

The Robert Preston Taylor Story

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By Bill Keith



The Robert Preston Taylor Story When Robert Preston Taylor was a red-headed farm boy growing up in Henderson, Texas, he had no idea that one day he would be caught up in the maelstrom of World War II in the South Pacific.

After he graduated from high school, he went to Baylor University and on to the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth where he received his doctorate in theology in preparation for ministry.

In pre-war In 1941, he learned that the U. S. government needed chaplains to minister to the troops in the Philippines. He and his beautiful wife Ione talked it over and decided it was important for him to serve the country. So he told her goodbye and enlisted to serve one year. He would not see her again for four and one-half years.

Eight months after he arrived in the Philippines, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the City of Manila the next day.

He ministered to the American troops during the Battle for Bataan and the Bataan Death March where thousands of Americans died. The March ended at the Cabanatuan Prison Camp where he began 42 months of imprisonment in POW camps in the Philippines, Japan, Korea and Manchuria.

He also survived the infamous "hell ships" where he and hundreds of other POWs were crowded in the holds of Japanese transport ships. American pilots, not knowing the Americans were on board, bombed the ships killing hundreds of their own men. Taylor was wounded twice.

While in prison, the Japanese commander learned that Taylor was involved in smuggling food and medicine into the prison camp. The commander sentenced him to the "heat boxes" -- a death sentence -- where he was denied food and water for long periods of time.

Besides fighting the stifling heat, Taylor found he had to adjust to the monotony of the long days. The

four-by-five cell cramped his body.

Since no latrines were accessible, he and the others piled waste in front of their cells doors, hoping to rake it out with their bare feet should the door open. Others, too weak to care, lay in their own refuse.

One day the guards opened the door to his cell and he crawled out and, with the use of a cane, made his way to the parade ground where a number of troops were milling around.

He began to speak to them: "Ask me about my condition. I'm dirty, nasty, and all I have on is my underwear. Can you smell the stench of my rotting teeth? Listen to me, listen without pity. I'm not going to die!"

He shouted the last words as loudly as he was able, and a cheer went up from the listeners.

"I'm going to live and you are too, because God is going to give us the strength. Now bow your heads in prayer," he concluded as a half-dozen guards closed in to take him back to the heat box.

As one trooper later related the experience, "We still smell the urine, the outdoor privy, the accidents on the blankets, the rotting garbage we would bury if we had shovels, but we have hope. Thank God we have hope!"

He miraculously survived the "heat boxes" and the Japanese transported him and thousands of others to Japan, on to Korea and finally to Mukden, Manchuria, where in 1945 he was liberated by the Russians.

Preston couldn't wait to get back to San Francisco to see Ione.

When he left the ship, he threw his arms around her but she did not respond. Rather, she drew back and stood away from him.

Preston, I've done a terrible thing.

He looked at her in silence.

"I'm remarried."

For several minutes Preston stared silently out over the harbor.

"My car is waiting," and she led him through the throngs of people to the parked car. They drove across town to a restaurant.

How little she has changed, he thought, looking at her angular nose and beautiful pale skin. But she was not wearing the ring he had given her during the wedding ceremony in Fort Worth. It had been replaced by a solid gold band.

You look well, Preston – as well as could be expected, I guess."

"You're as beautiful as ever, Ione."

Then neither spoke for a long while. They sipped their water, fidgeted with their silverware, shifted back and forth in their chairs until finally he asked, "What happened, Ione?"

She moistened her dry lips and swallowed before speaking.

"For nearly four years I waited and had faith you would return."

She paused, sipped again at her water.

"Go on."

“Well, last year I met this man and we dated some. Then he asked me to marry him but I refused.”

”Yes?”

“Then in January, Colonel Oliver and several of your friends were freed from Cabanatuan. They came through San Francisco, and ...” She broke into tears, sobbing softly as she tried to continue. “They told me you had died on the ships to Japan, and when I heard it I remarried, just last month.”

The tear slid down her cheeks and onto the linen tablecloth. “It’s too late for us.”

“But why, Ione? I still love you. I don’t care if you have remarried. I still love you and need you.”

“Preston, try to understand. I haven’t seen you in four years, and I’m already living with another man. Can’t you see? We’re no longer married.”

He looked at the sobbing Ione across the table and a thousand memories flashed through his mind. He felt so alone. For a moment he wondered if God had forsaken him, too. But then the doubt passed. He knew God had been by his side along. He was there now.

“You’re still a great gal, Ione. It’s okay.” He got up, squeezed her hand gently and walked out into the misty San Francisco morning

Preston decided to continue in the military and years later, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed him Deputy Air Force Chief of Chaplains. Later, President John F. Kennedy named him Air Force Chief of Chaplains with the rank of major general. He married the beautiful and charming Millie Goode, a well-known artist in Washington, D.C.

Author's Note: My book *Days of Anguish, Days of Hope* tells the story of Chaplain Taylor and his struggle and survival during the War in the Pacific. It is available through Amazon.com, Amazon Kindle and at www.billkeithbook.com.