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Harrodsburg Man Forgives but Cannot Forget Bataan Death March

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HARRODSBURG, Ky.—World War II has never ended for Maurice Jack Wilson. And it likely never will.

He has forgiven the Japanese for the humiliations and cruelty he suffered on the Bataan Death March and in prison camps in the Philippine Islands and Japan.

But it is impossible for him to forget. The symbols, real and imagined, are too close.

The metal braces that support his legs, the back brace he wears, the special car he drives, his home, office and work are all constant reminders of the three agonizing years he spent in the limbo of insecurity, hunger, fear and physical neglect.

And then there are the nightmares that now and then keep coming back to haunt his sleep. For Wilson, it is an awesome spectacle, punctuated with the rattle of machine gun fire, the thunder of exploding bombs and frightening pictures of his buddies, their faces struck with fear, and confusion racing for cover beneath Army tanks and trucks.

The dream lasts but a few seconds—but it is as real to Wilson as the day it occurred.

The moment was December 8, 1941, (December 7 in the United States). Wilson was one of 66 Mercer County men who, as members of Company D, 192nd Tank Battalion, Harrodsburg, Ky., National Guard, had arrived in the Philippines only three weeks earlier to help defend Southeast Asia against the "possibility of attack" by Japan.

Of the 66, only 37 returned. The rest were killed the next few months as the Japanese Imperial Army advanced down the Philippine Islands, or were captured with the fall of Bataan. Corregidor and Fort Drum, only to die later of malnutrition and disease in Japanese prison camps.

Wilson's tank outfit had drawn the assignment of protecting Clark Field, the pride of the United States' overseas airbases, from a Japanese ground attack.

"We thought the planes were ours. They were white and we figured they belonged to the Navy. The bombers came in first. Then the fighters, dropping bullets like hail. There wasn't a man among us who wasn't scared."

The next few months for Wilson and the thousands of other servicemen were a period that has gone down in military history as "one of the decisive battles of the world."

They fought to defend Bataan and Corregidor in a long, protracted struggle to save the Pacific and Australia from enemy hands while the United States and its allies regrouped their military forces for the war in the Far East against Japan.

Wilson's tank outfit roamed about the countryside for several days, living off the land and attempting to hide from Japanese aircraft. It later regrouped at the head of Bataan Peninsula to fight the delaying action against the Japanese.

They ran out of food and fresh water on Bataan and turned to eating monkeys.

When Bataan fell, Wilson escaped to Corregidor.

Wilson stayed on Corregidor three days before transferring to Fort Drum, a concrete battleship built in the bay.

He was captured May 6, the day Gen. Jonathan Wainwright surrendered the U.S. forces in the Philippines. For the next 3 years Wilson's life was a battle for survival against disease, fatigue, hunger and on occasion, the Japanese.

He was first taken to a sugar plantation above Manila Bay to repair loading docks. While there, he went without water for three days, sucking buttons to stimulate saliva.

From there he was taken to Bilbid Prison where he stayed four days before being transferred to a prison camp.

The Japanese later put him on a work detail at Nichols Field in the PI, building and rebuilding runways.

From there, he was transferred back to Bilbid Prison, and then to another prison camp before embarking aboard a Japanese ship for a prison camp in Japan. The food at sea was "spoiled beef. I don't see how in the world it didn't kill all of us."

In Japan, he labored as a dock worker, unloading coal, until a fall left him paralyzed.

"Every night someone would die in sick bay. I figured they'd let me die also if I didn't do something. I looped a web belt around a rafter and lifted myself every day to get the use of my legs back. I finally got so I could walk but I walked like I was drunk."

With the end of the war, Wilson was transferred back to the United States where he was admitted to first one and then another military hospital for treatment of the injuries he suffered while in Japan.

He was discharged from Fort Ord, Calif., with 100 per cent disability.

"The first tried farming after he got out of the services but found the work physically painful and had to quit. Since then, his life has evolved around the 6 months he fought on Bataan, Corregidor and Fort Drum and the 1219 days he spent in Japanese prison camps."

"I'm the only one of the Harrodsburg boys that made a hobby of working with the Veterans Administration, doing service work." He helps veterans and their survivors in Mercer and surrounding counties prepare benefit forms and is the VA's unofficial contact man for information about the 66 who went abroad three weeks before the war started.

Perhaps ironically, he's also a fancier of Japanese pottery and china.

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