



DESCENDANTS GROUP
Jan Thompson - President

The Honorable Norman Mineta
Vice Chairman
Hill & Knowlton
607th 14th Street, NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20005

February 26, 2011

Dear Secretary Mineta,

Our organization, the Descendants Group--American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, are the children and friends of those that were captives of Imperial Japanese forces during World War II. Our mission is education.

We understand your efforts to build high speed rail systems in the United States but we ask that you take this opportunity to encourage Japanese companies bidding on these contracts to do what simple human decency demands: acknowledge their use of American prisoners of war as slave labor during WWII and apologize to the surviving former POWs.

In WWII, some 27,000 American military and civilian personnel were held as POWs in by the Japanese. Four of every ten died in captivity. Many of those deaths, particularly in the early months of the war, were caused by the brutal treatment and willful neglect of the Japanese military. Nearly 22,000 Americans were captured in the Philippines. The infamous Bataan Death March, brutal work details, and the horrendous prison camps, O'Donnell and Cabanatuan, claimed the lives of more than 4,500 Americans by the end of 1942. The culpability of Japanese corporations in the mistreatment and deaths of POWs, however, began with a decision by the Japanese government in mid 1942, and fully supported by Japanese Industry, to use POWs as forced labor. This necessitated the transport by sea of POWs to factories in Japan and occupied territories.

Most former POWs recall these "Hellship" voyages as the most terrible events of their long captivity. Packed body to body in the sweltering dark holds of cargo ships, the men suffered from criminally inadequate amounts of food and water. They were forced to eat, drink, and sleep, awash in the indescribable wastes that overflowed the tiny receptacles provided by the Japanese. Lack of water, starvation, dysentery, and other diseases killed many hundreds of Americans aboard the Hellships and left others so debilitated that they succumbed to the harsh conditions they encountered upon arrival. Even more costly was the decision to transport the POWs in unmarked cargo ships which caused several to be sunk by American submarines and aircraft. Of the 14,750 American POWs shipped from the Philippines to Japan and Manchuria as slave laborers, more than 3,540 perished during transport. While the Japanese military was primarily

responsible for the horrendous conditions aboard the Hellships, the reason those men were aboard those ships was that they were to be the slave labor force that ran the factories, mines, and dockyards of Japanese Industry.

The 11,500 American POWs from the Philippines who survived the Hellship voyages to reach Japan and Manchuria had been promised better food, treatment, and conditions. What they found were flimsy, un-insulated barracks, the thinnest of blankets, little or no heat, meager rations, and the harshest of work conditions. Conditions barely survivable by healthy men were fatal to those critically weakened by the deprivations of the Hellships. Six hundred men, literally half of all those Philippine POWs who died in Japan and Manchuria, perished in the first ten weeks after arrival.

Those who survived carried out back breaking labor, excavating, by hand, tons of coal and copper ore from company-owned mines that had been condemned as unsafe before the war. They toiled at smelters and blast furnaces with meager protective clothing and equipment. They worked in chemical plants, steel mills, and loaded and unloaded ships. They were forced to produce, transport, and load war materials that could be used against their fellow American soldiers. In all these jobs, prisoners were subjected to harsh discipline, abuse, and beatings by company employees that broke men's limbs, backs, and skulls. The work and the maltreatment killed hundreds of men and left visible and invisible scars that tormented the POWs for the remainder of their lives. Most of the meager pay the men received was withheld in "savings" accounts inaccessible to the men and uncollectible after the war, while others toiled without any pay at all.

In 2010, the Japanese government at long last delivered a formal apology to American POWs for the abuse and maltreatment inflicted upon them during the war. It is past time for Japanese corporations to do the same. We ask that you use your influence to encourage those companies that used Americans as slave labor to acknowledge that fact. We ask those companies to apologize for their abuse of POW laborers and their complicity in the nightmare of the Hellships. The San Francisco treaty insulates Japanese corporations from paying compensation to the POWs, but the use of the treaty as an excuse for denying their history and their responsibility is moral cowardice. The history is unarguable. Acknowledging it is, quite simply, the right thing to do.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information or assistance.

Sincerely,

Jan Thompson
President

Caroline Burkhart
Vice-President

Nancy Kragh
Secretary

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