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# Fight for freedom

## Author unearths daring POW raid

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Hampton Sides was an editor for Outside magazine in Santa Fe, N.M., publishing true-life stories about thrill-seekers who risked life and limb to challenge Mount Everest or cross the ocean in a canoe.

Then he stumbled on a story of real heroism: the liberation of 513 soldiers who endured the Bataan Death March in the Philippines during World War II and were held captive for nearly the entire war.

Vestiges of the march are everywhere in Sides' home state.

"There are a lot of survivors from the Bataan Death March who live in New Mexico," says Sides. "More than any other state. The name Bataan is on everything out here: buildings, streets, parades.

"I didn't know what the connection was until I found out they took the National Guard of New Mexico, federalized it and turned it into an Army artillery unit and sent the entire batch [of soldiers] to the Philippines.

"About half of them came back."

His engrossing "Ghost Soldiers," due out Tuesday, details a battle in which tens of thousands of Allied troops surrendered to the Japanese — the largest surrender in U.S. military history. They were then forced to march away from the action, a grueling journey that became known as the Bataan Death March.

Sides tells of the atrocities that the American and British POWs endured on their slow, demoralizing march to prison.

But the nightmare didn't end there. Some were shipped off to

serve as slave laborers for the Japanese. Others remained in the Philippines as prisoners in extreme conditions.

It was there that one camp was liberated years later during a daring rescue by the U.S.

In January of 1945, an elite group of Rangers was sent behind enemy lines to attempt a rescue. They were successful in their mission: Virtually everyone still alive was rescued, and the Allies suffered only minor casualties.

The raid garnered headlines around the world and served as inspiration for two movies, "Bataan," with Robert Taylor, and "Back to Bataan," starring John Wayne. (A new movie focusing on the raid is planned by Universal.)

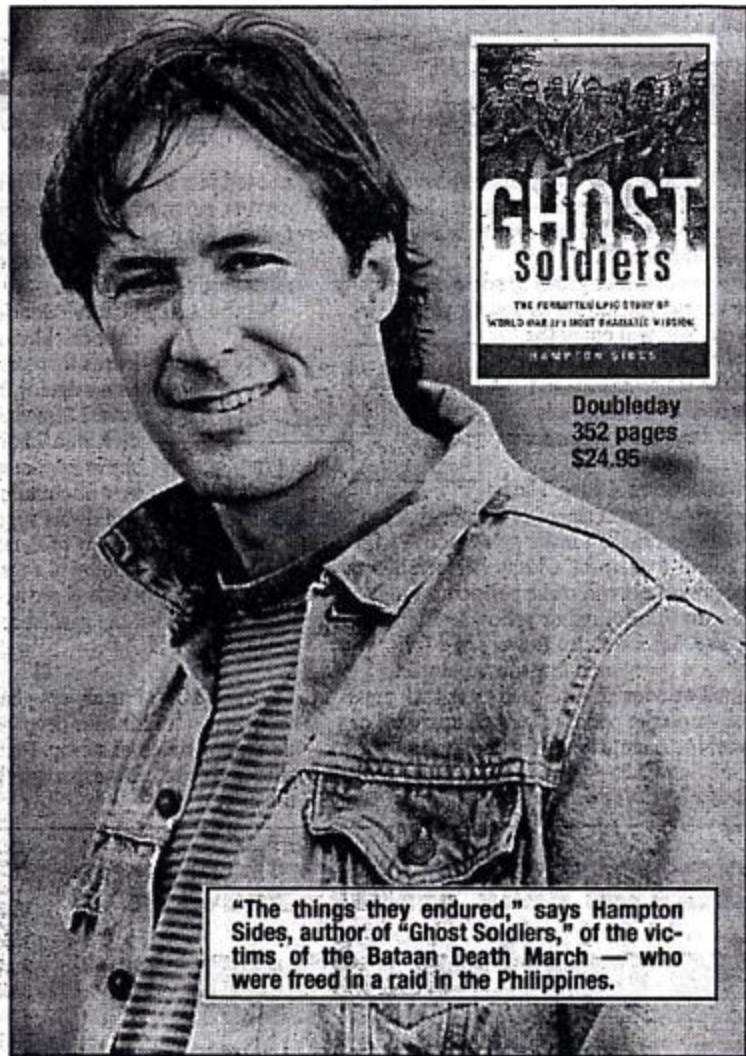
To tell this story, Sides quit his job and spent two years interviewing every survivor he could find.

"When I interviewed a lot of the Rangers, they were so modest," says the 39-year-old author.

"I had to remind them of how many things could have gone wrong. You had a thousand Japanese soldiers camping a mile away. You had seven to eight thousand Japanese soldiers four miles away in the garrison. You had two or three hundred Japanese soldiers in the camp itself.

"The death toll could have been so much higher. In a way, the Rangers went off half-cocked. They were certainly well-trained, elite soldiers. But they took off with a lot of optimism and, as it turned out, a lot of luck."

Among the lucky breaks: A major river the Rangers had to ford was at its lowest point (if they'd tried the raid at another



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"The things they endured," says Hampton Sides, author of "Ghost Soldiers," of the victims of the Bataan Death March — who were freed in a raid in the Philippines.

time of year, it simply wouldn't have been possible).

Also, local rebels bore the brunt of the fighting with remarkable bravery and even arranged for the transport of the feeble prisoners.

Given the famously reticent nature of many World War II vets, Sides wasn't sure how forthcoming the former POW's would be.

"At first, I'd feared I had come to this too late and they wouldn't be able to talk," says Sides, who lives in Santa Fe with his wife and three sons.

"On the other hand, as they've come to the end of their lives, they've been opening up a lot more. A lot of their wives told me they didn't talk about any of this stuff until last few years. War is pretty horrific in general, but particularly for these guys.

"The tragedies they saw, the things they endured — believe me, they're still dreaming about it. A few wouldn't talk at all."

When they did talk, it often led to heartfelt emotions, some bitterness about feeling forgotten

by the U.S., and even tears. Not that the interviews always flowed smoothly.

"The first in-depth interview I did was with Tommy Thomas," says Sides. "He lived in Texas at the time. I made a tactical error right off the bat. I rented a car in Austin, and it was a Mitsubishi.

"I drove up to the driveway. He didn't say anything, but his wife came out and said two words: 'The nerve.' And she was dead serious."

Now Sides knows better. But he's still surprised at how little he knew about the fighting in the Pacific — even if the reason for our national amnesia isn't hard to grasp.

"I was really fascinated and kind of amazed by my level of ignorance about this chapter of the war," says Sides.

"I'm not particularly a war buff. [To me,] Bataan was only the vaguest of references: the largest surrender in military history. But Americans don't quit. We don't give up.

"And I guess Bataan violates a lot of ideas about ourselves and our invincibility."