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INQUIRER SOUTHERN LUZON

# Inquirer Southern Luzon : Returning GI recalls war massacre

By Redempto Anda  
Inquirer

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY – No gun salutes welcomed Don Schloat as he disembarked from a commercial flight and stepped on Palawan soil again after 63 years. Neither were there streamers, military honors or flag-waving schoolchildren.

Had the American alerted authorities of his coming, these would have been standard greetings.

But Schloat had decided that he just wanted to see where it all happened: For more than two years, he had been held at a small prisoners-of-war (POW) camp now called Plaza Cuartel, on that fateful day when the kempeitai (Japanese military police) ended it all in a massacre largely overlooked by history.

At 86, Schloat is the only person remaining among 11 men who had survived the massacre and told the story of war's brutality.

On Dec. 14, 1944, over 150 American POWs were herded by the kempeitai into bunkers to die by burning and machinegun fire.

Most of them died in the pandemonium inside the two tunnels soaked with gasoline and set on fire. Others who tried to escape were bayoneted to slow death or ripped by bullets.

Schloat was lucky to have left the camp before it happened.

He was captured by the Japanese while trying to escape with two other prisoners, was beaten and transferred to the Bilibid Prison in Muntinlupa to face a Japanese court-martial.

All of those who died he knew, even the few who had lived to tell the horrific tale.

"They were all young men and they were all hoping to survive. When I asked who wanted to come with me to try and escape, most didn't want to risk it. We knew the war was going to end soon and everyone just wanted to wait it out. I never expected the tragedy to happen," he recalled.

### Plaza Cuartel

A small bronze marker with the names of Schloat and 10 other POWs who had survived the massacre was erected on top of what used to be the main underground bunkers occupied by the prisoners.

"I still remember all the details, but the emotion seems to have died down in me after all those years. I'm just pleased to make it back here to take a look at the place," he told the Inquirer.

Schloat took his time to walk around what is now a quiet garden frequented by schoolchildren.

"There were six coconut trees in the middle of this place. The Japanese would tie up the prisoners there and beat them with wooden planks for everyone to see," he said.

Except for the main portal to the camp that had been preserved, Schloat said the place had completely changed. Gone were the garrisons and the three main barracks where over 300 POWs had been housed. Also gone were the barbed wires surrounding the camp that overlooked Puerto Bay.

"You came in through the front gate and there were two towers on either side that ran parallel the road that went down the middle. There was another barracks at the end of it but they were connected with foot rails," he said.

"I would stand here in the morning to smell the breeze and look out to the sea," he said, pointing at the mangroves where he tried to hide during his escape.

### Hard labor

They were not allowed to intermingle with the villagers, the American said. "That was a big no-no. If you got caught trying to speak to

a local, they would kill you.”

Every morning, the prisoners were hauled into trucks and brought to the other end of town to work on the airstrip of what is now the city's international airport.

“Yes, we built that strip with forced labor. We had nothing but picks and shovels, and they had to be accounted for every afternoon when we got back to the camp because the Japanese made sure we did not use them as weapons,” Schloat said.

### **Beautiful place**

In the two years he had spent in Palawan, the veteran said he never realized how pretty the place was outside camp. For two days, he toured Puerto Princesa and its outskirts, and marveled at the natural beauty he never witnessed and enjoyed as a prisoner.

“This is a very beautiful place and I have met some very nice people,” he told Dr. Teresita Salva, president of the Palawan State University, during a brief tour of a local campus.

While at Plaza Cuartel, Schloat was helped by schoolchildren in etching a piece of paper on the marker to bring home.

Before leaving, the American stood at where he used to stand every morning. He breathed the same air that he breathed over 60 years ago. “It's still the same aroma,” he said, and walked on.

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