

GFO 2008 Writing Contest First Place

Standing For Her

by Mickey Bennett Sieracki

Mary Catherine Connor sadly stood at attention, watching the Japanese flag slowly rise to the top of the flagpole in front of the American High Commissioner's Office in Manila. It was early January 1942, and her peaceful life had turned into a nightmare that wouldn't end for three long years. Just that past September she had finished a business school course and had started work as a stenographer in the High Commissioner's Office. She was busy with her new career and enjoying life in Manila with family and friends. But all that changed on December 7th.

A family friend had been listening to his radio and rushed over to the Connor home to tell them of an attack on Pearl Harbor. Disbelief and shock were soon followed by grim reality the next day as the Japanese bombed Clark Air Force base, north of Manila, and hit the oil reserves in the Pasig depots. Black clouds hid the sky and the family knew the way of life they had known was coming to an end. The next few weeks passed in a blur of news reports and radio, until finally the shocking news that General MacArthur was leaving. On December 26th he declared Manila an open city. The hope was to spare the city and its residents from total devastation, but the bombing continued for the next few days.¹

As people considered what the coming of the Japanese would mean, there were those who reflected at the horror that had occurred just 4 years previously in Nanking. Mary's family had all read of the atrocities committed against the civilian residents of Nanking, the rapes, murders and torture of men, women and children by the Japanese troops.² Mary's mother, looking at her three teenage daughters, could not bear the thought of what might happen to them. The High Commissioner's office had confirmed there would be no evacuations of American civilians, so she considered her options. Near their home was a small drugstore, the Botica Batallones. A discreet phone call brought a delivery of 5 vials of cyanide. They would not have to endure long if the fury of the Japanese was unleashed again.³

But Mary and her sisters were young, and the blood of Basque, Irish, and English adventurers and soldiers ran strong in their veins. They would survive. Faced with this determination and courage, her mother began new preparations. She began gathering supplies: sleeping mats, toilet paper, two cans of oatmeal per person, one pack of prunes and sugar per individual, and more. A shelter was set up under one side of the house. Pails of water were filled for personal use and, if necessary, to put out fires. Then they waited.⁴

On January 2nd the Japanese marched into Manila in six man squads: one carried a rifle, another rode a bicycle, another carried as much rice as one man could. The others carried souvenirs from their march to the city. Shortly thereafter, Mary Catherine and her fellow employees from the High Commissioner's office were ordered to report to the office. Civilians, in general, and the rest of her family were advised to congregate in hotels and clubs as it was believed there was safety in numbers. So, here she was, watching the Japanese flag go up, not knowing what the future would hold, separated from her family. At least she knew the American flag had not been desecrated. Only the day before, Mr. Claude Buss and four others from the Office had secretly burned the flag and buried it on the grounds.⁵

When the flag-raising ceremony was over, the staff was held on the premises for about 36 hours, and then moved to a private home where they were held for some months. It was a fairly large home and easily accommodated most of the staff. Father Kelly from the nearby Malate Church said Mass every Sunday for the Catholics in the group, and Bishop Binstead of the Episcopalian Church held services for the Protestants. He and his wife were also incarcerated in the house.⁶

Almost immediately, Mary fell ill with acute appendicitis. She was fortunate that early on, the staff prisoners were treated well. She was sent to a local hospital and operated on. During her

GFO 2008 Writing Contest First Place

convalescence she heard of the fall of Bataan, and within days a terrified Mary watched from the hospital as the surviving American soldiers were marched through Manila to their destination in Cabanatuan. One of the mud-splattered soldiers stumbling by the house was her Uncle William, but she never knew it. The condition of the soldiers was so grim they were unrecognizable.⁷

The weeks dragged by. Word got through sporadically to the staff about events on the outside. Mary was able to get a letter through to her brother in the U.S. letting him know they were all safe, though she was separated from the rest of the family. Her parents and sisters had been taken in early February to the University of Santo Tomas, which had been set up as a huge internment camp. Santo Tomas was a large urban campus, easily secured, with many buildings suitable for housing the thousands of civilian prisoners of war. The university, founded in 1611, was one of the most revered landmarks in Manila.⁸

In late October the staff were given the choice of joining the American consular group at another residence in Pasay City, or going into the Santo Tomas internment camp. Some, including Bishop Binstead, ended up at the Los Baños camp outside of Manila. The thought of being with her parents and sisters, and with a larger group of people was comforting, and Mary quickly chose to join them. The joy she felt on seeing her parents and sisters again was indescribable. Come what may, at least they were together. At the beginning of the Occupation, the Santo Tomas camp was organized by a committee of internees who made rules, kept order, and assigned all internees to jobs. Mary worked as a stenographer initially, and then went on to teach in the camp elementary school.⁹ Mary, along with others in the camp, tried very hard to maintain some sort of normal routine for the hundreds of children in the camp. Adults gave up their own rations to ensure the children got enough to eat.

When Mary first entered Santo Tomas, her father escorted her through the camp showing her where everything was, stopping to greet old acquaintances from pre-war days. As they were moving around the complex, they came across a group of men chatting on the steps of one of the buildings. Her father introduced her to one of them, a businessman he had known slightly before the War. It was Henry Bennett, a Manila stockbroker. He would come to be the most important person in Mary's life.

Henry had come out to Manila in 1935 with the U.S. Army and had decided to remain in Manila after his tour of duty was over. He had fallen in love with the City, and saw more opportunities there than he could ever hope for back in his hometown in Iowa. He tried several ventures and finally had begun to see some success in his stockbrokerage business when the war broke out. He was immediately called back to active duty. His uniforms hadn't been delivered yet when the City fell, and under the impression he was a civilian, the Japanese assigned him to Santo Tomas along with the rest of the civilian POW's. It didn't take long for these two to realize they had met their life's mate. Hours were spent talking about their lives, their hopes, and their future. However, the grim reality was that they weren't sure they would have a future. Strict separation of the sexes was in place in Santo Tomas. There were separate dorms for the men, and women. The harshest of punishments were promised for women in camp who got pregnant. Needless to say they certainly forbade all marriages. Henry and Mary desperately wanted to get married.

Henry turned to one of his close friends in the camp, a Dominican priest, who agreed to help the couple, even at the risk of severe punishment. A secret wedding ceremony was held in 1943. Shortly after that the Japanese finally agreed to marriages in camp. Henry and Mary went through the formal process in order to allay any suspicions of the secret marriage, and on May 31, 1944 a formal marriage ceremony was held, the first in the camp.¹⁰ This couple, whose marriage was to last until Henry's death in 1981, was finally together as husband and wife. Perhaps their joy at finding each other during the most traumatic time of their lives helped them survive during the following year. As the tides of war began to turn against the Japanese, they became increasingly hostile to the prisoners in Santo Tomas. They gradually cut all the food rations, till eventually people had to survive on approximately 1000 calories of food or less a day.¹¹ Disease became prevalent, and the death rate began to climb. Who can say what might have happened if the war

GFO 2008 Writing Contest First Place

had not ended when it did? For several days in January 1945 heavy bombing could be heard over Manila from American planes. Finally in early February American planes flew over Santo Tomas and something fell from one of the planes – the pilot's goggles. Written on them – "Roll out the barrel".¹²

Mary and her new husband were free at last – ready to begin a new life. Their world for three years had been the confines of Santo Tomas. They all suffered from a host of illnesses: beriberi, severe malnutrition, fatigue, and anxiety. Henry had contracted tuberculosis as well as hepatitis. Mary had gone from a healthy 140 lbs down to 90.¹³ The average loss of weight in the camp was 51 pounds for men and 32 pounds for women.¹⁴ Catching up on three years worth of news began – some happy, much heartbreaking. Henry's father had died during the internment years; Mary's beloved grandparents in New York had both died, not knowing what had happened to their son's family. Mary's cousin Betty and her mother were found dead outside their home in Manila, victims of the final bombing of Manila. Next to their bodies was a dead Japanese soldier with a grenade clutched in his hand. There were some happy surprises. Her brother had gotten married in the States. Mary's Uncle William appeared one day walking up to them in Santo Tomas – he had just been released from a slave labor camp in Manchuria, where he had been sent after surviving the Bataan Death March and the initial camp at Cabanatuan. At first they did not recognize him. Everyone thought he had died during the Death March along with his cousin.¹⁵

The surviving internees and their civilian population had stood the test of fire – and literally so. The great city of Manila was put to the torch in the course of its liberation by the American forces. As the Japanese retreated, they went on a killing rampage. Corpses floated in the Pasig River and lay unburied in the rubble of the streets of the city. The destruction was so complete streets could hardly be recognized. In churches and chapels and in their own courtyards the dead lay stacked like cordwood. All places of refuge became the halls and fields of death as the Japanese threw grenades and burned buildings. In a swimming pool in one area there was no longer water – it was filled with bodies. In an ironic and tragic note, as the Japanese forces withdrew from places where their own wounded lay, their General came and issued grenades to those soldiers who could not walk to ensure them a merciful death, for the buildings were going to be fired.

In February 1945 Mary Connor Bennett again found herself standing at attention in a courtyard. But this time it was to watch the American flag raised. The courtyard was filled with a ragged mass of emaciated people. All focused their eyes with tears streaming from them on the American flag. The crowd's voices lifted in a heartfelt rendition of "God Bless America".¹⁶ This time Mary and her fellow internees had a future to look forward to, hope for a new life with her family, husband and friends.¹⁷

In January of 2008, Mary Connor Bennett sat in a wheelchair in an assisted living facility in Roseville, MN listening to an afternoon musical program. Her eyes were dimmed by age, her mind robbed of its brilliance and memory by advancing Alzheimer's. The program ended with "God Bless America". The song brought back one of those rare flashes of memory and Mary struggled to rise from her wheelchair. The staff rushed over, worrying that she would fall, and assured her she could relax and sit down. But she continued to struggle to stand. She looked at them and clearly said, "I will stand for this song till the day I die." A hush came over the group as one by one the other elderly residents joined her and rose to their feet.¹⁸

On March 6, 2008, Mary Connor Bennett took leave of her three daughters at her bedside and joined her beloved husband forever. We stand for her now.¹⁹

GFO 2008 Writing Contest
First Place

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- ¹ Morton, Louis, *The US Army in WWII, The War in the Pacific, The Fall of the Philippines*, Chapter XIV.
- ² CNN World News, December 13, 1997 "Chinese City Remembers the Japanese 'Rape of Nanjing.'"
- ³ Personal Recollections of Frances Connor O'Keefe as related to her niece, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.
- ⁴ Personal Recollections of Mary Catherine Bennett as related to her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.
- ⁵ *Dialogue*, A publication of the Thomas Jefferson Information Center (TJIC), Public Affairs Section, U.S. Embassy, Manila, Volume 2, No. 2, April 2001.
- ⁶ Shiels, Margo, Bends in the Road, 1999. Personal Recollections of Mary Catherine Bennett as related to her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.
- ⁷ Personal Recollections of Mary Catherine Bennett as related to her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki.
- ⁸ History of the University of Santo Tomas, UST website, <http://www.ust.edu.ph>.
- ⁹ *The Liberation Bulletin of Philippine Internment Camp No. 1 at Santo Tomas University*, Manila, Philippines, February 3, 1945.
- ¹⁰ Stevens, Frederic H., Santo Tomas Internment Camp, p. 441.
- ¹¹ *The Liberation Bulletin of Philippine Internment Camp No. 1 at Santo Tomas University*, Manila, Philippines, February 3, 1945.
- ¹² Ralph DioGuardi, Roll Out The Barrel...The Tanks Are Coming: The Liberation of the Santo Tomas Internment Camp, A Merriam Press Original Publication, Military Monograph MM20. Stevens, Frederic H., *Santo Tomas Internment Camp*, p. 482.
- ¹³ Letter from Mary Catherine Bennett to her sister-in-law Thelma Bennett Grundl, 1945
- ¹⁴ *The Liberation Bulletin of Philippine Internment Camp No. 1 at Santo Tomas University*, Manila, Philippines, February 3, 1945.
- ¹⁵ North, Oliver, War Stories II, Heroism in the Pacific, page 51. Doll, John G., The Battling Bastards of Bataan, A Merriam Press Original Publication, Military Monograph MM36.
- ¹⁶ Stevens, Frederic H., Santo Tomas Internment Camp, p. 363.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Mary Catherine Bennett by her daughter, Mickey Bennett Sieracki, 2000.
- ¹⁸ Story related to the family by the staff of Sunrise Assisted Living in Roseville, MN.
- ¹⁹ *Obituary*, Mary C. Bennett, St. Paul Pioneer Press, March 7, 2008.