



Granddaughters Jackie and Missy Brown stand with Kenneth Hourigan.



Mrs. Esther VanArsdall lost her husband to the War in the Pacific.



Mr. and Mrs. Bland Moore now live on Coldstream Drive in Danville.

Bataan Four recollections

Story and photos by
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You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it.

—William Tecumseh Sherman.

Men will not fight and die without knowing what they are fighting and dying for.

—Douglas MacArthur.

The Bataan Peninsula is a small rocky province in the Philippines, sandwiched between Manila Bay to the east and the South China Sea to the west. In the 1940's, as today, Bataan was primitive, featuring few highways and towns.

On this thumb of volcanic rock, covered with tropical flora and tipped to the south by tiny Corregidor Island, Mercer County lost, practically speaking, half a generation of sons to the War in the Pacific.

In November of 1941, 66 men from Mercer County received overseas assignments to the Philippines as part of the 192nd General Headquarters Tank Battalion. The battalion arrived at Fort Stotsenberg, and was transferred to Clark Field, an American airstrip, situated in Luzon Province on the mainland.

On Dec. 8, 1941, shortly after noon, one day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Clark Field was demolished by a Japanese air strike.

Following the attack, the separate U.S. tank battalions were ordered to the northwest and southeast portions of Luzon Province to repel Japanese amphibious landings on the Philippine shores.

After months of battle, the depleted U.S. forces withdrew to the Bataan Peninsula, swept by the tide of the constantly replenished Japanese Imperial Army.

In a memorandum dated either February or March of 1942, Lt. General Masaharu Homma, commander of the

Japanese forces in the Philippines, stated that while the Japanese Army was slowly beating back the American forces, the Americans were still able to see through most every Imperial battle plan. This, to Homma, was "disappointing."

April 9, 1942. Tired, dehydrated, half-starved, the men defending Bataan are surrendered by order of Major General Edward P. King.

Thus began what was later called "The Death March," a confused, inhumane forced march through the wilds of Bataan. Soldiers who survived the trip were to be sent to either prison camps or work details inside Japan. Within the 12 days it took to complete the journey, 5,000 Americans and Filipinos succumbed to disease, starvation, infection, and Japanese bayonets.

Some of the men, however, escaped immediate capture and made their way to Corregidor Island, or "The Rock," only to surrender to the Japanese on May 6, 1942.

Of the 66 men from Mercer County involved in the death march and the ensuing imprisonment, only 37 returned home.

The men of Bataan will be honored at 2:30 p.m. today in a celebration sponsored by the Harrodsburg Historical Society at Old Fort Harrod State Park. The guest speaker at the celebration will be Col. Edward H. Day Jr., who is presently serving as Provost Marshal of the U.S. Army Armor Center at Fort Knox.

What follows are the recollections of three survivors, Edwin Rue, Bland Moore, and Kenneth Hourigan, and one widow, Mrs. Esther VanArsdall.

"None of our troops ever surrendered," exclaimed Edwin "Skip" Rue as he sat in the den of his house located on Tremont Drive in Lexington. "We were surrendered by high command."

During the battle for Bataan, Rue was captain of the 192nd and liaison officer to General James R.N. Weaver.

THE KENTUCKY ADVOCATE Magazine, Danville, Kentucky, Sunday, June 14, 1981 5

Rue said he received his orders to surrender while in the field with his men. As is standard procedure, Rue stripped himself of all ammunition, dismantled his 45-caliber automatic handgun and threw the pieces in different directions into the thick jungle undergrowth.

It was a crazy night, he recalled, one filled with roars and flashing lights, and of all things, an earthquake. The American forces were exploding ammunition stockpiles. There was utter chaos.

The men were assembled at Balanga, he said, a small town in the south of Bataan. The 78,000 Americans and Filipinos were already underfed and exhausted from the four-month campaign prior, even before the surrender, food was scarce. "I'd pick up some food from the Filipinos — most of it was dirty. One (Filipino) brought me a dozen hard buns, and I thought, 'Boy, this'll last me all week.' I opened them up and there were ants in them."

When the death march began in Balanga, Rue was given one drink of water. That drink proved to be the last until the march ended at Camp O'Donnell in northern Bataan, where the ground was permeated with artesian wells.

Hunger cramps took their toll on Rue during the death march, and at one point he felt to the side of the marching column and doubled over, unable to pull himself back to his feet. A Japanese guard came up to him, kicked him in the ribs and stuck a 45-caliber automatic in his face, cocked and ready to fire. Try as he might, Rue was too weak to move. Rue recalls that a U.S. soldier walked by him in the march and said, "Don't move Skip, he won't shoot you."

"I remember men who lost their minds during the march," Rue said. "They were rounded up in the bullpen (an outdoor enclosure at O'Donnell) and I could hear them screaming and fighting all night."

The dead also left their mark on his mind. "I have a vivid memory of the continual line of corpses being carried to the graveyard. There was a whole lot of sickness — so much sickness." His head shook slowly as he looked back across the years.

The food on the march, if there was any, was hardly adequate and generally ill-prepared. The primary staple for the prisoners, he said, consisted of dirty stewed rice, cooked in uncleaned 50-gallon oil drums. "I remember looking at that preparation once — I wouldn't look at it again."

Rue left O'Donnell in early June of 1942, and was transferred to Camp Cabanatuan in the Philippines. The food situation there was little better. "The only protein we got was from the weevils in the rice," he said.

Following his stay in Cabanatuan, Rue was shipped to Japan. He recalled walking to the end of the gangplank and being handed a wood chip marked with a number. Each of the chips were marked, he said, in either red or black. The color of the chip determined where you would be taken next. The color on his chip was different from those of his buddies, and once separated, he never saw them again until the end of the war.

By the time he had spent a year or so in Japan, he said, American bombers — B-29s — were making regular runs over the country. He recalled the sounds of bombs exploding nightly for hours on end, until August 14, 1945, when the bombing stopped.

It was then that he decided to weigh himself. He was shocked. The years of prison camps, malnourishment and disease had reduced his weight to 87



Captain Edwin 'Skip' Rue

pounds and his waistline to 17 inches.

The only indication he had that America had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima came when a Japanese guard ran into his barracks screaming, "Yankee vultures! New weapon! Boom!" all of which was accompanied by wild gesturing. "It was the first time I'd ever seen a Japanese turn pale," Rue said.

Shortly after the bombing stopped, Rue and his men were transferred by train through Osaka. It was a sobering sight. Everything — save a solitary smoke stack — was leveled.

Rue's group was sent to Camp Roku Roshii, about 20 miles from Fukui, and it was obvious to the Americans that all was not right with the Japanese Empire. About this time, the Japanese started filtering out of the camp. Germany had already fallen and the Japanese knew they were in for the "full treatment," Rue said.

Shortly after Rue arrived at Roku Roshii, six B-29s flew over the camp and dropped rations to the starving prisoners. "It was just like an air raid — you had to look out to keep from getting hit by food," he said.

On Sept. 10, Rue and his fellow prisoners were on their way home. He was the first man off the gangplank when his group arrived in San Francisco. "I looked at the ground and just stood there. I didn't know where I was supposed to go — it didn't make any difference — I was where I wanted to be."

Rue now lives in Lexington with his wife, Frances. They have two daughters, Linda, who was 26 months old when he left for the Philippines, and Joan, who was born in 1948. Both daughters are now pursuing acting careers in New York City.

Skip Rue tries to forget, as best he can, the years in the Japanese prison camps. He lost his brother, Arch, a fellow prisoner, to pneumonia while in Japan. It was an ordeal.

"I just prayed a lot and never did give up."

Bland Moore was a big, strong man, when the Japanese first took him prisoner. He took the death march in stride, helping carry those who fell in the hot sun along the trail to O'Donnell.

Ever since he returned from the war, he said, his life has been his work, a narcotic

to help him forget the horrors he witnessed while a prisoner. It worked, he said, although his nerves still ring from the experience.

He remembers still the 5,000 men who died of dysentery, malnutrition, malaria, Beri-Beri, and exhaustion along the march. Men who fell from the ranks were bayoneted by the Japanese and left to die.

He figured he was on the receiving end of approximately 50 serious beatings during his three years, five months and three hours of captivity. He calculated to the last minute how long he was a prisoner.

"It's kind of hard to think I went through this," he said. He now lives with his wife, and Buster, an English bulldog, in a large house on Coldstream Drive in Danville. "They would beat you for nothing. They liked to beat on men a little larger than them."

Most of the time, though, the beatings were given for stealing food. "Every time I'd see food," he said, "I'd figure out some way to steal part of it."

The beatings, he said, varied in duration. Generally, a beating would be done with whatever was handy — hoes and pick handles, rifle butts, hilts of sabers — and would last for three to six hours, only to be followed by 12 hours of standing at attention in the hot sun.

While in the prison camps, Moore "fed men their last meals, gave them their last baths." His weight plunged from 184 pounds at the time of his capture to 118 pounds when liberated.

He said prisoners were kept in groups of 10, so that whenever one of the group escaped, which was nearly impossible, the other nine would die. Moore said he witnessed the beheading of 18 men on two separate occasions. He did not seriously contemplate escape because it would jeopardize his fellow prisoners.

"The one thing on your mind was survival. You were like an animal. You would kill anything to eat — snakes, bugs, whatever."

While a P.O.W., Moore worked a jackhammer helping construct airstrips for the Japanese. He was so weak at one point, he could hardly support the hammer and figured the only way to get out of doing the chore would be to break his arm. He tried, using a crowbar and two blocks, but it didn't work; he continued at the jackhammer despite the injured appendage.

Moore is surprisingly magnanimous about his war years and prefers to let the whole matter rest rather than continually dig up the horrors he lived through. "I was very happy to be home and wanted to put the past P.O.W. experiences behind me, so I went to work immediately."

Moore is now retired and has two sons and one daughter, all married. He added that the June Celebration should not be for the men who lived, but "for the ones who didn't come back."

Kenneth Hourigan was one of the soldiers who managed to escape from Bataan before the Japanese forces ramrodded their way in to the area. He said he had heard the order to surrender, but decided to take to the sea when he saw Japanese units gunning down Americans and Filipinos who were waving the white flag.

Hourigan and his comrades managed to make it down to the Bataan coastline, where they took a boat away from some Filipinos, much to their dismay, and headed for Corregidor Island. "The boat was too big for us and we drifted out into the China Sea," he said, where he and the others tied to a buoy to wait out the night.

Before complete darkness, a U.S. gunboat happened upon Hourigan's craft and tied alongside it for the evening. The next morning, they all went to Corregidor and hid in the Malinda Tunnel. They were captured May 6, 1942, and were kept on the island for two weeks to dispose of the dead.

Hourigan was then transferred to Cabanatuan and stayed there for almost a year and a half. Finally, he was put on a transport to Japan and imprisoned near Osaka where he worked in a steel mill.

His work detail started with 480 reasonably able-bodied men, but soon that number was diminished to about 80. The problem, as everywhere else, hinged on disease, malnutrition and neglect. "The Japanese finally gave us two hogs for soup, and kept two hams off each of them. All this to feed 480 men."

While in prison camp, Hourigan said, the worst thing he witnessed were rows of Americans made to stand in open graves toward the rising sun, given a glass of water, half a cigarette, and then gunned down by a firing squad. The men would turn to their comrades and say, "God bless America, or 'So long, boys.'" The commanding Japanese officer would walk behind the executed Americans and put one bullet piece into their skulls, he said.

"I would never want to be in the same outfit again with my friends — people I'd eat chicken off the same bone with."

The war's end sort of snuck up on Hourigan. "We didn't know the war was over until a Jap on a cooking detail got drunk on sake and let the cat out of the bag." Then came the airdrop of food — the first real food Hourigan and his buddies had seen in over three years. "It was like a dope. We felt like we could knock a building over eating all that good chow."

The group waited about three weeks after the airdrop, and then just took the guns from their Japanese hosts, marched out of town, commandeered a train, and arrived in N'Goya to be met by American personnel.

Hourigan came straight back to Harrodsburg after arriving in the U.S. and undergoing medical treatment. He worked for 20 years in the Mercer County Sheriff's Department and eight years in the Harrodsburg Police Department. He now owns a small country home two miles outside of Burgin where he raises tobacco, corn, and livestock. He and his wife, Sally Ann, play host to their two granddaughters, Jackie and Missy, during the summer months.

"You live from day to day," Hourigan said as he surveyed his front lawn profiled in the darkening twilight sky. "Today, the sky might be hanging low with clouds; the next day, the sun will pop out and you'll say, 'Boys, we might make it out of here.'"

George VanArsdall didn't make it home. "I tried desperately through the Red Cross to get through to him, but there was no way," said Esther VanArsdall of her husband, who died aboard a prison ship which was sunk by American aircraft toward the war's end.

Mrs. VanArsdall had her only child, Bill, while her husband was being held as a P.O.W. in the Philippines. Somehow, George VanArsdall learned that his child was a son, because he mentioned him in his sketchy letters from the prison camp.

Mrs. VanArsdall still thinks quite often of her husband, and "of how proud he'd be of his grandson." Bill VanArsdall is now working for a radio station in Atlanta.

While her husband was prisoner, Mrs. VanArsdall worked in a bakery and "took care of the baby; he was my salvation." She now lives alone with her dog, Brandy, on Main Street in Harrodsburg.