

Twenty-seven Falling Down

AT OMORI, LIFE BECAME IMMEASURABLY BETTER. PRIVATE Kano quietly took over the camp, working with Watanabe's replacement, Sergeant Oguri, a humane, fair-minded man. The Bird's rules were abolished. Someone got into the Bird's office and found a pile of mail sent to the POWs by their families. Some of the letters had been in his office for nine months. The letters were delivered, and the POWs were finally allowed to write home. "Trust you're all in good health and in the highest of spirits, not the kind that comes in bottles," Louie wrote in one letter to his family. "Tell Pete," he wrote in another, "that when I'm 50, I'll have more hair on my head than he had at 20." The letters, like so many others, languished in the glacial mail system, and wouldn't make it to America until long after the war's end.

Two weeks into 1945, a group of men, tattered and bent, trudged over the bamboo bridge and into Omori. Louie knew their faces: These were Ofuna men. Commander Fitzgerald was with them. The Omori prisoners told him that he was the luckiest man in Japan. A vicious tyrant called the Bird had just left.

Among the new POWs, Louie spotted Bill Harris, and his heart fell. Harris was a wreck. When Louie greeted him, his old friend looked at him vaguely. He was hazy and distant, his mind struggling for purchase on his thoughts.

The beating the Quack had delivered to Harris in September 1944 hadn't been the last. On November 6, apparently after Harris was caught speaking, the Quack had pounced on him again, joining several guards in clubbing him into unconsciousness. Two months later, Harris had been beaten once more, for stealing nails to repair his torn shoes, which he was trying to nurse through a frigid winter. He had asked the Japanese to give him some, but they had refused.

The Omori POW doctor examined Harris gravely. He told Louie that he thought the marine was dying. That same day, Oguri opened the storehouse and had the Red Cross boxes handed out. Giving his box to Harris was, Louie would say, the hardest and easiest thing he ever did. Harris rallied. Since his refusal to become a propaganda prisoner, Louie had been waiting to be shipped to punishment camp. While the Bird had badgered him, he had awaited his fate with equanimity. Now that the Bird was gone, and Harris was here with Louie's other friends, Louie wanted to stay. He met every day with dread, awaiting his transfer. —

The B-29s kept coming. Sirens sounded several times a day. Rumors eddied around camp: Manila had been captured, Germany had fallen, the Americans were about to charge the Japanese beaches. Louie, like a lot of POWs, was worried. Frightened by the bombing, the guards were increasingly jumpy and angry. Even guards who had once been amiable were now hostile, lashing out without reason. As the assaults on Japan intensified and the probability of invasion rose, the Japanese seemed to view the POWs as threatening.

Among the American forces, a horrifying piece of news had just surfaced. One hundred and fifty American POWs had long been held on Palawan Island, in the Philippines, where they'd been used as slaves to construct an airfield. In December, after American planes bombed the field, the POWs were ordered to dig shelters. They were told to build the entrances only one man wide.

On December 14, an American convoy was spotted near Palawan. The commander of the Japanese 2nd Air Division was apparently sure that the Americans intended to invade. It was the scenario for which the kill-all order had been written. That night, the commander sent a radio message to Palawan: "Annihilate the 150 prisoners."

On December 15 on Palawan, the guards suddenly began screaming that there were enemy planes coming. The POWs crawled into the shelters and sat there, hearing no planes. Then liquid began to rain onto them. It was gasoline. The guards tossed in torches, then hand grenades. The shelters, and the men inside, erupted in flames.

As the guards cheered, the POWs fought to escape, some clawing their own fingertips off. Nearly all of those who broke out were bayoneted, machine-gunned, or beaten to death. Only eleven men escaped. They swam across a nearby bay and were discovered by inmates at a penal colony. The inmates delivered them to Filipino guerrillas, who brought them to American forces.

That night, the Japanese threw a party to celebrate the massacre. Their anticipation of an American landing turned out to be mistaken. —

Sleet was falling over Omori as February 16 dawned. At seven-fifteen, Louie and the other POWs had just finished a breakfast of barley and soup when the sirens piped up. Commander Fitzgerald looked at his friends. He knew that this would probably not be B-29s, which would have had to fly all night to reach Japan so early. It was probably carrier aircraft: His navy must be near. A few seconds later, the room was shaking. The men bolted for the doors.

Louie ran out into a crashing, tumbling world. The entire sky was swarming with hundreds of fighters, American and Japanese, rising and falling, streaming bullets at one another. Over Tokyo, lines of dive-bombers bellied down like waves slapping a beach, slamming bombs into the aircraft works and airport. As they rose, quills of fire came up under them. Louie was standing directly underneath the largest air battle yet fought over Japan.

The guards fixed their bayonets and ordered the POWs back inside. Louie and the others filed into the barracks, waited for the guards to rush off to censure someone else, then stole out. They ran behind a barracks, climbed the camp fence, and hung there, resting their elbows on the top. The view was electrifying. Planes were sweeping over every corner of the sky, and all around, fighters were dropping into the water.

One dogfight riveted Louie's attention. An American Hellcat hooked up with a Japanese fighter and began chasing it. The Japanese fighter turned toward the city and dove low over the bay, the Hellcat right behind it. The two planes streaked past the camp, the Japanese fighter racing flat out, the Hellcat's guns firing. Several hundred POWs watched from the camp fence, their eyes pressed to knotholes or their heads poking over the top, hearts leaping, ears roaring. The fighters were so close that Louie could see both pilots' faces. The Japanese fighter crossed over the coast, and the Hellcat broke away.

All told, fifteen hundred American planes and several hundred Japanese planes flew over the POWs that day. That night, the city was bathed in red fires. The following day, back the planes came. By the end of February 17, more than five hundred Japanese planes, both on the ground and in the air, had been lost, and Japan's aircraft works had been badly hit. The Americans had lost eighty planes.

Seven days later, the hammer fell. At seven in the morning, during a heavy snowstorm, sixteen hundred carrier-based planes flew past Omori and bombed Tokyo. Then came B-29s, 229 of them, carrying incendiary bombs. Encountering almost no resistance, they sped for the industrial district and let their bombs fall. The POWs could see fire dancing over the skyline.

On the last day of February, Louie and the other officers were called into the compound. Fifteen names were called, among them Zamperini, Wade, Tinker, Mead, and Fitzgerald. They were told that they were being transferred to a camp called 4B, also known as Naoetsu. Louie greeted the news with bright spirits. Wherever he was going, he would be joined by almost all of his friends.

On the evening of March 1, the chosen men gathered their belongings and donned overcoats that had been distributed the day before. Louie said good-bye to Harris. He would never see him again.

The Naoetsu-bound men climbed aboard a truck, which bore them into Tokyo. Watching the air battle over the city had been exhilarating, but when the men saw the consequences, they were shocked. Whole neighborhoods had been reduced to charred ruins, row after row of homes now nothing but black bones. In the rubble, Louie noticed something shining. Standing in the remains of many houses were large industrial machines. What Louie was seeing was a small fragment of a giant cottage industry, war production farmed out to innumerable private homes, schools, and small "shadow factories."

Louie and the other transferring POWs were driven to the railway station and put on a train. They rode all night, moving west, into a snowy landscape. As they rode on, the snow became deeper and deeper.

At about nine A.M. on March 2, the train drew up to Naoetsu, a seaside village on the west coast of Japan. Led to the front of the station, the POWs stared in amazement; the snow rose up some fourteen feet overhead. Climbing up a stairway cut into the drifts, they found themselves in a blindingly white world, standing atop a snow mountain that buried the entire village. "It was as if a giant frosted cake were sitting in the town," Wade wrote. The snow was so deep that residents had dug vertical tunnels to get in and out of their homes. The contrast to fire-blackened Tokyo was jarring.

Pulling their baggage along on sleighs, the POWs began the mile-and-a-quarter walk to camp. It was windy and bitterly cold. Fitzgerald, who had a badly infected foot, had the most difficulty. His crutches poked deep in the snow and wouldn't hold his weight.

The prisoners crossed a bridge and saw the Sea of Japan. Just short of it, cornered against the Ara and Hokura rivers, was the Naoetsu POW camp, almost entirely obscured by snow. Louie and the others trudged into the compound and stopped before a shack, where they were told to stand at attention. They waited for some time, the wind frisking their clothes.

At last, a door thumped open. A man rushed out and snapped to a halt, screaming "Keirei!"

It was the Bird.

Louie's legs folded, the snow reared up at him, and down he went.

Twenty-eight Enslaved

LOUIE WOULD REMEMBER THE MOMENT WHEN HE SAW THE Bird as the darkest of his life. For the Bird, it was something else. He beamed like a child on his birthday. He seemed certain that the POWs were overjoyed to see him.

Fitzgerald forked forward on his crutches and assumed the duties of senior POW. The Bird announced that just as at Omori, he was in command, and that the men must obey. He said that he would make this camp just as Omori had been under his tenure.

Ringling with shock, Louie picked himself up and hiked through the snow to the barracks, a twostory building on the edge of a small cliff that dropped straight down to the frozen Hokura River. The three hundred residents, mostly Australians, were shrunken down to virtual stick figures. Most were wearing the tropical-weight khakis in which they'd been captured, and which, thanks to years of uninterrupted wear, were so ragged that one civilian likened them to seaweed. The wind, scudding off the sea, whistled through cracks in the walls, and there were so many holes in the roof that it snowed indoors. The whole building was visibly infested with fleas and lice, and rats trotted through the rooms. The beds were planks nailed into the walls; the mattresses were loose rice straw. Everywhere, there were large gaps in the floor; the POWs had pulled up the floorboards and burned them in an effort to survive temperatures that regularly plunged far below zero.

Stacked against one wall were dozens of small boxes, some of which had broken open and spilled gray ash onto the floor. These were the cremated remains of sixty Australian POWs—one in every five prisoners—who had died in this camp in 1943 and 1944, succumbing to pneumonia, beriberi, malnutrition, colitis, or a combination of these. Relentless physical abuse had precipitated most of the deaths. In a POW camp network that would resonate across history as a supreme example of cruelty, Naoetsu had won a special place as one of the blackest holes in the Japanese Empire. Of the many hells that Louie had known in this war, this place would be the worst.

Louie lay on his plank and tried to ready himself for what Naoetsu would bring. As he fell asleep that night, halfway around the globe the world's best runners were gathering for a track meet at Madison Square Garden. The promoters had renamed the marquee event in tribute to Louie, who was still believed dead by virtually everyone outside of his family. When the Zamperinis heard of it, they were upset: The race was to be called the Louis S. Zamperini Memorial Mile. Out of respect for the family, the name was changed to the Louis S. Zamperini

Invitational, but that did little to lift the spirits of those involved. Marty Glickman, who'd been on the 1936 Olympic team with Louie, watched the race with tears streaming down his face.

The race was won by Jim Rafferty, America's best miler. His time was 4:16.4, four seconds slower than the time Louie had clocked on the sand of Oahu just before climbing aboard Green Hornet. —

The first weeks Louie spent in Naoetsu were almost lethally cold. Each night of shivering in his bed of straw ended abruptly before dawn, when he was shouted awake and forced outside for tenko in deep snow, howling wind, and darkness. By day, he huddled with Tinker, Wade, and his other friends in patches of sunlight, trying in vain to keep warm. He was soon nursing a cough, fever, and flulike symptoms, and the Naoetsu slop did nothing to help his body recover. The rations, which were halved for officers, rarely varied from millet or barley and boiled seaweed, plus a few slices of vegetable. The drinking water, which the POWs had to haul in on sleds, was yellow and reeked. Seeing the guards smoking American cigarettes, the POWs knew that the Red Cross was sending relief packages, but the prisoners got nothing.

Watanabe was the same fiend that he'd been at Omori, prompting the Aussies to nickname him "Whatabastard." He held a far lower rank than Naoetsu's commander, an elfin man sporting an abbreviated mustache as an apparent homage to Hitler, but the commander deferred to the Bird, just as the officers at Omori had done. And here, the Bird had recruited a henchman, an eggplant-shaped man named Hiroaki Kono, who trailed Watanabe around camp, assaulting men with the intensity, wrote Wade, of "a roaring Hitlerian animal."

Louie's transfer to Naoetsu, into the grip of the Bird, had been no coincidence. Watanabe had handpicked him and the others to come to this camp, which was short on officers. According to Wade, each chosen man had a skill or history that would make him useful. Al Mead, who had helped save Louie from starvation at Ofuna, had headed Omori's cookhouse; Fitzgerald had been a ranking officer; Wade had been a barracks commander; and so on. The only man with no such history was Louie. Wade believed that the Bird had chosen Louie simply because he wanted to torment him.

Wade was right. From almost the moment that Louie walked into camp, the Bird was on him, slapping him, punching him, and berating him. Other POWs were shocked at how the sergeant pursued Louie, attacking him, remembered one POW, "just for drill." Louie took his beatings with as much defiance as ever, provoking the Bird to ever more violent attacks. Once again in his tormenter's clutches, Louie descended back into a state of profound stress.

And yet, by virtue of his rank, Louie was fortunate. Naoetsu was a factory village that generated products critical to the war effort, and all of its young workers had gone to war. The POWs were here to take their place. Each day, the enlisted POWs waded through the snow to labor in a steel mill, a chemical factory, the port's coal and salt barges, or a site at which they broke rocks for mineral extraction. The work was extraordinarily arduous and often dangerous, and shifts went on day and night, some for eighteen hours. In the hikes back from this slave labor, men were so rubber-legged that they tumbled into snow crevasses and had to be dragged out.

Each morning and night, Louie saw the enlisted men rambling in from their slave shifts, some completely obscured by coal soot, some so exhausted that they had to be carried into the

barracks. The Japanese literally worked men to death at Naoetsu. Louie had much to bear, but at least he didn't have this. —

Winter faded. The river ice gave way to flowing water, and houses emerged where only snow had been. When the drifts in the compound melted, a pig miraculously appeared. All winter, he'd been living below the POWs in a snow cavern, sustained by bits of food dropped to him by an Australian. Louie looked at him in wonder. The animal's skin had gone translucent. With the ground thawed, the Bird announced that he was sending the officers to work as farm laborers. Though this violated the Geneva Convention's prohibition on forcing officers to labor, Fitzgerald now knew what life in camp with the Bird was like. Work on the farm would keep the officers out of the Bird's path for hours every day, and couldn't be anything like the backbreaking labor done by the enlisted men. Fitzgerald raised no protest. Each morning, Louie and the rest of the farming party assembled before the barracks, attended by a civilian guard named Ogawa. They loaded a cart with benjo waste—to be used as fertilizer, as was customary in Japan—then yoked themselves to the cart like oxen and pulled it to and from the farm. As they picked their way along the road, sometimes darting off to try to steal a vegetable from a field while Ogawa's back was turned, Japanese farmers came out to stare at them, probably the first Westerners they'd ever seen. Louie looked back at the wan, stooped old men and women. The hardships of this war were evident on their blank, weary faces and from their bodies, winnowed for want of food. A few children scampered about, raising their arms in imitation of surrender and mocking the prisoners. There were no young adults.

The walk, six miles each way, was a tiring slog, but the work, planting and tending potatoes, was relatively easy. Ogawa was a placid man, and though he carried a club, he never used it. The plot had a clean well, a relief after the stinking camp water, and Ogawa let the men drink all they wished. And because they were now working outside the camp, the officers were granted full rations. Though those rations were dwindling as Japan's fortunes fell, a full bowl of seaweed was better than half a bowl of seaweed.

April 13 was a bright day, the land bathed in sunshine, the sky wide and clear. Louie and the other officers were scattered over the potato plot, working, when the field suddenly went still and the men turned their faces to the sky. At the same moment, all over Naoetsu, labor at the outdoor work sites halted as the POWs and guards gazed up. High overhead, something was winking in the sunlight, slender ribbons of white unfurling behind it. It was a B-29.

It was the first Superfortress to cross over Naoetsu. The Omori officers had seen hundreds of B29s over Tokyo, but for the Australians, who'd been hidden in this village since 1942, this was their first glimpse of the bomber.

Followed by innumerable eyes, some hopeful and some horrified, the B-29 made a slow arc from one horizon to the other, following the coastline. No guns shot at it; no fighters chased it. It dropped no bombs, passing peacefully overhead, but its appearance was a telling sign of how far over Japan the Americans were now venturing, and how little resistance the Japanese could offer. As all of Naoetsu watched, the plane slid out of view, and its contrails dissolved behind it.

The POWs were elated; the Japanese were unnerved. At the work sites, the prisoners hid their excitement behind neutral faces to avoid provoking the guards, who were unusually tense and hostile. On the walk back to camp that evening, the prisoners absorbed a few swipes

with a club, but their mood remained merry. When they reached the gates, the Bird was waiting for them.

Roosevelt, he said, was dead.

The men deflated. The Bird sent them into the barracks.

A few days later, Ogawa made a little joke to the Bird, teasing him about how his POW officers were lazy. Ogawa meant no harm, but the remark sent the Bird into a fury. He shouted for the farm workers to line up before him, then began berating them for their indolence. He stormed and frothed, seeming completely deranged.

Finally, he screamed his punishment: From now on, all officers would perform hard labor, loading coal on barges. If they refused, he would execute every one of them. One look at the Bird told Fitzgerald that this was an order he could not fight.

Early the next morning, as the officers were marched off to labor, the Bird stood by, watching them go. He was smiling. —

It was a short walk into slavery. The officers were taken to the riverbank and crowded onto a barge, which was heaped with coal destined for the steel mill. Six men were given shovels; Louie and the rest were given large baskets and told to strap them to their backs. Then, on the guards' orders, the shovelers began heaving coal into each man's basket. As a cubic foot of loose coal can weigh as much as sixty pounds, the bearers were soon staggering. Once the baskets were full, the bearers were ordered to lug the loads off the barge and up the shore to a railroad car, where they wobbled up a narrow, steep ramp, dumped the coal into the car, and returned to have their baskets refilled.

All day the men shoveled and hauled. The guards kept the basket men moving at a rapid clip. By the time the guards finally let them stop, the men were utterly exhausted; by Wade's estimate, over the course of the day, each basket bearer had carried well over four tons of coal.

So began a daily routine. Each time the men finished clearing one barge, they were pushed aboard another, and the hauling went on, punishing their bodies and numbing their minds. Somewhere along the way, as he and the others bent under their burdens and plodded along, Tom Wade began reciting poetry and speeches. Louie and the other slaves shoveled and walked in time with Shakespeare's soliloquies, with Churchill's vow to fight in the fields and in the streets and in the hills, with Lincoln's last full measure of devotion.

The barges were eventually empty, but the officers' life in slavery had only just begun. In a mass of POWs, Louie was herded onto another of the barges, which was pulled by a tugboat into the Sea of Japan. About three-quarters of a mile out, the barge drew alongside an anchored coal ship and stopped, the sea heaving under it, water spraying over the deck. Standing before the prisoners, a guard gestured to a net slung over the side of the ship. Jump from the barge onto the net, he said, then climb up onto the ship's deck.

The POWs were appalled. On the tossing sea, the two vessels were pitching up and down, crashing together and rolling apart, and the net was a rapidly moving target. If the men mistimed their jumps, they'd be caught between the crafts as they collided or thrown into the water as they gapped apart. The men balked, but the guards forced them forward, and the POWs began jumping. Louie, as scared as everyone else, sprang across and climbed clear.

He was hustled into the ship's hold. Before him stood a giant dome of coal and, beside it, a large hanging net. As he was given a shovel, the guards suddenly teemed around him,

screaming at him to get to work. Louie jammed his shovel into the coal and began piling it into the net.

Hour after hour, Louie stooped over his shovel in a churning cloud of black dust. The guards turned circles around him and the others, shouting and cracking them with clubs and kendo sticks. They pushed the POWs at such a frenzied pace that the laborers never had a moment to straighten their backs. Clubbed and badgered, Louie shoveled so frantically that the men alongside him whispered to him to slow down. At last, in the evening, the work was halted. The POWs were taken back to shore and dropped there, so caked in coal that they were virtually indistinguishable.

Every morning, the men were sent back to take up their shovels again. Every night, they dragged back into camp, a long line of blackened ghosts trudging into the barracks and falling onto their bunks, weary to their bones, spitting black saliva. There was just one bathtub in camp, and its water was almost never changed. The one other place to bathe was a vat at the steel mill, but the guards marched the POWs there for baths only once every ten days. Unwilling to brave the camp tub, the coal-labor men lived in a patina of soot, waiting to go to the mill. Eventually, Wade felt so befouled that he had someone shave the coal-clotted hair from his head. "It was an act of expiation," he wrote.

Day after day, Louie shoveled. Occasionally, he was switched from coal to industrial salt; the work was just as taxing, and the salt liquefied in his sweat and ran down his back, burning fissures in his skin. Fitzgerald labored alongside his men and tangled with the foremen to protect them. Once, during a nonstop fourteen-hour shift, he ordered the POWs to stop and told the foreman that he wouldn't let his men work until they were fed. After much argument, the overseers brought the men a single, huge ball of rice, then sent them back to work.

Tragedy was inevitable, and Louie was there when it happened. He was standing on the barge, awaiting his turn to jump to the ship, when the man ahead of him mistimed his leap, thudding into the side of the ship just as it collided with the barge. Crushed between the vessels, the man crumpled onto the barge. The guards hardly paused, pushing Louie to make his jump. While the rest of the POWs tramped past him, the injured man was left where he lay. Louie never learned if he survived. —

The slave labor at Naoetsu was the kind of work that swallowed men's souls, but the prisoners found ways to score little victories, so essential to their physical and emotional survival. Most of the work sites offered nothing to sabotage, but stealing was epidemic. On the barges, men would wait until the operator stepped away, then sprint into the galley and stuff all the food they could find into their clothes. The lunch boxes of the civilian guards kept vanishing; an overseer's pack of cigarettes, set

down while he turned away, would be gone when he turned back. The POWs would pinch anything they could, often items they had no need for, risking a beating or worse for something as useless as a pencil box. The box itself was nothing; the theft of it was everything. Because the POW diet was severely deficient in sodium, leaving many men crippled by muscle cramps and other ailments, the men developed a system for stealing and processing salt. As they worked, the men on the salt barges would secrete handfuls of salt in their pockets. In its raw form, the salt was inedible, so the barge men would carry it up to camp and slip it to the POWs assigned to the steel mill. These men would hide the salt in their clothing and carry it to

the mill, wait until the guard wasn't looking, then drop lumps of it into canteens filled with water. At day's end, they'd hang the canteens on the sides of a coal-fire vat. By morning, the water would be boiled away, leaving only edible salt residue, a treasure beyond price.

While in the benjo one day, Louie looked through a knothole and noticed that a grain sack was resting against it, in a storage room on the other side of the wall. Remembering the thieving techniques of the Scots at Omori, he left the benjo, searched the camp, and found a pile of discarded bamboo reeds, which were hollow. He took one and, when the guards weren't watching, sharpened the end. That night, he put on his camp-issued pajamas, which were fitted with strings around the ankles. He pocketed his bamboo reed, pulled his ankle strings as tight as he could, and headed to the benjo. Once inside, he jammed one end of the reed through the knothole hard enough to pierce the grain sack, then put the other end into his pajama fly. The grain—rice—poured through the reed and into his pants. When he had about five pounds in each leg, Louie pulled the reed out.

Louie walked out of the benjo, moving as naturally as a man could with ten pounds of rice in his pajamas. He strolled past the barracks guards and climbed the ladder to the second floor, where Commander Fitzgerald awaited him, a blanket spread before him. Louie stepped onto the blanket, untied his pant legs, and let the rice spill out, then hurried back to his bunk. Fitzgerald quickly folded up the blanket, then hid the rice in socks and secret compartments he had made under the wall panels. After memorizing the guards' routines, Louie and Fitzgerald would wait for a time when the guards left the building, then dig out the rice, rush it to the building stove, boil it in water, and scoop it into their mouths as rapidly as they could, sharing it with a few others. They never got more than about a tablespoon of rice per man, but the accomplishment of outwitting their slaveholders was nourishment enough.

In Naoetsu's little POW insurgency, perhaps the most insidious feat was pulled off by Louie's friend Ken Marvin, a marine who'd been captured at Wake Atoll. At his work site, Marvin was supervised by a one-eyed civilian guard called Bad Eye. When Bad Eye asked Marvin to teach him English, Marvin saw his chance. With secret delight, he began teaching Bad Eye catastrophically bad English. From that day forward, when asked, "How are you?," Bad Eye would smilingly reply, "What the fuck do you care?" ——

Disaster struck Louie one day that spring, on the riverbank. He'd been transferred back to hauling and was hunched under a basket, lugging a heavy load of salt from a barge to a railroad car. He carried his basket up the riverbank, then began the perilous walk up the railcar ramp. As he made his way up, a guard stepped onto the top of the ramp and started down. As they passed, the guard threw out his elbow, and Louie, top-heavy under the basket, fell over the side. He managed to get his legs under him before he hit the ground, some four feet down. One leg hit before the other. Louie felt a tearing sensation, then scorching pain in his ankle and knee.

Louie couldn't bear any weight on the leg. Two POWs supported him while he hopped back to camp. He was removed from barge duty, but this was hardly comforting. Not only would he now be the only officer trapped in camp with the Bird all day, but his rations would be cut in half.

Louie lay in the barracks, ravenous. His dysentery was increasingly severe, and his fevers were growing worse, sometimes spiking to 104 degrees. To get his rations restored, he had to find work that he could do on one leg. Spotting an abandoned sewing machine in a shed,

he volunteered to tailor the guards' clothes in exchange for full rations. This kept him going for a while, but there was soon no one left to tailor for, and his rations were halved again. Such was his desperation that he went to the Bird and begged for work.

The Bird savored his plea. From now on, he said, Louie would be responsible for the pig in the compound. The job would earn him full rations, but there was a catch: Louie was forbidden to use tools to clean the pig's sty. He'd have to use his hands.

All his life, Louie had been fastidious about cleanliness, so much so that in college he had kept Listerine in his car's glove compartment so he could rinse his mouth after kissing girls. Now he was condemned to crawl through the filth of a pig's sty, picking up feces with his bare hands and cramming handfuls of the animal's feed into his mouth to save himself from starving to death. Of all of the violent and vile abuses that the Bird had inflicted upon Louie, none had horrified and demoralized him as did this. If anything is going to shatter me, Louie thought, this is it. Sickened and starving, his will a fraying wire, Louie had only the faint hope of the war's end, and rescue, to keep him going.

Twenty-nine Two Hundred and Twenty Punches

AT ELEVEN-THIRTY ON THE MORNING OF MAY 5, 1945, THE sound of four massive engines broke the silence over Naoetsu. A B-29 was turning circles over the village. Sirens sounded, but in the steel mill, the foreman ignored them, and the POWs continued working the furnaces. Then there was a sudden, enormous crash, and it began snowing very hard inside the mill.

It wasn't snow, but a tremendous quantity of dust falling from the rafters. Something had shaken the mill violently. The foreman announced that the sound had only been a transformer blowing up, and kept the men working.

A moment later, a worker ran in and said something urgently to the foreman. The Japanese dropped everything and sprinted out, abandoning the POWs as they ran for the air-raid shelters on the beach. Gathering that only a B-29 could make the foreman run like that, the panicked POWs crowded together in a small room, praying that they wouldn't get hit.

They didn't. The B-29's bombs missed the plant, blowing gaping holes in a field nearby. It took an hour for everyone, captive and free, to calm down. The guards did their best to impress the POWs with the incompetence of American airmen, taking them on a crater tour to show how badly the bomber had missed, but they were spooked. There was much more to this raid than a couple of holes in a farmer's field, and everyone knew it. For the POWs, kept in ignorance of the Pacific war's progression, this raid, and the growing number of B-29 sightings over the village, raised a dazzling possibility. If the Americans were turning their efforts toward a

lone steel mill in a place as obscure as Naoetsu, had the B-29s already destroyed the big strategic cities?

The answer came ten days later. Four hundred new POWs tramped through the gates and halted in the compound. The Bird leapt onto a perch over them and delivered his standard harangue: "You must be sober! You must be sincere! You must work for earnest! You must obey! I have spoken." "Who the hell is Ernest?" muttered a POW.

When the Bird was finished, the four hundred new men wedged into the barracks with the three hundred old ones, and the benjos ranneth over. The new men said they'd come from slave camps in the huge cities of Kobe, a matrix of war production, and Osaka, Japan's biggest port. Weeks before, B-29s had swept over those cities in gleaming, three-hundred-plane swarms, showering them in fire. Large swaths of Kobe and Osaka had been burned to the ground. Of no use to Japan in razed cities, the POWs had been shipped to Naoetsu to be reenslaved for the empire. The new men had one other piece of news: Germany had fallen. The whole weight of the Allies was now thrown against Japan. —

That month, the Bird's presence at Naoetsu became sporadic. On top of his duty at Naoetsu, he'd been named disciplinary officer for Mitsushima, a camp in the mountains. He arrived there with his trademark flourish, bursting through a door and shouting, "Nanda!" at a group of startled POW officers, demanding to know what they were doing. Immediately, he set to beating the officers day and night. The POWs there called him "the Knob."

The Bird was so vicious at Mitsushima that the POW officers soon concluded that they had to kill him to save themselves. Conspirators formed "murder squads" set on drowning the Bird or hurling him from a cliff. Whenever the Bird was in camp, they stalked him, but he seemed to be on to them, moving about with armed guards. Meanwhile, two POW physicians, Richard Whitfield and Alfred Weinstein, hatched a plan to poison the Bird with massive doses of atropine and morphine. Again the Bird eluded them: The day after the doctors formed their plan, the Bird had the pharmacy medications locked up.

Whitfield devised a new plan. Preparing a bottle of saline solution and glucose to serve as a culture medium, he mixed in stool samples from two patients infected with amoebic and bacillary dysentery, tossed in three flies, then stored the bottle next to his skin for several days to incubate the pathogens. He and Weinstein delivered it to the POW cook, who poured it onto the Bird's rice for the better part of a week. To their amazement, the Bird didn't get sick, so the doctors mixed up a new dose, using the stools of six ill POWs. This time, they hit the jackpot.

In two days, the Bird was violently ill, completely incapacitated with rocketing diarrhea and a 105-degree fever. Weinstein found him in his room, crying and "whimpering like a child." The Bird ordered Weinstein to cure him. Weinstein gave him what he said were sulfa pills. Suspicious, the Bird made Weinstein take some of the pills himself. Weinstein took them, knowing that all that was in them was aspirin and baking soda. The Bird lost fifteen pounds in one week. Weinstein urged him to eat his rice.

With the Bird out of the way, the men and even the guards were, wrote Weinstein, "almost hysterically childish" in their delight. But the Bird seemed unmurderable. After ten days, his fever broke. He returned to Naoetsu to take out his rage on the officers and Louie. —

By June, Louie's leg was healed enough to bear his weight, and he was sent back to shovel coal and salt. He was growing ever sicker, and his dysentery never eased. When he appealed for rest while burning up with fever, the Bird refused him. His temperature was only 103, he said; you go to work. Louie went.

One day that month, Louie, Tinker, and Wade were shoveling on a barge when the foreman discovered that fish had been stolen from the galley. The foreman announced that if the thieves didn't turn themselves in, he'd report the theft to the Bird. During a lunch break, the innocent men persuaded the culprits to confess. When the men walked into camp that night, the foreman told the Bird anyway, as he suspected that more men had been in on the theft.

The Bird called for the work party to line up before him and ordered the thieves to stand before the group. He then walked down the line, pulling out Wade, Tinker, Louie, and two other officers and making them stand with the thieves. He announced that these officers were responsible for the behavior of the thieves. His punishment: Each enlisted man would punch each officer and thief in the face, as hard as possible.

The chosen men looked at the line of enlisted men in terror: there were some one hundred of them. Any man who refused to carry out the order, the Bird said, would meet the same fate as the officers and thieves. He told the guards to club any men who didn't strike the chosen men with maximum force.

The enlisted men had no choice. At first, they tried to hit softly, but the Bird studied each blow. When a man didn't punch hard enough, the Bird would begin shrieking and clubbing him, joined by the guards. Then the errant man would be forced to hit the victim repeatedly until the Bird was satisfied. Louie began whispering to each man to get it over with, and hit hard. Some of the British men whispered, "Sorry, sir," before punching Wade.

For the first few punches, Louie stayed on his feet. But his legs soon began to waver, and he collapsed. He pulled himself upright, but fell again with the next punch, and then the next. Eventually, he blacked out. When he came to, the Bird forced the men to resume punching him, screaming, "Next! Next! Next!" In Louie's whirling mind, the voice began to sound like the tramping of feet.

The sun sank. The beating went on for some two hours, the Bird watching with fierce and erotic pleasure. When every enlisted man had done his punching, the Bird ordered the guards to club each one twice in the head with a kendo stick.

The victims had to be carried to the barracks. Louie's face was so swollen that for several days he could barely open his mouth. By Wade's estimate, each man had been punched in the face some 220 times. —

June 1945 became July. Every day, a single B-29 crossed over Naoetsu, so high that only the contrails gave it away. The men called it "the Lone Ranger." Every night, bombers passed over in strength, forests of planes brushing over the village. To the POWs, they were a beautiful sight, "all lit up," wrote POW Joe Byrne, "as if they were going to a picnic." Throughout each day and night, the air-raid sirens kept kicking in. Sometimes, at night, the men could hear soft booming in the darkness.

Louie was sick and demoralized. He lay on his plank, daydreaming about the Olympics, holding them before himself as a shining promise, a future for which to endure an unbearable present. He prayed ceaselessly for rescue. His nightmares of his battles with the Bird were hellish, unbearable. His hope was dimming. In his barracks one day, a man dragged in from

slave work, looking spent. He lay down, asked to be awakened for dinner, and went still. At chowtime, Louie kicked his foot. The man didn't move. He was dead. He was young, like everyone else, and hadn't even looked sick.

The food situation was increasingly dire. In the spring, with the import of the Kobe and Osaka POWs, the camp population had more than doubled, but the rations had not. Now the rations were smaller still, usually consisting of nothing but seaweed. When a famished prisoner tried to get food from civilians, the Bird broke his jaw. Several POW officers appealed to the authorities for meat; to withhold it, they said, violated international law. After this appeal, two guards left camp and returned with a dog, reportedly the only one left in Naoetsu. The next morning, a bell rang, and Louie walked into the compound. There, impaled on a post facing the POWs, was the dog's skinned head. A few minutes later, the men were served breakfast. In the bowls were the remains of the dog.

As summer stretched on and the rations dwindled, Louie and the other POWs began looking toward winter with dread. They were told that both their rations and the barracks heating fuel were going to be cut more come winter, and might be halted altogether. Many of the men were already so thin and sick that they were, wrote one, "hanging on from day to day." Few POWs, in Naoetsu or anywhere else, thought they'd live to see another spring. At Omori, someone made up a slogan: "Frisco dive in '45 or stiff as sticks in '46."

There was a worry more pressing yet. Even in isolated Naoetsu, it was obvious to the POWs that the Japanese empire was staggering. Watching B-29s crossing over with impunity, they knew that Japan's air defenses had been gutted, and that the Americans were very close. The civilians that they saw were in shocking condition: The limbs of the adults were grotesquely swollen from beriberi; the children were emaciated. The POWs were so disturbed by the obvious famine among the civilians that they stopped stealing at the work sites. It was clear to them that Japan had long ago lost this war.

But Japan was a long way from giving in. If a massively destructive air war would not win surrender, invasion seemed the only possibility. POWs all over the country were noticing worrisome signs. They saw women holding sharpened sticks, practicing lunges at stacks of rice straw, and small children being lined up in front of schools, handed wooden mock guns, and drilled. Japan, whose people deemed surrender shameful, appeared to be preparing to fight to the last man, woman, or child.

Invasion seemed inevitable and imminent, both to the POWs and to the Japanese. Having been warned of the kill-all order, the POWs were terrified. At Borneo's Batu Lintang POW camp, which held two thousand POWs and civilian captives, Allied fighters circled the camp every day. A civilian warned POW G. W. Pringle that "the Japanese have orders no prisoners are to be recaptured by Allied forces. All must be killed." Villagers told of having seen hundreds of bodies of POWs in the jungle. "This then is a forerunner of a fate which must be ours," wrote Pringle in his diary. A notoriously sadistic camp official began speaking of his empathy for the POWs, and how a new camp was being prepared where there was ample food, medical care, and no more forced labor. The POWs knew it was a lie, surely designed to lure them into obeying an order to march that would, as Pringle wrote, "afford the Japs a wonderful opportunity to carry out the Japanese Government order to 'Kill them all.' "

Pringle was right. In the camp office sat written orders, drawn up by the commander and approved by central military authorities, for all captives to be "liquidated" on September 15.

Women and children would be poisoned; civilian men would be shot; the sick and disabled would be bayoneted. The five hundred POWs would be marched twenty-one miles into the jungle, shot, and burned.

At Omori, Japanese kitchen workers, as well as some soldiers, told the POWs that plans for their destruction had been set. The POWs would be turned loose, on the excuse that the guards were needed to defend Japan, and when the men stepped onto the bridge, the guards would mow them down with machine guns. The POW officers met to discuss it, but couldn't come up with any way to prevent it or defend themselves.

At camps across Japan, things looked just as ominous. Machine guns and barrels of accelerant were brought in. Metal dog tags were confiscated, in an apparent effort to comply with the stipulation that those executing POWs "not ... leave any traces." Prisoners were ordered to dig tunnels and caverns, and at a number of camps, friendly guards warned POWs that mines, ditches, and tunnels were going to be used as death chambers.

That summer, at Phil and Fred Garrett's camp, Zentsuji, officials suddenly announced that they were separating the Americans from the other POWs. The officials said that the Americans were being moved to a pleasant new camp, for their safety. The men were loaded onto a train and taken across Japan, through sad rivers of refugees. Peeking past the drawn window blinds, they saw razed cities. The air smelled of burned bodies.

After dark, they reached a remote area. The men were told to begin walking up a nearly impassable trail, winding up the side of a mountain. In a crashing rainstorm, they hiked for hours, through forest, over boulders, and through ravines, climbing so high that the surrounding mountains were capped in snow in summer. Garrett, his stump still un-healed, labored on his crutches, and the Japanese wouldn't allow anyone to help him. Men began fainting from exhaustion, but the Japanese drove the group on, allowing no rest stops. Drenched to the skin, the POWs limped up the path for eleven miles, leaving a trail of discarded possessions as they tried to lighten their loads.

At two in the morning, high on the mountain, Phil, Garrett, and the other POWs reached a collection of wooden shacks in a rocky clearing. Too exhausted to stand in formation, they collapsed. They were told that this was their new camp, Rokuroshi. No one explained why the POWs had been taken so far from anywhere and anyone, to a place that appeared uninhabitable. The POW physician, Hubert Van Peenen, looked about him, considered their situation, and came to a conclusion: This is the place of our extermination.

At Naoetsu that summer, camp officials began speaking of their concern that the POWs could be injured in air raids. For this reason, the officials said, the prisoners were soon going to be taken into the mountains, where they'd be safe. Away from their officers, the guards told a different story, telling the POWs that the army had issued orders to kill them all in August. This might have been dismissed as a lie, but that July, a civilian worker known for his sympathy for POWs warned a prisoner that an execution date had been set. The date he gave was the same as one that had reportedly been mentioned to prisoners in at least two other camps.

All of the Naoetsu POWs, the civilian said, would be killed on August 22.

The Boiling City

NO ONE IN NAOETSU WAS SLEEPING. B-29S CROSSED OVER every night, and the air-raid sirens wailed for hours on end, competing with the roar of the planes. The sound of them, and the sight of endless flocks of planes soaring unopposed over Japan, sent the Bird ever deeper into madness.

During the raids, the POWs were ordered to stay in the barracks with the lights out. Once the planes had passed, the Bird would bound in, ordering the Americans outside. He and his henchman, Kono, would pace back and forth, shouting and swinging clubs, kendo sticks, or rifles. On some nights, the Bird would shove the men into two lines, facing one another, and order them to slap each other's faces. Sometimes he and Kono would make them stand with their arms over their heads for two to three hours at a time, or force them into the Ofuna crouch, pounding them when they faltered. During one beating, Louie was clubbed on his previously injured ankle, leaving it so painful that he could barely walk. And on at least one of these nights, the Bird beat Louie to unconsciousness. —

Louie's job as pig custodian was over. Barge loading had also been canceled; Allied planes had sunk so many Japanese ships that none came or went from Naoetsu anymore. Louie was back on half rations. Limping, sick, and hungry, he begged the Bird for work so he could get full rations again. The Bird brought him a paper-thin gray goat that appeared to be on the brink of death.

"Goat die, you die," the Bird said.

Louie had nothing to secure the goat with, and no pen to put him in. His friend Ken Marvin stole a rope from his work site and brought it to him. Louie tied the goat to a pole and began nursing him, giving him water and grain. At night he tied him inside a grain shack. The goat only got sicker.

One morning, the Bird ordered Louie to come before him. He said that the goat had gotten loose, broken into a grain bin, and gorged himself. The animal was deathly ill, and it was Louie's fault. Louie knew that his knot had been secure. If the goat had gotten loose, someone had untied him. The goat died.

Terrified of retribution, Louie tried to hide from the Bird, but his dysentery was becoming very serious. Risking being seen by the Bird, he went to the camp doctor to plead for medication. The Bird ran him down, demanding to know if he had received permission to approach the doctor. Louie said no.

The Bird marched Louie away from the doctor's shack, passing Tinker and Wade, who'd been ordered to work outside. Out in the compound, the Bird halted. Lying on the ground before them was a thick, heavy wooden beam, some six feet long. Pick it up, the Bird said. With some effort, Louie hoisted it up, and the Bird ordered him to lift it high and hold it directly over his head. Louie heaved the beam up. The Bird called a guard over. If the prisoner lowers his arms, the Bird told him, hit him with your gun. The Bird walked to a nearby shack, climbed on the roof, and settled in to watch.

Louie stood in the sun, holding up the beam. The Bird stretched over the roof like a contented cat, calling to the Japanese who walked by, pointing to Louie and laughing. Louie locked his eyes on the Bird's face, radiating hatred.

Several minutes passed. Louie stood, eyes on the Bird. The beam felt heavier and heavier, the pain more intense. The Bird watched Louie, amused by his suffering, mocking him. Wade and Tinker went on with their work, stealing anxious glances at the scene across the compound. Wade had looked at the camp clock when Louie had first lifted the beam. He became more and more conscious of how much time was passing.

Five more minutes passed, then ten. Louie's arms began to waver and go numb. His body shook. The beam tipped. The guard jabbed Louie with his gun, and Louie straightened up. Less and less blood was reaching his head, and he began to feel confused, his thoughts gauzy, the camp swimming around him. He felt his consciousness slipping, his mind losing adhesion, until all he knew was a single thought: He cannot break me. Across the compound, the Bird had stopped laughing.

Time ticked on, and still Louie remained in the same position, conscious and yet not, the beam over his head, his eyes on the Bird's face, enduring long past when his strength should have given out. "Something went on inside of me," he said later. "I don't know what it was."

There was a flurry of motion ahead of him, the Bird leaping down from the roof and charging toward him, enraged. Watanabe's fist rammed into Louie's stomach, and Louie folded over in agony. The beam dropped, striking Louie's head. He flopped to the ground.

When he woke, he didn't know where he was or what had happened. He saw Wade and some other POWs, along with a few guards, crouched around him. The Bird was gone. Louie had no memory of the last several minutes, and had no idea how long he'd stood there. But Wade had looked at the clock when Louie had fallen.

Louie had held the beam aloft for thirty-seven minutes. —

On the night of August 1, sirens sounded and the village shook. In the barracks, the POWs looked out and saw wave after wave of Superfortresses. In the skies over Japan that night, America was staging by far the biggest air raid, by tonnage, of World War II: 836 B-29s, bearing more than 6,100 tons of bombs, incendiaries, and mines. The POWs working the factory night shifts ran for the beach shelters, but the planes bypassed Naoetsu. In Nagaoka, forty miles away, civilians looked up and thought it was raining. The rain was napalm.

With the bombers sweeping overhead, the Bird stormed into the barracks and shouted for all Americans to get out. As the men lined up in the compound, the Bird and Kono picked up their kendo sticks, walked behind them, and began smashing them over their heads. Men started falling. When Louie went down, the Bird crouched over him, clubbing him. Woozy, Louie lay there as the Bird and the sirens screamed.

At dawn the sirens went silent. The POWs on the beach came out of the shelters. In the compound, the Bird and Kono went still. Louie stumbled to his feet and looked to the northeast. The edge of the world was glowing; Nagaoka was burning down.

That same night, B-29s showered leaflets over thirty-five Japanese cities, warning civilians of coming bombings and urging them to evacuate. The Japanese government ordered civilians to turn the leaflets in to authorities, forbade them from sharing the warnings with others,

and arrested anyone with leaflets in their possession. Among the cities listed on the leaflets were Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

That night was a turning point for Louie. The next morning, his dysentery was suddenly extremely severe. He was dangerously dehydrated and beginning to have trouble eating. Each day he was thinner, weaker.

Every day and night, the B-29s raked over the sky and the Bird rampaged through camp. He attacked Ken Marvin, knocked him unconscious, roused him with a bucket of water to his face, told him to take care of his health, then knocked him out again. While Louie hid upstairs on his bunk, sick with fever, he saw the Bird and Kono beat two sick POWs until they acquiesced to the Bird's order to lick excrement from their boots. On another day, Louie looked across the compound to see the Bird and Kono standing before a line of POWs, holding a confiscated book on boxing and taking turns punching the prisoners.

Louie was walking in the compound when the Bird collared him and dragged him to the overflowing benjo pit. After pulling over several men, the Bird forced Louie and the others down on their stomachs, on top of the waste pits, and ordered them to do push-ups. Louie was just barely able to hold his body clear of the pit. Others were not so fortunate. When the exhausted men failed to push themselves all the way up, the Bird pressed the butt of his rifle to their heads and ground their faces into the waste.

Then came the day that Louie had been dreading. He was standing outside, filling a tub of water, when the Bird barked at him to come over. When Louie arrived, the Bird looked wrathfully at him and gestured toward the water.

"Tomorrow I'm going to drown you."

Louie spent a day gripped with fear, looking for the Bird, thinking about the tub of water. When the Bird found him, he was terrified. "I have changed my mind," the Bird said. Then he lunged at Louie and began punching him in the face, alternating right and left fists in a violent ecstasy. As abruptly as he had started, he stopped. Suddenly serene, he let go of Louie.

"I will drown you tomorrow," he said.

The Bird strolled away. His face wore the same soft languor that Louie had seen on the face of the Quack after he beat Harris at Ofuna. It was an expression of sexual rapture. —

Louie could take no more. He joined about a dozen officers in a secret meeting. By the time they parted, they had a plan to kill the Bird.

The plan was simple. The men would leap onto the Bird and pull him to the top floor of the barracks, overlooking the drop to the Hokura River. There, they would lash him to a large rock and shove him out the window. When he struck the water below, the rock would carry him under. He would never draw another breath.

The officers divvied up the tasks involved in the killing. A group of men would figure out how to overpower the Bird, who was quite fit and would be difficult to subdue. Several of the biggest POWs would find a heavy but portable rock and, out of view of the guards, hoist it up the ladders and roll it to the window. Louie was tasked with stealing enough strong rope to lash the rock to the Bird.

Louie couldn't find a rope long enough to tie a man to a boulder. He began stealing shorter lengths of rope, secreting them away, then tying them together with his strongest Boy Scout knots. Meanwhile, the rock crew found a large boulder, big enough to drown the Bird and

several other men. Somehow, they got it into the compound, into the barracks, and up the ladder without discovery. They positioned it by the window. When Louie had finally stolen enough rope, he tied it into one long line. It was looped around the rock, a dangling end lying ready to be wound around the Bird's body. Louie then prepared for the second phase of the plan. He had volunteered to be one of the men to capture the Bird, drag him up, and throw him to his death.

As the conspirators planned, the Bird entered the barracks. If the rock was then in place, he either didn't see it or didn't recognize what it was there for. He dug through the men's possessions. Under the tatami mat of an English officer, he found a piece of paper on which were listed the crimes of each of the Japanese officials. When the Bird looked up, he saw the man sneering at him.

The Bird was spooked. He believed that he saw the POWs glaring murderously at him. They had never looked at him in this way before. He knew that Japan was losing the war, and that when the end came, the Americans would try him. These POWs would accuse him of crimes, and the Americans would surely sentence him to death. No one, he knew, would defend him, and that fact left him angry and panicked. He was going to have to go to extreme measures to save himself.

Next to a window near which the Bird passed each day, the rock and rope sat ready. From the barracks window, it was a long plunge to the water. —

At a quarter to three on the morning of August 6, 1945, a B-29 skipped off Runway Able on Tinian Island. At the yoke was Paul Tibbets, a veteran bomber pilot. The plane headed north, toward Japan. The mission was so secret that Tibbets carried cyanide capsules for all of the crewmen, to be used if they crashed and were captured.

As the day's first light walked over the Pacific, the plane rose toward its bombing altitude, more than thirty thousand feet. Two crewmen climbed into the bomb bay. There sat a twelve-foot-long, nine-thousand-pound bomb called Little Boy. The men dropped to their hands and knees and crawled around the bomb, pulling out test plugs and replacing them with firing plugs. Little Boy was armed.

Crossing the Inland Sea, Tibbets saw a city ahead. A scout plane flying over it radioed back in code: The weather was clear. They wouldn't have to bypass this city and pursue the alternate targets. Tibbets spoke over the interphone:

"It's Hiroshima."

The plane passed the coastline and crossed over the city. Tibbets turned the plane west, then ordered his crew to don shaded goggles. Below, he saw a T-shaped bridge, the target. Tibbets surrendered control of the plane to the Norden bombsight, and the bombardier lined up on the bridge.

At 8:15.17, the bomb slipped from the plane. Tibbets turned the plane as hard as he could and put it into a dive to gain speed. It would take forty-three seconds for the bomb to reach its detonation altitude, a little less than two thousand feet. No one knew for sure if, in that brief time, the bomber could get far enough away to survive what was coming.

One of the crewmen counted seconds in his head. When he hit forty-three, nothing happened. He didn't know that he had been counting too quickly. For an instant, he thought the mission had failed.

Exactly as the thought crossed his mind, the sky over the city ripped open in a firestorm of color and sound and felling wind. A white light, ten times the intensity of the sun, enveloped the plane as the flash and sound and jolt of it skidded out in all directions. The tail gunner, looking out the back of the plane through his goggles, thought that the light had blinded him. Tibbets's teeth began tingling, and his mouth filled with a taste of lead. He would later be told that it was the metal in his fillings resonating with the radioactivity of the bomb. He looked ahead and saw the entire sky swirling in pink and blue. Next to him, the copilot scribbled two words in his diary: MY GOD!

Behind him, the tail gunner's vision cleared and he saw an eerie shimmering warp in the air over the city, ripping toward them at one thousand feet per second. "Here it comes!" he said. The shock wave slammed into the plane, pitching the men into the air and back down again. In confusion, someone yelled, "Flak!" Then a second wave, a consequence of the force of the explosion hitting the ground and then ricocheting upward, smacked them, and the plane heaved again.

At POW Camp 10-D, on the far side of the mountains by Hiroshima, prisoner Ferron Cummins felt a concussion roll down from the hills, and the air warmed strangely. He looked up. A fantastically huge, roiling cloud, glowing bluish gray, swaggered over the city. It was more than three miles tall. Below it, Hiroshima was boiling.

Thirty-one The Naked Stampede

THE NAOETSU POWS KNEW THAT SOMETHING BIG HAD happened. The guards paced around with stricken faces. Civilians walked past the camp, eyes dazed, hands in fists. A guard said something to Louie that stuck in his head: Hiroshima had been hit by cholera. The city was shut down, he said, and no one could come or go.

At one of the work sites, a civilian told a different story: One American bomb, he said, had destroyed an entire city. The POWs thought that he must have meant one raid with many bombs, but the man kept repeating that it was one bomb. He used a word that sounded like "atomic." The word was unfamiliar, and no one knew how one bomb could wipe out a city. Tom Wade got hold of a newspaper. Something the paper called an "electronic bomb" had been dropped, and many people had died. The POWs didn't know what to make of it.

At Omori, the shaken camp commander gathered the POWs. "One plane came over," he said, "and a whole city disappeared." He asked if anyone knew what weapon could do such a thing. No one had an answer.

On August 9, Nagasaki, like Hiroshima, disappeared. —

Uneasy days passed. Everything in Naoetsu remained the same, and day and night, the POWs were still sent to labor in Japan's war production factories. Clearly, something catastrophic had happened, but Japan had not given in.

For the POWs, time had all but run out. It was now approaching mid-August, and the kill-all policy loomed. Even if Japan surrendered, many POWs believed that the guards would kill them anyway, either out of vengeance or to prevent them from testifying to what had been done to them. Indeed, an Omori interrogator had told Commander Fitzgerald that the Japanese had plans to kill the POWs in the event that they lost the war.

With officials talking about taking them to a new camp in the hills, the POWs believed that the Japanese planned to dump their bodies in a mountain forest, where no one would ever find them. They discussed defending themselves, but they had no answers to twenty-five guards with rifles. Escape, too, was impossible; the camp was cornered against the sea and two rivers, and with no way to get boats for seven hundred prisoners, the only route out was toward the village, where the sickly, weak men would be caught easily. They were fish in a barrel.

Louie lingered in his bunk, fading, praying. In his nightmares, he and the Bird fought death matches, the Bird trying to beat him to death, Louie trying to strangle the life from the sergeant. He'd been staying as far as he could from the Bird, who had been whipping about camp like a severed power line, but the sergeant always hunted him down.

Then, abruptly, the violence stopped. The Bird had left camp. The guards said that he had gone to the mountains to ready the promised new camp for the POW officers. The August 22 kill-all death date was one week away. —

On August 15, Louie woke gravely ill. He was now having some twenty bloody bowel movements a day. After the month's weigh-in, he didn't record his weight in his diary, but he did note that he'd lost six kilos, more than thirteen pounds, from a frame already wasted from starvation. When he gripped his leg, his fingers sank in, and the imprints remained for long after. He'd seen too many men die to be ignorant of what this meant: beriberi.

In late morning, after the night work crews had dragged in and the day crews had headed off, Louie crept out of the barracks. With the Bird away, it was safer to walk in the open. Crossing the compound, Louie saw Ogawa, his overseer at the potato field. Ogawa had always been an innocuous man, one of the few Japanese whom Louie had never had reason to fear. But when he saw Louie, Ogawa yanked out his club and struck Louie in the face. Louie reeled in astonishment, his cheek bleeding.

A few minutes later, at noon, the compound was suddenly, eerily silent. The Japanese were all gone. At the same moment, in the factory mess halls, the POWs looked up from their bowls and realized that they were alone. The guards had left.

In camp, Tinker walked through the compound. Passing the guardroom, he glanced inside. There were the guards, crowded around a radio in rapt attention, listening to a small, halting Japanese voice. Something of great importance was being said.

At the factories, at half past one, the guards reappeared and told the POWs to get back to their stations. As Ken Marvin returned to his station, he found his overseers sitting down. One of the Japanese told him that there was no work. Looking around, Marvin spotted Bad Eye, the one-eyed civilian guard he'd been teaching incorrect English, and asked him why there was no work. Bad Eye replied that there was no electricity. Marvin looked up; all of the light bulbs were burning. He turned quizzically to Bad Eye and told him that the lights were on. Bad Eye said something in Japanese, and Marvin wasn't sure he understood. Marvin found a friend fluent in Japanese, pulled him into the

room, and asked Bad Eye to repeat what he'd said.

"The war is over."

Marvin began sobbing. He and his friend stood together, bawling like children.

The workers were marched back to camp. Marvin and his friend hurried among the POWs, sharing what Bad Eye had said, but not one of their listeners believed it. Everyone had heard this rumor before, and each time, it had turned out to be false. In camp, there was no sign that anything had changed. The camp officials explained that the work had been suspended only because there had been a power outage. A few men celebrated the peace rumor, but Louie and many others were anticipating something very different. Someone had heard that Naoetsu was slated to be bombed that night.

The POWs couldn't sleep. Marvin lay on his bunk, telling himself that if they were sent to work in the morning, Bad Eye's story must have been false. If they weren't, maybe the war was over. Louie hunkered down, miserably ill, waiting for the bombers.

No B-29s flew over Naoetsu that night. In the morning, the work crews were told that there was no work and were dismissed.

Upstairs, Louie began vomiting. As he bobbed in a fog of nausea, someone came to his bunk and handed him five letters. They were from Pete, Sylvia, and his parents, all written many months earlier. Louie tore open the envelopes, and out came photographs of his family. It was the first that Louie had seen or heard of them in nearly two and a half years. He clutched his letters and hung on.

The POWs were in a state of confusion; the guards would tell them nothing. A day passed with no news. When night fell, the men looked over the countryside and saw something they'd never seen before. The village was illuminated in the darkness; the black out shades all over Naoetsu had been taken down. As a test, some of the POWs removed the shades on the barracks windows. The guards ordered them to put the shades back up. If the war had ended, the guards were going to considerable lengths to hide this fact from the POWs. The kill-all date was five days away.

The next day, Louie was sicker still. He examined his feeble body and scrawled sad words in his diary: "Look like skeleton. feel weak." The Bird reappeared, apparently back from preparing whatever lay in store for the POWs in the mountains. He looked different, a shade of a mustache darkening his lip. Louie saw him step into his office and close the door. —

On August 17, at Rokuroshi POW camp on the frigid summit of a Japanese mountain, a telephone rang.

Phil, Fred Garrett, and more than 350 other Rokuroshi POWs were shivering through summer inside the barracks, trying to survive on a nearly all-liquid diet. In this extremely remote, deathly quiet camp, the lone telephone hardly ever rang, and the POWs noticed it. A few minutes later, the Japanese commander hurried out of camp and down the mountain.

For some time, the Rokuroshi prisoners had been racked with tension. All summer, the sky had been scratched with vapor trails. One night in July, the men had looked from the barracks to see the whole southern horizon lit up in red, generating light so bright that the men could read by it. On August 8, the guards had begun nailing the barracks doors shut. Then, on August 15, the guards had suddenly become much more brutal, and the POWs' workload, breaking rocks on a hillside, had been intensified.

After the commander left, something troubling happened. The guards began bringing the POWs out of the barracks and dividing them into small groups. Once they had the men assembled, they herded them out of camp and deep into the mountain forest, heading nowhere. After pushing the men onward through the trees for some time, the guards led the men back to camp and into the barracks. Later, the walks were repeated. No explanation was given. The guards seemed to be inuring the men to this strange routine in preparation for something terrible. —

On August 20, a white sky stretched out over Naoetsu, heavy and threatening. There was a shout in the compound: All POWs were to assemble outside. Some seven hundred men tramped out of the barracks and formed lines before the building. The little camp commander, gloves on his hands and a sword on his hip, stepped atop the air-raid spotter's platform, and Kono climbed up beside him. The commander spoke, and Kono translated.

"The war has come to a point of cessation."

There was no reaction from the POWs. Some believed it, but kept silent for fear of reprisal. Others, suspecting a trick, did not. The commander went on, becoming strangely solicitous. Speaking as if the POWs were old friends, he voiced his hope that the prisoners would help Japan fight the "Red Menace"—the Soviet Union, which had just seized Japan's Kuril Islands.

With the commander's speech finished and the POWs waiting in suspicious silence, Kono invited the POWs to bathe in the Hokura River. This, too, was odd; the men had only rarely been allowed to go in the river. The POWs broke from their lines and began hiking down to the water, dropping clothes as they walked. Louie dragged along after them, peeled off his clothes, and waded in.

All over the river, the men scattered, scrubbing their skin, unsure what was happening. Then they heard it. It was the growl of an aircraft engine, huge, low, and close. The swimmers looked up, and at first saw nothing but the overcast sky. Then, there it was, bursting from the clouds: a torpedo bomber.

As the men watched, the bomber dove, leveled off, and skimmed over the water, its engine screaming. The POWs looked up at it. The bomber was headed straight toward them.

In the instant before the plane shot overhead, the men in the water could just make out the cockpit and, inside, the pilot, standing. Then the bomber was right over them. On each side of the fuselage and on the underside of each wing, there was a broad white star in a blue circle. The plane was not Japanese. It was American.

The plane's red code light was blinking rapidly. A radioman in the water near Louie read the signals and suddenly cried out:

"Oh! The war is over!"

In seconds, masses of naked men were stampeding out of the river and up the hill. As the plane turned loops above, the pilot waving, the POWs swarmed into the compound, out of their minds with relief and rapture. Their fear of the guards, of the massacre they had so long awaited, was gone, dispersed by the roar and muscle of the bomber. The prisoners jumped up and down, shouted, and sobbed. Some scrambled onto the camp roofs, waving their arms and singing out their joy to the pilot above. Others piled against the camp fence and sent it crashing over. Someone found matches, and soon, the entire length of fence was burning. The Japanese

shrank back and withdrew. In the midst of the running, celebrating men, Louie stood on wavering legs, emaciated, sick, and dripping wet. In his tired mind, two words were repeating themselves, over and over. I'm free! I'm free! I'm free!

Down on the riverbank, a battered Australian POW named Matt Clift sat at the water's edge. His eyes were on the torpedo bomber, which was swooping overhead, alternately crossing over the river, then the camp. As Clift watched, something flitted out of the cockpit, trailing a long yellow ribbon. It carried through the air westward, directly toward the river. Clift stood up, leaned over the water, and reached out so far that he was on the verge of falling in. The object, a little wooden packet, dropped right into his hands. Regaining his balance with the treasure in his grasp, Clift had a delightful thought: Chocolate! His heart filled with gratitude for the "damn good bloke" of a pilot above. Clift spent some time trying to twist the packet open, and at some point realized, to his crushing disappointment, that it wasn't chocolate. When he finally got it open, he found a handwritten message inside:

OUR TBFS* HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO GET THROUGH THIS STUFF TODAY. WILL LEAD THEM BACK TOMORROW WITH FOOD AND STUFF LT. A. R. HAWKINS, VF-31, FPO BOX 948, LUFKIN, TEXAS.*

Before he flew off, Hawkins dropped two gifts: a candy bar with a bite taken out of it and a twenty-count packet of cigarettes with one missing. Fitzgerald had the candy bar sliced into seven hundred slivers, and each man licked a finger, dabbed it on his bit of chocolate, and put it in his mouth. Louie's portion was the size of an ant. Then Fitzgerald had the men form nineteen circles, each of which received one cigarette. Each man got one delectable puff.

Another American plane thrummed over, and a man fell out of it. Down and down he fell, and his parachute didn't open. Everyone gasped. Then they realized that it wasn't a man; it was a pair of pants, stuffed full of something, the waist and leg holes tied shut.

The officers retrieved the pants, and Louie stood among them as the waist was opened. Inside, sitting atop a pile of goods, was an American magazine. On the cover was a photograph of an impossibly voluminous bomb cloud. The men fell silent, piecing together the rumors of one giant bomb vaporizing Hiroshima and the abrupt end to the war.

Below the magazine were cartons of cigarettes and candy bars, and very soon, the compound was littered with wrappers and naked, skinny, smoking men. In a pocket, Fitzgerald found a letter belonging to the pants' owner. The man had been busy: He had a wife in California and a girlfriend in Perth. —

The rock still sat at the foot of the barracks window, Louie's rope tied around it. But the conspirators were too late; the Bird was nowhere to be found. Sometime that day, or perhaps the day before, he had taken off his uniform, picked up a sack of rice, slipped into the Naoetsu countryside, and vanished.