

AMERICAN POW

Written by

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EXT. CABANATUAN P.O.W. CAMP - PHILIPPINES - DAY (1942) -
FLASHBACK

Faces gaunt, desolate, some simply waiting for death's sweet embrace. They are disheveled, emaciated men, their uniforms mostly in tatters. This is the real horror of war.

A large group of American Prisoners Of War (P.O.W.) is huddled together. Lost, disheveled, malnourished. Amongst them is GEORGE WILLIAMS, 20, a tall skinny man with piercing eyes and thick expressive eyebrows.

The men huddled with George face an open, freshly dug pit. Across the pit, George sees a young soldier. A friend. BEN's face is gaunt with a beard, long, thinning, and matted. He is tired, awaiting his fate. He stands in a line of nine other P.O.W.s, their feet at the edge of the open pit.

Ben is shaking, filled with fear. He knows death is close.

A middle-aged Japanese soldier, ISHIDA, and a young baby faced Japanese soldier, TAKISHITA, both in clean smartly tailored uniforms, step up behind Ben.

ISHIDA
(in Japanese)
Fire!

George looks away, trembling, helpless, angry.

We hear a REPORT of gunfire from Takishita's rifle. A P.O.W. standing at the end of the line of nine men appears to skip, then drop from sight. A body tumbles into the pit. P.O.W.s still in the line trembling in fear.

The P.O.W.s in the larger group stare at their comrades. Absolutely helpless. More gunshots. And more bodies drop.

A GUNSHOT. This time louder than before. Frightening. The P.O.W. next to Ben is gone. We see his body slide head first into the pit.

BEN
Goodbye, fellas.
(looking at George)
George, tell Doris I love her.

SLOW MOTION: Takishita points his rifle at Ben, at the back of his head. We HEAR Takishita cycle the bolt and chamber a shell.

GEORGE
BEN!

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - GEORGE'S HOUSE - NIGHT (1994)

George wakes up, panting. A 72-year-old man with graying hair, a weathered face, creased from life, but still, with those piercing steely eyes...which he covers with his trembling hand, trying in vain to calm himself.

GEORGE

Nancy, pass me the water and Clonidine.

Silence.

George uncovers his eyes, staring at an empty right side of his bed, and sighs.

INT. KITCHEN - GEORGE'S HOUSE - DAY

He enters the slightly messy kitchen that was built in the 50s with limping feet.

Sympathy cards on the kitchen table, "I'm sorry for your loss." "My condolences." "Nancy was a great woman." He picks one up, then tosses it on another.

He heads to the cabinet.

Takes out a bowl and spoon from the cabinet. Opens the pantry, looking for cereal. Then he opens other cabinet doors. He still cannot find his breakfast.

After a big exasperated sigh, he pays attention to a monthly calendar hanging on the wall, September 1994. He tears off September and October. He looks up at the calendar, rips off November as well.

He picks up the phone and makes a call.

GEORGE

(into phone)

Brian. Do you know where your mother put cereal?

BRIAN (V.O.)

Did you try the pantry?

GEORGE

Already tried.

George hangs up and sees the family photo with his son on the wall.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - GEORGE'S HOUSE - FRESNO - DAY

With a cane, George walks to his car, a 1988 Ford Crown Victoria. He bends over, takes out his handkerchief and wipes the dirt off a P.O.W. license plate.

INT/EXT. 1988 FORD VICTORIA - DAY

George slides in, staring at his house. Pure misery etches in his face, darkens his eyes.

GEORGE

We used to drive up to San Francisco together. Remember that? And we'd have crab and sourdough on the wharf like a couple of tourists.

(a beat)

Jesus. I miss you, darling.

He makes the sign of the cross.

He sees a car coming down the street.

He takes a breath, stares at a St Christopher medal hanging from the rearview mirror.

He puts the Ford in reverse.

He CLOSES his eyes and STEPS HARD on the gas!

The Ford lurches into the street and narrowly misses the oncoming car by inches.

HONK!

George's car jumps the curb, slamming into his neighbor's mailbox across the street, crushing it.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - GEORGE'S HOUSE - DAY

Several boxes are stacked up. MOVERS go in and out carrying boxes.

BRIAN, 46, all-American, and his son, DAVID, 18, with a Kurt Cobain look, walk in. David wears headphones around his neck and carries a Sony CD player.

George has a bruise across his nose and his eyes blackened. He picks up a cardboard box. He begins to fill it with framed photos from the shelves. Each one a treasured memory.

DAVID
Grandpa, let me help you.

David picks up a cardboard box and walks out. George picks up a weathered TREASURE BOX, made of wood with a beautiful curving design across the top.

BRIAN
The movers can get furniture. Dad, just grab your personal stuff, okay? Anything else?

GEORGE
What about my car?

BRIAN
Dad, the D.M.V. suspended your license.

GEORGE
I'll take a test and get it back!

BRIAN
(a beat)
I don't know what you were doing.
But you are a danger to yourself
and others.

GEORGE
But--

BRIAN
I don't want to see you hurt. And to be honest, I can't afford whatever the hike to your auto insurance was going to be. So, no, I'm sorry, can't have you driving!

EXT. DRIVEWAY - GEORGE'S HOUSE - DAY

Brian and George walk outside and see the neighbor repairing his mailbox. Brian waves his hand, offers an apologetic smile. He straightens a "FOR RENT" sign on the property.

George stares at Brian's brand new Honda CR-V 1995 parked right next to George's car.

GEORGE
Why would you go and buy a Jap car out of all the American cars out on the market? You couldn't get a Chevy, a Ford or a Volkswagen or something?

DAVID
Volkswagen is a German made car.

GEORGE

Germans apologized for what they did. Japan didn't do anything close!

BRIAN

Dad. I get your point but come on. Can you let go a bit? We got a really good deal!

GEORGE

You could have asked me for help if you were a little short.

BRIAN

With what you get from your social security, I don't think so.

Brian slips a "FOR SALE" sign inside the windshield of George's car. Closes the door, locks it. Watches George remove the P.O.W. number plate.

DAVID

I always thought that was a cool plate.

GEORGE

A lot of us paid a mighty big price to get that plate.

David climbs into the back seat of the Honda. George, frowning, doesn't want to get into the car. Brian opens the door.

BRIAN

Dad! It's just a car! Get in!

George reluctantly gets into the car. The car backs out. George looks longingly at the "FOR RENT" sign.

INT. HONDA CR-V MOVING - DAY

Brian drives. Awkward silence, until...

BRIAN

Don't you love this? It drives a lot smoother than the old Mustang.

(a beat)

The gas mileage is so much better.

George ignores him. Brian sighs.

BRIAN (CONT'D)

Okay. My co-workers at the dealership are all Americans.

(MORE)

BRIAN (CONT'D)
Our customers are Americans. It's just the company which is Japanese.

DAVID
Grandpa, 'Made in Japan' has been cool since the '80s. Our TV is Sharp. My sound system is Sony.

BRIAN
Dad. The camera we got you for your birthday, that was Panasonic.

GEORGE
I gave it away!

DAVID
(to George)
What? Why did you do that?

GEORGE
And who made that camera?
Despicable soulless creatures,
that's who! Did I tell you how they tortured us...

GEORGE/DAVID
(David chiming in)
...how they starved us, how they forced us to work as slaves...

David rolls his eyes as he puts on headphones. He has heard this story countless times.

Brian sighs and nervously taps his fingers on the wheel, trying to find the words. An awkward moment.

BRIAN
Dad...I have to tell you something.
Now is as good a time as any.

GEORGE
Haven't heard it and already know I'm not going to like it.

BRIAN
David is going to Japan.

George looks at Brian with dismay. George then turns around, removes David's headphones and stares at David as if he's staring at an alien.

GEORGE
Why on earth would you want to go to that devilish country?

DAVID
For Anime!

GEORGE

Who?

BRIAN

It's not a person. They're
cartoons, dad.

DAVID

Not cartoons, Japanimation! I want
to learn Japanese, so I can
understand what they say in Anime.
And living in Japan will help me
learn Japanese. We found an
exchange student program and this
is a huge opportunity for someone
like me to live and learn in Japan.

INT/EXT. HONDA CR-V - DRIVEWAY

The car pulls into the driveway of Brian's small but comfortable house. Your standard three-bedroom home in Fresno, California.

Brian, David, and George still seated. The engine clicks to a stop. An awkward silence. Nobody getting out of the car.

DAVID

Dad?

(to Brian)

You have to tell him.

GEORGE

There's more? What? He got a Jap
girlfriend?

BRIAN

We're going to have a Japanese
exchange student staying with us
while David lives in Japan. It's
kind of an exchange between
families.

George's jaw drops in disbelief.

GEORGE

Is this your idea of a sick joke?!

BRIAN

It's a cultural exchange program.
One of the conditions is that while
David goes to live in their house,
a boy from a family in Japan gets
to stay with us.

GEORGE

'Cultural exchange' my ass. You telling me, they couldn't find another family to take him?

BRIAN

Don't talk that way in front of David and definitely not in front of our guest when he gets here. Please, don't turn this into an international incident.

George exits the car and slams the door. LIZ, 42, slender, dark blonde, casually dressed with simple earrings, Brian's wife, comes out to greet them, but George storms past her and into the house without saying so much as a hello.

LIZ

You told him already.

BRIAN

How'd you guess?

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Brian opens the door. There is an air mattress on one side of the room that barely fits in the cramped space.

GEORGE

Jesus.

George turns and leaves.

BRIAN

Where are you going?

GEORGE

Home.

BRIAN

Dad. This is your home now.

David brings in boxes.

DAVID

Grandpa, where do you want this?

BRIAN

Dad, David wants to help you unpack.

GEORGE

I'll arrange my prison cell however I see fit!

Brian sighs and nods. Brian and David leave.

George opens a cardboard box, removes the treasure box and a stack of Ex-P.O.W. bulletins. He arranges them on the bookshelf, along with his P.O.W. license plate and several framed old photos...

- Featuring George and Ben holding a trophy in high school basketball uniforms.
- A middle-aged George wearing an army uniform and posing with P.O.W. friends.
- George smiling with his wife NANCY and a six-year-old Brian.
- A basketball team photo with middle age looking George as the coach.

George stares at Ben's face and sighs. He then looks down at the photo and strokes his wife's face, wistfully.

EXT. BRIAN'S HOUSE - DAY

People jog by. Several houses have American flags hanging at the front of their home.

EXT. BRIAN'S HOUSE - DAY - LATER

Covered with sweat and dirt, George digs a hole in the front yard. An aluminum flag pole lay on the ground.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

George is now cleaned up and wearing his military dress uniform with P.O.W. medals and ribbons on his chest. He adjusts a dark red hat that has the embedded yellow text "AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR".

He opens the triangle shaped box. He pulls out an American flag properly folded, triangular blue field of stars.

EXT. BRIAN'S HOUSE - DAY

George comes out with the American flag. He carefully unfolds it not letting it touch the ground. He attaches the brass ring on the blue field to a snap hook, unfurls, and attaches the bottom snap hook.

A PRETEEN BOY and his FATHER walk by George.

George slowly raises the flag. He straightens up, prideful.

The father salutes George. The young boy sees his father and looks up George's shiny medals and P.O.W. hat. The young boy also salutes George.

George offers a heartfelt smile.

A Ford TAXI pulls up.

GEORGE
(re: taxi)
Nice. Good old American made.

EXT. FRESNO VETERANS MEMORIAL MUSEUM HALL - DAY

The sign "Pearl Harbor Memorial" hangs on the wall in the front. George gets out of the taxi.

George struggles to climb up the stairs without a cane. A CHINESE AMERICAN WOMAN approaches.

CHINESE AMERICAN WOMAN
(with a slight accent)
May I help you?

GEORGE
(tense but polite)
I am fine. Thank you very much.

She senses his disgust from his attitude, sees the text "AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR" on his hat.

CHINESE AMERICAN WOMAN
Your limp reminds me of my father.
He fought against the Japanese like
you.

GEORGE
Oh?
(softens)
Are you Chinese?

CHINESE AMERICAN WOMAN
We were allies.

He nods in approval.

GEORGE
Okay then.

She looks at him with respect and George is loving it. She holds his hand as he walks up the stairs. As they reach the top...

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Thank you.

CHINESE AMERICAN WOMAN
God bless you. You are a hero.

GEORGE
I was just doing my duty. Thank
you.

Chinese American woman leaves. George enters the building.

INT. FRESNO VETERANS MEMORIAL MUSEUM HALL - DAY (LATER)

His P.O.W. friends, JERRY, an ugly scar below his right eye, and MEL, bulky hearing aids in both ears, both wave and approach George.

JERRY
George! We missed you!

GEORGE
Jerry. Mel. How are you doing?
(he hugs everyone, to
Jerry)
How's your son doing?

JERRY
He started chemotherapy two weeks
ago. Thanks for asking.

George nods.

MEL
How are you holding up, okay?

GEORGE
I'm here, so I'm good.

MEL
Hey, while you were away, we've
been talking about the 50th-
anniversary event.

JERRY
Frank is on a committee to organize
the event.

George scoffs

GEORGE
He'll just turn it into some U.S.
Japan kumbaya moment.

FRANK, another P.O.W., shows up with his Japanese wife, SACHIKO. George and Jerry see them disgusted and turn away.

JERRY
(not so quietly)
Speak of the devil!

Frank approaches the two men while Sachiko stands back, in deference to the men, and simply bows.

FRANK
My condolences. I'm sorry we couldn't come to the funeral. We were visiting Sachiko's daughter.

George nods, stiffly. Trying for civility. An awkward silence.

GEORGE
Hey, I'll do the 50th.

Frank is flabbergasted.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
We should invite a mayor, and maybe a senator and who is our congressman? We ought to print up booklets to publicize the event. Guys, this is a big freaking deal.

FRANK
I like that.

GEORGE
Maybe we can print up the wartime posters. You remember what I'm talking about? There were posters like 'Stay on the job until every murdering Jap is wiped out!'

JERRY
Or 'You can't pop a Jap with scrap!'

MEL
'Slap a Jap club!'

FRANK
I don't think it's a good idea to push the word 'Jap'. We want to celebrate the end of a war, not inflame the negative feeling between Japan and the U.S.

JERRY
Feel free to step down. I wouldn't want your wife to be uncomfortable.

FRANK
(senses what's happening)
Well, we have to find our seats.
George, let's work this out later.

As Frank and Sachiko walk up the aisle to find their seat,
George and the OTHER P.O.W.s watch, then turn to each
other...

JERRY
(re: Frank, muttering
under his breath)
Traitor.

George takes a breath, Jerry reaches over and lightly
squeezes George's shoulder.

JERRY (CONT'D)
Everything said and done, we'll be
the last men standing.

GEORGE
What do you mean?

JERRY
I know you got my back, George.
We're Ex-P.O.W.s. We don't forgive.
We don't forget.

George laughs. One for all, all for one.

JERRY (CONT'D)
I'm serious. You know how things
are. We're in it together, right.
Isn't that right, Mel?

MEL
Never forget.

GEORGE
Damn straight!

They pat each other on each other's shoulder.

DORIS (O.S.)
Can I join the club?

DORIS in her 70's, elegant, approaches the three men.

JERRY
Doris! Of course, welcome.

GEORGE
Doris. It's always good to see you.

DORIS

George. I'm so sorry for your loss.
I'm sure Ben will be there to
welcome her at the pearly gates,
that is until I join them.

JERRY

Which will be a long time from now.

Doris smiles graciously.

DORIS

I would take her spot in a
heartbeat if it were possible.

George gently holds Doris's hand, looks at her with heartfelt sympathy.

MEL

George, are you coming to our
dinner?

GEORGE

Yeah. I know I missed a few. But I
promise I'll make the next one.

RYAN, a veteran in his 50s in a new J.C. Penney's suit,
approaches the podium.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Excuse me.

George approaches Ryan.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Hi Ryan. Look. Can I talk to you?
(pulling him aside)
I'm sorry I had to leave right
before the game.

RYAN

I totally understand.

GEORGE

Well, since my wife passed, I was
thinking the best thing would be
for me to get back to what I know,
coach the team again.

RYAN

George. Let's talk later.

Ryan gestures that he has to leave.

GEORGE

Of course.

Ryan steps up to the podium and adjusts the microphone.

RYAN

Hello. Hello, everyone. Please be seated.

People comply and fill the chairs.

RYAN (CONT'D)

Welcome to the 53rd Pearl Harbor Memorial event. Thank you all for coming. I know some of you come from far and it's nice to see your familiar faces.

People claps their hands.

RYAN (CONT'D)

We have several guest speakers today but before that, let's watch this short video to reflect what happened on December 7th.

The lights flicker off. A projector begins playing a video on the large screen hung on the wall.

VOICE NARRATION (O.S.)

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, which led to the United States' entry into World War II...

The room gets quiet.

VOICE NARRATION (O.S.) (CONT'D)

The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor without declaring war, damaging eight U.S. Navy battleships and sinking four. In the Philippines, many soldiers were captured in Bataan and Corregidor...

A montage of photos featuring the Pearl Harbor attack. The Bataan Death March. Images of sick and emaciated P.O.W.s play out across the screen.

The video continues with more images of fallen soldiers in Bataan and Corregidor, diseased, tired, and starved. They are little more than skin and bones.

No matter how many times these veterans see the footage, it still haunts them. It is a nightmare that they can't escape.

George closes his eyes. We hear the loud splash of wet mud.