

## To hell and back

By John Lukacs, Special for USA TODAY

SKOKIE, Ill. — On the afternoon of Nov. 27, 1937, in South Bend, Ind., Notre Dame needs a miracle, the kind found in Hollywood screenplays, not football playbooks.

It is late in the fourth quarter, and the Fighting Irish are tied 6-6 with Southern California. Suddenly, Notre Dame fullback Mario "Motts" Tonelli takes a hand-off deep in Irish territory, and the bleachers erupt as No. 58 races down the field. After 70 yards, the 5-11, 195-pound Tonelli is tackled, but he scores the game-winning touchdown seconds later.

Tonelli says his Notre Dame ring was a source of comfort during the Bataan Death March.

Afterward in the Notre Dame locker room, Tonelli confesses, "I don't remember that run. I don't know just what I was thinking about, except just to run."

Fast forward five years, to April 9, 1942, on the Bataan Peninsula, Philippine Islands. Columns of gaunt, stubble-bearded American prisoners of war, flanked by Japanese troops brandishing bayonets, weave along a jungle road under a blistering sun. Through the dusty haze, Sgt. Mario Tonelli sees a macabre trophy, a mutilated human head bobbing on a spear, as Japanese cavalrymen gallop past.

"We're in trouble," Tonelli whispers.

Instinctively, Tonelli buckles his steel helmet, ready for action. But there will be no fourth-quarter Hollywood heroics on the Bataan Death March.

Unlike thousands of other young soldiers, Tonelli's tale doesn't end in a shallow, unmarked jungle grave. Perhaps it's fate. Or destiny.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of, by any definition, one of World War II's most horrific tragedies and the incredible story of one football player's extraordinary will to survive.

Motts Tonelli, 86, was a survivor long before the millennial trend of reality television popularized the term. The yellowed newspaper clippings in the laminated scrapbooks spread across the kitchen table in his suburban Chicago home are proof.

And for the former football star and war hero, it's been that way since the beginning. At 6, he suffered third-degree burns on 80% of his body when a trash incinerator toppled onto him.

After the march, Tonelli endured as a prisoner of war.

Tonelli's immigrant father, Celi, a former quarry laborer in northern Italy, stonewalled a doctor's notion that his son might never walk again. He fastened four wheels to a door and taught his first U.S.-born offspring how to move about using his arms. Within months Tonelli was back on his feet, and by 1935 he was the pride of Chicago's prestigious DePaul Academy, a prep standout in



football,  
basketball  
and track.

Dozens of  
colleges  
courted him.  
After a  
whirlwind  
recruiting  
trip, he was  
sold on  
Southern  
California.  
But his  
mother,  
Lavinea,  
after a visit

from Notre Dame coach Elmer Layden and a priest fluent in Italian, decided otherwise.

"You're going to Notre Dame," she said. "It's a Catholic school, and you won't be far from home."

"And that was it," Tonelli says, laughing.

Tonelli spent three years with the Fighting Irish varsity, leading Notre Dame to the brink of a national championship in 1938. Following the College All-Star Game in 1939, he received his gold class ring, on the underside of which he had his initials and graduation date — M.G.T. '39 — engraved. He wore the ring proudly during a stint as an assistant coach at Providence College in 1939 and one season of pro football with the Chicago Cardinals in 1940.

In early 1941 Motts joined the Army and was assigned to the 200th Coast Artillery Regiment in Manila. Although the "Pearl of the Orient" was a prewar paradise of sun-drenched tropical beauty and cold San Miguel beers, Tonelli hoped to fulfill his one-year commitment and return to his new wife, Mary, and the Cardinals by the 1942 season.

Those plans were irrevocably altered in the early morning hours of Dec. 8, 1941, when Tonelli was roused from his bunk near Clark Field by an air-raid siren. At 0230 hours, a frantic trans-Pacific message had crackled over the airwaves: "Air raid on Pearl Harbor. This is no drill!"

### **'Alamo of the Pacific'**

After the initial lightning thrusts of the Japanese crippled the Philippines-based U.S. Far East Air Force and Asiatic Fleet, Gen. Douglas MacArthur ordered about 15,000 American military personnel and 90,000 Filipino troops to retreat into Bataan, a steamy jungle realm of rice paddies, nipa (Asiatic palm tree) huts and colossal volcanoes, to fight a delaying action and wait for reinforcements.

But with the War Department's mandate from the White House to defeat Adolf Hitler first, these ill-prepared, inexperienced troops, captured with little food and obsolete weapons, would be sacrificed to buy time for their countrymen. As a result, historians nicknamed the gallant stand on Bataan the "Alamo of the Pacific."

With an empty canteen, Tonelli began the 65-mile march near Mariveles, a port on Bataan's southern tip. Through dust clouds, he spotted artesian wells bubbling with cold spring water, but he dared not stop: The Japanese savagely executed all who strayed from the march. At dusk, the parched prisoners improvised by spreading their shirts on the ground to collect the dew.

"When morning came, we'd wring them out for something to drink," Tonelli recalls.

At dawn, cracks of rifle fire echoed throughout the hills. Some guards pumped bullets into those unable to continue; others delivered death with samurai swords.

Sympathetic Filipino civilians caught throwing food or flashing the "V for victory" sign in the direction of the haggard Americans were rewarded likewise.

Japanese tanks often swerved in deliberate attempts to run over wounded GIs lying on litters.

### **He wears the ring**

Tonelli was reflecting on his relative mortality when approached by a guard plundering the possessions of the weary, sunburned prisoners. He demanded Tonelli's Notre Dame ring, and Tonelli refused. The guard reached for his sword.

"Give it to him," yelled a nearby prisoner. "It's not worth dying for."

Reluctantly, Tonelli surrendered the ring. A few minutes later, a Japanese officer appeared.

"Did one of my men take something from you?" he asked in perfect English.

"Yes," Tonelli replied. "My school ring."

"Here," said the officer, pressing the ring into Tonelli's callused, grimy hand. "Hide it somewhere. You may not get it back next time."

The act left Tonelli speechless. "I was educated in America," the officer explained. "At the University of Southern California. I know a little about the famous Notre Dame football team. In fact, I watched you beat USC in 1937. I know how much this ring means to you, so I wanted to get it back to you."

The surreal encounter ended, and the gridiron and battlefield rivals headed their separate ways.

"I always thought that someday he'd try to look me up," Tonelli says. "I guess he probably didn't make it through the war."

## **Number comes up**

Nearly 700 Americans and 10,000 Filipinos died on the Bataan Death March, but for those who survived, the nightmare was only beginning. Tonelli absorbed numerous beatings in three squalid prison camps — O'Donnell, Cabanatuan, Davao — over the next 2½ years, but each night he would reach for the silver soap dish where he concealed his Irish ring. Each glimpse of the ring reminded him of better days and provided hope for the future.

Following a hellish, 60-day journey on a filthy, cramped merchant vessel in late 1944, Tonelli was sent to slave labor camps on mainland Japan. When he arrived at Nagoya No. 7, a prison camp near the village of Toyama, in the summer of 1945, Tonelli was a 100-pound skeleton, a mere shell of the bullish fullback that once roamed Notre Dame Stadium, Soldier Field and Comiskey Park.

"I felt that (Toyama) would be my last stop," he says. "I was going to die there or be liberated."

His body ravaged by malaria and an intestinal parasite, Tonelli wobbled to a table where a Japanese officer assigned prison garb and identification numbers.

Tonelli glanced at his new prison number. It couldn't be. Tonelli fought to hold back the jubilant tears.

Scribbled on a piece of paper was the number 58, the same number he wore throughout his football career.

"From that point on," he says, "I knew I was going to make it."