

The Veterans of 1898

September 16, 1944

IT'S still dark, 5 o'clock in the morning (actually 4 o'clock)* in the Santo Tomas Internment Camp.

The old men, the old Americans, veterans of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection, are up already. They do not sleep very well, would not even if they were not always hungry, like everyone else in the Camp. Passing between buildings before 6 o'clock is forbidden by the Japanese. The old men are waiting now for the bell in the tower to strike, so they can go to the eating-sheds; sit down and wait there at the crude plank tables and benches for their breakfast of watery rice-mush with only coconut-milk and no sugar, and a cup of weak tea-water. They are not strong enough to stand long in line, and want to be the first in the queues of internees which will start forming at 6:30 when the serving begins.

As they wait, they hear the enemy at Nichols Field (it now has a Japanese name) tuning up their motors. The engines race and roar in the quiet morning air, though the field is four or five kilometers away. They hear the planes taking off over the silent, dead city of Manila.

The old men mumble to each other in the dark. The day before yesterday the Japanese sounded the first air-raid alarm at 8 o'clock,—the first since they occupied America's Far Eastern capital two years and nine months ago, but the all-clear signal came at 9. However, again the alarm at 10 o'clock. Hearts rose in hope. And the all-clear has still not been sounded.

Nothing has as yet happened over Manila, but the Japanese are obviously excited and their planes are flying very high. It was rumored yesterday that Clark Field at Fort Stotsenberg (also re-named, of course) had been bombed; also the field at Lipa, Batangas. There were earlier rumors that Cebu and Iloilo had been bombed, and points in Samar and Leyte. And for over a week there has been talk that American forces had landed in Mindanao.** For several nights the internees in Santo Tomas have heard the heavy rumble of mechanized enemy troops moving out of Manila, apparently headed northward. And the Filipinos seem to be doing their part; there were two big fires in Manila yesterday.

Will it come today,—the long-awaited, the long-delayed attack on the enemy in Manila? It is a cloudy morning, unfortunately. Day before yesterday it was beautifully clear, but nothing happened.

It did not take us three years to strike at the Spaniards in Manila forty-six years ago, the old veterans say.

They are old and thin and shaky on their legs, because of the semi-starvation in the Camp as

much as because of their age,—these soldiers of Generals Merritt and Lawton and Chaffee and MacArthur. Some of them are Negroes of famous old cavalry regiments. These veterans have lived in the Islands for nearly fifty years. They never went back; this is now their home. They stayed and married women of the country. They have children and grandchildren outside the Camp. They are looked at a little askance by the younger American businessmen and the British internees, who profited from what these old soldiers established in the land. They are uncouth and simple men, the most of them; ragged and a little dirty since the Japanese closed the "Pack-age-Line" many months ago and they have had to do their own washing and mending. They are not so strong as when they carried their Krags, and their eye-sight is none too good. They are very worried about their families with whom, cruelly, they are not allowed to communicate. There is hunger in the Camp, but perhaps there is worse hunger outside because of the merciless Japanese levies on all the produce of the country. There is also dysentery, typhoid, and typhus in the city where no sanitary service exists any more. The homes of the old men have been broken up, their families scattered. The half-Filipino sons of many of them were with MacArthur *filis* in Bataan and gave their young lives there or died miserably of malaria and dysentery and hunger in the infamous war-prisoner camps. Others of their sons are with the Filipino guerrillas who are continuing their resistance in the mountains and jungles everywhere. The old men do not know who among their loved ones are alive and who are dead.

It did not take us three years to blast the enemy in the Philippines, they say.

Will they come today, at last,—our American bombers? Our winged fighters? Will we see the American emblem in the air instead of the "fried egg", the blood-spot, the pox-mark?

Oh, will it be today? Will we see the Flag again before we die? Many of us have died in the Camp this past year with none of our kin at the bed-side, without a last word. Will we grasp the hands of our sons? will we hold our grandchildren in our arms once more?

Will we ever have bacon and eggs and bread and butter and coffee for breakfast again?

Will it come today? The thunder and lightning which will scatter the savage, presumptuous foe? Wipe out their all too easy victory, and our shame!***

A.V.H.H.

*Daylight-saving time. Incidentally, also Tokyo time.

**These hopeful rumors were without foundation.

***The first American bombings of Manila came on September 21, five days after this was written.