

Veteran haunted by memories of captivity

By Jim Warren
Herald-Leader staff writer

"It was pretty rough," Maurice "Jack" Wilson of Harrodsburg says today, with the kind of understatement that is possible when one looks back over 40 years.

But Wilson, 72, still carries the scars of those "rough" times, and still can't sleep at night because of the pain from injuries he suffered in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps four decades ago.

He is one of the thousands of U.S. soldiers who were captured by the Japanese in the Philippines in the early days of World War II and who spent the entire conflict as prisoners of war — sick, starved, tortured and reduced to an almost inhuman wretchedness. About 60 percent of them never came home.

In many ways, they are the forgotten men of the war. When the great history-book battles were fought in the Pacific — Midway, Guadalcanal, Tarawa — they were far from the front lines. They raised no victory flags, liberated no cities. Over the years, they have become a footnote in the war's story.

But today, Veterans Day, that is changing. Manny Lawton, a prisoner of war, has written a new book, *Some Survived*, that vividly documents the hardships the men endured. The noted author and oral historian Studs Terkel has included accounts of the Philippine survivors in his new book, *The Good War*, which contains an interview with Wilson.

And this afternoon in Harrodsburg, the Kentucky National Guard will honor survivors from the 18th Tank Battalion, which served in the

Philippines and was largely composed of Kentuckians. Wilson and more than 30 others will receive Bronze Star medals in recognition of their service and sacrifice. In some cases, the medals will be accepted by survivors of the men who earned them in the 1940s.

In the view of Lawton, the recognition is long overdue.

"This is a story that should be told and made known because it is a part of our history," he said in a telephone interview from his South Carolina home. "And who knows? If it had not been for the men who laid their lives on the line, we might be living under the Japanese today."

"I think the recognition is coming now because the mood of the country is changing. There is an interest that wasn't there before, and the people are becoming more patriotic. Some-

body told me once that attitudes toward war run in 50-year cycles, and we're coming up on 50 years now."

Wilson also believes that recognition has been too long in coming, even though he says some of those who survived don't want to remember their ordeal.

"Some of the fellows who came back, they don't want to think about it or talk about it. But it doesn't bother me."

Wilson joined the National Guard's 28th Tank Company in 1933. In late 1940, with war fears growing, the company was inducted into the regular Army, becoming a part of the 18th Tank Battalion. Wilson, a kid fresh off the farm, landed in the Philippines that November. Exactly 18 days later, Japan attacked Pearl



Herald-Leader/Ron Garrison

Jack Wilson was captured by Japanese in early days of World War II. He will receive a Bronze Star today.

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World War II veteran haunted by memories of imprisonment

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Harbor and the Philippines, thrusting America into the war.

Nothing went well for the Philippine defenders. Lightning Japanese air attacks destroyed most of their planes, wrecked most of their installations. And when Japanese troops began landing, Gen. Douglas MacArthur ordered his troops into defensive positions on the Bataan Peninsula where, he hoped, they could hold out until help arrived. But help never came, and the defenders were doomed to fight a grim holding action that, although futile, bought precious time for America to gear up its war effort.

Wilson remembers Bataan as a place of desperate battles, disease and constant hunger. There was never enough food or medicine to go around, he said.

"There was no rear echelon on Bataan," he said. "Bullets were always flying over your head no matter where you were. I came down with dengue fever, but there was no medicine for it. We ate anything we could find, killed all of the horses we could find and ate them, killed all the mules we could find."

When Bataan fell on April 9, 1942, Wilson and a few friends traveled in a small boat to the adjacent island of Corregidor. There, a few defenders held out until May 6, when they, too, surrendered, ending all resistance. Wilson and his buddies were marched away into captivity.

Those captured on Bataan were herded off into the infamous Death March, in which about 11,000 men died during a 60-mile hike under a brutal sun. Hundreds of others died in the prison camps from the effects of disease, starvation and beatings.

Wilson missed the Death March, but he vividly remembers the day his unit surrendered.

"They (the Japanese) led us all out and lined us up in the hot sun in front of a machine gun," he said. "I was sure that they were going to pull the trigger at any minute. But instead, they searched us, took everything we had and then took us away."

Wilson remembers being in a succession of prison camps in the Philippines — filled with its high walls and electric fences; Cabanatuan, where 30 or 40 men died each night and were dumped into mass graves. He said that all the camps had one thing in common — brutal treatment.

Historians have suggested that the Japanese used brutality because they believed that surrendering in battle was a disgrace and that the Americans, having surrendered, were not deserving of humane treatment.

"Sometimes, they would just leave you standing in the sun without shirts or hats, until you'd get blisters as big as chicken's eggs," Wilson said. "Once, they moved us by train, in these little boxcars, and there would be maybe 100 guys in every car. No room to sit or stretch, and it was so hot inside that you thought you would just burn up."

Often, he said, the prisoners were required to do heavy labor, even though they were weakened by disease and lack of food. Failure to perform could earn a man a beating or death, he said. Wilson himself was beaten with bamboo poles "until I couldn't sleep on my back for weeks" because he was late to chow call one day.

Food was always in short supply. The usual ration, Wilson said, consisted of a tiny cup of rice twice a day. At other times, the men were given fish heads, bean leaves or even dried grasshoppers to eat. At one point, Wilson befriended a cat that wandered into a camp. A few days later, he said, two men killed the cat and ate it.

In his book, Lawton said that hungry prisoners constantly were on the prowl for grasshoppers, rats or dogs for food. One night, he wrote, he was awakened by two men arguing over who would get the larger portion of a snake they had just killed.

"I was a prisoner for three years and five months, and I never saw a biscuit, an egg or a glass of milk," Wilson said. "I weighed 200 pounds when I was captured, and I was down to 160 when I got out."

In September 1940, Wilson and a few other men were packed onto a small ship and taken to prison camps in Japan. Conditions on the ship were miserable, he said, with the men locked below decks in cramped spaces where they endured searing tropical heat. One man came down with appendicitis during the trip, he said, but no medical facilities were made available. But Wilson said two doctors successfully operated on the man, using a razor blade, a fork and some spoons as medical instruments.

As bad as those conditions were, the prisoners who were moved to Japan later in the war on the so-called "hell ships" endured even more. Many, packed into the holds of the ships where no air circulated, died from suffocation. According to some accounts, a few men went berserk from heat and thirst and tried to kill the other men. Others died when the ships were bombed by American pilots who didn't realize that the craft carried U.S. prisoners.

Wilson spent the rest of the war at Niigata, Japan, where he was forced to work as a slave laborer. Once he injured his back in a fall and was paralyzed for three months, staying in a prison hospital where "every morning you'd wake up and find somebody beside you dead."

Eventually, Wilson literally forced himself to walk again so that he could get out of the hospital, because "I was sure that it was going to drive me crazy if I didn't get out of there."

Freedom did not come until the Japanese surrendered following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And today, Wilson says he has no doubts as to whether the bombings were proper.

"If it hadn't been for that atomic bomb, I wouldn't be back here today," he said.

He said he isn't sure why he survived when so many others did not, other than the fact that he had a strong drive to endure.

"I just kept telling myself that if my mother and father weren't worrying, I could tough it out," he said. "I always felt that I could hold out; I just didn't know how long it would take."

Over the years, Wilson has tried to preserve memories, records and names of those from the Harrowsburg area who were in the Philippine defense, and those records helped the National Guard in finding men for today's ceremonies.

"There were 46 of us who went, and 29 died, either in prison camps or on prison ships," he said. "Thirty-seven of us came back, and 14 have died since then. There are 23 of us still living."

Pains from his back injury still keep Wilson awake on many nights, and, he said, "I have dreams every now and then. It comes and goes."

"I'm really lucky to be back in the shape I'm in when you realize three out of four died," he said. "But if they ever needed me to go again, I would. I'm no draft dodger."

Send us names, addresses

Last year's Mail From Home project was such a success that the Herald-Leader is repeating it this Christmas.

If you have a friend or relative in the military who will be overseas during the holidays, send the person's name and address to Mail From Home, c/o Lifestyle Department, Lexington Herald-Leader, Main and Mallard, Lexington, Ky. 40505.

The information must be received by Nov. 20. Please include the branch of service, where he or she is stationed and a little personal information, such as age, the school he or she attended, and interests and hobbies.



Wilson in 1943 photo

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