

By Steve Ellis

# Los Banos'

# Freedom Day

**A**wards and decorations could wait. Silver stars and unit citations would come later.

For the time being, Sgt. Martin Squires and his men felt a sense of satisfaction no medal could replace. Little did Squires realize that his participation in the Los Banos Raid of February, 1945, would affect his life for years to come.

A 24-year-old outdoorsman from the tiny logging town of Forks on Washington's rain-soaked Olympic Peninsula, Squires did not pay much attention to the thin, scrawny youngsters. They were some of nearly 2,150 civilian internees he had helped rescue a few hours before in a daring operation miles behind Japanese lines south of Manila.

Still, Squires believes he saw her, 17-year-old Margaret Whitaker, as she mingled with friendly GIs and her friends while they were settling themselves in their temporary home of New Bilibad Prison near Manila.

Margaret and her family had been interned for more than three years by the Japanese. Freedom Day, Feb. 23, 1945, had arrived at last for her and her sister, Betty, 14; her mother, Evalyn, 51, and her father, Jock, 54. Born in Spokane, Wash., Margaret grew up in the Philippines. Her father, a naturalized American of British birth, directed the field division of the Philippines Sugar Administration.

For most of their three years' internment following the Japanese occupation, the Whitakers were held in Manila's University of Santo Tomas. Within its 300-year-old walls, they and thousands of other Allied citizens waited out the war.

In the first week of December, 1944, camp administrators ordered the Whitakers and about 150 other prisoners to Los Banos by train. It was the site of another camp to which the occupation army had shifted other internees.

At Los Banos, the Whitakers found a more spacious camp, but as the weeks passed and their food ration dwindled, Margaret and Betty became increasingly concerned about their parents, who were growing weaker by the day. For the first time in their lives, they, too, endured the pains of hunger and heard the persistent growls in their stomachs.

"Our rice supply will run out on Monday (Feb. 19)," Margaret recorded in her diary. "Then we'll really begin to starve. We're starvin' now, but it's kind of a chronic ailment."

Last August Martin Squires and his wife, Margaret, celebrated their 31st wedding anniversary.



Two months after their liberation from a Japanese internment camp in the Philippines, Betty Whitaker, her mother, Evalyn; sister, Margaret, and father, Jock, were photographed in Manila before returning to the U.S. One of the paratroopers who liberated them from the Los Banos camp, Martin Squires, later married Margaret.

She carefully concealed her dairy during the periodic inspections by the guards. "I weigh 83 pounds which could be worse. Another man died this a.m. Two yesterday."

In her last entry dated Feb. 19, Margaret wrote that "the grave diggers are working overtime. The Army must come soon."

Come it did. On Feb. 23, in a well-coordinated operation of four distinct phases, units of the 11th Airborne Division slipped behind enemy lines and rescued the internees. Army casualties were four wounded and two killed.

On the evening of Feb. 21, Squires and his friends in the 11th's Provisional Division Reconnaissance Platoon (they called themselves Snoopers) learned this mission to Los Banos would be like no other. Instead of going by foot, Jeep or plane, they would make much of their journey by Filipino banca, a 20- to 30-foot canoe with a small sail and bamboo outrigger.

**S**everal weeks in the planning, the raid got underway shortly after one of the civilian internees, Peter Miles, escaped and made his way to the American lines just north of the San Juan River.

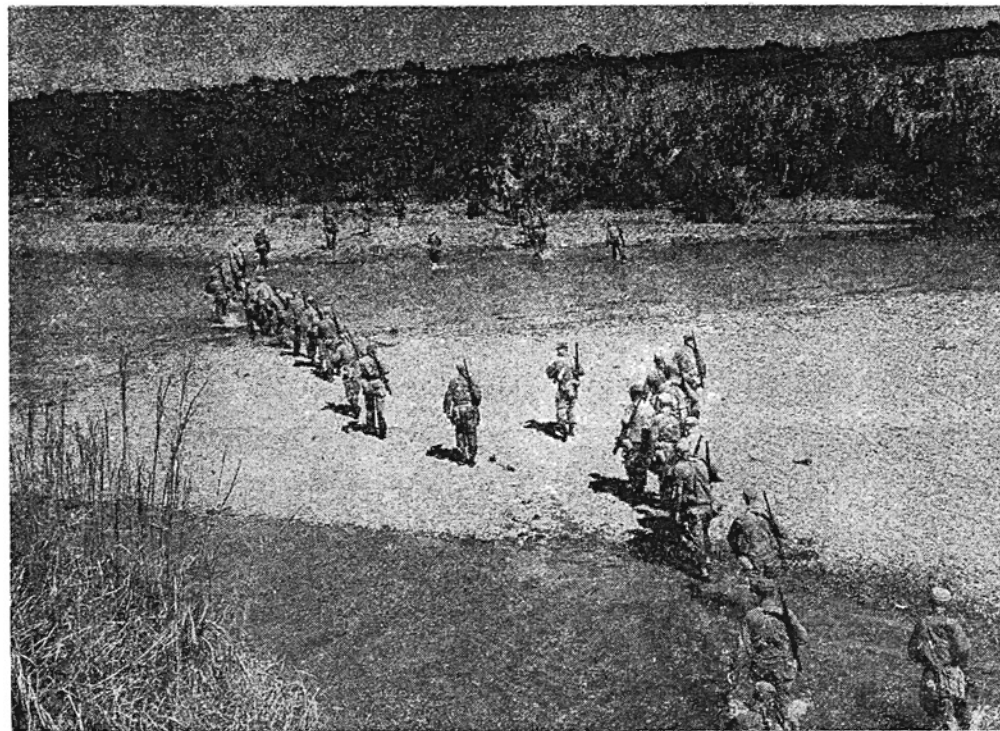
In the dark stillness, Squires heard the ominous mutter of an enemy patrol boat in the distance as he and his men crouched out of sight in one of three bancas crossing Laguna de Bay to behind the Japanese lines. Eventually, well past dawn his banca reached shore after 10 hours afloat.

The third banca, which left late, was becalmed and did not arrive until almost dark on the 22nd. The other Americans, already deep in enemy territory, spent the day hiding in a small, wooden schoolhouse out of sight of enemy patrols. By now, friendly guerrillas were aware of their presence.

Shortly after dark, the Snoopers resumed their voyage. They disembarked in San Antonio just east of Los Banos and Mayondon Point where an Amtrac battalion would land the next morning.

Leaving San Antonio shortly before midnight on the 22nd, the Americans and guerrillas split into six groups and set off for Los Banos through rice paddies and bamboo thickets, creeping silently along the trail. On several occasions, the Snoopers chose alternate routes to avoid patrols.

Squires learned that surprise was paramount. Under no circumstances



This Ranger column makes its way in the Japanese rear in the Philippines much like the 11th Airborne.

was the enemy to be aware of their presence before a coordinating paratroop drop at 7 a.m. Feb. 23. The recon patrol was under strict orders not to return enemy fire. If a Snooper was wounded, he must be evacuated to the camp as part of the raid.

As always, Margaret and the other women in her barracks rose for the 7 a.m. roll call.

"We lined up in front of the barracks but nobody came out to count us," she recalled. "While we were waiting, some planes came over and started dropping paratroopers nearby." It was an exhilarating surprise, as beautiful as a tropical sunrise.

After the 500-foot jump, the 120 men of Company B, 511th Parachute Regiment, organized quickly just west of the camp.

Billowing parachutes signaled the attack. The Snoopers quickly disposed of the sentries but sporadic firing continued from beyond the camp. Completely surprised guards who survived slipped away into the nearby hills.

"As soon as the parachutes opened, we dashed back into the barracks because we knew we were going to be

leaving," Margaret said. "We had to get our belongings ready."

**B**ullets whizzed by; the women flattened out on the floor. A girl who stood up was wounded in the stomach. She was one of the first evacuees.

Margaret's mother, spotting a GI with several guerrillas trying to come through a nearby fence, found her pliers and clipped open a hole.

Delayed during the night, Squires' group had reached its sector of the camp, the northwest corner, only to find that a sentry already had been killed. They directed the men living in the barracks to take their valuables and head toward Laguna de Bay.

An orderly evacuation was an absolute necessity since only the recently dropped paratroopers of Company B and some Snoopers separated the camp from a nearby enemy garrison of 5,000.

Simultaneously, the 11th Airborne launched an assault across the San Juan River south toward Los Banos. In this phase, the 188th Paraglider Infantry Regiment, less its 2nd Battalion; the 675th and 472nd Field Artillery Battalions, and Company B of the

637th Tank Destroyer Battalion suffered the 11th's only casualties on the operation.

Meanwhile, the 672nd Amphibious Tractor Battalion rumbled more than seven miles across Laguna de Bay toward the landing beach at Mayondon Point where the Snoopers marked the landing site with smoke grenades. The 672nd carried the 511th's 1st Battalion. The Amtracs arrived on schedule despite some tricky night navigating. They encountered small arms fire on the beach before rolling on to camp a mile or so from the lake.

As the lead Amtrac approached, Squires showed the driver where to knock down the eight-foot fence surrounding the camp. Many of the internees soon were pouring down the camp road to the waiting Amtracs.

After several hours of loading internees on the Amtracs and with the enemy regrouping, Squires climbed aboard the last Amtrac leaving camp. Some came under sniper fire. As it increased, Betty Whitaker crouched beneath a GI manning a machine gun. When she emerged, she discovered that what she thought was a tank was now churning its way across Laguna de Bay and toward the American lines.

The operation was declared complete by 5 p.m. The overland push was cancelled when it became apparent at Los Banos that everyone had been evacuated by Amtrac.

United Press correspondent Francis McCarthy, who arrived with the Amtracs, described the operation as "the most dramatic coup of the Pacific War" in his dispatches.

"Nothing could be more satisfying to a soldier's ear than this rescue," Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur said from his headquarters. "I am deeply grateful. God was certainly with us today."

In Bellingham, 90 miles north of Seattle, one afternoon in early 1945, Margaret returned to her dormitory at Western Washington State College to find a note. Some guy who said he'd been on the Los Banos raid had seen her picture in the local paper.

One thing led to another. Martin Squires and Margaret Whitaker began seeing quite a bit of each other. They still do. Last August, they celebrated their 31st wedding anniversary.

Their three children are grown up now, so the Squires spend a good deal of their free time collecting rocks, taking trips in their camper, swimming and playing badminton.

He is an aerospace engineer. She is a fifth-grade teacher. Just a couple of ordinary people who found themselves in one of World War II's most daring and successful operations. ■