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Ghost soldiers book review

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Ghost Soldiers: The Epic Account of World War II's Greatest Rescue Mission, by Hampton Sides. The Pacific war during World War II resulted in immense loss for many families as millions of soldiers lost their loved ones on distant shores. This devastating theatre included islands such as Midway, Iwo Jima, and Wake Island, as well as mainland battlefields like China and Burma. Many prisoners of war suffered greatly, with hundreds languishing in prison camps deep in the jungles of the Philippines. One such camp was Camp O'Donnell, where Allied soldiers were subjected to particularly harsh conditions. The men had survived the notorious Bataan Death March, a brutal attempt by the Japanese to relocate thousands of prisoners from a recently-captured city. Conditions at the camp were atrocious, with low morale and a sense that the men had been left behind to die. However, thanks to an American guerrilla leader who informed military authorities of the camp's existence, a daring rescue mission was launched. The author Hampton Sides recounts this story in his book, revealing the meticulous planning and execution that went into the operation. The elite Army Rangers, a carefully selected team, were tasked with infiltrating the camp and rescuing their comrades. With the help of Filipino supporters, they had to maintain the element of surprise until the last moment. Detailed reconnaissance from their guerrilla comrades was crucial for success, as they navigated exposed enemy territory crawling on their bellies. Facing vastly outnumbered odds, the team knew they were in for a potentially suicidal mission. But with high motivation and a willingness to risk their lives, they pushed forward to save their fellow soldiers. In 1945, a group of 121 US soldiers on a rescue mission slipped behind enemy lines in the Philippines to save 513 POWs. The prisoners had been subjected to brutal treatment and were starving at Camp O'Donnell, where many were suffering from diseases and torture. A recent massacre by Japanese soldiers elsewhere in the Philippines made the stakes extremely high and the time for planning was limited. The rescue mission, known as "Ghost Soldiers," was a daring raid that required meticulous planning. The soldiers faced a 30-mile march to reach the camp, where they would need to extract the POWs without alerting the Japanese guards. In his book, Hampton Sides recounts the story of this remarkable mission, focusing on the prisoners' plight at Camp O'Donnell and their resilience in the face of extreme hardship. The rescue is a testament to human bravery and self-sacrifice under impossible conditions. The Bataan Death March, which took place three years earlier, was one of the most shameful acts in history. Thousands of POWs were marched 60 miles through the Philippine jungle without food or water, with many being killed on sight if they stumbled or became ill. The prisoners were subjected to torture, starvation, and disease at the camps where they were imprisoned, leading to thousands more deaths. The rescue mission that Hampton Sides writes about in "Ghost Soldiers" is a remarkable story of courage and sacrifice, one that highlights the resilience of the human spirit even in the most trying conditions. The Philippines was liberated by General MacArthur as he returned to the islands and began the work of freeing the prisoners. The Japanese Commandant panicked when he heard about the approaching American forces, forcing hundreds of prisoners into cramped dugouts and setting them on fire. However, one prisoner managed to escape and return to American lines. MacArthur was deeply disturbed by the atrocities committed by the Japanese army and decided to stage a rescue mission for the remaining prisoners at the Cabanatuan prison camp. He feared that if he waited too long, it would be impossible to save the rest of the prisoners from being massacred. A team of Rangers led by Colonel Mucci was sent on a perilous mission to rescue 600 prisoners, many of whom were weak and unable to walk back to friendly lines. The rescue mission became one of the most daring in U.S. Military history. The book "The Rescue" by Hampton Sides vividly recounts the experiences of the Rangers and the prisoners, including their struggles with diseases, pain, and psychological games. It also describes the bravery and determination of the soldiers as they navigated 25 miles of enemy territory to rescue those in need. The author's narrative brings the story to life, highlighting the importance of divine providence in the success of the mission. The book is a powerful tribute to the soldiers who risked their lives to save others, leaving readers with a sense of sadness and triumph. The tone was set by Mucci, stating there'd be no atheists on this trip, showcasing the men's dedication and motivation for a suicide mission with slim chances of success. However, they had to try to rescue fellow soldiers left behind after battles in Bataan and Corregidor in early 1942. The survivors felt abandoned and forgotten by their families and the government. As one POW put it, "No mom, no dad, no Uncle Sam, nobody cares." The book tells not just this remarkable story but also delves into extensive background information to set the stage. The author's research is commendable, making him travel the globe to find survivors and visit places where significant events took place. This depth makes the book stand out compared to a movie adaptation like "The Great Raid," which, though good, doesn't quite live up to this written account. The book's success also lies in its ability to give credit to the sacrifices made by veterans of Bataan and Corregidor through The Ghost Soldiers Endowment Fund, with a portion of its paperback royalties donated to it. A memorable experience comes from learning how even the best-laid plans can go awry, much like Napoleon said about battle. This is evident in failed missions such as Operation Eagle Claw, where despite careful planning, accidents led to the mission's failure and embarrassment for the US. In contrast, the Cabanatuan rescue mission was a resounding success due to divine intervention or just luck. The obstacles were numerous, including the POWs being too weak and sick to escape on their own. But even when Japanese guards abandoned camp for a time, allowing prisoners access to food that helped them regain strength. When Rangers arrived, they faced another challenge by having to crawl across open fields without being seen, as one POW inside the camp could easily spot them. Planes would frequently fly overhead, but a P-61 Black Widow night fighter was deployed to counter this. The plane's aerial maneuvers provided cover for the mission. After the raid, as the column of carts with the sick POWs approached the American lines, they encountered difficulty crossing the highway's steep banks. A section of the highway had to be traversed before proceeding on the other side, which proved to be the most nerve-racking part of the operation. Remarkably, not a single Japanese soldier was spotted throughout this ordeal. This extraordinary tale has largely been overshadowed by subsequent events such as the battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and the atomic bombings. For those seeking an immersive action book based on a true event with cinematic quality, "Ghost Soldiers" is a compelling read. The true story of a US Ranger mission to liberate a POW camp in WWII during the reconquest of the Philippines is told through the eyes of the survivors and the Rangers involved. Hampton Sides weaves together various narratives including the surrender of Bataan, the notorious death march, the harrowing conditions within the POW camps, and the brave liberation effort by the Rangers. His storytelling occasionally veers off on captivating tangents reminiscent of his work in "Blood and Thunder," but he remains more focused here. The story of Ghost Soldiers is one where a woman named High Pockets risked everything with her network of spies and smugglers. Everyone should read about POW camps like Cabanatuan and the horrific conditions caused by Japanese treatment, as well as interesting stats from Sides' book that show for every 1 soldier killed, 4-5 prisoners were taken, while only 1 Japanese was caught per 120 soldiers. Reading this book can help understand why past generations felt strongly about the Japanese. The Bataan Death March and rescue mission are told in detail, with some POWs playing key roles in everyday life at Cabanatuan, keeping their comrades alive despite the constant fear of execution. The bestiality of the Japanese at Cabanatuan was almost unbelievable, but a rescue plan is detailed and you'll rejoice as the US Rangers break into the camp to save men who thought they'd been forgotten. The last diary entry from one prisoner will touch your soul: "We are all ghosts now." A must-read that highly recommends itself in military history and classics. Doctor Ralph Emerson Hibbs: A Man with a Rare Gift Hibbs was a slender bespectacled man who exuded an air of quiet confidence. His sense of humor remained intact despite the dire circumstances, often catching people off guard. He was the guardian of 700 exhausted soldiers who had been fighting for survival in Cabanatuan Prison Camp. The prisoners were malnourished and exhausted, with even their hair appearing tired. They lived on scraps, using improvised weapons to defend themselves. Despite being abandoned by their government, they banded together, relying on each other's expertise in survival skills like scavenging and bartering. To lift spirits, Lieutenant Henry Lee shared his poetry with fellow soldiers, earning him the nickname "poet of Bataan." His words brought solace and comfort to those who had lost hope. The prisoners also formed an underground network, relying on outside help from people in Manila who smuggled in food and resources. A Catholic priest, Father Heinz Buttenbruck, played a crucial role in the rescue effort. His photographic memory allowed him to bring vital messages into the camp during his weekly visits. When the Rangers finally arrived, they were shocked at the prisoners' condition, describing them as "sickly old birds" who had been pushed to the brink of starvation. After the prison was evacuated, a group of soldiers and a photographer discovered hidden documents, including death logs and medical records. They also found a cache of literary works, including Henry Lee's poems, which provided a glimpse into the prisoners' lives during their darkest moments. The Bataan Death March and daring rescue mission were a pivotal moment in World War II. In January 1945, 121 US Rangers embarked on a treacherous 30-mile journey to liberate 513 POWs from the Cabanatuan camp. The Japanese had executed American prisoners elsewhere, but the Rangers' bravery would be met with both admiration and outrage. The story begins at the Puerto Princesa Prison Camp on Palawan, where the Japanese commandant ordered his troops to drown the prisoners in fire and shoot any who escaped. Some did survive, and their tales reached General MacArthur, prompting the rescue mission. The chapters alternate between the Rangers' perilous journey and the POWs' desperate struggle for survival in Cabanatuan. The human spirit's resilience is a dominant theme, as well as the crucial role of Filipino guerrillas. While the mission was initially hailed as a major success, it eventually faded into obscurity amidst other war events. However, this book sheds light on a pivotal moment in history and serves as a powerful reminder of the atrocities committed during wartime. For those who enjoy stories like Unbroken and Flags of Our Fathers, this book is an essential read. The author's extensive research and engaging narrative make it impossible to put down. The author masterfully weaves a captivating narrative by delving into the backgrounds of key characters, fostering an emotional connection with readers. Moreover, credit is given to Filipino guerrillas and humble villagers who played a crucial role in the raid's success. This book will undoubtedly appeal to fans of military non-fiction and WWII enthusiasts, but readers sensitive to graphic content may want to exercise caution. As Allied forces push Japanese forces out of Luzon island, a US Army Ranger-led mission is set in motion to rescue 500 POWs being held in Cabanatuan prison camp. The story is told through alternating chapters, juxtaposing the rescue mission with the harrowing experiences of the POWs during their three-year imprisonment in squalid conditions. The rescue of American and British POWs from the Japanese prison camp at Cabanatuan in the Philippines during World War II was a testament to the bravery and resilience of those involved. Without the support of local Filipino insurgents, it is unlikely that the prisoners would have survived. The raid, led by General Walter Krueger, was made possible by the help of Filipinos, who risked their lives to assist in the mission. Recommended for history buffs and readers who enjoy stories of survival and rescue, Hampton Sides' book delves into the treatment of American POWs by the Japanese during World War II. The author's meticulous research, which includes interviews with survivors, rescuers, and primary sources, provides a detailed account of the January 1945 rescue operation. The narrative is structured around the experiences of various characters involved in the mission, including Lt. Colonel Henry Mucci, Captain Robert Prince, and Dr. Ralph Emerson Hibbs. The author sheds light on the cultural differences between American soldiers and Japanese POWs, highlighting the significant challenges faced by those who had never been trained to handle themselves as prisoners. Through Private First Class Eugene Nielson's eyes, Sides vividly describes the atrocities committed by the Japanese, including the mass burning of POWs on Palawan Island. The rescue mission was a complex operation that required careful planning and execution, with 27% of all POWs having already been killed by the Japanese. Krueger's decision to launch the rescue mission was driven by his understanding of Japanese contempt for POWs, and the need to act quickly before more men suffered at their hands. The book provides a gripping account of the events leading up to the rescue, as well as the bravery and sacrifice of those who carried it out. The author masterfully crafts a narrative that delves into the heart-wrenching story of the 1945 operation that rescued over 500 Filipino and American prisoners of war from Cabanatuan, a Japanese camp in the Philippines. The book expertly conveys the recruitment and training of the Army Rangers, allowing readers to form a strong connection with the characters. Sides skillfully weaves together accounts of the POWs' inhumane treatment, their resilience, and the crucial role played by Filipino allies. The author's vivid descriptions of life within the prison camp, including food shortages, torture, and human cruelty, serve as a stark contrast to the courage displayed by the Rangers as they embarked on their perilous mission. Clara Fuentes, an American spy who provided critical support to the operation, is another fascinating figure whose story adds depth to the narrative. The author's portrayal of the Ranger's thoughts and emotions during the assault is both heart-warming and harrowing. The book concludes with an epilogue that follows the Rangers as they return to the United States via the USS Anderson, receiving a hero's welcome. Sides also provides insight into the lives of the rescued POWs and the US Army Rangers who played a pivotal role in their rescue. Sides' narrative masterfully interweaves chapters recounting the horrors of the Bataan Death March/Camp Cabanatuan with the daring rescue effort two years later. The author skillfully introduces us to a diverse cast of characters: dedicated Army medics and chaplains, courageous POWs, fearless Filipino rebels, and even a brave female US spy. Amidst the bleakness of camp life and Japanese brutality, Sides injects humor, offering poignant respite from the grim realities. The reader is left in awe of the resilience of those who survived these atrocities. This gripping story, well-crafted by Sides' deft writing, effectively balances its darker moments with a narrative that's both unforgettable and highly recommended. The Japanese had set up an American POW camp on the island of Palawan in January 1945. On this day, American prisoners were ordered into trenches during a fake air raid but were instead killed with machine guns or burned alive. Only six men managed to escape and make it back to the US. As American forces prepared to retake the Philippines, they were also aware of another POW camp near Cabanatuan that held 513 prisoners. These prisoners had endured the brutal Bataan Death March, where many had died from disease or starvation. The remaining prisoners were considered too weak and sick to be useful to the Japanese. A rescue mission was planned by 121 US soldiers, along with Filipino guerrillas, to liberate the prisoners on January 28, 1945. This mission involved several brave individuals, including Lieutenant Colonel Henry Mucci and Captain Robert Prince. The author of the book, Hampton Sides, tells the story of this mission, as well as the experiences of the prisoners before and after their capture. The rescue was a daring operation that required careful planning and execution. It included accounts from survivors who endured the harsh conditions in the POW camps, including Camp O'Donnell which was particularly notorious for its poor conditions. The horrors of war were brought to life on a daily basis, with tales of tropical diseases like amebic dysentery, cerebral malaria, and diphtheria spreading through the prisoners' ranks like wildfire. The dire conditions, exacerbated by near-starvation diets lacking essential vitamins and minerals, left many prisoners blind or suffering from other debilitating maladies. It's striking to note that sympathetic Filipino insurgents attempted to counteract these effects by smuggling in food items like fruit juice. What caught my attention was the author's attempt to present a balanced view of the Bataan Death March. While not whitewashing the atrocities committed against American and Filipino prisoners, as well as Filipino bystanders who tried to help them, Sides does suggest that the harsh conditions were more due to poor planning rather than malice. General Homma had anticipated evacuating POWs months in advance, preparing Camp O'Donnell as a way station with plans for healthy prisoners to march and the rest to travel by vehicle. However, this plan was grossly underprepared. With an estimated 25,000 prisoners, reality showed almost 100,000, leading to inadequate supplies of food, vehicles, and other necessities. The Japanese were surprised at the weakened state of American prisoners, many on the verge of starvation. The contrast between the mechanized American army's accustomed pace and the daily marching endurance of Japanese soldiers created a humanitarian crisis. The trek from Bataan to Camp O'Donnell took an average of a week but was prolonged due to the large numbers of prisoners and their scattered distribution, leading to the deaths of 750 Americans and 5,000 Filipinos during evacuation. Conditions at Camp O'Donnell were even more dire, claiming another 1,500 American and 15,000 Filipino lives. This book is an exemplary read that transitions smoothly from grim accounts to thrilling narratives of rescue missions. It offers a poignant day-to-day account of the POWs' experiences and the soldiers involved in their liberation, making it a compelling biography that's as engaging as it is informative. I recently read a book that provided valuable insight into the Bataan death march and POW camps operated by the Japanese. The author's account left me emotionally drained, as I struggled to comprehend the brutal conditions faced by the prisoners. At times, I felt as though I was reliving the experience alongside them. The bravery and loyalty displayed by Filipino civilians who played a crucial role in the liberation of these prisoners deserves recognition. It is essential that history acknowledges their contributions. This book is an excellent read for anyone interested in non-fiction history. Despite taking time to complete due to the lengthy background information, I thoroughly enjoyed the raid itself and found the planning process fascinating. The author's attention to detail shed light on a unique and daring operation. I was initially hesitant about reading this title, but it ultimately suited my taste in non-fiction books. The title hinted at the success of the rescue mission, which made it an appealing read. My knowledge of history is limited, but I had heard of the Bataan death march and its tragic consequences. However, what's often overlooked is that our own military's actions contributed to the prisoners' desperate situation. The subsequent treatment by the Japanese was appalling. The author masterfully weaves together the stories of the POWs and the Rangers who participated in their rescue, as well as Filipino guerrilla forces. Their work demonstrates that the rescue mission would have been unsuccessful without these groups. I'm just an emotional wreck after reading "Ghost Soldiers" by Hampton Sides. The way he weaves together the stories of these brave men who fought for their country is truly heart-wrenching. It's a must-read for anyone interested in history, especially those with family ties to the Pacific Theater during WWII. I mean, it's not just about the Nazis or Pearl Harbor - it's about the thousands of Americans who were captured and died, often under unimaginable conditions. This book is like a fictional thriller but it's real, folks! It tells the story of the "Bataan Death March" life as a POW of the Japanese Imperial Army and the courage of a group of special ops men who liberated them. I'm talking murder, cruelty, and an impossible mission that shaped the world we live in today. Trust me, you need to read this book - it's not just for history buffs or those with family ties to the Pacific Theater; it's for everyone! It'll help us understand the leaders shaping our world right now. I'm blown away by Hampton Sides' writing style and his ability to make this true story feel like a page-turner. The way he transitions between the rescue efforts and the years of torture the POWs endured is masterful. It's hard to read some parts, but it's so important that we remember these men. I'm now a Hampton Sides fan thanks to this book! On January 28, 1945, a team of elite US Army Rangers embarked on a daring mission to rescue over 500 American and British POWs held captive in the Philippines. The prisoners, including survivors of the infamous Bataan Death March, had spent three long years in a brutal camp near Cabanatuan. As I read this gripping story, I was captivated by the bravery and sacrifice of both the prisoners and their rescuers. I felt like I got to know each of them intimately, and my reaction was deeply personal. I couldn't help but think of my father's experiences in the Pacific during World War II, where he served alongside General MacArthur. This book is a must-read for fans of Laura Hillenbrand's Unbroken or Doug Stanton's In Harm's Way. James Naughton does an excellent job narrating the audiobook, making me feel like I was right in the heart of the action. One listener had a more emotional response to the story. They were deeply affected by the treatment of soldiers during wartime and struggled to continue reading at first. However, they persevered and eventually finished the book, reflecting on the senseless violence and suffering caused by war. They lamented the lack of peaceful solutions and the way wars have changed over time, with leaders becoming more detached from the front lines. The story sparked a powerful reflection on the futility of war and the importance of honoring life. The listener's heartfelt rant serves as a poignant reminder to respect and value human life, striving for peaceful resolutions rather than resorting to violence. The book's narrative delves into the "honor" of our country, yet it's driven by more than just patriotism. The author masterfully weaves a factual yet human account of the fall of Bataan, the infamous "Bataan Death March," and the internment of POWs in Camp O'Donnell. This story revolves around the rescue of 530 remaining prisoners, highlighting the bravery of Rangers, Filipino resistance fighters, Alamo Scouts, and ordinary villagers who contributed to the mission. The author's approach, focusing on particular individuals, adds a personal touch to the historical events. The narrative explores camp life, including the horrors, distractions, and camaraderie that developed among prisoners. It also delves into the tenderness displayed by Rangers as they liberated their comrades, making it a truly moving account. Seventeen years ago, I listened to an audio version of this book and was captivated. Since then, I've read three other books by Hampton Sides, all of them magnificent. The author's ability to clarify complex military situations, combined with his focus on both tactical leaders and ordinary soldiers, makes for a gripping narrative. Throughout the book, recurring motifs of human decency, fortitude, and dedication shine through, making it an excellent example of how history can be presented in an engaging and realistic manner. The movie adaptation of Hampton Sides' book seems remarkably faithful to the original story. Hampton Sides has solidified his position as one of my favorite authors, thanks to this engaging tale. May 14, 2020As a history enthusiast and fan of historical fiction, Hampton Sides is highly regarded for his works. In "Ghost Soldiers," he takes us on a harrowing journey to Cabanatuan, Philippines in 1945, where 513 American and British POWs endured unimaginable hardships. The prisoners, many of whom were survivors of the Bataan death march, faced extreme cruelty, disease, and starvation. With the Japanese being pushed out of occupied territories, the prisoners feared for their lives, knowing that the Imperial troops would not hesitate to kill them before rescuing them. Meanwhile, a daring rescue mission was hatched by U.S. Army Rangers, who hand-selected 121 troops for the perilous task. The soldiers were met with resistance from as many as 8,000 battle-hardened Japanese soldiers, but they persevered, aided by Filipino guerrillas. As the Rangers encountered the prisoners, they experienced a range of emotions, from euphoria to fear and disbelief. Some prisoners initially believed that their rescuers were impostors, having been tricked by Japanese attempts to lure them out earlier. Hampton Sides' retelling of this remarkable event is masterful and meticulously researched. The book provides a gripping narrative that sheds light on the bravery and sacrifice of the men who saved the lives of those prisoners who had been forgotten. While some critics may find the story's portrayal of certain characters believable, others might feel that it lacks happy endings in its other WWII accounts. The book offers an unbiased account of the Japanese invasion, providing limited insight into the motivations and characters of the enemy. Despite its role in shaping events, even the Huk nationalists are portrayed as enigmatic figures. The narrative is primarily told from the perspective of the allies, resulting in a one-sided portrayal. Nonetheless, when viewed as a story, it remains an engaging read.