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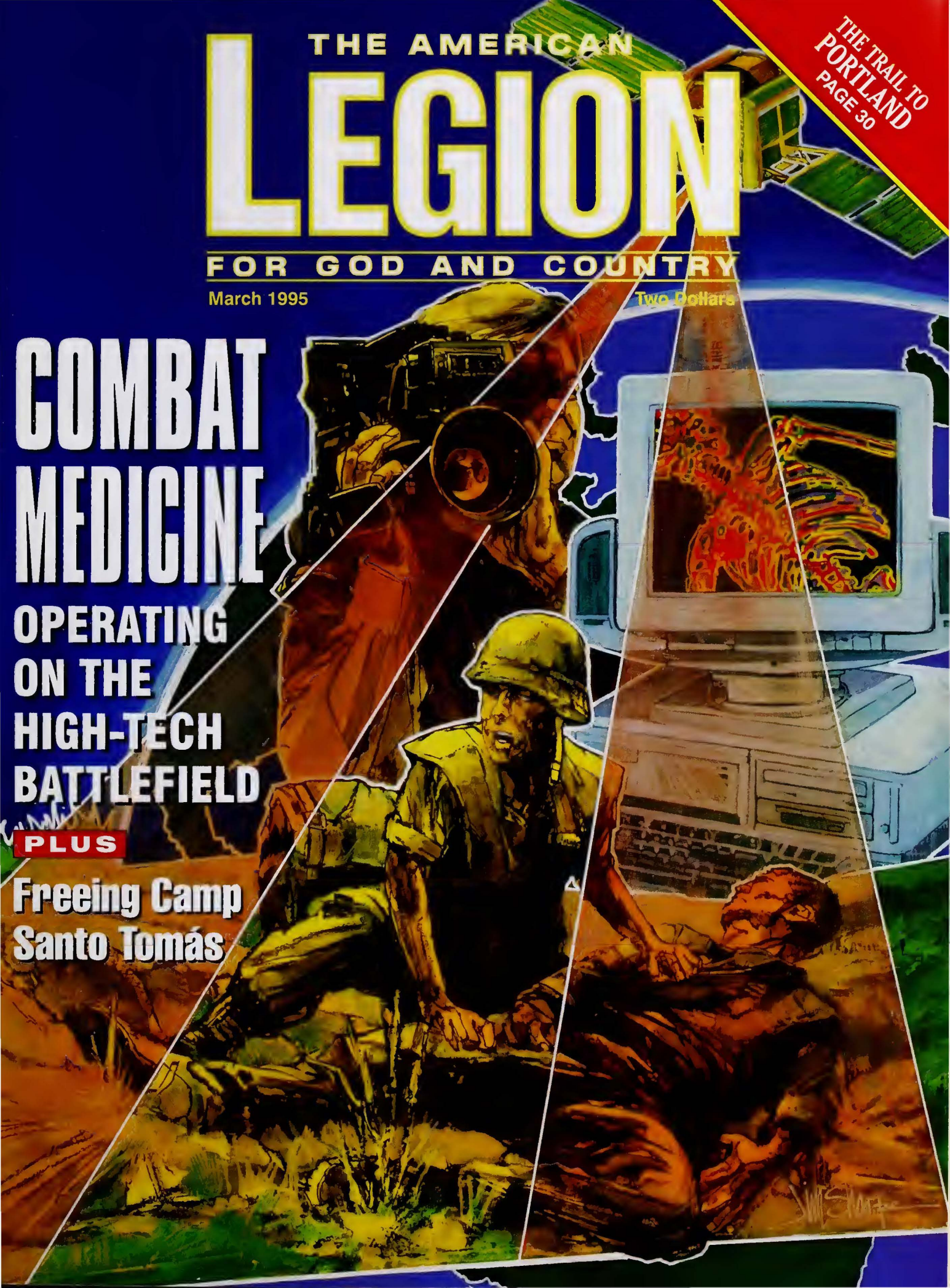

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Vol. 138, No. 3

March 1995

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COVER *Learn how medics in war can get second opinions half a world away with video hookups. See Page 20. Illustration by Jim Sharpe.*

THE AMERICAN LEGION MAGAZINE, a leader among national general-interest publications, is published monthly by The American Legion for its 3.1 million members. These military-service veterans, working through nearly 15,000 community-level Posts, dedicate themselves to God and country and traditional American values; strong national security; adequate and compassionate care for veterans, their widows and orphans; community service; and the wholesome development of our nation's youths.

CARL MYDANS/LIFE MAGAZINE

The dramatic liberation of this Philippine internment camp was one of the most triumphant moments of World War II.

Freeing Camp

By Bill Underwood

EVEN among World War II's best-known examples of military heroism and human triumph, Santo Tomás stands out. The dramatic rescue of nearly 4,000 American and Allied civilians imprisoned on a Philippine University campus perhaps best symbolizes America's role of restoring freedom for millions across the Asian continent.

For the prisoners, liberation began at dusk on Feb. 3, 1945. A U.S. Marine warplane swooped low over downtown Manila and dropped a goggles case into the Santo Tomás Internment Camp. "Roll out the barrel," read the coy note inside. "There's going to be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

Among the most eager recipients of the message was 18-year-old Dennis Greene. Along with his father and younger sister, Greene had been an inmate of Santo Tomás for all of the 37 hellish months the Japanese Imperial Army had occupied the Philippines. As word spread, young Greene quietly made his way to the roof of the prison camp's main building—where he stared in amazement as armored vehicles appeared in the distance.

Two days earlier, U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Henry Annasenz's unit, H Troop, 5th Cov. Rgt. of the 1st Cav. Div. had set off on a 70-mile mad dash deep into enemy territory. The mission of the "flying column" was to liberate Santo Tomás before the long-suffering internees were killed by the cornered Japanese, who were becoming increasingly fanatical.

Now Greene looked on as the lead tank of the 44th Tank Bn., "Battlin' Basic," crashed through the ornate front gate. The "Georgia Peach" tank and Annasenz and other GIs were right behind.

It was 9 p.m. And for 3,768 starving non-combatants, deliverance from Santo Tomás was at hand.

For the Greene family, the nightmare had begun on Jan. 2, 1942, a mere four weeks after Pearl Harbor. The Greenes tried to flee the supposedly "open city" of Manila in their new Dodge.

Bill Underwood, a former newspaper reporter, is a freelance writer based in Carmichael, Calif.

CARL MYDANS/LIFE MAGAZINE

CARL MYDANS/AP WIDE WORLD

CIVILIANS— The Japanese held 4,000 U.S. and Allied civilian prisoners on the grounds of the University of Santo Tomás in Manila. Far left, jubilant internees cheer as a U.S. Flag is unfurled. Center, GIs protect internees from retreating Japanese troops. Near left, prisoners were barely given enough food to survive.

Santo Tomás

"We drove right into the Japanese Army," recalls Greene, just 15 at the time. "They were marching in as we were trying to get out." The trio was detained, but managed to return home in the commotion.

For their second escape attempt, the Greenes disguised themselves as Filipino laborers and piled into an old car. When the ruse came undone at a Japanese road block, the family was taken directly to the University of Santo Tomás. Three-quarters of the "enemy aliens" crammed into the 50-acre campus were U.S. citizens.

Conditions were miserable to start and steadily worsened. There were no beds at the outset, and few toilets. In three years, says Greene, "I don't think I ever just walked into a bathroom" without waiting in line. "Close your eyes if you want privacy" became a running joke.

Malnutrition was always the chief hardship. The staple of the overtaxed camp food line was a soupy rice known as *lugaw*. The ladles used in the food line grew ever smaller, remembers Greene, who always kept a spoon tucked in his belt in case any morsel was overlooked.

CONDITIONS deteriorated further in February 1944, when the Japanese military took direct control of Santo Tomás amid mounting war losses. New off-limits areas were created. Mug shots with serial numbers were taken, and prisoners were forced to sign pledges promising not to escape.

Twice-daily standing roll calls were often supervised by the harsh Lt. Abiko, who instructed inmates in the newly mandatory art of bowing to their captors. Abiko's forced labor projects were expanded, though one involving a camp moat was thankfully dropped.

Disease ran rampant due to the meager diet and dismal sanitation. The Greenes supplemented their *lugaw* with red ants—or stray cats, the latter through an arrangement with an interned physician.

"I would catch the cat, the doctor would skin it and my father would cook it," says Greene. Because Greene's sister refused to dine on feline, he and his father donated their food line rations to her.

Hope arrived in September 1944 with U.S. air raids on Manila. News of the key American landing on Leyte Island in October prompted the quip, "Better Leyte than never." The agitated Japanese troops dug bomb shelters. They staged bayonet practice by day and blacked out the camp at night.

"We knew the Japanese were losing the war," Greene says, "but we were getting it worse than ever." Four members of the camp's internee committee were secretly beheaded in January 1945. That month alone, 32 internees died, double December's total.

With the food line providing barely

Santo Tomás

DAILY MEAL—A mother cooks corn meal mush for her children. By January 1945, the camp was literally starving.

BETTMANN ARCHIVES

700 calories per day, adult males dropped to an average weight of 112 pounds. By the time Sgt. Annasenz came ashore at Luzon's Lingayen Gulf on Jan. 27, Santo Tomás was literally starving to death. "We had never heard of Santo Tomás," said Annasenz, part of a crack machine-gun unit with H Troop, 5th Cav. Rgt., 1st Cav. Div. "We were just told to drive into Manila and liberate some prisoners."

Despite stiff resistance, the armored column charged through Japanese lines on Feb. 1, well ahead of the main force. By Feb. 3, the determined cavalrymen had become the first GIs to re-enter the Philippine capital.

Methodically blowing up buildings as it retreated, the Japanese Army was razing the 800-year-old city once known as the "Pearl of the Orient."

"It was so bright that you could have read a newspaper that night," recalls Annasenz, who would earn a Purple Heart the next day and another the following month. "The whole city was burning," says Annasenz.

But at the Santo Tomás Internment Camp, cries of "The boys are back! The boys are back!" were accompanied by cheering, weeping and spontaneous singing of "God Bless America."

However, the celebration was premature. All of Santo Tomás was not yet free.

Eyewitness accounts paint a vivid picture of a fierce Lt. Abiko emerging from the education building, where more than 50 Japanese were barricaded. He lunged forward while reaching for a suicide grenade in his shoulder pouch. An alert Army major grabbed a GI's carbine and shot Abiko through the stomach without aiming. Internees kicked and spit on the hated guard, who, the story has it, was buried face down in mud.

ABIKO'S dramatic demise still didn't put an end to the ordeal for some long-suffering internees. It was not until after tank cannons began to blast away at the three-story education building that anyone realized that over 200 people—Greene's father among them—were being held hostage inside. A tense standoff ensued, during which the elder Greene escaped from the top floor of the stucco building using a homemade rope of knotted cloth. He fell due to his weakened condition and was not located among the wounded for three days.

Finally, 36 hours after the shelling began, the camp was liberated. The mission had been accomplished by fewer than 200 GIs and a relative handful of tanks—and a few ad hoc conscriptees. Greene and a fellow teenage volunteer braved Japanese rifle fire during a foot raid on the camp's rice storehouse. Today, as a result, he goes by the nickname of "Banzai" at annual reunions of Santo Tomás survivors, where the incident is referred to as "The Charge of the Rice House."

Though Santo Tomás had been freed, the Battle of Manila would rage for another month, thanks to 16,000 diehard Japanese naval troops who massacred thousands of Filipino civilians before making their own suicide stand. Greene went out on perimeter patrols and worked as a stretcher-bearer, bringing the bodies of "dozens and dozens" of U.S. soldiers back into the camp. "I remember thinking what great-looking American boys these were and how we just piled them up," says Greene, who later served in the Korean War.

The remaining Japanese holdouts were escorted out of Santo Tomás at daybreak on Feb. 5; they had been allowed to keep their swords and sidearms in exchange for freeing the hostages. Sgt. Dan Balkin, an Army medical artist and photographer, entered the camp that day to document internee health and living conditions.

"An almost immediate, physical change seemed to come over them," says Balkin, describing the curative power of freedom. For internees and GIs alike, he says, the liberation of Santo Tomás generated a "tremendous feeling of being part of something great." □

REUNION—Left to right, SSgt. Henry Annasenz, a camp liberator; Dennis Greene, a prisoner; and Sgt. Dan Balkin, an Army medical artist.

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