

Captain Willibald Charles Bianchi

Born

March 12, 1915
New Ulm, Brown County, Minnesota

Entered Service

June 3, 1940
New Ulm, Brown County, Minnesota
2nd Lieutenant
Officer Reserve Corps

April, 1941
1st Lieutenant, U.S. Army
45th Infantry, Philippine Scouts

World War II

March 5, 1942
Captain, U.S. Army

Date of Death

January 9, 1945
Bagac, Bataan Province, Philippine Islands



Awards

Medal of Honor
Bronze Star
Purple Heart with 3 Oak Clusters

Citation for Medal of Honor

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with the enemy on 3 February 1942, near Bagac, Province of Bataan, Philippine Islands. When the rifle platoon of another company was ordered to wipe out 2 strong enemy machinegun nests, 1st Lt. Bianchi voluntarily and of his own initiative, advanced with the platoon leading part of the men. When wounded early in the action by 2 bullets through the left hand, he did not stop for first aid but discarded his rifle and began firing a pistol. He located a machinegun nest and personally silenced it with grenades. When wounded the second time by 2 machinegun bullets through the chest muscles, 1st Lt. Bianchi climbed to the top of an American tank, manned its antiaircraft machinegun, and fired into strongly held enemy position until knocked completely off the tank by a third severe wound.

Early Years

Willibald Charles Bianchi, son of Joseph and Caroline "Carrie" (Eibner) Bianchi was born on March 12, 1915, in New Ulm, Minnesota. He was the 2nd child, and the only son, born to Joseph and Carrie. Willibald "Bill" had an older sister, Josephine, and 3 younger sisters, Magdalene, Jermayn and Mary Louise.

Bill grew up on a 73 acre poultry farm south of New Ulm where he helped his father with many farm chores including milking cows and tending to chickens and turkeys. While he was still in high school, his father, Joseph, died in an accident on their farm. Bill had to leave school and take over the responsibility of running the farm to support his family. He later completed his high school studies at the University of Minnesota farm school in St. Paul, MN. At age 21, Bill Bianchi enrolled at South Dakota State University (SDSU) where he majored in animal science, was active as an Army ROTC cadet major, and played on the college football team. He worked his way through college by cleaning and sweeping out the college print shop and classrooms, and doing furnace work. His fellow students started calling him “Medals” because he wore his ROTC uniform a lot, even when he went home on weekends, partly because he could not afford much clothing, but also because he liked soldiering. He was so proud of his ROTC decorations.¹ Upon graduation from SDSU in 1940, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Army. He requested foreign service in order to see action at the earliest possible date.

The War Years

In April, 1941, Bill Bianchi left for the Philippines to serve in the U.S. Army, 45th Infantry Division, Philippine Scouts, and his first task was to convert Philippine natives into trained soldiers. Bianchi distinguished himself by transforming these natives into fearless jungle fighters. He and the other officers who made up our first expeditionary force of World War II, worked against time to create an army that could withstand Japanese aggression. In the end, there wasn't enough time. We didn't have enough trained troops, airplanes and tanks to oppose the Japanese landings, so all they could do was try to delay the enemy as their armies converged on Manila. Our troops retreated into the Bataan Peninsula to keep a foothold in the Philippines until reinforcements came. These soldiers didn't have the equipment and ordinance of the customary World War II soldier—these refinements were to come later. The men on Bataan were the pioneers. They were the men who held the line while the country was getting ready.

The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to Bianchi for his bravery in battle during the famous Tuol River pocket on West Bataan on February 3, 1942. This took place prior to the fall of the Philippines during the early stages of World War II. He was wounded early in the action when 2 bullets passed through his left hand. He was wounded a second time by 2 machine gun bullets through the chest. His third wound was severe when he was blown off the top of an American tank by either a mortar explosion or a grenade blast. Bill lay unconscious on the ground. It was some time later that Bill's mother, Carrie Bianchi, received a telegram from the Adjutant General of the United States Army. It reads: “Deeply regret to inform you that your son, 1st Lt. Willibald Charles Bianchi, was seriously wounded in action in the Philippines on February 3. Progress reports will be forwarded as received.” Bill returned to active duty after just one month and was promoted to Captain. His actions succeeded in weakening the Japanese position so that it was later captured by infantrymen with little or no loss of life.

On April 9, 1942, Bill Bianchi was captured by the Japanese with some 75,000 other American and Filipino soldiers, in the fall of Bataan. The Allied troops were interned for 24 hours without food or water, and then they were forced on the infamous 65-mile Bataan Death March from Mariveles to San Fernando. Many soldiers died along the way from disease and mistreatment. Bodies crushed by Japanese transports littered the line of march. The prisoners were half crazed by hunger, thirst, and the heat. In spite of Bianchi suffering from the same horrible conditions, he was up and down the line helping the men, spurring them on, and sharing their burdens. Otherwise, it was certain they would have been killed by the Japanese.

Bianchi was moved to several prison camps, each with conditions worse than the one before. There were no medical supplies, clean clothes, or sanitary facilities, and little food. Prisoners slept on mud-

floored huts, soaked by rain. Bianchi's reputation as a caregiver continued as he did what he could to aid his fellow men who, like himself, were suffering from the effects of the starvation diet, work, and dreadful living conditions. He bartered with his captors and managed to get food from their mess halls to aid hundreds of starving prisoners. Brigadier General Ted Spaulding, Huron, SD, served with Bianchi, and witnessed this first-hand. Many servicemen wrote to Bianchi's mother following the war, telling her that they owed their lives to her son.²

One of Bill's most difficult assignments was to provide honestly, the rather short rations that were issued by the captors. All too often, those put in charge of food distribution used their position to better the lot for themselves and their friends at the expense of the overall group. It took a man of great character and determination, such as Bianchi, to first see that all men received a fair share.

On October 16, 1944, Bianchi was transferred to Bilibid prison in Luzon, where conditions were even worse than at O'Donnell (April/May 1942) and Cabanatuan (June 1942-October 1944). He left Bilibid on December 12, 1944, aboard the Japanese ship Orokyo Maru, anchored at Subic Bay, where he again provided assistance to his buddies. That ship was sunk a few days later and he was transferred to an unmarked prison ship anchored off Formosa. On the morning of January 9, 1945, an American plane dropped a 1,000 pound bomb into the hold of the anchored ship. The U.S. was unaware the target was filled with American prisoners of war. Bianchi was killed instantly. He was 29 years old. Comrades who knew him said that he was probably in the ship's hold aiding the sick.

Captain Willibald C. Bianchi was one of three men awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for achievements prior to the fall of the Philippines in 1942, and was probably the most outstanding American soldier on Bataan in the early months of the War. His name will live long in the memories of the prisoners of Camp O'Donnell, Cabanatuan and Bilibid, for in addition to being a war hero, Bianchi was their No. 1 Benefactor through those three terrible years.

The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously to Captain Bianchi's mother, Carrie Bianchi, on June 7, 1945, at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, along with other awards and citations. Bianchi is the only Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from New Ulm, Minnesota, and the only soldier originally from Brown County, Minnesota, to receive our country's highest military award for his acts of bravery during World War II.

Bianchi's mother received the following letter dated October 25, 1945, from General Douglas MacArthur. "Dear Mrs. Bianchi: My deepest sympathy goes to you in the death of your son, Captain Willibald C. Bianchi, who died in action against the enemy. You may have some consolation in the memory that he, along with his comrades in arms who died on Bataan and Corregidor and in prison camps, gave his life for his country. It was largely their magnificent courage and sacrifices which stopped the enemy in the Philippines and gave us the time to arm ourselves for our return to the Philippines and the final defeat of Japan. Their names will be enshrined in our country's glory forever. In your son's death I have lost a gallant comrade and mourn with you. Very faithfully, General Douglas MacArthur."

Carrie Bianchi wrote that, "As a mother, I am proud to be able to give to this generation and to our beloved America the most precious gift that life makes possible, my only son."

Post War Years

Captain Willibald C. Bianchi was just 29 years old when he was very tragically killed on January 9, 1945. Bill never married so he left no descendants to honor him for his acts of valor and bravery in war. However, Bill's four sisters and their families have kept his memory alive. They have honored him by donating his Congressional Medal of Honor award and his other medals to the Brown County Historical Society along with the supporting documentation for each award. Thanks to the family, the public can actually view the medals and appreciate the significance of his sacrifice for generations

to come. The City of New Ulm honored him in 1955 by naming a new street, Bianchi Drive, in the new hilltop residential area.³ In 1990, the American Legion Post in New Ulm changed its name from Ben J. Seifert Post #132 to Seifert-Bianchi Post #132 to honor the only Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from New Ulm.⁴ Captain Bianchi was honored by his alma mater, South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD, in 1998, when the Bianchi memorial in the University Student Union was dedicated and the Scholarship for ROTC and New Ulm natives attending SDSU was established. He was honored again in 2000 when the “Cpt. Willibald C. Bianchi Medal of Honor Monument” was dedicated.

Burial

Captain Willibald C. Bianchi was buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (Punchbowl) (MA-39) (MH) Honolulu, Hawaii (marker only). He is also remembered on the Wall of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial in Manila, The Philippines.

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Acknowledgements

Excerpts from a story “Bill Bianchi, Bataan Fighter, In the Tuol River Pocket, Bataan, February 3, 1942” – author unknown

Excerpts from Military Press Release “For Immediate Release with Army Forces Western Pacific 29th Replacement Depot Near Manila” – author unknown

Excerpts from the “Cpt Willibald C. Bianchi Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient Monument Dedication Program at South Dakota State University (SDSU), Brookings, SD, on September 22, 2000

Excerpts taken from various sources such as official military correspondence and various local newspapers:

1,3 “On Veterans Day, ... WWII heroism of Lt Bianchi”, Minneapolis Tribune (Gail Tollin/AP) 11-12-1979

2 “SDSU Honors Bianchi with Monument, Scholarship”, New Ulm Journal (Dan Robrish) 7-15-1997

4 “New Ulm Legion to Add Name of Medal of Honor Recipient Bianchi”, New Ulm Journal (Marge Iverson)