

A Portrait in Spiritual Resilience



BY CHAPLAIN (COL.) SCOTT A. OFSDAHL

Our “Comprehensive Airman Fitness” (CAF) program emphasizes four pillars that are needed to maintain a state of total well-being. The synergy of these four pillars helps sustain the fortitude for bouncing back from difficult life experiences.

Most of us understand the mental, physical and social parts; but what does it mean or look like to be “spiritually resilient?”

We can learn answers to these important questions by examining the life of a “spiritually” resilient giant — Chaplain Preston Taylor. His life offers a menu of suggestions on how to develop spiritual resilience for all of us. Much of what follows is quoted directly from Taylor’s official bio or from author Billy Keith’s book, *Days of Anguish, Days of Hope*, and his article in the Baptist Press titled, *Fourth of July: POW Chaplain Redeemed His Agonies*.

So who was Chaplain Preston Taylor? He married his beautiful wife, Lone, after seminary and then he served as the pastor of two churches in Texas where he joined the reserves. In 1941 he received a call from the War Department asking him to spend a year as an Army Air Corps Chaplain in the Philippines. His congregation approved. He departed knowing that the most difficult

part would be his separation from his wonderful wife Lone. She had been the only one in the family to bid him bon voyage at the port of San Francisco when the USAT Washington sailed for the Orient.

Taylor arrived in Manila in May 1941. With the declaration of war on Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, his 31st Infantry Regiment, Philippine Division headed to the front lines on the Peninsula of Bataan. Taylor would later be cited for bravery and he was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action for his services in the Battle of Bataan.

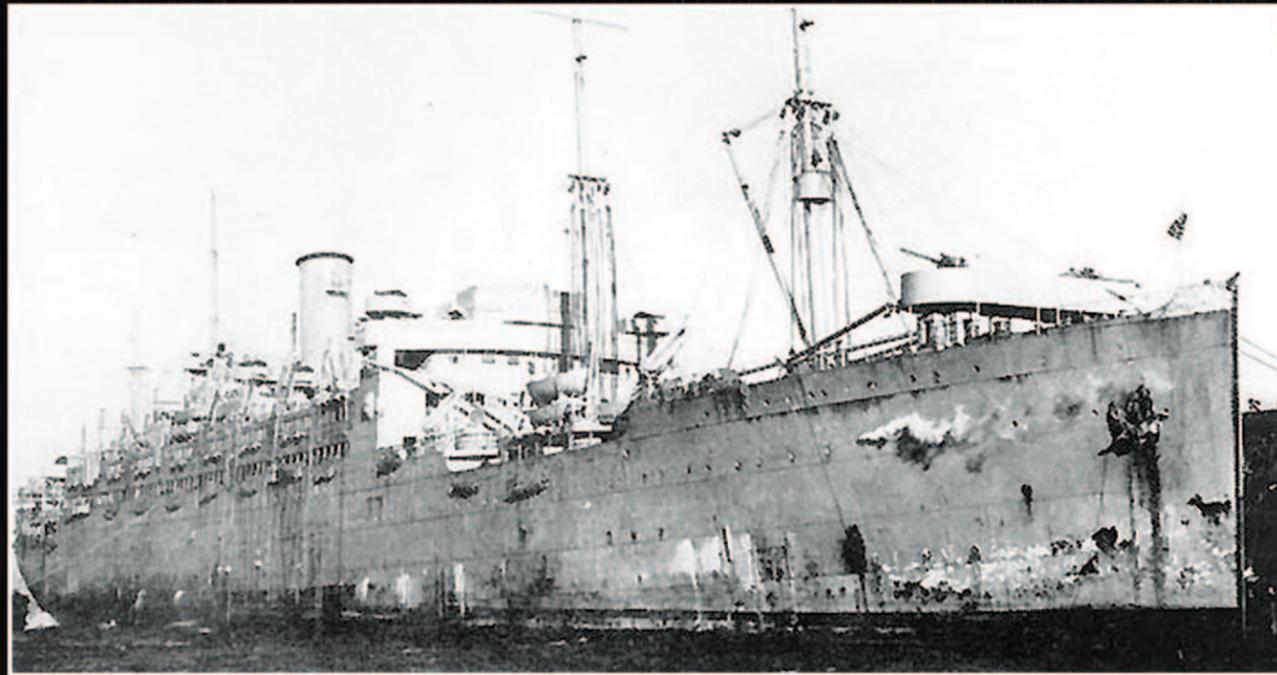
At the surrender of the American forces in the Philippines, he became a member of the “Death March” which led from Bataan through the streets of Manila, to the prison camp approximately eight miles east of Cabanatuan. He served as the chaplain in the prison camp hospital at Cabanatuan where he ministered to more than 10,000 patients. In the summer of 1944, he spent 14 weeks in solitary confinement for smuggling food and medicine to the patients. Taylor would be the only chaplain to survive the horrors of 42 months in Japanese prison camps. Toward the end of the war, he was taken to Japan and Manchuria on one of the infamous “hell ships,” which was bombed twice by American planes with a loss of more than 1,000 lives. During the second bombing, Taylor was struck in the wrist and leg by flying fragments. Ironically, he wasn’t awarded a Purple Heart since he was wounded by our own forces.

SP
IR
IT
UA
L

S
O
C
I
A
L

P
H
Y
S
I
C
A
L

M
E
N
T
A
L



Following his liberation, Taylor was assigned in January 1946 as deputy staff chaplain, HQ Army Air Forces Training Command at Barksdale Field, La. ... the base he had left five and a half years earlier for the Philippines. In 1962, upon recommendation of Gen. Curtis LeMay, President John F. Kennedy named him Air Force Chief of Chaplains, with the rank of major general.

What an incredible tale. I highly recommend reading the book, *Days of Anguish, Days of Hope* for the full story of his sufferings, courage and service. You won't be disappointed. Let's go back to the questions at the beginning of this article — how can this help ME? I offer two suggestions (of many), learned from the life of Taylor that can encourage "spiritual" resilience. This "spiritual" resilience, along with the other three dimensions, may help us thrive through tough times.

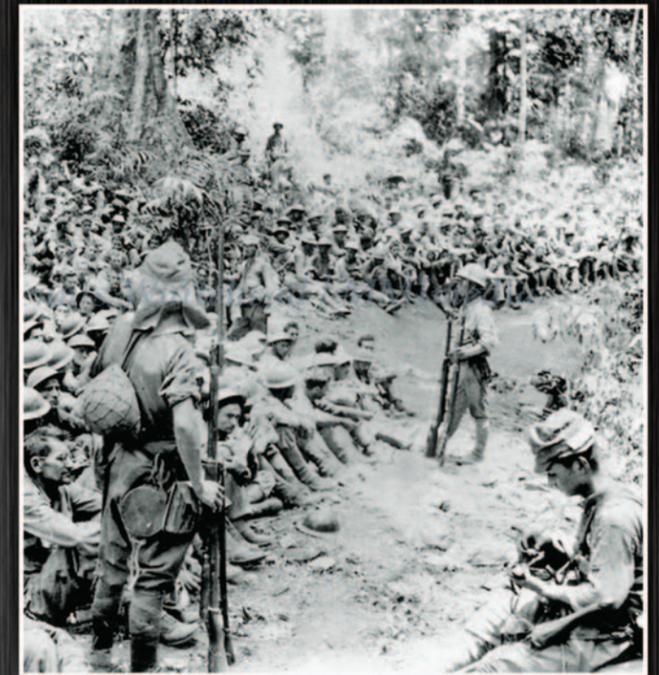
First, Taylor had a strong sense of purpose and meaning in his life. In the first eight months at the Cabanatuan POW camp, more than 8,000 prisoners were stuffed into the overcrowded compound and over 2,500 died from sickness, maltreatment and starvation. In the first nine months at Camp O'Donnell, 40,000 American and Filipino prisoners died. This was Taylor's world of death. Billy Keith, in an article for the Baptist Press, stated that Taylor would never forget Independence Day, 1943. While in the Cabanatuan POW Camp, on the Fourth of July, "the Japanese prison guards placed Taylor in a so-called 'heat box' to punish him for attempting to have medicine smuggled into the camp to save American lives. He and several other prisoners languished in the boxes, often without food or water, where the temperature reached 110 degrees as the sun beamed through the split bamboo walls." His survival was a miracle. Later after being freed from the 'heat box,' Taylor was weak and he required a cane to stand or walk. He gathered a

group of prisoners around him and said, "Ask me about my condition. I'm dirty, nasty and all I have on is my underwear. Can you smell the stench of my rotting teeth? Listen to me, listen without pity, I'm not going to die. I'm going to live and you are too, because God is going to give us strength."

Taylor drew strength from a purpose and meaning outside of himself. An important question for the development of our own "spiritual resilience" is finding an answer to the same question: where do WE go to find the strength to overcome? For Taylor, a devout Christian, his strength came through religious faith and hope. A "non-religious" source of meaning came from his unconditional and deep love for his wife Ione. Taylor is quoted over and over in the retelling of his experience to author Billy Keith that his thoughts and longings for his wife Ione were a significant lifeline for him. His hope of being reunited with her gave him the strength he needed to get through some of his darkest days. Regardless of our religious background or lack thereof, asking this same question and seeking an answer is important to the development of our spiritual resiliency.



Second, Taylor's profound example of forgiveness laid a powerful foundation for his "spiritual resilience." Tragically, Taylor faced one of his most difficult hours when the war ended and he returned home. He learned that the love of his life, the one for whom he 'lived' and the one who meant everything to his future ... had remarried. Ione, his precious wife, was mistakenly told that Preston didn't survive the "hell ships." Since Preston was dead, she moved on with her life. She remarried a month before he returned home. Taylor told Billy Keith that "when he heard the sad news, he thought God had deserted him. But, in time, he realized that God had been with him all through the years of imprisonment and would always be with him." Taylor sacrificed so much for his "band of brothers." Now he had to grieve the loss of Ione and he had to sacrifice his hopes and dreams for a family with her. This experience was devastating. Yet he forgave her and he gave her the freedom to begin a life with a different man. It was that same attitude and power of forgiveness that led him to forgive his persecutors. Billy Keith described Taylor as a man of great humility. He quoted Taylor in his later years as the



Chief of Chaplains, "We don't want to be bitter toward the Japanese. It was a great tragedy for that nation to undergo such a trauma, just as it was for the prisoners of war in their camps. I learned to forgive them a long time ago." An important question for the development of our own "spiritual resilience," based on the life of Taylor, involves struggling with the same difficult question: "is there someone in MY life that I need to forgive? If we are able to forgive, and sometimes that involves forgiving ourselves first, a huge burden can be lifted from our hearts and life can have a new beginning.

We started this article by asking what "spiritual resilience" might look like. The life of Preston Taylor gives us a clear picture of the power and strength embodied within the spiritual pillar. Wrestling with two important questions can go a long way in developing our own spiritual resilience ("Where do I go to find the strength to overcome?" and "Is there someone in MY life that I need to forgive?"). Meaning and purpose along with love and forgiveness are just a few of the many "spiritual" skill sets important to the development of spiritual resilience. Other "spiritual resilience" themes highlighted in Taylor's life could include the importance of "gratitude," "practicing kindness and compassion," "the power of mediation and prayer," and the "importance of community or connection." All of these aspects of "spiritual resilience," seen in Taylor's life, if applied to our own lives, can enable us to grow spiritually. To mine the rest of these treasures, you'll need to read the book, *Days of Anguish, Days of Hope* by Billy Keith! If Taylor were here today, I think he would agree that "spiritual" resilience, along with the other three dimensions, can help all of us thrive through tough times! ✦