

Vivian Holt
Interview 128a
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Introduced by Steven Hannah
Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

ABSTRACT: In this speech for a Diboll History Class in 1988, Vivian Holt describes her childhood in The Philippines as the daughter of an American father and Philippine mother. She survived Japanese bombings, internment in a concentration camp, starvation, and fighting between Japanese and American forces during World War II. After the liberation of Manila, Mrs. Holt, her father, and her 2 brothers came to the United States.

This is a transcription of a talk of Mrs. Vivian Holt given to a history class at Diboll High School. She was introduced by Steven Hannah.

Vivian Holt: I can assure you that Steven was the best student in class when I was substituting. I felt it an honor when asked by Steven to speak to you today about Philippine history, sharing with you some of my World War II experiences as a Prisoner-of-War in the Philippines.

The beautiful Philippine islands are located southeast of the continent of Asia in the southwest Pacific, a 7,000 mile stretch between Manila and San Francisco, California.

There are 7,083 islands in the Pacific Ocean. Only a third of them are named. 463 of these islands have an area of one square mile or more. On approximately 2,000 of these islands are three-fourths as large as Japan. In size the Philippine Islands are considerably less in area than California. If the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware were joined together, their square miles would equal those of the Philippines--115,600 square miles.

How many people live in this far-away land? In 1978 the population was 42,800,000 people. It is the 6th largest country in Asia. The Philippine Islands were probably known to the Chinese traders in the 10th century. In 1521 Ferdinand Magellan landed on two islands in the Philippines, the Mactan and Cebu Islands.

Consider that the Philippine history began with the death of Magellan on April 27, 1521. On May 1, 1898 Admiral George Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet off Cavite in Manila Bay. May 10, 1898, Spain ceded the Philippine Islands to the United States for twenty million dollars. That ended about 400 years of Spanish rule.

My father was an American, born in Rock Island, Illinois. He joined the Marines and in 1907, went to the Philippines. He loved the islands and when he was discharged he decided to stay in the Philippines. He married my mother who was a Filipino. To their marriage was born 4 children. My older sister, myself and two younger brothers. Our mother died when I was only four years old.

In 1938 my older sister married and moved to another island. The same year my father became very ill and he had to have two major surgeries. When he came home from the hospital, we had a terrible typhoon. A typhoon is a tropical cyclone with winds

rotating 90 to 130 miles an hour in a counter clockwise direction. Hundreds of my father's chickens, ducks, turkeys were killed. Fruit trees were up-rooted. Palm trees were blown over, it was really a miracle only our house was left standing. We lost everything on our farm. Because of my father's weakened condition from surgery, he decided that we would move to the city of Manila, about 70 miles from our farm.

Because we were small and my father had to find a job, we were separated from each other. My two younger brothers were placed in an orphanage for boys, and I went to live with my godparents. My godfather was an American and my Godmother was a Filipino--a Mestizo like me--half American and half Philippine. My father found a job working for the United States High Commissioner to the Philippines at night as a guard.

On December 8, 1941, the Japanese attacked the Philippines and landed on the island of Luzon. Manila fell to the Japanese on February 2, 1942. I can remember the bombing of Manila and the incessant air raid alarms that kept the people in a state of panic. There were lots of fires, looting, acts of violence and lawlessness which brought the complete breakdown of business and normal living. It was also hard to withdraw money from the banks.

After the first bombing of Manila, President Manuel Quezon issued an order that limited withdrawals from banks up to 200 pesos a week (that is one hundred dollars a week) except for payroll purposes. The banks were open for business for the last time on December 29, 1941, after which they closed their doors without notifying the public. This act made it very hard for the internee, the American and British citizens were interned. It caused them a lot of suffering. The lack of money to purchase the necessities of life was really a big problem.

When the Japanese marched into Manila, all the stores in the city were closed. Streets were deserted. No one knew what would happen next. My father got my two brothers from the orphanage and took them to my godparents' home. So we were all together. My father was there with us, too.

The Japanese took action right away to put all the enemy aliens, referring to the American and British citizens, under custody. The Japanese ordered all enemy aliens to pack their suitcases and bags. In many cases only 3 to 5 minutes was given to pack their bags. They were made to believe they would only be interned for 3 days. Others were given more time to pack their things. We had our bags packed in about 5 minutes.

All the prisoners, as we were called, were told to go to a certain building and be counted. We had to stand in line all day. No one was allowed to talk. If anyone talked, the Japanese soldier would slap the one who talked three times real hard with his arm. We did not have anything to eat or drink. Our baggage was searched. All knives, flash lights and cameras were taken. After we were counted we were packed into a jeep and driven recklessly by a Japanese soldier to either the Luneta Park, the Bay View Hotel, Villamor Hall or Rizal Stadium. My godparents, their children, my father, my two brothers and I were taken to Villamor Hall. From this point of concentration we were then transferred to the famous Santa Tomas Internment Camp. Santa Tomas was before the war, a university. It was founded by the Spanish Dominicans in 1611. There were 4,000 internees at Santa Tomas, mostly Americans and British.

When we arrived at the camp, the Japanese told my father that because our mother was Philippine, that we were not American citizens and we could live outside of camp. My father was very glad to hear that because he thought he might get a little more

food living outside the internment camp. In those early days of concentration, we were allowed to visit our father and take food to him. Santa Tomas Internment Camp had an iron fence all around it. Our father was allowed to come out of the iron gate and visit with us. After a while the Japanese became more strict and we could only visit with him through the iron fence.

As time went by the Japanese built a solid bamboo fence inside the iron fence. And our father was allowed to come from behind the bamboo fence and visit with us for just a very short time. Soon all visitations were stopped.

The first tragedy that happened at Santa Tomas Internment Camp was in February at 8 o'clock at night after roll call. Laycock, Fletcher and Weeks escaped from the camp by climbing the wall. They were caught by the Japanese 5 miles from Santa Tomas and returned to the camp. The Japanese Commandant ordered all the room monitors and the Chairman of the Executive Committee to tell all the internees that if that same thing ever happened again, those who tried to escape would be shot right on the spot. The three men were taken to jail. On February 14th they were sentenced to death by a Japanese Court Martial. And on Sunday, February 15th, the three men were led to a cemetery where the Japanese soldiers had dug three graves. They were told to sit by their graves; they were blindfolded and shot to death.

After a few months of internment, in March 1942, the internees who had families living outside were allowed to return to their homes and be with their families. My two brothers were being taken care of by an elderly Filipino couple. I was living with my godmother again as her husband was also interned. My father was released. He rented the second story of a house and we were all together. We were so happy to be together. We did not have much furniture in the house. Father promised the landlord he would pay him for the rent after the war. We had a chair for my father to sit in, a bed for him, grass mats for my two brothers and me to lie on at night, a table with four chairs, a few dishes and a few pots and pans. I can remember days when the only thing we had to eat was boiled corn meal and a little salt twice a day. There were times when we just had corn with a little grated coconut twice a day. I remember going to the market and seeing people sitting on the sidewalk begging for food, dying of starvation. Some of them were so weak they could not return to their homes. They just stayed there until they died. A big truck would come, pick up the dead bodies, and dump them in a big hole outside the city.

I was awakened one night after midnight by a noise at the back door. Someone was trying to break in, looking for food. I was so scared I can remember my heart beat so fast that I thought I would die. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak to call my father. I prayed with all my heart that person would leave us because we had heard of people being killed by starving people who had broken into the homes. After a while I got this friend to call my father and this person who was trying to break in the back door heard our voices and disappeared. The next night he was there again trying to break in the back door.

The next morning I decided I would have to do something to make that back door more secure so he could not come in. We did not have any tools. I walked up and down the street to look for nails. I found some nails, brought them home and got a rock to use as a hammer and nailed that door securely.

They next night he was back. So the next morning I thought to myself, I will have to do something to discourage him from going to that back door. I looked for bottles. I

found quite a few empty bottles. I took them to the back porch, got a rock and broke the bottles to pieces and scattered them all around the back porch. That night I waited. Soon I heard the footsteps of someone coming up the steps to the back door again. But that was all I heard and that was the last time.

My father was released for only a little over a year. And in May of 1943, my father, along with other internees, were ordered by the Japanese to be re-interned at Santa Tomas Internment Camp. From that time on, we were completely cut off from our father. We did not hear from him nor see him.

On December 21, 1944, the American pilots bombed Manila. The second bombing of Manila was on October 15. After that bombing, the people inside the concentration camps and outside were filled with high hopes that the Americans would soon rescue us.

Santa Tomas Internment Camp was liberated on February 3, 1945. That night on February 3, Japanese soldiers entered our neighborhood, they found a vacant home. They poured gasoline on the floor and started a fire. They wanted to burn the people in that neighborhood while they slept. I was awakened by people crying for help. I remember looking out the window and seeing fire everywhere. People were trapped in their homes. I remember seeing neighbors running to help neighbors being shot down by Japanese snipers.

The few of us who escaped went to the schoolyard that was near our home. Some of the men dug a canal. We stayed there all night. I remember seeing neighbors running to the canal for shelter and being shot down by Japanese snipers. Beside me in the canal sat a girl who was a few years older than I. Her parents had been killed by the Japanese. She was very nervous and frightened. She looked at me and said, "Vivian, do you know how to pray?" I said, "Yes, I do." She said, "Would you please pray for me. I have a terrible feeling that something awful is going to happen to me." The next morning we saw on the other side of the schoolyard shelters that the Japanese soldiers had built for themselves. They had to leave the shelters and retreat because the Americans were advancing toward them. Those of us in the canal decided to rush to the shelters and stay there because it was safer. I found myself in the shelter with my godparents, her mother and children. That girl I prayed with was also there, too. I also noticed a mother with a little boy. The boy was starved and weak. He hadn't had anything to eat for days.

He was crying to his mother for some water to drink. The mother said, "I am sorry, dear, I have no water to give to you." I remembered then, that there was a drinking fountain on the playground, and I told the mother that I would go and get her son something to drink. There was an empty can outside the shelter lying on the ground. She said, "No Vivian, I don't want you to go. The Japanese snipers will shoot you." The girl I prayed with said to the mother, "Let me go, I will be careful." I was surprised the mother did not stop her. She said, "Please be careful because the Japanese will shoot you if they see you outside this shelter." She said, "I will be careful. I will crawl to the fountain." The girl got out of the shelter, reached for the can, and was about to get some water when a Japanese soldier shot her in the forehead.

That afternoon we heard American voices--American telling us who were hiding in the shelters to come outside because there would be a lot of shooting where we were. And to go behind their lines. We were so happy to see the Americans. We hadn't had anything to eat for so long. We were so weak and sick. My clothes were torn. I was

barefooted. But we were so happy to see them and to know that at last we were liberated from the Japanese. We were going to walk over a bridge to a high school gym and stay there for shelter. I remember walking over a lot of dead Japanese soldiers lying on the street. Shrapnel was flying here and there. People were being shot on either side of me. I remember seeing buildings being blown up. But in the midst of it all, God was right there with me and he protected me.

When we arrived at the high school gym, a lady came to me and said, "Vivian, one of your brothers has been killed by the Japanese and the other is running around crying, calling for you." I remember standing by the side of the street watching the people coming toward the gym, and they were liberated from the other side of the city. I would run to them hoping and praying that I would see my two brothers, but I never did see them.

The next morning, February 5, my godmother and I were told that we could visit our loved ones at Santa Tomas, that they were liberated. I remember on the way to see my father, I wondered what I would tell him about my two brothers. When I got closer I noticed an old man standing by the gate talking to two boys. I said to myself, "That looks like my father, but he looks so old and his beard was white." When I got closer I discovered it was my father talking to my two younger brothers. Later, a couple told me that Japanese were after them and they were able to escape and hide in a hole. They covered themselves with sheet iron and stayed there until they were liberated. My father was almost blind. The Japanese had taken his razor away from him and he could not shave. He weighed only 80 pounds. He told me that if the Americans had not come the day that they did he could not live because he was so weak from starvation and he could not get up from his bed.

We entered Santa Tomas to be with our father. It was very crowded in the camp. There was no place to stay at night.

When we got inside the camp, the American Red Cross started feeding us. We had not had anything to eat for so long. We did not have any dishes to eat from. We found some cans and cleaned them and used them as dishes. We were advised not to eat too much or too fast at once. There was a young boy who was so starved like the rest of us who did not listen. He ate fast and he ate a lot. He died soon after. That night it was so crowded we could not sleep in the building. My father just sat in a canvas folding chair and we slept on the cement beside him.

The Japanese who escaped to the hills started shelling the Santa Tomas Camp trying to kill the Americans there. It was really very sad. Some of the internees who saw the Americans liberate them and saw their loved ones again were hit by the shells and killed.

Soon the American Red Cross offered to bring back to America the families who wanted to return to this country. My father had been in the Philippines for 37 years. He decided to come here. I was so happy. I had dreamed of seeing America. We left the Philippines on boat. It took us a month and two days on water. The war was still going on. We went through the Panama Canal and landed at Newport News, Virginia. My father lived only a little over a year. We were left orphans in this strange country. But you know God was so wonderful to us. He raised up so many wonderful things for us. We were able to finish our education. We had missed almost 4 years of schooling because of the war.

I love this country. And I challenge you young people to love God with all your heart and to love this great and beautiful country. For truly, America is the land of the free and the home of the brave. God bless you all

Questions asked by the Class:

Have you ever been back to the Philippines?

No, I have never been. My brother went back. I would like to some day.

How hard was it for you to lose your hatred for the Japanese?

You know I marvel at that. I think because I am a Christian. If I did not know the Lord and was not a Christian, I believe I would have strong hatred for them after what happened to my father and the other sufferings I went through. You know after I graduated from college, I dedicated my life to go back to the Philippines as a missionary. I passed all my tests--psychological tests and other tests, but when it came to my physical, I did not pass because of my war experiences. I think being a Christian made me love them and wanted to go back to tell them about the Lord.

Have you met Father Julian?

Yes, he has a wonderful story.

Was that the same camp?

Yes, I think he was in the same camp. We did not know him at the time. We met him here in Lufkin when we came back.

You might be interested to know that the languages in the Philippines are English, Tagalog, the national language, and Spanish. We have 87 different languages and dialects in the Philippines.

I speak the national. Do you want to hear something. I will speak a verse from the Bible. John 3:16. I am sure you all know it by heart. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have ever lasting life."

John 3:16 in the Tagalog language:

"Sapagkit gayon na lamang ang pagsinta ng dios sa sanglibutan, na ibinigay niya and kaniyang bugtong na anak, upang ang sinomang so kaniyay sumanpalataya ay huwag mapohamak, kundi magkaroon ng buhay na walang hanggan."

It is an easy language to learn they tell me. A missionary from the United States went there and they told me that in 6 months they were able to speak the Tagalog language.

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