

Mercer County Man Recounts Bataan Horror

By Scott Smith
South-Central Kentucky Bureau

HARRODSBURG — On the ninth day of April 1942, about 12,000 fever-ridden, half-starved Americans on Bataan, a 15-by-20 mile peninsula that forms the west shore of Manila Bay in the Philippines, surrendered to the Imperial Japanese 14th Army.

Maurice E. "Jack" Wilson was then 28 years old. He was one of 66 Harrodsburg men with the 192nd Tank Battalion on Bataan.

"Twenty-nine of my close friends never came back home with me to Harrodsburg," he said last week, thumbing through large stacks of old photographs, letters yellow with age, Army documents and news clippings that told of the ordeal that followed one of America's darkest days during World War II.

Today, at 60, blind in one eye and disabled in both legs as a result of his war experiences, there is only a hint of bitterness in his voice as he recounts the many Japanese prisons and the horrors of watching his friends slaughtered.

"Some of the survivors don't like talking about it," he said, "but I think that is what has kept me strong over the years. I guess I am one of the few who has kept records of what happened over there. And I would go through it again. I'm just one of those people who loves his country enough to fight for it."

The Philippines had fallen, five months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the defeat cast a shadow of grief and despair over the entire United States.

Nowhere was the shadow deeper than in Harrodsburg.

Twenty-two percent of all the men in Harrodsburg between 19 and 29 years old were part of the 192nd Tank Battalion that had been called to active duty in November 1940.

"Our group was among the first National

(Turn to HARRODSBURG, A8)



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Wilson poses near tank honoring Harrodsburg men who fought on Bataan.

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Harrodsburg Man Remembers Horrors of Bataan

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Guard units to be called up," Wilson said. "We trained at Fort Knox for 10 months, then went to Louisiana for Armywide field maneuvers in September 1941."

The superior performance on maneuvers by the Harrodsburg unit impressed Gen. George S. Patton, the country's top tank expert. He chose the unit for duty in the Philippines, where it arrived on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 30, 1941.

A few of the men were killed in action, but most died on the infamous Bataan Death March, when the Japanese prodded their prisoners through the peninsula's mountains and jungles to camps in the heart of the Philippines. Others died of dysentery, beriberi, dengue fever or malaria while prisoners. Two were killed when U.S. submarines sank unmarked Japanese transports in which prisoners were being taken to Japan late in the war.

"I wasn't in the death march," Wilson said. "About 24 of us climbed along the edge of a cliff, getting toe-holds on rock ledges, while the Japs were on top of the cliff with their tanks."

"We edged around the cliff and saw a hole that went back into a cave. We walked in, and there was a man, half-Chinese and half-Spanish, with a boat. It had a hole in it, but we bailed it out."

"Our intention was to go to Australia. We loaded two 55-gallon drums of gas on board, and then an officer from the 20th Coast Artillery came up. He drew a gun and said, 'You've got to take me and my men with you or I'll kill you.' There were 10 to 12 of them. We took them."

Under constant cannon fire from Japanese tanks, Wilson's boat made it to Corregidor, where Gen. Jonathan Wainwright had assumed command after Gen. Douglas MacArthur had been evacuated to Australia. Officers there refused to allow the group to continue.

Wilson was captured when Corregidor fell on May 6, 1942.

"We were all on Fort Drum, a concrete battleship that had been built on coral rock in the middle of Manila Bay. We were there from April 10 until we surrendered almost a month later," he said.

When Wainwright ordered the white flag hoisted over the island fortress, Wilson and the other prisoners were taken to Cabanatuan, a prison on Luzon.

Four of his Corregidor buddies tried to persuade him to escape with them.

"I had a touch of malaria and dengue fever. I said no. Next day, the Japanese caught the boys and brought them back. They tied them up, took their hats off and strapped a two-by-four behind their knees so that they had to squat, and it cut into their legs. They left the boys there, facing the sun, for two or three days. Then they shot them. Some of the prisoners wouldn't stay and watch, but I said, 'I'm staying; I could have been one of them.'"

The U.S. and Filipino troops were on half-rations even before the war broke out. Soon they were forced to eat anything they could find. They watched monkeys and ate what the monkeys ate. They ate iguana lizards and striped hare every edible plant and bush. They even ate their own horses and pack mules.

"I was a cook in battalion after they had taken me out of the tank because of an eye injury. They'd bring in a horse's leg with the hide still on it. I'd have to peel the hide off, and the only way I could cook it was to run it through a meat grinder."

"We'd have maybe one little loaf of bread and only four cans of salmon — the little cans like you get at the grocery store — to feed 70 to 80 men."

The Philippines' doom was sealed during the first week of the war. The U.S. strategy to counter the Japanese fleet and keep supply and communications lines to Manila open was wrecked by Pearl Harbor. Within a week of the first raid on Clark Field, successive bombings had made impotent the B-17 bomber force that MacArthur had planned to use in counter-attacking the Japanese airfields on Formosa.

Already short of ammunition, food and medicine and prevented now from being resupplied, the Philippine garrison began one of the most heroic defenses in the history of the war. The Japanese took 40,000 prisoners when it ended, but with a fearful cost: 2,700 Japanese dead, 4,000 wounded, 10,000 to 12,000 sick.

The Imperial 14th Army was no longer an effective fighting force, and its commander, Gen. Masaharu, was relieved of command. The quick victory he had expected had taken six months.

"On our way to the Bilid prison hospital in Manila," Wilson said, "Filipino people had put tubs of water with 10 cups on each tub along the road. Sometimes they would throw us some cigarettes, but when the Jap guards saw them, they were beaten very badly."

"In another prison, the Cabanatuan prison, we were forced to do farm work. The Japs had no tractors



Herald-Leader/E. Martin Jesse

Wilson prefers to remember his captivity.

or horses there. The ground was black and hard. They would put 150 men out there with grubbing hoes. Just about everywhere we were working, there were huge red-ant hills the size of the round hay shocks you see on farms today."

"If the Japs caught any of us talking, they would force us to lie on the ant hills for hours."

When Japan surrendered in August 1945, Wilson was in the Niigati prison on the Japanese mainland. He was not liberated until September.

"I weighed 105 pounds," he said.

"That was 95 pounds less than the 200 I weighed when I left home."

Today, sitting comfortably in his home on Mackville Road, a few miles from where a landmark rests in honor of the 66 men of the Harrodsburg tank battalion, he lives quietly with his memories.

The walls of his den, where he often sits to remind himself of what it really means to have survived the nightmare of war, are covered with black-framed reflections of men who also knew war's life and death moments.

In 1961, the survivors in Harrodsburg got together to dedicate a monument to their unit on the outskirts of town. There, on a well-kept plot, stands a World War II light tank. Behind it are a flagpole and a bronze plaque, headed simply "Bataan" with the names of the 66 men in the unit.



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