Chapter 13

This May Be It

My name is Richard Williams. I have light brown hair and blue eyes. I was 22 in 1942.

The heat, bugs, and general muck of the air was all I felt in this humid climate of the Philippines. Even though it was March, I felt as if these islands never experience a true winter like that of my hometown. Back in Vail, Colorado, I would be enjoying some late snow up in the mountains right about this time of the year, but spring would be coming soon. All my family is back there, wishing me well for the ending of the tyrants of Japan.

Ever since I was little, I had big dreams of joining the army and fighting for my country to stop those trying to hurt it. Being the only child, my mother always tried to steer me towards some other career she thought would suit me. Though my father said he agreed with her, he secretly helped me practice with one of his old hunting rifles and taught me basic maintenance and other useful skills.

While I was in high school, tensions started to rise over in Europe, but also they did over by Japan. After graduation, my mother still did not want me to join the army, but she allowed me to join the Marines. I guess she thought that if I’m deployed in the Pacific, there was not as much of a chance of me fighting in a war. I think she is scared to death for me right now. I was 18 years old then.

Now, I’m 22 years old and have achieved the rank of Corporal. I’m also fighting for my life over in these Godforsaken islands. Every since January, the Japanese army just seemed to pour into the islands and demolish all our defenses. I consider myself lucky because my base was further inland than many other divisions. The threat was becoming so severe that on February 22, President Roosevelt had ordered General MacArthur out of the Philippines.

That stubborn old man stayed at head quarters until March 11, believing he would devise a plan to push back the Japs and keep the Philippines. When they became too close, General MacArthur left his base at Corregidor and was flown to Australia. Before he left, he promised the people of the Philippines, “I shall return.” General Jonathan Wainwright became the new commander of our forces.

For days, we fought with a renewed vigor to make it so MacArthur could come back sooner than he had anticipated. The new General, however, did not take any decisive actions against our enemy but more calculated ones.

The trenches were blessedly cool compared to the air above trying to smother us with heat and moisture. The offered the best places, too, to avoid the constant shelling the Japanese sent into our positions. Almost every day we had to shift back and abandon our previous positions and move further inland. I don’t know how long we can keep fighting at this rate if we are losing so much ground.

Between attacks, my commanding officer told some of the men about news from the other parts of the Pacific and important news from home. On March 18, General MacArthur was appointed commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater by President Roosevelt. On March 24, Admiral Chester Nimitz was appointed as Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Theater. Perhaps with these new changes in command, reinforcements would arrive, and we could push back at the approaching enemies.

My prediction was somewhat correct. Reinforcements came with a new vigor to fight for their country, but they were from the wrong army. On April 3, a fresh wave of Japanese attacked us at Bataan. I could see many coming through these jungles and scorched areas were their artillery had hit. Just hours before, the Japs put up their most intensive shelling of this battle. Many of my comrades laid about this horrible scene of death and destruction that the war had come to. Many were from both the Marines and the Philippine army. If the numbers are correct, we had 79,500 men for the Allied side and only 75,000 men of the Japanese to fight this increasing battle. Morale seemed broken, and I and other men still alive put up minimal resistance to the advance.

Three days later, on the 6th, the first regular army U.S. troops started to arrive in Australia. It was too late for their help now, though. On April 9, we laid down our weapons and unconditionally surrendered to the Japanese forces.

The Japs constructed quickly built shelters and fenced in areas further back from the lines. Those buggers thought there was no doubt either we would surrender or all die so they built the cages we would be in. However, they did not think of the amount of people that had surrendered, so space was crowded at best. To combat this problem, they decided to move all of us to a new POW camp, but they made us walk.

On April 10, the Japs started what was to become the Bataan Death March. Conditions were horrible as I trudged along with the other 12,000 Americans that had surrendered plus another 64,000 people. The roads were muck from the rain and humidity of this climate. For 60 miles we marched onward, our captors jeering at us and forcing us faster if we did not look tired enough! They gave us no food or water. All around me, fellow soldier dropped from heat exhaustion or from the lack of food and water. I did not speak to anyone walking close to me, wanting to preserve whatever strength I had left to eventually make it home to my family. As each body fell, I mourned for them and their families that would never see their son, brother, husband, or father again. If I had enough energy, I would have been enraged by our captors’ poor treatment of us, and for the blatant disregard of the rules of warfare and humanity. Instead, all I felt was exhaustion and dying hope. That was the stench that surrounded each and everyone still walking forward: dying hope and despair. Our brothers were falling and there was absolutely nothing we could do to stop it.

When we finally reached the new camp, I want to cry for sheer joy of making it without succumbing to the heat and exhaustion. They gave us little food, but it was enough to revive me enough. For days, we counted up the men and determined who had perished on this long and hard journey. In the end, an estimated 5,000 American soldiers had died along the way. A service was held in the camp for each of our comrades.

The march was not the only place to fight for survival now it seemed. Even in the camp, I had to fight for my food and fight the despair that claws up your throat, threatening to choke you. Every day, it was getting harder and harder to live onward with weight of death and destruction happening outside my fenced-in world.

Just to rub in more salt to our wounds, the Japanese had translators tell many of us about some of the aspects of the rest of the war. One was on May 6, the Empire of Japan had taken Corregidor and General Wainwright had unconditionally surrendered all U.S. and Filipino forces in all of the Philippines. Corregidor was the last island we truly held at Manila Bay in the Southwest Philippines. We had lost our foothold here. I was 22 years old. Was there any hope in sight for our army?