

The horror of the Death March

Fatigue, hunger, fear gripped U.S. prisoners during long trek

BY EDWIN W. "SKIP" RUE
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD-LEADER

At San Fernando, near the end of the Death March, I went down. I had stomach cramps so bad I couldn't go on.

When I came to, this Japanese soldier was kicking me in the side. I rolled over and he stuck an American .45 automatic in my face, with the hammer pulled back.

Some fellow walking by yelled, "Just lay there, Skip. He won't shoot you."

For some reason he didn't. He just walked away, and this Filipino came by on a bicycle and tried to help me up on the handlebars. Finally, I was able to get up and go on.

Fifty years ago today, 76,000 Filipino and U.S. troops were marching out of the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines and into captivity. Thousands would die on the infamous "Death March." Bataan's defenders had surrendered April 9 after holding off Japanese invaders for four bloody months. Edwin "Skip" Rue of Lexington was there as part of a Kentucky National Guard tank unit. He recalled the Death March for reporter Jim Warren.

I grew up in Harrodsburg, and I joined the Kentucky National Guard in 1934, when I was 24 years old. Jobs were scarce, and they said I was good officer material. Eventually, I made first lieutenant in tank Company D.

In 1940, our entire outfit was activated. We arrived in the Philippines on Thanksgiving Day 1941,

and the war started right afterward.

We were suicide troops.

The forces in the Philippines were expected to make a stand, but nobody expected us to last long. We were supposed to buy time. Well, we bought a lot more than the Japanese ever thought we could.

We were always moving. Our tanks covered every retreat, from

Lingayen Gulf all the way to Bataan.

We had M-3 light tanks. The floor plates were aluminum, and the Japanese had this powerful little land mine that could just pulverize those plates. The pieces would fly into the bodies of the crew inside. And the Japanese put those mines everywhere.

The fighting on Bataan was brutal. I was a liaison officer, and once I went to a divisional commander to tell him to deliver his prisoners of war to a certain place.

He said, "What prisoners of war?"

We had heard about the treat-

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ment the Japanese gave their prisoners. So, nobody worried much about taking prisoners.

We heard all kinds of rumors about help coming. There was one story that a shipload of planes had landed and that they were converting Dewey Boulevard in Manila into a runway. Of course, there was nothing to it.

We soon knew — those of us in a position to see the big picture — that no help was coming. It was clear to me that we would all either be wiped out or taken prisoner.

I had a wife back home, and a 26-month-old daughter.

The night before the surrender, some food had been sent to us. I got a can of condensed milk and a can of tomatoes. That was the last "meal" I had for a long, long time.

The next day, a Japanese patrol picked us up, and the next morning we started north.

For me, that was the beginning of the Death March.

The heat was terrible; there was no food or water.

After four months of fighting, we were all in pretty bad shape. There wasn't much food on Bataan, so everybody was weak. A lot of people had malaria, dysentery, beriberi. Some were wounded.

One of our Harrodsburg men, Cecil VanDiver, had had an appendectomy just before the surrender. The incision hadn't healed, but they made him march anyway.

I never felt so sorry for anybody in my life. I couldn't see how in the world he was going to make it, but there he was, plugging along. And he made it.

I was better off than some. Just about everybody was in rags, but I'd saved an extra uniform, which I put on right before the surrender. I had the beginnings of beriberi; I was weak. But I could walk.

You have to imagine a long stream of people, thousands of Americans and Filipinos, shuffling down the road.

There were Japanese guards walking along with us, but there wasn't much organization. No real pace you had to maintain. There was no way, considering the condition everybody was in, for us to move fast.

Sometimes, if we got bunched up, they would make us stop or back up to spread out.

As we moved along, more and more people joined in. There were people coming in from all the little jungle trails that fed into the main road. The Japanese patrols were picking them up everywhere.

I don't know where I was in the line. I know there were a lot of people ahead and a lot of people behind.

The group I was in, it took us five



U.S. and Filipino soldiers begin the 'Death March' from the Bataan peninsula.

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days to get from Bataan up to San Fernando and then to Camp O'Donnell, the Japanese prison camp. That's more than 60 miles.

There were no real "rest stops," at least none that I recall. Sometimes the column would stop a few minutes and you could drop down and rest. But that was all.

I had lost my helmet. All I had was a little hand towel, which I tied at the corners and put over my head, to keep some of the sun off.

I had a canteen, but I didn't have any water. We had heard that there were artesian wells up ahead where we could get water, and I decided to wait.

But some people, particularly the Filipinos, were drinking out of mud holes and water buffalo wallows all along the way. That's why there were lines of dead men later at O'Donnell. From drinking that water.

The Japanese passed out some rice balls to us. But I couldn't eat it. I don't know why, I just couldn't.

Later, of course, I was glad to get it.

As you walked along, there were people all along the sides of the road who had fallen out and couldn't go on.

There are all kinds of stories about the Japanese shooting people or bayoneting people who dropped out. I have no doubt that went on, but I didn't see any of it.

Apparently, some of the guards would just shoot people, and some others would let people rest until they could go on.

Sometimes, you would see them dragging people off into the jungle and maybe you would hear shots. There was no question that lots of

people were dying.

I do know that I stumbled over two bodies in the road. The column just walked right on over them; they wouldn't let you stop.

There was no way you could stop and say, "Hey, let's get this man out of the road." Even though everybody there would have liked to do that.

Once, I saw my younger brother, Arch, who joined the National Guard after I did. We spoke a few words, but we couldn't stay together.

Arch never made it home. He died of pneumonia in a prison camp in Japan.

After 50 years, I can't describe the fatigue you felt. All I can say is that I felt like I could drop down anywhere, right in the middle of the road, and go to sleep. And anytime there was a little break, that's just what I did.

What do you think about?

I thought about everything in the world. I thought about trying to escape — and it was possible to slip off into the jungle and get away. I could think of a lot of reasons to escape, but I couldn't think of any place I could go.

Some did escape, took to the hills and joined the guerrillas. Or so I heard.

I always tried to keep my spirits up, be optimistic, hope for the best. I just tried to ride it out.

And I tried to get the other fellows to think the same way. But some of them wouldn't listen to you.

At San Fernando, they put us on trains for the trip up to Camp O'Donnell. And that might have been the worst.

The boxcars on those trains were small, and they just crammed people into them like cattle. The heat in there was unbelievable, and some men just died of suffocation.

But I was one of the lucky ones. They happened to put me in a car where some of the guards were riding, and they kept the door open. I was able to get by the door and get a little air. Otherwise, maybe I wouldn't have made it.

As we came into O'Donnell, some of us were helping this older captain who had been in World War I. He was all blue under the eyes, and I think now his heart was just giving out on him.

I put him in the shade of a building and put his canteen under his arm. I told him to rest; it never occurred to me he wasn't going to make it. I never saw him again.

I used to have trouble talking about the Death March. But I guess time changes everything. Now, I just kind of look at it as a piece of history.

Considering the condition I was in, I don't know how I made it through the march. Maybe I was a little older, a little tougher mentally.

I don't think there was ever a time when I thought I couldn't go on. I know there was never a time when I thought I wouldn't try.

It was the only way to get home.

• In late 1942, Skip Rue was sent to a prison camp in Japan, where he remained until war's end. Of 66 men in Harrodsburg's tank Company D, Rue and 36 others made it home.

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