



American GIs march from Camp Cabanatuan, a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines, after being freed at the conclusion of World War II. Benjamin Morin, SJ, who was a POW for three and a half years, found his vocation as a Jesuit priest in Cabanatuan.

Freedom

FR. BEN MORIN LOOKS BACK ON HIS YEARS
AS A POW AND HIS LIFE AS A JESUIT

Sixty years ago,

in October, 1944, Benjamin R. Morin was harvesting sweet potatoes, white potatoes, cabbage, and radishes as a prisoner of war at Camp Zentsuji in Japan. He knew then that he wanted to become a Jesuit priest. But he didn't know if he'd ever be freed. By then he'd been in captivity for nearly three years.

He'd been a senior in high school when he entered the Illinois National Guard in 1938. Three years later, having been called to active duty and commissioned a second lieutenant in the 192nd Tank Battalion at Ft. Knox, he was sent to the Philippines. His battalion arrived on November 20, 1941.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor 18 days later. That day the Japanese 11th Air Fleet also attacked Clark Field, the principal air base for American forces in Luzon, Philippines. The attack destroyed close to half the American fleet, leaving American positions open to invasion. On December 22, Japanese forces began landing.

Lt. Morin was called to lead a platoon of five American tanks to meet the enemy. It was the first U. S. tank attack of the Second World War. The American tanks, confined by hilly terrain to a narrow road, encountered heavy fire. It happened quickly. Fr. Morin remembers a flash. The front door of the tank was gone, ripped off by the explosion. They pushed forward through the smoke until a Japanese tank rammed them, breaking the tank's track. They were immobilized. The four other American tanks rattled past. Heavily outnumbered they fought on. The Japanese forces continued to fire at Lt. Morin's tank. When it burst into flames, he and his men rushed out, their hands held high in the air.

"We were," Fr. Morin recalls, "completely at the tender mercy of the Japanese." But the Japanese were neither tender nor merciful to their prisoners. Fr. Morin and his three crew members were tied to the top of separate Japanese tanks and transported far behind enemy lines.

For the next three and a half years, Fr. Morin endured squalid conditions in numerous POW camps in the Philip-



Fr. Morin at the Milford Novitiate where he entered the Jesuits in 1946, less than a year after being freed.

piners and Japan. He watched hundreds of his comrades die as a result of dysentery, dengue fever, malaria, diarrhea, and diphtheria. He, like all the other prisoners, suffered physically and psychologically from a lack of food. In southern camps the heat was often overwhelming. In the north, during the winter, Fr. Morin and dozens of prisoners were crammed into flimsy barracks with just a few blankets between them. Lice were a constant annoyance. In camps that housed thousands of prisoners, there were no proper toilets, only ditches. Diseases spread like wildfire. In Tanagawa, Fr. Morin was occasionally asked to take the bodies of dead soldiers to the crematory. He collected wood to deliver with the bodies and waited until the cremation was complete for the ashes. In Zenjutsi, after attempting to steal bread from the camp bakery, Fr. Morin was beaten severely and tortured. In the time he spent in Japan, meals consisted only of a cup of rice and a cup of thin soup.

Desperation and death followed Fr. Morin through the many camps he endured. When speaking about his experience, Fr. Morin says there was a dog-eat-dog mentality amongst the prisoners in the camps. "I'm not criticizing anyone," he says. "What we went through wasn't easy and people after a while, naturally, started to look out for themselves."

But There Was an Exception

In Camp Cabanatuan in the Philippines Lt. Morin met Fr. Victor Turner, SJ, an Australian Jesuit. Fr. Turner, who'd been ordained in 1937, was a chaplain for the Australian Imperial Forces and had been captured with an Australian regiment in the Solomon Islands. "He was the first Jesuit I'd ever met," Fr. Morin recalls. "He was a brilliant speaker. His sermons were practical and interesting. He was gifted all the way around. He had human gifts. He could connect with people."

In the same camp, Fr. Morin met Fr. Thomas Scecina, a chaplain from the archdiocese of Indianapolis who'd been serving with a regiment of Philippine Scouts, a group of Filipino soldiers who fought under American officers. "Scecina was unfazed by the conditions in the camp," Fr. Morin recalls. "He said he'd be content to spend the rest of his life there. He told me he was very happy in that prison camp because 'this is where God wants me. Providence has kept me here.' He was content to be there and to die there."

In those two priests, Lt. Morin, who was 23 years old, saw everything he ever wanted to be in life. They moved peacefully and lovingly through the camp. They helped everyone. They were alive in a place full of death. They lived in a prison but they were free. "They were men who knew what they were doing in life. They had a mission in life, a purpose," he recalls. "Their lives appealed to me." He vowed that if he ever got out of the camps, he would become, like Fr. Turner, a Jesuit priest.

On September 2, 1945, the Japanese surrendered. A week later, Fr. Morin had been rescued from the camp and was being processed for return to the States at a base in Manila. At home, Fr. Morin's parents clung to hope that he might still be alive, though they hadn't heard from him for well over a year.

On October 18, he returned to Chicago. "There on the front porch my mother and dad were waiting. I dashed up the porch steps and swept my dear mother into my arms." Then he told his parents he was going to become a Jesuit



Fr. Morin, who served for 38 years in Peru, celebrates Mass in a neighborhood outside Arequipa.



Fr. Morin now resides at Colombiere Center.

priest. Ten months later, on September 1, 1946, he entered the Jesuit novitiate in Milford, OH. James L. Fox also entered the Jesuits that day (he's since left the Society and recently retired from the law practice he started in Chicago). He, like Fr. Morin, was a veteran and they became, and have remained, great friends. "Ben is not shy. He is understated, modest in his speech. He's soft-spo-

ken," says Mr. Fox, "but he was a wonderful priest. I always thought of him as a Saint."

As a novice, Ben wrote often to his superiors expressing a desire to become a missionary in India or Japan. "I was kind of an idealist," he says of his desire to serve in an international mission. "I wanted to give my all for Christ and not hold anything back. So I figured I ought to be a missionary. But I was always turned down."

In 1956 he was ordained and assigned to Loyola Academy. Then, in 1960, he was assigned to Peru—for him a dream come true. From 1960 to 1965, he worked to set up a mission church in Tacna, Peru. In 1965, he was assigned to Arequipa, a town 150 miles north in the Andes Mountains. He spent more than 30 years there. His principal work was at Iglesia de la Compania, a Jesuit church in Arequipa, but Fr. Morin was called to work directly with the poor. He connected with Fr. Carlos Pozzo, SJ, an Italian Jesuit who served in the poorest neighborhoods in Arequipa. Fr. Morin joined him. Later he began journeying into the mountains to serve the people in the small villages, many of which didn't have churches.

"I took the inter-provincial buses up into the mountains and I'd stay for four or five days. If there was a church, I'd stay there," Fr. Morin recalls. "If not, I'd stay in someone's house. The housing was very primitive. And it was cold in the mountains. We did most everything by candlelight. I'd visit with the people, say Mass each day, hear confessions. Then I'd go back down to Arequipa, shave and clean up, and then head back into the mountains to another village."

It was a life perfectly suited for a simple man. And, according to Jim Fox, "Ben is a simple man. A simple priest. He has a single purpose in life, to fulfill his vocation, his calling from Christ our Lord, to the utmost."

Fr. Morin continued this service to the people of Peru until 1998, when he returned to the United States and took up residence at Colombiere Center. Through prayer, he continues to fulfill his vocation. He also still looks out for the poor of Peru. Mr. Fox says he recently sent a check to Fr. Morin. "He called me the day he got the check and told me he'd sent it down to Peru, to the poor people



Colombiere Update

In the early 1990's, donors to the Chicago and Detroit Provinces contributed \$25 million through the "Promises Kept" Campaign to finance renovations at Colombiere Center, the health care facility where retired Jesuits from the two provinces reside. Fr. M. Joseph Casey, SJ, Colombiere's director says the campaign has helped Colombiere provide high-quality care to the 51 Jesuits living there and has helped them fulfill their special mission of praying for the Church, Society, and other needs. "We're able to provide 24-hour care," Fr. Casey explains. To do it, he employs a staff of 18 registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nurses aides. In recent years, Colombiere has also hired a physical trainer who gives exercise and weightlifting classes.

"This place is terrific," Fr. Morin says of Colombiere. "The staff here is very kind and generous. They're good people." Fr. Morin also makes a point to thank those who've made it possible for him to be at Colombiere. "Our partners and benefactors are our backbone. We need them. They really help us. This is not a one-man operation. We need the laypeople. They are in this with us."

Please consider a contribution to the Senior Jesuit Fund. Your gift will ensure that Jesuits from Colombiere are able to continue their mission and continue to receive great care. To support Fr. Morin and the Jesuits at Colombiere, please call Jeff Smart (800-922-5327) or Mike Murray (800-831-9470) or use the enclosed envelope.

he'd worked with when he was there."

Fr. Morin says he misses Peru, and the work he did there. When asked why, after enduring so much during the war, he wanted to return to such difficult living conditions, he shrugs his shoulders and smiles.

"I felt like I was doing God's work." ■