Philippines, he was assigned to the B-17 Flying Fortress bombers of the 19th Bombardment Group. After war broke out, the squadron did not function as an aviation unit for long because of the damage their planes received as the Japanese attacked the Philippines soon after their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

As it did for thousands of other allied soldiers, freedom for Bernard Givens ended with the fall of Corregidor and the capture of Army General Wainwright's forces, May 6, 1942 (in his book, "The Fall of the Philippines", author Louis Morton provides great detail about how and why the Philippines were lost in the early months of the war).

Sergeant Givens endured barbaric treatment and torture at the hands of his Japanese captors. Like many other allied prisoners, he was abused, both mentally and physically. The scar on his right foot—stabbed by a Japanese soldier's bayonet because of his refusal to interpret American military radio messages—was

The Story of an American World War II POW

vivid testimony to the torture he had bravely withstood. Raised into a strong Christian family, he often relied on prayer and his faith in God to see him through the horrific times he would face.

Along with hundreds of other prisoners of war from the US, England, Australia, and other allied countries, Sgt. Givens arrived in Japan in November, 1942 aboard what later became known as Hell ships. The prisoners of war had previously been held on the Pacific island of Taiwan where, as he put it, "...we were being put in shape, according to the Nips, for labor in Japan."

In December, 1942 Sgt. Givens and many other prisoners were put to work at a shipyard in Yokohama. The work they performed was dangerous and as recorded in his diary, "...cold and miserable in the winter and hot and sultry in the summer. Since we didn't have any choice in the matter, all we could do was just freeze and sweat and hope to goodness for a quick ending."

December 7, 1941. This first Sunday of the month, on a beautiful sunlit morning in Hawaii, the Japanese launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. After recovering from the initial blow, American forces began a steady but bloody march towards Japan by capturing a string of Pacific islands.

From one of these captured islands in May, 1945 Army Air Force B-29 bombers were able to reach out and bomb many of the industrial and population centers of Japan. Yokohama was one such city. The Japanese, concerned about possible retribution by the United States, decided to relocate the prisoners to a safer place rather than risk their being killed in the Yokohama air raids.

"So on May 12," he wrote, "we were split up into groups of fifty and sent to various other camps throughout Japan. Our days (in Yokohama) were over but we had landed in something worse, an infernal coal mine. After giving us a work suit and a pair of split-toed cloth shoes, they sent us down to see what it was all about. "What a mine! I'm sure the laws in the states wouldn't allow such a mine to operate. It looked as if the whole works would come down any minute but they told us that only one person had been killed during the past year."

The 242 men of Sendai Prison Camp Two settled into the drudgery of working in the coal mines. Camp Two covered about one acre of land and was enclosed by a high wooden fence. Nearby was a small Japanese village. Beyond the village lay rice patties, typical of much of rural wartime Japan.

Givens and the other prisoners of war habitually worked twelve-hour shifts. They changed from days to nights every ten days. The work, he described, was "...simply rotten..."

Upon coming out of the mine for the last time and discovering his impending freedom, he inscribed, "...what a relief to know that tomorrow, instead of sticking a box of rice under our arms and heading for the mine, we could lay around and take life easy until the Yanks arrive in camp and take us to a (Westcoast-bound) ship."

The prisoner's diet consisted mostly of rice and, as he recorded, "...we never got enough to satisfy our ever present hunger." Yet, after learning of the unbelievably good news of the war's end, Sergeant Givens recorded, "...I looked on the shelf behind my bed and there set a half bowl of rice. I took another bite, but it had absolutely no taste; so I left it sitting."

The Story of an American World War II POW

August 27, 1945. Airplanes from the Navy aircraft carrier USS Lexington flew over the prison camp for the first time and parachuted food, clothing, and other supplies for the prisoners' use.

“This is another date we'll remember for years to come. Never have I witnessed such a day. I wish I could describe all that happened just as it happened, but that's beyond my talents.

“The fun started about eleven o'clock in the morning when a squadron of US Navy fighters and torpedo bombers from the aircraft carrier Lexington dived down into the midst of our little camp. They came so low until we could almost see the color of their eyes.

“After circling the camp two or three times, the torpedo bombers started coming in at about one-hundred feet with wing flaps lowered for the lowest possible speed.

“Just before reaching the camp, the bomb bays were opened, but instead of bombs, ...crates, bags and boxes of food, cigarettes, candy, and toilet articles began to pour out...they were flying so low the parachutes never did any good.”

The Japanese, during the course of the Pacific war, claimed to have sunk the Lexington several times. They referred to the Lexington as a "ghost ship" because she always reappeared each time they thought they had sunk her. Here she was at war's end off the coast of Japan. Her mission this time was one of mercy, delivering life sustaining supplies to American and allied POW's.

As Sgt. Givens wrote, “Imagine a group of men who had eaten nothing but rice and soup for three and a half years. Then imagine the reaction of these men upon seeing American chow coming in by the planeload. You'd have to be a prisoner of war to know what I mean.”

Several of the bombers that parachuted supplies to the prisoners also dropped personal notes of support and encouragement. Many, such as Navy Lt. J. B. Hoyt, of Mercer Island, Washington, and A.R.M. Second Class W. A. Brewer, of Paducah, Kentucky, also included their names and hometowns.

This was not to be the last visit from the Lexington's airplanes. They returned later that same day. As recorded in the diary, a Japanese photographer was taking group pictures of the POW's by nationality. He was about to take a group shot of the American prisoners when the roaring of approaching planes was heard.

“We jumped up and cleared the small parade ground. Again, they came in very low, dropping food and cigarettes as in the morning. They (also) put us on an air show, which was something to marvel at.

“Diving, belly rolls, loop-de-loops, wing-overs, and about everything in the book. I've never heard so much shouting as was coming from the mouths of English, Canadians, Australians, French, and everyone else. (Many shouted) ‘Come on Yanks, give us another wing over,’ or ‘Look at them Yanks. Boy they can't be beat.’”

As they awaited their rescue, the POW's enjoyed basking in the sun and telling stories of what they would do when they got back home. Many reread the letters from home they had received while in captivity.

One such letter to Sgt. Givens, from his brother Horace, which was dated March 29, 1943, read in part:

The Story of an American World War II POW

Dear Bernard,

It was only to-day that I learned your address... You can't imagine how many times I have wondered just where you are and what you were doing. It is very good news to me, to say the least, to know that you are safe.

We all here are enjoying the best of health and you can rest assured that our every thought and prayer is of you and your continued good health and safety.

I too am in the Army and have just about finished my first training. It is our duty to support you men that are so bravely carrying on for us.

Daddy and all the rest of us in the family send to you our best wishes and love... I am, as ever,

*Your devoted brother,
Horace*

September 2, 1945. Sgt. Givens recorded in the diary that this was his biggest day since learning of the war's end. Yet sadly, he wrote, tragedy paid the POW's one more visit.

“At 5:40 this morning, just as we were getting out of bed, we heard the drone of airplanes. Several big transports and B-29's were heading our way. They were flying real low so we knew they were going to drop supplies, and sure enough they did. Tons and tons of it. There were ninety-six cargo parachutes loaded with... articles and food of all kinds.

“It took all two-hundred of us, with the help of two ox carts and several Japs, over three hours to dig all of it out of the flooded rice field, out of trees, creeks, and ravines. We finally got it together and into camp.

“It would have been a wonderful day except for the fatal accident of one of our American boys and a very serious accident to one of the Portuguese. They were on the roof of one of the buildings trying to signal the planes with a signaling device that we had rigged up.

“The second plane over released his load and some of the crates slipped out of the parachutes, spinning through the air at a terrific speed, making a direct hit on the American, knocking him through the roof. He was killed instantly.

“The Portuguese was more lucky. He only lost a foot from the ankle down. He was taken to Tokyo and put aboard a hospital ship. Funeral services were held (for the deceased American) at 4:30 and his body taken away for cremation.”

Some of the Japanese civilians helped them gather the dropped supplies. One, an old man, the POW's came upon as he was traveling down a nearby road with his ox and cart. Sticking a can of Campbell's soup under his nose, one of the prisoners spoke, “Presento soupo moto coy neshi campo.”

The old man replied, 'Hai.'

The Story of an American World War II POW

Drums of food and supplies were piled on the ox cart until the wheels started to sink into the soggy ground. Never in his whole life, Sgt. Givens wrote, had (the old man) seen such food and so much of it. “(He)... probably didn't know that there was anything to eat except rice, fish, and a few vegetables. For two cans of soup and a can of peaches he would probably have given us his ox, cart and all.”

Many of the Japanese civilians that lived near the POW camp wanted to know if the planes that had parachuted the “meshi” to the POW's were B-29 bombers. “To every Japanese, from six years old on up, the B-29 has been a horror and nightmare for the past several months.”

One of Sgt. Givens' last entries in his diary read, “Several days ago the Navy planes dropped notes telling us to write on the roof of the buildings the things we needed most. Naturally, we wrote FOOD AND CIGARETTES in big letters. Well after today, we erased that and put instead, ENOUGH, THANKS.”

September 9, 1945 “Peace was signed in Tokyo today,” Sergeant Givens penciled in his diary, “It's a national holiday in Japan.”

One of the last entries in his diary read: “One thing I've learned since leaving home and that's the United States of America is and always will be the greatest country on the face of the earth. Thank God I'm one of Uncle Sam's Nephews. BWG. Sendai, Japan.”

Sergeant Givens returned to the United States and his family. He married, settled down to work and raise a family in the small, neighborly town of Bainbridge, Georgia. Bainbridge was located not too far from his birthplace in southeast Alabama's Houston County. He and his wife had three children, two sons and a daughter.

December 1, 1957. Like another Sunday almost sixteen years before, this first Sunday of the month was a pleasant, bright day. As they did every Sunday, Bernard Givens and his family attended Sunday School and church services.

Later in the day, as he sometimes did on Sunday afternoons, he went to visit an old friend. On the outskirts of town, Bernard Givens' automobile stalled on a back road, unguarded railroad crossing. He was suddenly and tragically killed when a freight train rushing from behind a blind curve, hit him as he tried to dash free.

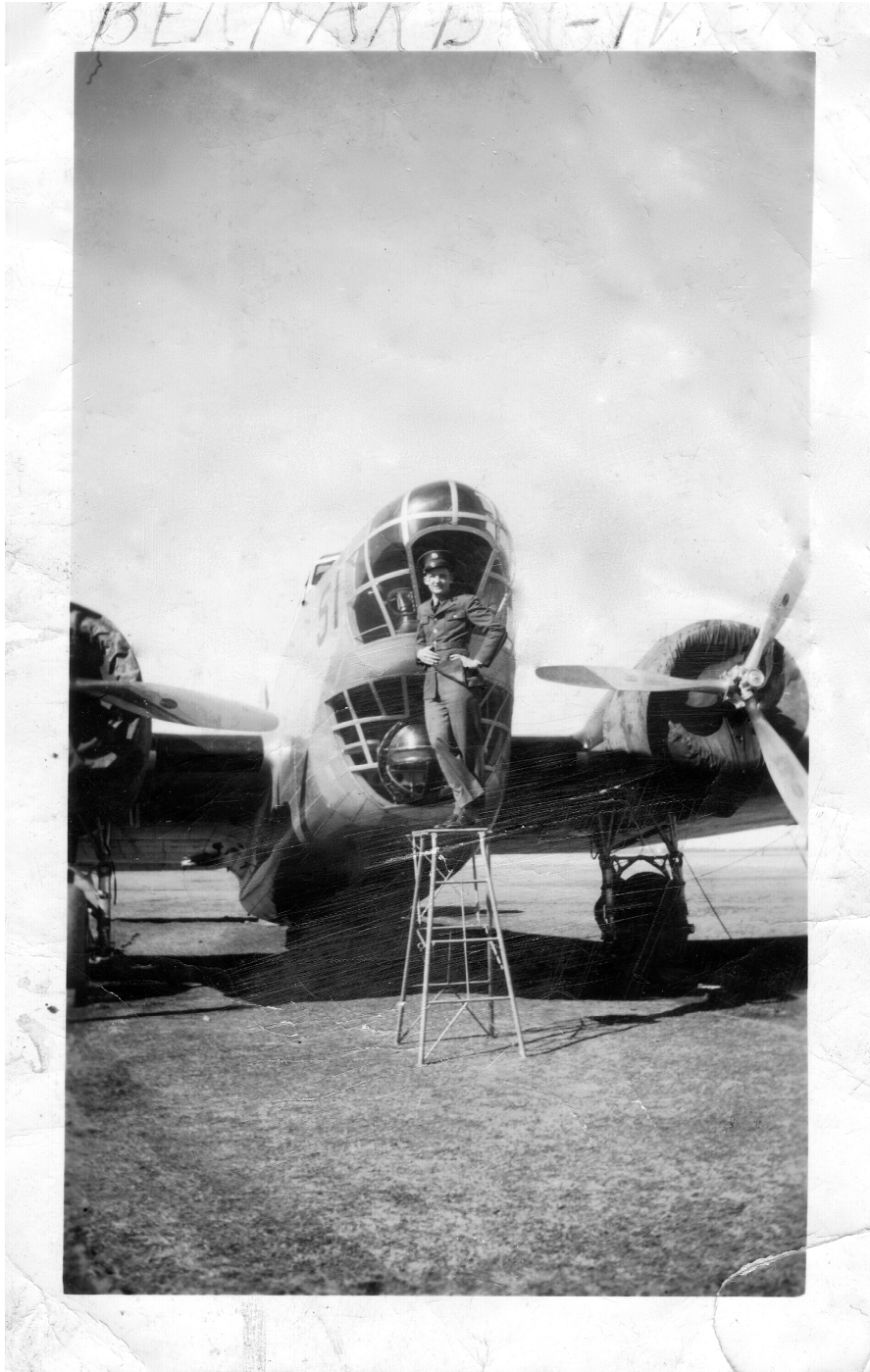
Like that other tragic-filled Sunday almost sixteen years before, there was no advance warning.

Epilogue. Bernard Givens wrote in his diary after the war ended that another POW had told him, “Gibby, you don't know how lucky you are to be a Yank.”

“But they were mistaken.” he wrote in his diary. “I do know and there's no man anywhere that's prouder of being an American than I.”

For this loyal and brave nephew of Uncle Sam, death came much too soon. Yet the legacy he left, devotion to God and an unflinching love for his country and his family, lives forever.

The Story of an American World War II POW



This photo of Bernard Givens was taken at Barksdale Field, Louisiana, February 12, 1940. Following his assignment at Barksdale, he attended radio school at Scott Field, Illinois. After radio school, he was stationed for several months in Savannah, Georgia and was then sent to California. From there, on November 2, 1941, he sailed for the Philippine Islands.

The Story of an American World War II POW

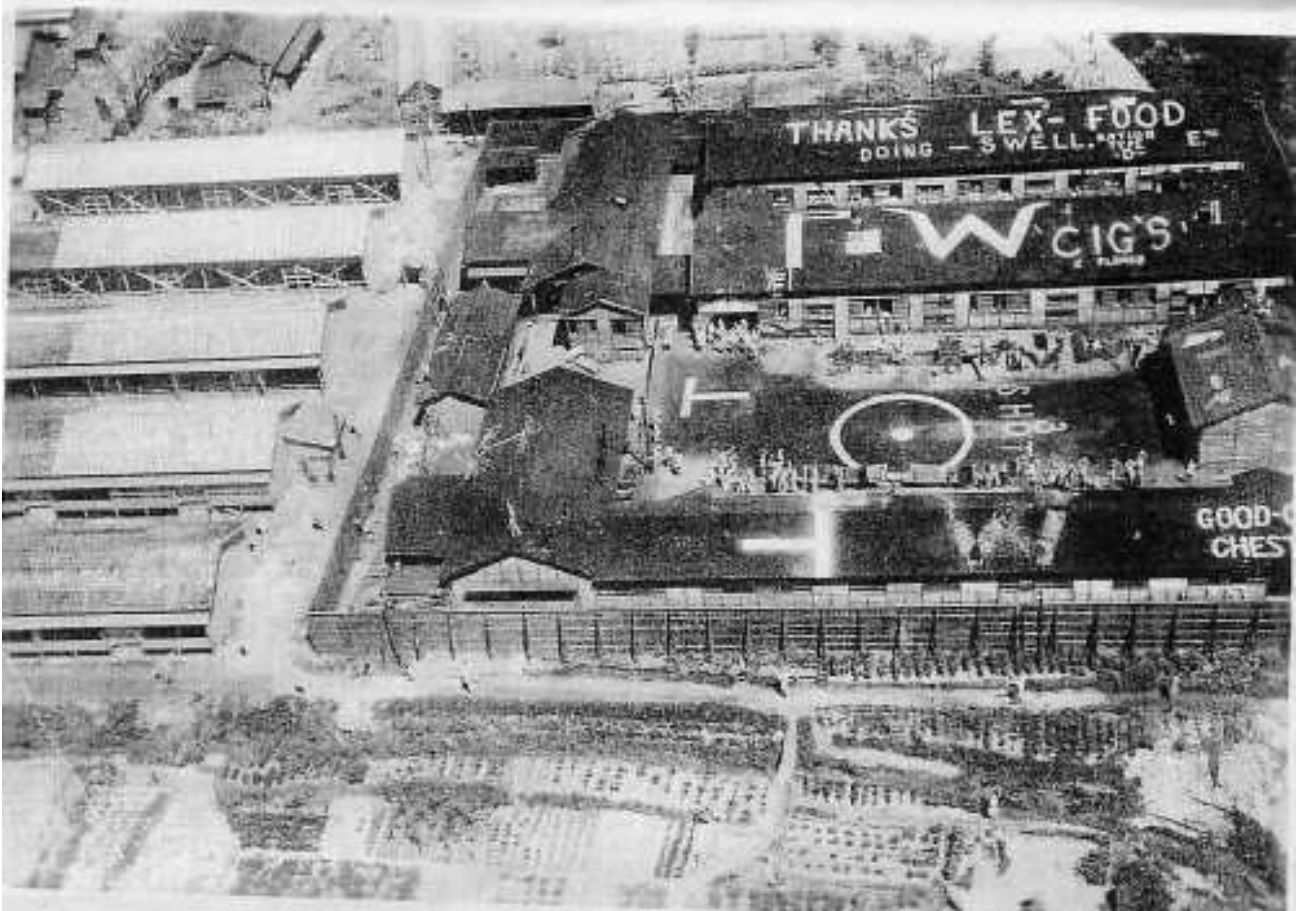
A B-17 crew from the 19th Bombardment Group, Stationed in the Philippine Islands At the start of World War II.

Source: http://www.19thbg.org/photo_gallery.htm



(This B-17 is like the one in which Bernard Givens served as a Radio Operator and Gunner.)

Sendai #2 POW Camp in Japan.



Mission No: 73 POW M5

Date Flown: 2 September 1945

Rectangular area with gate extended at one corner. Two large rectangular barracks, one L-shaped chapel barracks, and several smaller buildings in area. No guard house observed. Large PW on roof of center barracks. Circle in center of clearing within compound from which arrow extends pointing toward gate. Word "HITS" written across arrow. Signs on barracks farthest from gate read "LEX, SWELL, FOOD, RATION, TYPE D". Next to PW sign is "CIGS PLEASE". On L-shaped building is sign "GOOD OLD CHESTY", with anchor and USN at opposite end. Mine adjacent to camp.

About four persons are visible within compound. No bundles seen striking in compound area. Not an assigned target for this mission.

USN Archives

This coal mine was located near Sendai Camp 2

Source: http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/sendai/sendai_2/sendai_2_main.html



List of American POW's at Sendai Camp #2

Source: http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/sendai/sendai_2/sendai_2_main.html

Name, Rank, ASN, Unit, POW#, Date of death, Cause, Notes

Armour, Jesse J.,Sgt,38008057,515th CA,216,na,na,Delta CO
Atkins, Thomas E.,SSgt,38011900,200th CA,215,na,na,Clarksville TX
Barniskis, Edward A.B.,Cpl,7024437,59th CA,219,na,na,Philidelphia PA
Bradley, Charles E.,Cpl,19012945,60th CAC Hq Btry,220,na,na,San Angelo TX
Cmeyla, Patrick M.,Maj,O&363564,USA (MC),1,na,na,Sioux City IA
Dee, Stanley,Cpl,6686738,CAC,221,na,na,Yonker NY
Feavwear, Charles Ree,SSgt,6913219,60th CAC,214,na,na,Saginaw MI
George, Thomas J.,SSgt,17023844,60th CAC,213,na,na,El Dorado Spr NM
Givens, Bernard W.,Sgt,6971546,91st BG,217,na,na,Miami FL
Graham, Earl C.,1sr Sgt,6655245,91st AF,206,na,na,Cleveland OH
Guthrie, John Connaughty, Gnr, 5190, HKVDC, 195,na,na,American,Pleasantville NY
Hnulik, Richard A,Sgt,20843817,515th CA,218,na,na,Artesia NM
Muller, Gottlob Carl,TSgt,20842756,200th CA,209,na,na,Tolar NM
Overmier, William Clayton,SSgt,20842947,200th CA,212,na,na,Albuquerque NM
Rose, Cecil D.,TSgt,6553668,Har Def Hq,210,na,na,Kansas
Sarata, Joseph S.,SSgt,6134856,Sig Corps,211,45.9.2,accident,Washington DC [Parachute drop of food- crushed by pallet when ripped from chute]
Stensby, John L.,TSgt,6919776,60th CAC,208,na,na,Milwaukee WI

The Story of an American World War II POW

This sketch was made by Pvt. C. L. Rozario, a member of the HKVDC who originally came from Portuguese-owned Macao.

Source: <http://mariseoshouse.blogspot.com/2005/02/letter-from-pow-barney-byrne.html>



The Story of an American World War II POW

<http://archiver.rootsweb.com/th/read/ALHOUSTO/2006-08/1156869024>

Excerpts From The Dothan Eagle newspaper: 10 Dec 1943

Houston Soldier Writes From Tokyo.

Relatives of a Houston County soldier today still wondered what life is like in a Japanese prisoners of war camp in Tokyo after a letter Saturday from Sergeant Bernard W Givens, of Ashford route two, shed little light on the question.

Sergeant Givens, who has been in the Army since 1940, was captured by the Japs in the fall of Corregidor and has been in a prisoner's camp since May 7, 1942.

Although Sergeant Givens, son of John J Givens, Ashford route two, wrote relatives in June, the message did not arrive until yesterday when they also received a letter from him dated August 23.

The letter and card, printed on Japanese stationery, carried the curious looking Japanese symbols and was censored by both enemy and American censors.

In his letter Sergeant Givens said he was enjoying the 'warm August weather,' and 'let's hope the war will soon be over and we can see each other again as before.'

Then in a hopeful vein he added: 'Above all don't ever worry about me regardless of what happens...'

Sergeant Givens was among the defenders of Corregidor when the Americans held out against a superior numbered enemy and gave in only after they had been subjected to some of the heaviest fighting experienced in the early stages of the Pacific war.

**

Source: email of Mary Cathrin May; 28 Jan 2009

"[These] newspaper articles [are] about two men from the 27th Bomb Group, WWII. One is the obituary (dated 1949) of my own Uncle Emil Russ "Billy" May (Hq. Sq.), and two items about a survivor, Bernard Whitt Givens (91st Bomb Sq.). The items are compliments of William Richter, cousin of Bernard Givens."

[The Dothan Eagle](#)

September 7, 1944

"GIVENS BROADCASTS FROM NIPPON PRISON"

"Interception of an unofficial shortwave Broadcast from Japan made by Sergeant Bernard W. Givens, of Ashford Route two, was revealed this week in a telegram to his father, John J. Givens, Ashford Route two, by the Provost Marshal General. Sgt. Givens, stationed at Corregidor, in the Philippines, was captured by the Japanese on May 7th, 1942, and is now being interned in a prisoner of War camp in Tokyo. The text of the telegram follows;

"Following unofficial broadcast shortwave from Japan has been intercepted, 'Hello dad and all the family and friends I am happy to be to be able to make this broadcast and to let you know I am well and am waiting for the time I can see all of you again I have received letters from all the family and was glad to know everyone was doing fine Give all the friends and neighbors my regards I think of all of you each day. So chins up until we meet again. Love to all, Bernard W. Givens. This broadcast supplements previous official report received from International Red Cross. Lerch, Provost Marshal General."

[The Dothan Eagle](#)

September 20, 1945

"SGT. B. W. GIVENS FREED FROM JAPS"

"Sergeant B. W. Givens, twenty-three, a prisoner of war since the fall of Corregidor was returned to military control September 7, and is being returned to the United States soon, his father, John J. Givens, of Ashford, route two, has been notified.

Sergeant Givens enlisted in the Army October 18, 1939 at the age of 17 and received his basic training at Barksdale, La. He attended radio school at Scott Field, Ill., and after serving in Savannah, Ga. for several months, was sent to California in October 1941, and on November 2, 1941, sailed for the Philippine Islands.

After Corregidor fell May 6, 1942 he was listed as missing in action until October, 1942 when his family was notified he was a prisoner of Japan. He was liberated from a camp in Tokyo.

During his internment his family received from him two letters and two cards, all several months old when delivered and in two instances more than a year old. They also received several short wave radio grams from persons who heard the short wave radio broadcasts on which Sgt. Givens gave his fathers address."

The Story of an American World War II POW

http://mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/sendai/sendai_2/sendai_2_main.html

Hellships:

Naura Maru known to have sailed 29 Apr 1944 with 47 Canadians plus 173 other men from Hong Kong- sent to Sendai #2.

Dainichi Maru from Taiwan ex Singapore; arrived Japan 25 Nov 1942.

Rosters: Source- AWM 144/14/46 courtesy of Jonathan Moffett, Historian of the A&SH

The Americans arrived from Yokohama Camp 1D in May 1945 (Most previously on Taiwan). The Commonwealth men were already present at that time. About 100 mixed nationalites arrived around 13 June 1945 from Tokyo #1 Yokohama after the fire bombing of Tokyo.

Rescue roster located and cross checked NARA Record Group 407 Boxes 11 and 12; Deceased noted in **Brown**.

[British](#)

[Canadian](#)

[Americans, Australians, Portugese & Others](#)

Americans

Name, Rank, ASN, Unit, POW#, Date of death, Cause, Notes

Armour, Jesse J.,Sgt,38008057,515th CA,216,na,na,Delta CO

Atkins, Thomas E. "Tom",SSgt,38011900,200th CA,215,na,na,Clarksville TX

Barniskis, Edward A.B.,Cpl,7024437,59th CA,219,na,na,Philidelphia PA

Bradley, Charles E.,Cpl,19012945,60th CAC Hq Btry,220,na,na,San Angelo TX

Cmeyla, Patrick M.,Maj,O&363564,USA (MC),1,na,na,Sioux City IA

Dee, Stanley,Cpl,6686738,CAC,221,na,na,Yonker NY

Feavwear, Charles Ree,SSgt,6913219,60th CAC,214,na,na,Saginaw MI

George, Thomas J.,SSgt,17023844,60th CAC,213,na,na,El Dorado Spr NM

[Givens, Bernard W.](#),Sgt,6971546,91st BG,217,na,na,Ashford AL (also noted in Miami FL)

Graham, Earl C.,1sr Sgt,6655245,91st AF,206,na,na,Cleveland OH

Guthrie, John Connaughty, Gnr, 5190, **HKVDC**, 195,na,na,American,Pleasantville NY

Hnulik, Richard A,Sgt,20843817,515th CA,218,na,na,Artesia NM

Muller, Gottlob Carl,TSgt,20842756,200th CA,209,na,na,Tolar NM

Overmier, William Clayton,SSgt,20842947,200th CA,212,na,na,Albuquerque NM

Rose, Cecil D.,TSgt,6553668,Har Def Hq,210,na,na,Kansas

Sarata, Joseph S.,SSgt,6134856,Sig Corps,211,45.9.2,accident,Washington DC [Parachute drop of food- crushed by pallet when ripped from chute]

Stensby, John L.,TSgt,6919776,60th CAC,208,na,na,Milwaukee WI

Photograph of Bernard W. Givens and his brother Horace, taken after the war.

