

Army finally will honor Philippines survivors

By Sharon M. Heyricks
Herald-Leader staff writer

Forty-three years ago, when Maurice E. "Mac" Wilson shipped out under sealed orders with the Army's 188th Tank Battalion, he had no idea where he was going or what the coming weeks would bring.

"I took all my picture albums with me, so I could look at pictures on the weekends," the 37-year-old Harrodsburg native recalled.

But a few weeks after landing in the Philippines, Wilson witnessed the first squadron of Japanese warplanes descending on Clark Field — just hours after the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

In the months and years that followed, Wilson and thousands of other American fighting men would experience some of the worst atrocities of World War II — from the Bataan Death March to Japanese prison camps.

Known as "the Philippine Defenders," the men or their survivors are now being sought so they can be awarded a Bronze Star for recognition of their valor in combat.

In Kentucky, the search began about two months ago. It is centered on Mercer County, where men serving in the 38th Tank Company of the Kentucky National Guard later became part of the 188th and 194th Army battalions.

As far as National Guard officials can tell, about 80 Kentuckians were in the company, a number of whom were from Mercer County. Thirty-seven came home.

Twenty-eight of the Kentuckians who survived the defense of the Philippines have been found, said Sgt. Al D'Ambrosio, recruiting commander for the Kentucky National Guard in Harrodsburg. Immediate survivors — parents, wives, brothers or sisters — can claim the award if the person is deceased, D'Ambrosio said.

Supporting documents, including discharge papers, must be verified by the Army. Those who served between Dec. 7, 1941, and May 16, 1942, are eligible for the Bronze Star, according to the office of the U.S. Secretary of the Army.

Once the necessary paperwork is completed and all medals and citations are in, a presentation ceremony — probably at the Mercer County Fair grounds — will be conducted for the men or their survivors.

Many records were lost or destroyed in the war and the men were scattered throughout the United States afterward, but Wilson has helped provide the National Guard with names and addresses.

Why the delay of 43 years in handing out the awards?

Probably just "an oversight," D'Ambrosio said.

An officer with the Kentucky National Guard office in Frankfort said increased public interest in World War II atrocities probably helped spur the Army into action.

What happened to those men left scars on them for life," said Chief Warrent officer Clenn Birkhead of the adjutant general's office.

In the Bataan Death March, 10,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war were forced to march 55 miles under the blazing sun without food or water. Nearly 10,000 died along the way. Some were bayoneted by the Japanese when they slackened their pace, some when they collapsed into ditches.

A Lexington man who lived through the forced march, Edwin W. Rutz, said he has had a disabling heart condition since 1945, the result of malnutrition he suffered during the march. Rutz said he didn't talk much about

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the experience.

"I was one of the lucky ones," he said. "I don't know how I survived."

Those who made it through the march faced another problem — the notorious Japanese prison camps. Rue spent three years and five months as a prisoner of war. In the final days of the war, he was transferred to a remote camp high in the mountains of Japan.

"It looked like a place they had brought us where we could die off and nobody would notice," he said. "The snow was 8 feet deep, drifting as high as 30 feet in some places. We never would have made it through the winter if the war hadn't ended."

Wilson, who lost the use of his feet because of a prison camp injury, is still bitter about his Japanese captors. "They beat us up so much, and for no cause," he said.

At one camp, he fell from a railroad trestle during a work detail, and

his legs were paralyzed. But Wilson said he was determined not to lie in bed and die.

"Boys was dying beside me every night," he said. "It like to run me crazy, so I forced myself to walk."

He earned the name "Paddlefeet" from his captors because he had to paddle his feet along as he walked. Today, Wilson wears braces on his feet, suffers constant pain and is unable to work.

"I get a good check from the government every month," he said. "But they could keep their money if I could just do a good day's work."

Pilot not hurt in crash

SANFORD, Fla. (AP) — A single-engine plane making a landing approach hit a building, flipped over and landed upside down in a parking lot, but the pilot was not seriously injured, police said.

The pilot, Robert Ames, 33, was in stable condition at Central Florida Regional Hospital in Sanford.

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