

STORY OF WAR

Burgin man survived privation, death march in the Pacific

By Evelyn Gander
Staff Writer

BURGIN — Cecil VanDiver is a grower of roses.

His pink rosebushes stand graceful, late-summer guard on each side of the front steps at the Burgin home that he shares with his wife, Ruby.

A long way from Manila, the Philippines, Nov. 20, 1941. VanDiver's job with Company D, 192d Tank Battalion was to work in the kitchen.

Scene by scene, VanDiver recalled his experiences. He detailed some with dialogue, colored in some with humor and framed them all with humanity.

He and the rest of the arriving Company bivouacked across from Clark Field there in Manila, the Philippines. The men found the canteen there — and a little brown monkey named Jocko.

VanDiver laughed: Seems the men liked to let Jocko take sips of beer. Jocko must've liked it, too: He got whatever kind of drunk he could get for a monkey, staggered back to his home with the soldiers in the barracks and fell into the nearest available bed.

A little over a month passed. It was Dec. 8, 1941. "I was working in the kitchen," VanDiver recalled. "Prettiest formation of planes (were going by)." A few seconds must've passed. He thought the planes were American.

"(Something was dropping),



looked like little sticks of wood. (Men) laid down on the ground all around the mess hall. They (Americans) shot down one of the planes. I jumped up and wanted to get a better look. (The) Company commander — Major Nelson — knocked me down. 'Soldier, you stay down! Don't get up until this (is) over!' Red tree bark, he remembered, showered down all over him as the Japanese pilots strafed the area.

If curiosity once almost got the better of him, cunning often wound up getting meat for the men.

Saying they had meat until the supplies lines were cut off, "We cooked horsemeat, killed monkeys, cooked lizards. (We were) glad to get any kind of a food. I made the coffee. They enjoyed the coffee.

"We raided (a) Filipino warehouse (for) coffee. (Traded it) for dogmeat (with the) natives."

(Continued on Page A8.)



Staff Photo by Kent Brown

Cecil VanDiver, part of Harrodsburg's Company D, 192d Tank Battalion, holds the Japanese flag he brought back from Manchuria when the war ended. He'd taken it down from a flagpole outside a restaurant where he'd eaten, the guest of a Russian ally.

VanDiver1

Clipped By:



jopolony

Sun, Jan 13, 2019

Burgin man survived privation, death march in the Pacific

(Continued from Page A1.)

(According to an account of Company D's experiences, written by Major General Arthur Y. Lloyd, adjutant general of Kentucky and others of his staff, in tribute to the men of Company D, the Clark field bombing was followed by amphibious landings by the Japanese forces. The 1924 Tank Battalion — and Company D — moved further into the Bataan Peninsula. Still, the Japanese were frustrated at the skill of the American defensive.) Conditions for the Americans must have been worsening, though.

"Not too far from time of the surrender," VanDiver remembered, "trucks went out (and brought back little loaves of bread. They were as hard as a rock."

VanDiver remembered that they were as far into the peninsula then as they could go. Seeing an American tank (and determined that it not be taken by the enemy), the men of Company D piled it with ammunition, poured gasoline over it and set it on fire.

"The morning (April 9, 1942) we surrendered, Major Nelson called and told us what was taking place. He had a loaf of that bread, (someone else had some pineapple juice. We had communion."

Major General Edward P. King Jr., leader of the Bataan forces, surrendered to Major General Kamechiro Nagano, according to the adjutant general's account.)

What forever came to be known as "The Bataan Death March" began (65 miles, according to the written account, from Mariveles to San Fernando and the Japanese prisoner of war camp).

VanDiver remembered. "The guards patrolled the whole island. I don't know how long the line was. Filipino scouts (would walk) back and forth. If we saw artesian wells — water (and tried to drink from them, we were shot. If you fell out for any reason, you were automatically killed. I fell out.

"Albert 'Blair' Moore and (Earl Pratt) spotted me and took a chance and broke rank and got me back in the march (before the guards saw what was happening). That night one of the boys from Oklahoma (Pratt) — now I don't know where he got it — had water in a canteen. 'Blair' had sugar cake. The Filipinos fed it to their livestock. We had a feast!

"At night they would herd us up so close together that you could sit up but (you) couldn't lay down and relax.

"Major Nelson made every step of the march and just as he got to the camp — went

Commemoration event Saturday

In honor of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, there will be a commemoration ceremony beginning with a parade at 6 p.m. Saturday in Harrodsburg. Its purpose will be to honor and thank the veterans of World War II, their families and those who served on the home front.

Parade — Beginning at Harrodsburg High School and ending at Harrodsburg Baptist Church — 6 p.m.

Ceremony — Mercer County Courthouse yard — 7 p.m.

Open House/Reception — Mercer County Courthouse Yard — 8:30 p.m.

through the gates — dropped dead. As nice a person as I'd ever met."

VanDiver was taken to Manchuria sometime afterward to work for the Japanese war effort.

He worked at first on a lathe in a rifle factory. "And I turned mine down just a shade," he chuckled, and made a useless gun.

Clearly not a rifle-maker, VanDiver was given a lumber-carrying job. He detested it. When the Japanese were looking for blacksmiths, he "embellished" his work history a little. "I told 'em my grandfather was a blacksmith (and I'd worked with him long and hard)," he just grinned.

When asked about the days near the War's end, though, he turned serious.

"We could tell (the Japanese) were losing by (the) attitude of the guards," as he described a beating he was given once for being sick.

The end came. "They called everybody in the barracks, put guards over us. We heard a lot of noise, gunfire. We helped one of the boys get up where he could see."

The soldier yelled out to the allied tanks firing by. Some of the Russians must've been listening. A tank turned around and came straight through the barracks wall. The Russian soldiers lined the Japanese guards up against the wall, took their rifles and gave them to the Americans. Prisoners minutes before, the Americans became guards.

VanDiver described, "We went to Mukden — a camp. It'd been hit (by the Americans). (Food, cigarettes, clothes were air-dropped). The first night after they dropped the food, nobody went to bed."

He laughed. "We ate so many canned peaches. (We'd) get sick. (Then we'd) eat some more. I still like canned peaches."

VanDiver2

Clipped By:



jopolony

Sun, Jan 13, 2019