# In Memoriam:
# Rick Salzberg Pays Tribute
# To Bill Wells

**Richard Salzberg**
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# Bill Wells

**By Richard Salzberg**

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*You want to talk heroes, let's talk about the guys from Bataan.*
– Mike Royko, Journalist

The three strangers found themselves sitting together at a small party following the christening of a new baby, the daughter of a shared acquaintance.

As is frequent at such extended affairs, the conversation drifted towards the generalities of generational experience, with one old fellow reminiscing in an animated fashion about London during the early days of the war. A reporter then for Life Magazine, he recalled the Blitz and all the stress and fast living that always seems to accompany a war against a civilian population. His account was lively and interesting, and he recollected it with some fondness. Apartments, like good food and decent liquor were certainly more difficult to come by, he said, and it was all quite dangerous, of course, but "all in all, it had not been such a bad time to get through," for a young man such as he was then.

Clearly of the same World War II generation, the other older man was taller and quite thin, quietly polite in his plain dark suit. He listened respectfully enough, offering an occasional, well-timed nod. At a lull in the London reminiscences, the third man, younger than the other two by about half, sought to be inclusive with a not very creative variation of the once basic, now generally forgotten question: "So, what did you do during the war?"

After a moment the thin man cleared his throat, then said simply: "I was in the Philippines." The younger man was familiar enough with that chapter of history to understand some of what that particular response might mean.

Pausing before he asked in an effort to appear discreet, but impelled by a fierce curiosity, he asked respectfully, "Bataan and Corregidor?"

"Yes," the older man answered. "I was in the Navy."

That was Bill Wells.

From that momentary exchange followed years of friendship, filled with illuminating conversations, and extended inquiries, powerful reflections, and compelling descriptions about that time. Each got to know the other's family, and the younger man was able to meet many of the old veterans who had served their time in hell along with Bill Wells. But it was his first statement, the simple honesty of the "Yes, I was there," that remained the essence of the man.

Bill Wells died recently, passing quietly beyond us last December 14. At the end it was his decision not to be kept alive by a machine. His wife Dot confirmed that he was a fighter to the very last. "When he was taken off the respirator we were told that he would be gone in about an hour. Six hours later Bill was still alive, and we were still there with him."

Born into a good Quaker family in Swansea, Massachusetts, Bill was raised in West Springfield. He had always enjoyed history in school, never consciously understanding he was destined to play such a role in the very midst of it. He once recalled how Civil War tales of the horrors of Andersonville had shaken him as a schoolboy and how, years later in a Japanese cage

during his nearly four years as a POW, he had reflected on that memory, unavoidably amused by the irony.

Bill Wells joined the Navy in 1932. Like one of his uncles, he had wanted "to see the world." Many of the young men he would later fight and die and bleed with had enlisted only to cheat the Depression with the three meals a day the service provided, but not Bill. He sought adventure, and he found plenty of it even before the war in the Philippines began.

As part of the Yangtze Patrol on a Navy gunboat in China he learned small arms and weaponry at the hands of none other than the legendary Chesty Puller, who happened to be the officer in charge of the ship's Marine contingent. Thanks to that gritty tutelage and his own characteristic hard work, Bill became the youngest Chief Gunners Mate in the U.S. Navy, renowned as "Gunner" Wells for his uncanny proficiency throughout the 1930s Pacific Fleet. As an "old China hand," Bill bore early witness to the ferocious character and ambition of the Japanese war machine. He knew all about what happened in Nanking in '37 because he was over there. Unlike stateside Americans, he and his fellow professionals had no illusions about the future in Asia or the inevitability of war.

Then Bill got lucky and was shipped to the Philippines.

*The huge mortars hidden in Corregidor's hollows which gave the island its reputation of impregnability were embossed, if one looked closely, with an identity of manufacturer and date which made one feel less sanguine about the fortress-island's chances: Bethlehem Steel, 1898.*

– Stanley Weintraub, "Long Day's Journey Into War: December 7, 1941"

After Dec. 7, 1941, the world was changed forever, especially for the men and women left to their fates in the Philippines, Bill Wells among them. The same Japanese movement that smashed the Americans at Pearl Harbor was unleashed upon them at virtually the same time. By Dec. 8, in Manila alone there were more than 3000 civilian casualties. What had been one of best duty stations in the world overnight had become an indescribable apocalypse.

Under Gen. Douglas MacArthur the overall preparedness and response of the American forces and their Philippine allies was, at best, woefully inadequate.

> *Some supplies never went anywhere. While MacArthur's staff busied itself deciding where it was to go, mountains of food burned on the dock(s) – and then Bataan starved.*
>
> – Col. Bradford Chynoweth

Countless untold examples of individual courage could only forestall the inevitable. Air Corps pilots whose planes had been allowed to be destroyed on the ground at Clark Field were issued rifles and ordered into the jungles of the Bataan peninsula to fight as infantry. Navy kids with their ships bombed to the bottom of Manila Bay were told to dye their whites with old coffee grounds and sent to defend the beaches of Linguyan Gulf. (A report found on the body of a Japanese officer described "particularly desperate American shock troops" in their curious "yellow uniforms.") The last cavalry charge in U.S. history took place against Japanese armor on the Bataan Peninsula, then the proud cavalrymen killed their beloved horses because they were needed for food.

Bill Wells was officially credited with shooting down nine enemy planes, managing this with a World War I-era deck gun that he had the foresight to order unpacked, cleaned, and rehabilitated. He persisted in talking about that sort of thing only when pressed.

*The Navy's antiaircraft guns were three-inch weapons built to interdict low-flying early 1930s biplanes. . .*

– Stanley Weintraub

The Philippine troops persisted in their heroic, hopeless defense for four months. Bataan fell on April 9, 1942, while "the Rock," as the fortified isle of Corregidor was known, endured the heaviest bombardment of the entire war until May 6. During that time of such courageous resistance, the Battle of Midway had taken place. The course of the Pacific war had begun to change, and without exaggeration our own world had been made safer by the tenacity and heroism of the "Battling Bastards of Bataan."

*We're the Battling Bastards of Bataan,*
*No mama, no papa,*
*no Uncle Sam.*
*No aunts, no uncles,*
*no cousins, no nieces.*
*No pills, no planes*
*or artillery pieces.*
*And nobody gives a damn.*

When the fall of the Philippines came Bill Wells was fighting on Fort Hughes, a floating battery near Corregidor. He described the sight of American flag coming down as one of the saddest moments of his life. Years after meeting Bill the younger man overheard a close friend of Bill's, another Navy veteran of the Philippines, mention a severe shoulder wound he had at the time of the surrender. ("We never did surrender. We were *surrendered*.") When the younger man expressed surprise at never having heard about that circumstance during his trials, Bill replied simply, "Well, it never came up." It had just not seemed important enough or necessary to mention.

What followed was to last through the end of August, 1945: The unrelieved horror of what will remain among the most barbaric accounts in all of recorded history, with this intentionally committed against utterly defenseless POWs by a nation supposedly civilized. After more than 3 ½ years, the incessant atrocities and slave labor ended only because of the two atomic bombs that fell on Japan.

*I was there, and even now, I still don't believe it myself.*

– Ike Hylton, Navy Veteran

Beyond the Bataan Death March and the countless examples of torture, murder, and mass executions, there were the death camps of the Philippines like Cabanatuan and O'Donnell, names that should never be forgotten, and the Hell Ships that carried their doomed, savaged human cargo to death at sea or to slave labor sites throughout the Japanese empire.

Spared the Death March by being able to continue the fight in Manila Bay, as well as Cabanatuan, Bill was held in places like Bilibid, Batangas, Lipa, Toroku, Formosa, Kobe, and Maibara. He once said that every man who managed to return home had to have his own system, his own techniques to cheat death and survive. Bill said two things worked to keep him alive:

Love and Hate. He described a love for his country, his family, the flag. When he spoke of his hatred it was for the Japanese – but it was reserved only for his tormentors. He said that if a Japanese family ever moved next door to him they would be welcome, that he would expect and encourage his grandchildren to play with their kids. But he was quick to add, even so many years later, that if he ever came across one of the ones that had brutalized him or other Americans, he would kill him on the spot. It remained a believable statement.

Bill Wells came home with a host of medals, along with the "wounds that do not heal," and a bad case of wanderlust. His mother had died while he was away, although she never doubted he was alive even when he was listed as Missing in Action for years. The postwar adjustment for all the former POWs was a challenge beyond any description. ("I don't think there was a one of us that didn't try to drink himself to death in the years just after the war.")

> *Even after the Japanese surrendered, the American public had no idea of what the American troops went through at the hands of the Japanese.*
>
> – Larry Bonko, Journalist

The battles and the subsequent years of the barbarity of the POW existence, especially in the face of an unknown future, combined to forever sear the souls and consciousness of tens of thousands of young Americans like Bill Wells who had managed to survive and return. Whenever they were asked about their experiences the survivors responded with honest accounts that no one could believe. ("Especially the young docs at the VA.") After a while they stopped talking about it to anyone except each other.

*It is well-known that POWs in the Pacific theater during World War II typically experienced extremely inhumane and brutal treatment. . . Despite the passage of (more than) 40 years since the traumatic experience, most of the individuals studied continued to have symptoms. . . The most common of these symptoms were flashbacks or recurrent memories of the experience and a sleep disturbance manifested by nightmares with themes revolving around the period of imprisonment. Several of the subjects phrased the matter in terms of never having had a good night's sleep since they were liberated.*

– American Journal of Psychiatry 144:9, September 1987

In 1947 Bill married Dot McRae in Jacksonville, Florida. They had two daughters, Bev and Carol, and a son, Bill. After retiring from the Navy as a Commander in 1957, he managed Bryant Hardware in Kempsville for 28 years. Bill was a charter member of the Kempsville Fire Department and Rescue Service. He was active in the national affairs of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, Inc., travelling across the country to attend meetings and serving as its Honorary National Commander from 1992 until his death.

In the late 1980s the younger man had an idea for a documentary and Bill supplied his support. Assisting with the challenge of recruiting "volunteers," he and four other vets and their sagas became the subject of WHRO's groundbreaking *Heroes Still. . . . On the Journey From Bataan*. First telecast in April of 1988, the providential winds that drove the production enabled the program to take on something of a life of its own, as over the years it has continually aired on one PBS affiliate or another, "coast to coast and border to border."

*This is the most I've talked about those years since I was liberated. I didn't care to go over it all again.*

– Eugene "Doc" Rogers, Navy Veteran

Bill Wells and the other vets, Jim Downey, Harold Feiner, Norman Matthews and Eugene Rogers, quiet men who had never even spoken about their time in hell with family members were recognized and commended on the street. Bill was hailed once by a stranger from across the lobby of a San Diego hotel. Although somewhat embarrassed by such attention, the younger man sensed it pleased Bill because it meant the story was circulating.

*In some history books we are not even mentioned. . .*

– Harold Feiner, Army Veteran

Following the lead of veterans groups in Canada and other Allied countries, in recent years there have been formal legal "efforts being made in pursuance of redress against those Japanese industrialists that used American prisoners of war as slave labor at their industrial sites during World War II." (Kawasaki, Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Showa Denko, and Nippon Steel Corp.) Bill closely followed this movement for fair treatment and compensation, but he told the younger man it would never happen in his lifetime, and "at this stage in our lives, twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars won't make too much of a difference for any of us. It's just the principle of the thing."

*The U. S. State Department is hindering efforts by World War II POWs suing Japanese firms that allegedly used them as slave labor, the New Jersey attorney representing the POWs charged Thursday.*

– John J. Lumpkin, Albuquerque Journal, January 2000

So now Bill Wells is gone. In the last few years Bill's eyesight was greatly diminished by ongoing war-related deterioration, and he was forced to give up the cross-country driving which he loved. His hearing too had been on the wane, and he had heart surgeries and a stroke. He was even forced to give up his Camels. But he never stopped.

Always a leader, Bill was imminent among those quiet heroes still in our midst. A group of the old Bataan / Corregidor veterans get together for a wonderfully informal breakfast at Bunny's Restaurant in Suffolk on the first Wednesday of each month. Bill, Ike Hylton and Charlie Dowdy had started that tradition. Gunner Wells will be missed there, as he will be missed in many places.

Bill Wells was no saint, but he was a wise and honest man. Always uncomfortable with the term "hero," he was nevertheless very proud of his service to his country. ("If you want to talk about heroes, let's talk about the wives," was a shared refrain.) We too should be proud. The dramatic sacrifices were his, but his story is a part of our own.

Is there a way to offer thanks for such a contribution? Perhaps read a book about history; do a word-search on "Bataan" or "Corregidor;" or visit the new National POW Museum at Andersonville, Georgia. Ask your parents or grandparents about what they recall from that time – and who they remember as being a local boy who got caught over there.

You will come away with good answers, and those you should remember. Then tell someone else about what you have learned. Those are some good ways to acknowledge Bill Wells.

> *He was a true patriot, and I don't mean that in any jingoistic, bullshitty, America-rules kind of way. He's the reason (we) are enjoying a booming economy without having to worry about being drafted or shot.*
>
> – Chris Grier, Journalist

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