



The only portrait of Cliff and Eva Condon together in his archival collection in Morgantown. Probably taken in California in the 1930s. West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries

## CLIFFORD CONDON'S LAST WINTER

by Kyle Warmack, Program Officer

### For Cliff and Eva

AS THE HOLIDAYS DREW NEAR IN DECEMBER 1944, most Americans had reason to be optimistic about how World War II was progressing. In Europe, Allied forces had advanced steadily into France after June's D-Day landings. Paris had been liberated. Axis forces were nearly pushed out of Italy, and on the Eastern Front, the Nazis had largely been driven from Romania, Yugoslavia, and Hungary.

In the Pacific, the retaking of the Marianas Islands meant that Japan was now in range of American B-29 bombers. And in the final months of 1944, after American sea victories left the Japanese fleet in tatters, General Douglas MacArthur inaugurated the long-awaited liberation of the Philippines.

Still, millions of Americans celebrated Christmas with a note of trepidation, not knowing whether their husbands, fathers, or sons overseas were safe. One of the families suffering from this uncertainty dwelt in a modest, two-story home at 549 Locust Avenue in Morgantown, where they had lived for over twenty years in the working-class Woodburn neighborhood, up a slope overlooking the sparkling waters of Deckers Creek and the Monongahela River.

The residents of 549 Locust—glass worker Nesley Condon and his wife Bertha—had two sons in the Navy, Carl and Clifford, or “Cliff,” as they usually called him. True, their sons were not new to naval service; both had enlisted as young men in 1923 and made Uncle Sam's Navy their careers. Both had served with the Pacific Fleet and Philippines-based Asiatic Fleet in Manila, homeport of the “Yangtze gunboats” that patrolled the pirate-infested waters of coastal China. In fact, Carl's wife had even been evacuated from northern China when the Empire of Japan reinaugurated its invasion of China in 1937.

But Nesley and Bertha Condons' concern was very real as their fourth wartime Christmas neared, because Cliff hadn't been heard from since December 13, 1941. That day, during the shocking and chaotic week following the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, a Western Union telegram arrived for Cliff's wife Eva. She was working as a typist in the massive Navy yard in Vallejo, California, where she and Cliff had spent several years during the 1930s.

The telegram was brutally short, but tried to be reassuring. The last words Eva would receive from Cliff for several years were:

“ALL OF US WELL NO REASON FOR WORRY  
NOTIFY MOTHER MERRY XMAS.”

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THREE YEARS AFTER THE TELEGRAM, HOWEVER, all was not well for Cliff. He had spent that time as a prisoner of war of the Japanese, almost all of it in Manila's rank, overcrowded Bilibid Prison, where most internees lost 50 pounds or more due to starvation rations and inadequate medical care. A Navy pharmacist with over 20 years of service (mostly in the Pacific), Cliff had been captured almost immediately, along with most of his Cañacao Navy Hospital hospital staff, when the Japanese marched into Manila in January 1942.

Some of his fellow corpsmen and pharmacists were already dead, killed when Japanese bombers gutted Cavite Navy Yard near the hospital. Others had been sent to join Marine units in Bataan and Corregidor, where they fought on for several more months before joining tens of thousands of Americans in squalid POW camps—assuming they had survived the fighting at all.

After several stints in temporary camps following their capture in January 1942, Cliff and over a hundred of the Cañacao Hospital officers and enlisted men were installed in Bilibid Prison—a decrepit old Spanish jail in the heart of Manila. Cañacao's Navy medical officers became Bilibid's chief administrators, working with Japanese military authorities to address issues of camp hygiene and supply (when and if anything could be done at all).

Due to his long experience, Cliff was put in charge of Bilibid's Personnel department and given a staff of five Pharmacist's Mates. Together, they kept records for the Japanese, tracking the transfers, illnesses, and deaths of thousands of prisoners. This was a priority for the Japanese military, who as the war ground onward, increasingly viewed American prisoners as expendable manpower that could replace Japanese men of fighting age in factories, mines, and other war industries. Such resources, like ammunition or planes, had to be documented similarly.

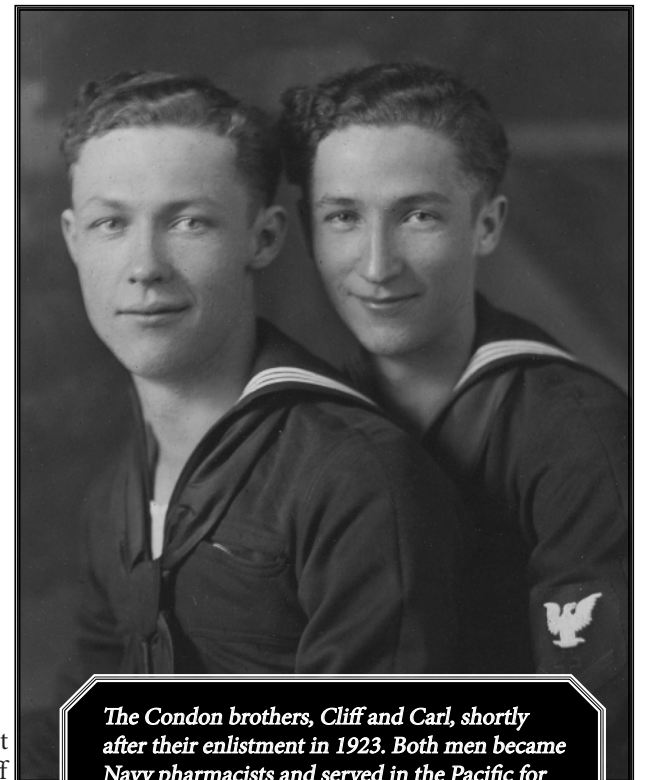
Cliff's most important work wasn't being done at the behest of the Japanese, however, but under their noses. The seasoned warrant officer instructed his staff to make secret copies of the records they were producing for their jailors. These copies were to be hidden away and handed over to the Navy at war's end. Such clandestine records could ensure that the fate of Bilibid's men would eventually reach their families, even if the Japanese destroyed the official documents before surrender.

There were many close calls during which Cliff and his men were nearly discovered, for which the punishment would probably have been execution, but they nearly made it to the end of 1944 unscathed. After liberation one of Cliff's men, Pharmacist's Mate Robert Kentner, made it back to the U.S. with a set of the records, which were later used in war crimes trials, as well as to ensure benefits for the veterans and their dependents.

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ON DECEMBER 13, 1944—three years to the day on which Cliff had sent the short, reassuring telegram to his wife with a final “Merry Xmas”—1,319 POWs were marched out of Bilibid Prison. Emaciated and shuffling, they wound in a long column through the rubble-strewn streets of Manila, which was now subjected to daily attacks by MacArthur's bombers.

They waited on a half-shattered pier for hours as thousands of Japanese men, women, and children, who had relocated to the Philippines as part of the occupation's civilian administration, filed past onto a former passenger liner named the *Oryoku Maru*. Then Cliff and his companions were packed into the ship's three cargo holds like cattle.



The Condon brothers, Cliff and Carl, shortly after their enlistment in 1923. Both men became Navy pharmacists and served in the Pacific for two decades, though Carl shifted to recruiting during World War II. West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries

Cliff had known this day might come. It wasn't the first “draft” to relocate POWs to Japan. On November 2—his wife Eva's birthday—he had penned a detailed letter to her, recounting his long captivity and laying out his dreams for the postwar future. “The two of us will take a leisurely second honeymoon all down through the South taking about 3 months - Do you want to?” The letter would reach Eva, courtesy of an unknown liberated POW, about five months later.

That night, *Oryoku Maru* and an accompanying convoy tried to slip out of Manila Bay under cover of darkness, steaming past the half-sunken husks of dozens of Japanese ships. For most prisoners, it was the worst night of their lives—and for nearly as many, it was their last.\*

In the morning, carrier-based planes from USS *Hornet* found the *Oryoku Maru* hugging the Philippine coast and targeted the sluggish vessel with bombs and rockets. *Oryoku Maru* possessed no markings to designate it as a civilian or POW-carrying vessel, and the Americans trapped inside had no way of signaling their presence. After several lesser hits, a bomb tore open the liner's stern, killing some 200 prisoners and crippling the ship's steering. Figuring they had done enough damage, *Hornet's* pilots peeled off, leaving the Japanese to evacuate their civilians and—eventually—

\*There is not sufficient space here to recount the horrors that befell the POWs inside the *Oryoku Maru*. For a fuller version, please see the link at the end of this article.

Cliff's older brother Carl with their mother Bertha on the front porch of 549 Locust Avenue, the family's home in Morgantown. The house still stands today. West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries







Detail from a photograph of the U.S. Navy officers of Bilibid Prison, August 1942. Our WV National Cemeteries Project team believes this is the last surviving glimpse of Clifford Condon (standing center). Conditions at Bilibid generally worsened from this point onward, and most of these men lost 50 pounds or more from their pre-war weight. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library collections

the prisoners on the night of December 14-15. Many of the Americans were forced to swim, and were shot from the shore if they appeared to be making a break for freedom.

Not all of Cliff's small band escaped the American planes' deadly assault. Pharmacist's Mate 1st Class (PhM1c) Elden Bjurling never made it off the ship. PhM3c Deenah McCurry's leg was badly lacerated by shrapnel. He had to be helped to shore, where his condition worsened in the subsequent days.

The Japanese herded the wet, emaciated survivors onto an old Navy tennis court and held them for days with barely any food or water. Eventually, trucks arrived to convoy the men to San Fernando in Pampanga province, there to await the next train at a rail depot under daily attack by American bombers. Most of the prisoners were put up in an abandoned movie theater, where they received their first hot meal in weeks. It was nearly Christmas.

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**WITH THE ORYOKU MARU FULL OF HOLES IN**

Subic Bay, the exhausted Americans shivering in Pampanga prayed that the Japanese would be forced to return the prisoners to Bilibid. The POWs could then hunker down and wait for liberation. But it was a forlorn hope. Clifford Condon and the other thousand survivors would be the last major shipment of POWs out of the Philippines.

In the early morning hours, a train pulled into the bomb-cratered depot. As POWs were forced tightly into its freight cars, a group of Navy medical officers approached their Japanese captors.

Fifteen of the Americans were too badly wounded from the *Oryoku Maru* ordeal to continue, the Navy men said. They must be sent back to Manila. There is no way of knowing if Cliff participated in this negotiation, but given that one of his five subordinates, Deenah McCurry, was one of the wounded men in question, it is hard to imagine him steering clear.

The Japanese guards, led by a lieutenant who would later be tried for war crimes, reluctantly agreed. Mollified, the American officers boarded the packed train, satisfied at least that a handful of their comrades were safe from whatever lay ahead.

They were wrong. McCurry and the other wounded were loaded on a truck, driven a few miles from San Fernando de Pampanga, and bayoneted to death. The Japanese guards buried them in shallow graves on Christmas Eve, 1944.

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**OBLIVIOUS TO DEENAH MCCURRY'S AWFUL FATE,**

Cliff joined the prisoners on the train. Guards forced dozens to ride on top of the cars, where the sight of frantically waving POWs caused American planes to break off their attacks.

On December 29, less than two weeks before MacArthur's troops were to land on those same beaches, the POWs boarded two more ships in Lingayen Gulf, the *Enoura Maru* and *Brazil Maru*.

Though Cliff survived yet another bombing by the planes of the USS *Hornet* in Taiwan, he did not escape

unscathed this time. The bomb explosions which crippled the *Enoura Maru* also fractured Cliff's arm—and possibly his spirit.

After the POWs endured a final, miserable sea journey from Taiwan to Japan in late January, they made landfall on the home island of Kyushu. Cliff spent most of his final months in two camps around Fukuoka. The last camp might have seemed ironic to a man who grew up in Pennsylvania and West Virginia: Fukuoka No. 22 was a coal mine. Not that it mattered much to Cliff, who was by now a broken man too sick to work.

According to final glimpses of Cliff in prisoner diaries, other POWs had to help move him from place to place. He refused food and baths, and probably never left the medical ward until his death on June 2, 1945, less than three months before the end of the war.

Of the six men in Cliff's Personnel department at Bilibid, only two survived the war's final months. His subordinate Robert Kentner stayed behind with a small group of prisoners in Manila, and submitted the group's hidden records to the Navy upon liberation. Of the five who went to Japan, only Pharmacist's Mate Carl Gordon lived.

Back in Vallejo, California, Cliff's wife Eva's nerves were so frayed that she considered moving back to her family in Morgantown. But word finally arrived in November 1945 of Cliff's fate. Her desperate letters to the Navy Department trailed off, replaced with the tragic banality of requesting Cliff's life insurance benefits. She never remarried, and died in Vallejo in 1966. A small collection of her papers and photographs was later donated to the West Virginia and Regional History Center by Eva's sister, Janet Kincaid.

Clifford Condon's remains are interred in Arlington National Cemetery, as are those of his brother Carl, who died in 1970.

Clifford Condon's full biography can now be experienced in an online multimedia exhibit entitled, *The Record Keepers: Clifford Condon and the Sailors Who Rescued the Memories of Bilibid's Prisoners of War*.

You can view the exhibit at: <https://wvhumanities.org/programs/west-virginia-national-cemeteries-project/>

**EVENTS FEBRUARY-MARCH 2025**

Visit the **EVENTS** tab at [wvhumanities.org](http://wvhumanities.org) for the most up-to-date information!

- Feb 8 "Interwoven" - Arthurdale Heritage textiles exhibit opening, The Arts Center, Elkins. 1-4pm
- Feb 14- Mar 17 Born of Rebellion - Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit installed at James Monroe High School, Lindside. Contact school office for visiting hours and procedures: (304) 753-5182
- Feb 14- Feb 23 The Crucible - Performances of Arthur Miller's classic play, Geneva Kent Center for the Arts, Huntington. Tickets at [www.alchemytheatretroupe.org](http://www.alchemytheatretroupe.org)
- Mar 2 Thomas Ingles - History Alive presentation, Calhoun County Public Library, Grantsville. 2pm
- Mar 10 Col. Ruby Bradley - History Alive presentation, South Charleston Public Library, South Charleston. 6pm

- Mar 21 2025 Exhibit Opening - Jefferson County Museum, Charles Town.
- Mar 21 Granny Witches Herbal Legacy - Class and discussion about history, healing, and Appalachian folk traditions, Tri-State Local Foods, Huntington. \$25. 10am
- Mar 27 Margaret H. Lemos - Marshall University Amicus Curiae Lecture Series on Constitutional Democracy, Brad D. Smith Foundation Hall, Huntington. 7pm
- Mar 30 Little Lecture by Eric Waggoner - First 2025 Little Lecture, introducing this year's series on contemporary Appalachian literature, MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. \$10. 2pm
- And more! New events are added all the time to our online Events calendar! Be sure to check it out!

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Mar 30 - Apr 27 - May 18 - Jun 22

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