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“Junior” - The Ultimate Warrior

By Jerry D. Blanche, Ph.D.

On the eve of Memorial Day each year there are plenty of tears for us, plus too much TV, including the annual “National Memorial Day Concert” and reruns of the CBS *60 Minutes* feature about the mysteries of missing WWII soldiers. In that piece the cameras focus on soldiers’ death sites found beneath the sea in the Philippine Islands, a space very near the sacred area where the remains of my uncle, my father’s brother, Osborne L. Blanche, Jr., lie today. “Junior,” as he is known to the family, is one of our heroes, an ultimate Chahta warrior, having survived such atrocities as the bloody Battle of the Philippines (1941-42), one of the infamous Japanese “death marches,” being held prisoner under the harshest of uncivilized conditions in the Philippine jungle for almost two years, then, being killed incomprehensibly by Navy submarine servicemen from the very country where he was born. When the *60 Minutes* underwater cameras focused on downed American aircraft and other blurry, aged pieces of military fragments, and when the commentator pointed out that someplace right there, where divers were placing hands on these sacred symbols of courage, duty, and love of nation, there lie, to this day, the remnants of our beloved fathers, brothers, uncles, and nephews; there too, close by, rests Junior, by birth a citizen of the Chahta Nation, who gave everything he had for his one and true res publica.

I want to tell you more about Junior and what happened to him, so that you, too, might always remember him and so many more of our great Chahta warriors as real people. Chahta men and women volunteered willingly to risk their lives for a country that didn’t particularly respect or honor them before that longest of declared wars (WWII) and a government that still has a long way to go toward righting the countless injustices inflicted upon our people. At any given time during World War II, an estimated 25,000 indigenous citizens like Junior and his seven brothers and sisters, served in the war effort. Several hundred of these valued soldiers were women, including Junior’s sisters, Charles Laverne “Chillie” Blanche, an Army nurse, and Opal Blanche, one of the famed “Rosie the Riveters,” women employed in jobs at factories and shipyards previously filled by men. In fact, for every ten soldiers drafted during that war, fifteen more volunteered, just like Osborne Sr. and Minnie Blanche’s children. Amazingly, all the Blanche children returned to their home on Mt. Fork River, except for Junior and his proud brother, Paul, who died in a vehicle accident at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he was an instructor in heavy field artillery.

The prophetic words of my grandfather, Osborne Leonidas Blanche, in a letter to his eldest son, Herman, around 1929, reflect the wisdom that frequently comes to our Chahta elders. In that open letter to Herman sometime after his 18th birthday, Osborne said, “I wish to give you a few hints to remember along the pathway of your life.” Referring to the gifts endowed to man and woman by Achafa Chito, and referring metaphorically to our very feet he said, “Feet must avoid the four paths of selfishness, beat down the briars-

-avarice, tyranny--though your feet may bleed in the effort....” Did Junior remember and reflect upon his father’s words to his brother, Herman, as he painfully plowed his way, barefoot, through the Philippine jungle during the infamous Bataan Death March? No doubt he did, many, many times, fully aware that his next hope for rest and a few sips of water might be the dreaded horror chamber the Japanese called the “Davao Penal Colony.”

Junior first reported for active duty in the U.S. Army Air Corps when he was twenty-nine years old, on May 7, 1942. After basic training, Pvt. Blanche was assigned to Hickam Field, Hawaii Territory, where he joined the 4th Bomber Squadron, 19th Bomb Group “Heavy”, and eventually a temporary command organization called the 5th Interceptor Command (Provisional). [*Today the USAF 19th Fighter Squadron, Ft. Smith, Arkansas, not far from Junior’s home, is heir to 14th Bomber Squadron lineage and honors.*] The 5th Interceptor Command was established by the United States Army Air Forces in 1941 to provide aircraft and base ground support at Clark Field, Philippine Islands. After the 5th Command was overtaken in the bitter Battle of the Philippines in 1942, some survivors, like Junior, were quickly trained to fight as ground infantry troops during the Battle of Bataan. As the final B-17 and P-40 aircraft Junior had been trained to maintain were destroyed or evacuated to Australia, Junior’s heavily out-manned and out-gunned Fifth Interceptor Command was forced to surrender then subjected to the infamous Bataan Death March. The savagery and brutality of that treacherous trek through the Philippine jungle is well documented and worthy of its own chapter in the long history of the struggles for survival among Chahta people, among many others.

After his capture, and survival of “the death walk,” Junior was imprisoned for many months at the Davao Penal Colony, a POW farm labor camp, formed in 1932, about ten miles northwest of the small port city of Davao on the southeast coast of the Island of Mindanao. The verification of Junior’s name and Broken Bow address was found after the war ended on a roster that had been buried within the prison compound by a fellow prisoner. The roster was recovered by U.S. Forces during the liberation of the Philippines and is currently held in the U. S. National Archives. Junior’s name, and others, were officially cross checked against the Colony’s primary data base. Another American soldier’s roster/diary containing Junior’s signature and address and written during the Battle of the Philippines also survived the war and was brought home by its owner, Alabama serviceman Warren R. Stewart, Jr., who was eventually liberated from a POW camp near Tokyo.

On March 2, 1944 during Junior’s detention at the Davao Penal Colony, he among 650 men, were marched to a facility most likely called the “Philippines Unstated Philippines 14 121” camp near the village of Lasang. He and his Allied cohorts and civilians, whom the Japanese considered the healthiest men at Davao, were transferred there to work near Lasang airport, an air base on the Island of Mindanao critically important to the Japanese air forces. By late August, the prisoners in this detail had been set to work in the boiling sun at two airstrips, where they watched Japanese bombers and fighters take off on their daily missions. Among this detail were many American officers, and they all suffered endless hardships. They were cruelly beaten by their captors, forced to work

unreasonably long hours under the most grueling demands, and were given extremely limited food and water rations that were barely fit for human consumption. Punishment for even minor missteps included beheading, torture, starvation, and other atrocities. After these airstrips became fully operational, they were eventually discovered by the American 5th Air Force, which began strafing and bombing them. However, prisoners were given no protection against the bullets and bombs dropped on the airstrips by American planes. In retaliation for the air raids, the prisoners were, once again, put on food rations that were far below the minimum for men to remain strong enough to do the kind of work that was demanded of them. Needless to say, these rations, feeble in quantity and quality, contributed to the deaths of many men.

On August 20, 1944 the main group of surviving POWs, including Junior, were eventually hobbled with ropes and marched barefoot off to the Tabunco pier at the Davao Gulf port of Luzon. There, wrote Gregory F. Michno, "About 750 Americans were crowded into the holds of a Japanese freighter. No one seemed to know the vessel's name, but some had seen the number '86' on its side. Pvt. Victor Mapes of the 14th Bomb Group thought it was about 120 degrees below decks."¹ The '86' became the next, and one of the worst, tightly packed temporary prison pigstys for Junior, as they slowly sailed along the Mindanao coastline for an unbearably long two weeks. There were no latrines; water was so scarce that some men were forced to drink their own urine. Ironically, prisoners watched as Japanese guards held practice exercises in how to kill any prisoners who might attempt an escape should there be a submarine attack.

Junior's next place of misery and death after the '86' would become his last. After meandering along the Mindanao coast, they finally dropped anchor at Zamboanga, August 24. There, after not being allowed off this disgusting ship for any reason and enduring another gruelling ten-day wait, on September 4th the prisoners switched places with Japanese soldiers from another freighter in an attempt to confuse any possible American spies who might report their whereabouts. They were forced into the dismal, jam-packed holds of the aged, 2,634-ton Japanese cargo ship, the Shinyo Maru, soon named by Junior and his Allied cohorts among the enemy's "Death Ships" or "Hell Ships". The Shinyo Maru had unloaded a cargo of rice, cement, and "miscellaneous goods," including their own soldiers, at Zamboanga. A collection of merchant vessels like the Shinyo Maru were being recycled to transport prison camp survivors on the Philippine Islands to places where they could not be liberated and debriefed about their murderous imprisonment, to places elsewhere in the Japanese empire. By August 1944 it was widely known that General Douglas MacArthur had plans for the successful freeing of the Islands, and he was advancing steadily toward his goal. The enemy was on the run, and they were clamoring to evacuate their penal camps quickly and remove the evidence of their war crimes.

A coded message to the Shinyo Maru on September 6 ordered the ship and its accompanying convoy to depart for Cebu the next day, September 7, bound for Manila. Japanese navy war planners concealed carefully the true identity of the "evacuees" packed below the deck of the Shinyo Maru. Junior was among those 750 suffering prisoners who could never have imagined the horrible naval carnage that was only

fourteen hours away.

Unfortunately, a shocking mistake was made about that same time by the Americans. The final message sent to the Shinyo Maru by its commanders, describing the true nature of its human cargo, was intercepted by nearby units of the U.S. Navy, but because of a monumental and deadly military intelligence failure, its precious cargo was not identified in time as Allied POW's.

Thursday, September 7, 1944 the Shinyo Maru, at around 2:00 am, pulled away from the dock at Samboanga. Junior and the other prisoners had no idea where they were until the men who went topside to empty their latrine cans returned to tell them. The men were all very dirty, many suffering from various jungle diseases, malnutrition, dehydration, and frequent blackouts. One captor, an American officer, later said, "The Japanese allowed the men up deck twice to run through a hose sprinkling salt water. It was hardly a bath but helped considerably." In preparation for the long and deadly transport to Japan, the Shinyo Maru hatch covers above the men below were, ominously, moved and secured tightly with ropes to prevent escape.

At 4:37 p.m. on September 7, 1944 Lt. Comdr. E. H. Nowell, skipper of the U.S. submarine Paddle, SS 263, sighted the Shinyo Maru's convoy about ten miles north of Sindangan Point, Mindanao. Excerpts from the Paddle's log indicate that the Japanese convoy was made up of a variety of eight ships also being escorted by two aircraft overhead. Unfortunately, none of the ships showed any special markings that might have helped communicate that Allied prisoners were aboard any of the doomed Japanese vessels. Submarine Commander Nowell's own words, sharp, soldierly, and sterile in his partial description of what happened next show no hint of realization of what his deadly torpedoes unleashed upon one of his targets:

"1651 [time] Fired four bow tubes at AO [tanker]. Depth setting 6 feet, torpedo run 1875 yards, 348° average gyro angle, 106° P average track angle, 3 degree spread between torpedoes. Continuous bearings during firing. Immediately shifted set-up to leading AK [Shinyo Maru] and fired two tubes set at 4 feet, 21° right gyro, 73° port track, torpedo run 1350 yards, 2 degree spread. All torpedoes heard to run toward targets. Three seconds after firing last torpedo at AK [Shinyo Maru], the first hit was observed in AO. A second hit in AO was heard 14 seconds later while periscope was on escort on port bow. Two timed hits in AK [Shinyo Maru] were heard (59 seconds after firing) while periscope was on escort on starboard beam, distance less than 1200 yards. Two torpedo wakes were seen headed for AK [Shinyo Maru] as periscope was swung around to DE. Escort on starboard beam seen to have directly turned toward, so the order was given to go deep. Periscope went under (had been running at 65 feet because of flat calm sea) before extent of damage to AK [Shinyo Maru] and AO could be seen. Loud, characteristic, breaking up noises were heard almost immediately however, and continued for some time after depth charging began. It is believed that of those two ships at least the AK [Shinyo Maru] sank and possibly both did."

Aboard the Shinyo Maru, some of the prisoners were killed instantly by the explosions from the torpedoes and the rush of water into the hold of the ship. Japanese soldiers above immediately opened the hatches, too, and under orders from their leaders, dropped

grenades below in an attempt to kill any POWs who might escape somehow. Others fired their machine guns wildly into the hold, spraying bullets all around the inside of the death trap, while the prisoners were battling fiercely for their lives and trying to find some miraculous way to get out of what was quickly becoming a sinking tomb. One survivor, 1st Lt. John Morrett, later described the initial attack. “Suddenly there was a terrific explosion immediately followed by a second one, and heavy obstacles came crashing down from above. Dust filled the air, and bleeding men lay all over each other in mangled positions, arms, legs, and bodies broken.”

Some POWs were able miraculously to dive through the holes blasted in the side of the ship, and several others withstood the onslaught and scrambled for their lives through the hatches whenever an opportunity allowed, then heroically made their way to the ship’s side and jumped overboard. Those who made it into the water were still being fired upon by machine guns, slashed by bayonets and swords, and held under water by Japanese guards in lifeboats who used every means possible to prevent their possible escape. The exact cause of Junior’s death from the submarine attack, we will never know, of course. But, it could have been any one of the following: (1) Beams and hatch covers fell into the hold where he was trapped; (2) Guards were shooting and dropping grenades on POWs as they came out of the holds; (3) Japanese lifeboats were directing fire at POWs swimming in the water; (4) The Shinyo Maru sank, taking about five hundred dead, wounded, or trapped POWs with it; or, (5) At dusk, a large Japanese oil tanker, which had run aground after torpedo hits, opened fire on the POWs with deck-mounted machine guns. At least 1520 POWs, 4120 Asian laborers, and others died during that tragic submarine attack.

Nonetheless, with the odds clearly against their survival, eighty-three survivors of the Shinyo Maru catastrophe somehow made it three to four miles to the nearest beach, a testimony to their courage, swimming skills, and gut-wrenching determination to live. Most all of them were wearing a simple loin cloth or nothing at all when they finally dragged themselves on shore. About two days later one of the POWs died on the beach and was buried later on the hill in back of the town of Sindangan. To their great credit and sense of brotherhood, the eighty-two remaining survivors were assisted by friendly Filipinos and members of a heroic group called Volunteer Guards.

This group of friendly allies helped eighty-one survivors to their eventual rescue on October 29, 1944 by another American submarine, the USS Narwhal under the command of Captain Jack C. Titus. One brave wounded U.S. soldier, 1st Sgt. Joseph P. Coe, Jr. remained on Mindanao to continue fighting, for which he later received a [Bronze Star](#). When the Narwhal reached its prearranged point off the island to attempt its dangerous rescue, Commander Titus gave orders for the submarine to surface then communicated his presence and asked those on shore how many prisoners were waiting to be brought aboard. The shore party signaled that there were eighty-one soldiers and waited nervously to find out just how much room there was remaining on the Narwhal and how many of these brave soldiers would be allowed to join their comrades in safety once again. Aware of his fully-manned submarines limited space, but with only the slightest hesitation Commander Titus, after a quick survey of his crew, replied to the shore party, “Bring

them all!" He later calmly noted in his ship's log, "Four of them were stretcher cases. Gave shore party flour, coffee and lubricating oil. Took on board official mail. Backing Clear. Made trim dive."

War is predictable, only in its chaotic and unexpected surprises, to say the least. Communication technology in the 1940's was limited, and sometimes even the most dramatic and heartbreaking messages were late in getting to their intended receivers, if at all. A perfect example, it wasn't until after the war that the American Paddle crew learned the true story of the Shinyo Maru's cargo and the horrible breakdown in sea skirmish communication that led to the death of so many brave men. Of course, it was a mind-wrenching bit of news. Commander Nowell told one of his officers after the war that he didn't learn about the POWs until two years later, 1946, when he went to his headquarters to check on his latest orders.

FINAL NOTE: After the war it became a tradition for the eighty-two survivors of the Shinyo Maru tragedy to hold a reunion to strengthen their amazing bond and honor their buddies who did not survive. On September 8, 2000 at the Jacksonville, Florida Naval Air Station chapel, the eighth and final reunion was held. Fourteen of the remaining silver-haired survivors in their 70's and 80's were standing in two rows, trying to hold back their tears. The chaplain rang a bell for Junior and the dozens of other Shinyo Maru dead. Then, the guest speaker, Hayes Bolitho, who suffered gunshot wounds to the foot and hand, broken ribs and bayonet slashes from Japanese guards in his escape from the torpedoed ship, said solemnly, "We are a group of good men who served our country. We are the ones who survived. Those who died are in our hearts."

The circumstances of Junior's death do not fit the usual definition of "friendly fire," as the Japanese cargo ship on which he was being transported from his jungle stalag was a deliberate target, albeit an ill-chosen one, of the U.S. Navy and Army Air Corps. It was September 7, 1944.

Minnie and Osborne Blanche, Sr. had not received any communications from or about Junior since 1942. The eventual news was not something any parent of a soldier in war wants to hear. A letter from the U.S. Adjutant General, Major General J.A. Ulic, arrived on October 26, 1944, addressed to Mrs. Minnie Blanche. Major General Ulic wrote, "The war department was recently notified of the destruction at sea of a Japanese freighter that was transporting American Prisoners of War from the Philippine Islands....There were a...large number who did not survive....It is with deep regret that I must inform you that your son, Private Osborne L. Blanche, Jr. was in this latter group....Please be assured that as soon as additional information becomes available you will be immediately notified."

Junior's final U.S. Army Air Corps personnel file, delivered many months later, confirmed Junior's death. His mother and father, Osborne Sr. and Minnie Blanche, and his brothers and sisters, were gathered once more at their beloved home on the river near Eagletown. His file closed with the simple words, "Status: Executed, Died in Ship's Sinking or Shot While Attempting Escape. Area: Southwest Pacific Theatre Philippine Islands."

Our prayer:
CREATOR,

Osborne L. Blanche, Jr., born and raised at peaceful, life-giving Mountain Fork, a Chahta Nation river, near Eagle Town; died on an unfriendly ocean. His grave: off Sindangan Point, the Sulu Sea, the Philippines: (08-12N, 22-37E). Limestone walls within the Manila American Cemetery, Philippines, list 36,285 names, including Junior's, on the Tablets of the Missing as does The World War II Hellships Memorial, Subic Bay, Phillipines; Tuskahoma, place of the 1883 Chahta Capitol, exhibits a memorial stone for fallen Chahta WWII soldiers, and others as well, which is especially fitting, since "tvshka humma" means "red warrior". Junior and his fellow Chahta warriors, where they have passed over, whichever battles they have fought, will remain in the hearts and memories of their family, the Chahta Nation, until they meet again.

¹ Gregory F. Michno, *Death on the Hellships*. Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2001, p. 226.



Chi pisa lachike, Junior.