

The National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

Liz Irvine and Yvonne Charles

Santo Tomas Prison Camp

November 11, 2016

My name is Larry Rabalais and today is November 11, 2016. I am in Fredericksburg, Texas at the National Museum of the Pacific War. I have with me two survivors of the prisoner of war camp, Santo Tomas which was in the Philippines. The first is Liz Irvine and the second is Yvonne Charles. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

I would like to start by having a general conversation about it; I would like to discuss the Japanese treatment of the internees. I know that there is a reputation out there that the Japanese were extremely cruel and brutal. I think it was more complicated than that and that is what I would like to talk about.

I would like to start with you Yvonne, if that is ok and get your opening comments on your observation of kindness acts and brutality acts that you experienced in the three years you were in Santo Tomas.

Yvonne Charles: Well, I had no experience with brutality. The only brutality I heard about was when anyone escaped, which happened, several times. And as one would expect, when they were caught, they would be executed. And, this did happen.

Rabalais: Did either one of you know someone, who escaped, successfully, and not brought back, during that three-year period?

Ms. Charles: Not that I knew of personally.

Rabalais: Liz, what was your experience, on the brutality part of it?

Liz Irvine: I, personally, was never on the receiving end of it. I did witness a Filipino who they had beaten up and drug in to compound.

Rabalais: Tell me a bit more about what you saw.

Ms. Irvine: Near the main entrance, he and a friend ran past me and the guard Abatol came running in very agitated manner and a bunch of guard went running with him. We stood around to see what was going on. They dragged this Filipino man in. He was a skinny, middle-aged man. He was wearing a white T-shirt. They just started beating him and when he

would go unconscious, they would pour water on him and revive him and they just kept beating him until they couldn't revive him any longer.

Rabalais: Did anyone know what he supposedly did?

Ms. Irvine: I have no idea. I never heard.

They took him and wired him to the fence that separated our grounds from the Catholic building next door. They just left him there. That night they had a Filipino doctor who would come to the camp to attend to the prisoners and he declared him dead. That is all I knew about it. We were actually terrified, as we did not know how the guards would react.

Ms. Charles: What kind of security did they have? I just don't recall that.

Ms. Irvine: I looked it back up, because it was in the book The Gun Pipe diaries which was a book written by a fellow prisoner, Tressa Cates. It happened the first night that we were there.

Rabalais: Gun pipe diaries?

Ms. Irvine: If you were writing a diary, you kept it well hidden. They would come through and search your stuff, every-once in a while and they did not like finding diaries. I kept mine with my school papers and I discovered later that my dad had been keeping one in school note books. And Cates hid hers in a drainpipe outside her room and that is the reason it was called Drainpipe Diaries.

Rabalais: Yvonne, did you keep a diary at all?

Ms. Charles: I kept a diary. As I recall, I kept them in boxes under my bed. I never did worry about it.

Rabalais: So, they never came in and searched all your stuff?

Ms. Charles: No. Not that I recall.

Ms. Irvine: They came into our room one time and took everything out. I don't know what they were searching for. Then everybody had to stay put. If you were out, you stayed out. If you were in, you stayed in.

Rabalais: To what extent did the two of you know each other when you were in the camp?

Mr. Charles: We knew each other prewar.

Rabalais: Tell me about your personal relationship before the war and how you got to know each other.

Ms. Charles: I guess it was probably two sides.

Ms. Irvine: We went to the same school.

Rabalais: When did you discover you were in the same POW camp?
Do you remember how you linked up?

Ms. Charles: We knew that everyone was going to be brought into a camp but I just can't remember when we found each other.

Rabalais: Were your rooms close to each other? Were you neighbors in the building.

Ms. Charles: Well, we lived fairly close to each other.

Rabalais: From what I have read, there were four hundred children in the camp. Now, let's go back to the subject of the Japanese treatment. We have talked a little bit about the brutality. I think most people had an image that there was a lot of brutality. I would guess that there were isolated cases of brutality, but not that much. What about acts of kindness that might surprise and outsiders if they heard about it.

Ms. Irvine: I know that there one of the Japanese guards that would bring in sugar for a little boy. He liked little kids.

Rabalais: Now was this a guard or one of the officers?

Ms. Irvine: It was a guard.

Rabalais: What about you, Yvonne? Anything come to your mind?

Ms. Charles: Well, as I mentioned yesterday, shortly before we moved East, we were having lunch together in a little spot in one of the buildings. Nearby, a Japanese soldier was having his lunch and we were watching through the fence and spilled some sugar, apparently on purpose, in our direction. We able to get it through the wire. He knew we were starving and they didn't have quite enough food either. His actions were certainly appreciated.

Rabalais: Where there any other instances of kind of surprising humanity that was shown, that come to mind?

Ms. Charles: Not that I recall in our camp but I can remember several instances that a friend of mine who was in the military prison camp was involved in.

Rabalais: Tell us about that.

Ms. Charles: She was getting supplies from all over and anything that was donated, went to the military prison camp. One day a Japanese Officer came and said that he was driving a truck to the military prison and if he stopped by her house, could she give them some of her stuff to take to the military POWs. And he did that. I am sure he would have been in trouble if his superiors had known about it. She run into several instances like that where they went out of their way to help her help the military POWs.

Rabalais: That is not the image the world has of how things were going. Thank goodness for those few bright spots.

I can't remember which of you told me the story about the Japanese officers and a Staff Car that picked up.....

Ms. Charles: (Laughing) That was how we arrived in camp. In a Japanese Staff car.

Rabalais: Please tell that story. To me that is a good story.

Ms. Charles: We had to register at Rizal stadium (Manila, Philippine Island)) ma at a big round table they had set up. From there, we didn't know where they were taking us. For some reason, our family didn't get taken in the first batch that went, so we were in this truck that took us as far as a street corner that was near Rizal stadium. They dumped us out there and told us to wait until a truck would come by and take us to our destination. We stood there and waited and waited. It was in the middle of the day and hotter than heck. We hadn't had our lunch and we waited and waited. After a while, a Japanese Staff car came by with a Japanese office in it. My dad flagged them down and he told them that they had told us to wait there until a truck would take us to where we were going. He said, "Oh, I know where you are supposed to go and I will take you there." So, we climbed into the Staff car and rode across the city to Santo Toma. (laughing)

Rabalais: So, you arrived in style. In a Japanese Staff car. (All laughing)

Ms. Charles: Yes. We made quite an entry.

Rabalais: Ok. Let's go to another subject. Both of you were teen-agers, in your mid-teens, during you stay at Santo Tomas and I know there were a lot of things that teens did together. You had social groups and secret places to meet and talk about whatever. You were all educated in school. I just wanted to throw out the subject of teens and teen bonding, the teen social scene, how you were still the part of everything. Either of you would like to comment on that?

Ms. Charles: It was probably a highlight of my life as I was able to see friends after school. Prior to this time, I really didn't know how to socialize with friends other than seeing them at an occasionally a party.

Rabalais: This is an interesting twist. You had to be in a POW camp to really have a social blossoming.

Ms. Charles: Most people lived in an area where they could get together and visit. Some of them got to do this at school.

Rabalais: So, the get-togethers, you would have with your friends; describe to me what a typical get-together would be.

Ms. Charles: A lot of us were very sports orientated and we would be out on the court shooting baskets and dribbling the ball. But generally, we did a lot of talking. One thing would make up what we called Slam books. You would put your name on it and then pass it around and you would write comments about the person.

Rabalais: You called them, what?

Ms. Charles: Slam books.

Ms. Irvine: Of course, afterwards, you were anxious to see what people said. Sometimes you weren't too happy with what they said.

Rabalais: They slammed you, huh?

Ms. Charles: We had autograph books.

Ms. Irvine: Yes, I had an autograph book.

Ms. Charles: And then we would have conversations with friends and we would talk about subjects that some of the adults would not hear of. We were in a serious situation; we were not worried about it and we thought everything was going to be fine. I remember sitting outside at night and talking about the universe.

Ms. Irvine: Did you talk about our basketball team in our league?

Ms. Charles: I really don't remember any such conversation.

Ms. Irvine: Some of my friends and I did. We named all the teams and what they needed.

Rabalais: Now this was basketball and softball. Did you have an open area where you could play softball?

Ms. Charles: We had a large open area, in front of the building. They would sit up chairs. Of course, many of the people had duties to perform before they could participate or watch any games.

On occasion, the Japanese would take pictures. For years, I had a newspaper with our picture in it, that had been taken at one of the games.

Rabalais: What kind of fence barrier did they had around the perimeter, to keep people from leaving?

Ms. Charles: The University had a big concrete and iron fence that went around with gates at the front. It was already fenced when the Japanese took it over.

Ms. Irvine: The last year they put barbed wire coils at the top of the fence.

Ms. Charles: The last year they really fortified the grounds.

Rabalais: That is when the management changed.

Ms. Charles: Yes.

Rabalais: How much did it change? Let's talk about how it got touch toward the end. They put barbed wire on top of the fence. What else happened?

Ms. Charles: Anybody that was outside past 10:00 pm was in trouble. Then, there was no more³ going out on a pass or anything.

Ms. Irvine: About this time, we gave up the sports. They decided that after the Christmas brake that sports could not resume.

One thing we did to pass the time was to type receipts. I spent hours typing recipes. My brother typed recipes.

Rabalais: Were typewriters supplied by the school?

Ms. Irvine: Yes. Doing this provided some satisfaction because we talked about food.

Ms. Charles: Everybody was collecting recipes. In the beginning they were just hand written. That was a big thing then. Even the men were collecting them.

Rabalais: Everybody was emaciated.

Ms. Charles: Yes. Everybody was.

I was in the hospital with (?) and I had all these visitors. Liz came to visit me, while I was there.

Ms. Irvine: I was working there so I could easily get in to see you.

Rabalais: Now this hospital was the one that was across the street from your campus?

Ms. Charles: It was a Convent, originally and was connected with San Catalina.

Rabalais: Earlier, we were talking about passes, getting a pass to go outside. Was this outside the compound?

Ms. Charles: Yes. The first two years. If you had a good reason to go out.

Rabalais: What would be a good reason?

Ms. Charles: Well, my grandmother, who had injured her ankle, was on the outside and she was laid up. So, my mother got a pass to go out and be with her for a while. Some people were getting passes to go out to the Philippine General Hospital. Remember, this one fellow got polio and they sent him out to Philippine Genera?

Ms. Irvine: Yes.

Ms. Charles: This was all in the first two years.

Rabalais: Right. During the first administration. Later, the tough guys came in to run the place.

Ms. Charles: The passes were for a certain period of time and then you would have to come back.

Rabalais: What if you tried not to come back?

Ms. Charles: Well, they chased down and put you back in.

Liz, remember those three guys that were never caught after they took off?

Ms. Irvine: No, I was in the hospital about that time. WE had a friend that had some Colon surgery and she was not expected to live. They took her to Philippine General for the operation and she survived. They had not expected her to live.

Rabalais: How long was she in that hospital?

Ms. Irvine: About a month or six weeks.

Rabalais: In some ways that was an act of kindness, because the typical Japanese running a POW Camp.....

Ms. Irvine: They pretty much gave in to doctor's requests and allowed them to do what they wanted to do.

Ms. Charles: I think they were terrified about the possibility of plagues or anything like that.

Ms. Irvine: They would catch rats. In the camp, and check them to see if they carried the plague or something like that.

Rabalais: Now let's discuss the subject of animals. Based on my discussion with you ladies yesterday, that runs the gambit. From bed-bugs to horses and everything else in between. Let's talk about infestations, first. What was your experience.....

Ms. Charles: We had a plantation committee and they would put posters up around camp covering various things and one was about bed-bug control. It said, "My mother often told me when I was on her knee, the closest bed-bug heaven is upon an internee."

(All laughing)

This kind of thing happened all the time during our internment.

Rabalais: I think this is a reflection, somehow, of how was maintained.

Ms. Charles: It really was.

Rabalais: That was one of the techniques of keeping up the moral was to learn to joke about life because what else can you do?

Now what about fleas? Were they ever a problem?

Ms. Irvine: I don't remember fleas.

Ms. Charles: Neither do I.

Rabalais: How about head lice?

Ms. Charles: I don't remember lice being a problem.

Rabalais: So, bed bugs were the biggest nuisance? What about rats?

Ms. Irvine: Mosquitos, too.

Rabalais: Let's talk about mosquitos, then.

Ms. Irvine: We had mosquito nets at each of our beds. Of course, we didn't have air-conditioning. We did have high ceilings but open windows gave us some circulation. Of course, we were somewhat conditioned to the heat.

Rabalais: You had been living in the Philippines so you knew all about it.

Ms. Irvine: That was just something that everybody delt with.

Rabalais: So, everybody had mosquito nets to sleep with. What did you have to keep the mosquitos off of you during the day?

Ms. Charles: I think we became somewhat immune to the bites. They really bothered me when I first went out to the Philippines but you become somewhat conditioned to mosquito bites.

Rabalais: What about rats? We mentioned bubonic plague which never developed.

Ms. Irvine: The far back corner of the campus had been kind of a dumping ground and that is where the problem was. That is where there were a lot of rats. That is where the problem was.

Rabalais: What about pets?

Ms. Irvine: Cats. (Both ladies laughing)

Ms. Irvine: There were some around until they got eaten. We were invited to dinner one time which was a big thing at that time. There was some meat served at that time and we were not sure what it was but we ate it.

Ms. Charles: There was one guy that came in with a lady from Hongkong or somewhere and he would walk a dog around camp. My dad would say, "You can't tell which end of the lease the dog is on." (All laugh)

Rabalais: And that dog didn't survive? It is amazing how that works.

Ms. Charles: That is what happened to all of the pigeons that people could catch and anything.

Rabalais: So, they caught birds then?

Ms. Charles: I don't know how they did it. But I remember them talking about doing that.

Rabalais: How was garbage and trash disposed of? Did they have a refuse dump where they took it?

Ms. Charles: Yes.

Rabalais: Now tell me about this horse. I am hearing horse stories

Ms. Charles: I don't know much about it.

Rabalais: So, we think that we think that....

Ms. Charles: It belonged to the Japanese Commandant. That is where the horse was. It was by his office.

Rabalais: So, this was like a ceremonial horse. I guess if you were at a certain level in the Japanese army, you get a horse or something like that.

Ms. Charles: I never saw the Commandant on it. I was familiar enough of seeing the horse to even remember it, until I saw a picture of it. That is all I know about it.

Rabalais: Now we have talked about illnesses and sicknesses and the concern about there being a spread of some sort. I recall that Polio was mentioned. That must have been a problem at one time.

Ms. Charles: Fortunately, there were not that many cases. There was one very large man, who played ball, got polio and died.

Ms. Irvine: That was the husband of my chat leader. His name was Edward (garbled). Then here was Harold. He got it and survived it but became crippled. There was a young woman who got it, but she survived. She was confined to a wheel chair.

Ms. Charles: It scared everybody.

Ms. Irvine: People didn't know much about it.

Rabalais: You mentioned dengue fever. I know that was a problem with the military who served in the tropics like Guadalcanal. Did that ever show up in your camp?

Ms. Irvine: I am sure it did, but I don't recall any specific cases.

Ms. Charles: They call it Breakbone fever.

Rabalais: Yeah, Breakbone fever.

Ms. Charles: Then they had that Needles epidemic. This is when I ended up in the isolation hospital. A whole bunch of us were in that. That happened about the second year we were in the camp.

Ms. Irvine: I was exposed but I never got that.

Rabalais: How many Japanese guards and staff were there in your estimation? Were they very limited or what?

Ms. Irvine: Well, they had them posted and you would see them marching around.

Rabalais: Where did they stay?

Ms. Irvine: They were quartered on the first floor of the egg building. I don't know where the Commandant lived.

Ms. Charles: The Commandant might have been living in the same building where his office was.

Rabalais: That was a separate building, wasn't it?

Ms. Charles: Yes.

On one occasion, I got some banana leaves which we were going to use for cooking and I heard one of the guards talking and I turned around and I was told I needed to show them some respect and that I should bow. He was a guard and I should bow.

Rabalais: Now, you were trained to bow, right?

Ms. Irvine: My mother was a room manager and she had to go to training that covered things like that.

Ms. Charles: You had to bow from the waist.

Rabalais: Not a nod of the head or anything like that.

Now, I would guess that they had a lot of the same issues that the internees had. I am sure that they had bed bugs and things like that and they were hungry too.

Ms. Charles: Yes, we were probably hungry together.

Ms. Irvine: They butchered that that carabao that time ate it that time while everybody was starving.

Rabalais: Now, this was like a water buffalo?

Ms. Irvine: Yes, it was called a Carabao.

Rabalais: It was like an ox.

Ms. Charles: Yes, they would use it for plowing and pulling carts. They loved a mud bath to keep cool.

Rabalais: Tell me about the cooking. Did you eat the tail?

Ms. Irvine: Well, it was just put in a pot. It had a little flavor and, yes, we cooked it.

Rabalais: So, they butchered this Carabao right in front of everybody and then proceeded to cook it for themselves.

Ms. Irvine: Yes.

Rabalais: Tell me about it.

Ms. Irvine: I just vaguely remember that.

Ms. Charles: That happened during the first two years; when we would occasionally get some meat.

Rabalais: Well, when I think about the food subject, which is probably the one thing that people want to talk about; I remember that when the rescue occurred and the G.I.s were there and you guys were as hungry as you had ever been and they were eating their C rations or K rations and you guys were wishing you could get your hands on some of that.

Ms. Charles: I was down in the lobby and you know we were starving, of course, and this guy was cooking this little can of whatever paying no mind to what was going on around him. Of course, he didn't realize how hungry we were for if he had, I am sure he would not have done that.

Rabalais: I was intrigued by your descriptions of how the G.I.s when they came in; what your impression of their physical appearance was. I am paraphrasing now: "They were huge. They were orange, and they had these uniforms that I did not recognize." So, let's talk a little bit about your first impressions when the G.I.s came in.

Ms. Irvine: Compared to the men in our camp who were nothing but skin and bones. I am sure that they were shocked. They were yellow because they had been taking antibrane to combat malaria.

Rabalais: Apparently the uniforms had changed from the old.

Ms. Charles: They were wearing the Campaign hats before the war. Those were the hats they wore during the Spanish American War and the First World War.

Rabalais: So, what do you remember about the rescue?

Ms. Charles: Relief! Finally, we are free! We knew we were going to be free, but I think in the back of our minds we weren't sure it would be timely enough; because we weren't getting enough to eat.

Ms. Irvine: At the rate that people were dying there was cause for concern.

Ms. Charles: We knew it was going to happen because there was a lot of action around us.

Rabalais: I guess you could hear the noise.

Ms. Irvine: Yeh. There was a lot of fighting going on around the camp, even.

Ms. Charles: The Japanese had dug foxhole and set up machine guns around the camp.

Ms. Irvine: Before that, the Japanese had started blowing up oil dumps and stuff so there were constant explosions. It got to be so constant that you didn't even hear them anymore.

Rabalais: So, when they came through the front gates.....

Ms. Charles: One of the boys was a gunner on the very first tank that came through the gates. He and his family had become very good friends to our family as they lived very close to us. He was telling us that he was so excited, when they started to go through the gates, he forgot to pull the hatch cover down so as they went through it ripped the hatch cover off.

Rabalais: So, there was a little bit there was somewhat an ugly scene when the head of the Japanese Garrison;, what was his name?

Ms. Charles: Ms. Irvine: Abiko.

Rabalais: He was killed. How did that involve and how was his body treated afterwarfds?

Ms. Charles: Not well. He was one of the hated. He was wounded as the American army entered the camp and he was taken to the hospital where he was stabbed and beaten by some of the internees and he died.

His body was left on the floor so anybody could walk by and see him. I don't know how long his body lay there.

Ms. Irvine: Eventually Doctor Stevenson, after he was let out of his cell, tried to treat him.

Rabalais: So, you became, in a lot of ways, a close-knit community because of your sharing the issues for three years. Tell me a little bit about after the war was over and everybody went off in their own direction. You stayed in contact and you have reunions and this kind of thing. Describe the family, a little bit, as it is today as a result of the relationships that you made back then.

Ms. Charles: Reunions are really exciting and we look forward to going to them. Our kids all go.

Ms. Irvine: I remember the first big one was in 1980.

Rabalais: It was thirty-five years before the first one?

Ms. Irvine: When we got back, it was time to move forward. Some of us went back to school and some had families. Most of us didn't have a lot of money but we had time. I wrote letters and periodically would talk on the phone.

Rabalais: Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Ms. Irvine: I can't think of anything else. I am sure that I will later on.

Ms. Charles: I feel the same way.

Rabalais: Ladies, I regret that we have run out of time. Thank you for spending the time with me. I appreciate it.

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