



Twenty-three “Monster”

IT WAS LATE MORNING ON THE LAST DAY OF SEPTEMBER 1944 . Louie, Frank Tinker, and a handful of other Ofuna veterans stood by the front gate of the Omori POW camp, which sat on an artificial island in Tokyo Bay. The island was nothing more than a sandy spit, connected to shore by a tenuous thread of bamboo slats. Across the water was the bright bustle of Tokyo, still virtually untouched by the war. Other than the patches of early snow scattered over the ground like hopscotch squares, every inch of the camp was an ashen, otherworldly gray, reminding one POW of the moon. There were no birds anywhere.

They were standing before a small office, where they’d been told to wait. In front of them, standing beside the building, was a Japanese corporal. He was leering at them.

He was a beautifully crafted man, a few years short of thirty. His face was handsome, with full lips that turned up slightly at the edges, giving his mouth a faintly cruel expression. Beneath his smartly tailored uniform, his body was perfectly balanced, his torso radiating power, his form trim. A sword angled elegantly off of his hip, and circling his waist was a broad webbed belt embellished with an enormous metal buckle. The only incongruities on this striking corporal were his hands—huge, brutish, animal things that one man would liken to paws.

Mutsuhiro Watanabe, “the Bird.” National Archives

Louie and the other prisoners stood at attention, arms stiff, hands flat to their sides. The corporal continued to stare, but said nothing. Near him stood another man who wore a second lieutenant’s insignia, yet hovered about the lower-ranking corporal with eager servility. Five, perhaps ten minutes passed, and the corporal never moved. Then, abruptly, he swept toward the prisoners, the second lieutenant scurrying behind. He walked with his chin high and his

chest puffed, his gestures exaggerated and imperious. He began to inspect the men with an air of possession—looking them over, Louie thought, as if he were God himself.

Down the line the corporal strode, pausing before each man, raking his eyes over him, and barking, “Name!” When he reached Louie, he stopped. Louie gave his name. The corporal’s eyes narrowed. Decades after the war, men who had looked into those eyes would be unable to shake the memory of what they saw in them, a wrongness that elicited a twist in the gut, a prickle up the back of the neck. Louie dropped his eyes. There was a rush in the air, the corporal’s arm swinging, then a fist thudding into Louie’s head. Louie staggered.

“Why you no look in my eye?” the corporal shouted. The other men in the line went rigid. Louie steadied himself. He held his face taut as he raised his eyes to the corporal’s face. Again came the whirling arm, the jarring blow into his skull, his stumbling legs trying to hold him upright.

“You no look at me!” This man, thought Tinker, is a psychopath. —

The corporal marched the men to a quarantine area, where there stood a rickety canopy. He ordered the men to stand beneath it, then left.

Hours passed. The men stood, the cold working its way up their sleeves and pant legs. Eventually they sat down. The morning gave way to a long, cold afternoon. The corporal didn’t come back.

Louie saw a wooden apple box lying nearby. Remembering his Boy Scout friction-fire training, he grabbed the box and broke it up. He asked one of the other men to unthread the lace from his boot. He fashioned a spindle out of a bamboo stick, fit it into a hole in a slat from the apple box, wound the bootlace around the spindle, and began alternately pulling the ends, turning the spindle. After a good bit of work, smoke rose from the spindle. Louie picked up bits of a discarded tatami mat, laid them on the smoking area, and blew on them. The mat remnants whooshed into flames. The men gathered close to the fire, and cigarettes emerged from pockets. Everyone got warmer.

The corporal suddenly reappeared. “Nanda, nanda!” he said, a word that roughly translates to “What the hell is going on?” He demanded to know where they’d gotten matches. Louie explained how he had built the fire. The corporal’s face clouded over. Without warning, the corporal slugged Louie in the head, then swung his arm back for another blow. Louie wanted to duck, but he fought the instinct, knowing from Ofuna that this would only provoke more blows. So he stood still, holding his expression neutral, as the second swing connected with his head. The corporal ordered them to put the fire out, then walked away.

Louie had met the man who would dedicate himself to shattering him. —

The corporal’s name was Mutsuhiro Watanabe.* He was born during World War I, the fourth of six children of Shizuka Watanabe, a lovely and exceptionally wealthy woman. The Watanabes enjoyed a privileged life, having amassed riches through ownership of Tokyo’s Takamatsu Hotel and other real estate and mines in Nagano and Manchuria. Mutsuhiro, whose father, a pilot, seems to have died or left the family when Mutsuhiro was relatively young, grew up on luxury’s lap, living in beautiful homes all over Japan, reportedly waited on by servants and swimming in his family’s private pool. His siblings knew him affectionately as Mu-cchan.

After a childhood in Kobe, Mutsuhiro attended Tokyo's prestigious Waseda University, where he studied French literature and cultivated an infatuation with nihilism. In 1942, he graduated, settled in Tokyo, and took a job at a news agency. He worked there for only one month; Japan was at war, and Mutsuhiro was deeply patriotic. He enlisted in the army.

Watanabe had lofty expectations for himself as a soldier. One of his older brothers was an officer, and his older sister's husband was commander of Changi, a giant POW camp in Singapore. Attaining an officer's rank was of supreme importance to Watanabe, and when he applied to become an officer, he probably thought that acceptance was his due, given his education and pedigree. But he was rejected; he would be only a corporal. By all accounts, this was the moment that derailed him, leaving him feeling disgraced, infuriated, and bitterly jealous of officers. Those who knew him would say that every part of his mind gathered around this blazing humiliation, and every subsequent action was informed by it. This defining event would have tragic consequences for hundreds of men.

Corporal Watanabe was sent to a regiment of the Imperial Guards in Tokyo, stationed near Hirohito's palace. As the war hadn't yet come to Japan's home islands, he saw no combat. In the fall of 1943, for unknown reasons, Watanabe was transferred to the military's most ignominious station for NCOs, a POW camp. Perhaps his superiors wanted to rid the Imperial Guards of an unstable and venomous soldier, or perhaps they wanted to put his volatility to use. Watanabe was assigned to Omori and designated the "disciplinary officer." On the last day of November 1943, Watanabe arrived. —

Even prior to Watanabe's appearance, Omori had been a trying place. The 1929 Geneva Convention, which Japan had signed but never ratified, permitted detaining powers to use POWs for labor, with restrictions. The laborers had to be physically fit, and the labor couldn't be dangerous, unhealthy, or of unreasonable difficulty. The work had to be unconnected to the operations of war, and POWs were to be given pay commensurate with their labor. Finally, to ensure that POW officers had control over their men, they could not be forced to work.

Virtually nothing about Japan's use of POWs was in keeping with the Geneva Convention. To be an enlisted prisoner of war under the Japanese was to be a slave. The Japanese government made contracts with private companies to send enlisted POWs to factories, mines, docks, and railways, where the men were forced into exceptionally arduous war-production or war-transport labor. The labor, performed under club-wielding foremen, was so dangerous and exhausting that thousands of POWs died on the job. In the extremely rare instances in which the Japanese compensated the POWs for their work, payment amounted to almost nothing, equivalent to a few pennies a week. The only aspect of the Geneva Convention that the Japanese sometimes respected was the prohibition on forcing officers to work.

Like almost every other camp, Omori was a slave camp. For ten to eleven hours a day, seven days a week, Omori's enlisted POWs did backbreaking labor at shipyards, railyards, truck-loading stations, a sandpit, and a coalyard. Men had to be on the verge of death to be spared; minimum fever levels for exemption were 40 degrees Celsius, or 104 degrees Fahrenheit. The labor was extremely grueling; according to POW Tom Wade, each man at the Tokyo railyards lifted a total of twenty to thirty tons of material a day. Probably because Omori was used as a show camp where prisoners were displayed for the Red Cross, the men were

“paid” ten yen per month—less than the price of a pack of cigarettes—but they were permitted to spend it only on a tiny selection of worthless goods at a camp canteen, so the money came right back to the Japanese.

Compounding the hardship of Omori was the food situation. The rations were of better quality than those at Ofuna but were doled out in only slightly larger quantities. Because officers weren’t enslaved, they were allowed only half the ration given to slaves, on the justification that they needed fewer calories. Along with rice, the men received some vegetables, but protein was almost nonexistent. About once a week, someone would push a wheelbarrow into the camp, bearing “meat.” Because a wheelbarrow’s worth was spread over hundreds of men, a serving amounted to about a thimble-sized portion; it consisted of things like lungs and intestines, assorted dog parts, something the POWs called “elephant semen,” and, once, a mystery lump that, after considerable speculation, the men decided was a horse’s vagina.

Just as at Ofuna, beriberi and other preventable diseases were epidemic at Omori. Because rations were halved for sick men who were unable to work, the ill couldn’t recover. Men harrowed by dysentery—“the benjo boogie”—swallowed lumps of coal or burnt sticks to slow the digestive waterfall. Many men weighed less than ninety pounds.

The only saving grace of Omori, prior to November 1943, had been the attitude of the Japanese personnel, who weren’t nearly as vicious as those at Ofuna. The prisoners gave them nicknames, including Hogjaw, Baby Dumpling, Bucktooth, Genghis Khan, and Roving Reporter; one unfortunate officer, wrote POW Lewis Bush, wore puffy pants and “walked as though he was always bursting to go to the lavatory,” prompting the men to call him Lieutenant Shit-in-Breeches. There were a few rogues and one or two outright loons, but several camp employees were friendly. The rest were indifferent, enforcing the rules with blows but at least behaving predictably. Relatively speaking, Omori wasn’t known for violence. When Watanabe came, all that changed. —

He arrived bearing candy and cigarettes for the POWs. He smiled and made pleasant conversation, posed for photographs with British officers, and spoke admiringly of America and Britain. For several days, he raised not a ripple.

On a Sunday morning, Watanabe approached some POWs crowded in a barracks doorway. A POW named Derek Clarke piped up, “Gangway!” to clear a path. That one word sent Watanabe into an explosion. He lunged at Clarke, beat him until he fell down, then kicked him. As Bush tried to explain that Clarke had meant no harm, Watanabe drew his sword and began screaming that he was going to behead Clarke. A Japanese officer stopped the attack, but that evening Watanabe turned on Bush, hurling him onto a scalding stove, then pummeling and kicking him. After Bush went to bed, Watanabe returned and forced him to his knees. For three hours, Watanabe besieged Bush, kicking him and hacking off his hair with his sword. He left for two hours, then returned again. Bush expected to be murdered. Instead, Watanabe took him to his office, hugged him, and gave him beer and handfuls of candy and cigarettes. Through tears, he apologized and promised never to mistreat another POW. His resolution didn’t last. Later that night, he picked up a kendo stick—a long, heavy training sword—and ran shrieking into a barracks, clubbing every man he saw.

Watanabe had, in Bush’s words, “shown his hand.” From that day on, both his victims and his fellow Japanese would ponder his violent, erratic behavior and disagree on its cause. To

Yuichi Hatto, the camp accountant, it was simply madness. Others saw something calculating. After Watanabe attacked Clarke, POW officers who had barely noticed him began looking at him with terror. The consequence of his outburst answered a ravening desire: Raw brutality gave him sway over men that his rank did not. "He suddenly saw after he hit a few men that he was feared and respected for that," said Wade. "And so that became his style of behavior."

Watanabe derived another pleasure from violence. According to Hatto, Watanabe was a sexual sadist, freely admitting that beating prisoners brought him to climax. "He did enjoy hurting POWs," wrote Hatto. "He was satisfying his sexual desire by hurting them."

A tyrant was born. Watanabe beat POWs every day, fracturing their windpipes, rupturing their eardrums, shattering their teeth, tearing one man's ear half off, leaving men unconscious. He made one officer sit in a shack, wearing only a fundoshi undergarment, for four days in winter. He tied a sixtyfive-year-old POW to a tree and left him there for days. He ordered one man to report to him to be punched in the face every night for three weeks. He practiced judo on an appendectomy patient. When gripped in the ecstasy of an assault, he wailed and howled, drooling and frothing, sometimes sobbing, tears running down his cheeks. Men came to know when an outburst was imminent: Watanabe's right eyelid would sag a moment before he snapped. Very quickly, Watanabe gained a fearsome reputation throughout Japan. Officials at other camps began sending troublesome prisoners to Watanabe for "polishing," and Omori was dubbed "punishment camp." In the words of Commander Maher, who'd been transferred from Ofuna to become the ranking Omori POW, Watanabe was "the most vicious guard in any prison camp on the main island of Japan."

Two things separated Watanabe from other notorious war criminals. One was the emphasis that he placed on emotional torture. Even by the standards of his honor-conscious culture, he was unusually consumed by his perceived humiliation, and was intent upon inflicting the same pain on the men under his power. Where men like the Quack were simply goons, Watanabe combined beatings with acts meant to batter men's psyches. He forced men to bow at pumpkins or trees for hours. He ordered a clergyman POW to stand all night saluting a flagpole, shouting the Japanese word for "salute," keirei; the experience left the man weeping and out of his mind. He confiscated and destroyed POWs' family photographs, and brought men to his office to show them letters from home, then burned the unopened letters in front of them. To ensure that men felt utterly helpless, he changed the manner in which he demanded to be addressed each day, beating anyone who guessed wrong. He ordered men to violate camp policies, then attacked them for breaking the rules. POW Jack Brady summed him up in one sentence. "He was absolutely the most sadistic man I ever met."

The other attribute that separated Watanabe from fellow guards was his inconsistency. Most of the time, he was the wrathful god of Omori. But after beatings, he sometimes returned to apologize, often in tears. These fits of contrition usually lasted only moments before the shrieking and punching began again. He would spin from serenity to raving madness in the blink of an eye, usually for no reason. One POW recalled seeing him gently praise a POW, fly into a rage and beat the POW unconscious, then amble to his office and eat his lunch with the placidity of a grazing cow.

When Watanabe wasn't thrashing POWs, he was forcing them to be his buddies. He'd wake a POW in the night and be "nice as pie," asking the man to join him in his room, where he'd serve cookies and talk about literature. Sometimes he'd round up anyone in camp who

could play an instrument or sing, bring them to his room, and host a concert. He expected the men to respond as if they adored him, and at times, he seemed to honestly believe that they did.

Maybe he held these gatherings because they left the POWs feeling more stressed than if he were consistently hostile. Or maybe he was just lonely. Among the Japanese at Omori, Watanabe was despised for his haughtiness, his boasts about his wealth, and his curtness. He made a great show of his education, droning on about nihilism and giving pompous lectures on French literature at NCO meetings. None of his colleagues listened. It wasn't the subject matter; it was simply that they loathed him.

Perhaps this is why he turned to POWs for friendship. The tea parties, wrote Derek Clarke, were "tense, sitting-on-the-edge-of-a-volcano affairs." Any misstep, any misunderstood word might set Watanabe off, leaving him smashing teapots, upending tables, and pounding his guests into oblivion. After the POWs left, Watanabe seemed to feel humiliated by having had to force friendship from lowly POWs. The next day he would often deliver a wild-eyed whipping to the previous night's buddies.

Like any bully, he had a taste for a particular type of victim. Enlisted men usually received only the occasional slapped face; officers were in for unrelenting cruelty. Among those officers, a few were especially irresistible to him. Some had elevated status, such as physicians, chaplains, barracks commanders, and those who'd been highly successful in civilian life. Others he resented because they wouldn't crawl before him. These he singled out and hunted with inexhaustible hatred.

From the moment that Watanabe locked eyes with Louie Zamperini, an officer, a famous Olympian, and a man for whom defiance was second nature, no man obsessed him more.