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La Crosse to Los Banos and Back

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Hardships Of Three Years In Prison Camp In Philippines Told By Nichols On Return Home

Three years in a Japanese prison camp!

Three years of disease, malnutrition and, says Leonard David Nichols, "waiting, hoping and knowing that some day our forces would win," are recalled.

Nichols, who was released from Los Banos prison Feb. 23, 1945, after three years in which he lost 45 pounds, is visiting his parents, Mr. and Mrs. D. W. Nichols, 823 South Sixth street.

The hardships he has endured, the suffering, ill treatment—all this is hidden now behind the gladness and relief which shines in his eyes. Stories of those many months under the Japs do not come easily.

He speaks simply and with some hesitation of most incidents. But there is one day he remembers above all others and of it he is enthusiastic.



—Tribune Photo

LEONARD D. NICHOLS

[excerpt]

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 April 22, page 12)

Even though he was not in the armed forces, **Leonard D. Nichols of La Crosse** found himself in a Japanese prison camp for most of World War II. Despite his civilian status, he endured the same danger and hardships as any other military prisoner of war. Nichols and his fellow prisoners were freed in one of the most daring and successful rescue missions in military history.

Leonard D. Nichols was born August 18, 1914, at West Salem, Wisconsin, to David W. and Anna M. Nichols.¹

When he registered with the Selective Service in 1940, he was 5 feet, eight inches tall, and weighed 148 pounds.²



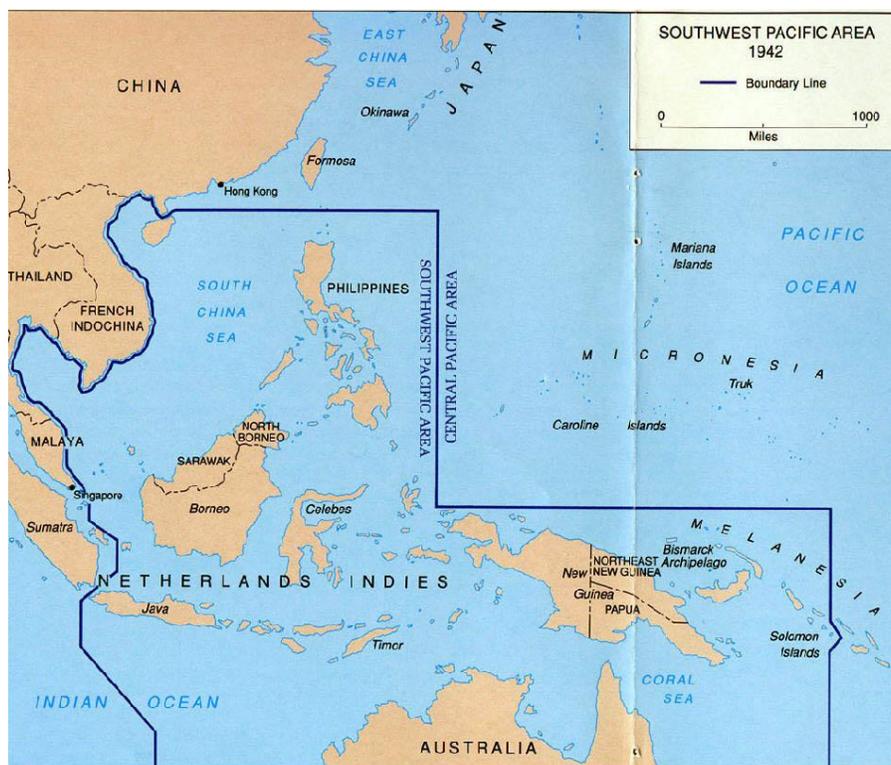
Photo of Leonard Nichols, probably from a high school yearbook
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1943 December 22, page 1)

The 27-year-old Nichols arrived in the Philippines on November 29, 1941, as a civilian employee of the Army. In his job as an aviation mechanic, he helped assemble [P-40 fighter planes](#) for the Army Air Corps³ at Nichols Field.⁴ Nichols Field was near Manila on the island of Luzon.⁵



Curtiss P-40 Warhawk
(Pacific War Online Encyclopedia)

When the Japanese made their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, they were able to destroy many of the Army Air Corps P-40 fighter planes at their airbases in Hawaii. The Americans had parked them wingtip to wingtip to make them easier to guard against sabotage. Only a few were able to get airborne and oppose the Japanese air raid that brought the United States into World War II.



Southwest Pacific in 1942
(National Archives)

Nine hours after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese launched a huge air raid on the Clark and Iba airbases in the Philippines. It was a replay of the Pearl Harbor attack without the ships. Most of the American airplanes, parked wingtip to wingtip here just as they were in Hawaii, were destroyed on the ground while their crews were having lunch. The Japanese followed up with an invasion force landing on Luzon, just north of Manila, on December 22, 1941.⁶

Nichols sent a cablegram to his parents in La Crosse on December 16 stating that he had not been hurt in the Japanese attack. It would be two years before his parents heard anything from him again.⁷

Nichols continued his work for the Army until December 31. The Japanese occupied his area on January 2, 1942, and Nichols became their captive on January 14 when civilians were given an ultimatum to surrender.⁸ The civilians were called internees rather than prisoners of war, but they were prisoners just the same.



The Philippines
(National Archives)

Meanwhile, American and Filipino troops under General Douglas MacArthur carried out a valiant but doomed defense of Luzon and the island of Corregidor for several months. President Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to escape to Australia. On April 9, 1942, the 78,000 defenders of the Bataan peninsula, weakened by hunger and disease, surrendered to the Japanese. Another 13,000 Americans and Filipinos held out on Corregidor until May 6 until they too were ordered to surrender. The Japanese now controlled the Philippine Islands, as well as thousands of military and civilian prisoners taken in the campaign.⁹

Nichols and other civilians were first interned at Santo Tomas on Luzon. As the arrogant conquerors of the Far East, the Japanese troops exerted their superiority over the captives. Nichols said "the treatment was pretty bad at first. There was quite a bit of slapping around as the Japs were feeling pretty cocky about taking Manila . . . the young Japanese pushed us around . . .," until that behavior tapered off. But there were exceptions. A young Filipino was beaten unconscious by rifle butts for insulting a Japanese guard. Nichols also saw five British civilians killed when they tried to escape.¹⁰

The Red Cross notified his parents on March 18, 1943, that Nichols was a prisoner of the Japanese.¹¹

Nichols remained at Santo Tomas until early 1943. The Red Cross was able to supply some food, and some of the captives had a stash of money that could be used to buy food. Later the Japanese took over food supplies, so the captives were fed rice and vegetables. After the vegetables disappeared, their diet consisted of rice, some coconuts, and some bananas.¹²

On May 14, 1943, Nichols and 800 younger captives were sent to a former agricultural college at Los Banos. After staying in the college buildings for a while, they were moved out into barracks made of heavy native grass. In December the men were ordered to build barracks and sanitation facilities for hundreds of women and children that would be joining them from Santo Tomas.¹³

Just before Christmas in 1943, Nichols's parents finally received a letter from him. Nichols wrote that he was living in a camp about 40 miles from Manila. He had spent some time in the hospital early in his confinement, but his health was fairly good. His duties in camp involved sanitation. "Time sure goes slow here, and at times it gets pretty monotonous." He mentioned another man from La Crosse, Lonnie Hines, being in the same camp with him for a while [Santo Tomas]. In addition to some comments about the hot, rainy weather being hard to get used to, Nichols wrote, "I sure miss all of you, and hope somehow it will be possible to get home again soon."¹⁴

The Los Banos camp was organized with a "central committee" of prisoners who dealt with their captors, and "monitors" who were each responsible for 100 people.¹⁵ Each barracks held about 100 people, and each prisoner had three feet by three feet by seven feet of personal space.¹⁶

The majority of the more than 2,000 internees were American (1,575 at the time of liberation); other nationalities represented were British, Australian, Canadian, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, and Italian.¹⁷ There was also one man from France and another from Nicaragua.¹⁸ These people had been involved in business, commercial, educational, professional, and religious pursuits when the Japanese invaded. Some were American military dependents who had not made out in time.¹⁹ Included among the captives were 500 religious people---missionaries, priests, nuns, and even two bishops.²⁰ Twelve U.S. Navy nurses were the only military personnel in the camp.²¹

All generations were present in the camp. At least 18 babies were born in captivity there.²² At the time of liberation, the youngest person was three days old and the oldest was 70 years old.²³

Their treatment got worse when the Japanese realized they were losing the war. They tried to make the captives bow to them, but nobody would do it. This was followed by "some slapping around" until the Japanese gave up that demand.²⁴

Food and tobacco were precious commodities in the camp. The prisoners ate just twice a day. The last Red Cross food package came on December 23, 1943. The bishops begged the Japanese commander for more food to stave off disease, but they were always refused. Those who had money could secretly buy things from the guards. "Two pounds of sugar cost \$80 and a half pound of tobacco \$60. A duck egg could be had for \$9. Coconuts were \$3.50 and bananas \$3 a half dozen," said Nichols. A wristwatch could be traded for four pounds of sugar, while a fountain pen would be good for five packages of cigarettes. When their money and barter items were gone, their diet suffered. Nichols said he ate cats and dogs that the prisoners had skinned and cooked. During their last week of captivity, each prisoner

was getting 2.5 ounces of unhusked rice per day. It took about six hours to husk the rice, and about five men would go to the woods under guard to get firewood for cooking. Two men who escaped into the hills looking for coconuts were shot and killed when they tried to return to camp.²⁵ Another prisoner stated that they ate weeds, flowers, vines, salamanders, slugs, grubs, and rats to survive.²⁶

Mosquitoes were thick when everyone went to bed at 7:00 p.m. They slept on mats and wooden bunks.²⁷

Despite the hunger and living conditions, Nichols said camp morale was high. Prisoners put up cartoons of the guards around the camp. For a short time, the prisoners put on camp shows, until these were prohibited, that subtly poked fun at the Japanese. A few letters came into the camp, but Nichols received only two himself.²⁸

Two cards from Nichols reached his parents in La Crosse on January 17 and 18, 1945. In one, he wrote that he hoped to be "getting home soon."²⁹ His hope was soon to be realized.

Having left the Philippines in early 1942 under a cloud of retreat and defeat, General Douglas MacArthur had made good on his vow to return by landing an American invasion force on Leyte on October 20, 1944.³⁰ From there it was less than 800 miles north to Luzon where most of the Allied military and civilian prisoners were being held.

When American troops landed on Luzon in early 1945, the prisoners enjoyed a week of unexpected freedom. After informing the central committee, the Japanese guards left Los Banos early on the morning of January 6, the day that American forces landed at Lingayen Gulf. The prisoners brought an American flag out of hiding to fly over the camp. They stayed in the camp because they thought it would make it easier for the American forces to find them. Filipinos from the area brought in food, so the prisoners ate well for the first time in years. An abandoned radio provided them with news of the American invasion.³¹

This idyllic sojourn soon ended, however, when the Japanese returned on January 14. Nichols said, "They were drunk and more mean and nasty than ever." Food rations were cut. Dysentery, malaria, and beriberi afflicted many prisoners. Ten people died just a week from the final liberation of the camp. Nichols constructed coffins and crosses for them.³² Disease and malnutrition were causing two deaths per day at the camp in January 1945.³³

By this time in the war, Japanese atrocities against prisoners were well-known. General Douglas MacArthur also felt an obligation to the people in prison camps that were there because of his inability to prevent the Japanese conquest of the Philippines in 1942. On February 3, 1945, the same day that American forces were liberating the Santo Tomas camp, MacArthur instructed Lt. General Robert Eichelberger to rescue the 2,000 prisoners at Los Banos as soon as possible. Los Banos was 50 miles behind Japanese lines on the southern shore of Laguna de Bay, a shallow lake surrounded by swampy terrain. Eichelberger delegated the mission to [Major General Joseph Swing](#) of the 11th Airborne Division. Swing gave the task to [Colonel Robert Soule](#) of the 188th Glider Regiment.³⁴



11th Airborne Division patch
(Medals of America)

The mission required intelligence about the Los Banos camp. Filipino guerrillas scouted the area, and they also brought out Peter Miles, an American engineer, who had recently escaped. Miles drew a map of the camp that included Japanese defensive positions.³⁵

Assembling the raiding force was the next step. Nine [C-47 transport planes](#) for a company of paratroopers were readied at Nichols Field, the same airfield where Leonard Nichols had worked on P-40 fighter planes. Fifty [amtracs](#) were gathered to transport the freed prisoners and raiding party away from the camp.³⁶

The raiding party of 32 Americans and 80 Filipino guerrillas marched to the northern shore of Laguna de Bay on February 20. Then they paddled native canoes to the southern shore and went into hiding. During the night, they traversed rice paddies and swamps for seven hours to reach their jumping-off point near the camp.³⁷



Map of the Los Banos Raid
(Bruce Henderson Books)³⁸

The liberation of Los Banos finally came in the early morning hours of February 23, 1945. The raiding party set off smoke grenades to mark the camp for the amphibious force and the paratroopers before bursting into the camp to kill the guards. Paratroopers dropped from the sky to set up blocking positions to oppose any Japanese reinforcements.³⁹ Leonard Nichols was standing beside a barracks when he saw the first American paratrooper land. When the firing started, all the prisoners laid flat on the ground to avoid being hit. After about a half-hour, the camp was in American hands.⁴⁰ In an operation demonstrating masterful coordination and timing, all [2,122 civilian internees](#) were safely rescued.⁴¹

Amtracs waddled up to the camp to start shuttling prisoners out while fighter planes flew air cover. The prisoners gathered their meager belongings (Nichols forgot to take his prison diary) and loaded on the amtracs for a trip across the Laguna de Bay lake under sporadic Japanese fire.⁴²

For such a risky and complicated operation behind enemy lines, total casualties were light. Two Filipino guerrillas were killed and six wounded in the attack on the camp. Two American paratroopers were wounded in taking the camp. Three soldiers of the 11th Airborne in the overland task force were killed; this group was advancing along a highway to link up with the raiding force, but they were not able to break through that far. Of the estimated 250-man Japanese garrison of the camp, about 70 were killed and the rest fled.⁴³

After a week in a rest camp, they were flown from Luzon to Leyte. From there, Nichols was on a ship to the United States, arriving on April 8. Leonard Nichols was in his parent's home at 823 6th Street South, La Crosse, Wisconsin, on noon, April 17, 1945, after an extraordinary wartime experience.⁴⁴

The success of the Los Banos Raid was tempered by a horrific aftermath for the Filipino people who lived around the Los Banos Camp. The Japanese assumed they had assisted the Americans with the raid, and the Japanese exacted a terrible revenge. About 1,500 Filipinos were massacred with bullets, bayonets, and by being burned alive after being tied up in their homes.⁴⁵

In 1945, Leonard Nichols started working for Ohio Medical, a medical supplies company. He remained with them for 37 years, retiring in 1982. He was married two times and had a son and a daughter. Leonard D. Nichols, who was part of one of the great stories of World War II, died on June 6, 1999, in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, at the age of 84.⁴⁶



Leonard Nichols
(*The Capital Times*, 1999 June 8, page 21)

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Sources & Notes:

¹ "Nichols, Leonard D.," *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1999 June 8, page 21.

² The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System*, 147; Box: 514.

³ "Hardships Of Three Years In Prison Camp In Philippines Told By Nichols On Return Home," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 22, page 12. The P-40 Warhawk was the primary Army Air Corps fighter plane at the beginning of World War II. Before the United States entered the war, Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group pilots, the famous "Flying Tigers," used it successfully against the Japanese in China. In a one-on-one dogfight with a Japanese Zero, however, the Warhawk could be outmaneuvered. P-40 fighter planes were used in the early years of the war in both the European and Pacific Theaters, but by the last few years of the war, they were largely superseded by better Allied aircraft.

⁴ "A Real Christmas Present--Letter From Prisoner Son," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 December 12, page 1.

⁵ Lt. Gen. Edward M. Flanagan Jr. USA (Ret.), *The Los Banos Raid: The 11th Airborne Jumps at Dawn* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1986), 21. Flanagan was an officer with the 11th Airborne fighting on Luzon, but he was not part of the rescue mission (page 9).

⁶ Donald Miller, *The Story of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 102.

⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1943 December 12.

⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

⁹ Miller, 104-105.

¹⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

¹¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1943 December 12.

¹² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

¹⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1943 December 12. The article notes that Lonnie Hines had lived in La Crosse, but "is believed to have moved from here to Green Bay, Wis."

¹⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

¹⁶ Flanagan 28.

¹⁷ Flanagan, 237-262.

¹⁸ Flanagan, 26.

¹⁹ Flanagan, 15.

²⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

²¹ Flanagan, 25.

²² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

²³ Flanagan, 26.

²⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

²⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

²⁶ Flanagan, 29-30.

²⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

²⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

²⁹ "Family Receives Two Cards From Prisoner Of Japanese," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 January 28, page 9.

³⁰ Frazier Hunt, *The Untold Story of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), 309.

³¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22. This newspaper article states that the guards left the camp on December 6, but the invasion of Lingayen Gulf was on January 6, 1945. The latter date fits the timeline presented by Nichols. For more on the Lingayen Gulf invasion, see: James M. Scott, "Terror & Triumph at Lingayen Gulf," *U.S. Naval Institute*, 2018 October, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2018/october/terror-triumph-lingayen-gulf>.

³² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

³³ Flanagan, 30.

³⁴ Frazier Hunt, *The Untold Story of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), 335-336.

³⁵ Hunt, 336.

³⁶ Hunt, 336.

³⁷ Hunt, 336.

³⁸ Bruce Henderson, *Rescue at Los Banos: The Most Daring Prison Camp Raid of World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 2015), <https://brucehendersonbooks.com/books/rescue-at-los-banos/overview/>.

³⁹ Hunt, 336.

⁴⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

⁴¹ Flanagan, 13. For a list of all the internees rescued, see: http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/philippines/PHI-CIV-02_Los-Banos_roster_1944-12-25_RG389Bx2070.pdf

⁴² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

⁴³ Flanagan, 218-219. Sources differ on the American casualties during the mission. Hunt states that it was two dead and one wounded, with one internee slightly wounded. Flanagan (page 11) states that there was not a single fatality in the raiding force, but the Soule Task Force suffered four American soldiers killed (page 11). Miller (page 434) shows two American soldiers killed and two wounded.

⁴⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 22.

⁴⁵ Flanagan, 205-213.

⁴⁶ *The Capital Times*, 1999 June 8.

See also:

- 11th Airborne Los Banos Rescue February 23, 1945 (a shorter version of "Rescue at Dawn") <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ubPOf4QUE>
- Rescue at Dawn The Los Banos Raid Documentary <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oebl8r8Q8eE>
- Raid on Los Banos <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqkTddTNMBY>
- Jim Holzen-Los Banos Raid <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oODQI9g856I>
- Rescue: Allied Prisoners, Los Banos, Luzon, Philippine Islands 1945 (full) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VINyM3SoFkA>