Sitting in his barracks in Corregidor, an island in Manila Bay, on Dec. 29, 1941, 1st Lt. Austin "Shifty" Shofner ran outside at the sound of sirens, just in time to watch 18 Japanese bombers unload on his base.

Surveying the damage, he ordered a dentist, the closest thing to a medic he could find, to help some wounded Marines. "Suddenly" he had "the feeling it would be a long war."

Lt. Shofner was right. Especially for thousands of veterans of the Bataan Death March and the surrender of Corregidor who survived torture and systematic starvation in the notorious prison camps in the Philippines.

John Lukacs, a freelance writer, tells the remarkable story, with more twists and turns than the Coney Island Cyclone, of 10 of them, who, along with two Filipino convicts, engineered the only American group escape from a Japanese penal colony during World War II.

Mr. Lukacs is a gifted stylist and storyteller. He doesn't flinch at the grim or the gruesome. Consider, for example, his description of the floating corpses of POWs, pinned to their final resting places with bamboo poles because the high water table filled the pits with seepage, "as dogs and buzzards gnawed on their arms and legs, stiffened with rigor mortis and silhouetted in the milky moonlight."

And he knows how to build suspense. As the conspirators left the Davao compound, Mr. Lukacs writes, a clueless fellow officer cried out "in a piercingly loud voice" to one of them: "Your toothbrush is sticking out the back of your musette bag. Are you planning to escape?"

At bottom, "Escape From Davao" is a morality tale, not unlike the war movies of the 1940s and '50s, about pluck, luck, courage, comradeship, Yankee humor, ingenuity, and religious faith, featuring easy-to-identify heroes (the Americans) and villains (the Japanese).

To preserve their sanity and keep hope alive, the prisoners distracted themselves by founding "a fraternity of filth, called 'Skunk Patrol, Alpha Chapter’ "; producing shows and musical performances; gambling, on anything and everything; and recycling rumors about America’s "great Pacific offensive."

Many of them shared their meager rice rations with buddies in the POW hospital. And they stuck to their promises not to abandon anyone who fell ill, got injured or shot.
After they got away, Mr. Lukacs reveals, in a timely and telling discussion of censorship, the Davao Ten weren't entirely free.

Concerned that revelations of Japanese atrocities would reduce public support for his "Europe First" military strategy and provoke retaliation against POWs, President Roosevelt ordered the War Department in September 1943 to prevent the publication or circulation of "any stories emanating from escaped prisoners."

The gag order was not lifted until early 1944, when the war against Germany was nearing its end. The Davao disclosures, and other "stomach wrenching" reports, Mr. Lukacs suggests, fed Americans' thirst for revenge and foreclosed the possibility that the United States would settle for nothing but Japan's unconditional surrender.

It's also likely that the stories made it easier for President Truman to order the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Davao Ten had had their 15 minutes of fame. Almost 60 years later, all but one of them are gone. But for some men, Mr. Lukacs concludes, "legacy trumps survival."

Thanks to him, we can now call the roll of 10 ordinary -- and extraordinary -- Americans:

Boelens, Dobervich, Dyess, Grashio, Hawkins, Marshall, McCoy, Mellnik, Shofner, Spielman.

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