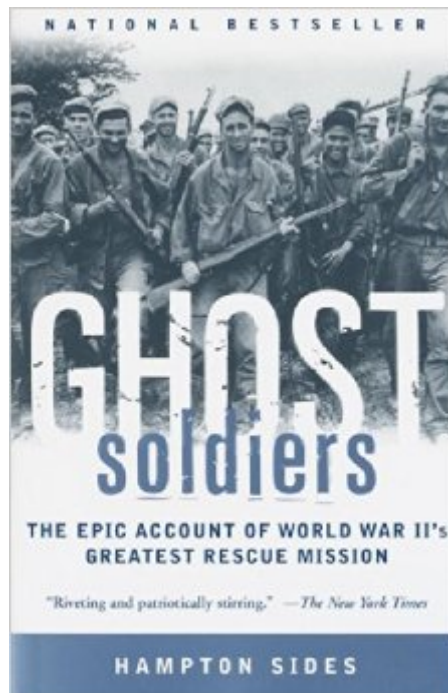


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# Ghost Soldiers: The Epic Account Of World War II's Greatest Rescue Mission



## Synopsis

On January 28, 1945, 121 hand-selected U.S. troops slipped behind enemy lines in the Philippines. Their mission: March thirty rugged miles to rescue 513 POWs languishing in a hellish camp, among them the last survivors of the infamous Bataan Death March. A recent prison massacre by Japanese soldiers elsewhere in the Philippines made the stakes impossibly high and left little time to plan the complex operation. In *Ghost Soldiers* Hampton Sides vividly re-creates this daring raid, offering a minute-by-minute narration that unfolds alongside intimate portraits of the prisoners and their lives in the camp. Sides shows how the POWs banded together to survive, defying the Japanese authorities even as they endured starvation, tropical diseases, and torture. Harrowing, poignant, and inspiring, *Ghost Soldiers* is the mesmerizing story of a remarkable mission. It is also a testament to the human spirit, an account of enormous bravery and self-sacrifice amid the most trying conditions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

After glowing references to "Black hawk down", "Flags of our fathers" and "We were soldiers once, and young", I was eager to receive and read "Ghost soldiers". And, to be candid, I read it straight through the day I received it. Sides weaves American Caesar Douglas MacArthur's departure, the 1942 fall of Bataan, and the prisoners' three-year aftermath into the effort by untested Rangers to rescue the POWs in late January 1945, when only 500 sickly men survived in an old camp north of Manila. In some respects, these POWs were the lucky ones, even as they lost hope in a rescue thirty-three months in the offing. Moving back and forth between prison life and the rescue effort,

Sides builds the story well. The joy of rescue mingles with the possibility of a last-minute massacre. The Japanese treatment of American POWs in WWII holds a special place of horror in the minds of Americans of "the greatest generation", and this book makes the terror real. At the same time, the Japanese are not all portrayed as monsters or torturers. In fact, it's the humanity amidst the stark terror and misery that surfaces in this book, the small acts of kindness, the apparently random administration of mercy, and the kindred spirit of POWs. The Ranger rescue demonstrates American soldiering at its best, at a time when wounds about actions in Vietnam not only remain, they have recently resurfaced. Sides makes it clear war is based on hate and horror but honor as well. More students of history need to read and know this story, somewhat forgotten or overlooked in the magnitude of events that followed: V-E Day, Hiroshima, V-J Day. The book falls a bit in its narrative.

Disappointment and shame for having to surrender at Bataan; humiliation and abuse from the Japanese captors who treated those who surrendered as less than worthy opponents; starvation, exhaustion, and torture on the 70 mile forced trek, known and immortalized as the Bataan death march; punishing, back breaking labor in slave camps. So it was for US servicemen who surrendered at Bataan or who were captured elsewhere in the Philippines in 1942. For one such Army private - Eugene Nielsen, whose story makes up one of the narratives of *GHOST SOLDIERS*, the three years of his life spent in the Philippines was a perpetual nightmare. Beginning with a description of the torture and execution of prisoners at the Puerto Princesa Prison Camp on Palawan, Philippines, the book describes the daily ordeal - it can't be called life - that these men endured. By December 1944 the Japanese on Palawan knew that it was only a matter of time before the Americans returned. The officer in charge, the one the men called the 'buzzard' decided to rid himself of his prisoner problem. From their positions in trenches the Americans watched as Japanese carrying liquid filled buckets approached. "With a quick jerk of the hands, they flung the contents into the openings of the trenches. By the smell of it on their skin, the Americans instantly recognized what it was - high octane aviation fuel from the airstrip. Before they could apprehend the full significance of it, other soldiers tossed in lighted bamboo torches." The details provided by the book are obviously gruesome. That Nielsen and 10 others survived the incineration is miraculous. It was these survivors' accounts as told to Army intelligence that prompted the US to send in Rangers to free the 513 Americans held prisoner at Cabanatuan.

Why? How is it that we are who we are, or do what we wish, or live in a nation where the words

"choice" and "freedom" are taken for granted? My grandfather was not one of the Bataan survivors, nor did he ever have to endure the horrors of captivity at the hands of the Japanese Army. However, as a veteran of the Americal Division, he saw enough bloodshed and death to last him a lifetime. Because of him, I take the opportunity to read as much as I can on the Pacific War so that I may better understand his experiences in battle as a young man not all that older than myself today. "Ghost Soldiers" is one of those books that grabs you from the first sentence and does not let go until the final page has been turned. Masterfully written, exhaustively researched, and superbly paced, Hampton Sides employs the same technique that Mark Bowden used in 1999's "Black Hawk Down" in that the historical account reads more like a novel than a work of military history. The characters and events however, are entirely real. Sadly, many of the true heroes of "Ghost Soldiers" did not survive their ordeal and never returned home. Every American should read this book. Not just those who are interested in military history, or those professionals in this country's armed forces who seek to further develop and immerse themselves in the profession of arms. No, the ones who need to read this book are those who abhor war and who cannot even begin imagine the unthinkable acts of cruelty and suffering heaped upon young men whose only crime was that they were on the losing side in the early going of the Pacific War.

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