
Journeys
HOME

Journeys HOME

Inspiring Stories, Plus Tips and Strategies to Find Your Family History

Featuring Andrew McCarthy, Joyce Maynard, Pico Iyer, Diane Johnson & the National Geographic Travel Team

Foreword by Dr. Spencer Wells, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence

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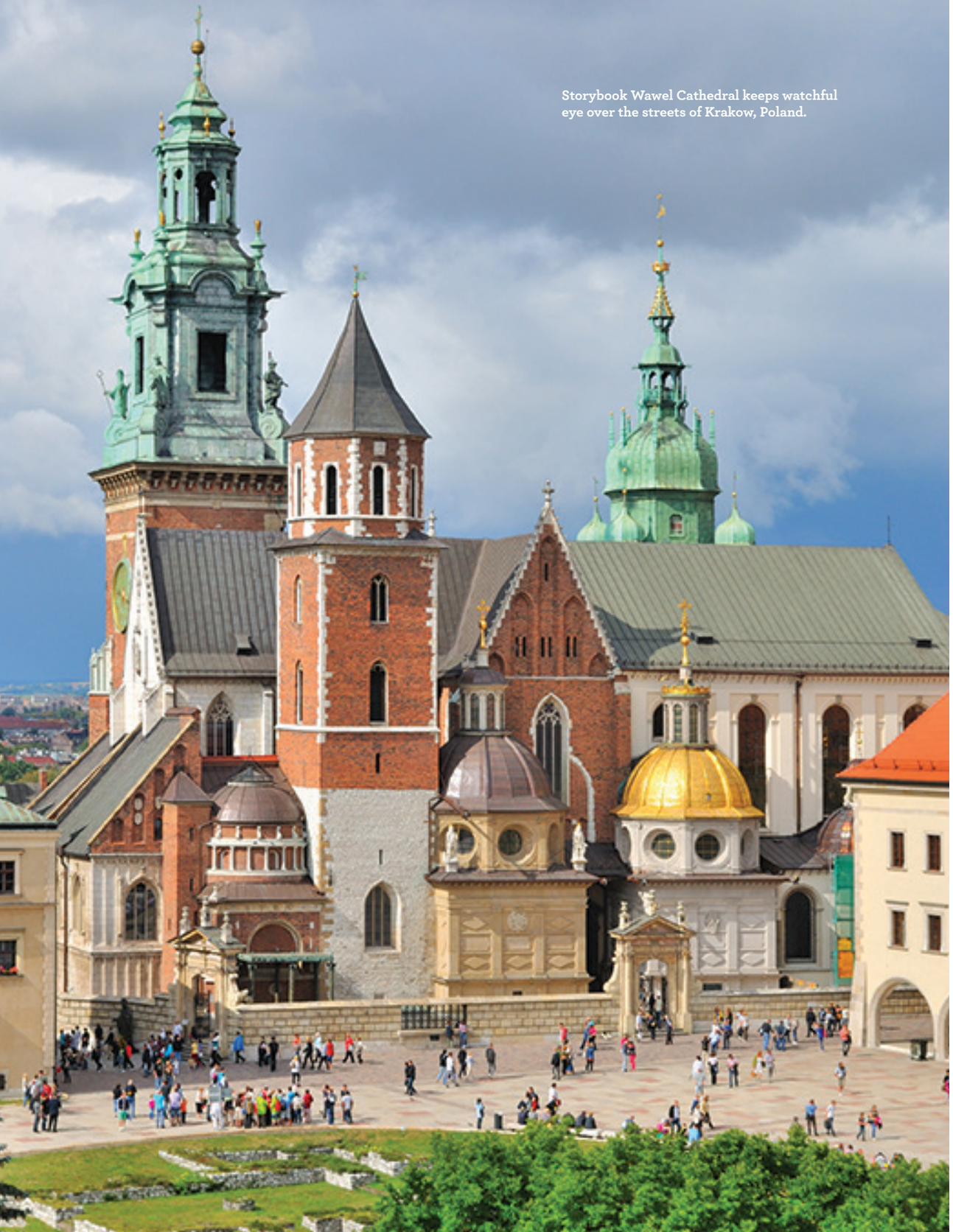
The soft, spellbinding moorland atop the Brecon Beacons mountains in Britain



Storybook Wawel Cathedral keeps watchful eye over the streets of Krakow, Poland.

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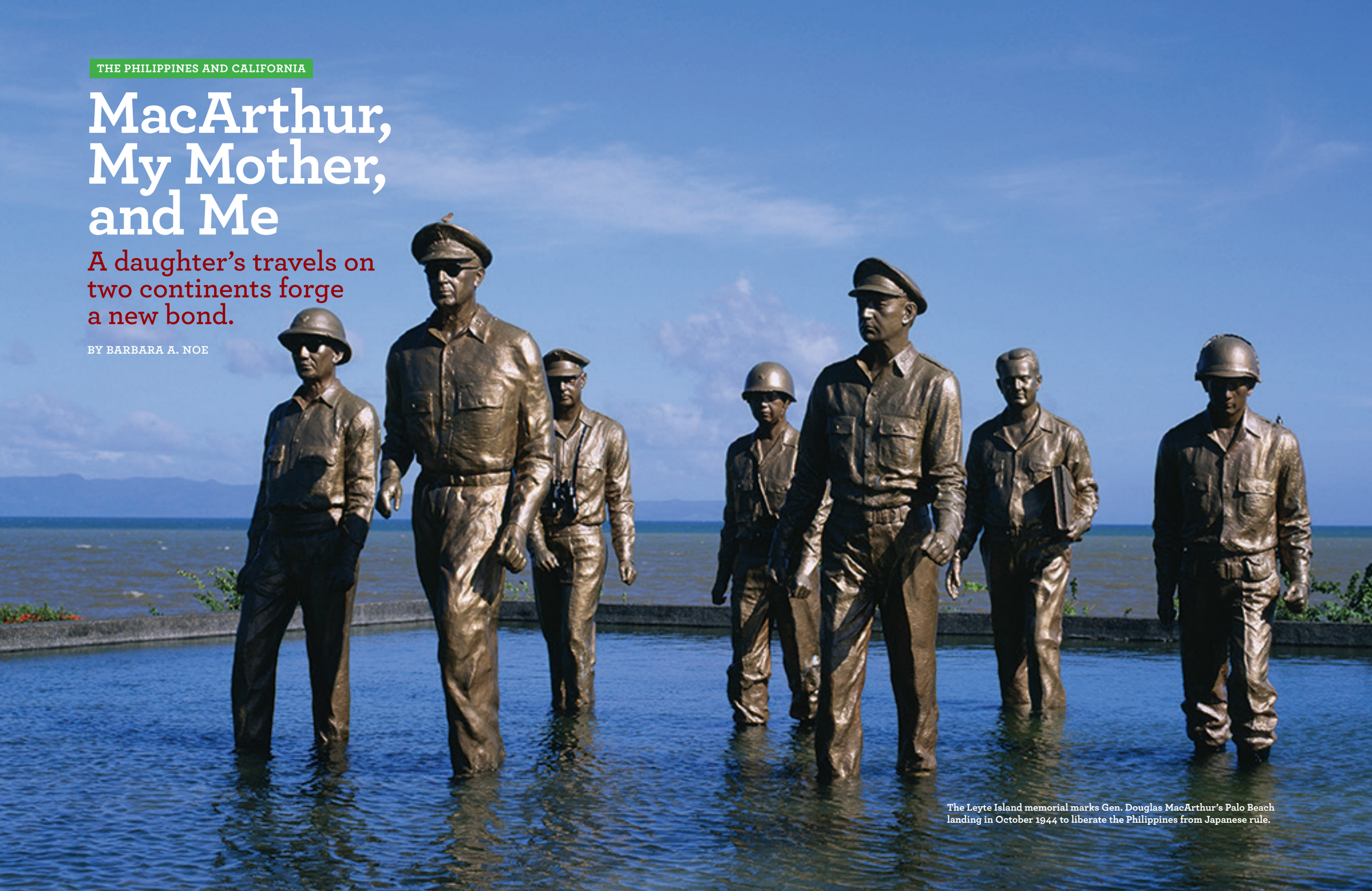
THE PHILIPPINES AND CALIFORNIA

MacArthur, My Mother, and Me

A daughter's travels on two continents forge a new bond.

BY BARBARA A. NOE



The Leyte Island memorial marks Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Palo Beach landing in October 1944 to liberate the Philippines from Japanese rule.

"We're looking for the Dewey Mine," I say nervously. My fiancé, David Kennedy, and I have trespassed on private land deep in Siskiyou County, in northern California, and I'm convinced that the owner may pull out a gun. But I'm determined to stay strong because I'm here in a last-ditch attempt to learn everything I can about my mother's intriguing childhood (and, dare I say, obtain some insight into our sometimes wobbly, typical mother-daughter relationship during my own childhood).

It all started a few years back, when I accompanied my mother on a trip to the Philippines.

Wait. Let me back up.

Leanne Blinzler Noe, my mother, spent the first three years of her life in Siskiyou County, where her father worked at Dewey gold mine and her mother, who had eschewed a cosmopolitan San Francisco lifestyle, kept house in a two-bedroom shack.

After the mine was closed in the mid-1930s, my grandfather, Lee Blinzler, sought work in the Philippines, where a mining boom was in full swing. My grandmother, Kay, joined him a few months later, in October 1936, with their two little girls, my mother and my aunt Ginny.

The mother of author Barbara Noe (right) and two friends return to the site of their wartime imprisonment.

"It all started a few years back, when I **accompanied my mother on a trip to the Philippines.**"

They lived on the small island of Marinduque in a bamboo Nipa hut, and it looked like their life was on an uptick. In January 1937, my grandmother wrote to her sister back in the States: "It is a very nice sensation to know we are climbing out of debt. Four years of poverty operations and babies isn't easy but we do feel that 1937 will be good for a change."

Alas, out of the blue, with no nearby medical facilities, my grandmother died three months later at the age of 27 from an indeterminate disease. My grandfather placed my mother and her sister in a German convent, first in Manila, then at the nuns' summer place in Baguio, in northern Luzon, near the mine where he worked.

The nuns were strict, of course. But my mother and aunt enjoyed forest hikes, eating the world's best mangoes, and seeing their dad on the weekends, when they would ride ponies at Burnham Park or go to the coast at Miramonte, stopping at barrios along the way to see a cockfight or to pose in front of a carabao.

THEN, IN DECEMBER 1941, eight hours after Pearl Harbor was attacked, the Japanese bombed the Philippines. They invaded the country and imprisoned all Allies, including my grandfather. My mother and her sister remained at the convent until they too were interned in 1944.

A desolate remnant of Dewey Mine, in northern California, where Barbara Noe's grandparents lived and worked

When I was growing up, my mother would toss out random stories about her experiences in the prison camp: bedbugs, one-ladle food rations (and her father's sharp command to never eat anything that spilled onto the cement floor while being served), the Japanese death warrant that had been issued on the prisoners as American soldiers neared Manila, and the impressive rescue spearheaded by Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

On top of that was the still present scar in her cheek, and the fact that she cannot to this day open her mouth more than two fingers wide—the result of shrapnel that lodged itself into her jaw during the Battle of Manila. She still keeps the piece of shrapnel in her jewelry box. I used to finger it as a child, imagining the pain and terror she must have felt (though she insists that she didn't feel anything, probably due to shock).

I think my mom's lack of traditional family life as a child created her commitment to building a tight-knit one with my father and my two sisters and me. But sometimes, my mother was distant, lost in her thoughts. I never had the words to delve any deeper into what was bothering her. She's a very strong woman and was devoted to making the best of things and moving forward with her life.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I JUMPED at the chance to join her on a trip back to the Philippines with a group of about 50 former civilian and military POWs, as well as some of the soldiers who had rescued them, to celebrate Liberation Day. It was during this trip that I slowly began to understand the chronology of everything that had happened to her, the details, the significance.

We toured Corregidor, MacArthur's last stronghold before he fled to Australia, vowing, "I shall return." We walked the last half a mile of the Bataan Death March, when more than 70,000

The author and her mother join the Liberation Day anniversary celebration at University of Santo Tomas in Manila.

American and Filipino soldiers were forced on a 55-mile trek beneath the searing sun and thousands perished.

But perhaps the most poignant moment of the trip came at University of Santo Tomas in Manila. The venerable university had been converted to an internment camp for Allied civilians, where my mother—11 years old at the time—and her little sister were imprisoned in March 1944. Her two camp friends Dorothy Mullaney Brooks and Connie Ford were on our trip as well, and we all wanted to visit the classroom that they had called home.

We climbed the grand mahogany stairs to the third floor. The three friends were silent as we strolled down the window-lined hallway and found what had been Room 55-A. As they surveyed the desk-filled room, I tried to imagine 25-odd beds crammed wall to wall, with everyone's meager belongings tucked away in their tiny allocated space.

"Our cots were over there," my mother said, pointing to a spot on the floor.

The friends reminisced about the 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. roll calls and the subsistence meals of *lugao,* or watery rice, and how they had to bow to Japanese sentries. My mother's main job was to stand in the food line to get meals for herself and her father (her younger sister stood in a different line).

My mother shared a story about a rubber doll she found one day in the outside trash. "Its one arm was a little softened, sticky," she said, "but I don't know why someone threw it away. I took it and nurtured it, sewed clothes for it out of scraps."

My heart went out to that little girl—my mother. She had lost her own mother at such an early age. She nearly starved to death. Obviously, any of my struggles in the urban jungle were incomparable. Maybe that's not fair to me (I say), but I was slowly beginning to understand.

Connections

When I was little, my mother often talked about her hero, Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Of course, the notion of "hero" contradicted so much of what I'd go on to learn about the arrogant, difficult World War II commander. That said, it was due solely to his quick-witted determination that the Santo Tomas POWs—my mother, aunt, and grandfather included—were liberated.

Years later, when my mother was in her 20s, she wrote MacArthur in admiration. He wrote back, rather humbly: "It was thoughtful . . . to write me as you have and I appreciate it more than I can say." —Barbara A. Noe

> "Japanese gunfire exploded all around them. **The American soldier standing next to my mother was killed—killed!**"

DURING OUR VISIT TO SANTO TOMAS, we commemorated their Liberation Day with an outdoor celebration in front of the Main Building. As I sat listening to a mix of Filipino and American music, enjoying wonderful chicken and pork adobo, it struck me that on exactly the same spot, a different scene unfolded on that day, February 3, 1945. Rumor had it that the Japanese planned to kill the internees of Santo Tomas; MacArthur was adamant that the First Cavalry move to Manila as quickly as possible and rescue them. My mother, who was not aware of an imminent threat, shared her story with me.

"After dinner that evening," my mother told me, "while dishes were being washed, planes flew overhead and a pilot dropped a pair of goggles with a note: 'Roll out the barrel,' referring to the song whose last line is 'the gang's all here.' The planes left and everyone returned to their chores. There was a six o'clock roll call and early bedtime. I could see the light from tracer bullets streaking across the sky through the windows. I heard the rumblings, gunfire in the distance, and the dark sky lit up.

"Around nine o'clock, without warning, the plaza in front of the Main Building illuminated with pink and white flares. Ginny and I rushed down from our room to the front hall and watched from the crowded stairs.

"Soon a tank came into view. Everyone was running around and shouting, 'They're here! They're here!' The vehicle came to a halt and several unusually tall and healthy-looking men emerged, looking like big, good-natured giants. Gen. William C. Chase stood up on a table in the lobby: 'I'm so glad to see you,' he said. 'Better to give life than take life.' "

But their ordeal wasn't over yet.

A few days later, against all precautionary regulations, my mother and her sister snuck out of the Main Building to the plaza just in front to get some Hershey bars offered by a couple of soldiers they had met. Although they had been liberated, the Battle of Manila was in full swing and as the Americans fought to free the rest of the city, Japanese gunfire exploded all around them. The American soldier standing next to my mother was killed—killed!

My mother speaks so matter-of-factly about the incident; how a chunk of shrapnel became embedded in her jaw; how her sister's arm received a

World War II topside barracks on Corregidor Island, Philippines, housed U.S. soldiers.

The author's mother was among those liberated in November 1944.

wound that would require 90 stitches; how she and her sister were rushed to an evacuation hospital, where they saw others more wounded than themselves; how her father later visited the dead soldier's family in New Jersey.

As we flew out of Manila a few days after the Liberation Day celebration, my mother sat next to me, staring out the window into the darkness of the night, no doubt contemplating all the memories that had been stirred up during the trip. I touched her arm, feeling a closeness that I had yearned for during my childhood.

BACK IN CALIFORNIA, she and I later searched for the tiny mining community near Yreka, where she spent her first three years, but failed.

Now, David and I are trying to track it down. I had targeted in on a map, on one small area. But I couldn't figure out, in this rugged, remote corner, exactly which little road was *the* road.

It was David's idea to simply drive onto the property of the first open gate we found. So imagine my surprise when the man on whose property we trespassed said, "You're on Dewey Mine Road." We were thankful he didn't have a gun.

"It's a pretty bad road," he continued, mentally assessing our rented four-wheel drive. "Wait a minute. I'll lead you there."

We followed his truck for a bit, and just like that, we were grinding along the same forested road that had been the main connection between my grandparents, mother, and aunt, and the outside world nearly 80 years before.

I have letters that my grandmother wrote from there that bring alive her self-effacement and sense of humor, complete with her misspellings. She talks about wanting a Scotty dog instead of a diamond ring: "Up in the mountains a dog would be company for me while Lee is at the mine; a ring would only be a nuisance."

We make it across six creek crossings, bouncing along the rutted route, avoiding holes, boulders, and tree limbs. I recall a story that my mother told me about my great uncles—my grandmother's brothers—coming once to visit. My grandfather advised them against driving at night, but of course they did. And the car turned over. Horses had to be brought the next day to right the car.

After 3.2 miles, we spot a dilapidated building—the stamp mill. We park the car and walk from there. A little creek meanders alongside us in the epitome of a sylvan scene. The air smells of pine and dirt—clean and fresh. Thunder groans overhead, and I wonder if my grandfather is watching us from above.

And then we spot two cabins. Was this where my mother lived? One's smashed to the ground, but the other one remains standing. Corrugated metal covers the front, and two wooden doors lie flat against them. We walk to it and I peek inside, a sense of reverence overcoming me as I seemingly peer into the past. I have my grandmother's words:

> The place was all dull grey and
> I have been making the living room
> ivory. Finished our room in cream and
> green. Then Leanne's room is perfect.
> The walls are turquoise blue and the
> woodwork pink. I made a stencil fuzzy
> little white lamb, to go around the wall,
> with a pink ribbon at a rakish angle . . .
> Lee was laughing the other day, think-
> ing what some tough miner will say
> one day if such ever has to occupy
> that room.

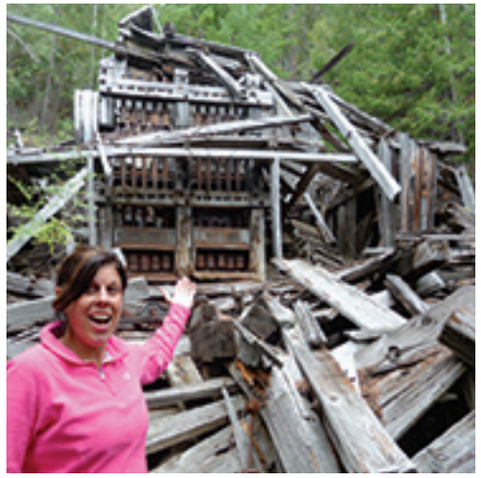
But where's the mine?

We continue up the road and, after a fruitless hike up what we finally deem to be the wrong way, we return to the stream, deducing that the mine must have been nearby because it relied on a water source. We see tailings (waste rock) that certainly belonged to a mine. We follow a trail along a hillside. Then, peering into the foliage below, I spot what appears to be a collapsed tree house. I look more closely, and amid the squashed timber I see a wheel. No doubt about it, we found the mine!

The wind whispers through the trees and swaying pines. Everything surrounding us remains exactly the same as when my grandparents lived here as a young couple newly in love. I sense them around me, nodding their heads at my victorious quest. All of the puzzle pieces have fallen into place, and I feel at peace.

I cannot wait to tell my mother.

BARBARA A. NOE is the senior editor of National Geographic Travel Books. She helped her mother write her story in the book *MacArthur Came Back: A Little Girl's Encounter With War in the Philippines.*



Barbara Noe finds the rubble of Dewey Mine.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PHILIPPINES AND WORLD WAR II

• WATCH
Nothing brings the internment camp experience into focus like the firsthand accounts of Allied civilian prisoners. In ***Victims of Circumstance,*** a documentary by Lou Gopal and Michelle Bunn, Santo Tomas Internment Camp survivors (including writer Barbara Noe's mother) share their gripping personal stories.

• VISIT
World War II history books, handwritten letters from internment camp survivors, and pre–World War II memorabilia (such as invitations, hotel brochures, and phone books) are included in the James J. Halsema Collection of Philippine History housed at the **MacArthur Memorial** *(macarthurmemorial.org)* in Norfolk, Virginia. The U.S.-born Halsema was incarcerated and tortured during the Japanese occupation.

• READ
Reading books set in wartime Philippines can help flesh out your own ancestor's story. Two must-reads: ***When the Elephants Dance*** by Tess Uriza Holthe (Crown, 2002), a lyrically written novel set in the final days of World War II about several Filipino families in Manila, and ***Ghost Soldiers: The Epic Account of World War II's Greatest Rescue*** by Hampton Sides (Anchor, 2002), the minute-by-minute re-creation of the dramatic rescue of Allied soldiers at Cabanatuan.