

**Harrodsburg Tank Battalion in the Philippines:
Survivors of the Bataan Death March**

Interview with Earl Fowler

March 17, 1961

Conducted by William Joseph Dennis

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REEL NO. 4

March 17, 1961

EARL FOWLER speaking:

This is Earl Fowler talking, 38th Tank Company, Harrodsburg. We went into the Army, November 25th, 1940 from the National Guard and we stayed here at Harrodsburg a week I guess. Then they brought a truck up here and took us to Fort Knox. We stayed down there all of 1941, running tanks down there and done tank duty, stuff like that. Then we left from Fort Knox and went to Camp Polk, Louisiana, on maneuvers and stayed there about a month. And then we left Camp Polk, Louisiana, and . . . told us we was going somewhere, we didn't know where we was going, heading to some island. Never knew where I was going til I got there. After I got there, it was the Philippine Islands. Then we was over there about a month.

Then while we was there, I used to go to the show up there every night practically. Finally they give us our guns there one time and they give us live ammunition to carry with us when we went up to the show. We, I know then something was going to happen because they wouldn't let us carry live ammunition like that to the show; used to go every night and they wouldn't let us carry it. Went along and it wasn't a few days til the war broke out. We was eating in there one morning at the mess hall and they said they'd just bombed Pearl Harbor at 12:00 that day. Soon as we got done eating, they loaded us up and took us out there to the airfield. We had our tanks camouflaged there in a thicket, along the airfield. It wasn't long then until about dinnertime that day, we looked up and saw, counted fifty-four coming over. I said, "Look at those American planes they sent us."

We had our mess trucks backed up there and we had our mess kits sticking out there to put food in and I just give that thing a slung and me and a Thompson boy took off down that . . . as hard as we could go, down through them leaves. . fell down behind some bushes there. That

plane shot down out of the air from somewhere, don't know where it come from. Right over in that thicket, that plane set down bullets right side of me. I got up and watching that airplane making a little turn up there fixing to come back down again. I got up and got the top up and got down in that tank. I was trying to get the top down, trying to get the front door down, about that time a bullet just barely hit the edge of that door there, just lacked a half inch coming in. And it sounded just like the rain hitting the top of that thing.

Then they burned up all the planes on the airfield, going up in smoke and the hangers down there, big barrels all exploding like smoke rolling out. And the _____ set the grass on fire and we had to get out of the thicket to keep from getting burned up in the tanks . . . another place away from that fire. We had one guy there, Hugh Leonard, he might near got killed. He didn't; he died later, but that bullet grazed his forehead. We had another guy was killed in that raid – Brooks. Jack was coming down through there and he couldn't get in the tank and he crawled underneath of it. We was all scared to death.

Then finally, that didn't last but a few minutes. W.T. Sparrow, I think he shot one's tail off. Then after that, we left there and went on to some little town, a little bit after that. We had a tank sitting out there and we had a machine gun next, Kenneth Hourigan and a bunch of us in it. So they said the Jap troopers coming up that creek that night, but they never did come and I didn't know whether they was or not. So I get up there and come out of the tank and pull guard so many hours and then, after that, when my time was up, Kenneth, he'd come on guard. I seen something moving out there white and I didn't know what it was. I cut loose on that thing; I didn't know what it was a Jap or what it was moving out there. Kenneth jumped out of that tank and said, "What's the matter? What's going on?" And so, we weren't taking no chances on nothing. So, we didn't see nothing moving, so they finally went on back, went to bed.

Then we finally moved out of there, so we went to another location and then we went on down from Bataan – that's where we surrendered there. So we had our tanks there and we took to tearing things off the tanks, burning them up, anything to keep the Japs from using them. So a bunch of us headed for the beach, Corregidor, and we had a little mine sweeper out there the Filipinos had went down there somewhere and got some gasoline off another boat and brought it up there and put it in this little boat that was out of gas and filled it up. They told us to wade out there in the beach. I waded out in the ocean water up around my neck. Still had my pistol buckled on. And they had a rope out there and they'd catch hold of the rope and they'd pull us in that boat. I think there was twenty-five of us got in that old boat. We went down underneath. We'd set down in there and hear them; they was bombing Corregidor over there, tearing it all to pieces. Then there duds falling and bombs hitting out there in the ocean. So one come down and hit right side of that boat. It happened to be a dud but if it hadn't, it it'd been a live bomb, I probably wouldn't be here today.

So we kept going and finally got across and we pulled up and jumped out and tied to the docks there and then we all took out towards the mountain, in the tunnels. And then stayed there overnight and they give us something to eat, food, and got our clothes. And then the next day, they took us out of there, marched me out to Monkey Point and there's where they put me in Company D, Marine Corps. So we stayed there on that point every day and we'd have to kind of hide around cause they had a Red Cross bay there and they had a big balloon. They'd raise that thing every day, up and down. It'd finally go down and then come back up and they was watching that place over there. And they'd take and when they'd spot something over there, they'd cut loose. So one day they seen us moving over there and they cut loose with them machine guns things. I took for a dugout there; I fell right over in there and they cut the limbs off right over my head and leaves and then they quit after they didn't see nothing moving.

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I guess it was four or five miles back to the mess hall. So we was sitting there one night about twelve o'clock waiting for something to eat. I never did get nothing to eat that night. So about that time over in them mountains in Bataan the Japs opened up with them guns, guns were flashing just like big lights up in there . . . looked like about a hundred going off, shelling that place over there. We all got in a foxhole; wasn't about thirty minutes til the Japs come across that bay. I think a thousand or two first bunch that come about two thousand maybe. I don't know directly how many, guess about that many. Little old boats, little green light on the back of them; Japs piled full, Japs just like sardines in there.

It wasn't just a few minutes, they was on the bay, just hollering. Just make your hair stand on your head nearly. Like Indians or something. You talk about hair-raising. So just started shooting in to us and we had 37-millimeter dug back about ten feet in the bank right down to the water. Me and two more of the other guys in that foxhole dug back in the bank and we opened up that 37-millimeter, one putting the shell in and one pulling the trigger and one getting them out of the box. We tearing them all to pieces out in the bay. Tearing them up so much they were trying to locate that gun. And then after we got on, it quieted down there in few minutes. Directly, you could hear them jabbering, talking, down below us.

They started climbing up; they had their heads camouflaged with leaves and stuff. I was right there at that _____ and had that rifle, edge of that hole and watching, seen something moving up there. It was a bunch of leaves moving; seen his arm come over like that, threw a hand grenade right directly in that hole, laying there spewing. And we piled in on top

of each other. One guy laying on top of my legs and I tried to pull it out of the way. About that time I tried to throw it out of the hole, pick it up. About that time the thing went off and got me in the foot, in the leg and the blood started running down my leg into my shoe. I was working my foot around in there and I could feel that blood squashing around. And that leg felt like it blew off, numb and I couldn't walk on it for a long time . . . and all. And this other guy got his back full of shrapnel; he was crawling and taking on. So we told him to lay down there, even afraid to talk. I just pointed at him and told him to lay down and be quiet. I knewed they was going to try to get in there.

Apparently they started a fire up there, trying to burn us out. And that smoke started rolling up there and blaze. We knew we were going to have to come out of there in a few minutes. And the Filipinos right up there a little piece, they seen we was in trouble and they had a .75. Well, they dropped a .75 shell right below us. It shook the ground. And there wasn't a Jap nowhere for a long time. And then it wasn't too long after that, about an hour and thirty minutes, and here come another bunch across, coming across again, attacking us again. So we give them hell, too. All them guys along the beach, right down below me, they all got killed, got them all. Wasn't one left. We was about the only ones left.

We stayed there. We was still shooting at them. See them down there in them boats; one raise his head up and we'd crack down on him with that rifle. Turn them over in the boat. We could hear them around there and we didn't know war was over. Finally one guy stuck a flag out there, piece of rag, white, and held it and peeped out and seen a Jap officer standing up there looking out from his post. We stuck that flag out there and he come down and he could talk English and he told us to come out. We come out of there with our hands up. He searched us and took us on up on the bank up there, up in the road there and there layed one dead, tore all to pieces, insides all tore out. Four more sitting there with their hands tied behind their backs,

sitting down. Well, I said, "I guess they're going to shoot them." So they took us and put us and tied us up too and I thought, "They going to kill us, I guess." So the sat there and jabbered a minute and directly they come up and cut the ropes, turn us loose, going to keep us prisoner.

So they told me to go down on the bank and start carrying the gear up off the banks. They'd make you work a little bit and then maybe they'd let you sit down a few minutes. Then they'd put you back to work and we was trying to get some water from the Jap guards there. They had canteens buckled around with water in it. We hadn't had no water for two or three days. So, we kept motioning to them, trying to make them understand we wanted some of that water. No, they wouldn't give us no water, let us have none. So we finally . . . so they went back and got the gear off the bank and they moved us out of there, lined us up and marched us on up the road there a piece. So I stayed all night right in the middle of the pike, layed right down in the hard gravel road, had a big rock for a pillow, layed my head on.

They never give us no food or nothing at night. So they finally started giving us a little rice. _____ rice they called it. And then they had this eggplant soup, you pulled the top of it. You wouldn't get all the rice you could eat. Then they took us on, kept us there for about a week, on Corregidor. And then the put me on, I think it was, a boat and took me on across to _____. Never went right up to the land, had to get out and wade in the water, came up around our waist, to get to the beach. Couldn't get the ship up close to the land. And then we marched in two ranks right on down through Manila to a camp, I can't remember how many miles. And I stayed there six months, in Bataan in a prison camp.

While I was over there in that prison camp in Bataan, they'd just as soon shoot you as look at you. They'd kill you there. So, I remember one time four guys thee, they escaped there one night and got away going down the road, trying to get to the headhunters. The headhunters would take care of them if they'd get up in the mountains, away from the Japs. And so the Jap

officers caught them that night and brought them back. They had a horse stable there in this camp and they tied these four guys up in that horse stable and tied their hands up over their heads and put boards in between their legs and made them squat for seventy-two hours. Them guys, they wouldn't let them go to the latrine or nothing. And one afternoon there, a bunch of officers there and I told them, "I bet they're going to kill those guys this afternoon." They was over there digging graves on the ridge, four graves. It wasn't long before I seen twenty-five officers out there, firing squad, and officers. And they had these four guys and they was leading them and they had their hands tied behind them with rope on them and leading them just like they was dogs or something.

And they brought them out and stood them up right at the foot of them four graves, one all along there. Had them blindfolded. They took that blindfold off and brought a bucket of water up there, dipper, and give them a drink of water and let them smoke a cigarette apiece, before they killed them. Made us stay out there and watch it, cause they escaped. They shot them and they fell back in the hole and the tried to crawl out and shoot them again. And they covered them up, just half-dead.

And after that, they put us in squads of ten men, ten men in a squad. If one guy got away, the other nine got killed, shot all nine of them. You had nine in your squad and you'd watch them see that one didn't get away, escape, cause if one escaped, you got killed in the squad.

So after that, they guys died of dysentery and everything. I'd see them die out there and lay out there two or three days on the ground before they picked them up and bury them, lay out there in the hot sun. And they'd take you out on a detail and work and wouldn't give you no, oh they'd give you a piece of bread if you worked. But you had to work before they'd give you a piece of bread, according to what you wanted to do.

When we left the Philippines, they had two ships and one shipload went to Tokyo and one ship went to Munkin, Manchuria. So I was on that ship that went to Munkin, Manchuria. It took us a week, U guess, to go across, or get there. It took thirty days to go across to Munkin, Manchuria. Japs had one little island over there and we stayed, stopped overnight. So we stayed there a night or two, I don't know, but I know we stayed overnight. They docked us there and the Japs got off, went over on that island. They owned that island then. Had, for the time being, but we soon got it back. That ship was eat up with lice. They had us packed on there like sardines. I couldn't find nowhere to sleep on that ship or nothing. Slept night on them there steps going down underneath, layed down on them, and they tramped all over me. And I finally next night I made it down underneath and found a bed down there. Got in between two other guys. Two guys laying on each side of me the next morning dead. And another one laying just a little piece further. They was dying just like flies.

I finally felt something crawling all over me. And I asked some guy, "Wonder what that it crawling, feels like something itching me or something." He said, "I bet you got lice, body lice." Dern, I got to looking at those things and I was eat up with them. So we pulled out off there and kept going on and we got to going along and all at once there was a British or American submarine or something come shooting at the Japanese ship. Didn't even have it marked there we was prisoner, just had regular ship, didn't have it marked or nothing. And that old ship just wiggling and twisting and carrying on, dodging, and them submarines would come up to it and then they'd go down. One passed the tail end of it and they missed, they swept that thing around and missed it. They give us some lifesavers to put on and we had them on, standing there ready to jump in the water if we went up.

Then the Japs started throwing the big old depth charges in there, trying to sink that submarine. I'm standing there right at the rail looking over and here come a big mine floating

down ten feet from the ship, just bouncing along. The water was smooth, wasn't rough or nothing. If that thing had hit the ship, there wouldn't have been nothing left of it. I don't know if we'd jumped out there if we'd stayed alive or not. They stopped; they didn't sink the ship. Then we got settled and kept on going. Finally we come to Munkin, Manchuria. Got off there and we come to a little town there, named Hotan. Then we, they took us off the ship there and they lined us up and marched us through Hotan, about three or four miles out of town to where they had them barracks. Them little old barracks looked about like a barn, about like a shed or something. They had them there just float boards to lay on, one down there and top like a ladder, climb up there and lay down to go to sleep lay a blanket down, right beside each other. So they put us there and we stayed there a few days and they started a detail I was on then. Took us to them barracks when we started working.

And they'd line us up every morning to march. So we had to walk three miles to work every morning and three miles back. One morning there, caught a bunch there one afternoon, sitting outside the barracks. They had orders for them not to smoke, couldn't smoke outside of your barracks. They caught three or four guys out there smoking. Next morning when they lined us all up, they called them guys out. We had an old Jap lieutenant there; his name was Nikki. And they Jap sergeant, he could talk English as good as anybody; the lieutenant couldn't. He looked just like a nigger. So he called . . . he standing there with a two by four in his hand. He hit those guys across the head; I thought for sure he was going to kill them. He'd keep hitting til they'd go down, knock completely out, just fall like a shot. Then he'd jump on top of them and start beating them in the back. Then when he got through, he'd make him get up, bring him to, get him back in line and make him go to work. They just layed the flesh wide open, right up over the forehead where they hit them there.

And they called one little bitty guy out there. That little bitty guy didn't know enough to, they finally caught on to it to fall when they hit them and not stand there til they knocked them out. That little guy, he just stood there and wouldn't go down. They liked to have killed him, just kept beating on him til he went down. And they marched us on and worked us all day. Everytime we walked along, they wouldn't give us no cigarettes. I didn't smoke but I'd pick them up and give them to guys that did smoke. Every time I'd see one, I'd snatch it, pick that cigarette butt the Chinese threwed there. I'd get a bunch of them and put them in my pocket. And then I'd slip and give them to guys that smoked, you know.

So we got into Hotan, where I worked, factory there, big factory they had. So then to get to this place to work, they'd have you carrying, it was 30 degrees below zero, they'd have you carrying railroad ties, one guy on each end. Picking up rocks, carrying rocks, unloading sacks of cement, sheet iron, unloading carloads of coal – that's what we had to do every day. Guards would come around, catch you sitting down, they'd beat you up. So they caught a bunch, about ten of us sitting down there one day, and they come jabbering about who that ten was sitting down and we had to line up, get up there, and tell who it was. So we all lined up there and they beat the devil out of us. Stand at attention and hit you one way, knock you one way and punch you with the butt of the rifle. And every time your foot would move, they'd holler, "Attention!" again. And they got through with us, they told us to go back to work.

And finally, we got on to the Chinese. They got so they'd slip us cigarettes. Every night they'd shake us down, take the clothes off us, find them cigarettes. People started hiding them everywhere. If they'd find cigarettes on you, they'd take you in camp and give you a beating. So they run us into that camp there one afternoon and I didn't know what they was fixing to do. They lined us up and run us into the main camp. When they got us in there, that one great big old Jap – weighed about three hundred I guess, called him "Bull" – he run us in there and made us

take all our clothes off, stripped and lined us up by rank. Made us take them off and lay our clothes right down in front of us, at feet. And standing there naked for about thirty minutes. I don't know how we kept from freezing to death. I thought they was going to shoot us, kill us or something. I didn't know what was going to happen. They gave us a talking and told us to put our clothes back on. They let us go into our barracks.

So next morning, when we get ready I was off that detail then where I was at, that was when I was put back in Hotan, in them big two-story barracks. And they'd, next morning if you didn't fall out just right then when they'd holler "Fall out," if you didn't get out right now they'd make you, get you out there and run you around that parade ground. They run us parade ground, they run me around there til I couldn't hardly drag and every time I'd start slowing, that Bull would take right after you with that saber, laughing and throwing a fit, that officer, that Jap, and you'd move out, you better run out; he'd run that thing through you. You'd run til you done give out, just about gone, and then he'd make you get down and start crawling across that parade ground, back and forth, til you passed out, didn't know nothing. Just because you didn't fall out when they told you, just right now. And they'd just laugh. Sometimes when you was out working, they'd make you stand with a broom up over your head for hours at a time. Make you lay down not let your belly touch the ground, hold it up, something hard to do, torment you, and if you started going down, kick you and make you raise back up.

So we were out there one day, they made us raise a garden too. We raised a garden one time out in a graveyard. You look down in there, see lots of dead Chinese skeletons laying in there. We raised all kinds of vegetables, everything to eat. One day we was out there working and I looked up and here come a big dog across there. I told some boys, said, "Look coming yonder, coming across there, got a baby in his mouth." He went in a shed over there, eat it up and come back out. One day we was out there working in that garden and they let us sit down for a

few minutes to rest alongside of a brick wall there. And an old Chinese man come along there and he was wanting to give us some information. And he just come by there and they was afraid he was going to tell us something, that the war was about over or something, how it was going, and that guard caught that old man out there. He had his satchel, carrying, what he made his living with, and he made that old man get on his knees begging, begging this guard not to kill him. He'd look around at us, jabbering, trying to get us to help him, you know. We couldn't do a thing. He just knocked and beat that Chinese half to death, kicking him and everything. Gave him a good beating and then took his satchel and throwed it away, wouldn't let him have it. He kept asking to have his satchel back, that's what he made his living with; wouldn't let him have it; throwed it away. Told him to get going, made him go on.

Then another time, they caught two women out there. They were trying to get away. Kept hollering and got them to stop. Got them there and slapped them and knocked them down, half killed them. Didn't kill them and finally let them go. We thought he was going to kill them, but he didn't.

And when the American planes come in there, they come over that main camp there and dropped bombs out in that factory a little piece from us, ammunition factory. There was about 250 Japs working in there and when they dropped the bombs, there wasn't nothing left, just the walls, standing up over there, just flattened that factory just as flat as it could be. And there was two bombs fell short. One went down through the latrine, blowed all the window lights out of them. And so, there was nineteen got killed in that camp that day. Some got their arms blowed off, some their heads. Bumgardner, I remember him in there and mighty near killed him. He didn't know nothing for a long time; something hit him up there in the head and about knocked him half-crazy. He didn't know nothing. He finally got all right. But they thought he was going to die any time.

So after that was over, the Americans started coming in there every day. There'd be three come about twelve o'clock every day and started dropping food in there to us – all kinds of canned meat and everything. And we'd run out there and get it and a bunch of us got sick – started eating that stuff and about died. And groaning and taking on, guys in there just dying – I thought I was going to die. Been used to that rice in our stomachs and got that good food and went to filling up on it, tasted good, couldn't keep from eating. Eat so much that it might near killed me but I guess I got an ulcerated stomach, stomach problem for years. Got an ulcerated stomach problem.

It wasn't long til the Russians come into that main barracks, main camp. They come in there one night about seven o'clock and took over and it wasn't long after that til the Americans come in. And we still stayed in the main camp. After the Russians come in there and took over, then the Chinese went to fighting the Japs on the outside of the walls. And that there night, every little bit, I'd get up there on top of them two-story buildings and you see them houses, little straw houses, going up, big fire go up every few minutes. They said they was catching them Japs in there and wouldn't let them out. Burned them up alive. Every time they'd watch one come out, they'd shoot him. And the Russians, they brought the Japs all out in two ranks, marched them out, after they took over, with the rifles and bayonets. Then they brought the Americans out and lined them up in two ranks, the prisoners, and made each Jap walk up and lay a rifle down. They laid ten down each pile. And then an American walked up there and Russian handed him a rifle with a bayonet on the end of it.

And then when we all got a rifle, they told us to take them out. And we marched them all out and put them in barracks then, worked them, put them on KP and made them fill up the foxholes they made us dig. And we had one old officer out there that wouldn't give us nothing to eat. You had to do so much work and you wouldn't get nothing to eat. And he didn't want to

mop that there barracks there. He said he wasn't going to mop it. He did mop it. We just took and beat the devil out of him. He'd been whipping us. They didn't want to fill up the foxholes; we made them fill them up. We'd tell them to climb up that wall, trying to get them to get up and climb over that wall, wanted to shoot them off. The Russians told us to, said if they give us any trouble, to shoot them. Japanese didn't want to go over the wall, said the Chinese would kill them, get on the outside. They was getting every one out there, waiting for them.

Then they put me on a train, down through Munkin there and got on a big ship, American ship there, and they sprayed us for lice and everything. They shipped us out of there and went to, I believe it was, Formosa, not Formosa, shipped to Okinawa. From there, got on the airplane to the Philippines. Then I got on another ship on to the United States. And then, after I got in the United States, I was sent to General Hospital up there and stayed there about six months. Stayed up there a long time and then I'd get furloughed and then I'd have to go back. And then they put me on a train there, a hospital train, and I took that train to Camp Atterberry, Indiana, and I was discharged from there May 16th, 1946.