

CDR Zemo Tarnowski, USN RET

10 May 1918 to 1 Feb 1998

Zemo Tarnowski enlisted in the United States Navy on 29 Dec 1937 and had advanced to the rate of first-class petty officer when Pearl Harbor took place.

This is a brief story of the only enlisted Aerographer's Mate to be awarded the Navy Cross for his remarkable actions during World War II. The account is based directly upon the book LAUGHTER IN HELL by Stephen Marek. Read it.

Captured by the Japanese Army on the Bataan Peninsula in 1942, he survived the Death March and was sent to prison in Osaka, Japan. These men worked as stevedores in the railroad yards and underwent the same severe conditions that became a hallmark of the treatment accorded prisoners by the prison guards (that we all have read and heard about).

A peculiarity of the mindset of the Japanese guards was in their attitude toward the commissioned-officer prisoners. The Geneva POW Accords provide that officers could not be forced to perform manual labor. Therefore, the guards simply would not pay attention to the POW Commanding Officer because they did not work and therefore "earn their way." Nothing could be accomplished in adjudicating day-to-day conditions.

In response the entire group of prisoners – in conference – decided to elect an enlisted man to act as the POW Commandant. A leader who did perform labor and was acceptable (in their eyes) to deal with.

When this elective approach was determined, it was unanimously decided that AG1 Tarnowski, USN, would be the POW leader for the remainder of the interment. It followed that he was quite effective in communicating with the guards, but each time that he approached them, they administered a (physical) beating before talking could and would proceed.

The prisoners developed a way of life seldom, if ever, witnessed that resulted in their becoming strong, healthy men who had developed a unique relationship with the local populace. This is explained in detail in LAUGHTER IN HELL.

When the war was over, the command reverted to the POW officers. They, in turn, wrote a recommendation to the Navy Department and requested that AG1 Tarnowski be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in recognition of his actions in Osaka. This was denied because "he was not wounded in action." The award was downgraded to the Navy Cross (the nation's second highest individual award).

In my opinion, Commander Zemo Tarnowski, USN, was the most efficient and capable weather forecaster ever to serve in our field of endeavor.

Written and submitted by:

Paul O. Grisham, LT, USN (ret)