

War stories

A veteran recalls life as prisoner of the Japanese

By LISA POWER
Tribune Staff Writer

LAKELAND — He became a slave.

In body, William Gentry belonged to the Japanese when he and 65 other members of the Kentucky National Guard were captured in the Philippines on April 11, 1942.

But in spirit, Gentry — and many of the estimated 10,000 American soldiers and 40,000 to 50,000 Filipinos who made the infamous Death March to Camp O'Donnell in the Bataan peninsula — remained free.

Gentry, now 70 and a Lakeland resident, marched 125 miles over 12 long days to the prison camp. About 650 soldiers died during that walk; many more Filipinos perished.

"I saw dead men all along the side of the road," says Gentry, a lieutenant then who later was promoted to captain. "When we got to camp, I got a little spot of ground inside the fence. I had a pair of coveralls, a pair of shoes, a canteen, cup and spoon. I had no socks, no toothbrush. That's all I had until someone died."

"I remember a Japanese officer came in and told us we were an inferior race. We were slaves, he said, and we would always be slaves and our family would soon be slaves. A day or so later, a colonel came in, and in perfect English, he said the Japanese will not win this war or the next war, but in 100 years, they would own the United States of America."

Gentry spent 33 months as a Japanese prisoner of war, working in the rice fields of Mindanao Island and working to survive the torture that was indiscriminately laid upon both American and Filipino prisoners.

Gentry did not escape the torture, though he endured it. Japanese Lance Cpl. Kazutane Aihara, the man accused of hitting Gentry over the head and sending him to the hospital for six months, was sentenced to death in a war crimes trial for atrocities he committed against Allied soldiers.

Sickness and torture took its toll on Gentry. His 6-foot-1 1/2-inch

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Tribune photograph by GREG FIGHT

William Gentry displays on his shirt the many medals he has won. He has accumulated the Silver Star with one cluster; the Bronze Star, which was presented by President Reagan in 1984; the POW Medal, the

Purple Heart, the American Defense Medal with one star; and the Asiatic Pacific Theater Medal with two stars. The certificate he holds was presented with the Bronze Star by Reagan.

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Veteran honored for war-time service

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frame carried 210 pounds when he was captured. When he was liberated by Gen. Douglas MacArthur's forces on Jan. 31, 1945, Gentry had lost more than an inch in height and more than 70 pounds.

"They wanted us to die," he says. "But we learned to eat weeds and grasses. We learned to steal from the Japanese, and we did anything we could to disrupt them."

Gentry returned home to Harrodsburg, Ky., a hero and went on to a civilian career as an plant engi-

neer for Corning Glass Works in New York. He returned to work after his retirement from Corning as an industrial trainer for the Polk County phosphate industry.

But over the decades, the government has remembered Gentry's role in the war. Last year, he received the Purple Heart and the Silver Star for his gallantry and for wounds received in February 1942.

Gentry said he wants Americans to remember veterans' sacrifices all year, not just today on Veterans Day. He said he'll never forget the message of Bataan and the war.

"The people buried in the

graves in the Philippines asked me to talk to the world," Gentry says. "The message is, 'Don't let the Japanese take us. Don't let people get back into the apathetic situation they were in before World War II."

"People today don't give a continental about what happened in World War II. Nobody cares."

Gentry, who remains bitter about the Japanese, predicts Japan's growing economic power in the coming decades will be a more serious threat to the United States than the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc.

"People need to get interested in

this country," he says. "People take everything for granted."

If they don't heed the lessons of history, he warns, America will not survive. And the valor and spirit of our nation's veterans, Gentry contends, will be for naught.

Funeral Notice

HODGE

AVON PARK — Funeral Services for Mrs. Shirley Diane Hodge, 43, of Avon Park, will be held this afternoon at 3:00 p.m. at the Fountain Funeral Home Chapel with Reverend Irvin Price officiating. Interment in Midway Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Maxton, NC. She is survived by

Thanksgiving meal planned

needy people in the area, he said. Case said he doesn't know how

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