

**Harrodsburg Tank Battalion in the Philippines:
Survivors of the Bataan Death March**

Interview with John Elmore Sadler

March 15, 1961

Conducted by William Joseph Dennis

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Tape 17 A 4
REEL NO. 2

March 15, 1961

JOHN ELMORE SADLER speaking:

This is John Sadler, Company D of the 192nd Tank Battalion. We left here with the National Guard on maneuvers and we wound up going overseas in 1941. Well, we sailed for Manila. There was a few of them sick on the boat, like I had a brother. He stayed more sick than he did well, 'til we got to the Hawaiian Islands. I think he recovered there all right. We got on, we got to the Philippines. There was, they met us with a band. Everyone seemed excited to see us. Then we got on the train and sent us to Fort Stosenburg and they sent us back after the tanks. And we got in the tanks and started up the street on the wrong side. And that caused quite a bit of excitement. They had to stop us and tell us to drive on the left-hand side, instead of the right.

Well, we finally got them to Fort Stosenburg and then we had to put the guns on them, reassemble the guns, put a lot of spare parts on the tanks. By the time we got that, we had to load our ammunition. We loaded our ammunition and that's about the day the Jap planes came over. We looked over in the West and they was coming in right in the sun. Me and a boy by the name of Brooks were out across on the other side of the field looking at a P-40, which we thought was the fastest plane we'd ever seen come in there and land. And so we up and seen those Jap planes and we starting running across the field. They didn't look right, so when they started dropping those bombs and buildings started blowing up and I was looking back, I fell flat on the ground. Brooks kept running. Well, the dust was so heavy that I didn't know what happened to Brooks 'til the raid was over.

When I was laying on the ground, the dirt from the bombs they had dropped had hit me and burned my face and it stuck there it hit me so hard. When I got in the tank, the sweat popped

out on me and it just turned into mud and run down my face. And the Captain come up, checking on his men to see if any of them was hurt and he looked at me and says, "Sadler, are you hurt?" I says, "I don't know." So I had to get out and let him search me and look me over real good.

There wasn't anything on me but just blisters where the dirt had hit me. We got everything cooled down from there and got our nerves back and we started running then first to one hole to another one or to places they thought the Japs was creeping through. And doing the best we could. There wasn't too many places you could take those tanks. If you get off the road, you was gone. They'd sink in clear up to the tracks.

Then they started us north. We got north and the ships started unloading up there and we was pulled in right behind the mountain. Well, curiosity, some of us walked up on the mountain and the men was sitting up there had artillery, plenty guns in those mountains and they sit there and watched the ships unload but no man was allowed to fire a shot. We come back to our tanks and waited. We sit thee, I forget how long, but we got orders to pull our tanks out and fall back, and let the Japs occupy the mountain. So the Japs took all their ships, I think there was twenty-one shiploads of them, took their men and their equipment and pulled it in to those mountains. They let them get set up. Then the Americans pulled a little counter-attack, got them started shooting. So things got pretty rough there for awhile.

They kept weaving us down. We kept what they call a retreat. But it was just small counter-attacks. We pulled back so far 'til they got their army broke up and then we'd fall back and counter-attack. They worked it that way clear on down through Bataan. When they pushed us as far down on Bataan as they possibly could, they'd bring up the army and hit us and we just had to stay if no other lines would have to hold. Put the Filipino Army up in front of us with Americans behind them with machine guns and if they turned and come back, the Americans

would kill them. And if they stayed, the Japs would kill them. And they held those lines 'til it smelled so bad that you'd have to put on a gas mask to stand the scent. Then they would fall back and start digging more foxholes. And that worked that way for several days, run into weeks.

Food ran out. We eat anything from monkeys on down, small birds 'til we didn't know what happened to all the chow. But we finally got back and when Bataan was giving up, some of us got to Corregidor. Going over toward Corregidor, they bombed us on a little boat trying to sink it trying to keep it from getting there. We finally got close enough to the shore that fifty caliber machine guns and anti-aircraft fire run the planes off but they still throwed artillery shells at us. We got on to the shore and got into a tunnel. And the tunnel was so many men in there that they was all smothering. Somebody said they was having chow there in a big mess hall, if you got there a certain time.

We all went down to eat the chow down there in the mess hall. The air raid signal blowed. Them guys, if you stayed there in that tunnel for a while, you got pretty used to it, thought you was clear of the bombs. When the air raid signal blowed, the boys run back to the barracks and left their food sitting there. Some of them hit the floor. Well, I got up and was going with the crowd and looked back and saw all that food. I wasn't going to leave that. So they blowed off a corner of the building and I went back and sat at the table and I went right ahead and filled up.

We stayed in that tunnel for a day or two. And one night they come and wanted to know if there was anybody that wanted to go on a detail. I got to talking to a Captain, Major or something, I couldn't tell what he was because it was dark in there. He said he'd try to do something for us boys that had just come over from Bataan. Well, long in the night, he come back and asked for us. So we run out there and he said he was going to a big concrete ship just

out in the water. So, we didn't care where we was going so we went down waited for the ship but as we walked along, there was a lot of food sitting along there. And the night was dark. There was about three of us boys that knew each other that was going and each one of us reached in and got us something out of that, was going to steal us something to eat. So when we got on this little boat that was taking us over to this place, we, the little light on the boat, so we got to checking what it was that we'd got. And one of us got coffee and the other sugar and the other one got dried milk. So it was the motor on that boat had a water cooler on there to keep the motor cool. And they couldn't put salt water in there; they had to put fresh water in it. So we drained some water out of the radiator thing there and we all had coffee.

Then when we got to Fort Drum, all the boys acted like they thought a lot of us, give us clothes, everything. I had a fever of 104. And they wanted to put me in the hospital there on the boat and I said, "Wait 'til I eat." They kept talking about that good chow and you could smell it over the ship. And so, they fed them in sections. So many would go down and they'd come out and so many more would go back in there. So I went down and eat and I come back. Another bunch went down and eat and I went down with them. Another bunch went down and eat and I went down with them. Another bunch went down and I went down and eat again. I guess if my fever hadn't have been 104, not telling how many times I would have gone back.

But then I stayed in the hospital and I eat in there for a right smart time. Then they got me back and put me on beach defense up on top of the place. I would watch the bombers come over. When they'd come over, I'd run back down in the hold. Mine was just a day job where some of the others worked on the heavy artillery. Sometimes during the night, they'd roll them out to help load the big guns. They really looked to me like they was working when I had it pretty easy up on top.

But it went on and we got back on our feet pretty well. The Japs come over and bombed and they'd missed the ship hitting water. Then the boys would all jump out in the water and pick up the fish they'd killed and we'd have a big fish fry. And then, as everything happens, they pulled a surrender. So they lined us all up on top and the Japs come out in little boats and surround the place. Then they invited us and wanted the money and the watches and anything that would be a benefit. They searched you several times.

Then they loaded us on those little _____ and we took out back to some little place where they was going to work us down there on some dock. I had a pretty pair of shoes on. They was really shining. A Jap kept looking at them; he took a liking to them right now. I'd move around a little and he'd move around pretty close to me. Finally he motioned at his shoes and mine. I told him, "No, too little." He said he'd fix so he cut the end out where my foot would stick out over the shoe. So when we got down on that dock, that's what I worked in. When the sun was really shining down, we had to pass rock to fill out the dock. Blisters came out on a bunch of the boys and well it did on me, but not as bad as it did on some of the rest. But there wasn't nothing hurt me as the end of my toes, crunching on them hot rock. I walked days around there, holding my toes up.

And they started feeding us a little stuff there. It didn't look very good, but it was pretty tasty, considering what we had to eat. Then as we went along, finally they took a notion to move us. They moved us into Bilibit Prison. And then from Bilibit Prison, we went to Cabanatuan. Malaria hit me again at Cabanatuan, also beriberi. I swelled up and looked like a balloon. But they made me in charge, before I got so bad, put me in charge of a wood detail. And we'd go out on this wood detail, the Filipinos would want to sell us something. But the Japs told us all we bought out there, we had to eat out there. By me being in charge of them, I was supposed to

check them in and see that they didn't carry nothing back to camp. And they sold some candy they called ponchitas. I guess there was 120 of those things in a box of ponchitas. So nobody searched me; I just searched the other boys. So I stole a box of ponchitas, bought a box, put them up under my shirt and was about to get away with them, So a Jap come up and seen them, He come down there and said, "What have you got?" I says, "Ponchitas." He'd already seen them. He said, "Sit down. You like ponchitas?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "Well, eat them." I eat about half of them and I started to give one of them away and he said, "No, you eat them all." I had to eat that whole box of ponchitas.

Then I lost that job on the detail, got sick again—malaria, beriberi. Walking on that detail caused a knot to grow in my groin. I couldn't walk and sometimes they'd have to put their hands in my back where I'd lean backwards. I could walk, but I couldn't bend over and walk. So then while I was in camp, my water quit on me. And all of the water I would drink would go down in my entrails, or somewhere where it wasn't supposed to and they couldn't draw it. So I, every time I was starved for a drink of water, and I had to drink a little bit, and it cramped me so, I begged that doctor to give me something. He passed me on away; he wouldn't do it. So I had to fight that for about eight days and then one morning, it just went down over night.

Then the camp moved out somewhere. I forget now where it was. We was going to move the whole camp. They put me on a truck and I knowed when they put me on that truck I must look pretty bad. So I went on up there and I run on my brother. He looked at me and told me I wasn't going to make it. "Yeah, I'll make it." So he got hold of some duck eggs, been dealing with the Japs someway, he brought them up there on a platter. I tried to eat one of those duck eggs but I didn't do very good at it. I couldn't make water for eight days so he took some rice and soaked it 'til it swelled up and dried it out, then rolled it and put it a pan and scorched it and

burned it. Then he took a bottle and rolled it, grind it up like coffee. He said, "You drink this." So I drank it, drank a little bit more and a little bit more until finally I got my water going again, just through that coffee he made me, I guess.

So then I got bad sick again and they sent him out on a detail. And I got bad sick again and they sent me over to the dysentery section. And I stayed over there for quite awhile, had malaria, hit me again. So some guy come along and he had 742 grains of quinine and he give them to me, which a tablet then sold for \$5 in that hospital. He said, "I'll give you some and if you'll take them and won't sell them." I said, "I won't sell them." So I took them all.

REEL NO. 3

March 15, 1961

When I left Cabanatuan that time and come back across the road, I got the doctor. I had dry beriberi, so I had the doctor put me on a detail and send me to Japan. The detail was going and he said if they caught him doing it that they'd probably beat him half to death or shoot him, if they sent somebody out there. They'd probably shoot him and shoot me too because they didn't want me littering up the place when they could have gotten better men. But I went anyway and when I got to Japan, they put me to work. When we started to Japan, they put us on a cattle boat and we started up there going pretty good until the American submarines kept sinking the ships. There was several ships shot right out of the convoy.

At that time, the Japs didn't vary at all. They kept right on their course and our ship wasn't much anyway. They just happened to miss ours. They got an oil tanker out of the bunch, the one; I saw it go up. We'd laid there day in and night out and didn't know when they was

going to get us. They never did make it. We finally got to Japan. We thought we was going to have it nice over there. They worked us in a coal mine and that was down underneath the ocean. And we lived on a little island was built out of the stuff they'd got out of the mine, the waste, the rock and stuff like that.

We worked there a long time and we had to learn Japanese. They _____ their "F's." I learned to talk quite a bit of Jap and understood a whole lot more than I could speak. And by the way they treated us, we kind of knew how the war was going along. If they wasn't too bad on us, why we knew they'd done pretty good somewhere. But if the Americans was kicking them around a little bit, they was kicking us around in camp. There was an old Jap there; I saved his life one time by getting him out of a big fall-in. And he was pretty good to me and would always tell me what was happening on the outside. The morning they dropped the atomic bomb, or the day they dropped it, I forget when, I was sitting in the mess hall. I don't know what I was doing in there, sick detail or something, blood poison. And this blood poison caused me to stay in camp.

I was in the mess hall and they dropped that bomb and at first we thought it was an earthquake. But she come with such a roar and the window lights flew out of the building and she swung way over looked like a forty-degree angle but then she straightened back up. So we got outside and got to looking and saw an awful toadstool just across the bay. And it towered up there I guess 4500 feet high. So the next morning, that night that old Jap gave me that information walked along by me going to the mine. He told me the Americans had a new weapon and it wouldn't be long before I'd be going home. And Nagasaki was just like that highway, everything was just as level. It killed and burned the whole city, one shell of some sort.

So we went on to the mines. And these mines, we was working down under the ocean, we never did go down in the mines. We didn't know why at the time but we found out the mines filled up with water after they dropped that bomb, must have cracked the surface all through there. Anyhow, it filled up with water. That tickled us. So we went back and see what was going to happen. They'd changed all the guards. The old ones were gone and the new ones had come in. And so they told us, the interpreter came down and told us the war was over. So the Americans run out and grabbed the rifles from the Japs. Well, all these last Japs they sent there could speak English as well as we could. They'd all went to school right here in the United States. They couldn't only speak English; they knew the old American slang. They could say anything, and talk just like you do and want to shoot craps and everything else. So we took their guns away from them and said, "If you boys want to stand guard, you'll have to keep the civilians out of here. If you want to stand guard, keep the rifle. If you don't want to stand guard, give them back to the Japs and they'll keep the civilians out." So the boys give the Japs back their guns and they stood guard.

Then there was some Navy planes, we saw them going over. And we made us a big P.W. sign. And so when we made this sign, they spotted it and they started down and they dropped wrenches with notes tied on them and everything. So a few days after that, we was going to see what that bomb did to that city. So me and another fellow, we took a walk. And we walked out of that camp with old Japanese clothes on so the Japs wouldn't recognize us. We rubbed some brown stuff on us and we walked over in that area. Well, they had guards on that area where that bomb had hit. But there was standpipes standing up 100 feet high and you could pick up a rock in your bare hand and just crumble it to powder. And Pullman cars was laying five and six blocks from the railroad tracks. There wasn't anything there you couldn't break with your hand

or a pipe. You could pick up an iron pipe and just bend it with your hands just like you'd break it in two. It was a tremendous heat. And there would be people sitting in foxholes; there'd be their carcass sitting up there that never had fallen over with all the meat gone off it. But they soon seen us in that area and come over and took us out of there and took us back to camp and told us to stay there.

So we stayed there a few days. Then planes started coming over telling us where to go, so we could get back to the American hands. We started back to the American hands, any way we could get there – old automobiles, riding in streetcars, trains. And we got as far as we could and there was a bay. And you couldn't cross the bay without a boat and we found an old Jap that had a boat. And we wanted 150 yen. So we had to go back and steal, grab and rob to get 150 pesos. We got them and took them down there to him and got two-thirds way across the bay and here come a hurricane. They called them tornado or something over there, about the same thing. So he said he'd turn around and go back, his little boat wouldn't stand it. We told him, "No, he couldn't turn back. We'd already paid him." He said he was going to turn back and one of the boys pulled a knife on him and run it up into his ribs and said "You head into it or we'll kill you and drive it ourselves." Although I don't think anybody on there could have drove the boat. So he headed into the storm and during that storm, the water would break under that boat and come down and hit the water and it almost broke all our legs. If you'd sit down it would almost break your neck. So every time we'd hit the water, we'd have to get back up on our feet, kindly make a spring for it.

So the hurricane was finally over and we was almost back where we started from and we went on back across. And we got some Japs to take us. They said they'd take us. And we got out in the country about ten or fifteen miles and dropped us off. Then we had a long time, a long

walk, and we finally made it up to civilian hands. We got to civilian hands and the boys all told us if we could speak any Japanese, they'd take us out and show us a good time that night, and maybe they could talk to some of the Japs for them, We didn't make it. I don't think any of the boys went out with them. They was too tired and sick and they just wasn't in the mood. So they come on then and made the reservations for us to go on the plane and flew us to some big island there that used to be fortified by the Japs. And we left there and come to Manila.

Manila, we left there on a ship and come to California and stayed in Letterman General for awhile and then caught a train to Louisville, Kentucky. And I went from Louisville, Kentucky to Framingham, Massachusetts to a _____ center and then was discharged there and came home. Thank you.