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

Interview with Kenneth Hourigan

March 15, 1961

Conducted by William Joseph Dennis

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Tape 17 A 3

Reel No. 2
March 15, 1961

KENNETH HOURIGAN speaking:

I am Kenneth Hourigan, deputy sheriff, Mercer County, have been for eight years. I was a prisoner of war by the Japanese. I was a prisoner 1260 days, I was mobilized the regular Army November 25, 1940, National Guard Unit, Harrodsburg, Kentucky.

We went to, stationed Fort Knox, Kentucky. We trained the troops down there, half-tracks, went to armored force school down there. I was radio technician. Then we went on maneuvers in about the latter part of 1941. Went to Louisiana, were on a month's maneuvers down there. General Marshall came down and inspected the troops. He picked our tank unit for foreign duty. Our battalion commander called us up one night and asked all the boys that wanted to go home for three or four days, that they could go. So we got a chartered bus back to Harrodsburg, a bunch of us boys in the company. Stayed three or four days and returned to Fort Knox for foreign duty, destination unknown.

We loaded tanks, fifty-four tanks on railroad cars. We went to San Francisco, California. We got to Frisco, they'd taken us over on an island called Angel Island, a small island. I had a kid brother was in my company, by the name of Horace Hourigan. He was a reconnaissance sergeant and I was a platoon sergeant. When we got on Angel Island, they give us some X-rays. He showed up pleurisy in one lung. I'd gone to the show that night and we were aiming to leave out, to sail the next morning. When I got in from the show, they told me they'd come and got my brother and placed him in Fort

McDowell Hospital on Angel Island. I had to break breakfast line, miss my breakfast, to run in and tell him good-bye.

We sailed out under the Golden Gate Bridge into the Pacific. The ship was *U.S. Pierce* Transport. We got to Honolulu. We stayed four or five days in Honolulu waiting for the *President Coolidge*, another ship to accompany us on to the Philippines. We got to the Philippines the 20th of November 1941. We unloaded there and taken train to Fort Stotsenburg on _____ Island, Philippine Islands. We would work with our tanks there, on alert, until the time the Japanese hit us which was December 8, 1941. We were having these tanks scattered along a wood on Clark's Field in case of a paratroop invasion. We were all, had been on alert all morning and at 12:00 we went off the alert. We left two men in each tank and two of us went to the CP, waiting for a chow-truck to take us back into camp. While we were waiting for this chow-truck, somebody hollered out, "Look at Uncle Sam's Navy planes." We stood there and counted fifty-four white bombers, three wings which were Japanese.

About that time the hangars went up at the far end of the field. We naturally started running for our tanks. I got almost halfway to my tank. I run up on a large foxhole about ten feet deep. I jumped over in it and here come about ten guys on top of me. We waited til they stopped bombing. We poured ourselves out of this foxhole and I immediately went to my tank. By that time there were twenty-six fighter planes that had peeled out towards the sun, that were scraping these big B-17's that were lined up on the runway. I crawled up behind my turret, a .30 caliber anti-aircraft machine gun. I got to firing at this plane and when he saw these traces, he made a figure-eight and came back from the rear. So I ordered the boys to open the turret top and I got inside.

We stayed in there a little bit and a fire broke out in the grass around there. We had to run through fire about fifteen feet and cut back into the woods. The fire run us out the second time. The second time we came out we run into a little road back in this woods. We got back in this road we run upon Sergeant Jack Wilson. He stopped his tank and we let him in our tank and we pulled back around towards the CP. When we massed there, we had one boy, by the name of Robert Brooks, that was killed in this bombing raid. By my understanding, this boy was the first man killed in the Eastern Theatre of War, Armored Force.

We then immediately massed and moved out. We moved about three or four mile in a bivouac over there. And we stayed there a few days and they moved our unit, our company, down to Manilupa, which is ten or fifteen miles south of Manila. We stayed down there until about the 24th day of December, 1941. A boy brought a newspaper down to where we were biv in mango trees; headlines said there were eighty Jap transports sighted in N_ngancook. Our company commander threw his helmet down on the ground and said, "Bet four hundred dollars we don't see a bit of action."

Before good daybreak, we were moving out north to help the other companies that were in combat. I remember this mighty well because it was my birthday, the 24th day of December, 1941. We rode all day and when we got to Del_____, we met some of the boys from our company, another company. They spaced us along a river at Del_____ and put a tank every so many yards apart. We were supported by infantry, at that time. They had my platoon of tanks between a railroad bridge and a concrete river. About midnight, I heard something blow up, like artillery. Well, my driver—which was James L. Shoaks—started the engine and I run around and told him to hold it. Well, everything

was quiet for awhile and I went around to find out what the action was, to Lieutenant Hummel's tank, which was about three tanks up.

I got about forty feet, another big explosion went off, knocked my feet out from under me. I could hear stuff falling, hitting the ground. By that time, my tank, I told him if anything happened, to pull out through the road and I would be up. When he did this, he pulled out. All the tanks pulled out to the road, but we couldn't find Lieutenant Hummel's tank. So we had one man pretty bad injured by the name of Anderson. So I put this injured guy on top of my tank and started down the road. My tank and three other tanks. We ran up on a Filipino in a car. We put this boy in the car and told the Filipino to get him to a first-aid station or a hospital as soon as possible; he was in bad shape. We saw the Filipinos go by two or three times. But we never did know what happened to

We got down to Captain Alman, our company commander, platoon of tanks. He wanted to know what happened. We said, "Far as we know the bridges blowed up or artillery—we don't know what happened. We didn't get no messages." He said, "You didn't get word that they were going to blow up those bridges?" I said, "No, sir." He said he sent Oscar dean, a runner, on a motorcycle, three times up there to tell Lieutenant Hummel. He said, "Well, we'll go back up there." We went back up there and Captain Altman got all over Lieutenant Hummel for not telling us what they were going to do. He said he radioed, but he did not because we had a man on each radio.

So next morning, we moved back down to Captain Altman's platoon of tanks and when then we realized we were in a trap because one Captain's tank had been knocked out where we were supposed to get our orders. So we decided to take cross-country. We went out through rice paddies and picked up two Filipino guides to show us the way.

They ran us right smack into the Japs along a railroad track. We had a skirmish there. Then we backed up and cut across a different route and hit the highway. When we got on this highway, there was a big bridge. We couldn't get across. We run a patrol up and down the river but there was no place to ford. So we got orders to destroy our tanks and throw our heavy guns in the river. So there was eighty men. We lost twenty-one tanks, two half-tracks, two motorcycles. There were eighty men. There were only about forty who could swim. Two of them were wounded. We'd taken bamboo poles and got those men across this deep river.

We sent a patrol on which went ahead and found a Filipino truck, came back and picked us up and we rode practically all that night. We stopped at a place close to Fort Stotsenburg and stayed all night. Then they assigned some more tanks to us. They cut the other companies down and assigned us some more tanks. Then we retreated, slowly retreated, held the retreat rather, for Bataan. We moved in this peninsula, Bataan, and then we fought there until the ninth of April. When we saw we were going to have to throw in the towel, another boy and the first sergeant and myself made off to the beach, trying to make it to Corregidor. But in the meantime, the tide started going out and we had such a large boat, we couldn't handle it. It's taken us a half-mile beyond one side of Corregidor, missing Corregidor a half a mile.

We went out into China Sea and caught a hold of a floating buoy and tied up. A gunboat had taken us to Corregidor. We went a big tunnel there in Corregidor, had Queen's Tunnel on it. We started in there and there was an officer. He said, "Where you boys from, Bataan?" We said, "Yes, sir." "Get out of there. That belongs to the Navy." We told him, "Yes, sir." We went over the hill and we saw another big tunnel—called

Malinda Tunnel—which was an army tunnel. We walked up to there and there stood a colonel, shoes shines, britches creased, pale as a ghost. We were black as the ace of spades from being in the sun, battlefront for six months, beard. We saluted him and he said, "Where in the hell are you boys from?" We said, "Bataan, sir." "What are you doing over here?" We told him we thought it would be better to come over there and fight it out than to surrender to those yellow-bellies. He said, "You shouldn't have done it. You should have stayed with your organization. Come over here to eat up the fighting man's chow." And I'm sure this colonel had never been out of the tunnel all during the war. He said, "Get in there and get signed on beach defense. You'll have to carry your own load on your shoulders over here." Which they hadn't had any war on Corregidor at that time.

We went in there to get signed out on beach defense. And the lieutenant that was signed them out on beach defense and had made it to Corregidor from Bataan told us to go back there and sit down and he would call us out on the next detail. This we did. We were sitting there in this tunnel and we heard these boots clipping. Here comes this colonel again. He said, "What are you doing sitting there?" We told him that this officer had told us to wait, that he would take us on the next detail. He said, "Wait, hell. Get up there and get signed up on beach defense." We said, "Yes, sir." We went up and told this officer that we wanted to get on this detail. He said, "It's going to awful hot spot." We told him we didn't care how hot it was. We wanted to get out of that madhouse. So he said, "Fall in."

So he take us out on a point direct across Bataan three mile where they could shoot point-blank artillery. We stayed there until the war, the Japanese got on and we went up to this tunnel to surrender. When the Japs come in to capture us, this Japanese

commenced to squawking at me in Japanese which I did not know what he was saying. When I saw he was getting madder and madder, I decided to walk off. That made him very mad. He made a charge at me with the bayonet and I was up on a bank with the road right below me where there was about a thousand men standing, prisoners of war. I jumped off this ledge just as he jabbed this bayonet, knocked down about eight or ten. I crawled between their feet. It was getting dusk. He came down looking for me, but I kept my back to him and he went on back. I come to find out what he wanted. He took a prisoner of war up there and told him, “ “ He put four abreast. He was trying to get them lined up in lines of four which I didn’t understand.

They’d taken us out then; they made us get in a tunnel and lay down on our stomachs, for fifteen minutes. Then they made us get on our knees and put our hands behind our heads. They rolled big guns up in the mouth of the tunnel. I thought it was “it.” But they was just trying to scare us. They made us take everything out of our pockets, taken our watches, our rings, any jewelry, any money we had, searched us. I was searched twenty-six times the first day I was captured. They’d taken us out to a motor pool where it was a big concrete yard. We stayed there several days. It was three days before we could get any water. We then were loaded on a ship and taken to Manila Bay. We had to jump out in the water and wade in and then they marched us through the streets of Manila, to Bilibit Prison. We stayed in Bilibit three or four nights, I suppose. They put us on a railroad car, seventy-five to a hundred to a small car. And we liked to have smothered to death. We rode a hundred miles or more to Cabanatuan and when we got to Cabanatuan, they’d taken us off the train and marched us for twenty miles to this prison.

When we got to this prison camp, we stayed there. I stayed in Camp 3, Cabatina One four or five months. They picked me out on a detail to work on the Kinley Airfield for the Japs. We worked down there in that blue mud up to our hips, barefooted for two or three months, everyday until we got an infection from this blue mud. They'd taken us back to Bilibit Prison and doctored us a little bit and then they'd taken us back to Camp One, Cabatina One. I stayed there until September 18th, 1943. The picked me out on a detail to go to Japan.

They'd taken us down to the ship to put us on. We got around to Formosa Straits, we run into an awful bad storm which was ten ship in this convoy. And next morning after this storm, there was only nine. One had sunken or something had happened to it. We got to Japan October 6th, 1943. They'd taken me off to the prisoner of war camp Steelmill, Hirahata, which is about thirty-five miles south of Osaka, Japan. We worked there at Steelmill until out of 480 men there, there was only about 80 able to walk around, in the winter of 1944. The army had to take over again. They had turned us over to the civilians of this Steelmill which like to have starved us to death, worked us to death. Then the army had to take us back over and increase our rations of rice and fish, and silkworms til spring come and we got on our feet. We were in this camp, there were plenty of lice and bedbugs, cold water, no soap, no cigarettes—only 15 maybe a month, once in a while. We wouldn't get it every month.

The worst beating I ever got while I was captured, in the prison camp, was giving a boy a light on a cigarette after 8:00. We had a blackout at 8:00. Cigarettes were so scarce at that time, you'd grab a little butt trying to get a last draw off it. I was going back to my bunk and this boy, his name was Parker, was laying in his bunk. He asked me to

give him a light, which I did. I took another drag off this little butt and put my foot on it on the concrete floor. In the meantime, when we was smoking in bed, we had to be careful about our ashes because the Japanese counted us six times a night. If they found any ashes lying around our bed, which was a blanket laying on the floor, they would work us over. So, Parker had a celluloid soap case top that he was putting his ashes in. When the Japanese guard came in the door, whoever was over by the door would holler out, "Stick in the house, bird in the cage," so anybody who was doing wrong could get straightened out. So Parker had taken this cigarette butt and dobbed it in this soap case, trying to put it out but the Japs came over and immediately had taken him to the guard house. I was laying up there in bed thinking how lucky I was that I didn't get caught.

Five minutes from then, he and a Jap that weighed 250 pounds came over. In this camp that we were in, we were not to rat on anyone. If we got caught, we were supposed to take our medicine and not involve any other men. Parker came up and he hollered for me and I stuck my head over the edge of my bunk which was about ten feet high right over him. Parker said if he didn't tell where he got the light, they was going to kill him. And he said, "They want you over to the guard house." This Jap was hollering, trying to talk English. I immediately climbed down with a T-shirt on, winter time. I'd taken an interpreter along, which was our squad leader, by the name of Joe Romera, a Mexican, and I told him to tell him I'd picked it up off the floor and give Parker a light and put it out. That I was not smoking. He continued telling these Japanese that and they would say, "Uso, uso," which means "lying" in Japanese. Said they were going to punish me. But Joe told me that he told them and told them but they would not listen, that they were going to punish me. I told him, "Okay." One lit into me and he worked me over until he

give out, put the judo on you, throw you over the head. I'd immediately climb back up at attention because they'd stomp you with those hobnail shoes if you layed there. And the last one was a little bitty Jap; they called him Sacadushi. He was in charge of medicine. He walked up to me and said, "You, smoky." I looked him in the eye and told him, "Smokey, nigh." He immediately take both fist and run them in both eyes at the same time which staggered me back about ten feet and then he run in for the kill. He judo me. Then he quit. Parker didn't get the beating I got. They'd taken Parker and myself in front of a Japanese officer who had been to the States and spoke broken English. He said, "Why you disobey orders?" I didn't say anything but Parker told him it was American custom to smoke before going to bed. He said, "We'll punish you some more."

So they immediately grabbed us and put us in a little guardhouse about like an outdoor toilet and opened the windows so the wind could blow in on us. A little later I heard somebody sniffing and I heard Parker crying. I asked Parker what was the matter and he said he hated it because he'd ratted on me. I told Parker, I says, "You're in here for the same reason I am. You want to go home just like I do and as far as I'm concerned forget about it." So he was all right, but we like to froze to death. The next morning they'd taken us out and put us on a big table and called all the men out and they said there'd be no more cigarettes issued because they'd caught two men smoking. They turned us loose and told us we couldn't have any breakfast which was a tea bowl of rice but the men in our squad had saved it back for us. So we got our tea bowl of rice. We knew they were going to put us in the guard house for three nights straight so we borrowed all the clothes we could to put on out on the job that day. When we came back

in that night, they grabbed us and put us back in the guardhouse but we kept warm; we had a lot of clothes on.

The next day it had commenced raining and warmed up. When we got to the gate we just kept walking and they never grabbed us and we never did spend a third night in the guardhouse. But in the meantime, this top sergeant, this American was under the Japs over us, talked the Japs into giving the rest of the boys their cigarettes. When they did this, there were forty-eight men in my squad beside Parker. Every man came around and gave me a cigarette but they wouldn't give Parker a butt. I slipped part of my cigarettes and give it to Parker. It was two-thirds of the camp didn't speak to Parker for two or three months for ratting on me.

They later moved us out of this camp. The ones that had been beat up the worst and moved us up to a camp up north towards a town called Toyama. We worked there on a dock until almost time to surrender. I had mashed a foot out on the job. I wasn't able to walk; I was able to walk but I wasn't going to let the Japanese know it. I was also on crutches. Lyle Harlow, a boy from Harrodsburg, had been with me all through this camp. He would hear any rumors and he said, "Yes, something funny happened out on ship today. The radio was on, broadcasting, and all the Japs were standing at attention, with their hats off. Made us stand at attention—lasted about an hour. Some big shot must have got shot down or something.

So we thought now more about it. Next morning, the boys fell out to go to work, the Japanese run them back into the barracks and told them, "No worky today, Nippon—religious holiday." Which we hadn't heard of that the whole time we had been in prison. So we still didn't think too much about it. So the next morning, the boys fell out to got to

work and the Japanese run them back into the barracks, told them, “No worky.” So we begin to think something then because the Japs had gotten to drinking this saki and getting pretty full. In fact, one got drunk and the boy that was cooking the rice, the Japs let the cat out of the box; he told him the war was over, that they had lost. We stayed in the camp a little while til we got to studying how we’d they’d know where we were at. So we got a sheet off a Japanese bed and took some Mercurochrome and ink and made an American flag and tacked it down on the roof.

We also take grass rice sacks and put lime on them and put P.W. on the roof. It wasn’t too long until we saw American planes off of an aircraft carrier. They spotted this camp and they dropped us a note in this tube looked something like a flashlight with a ring in the end of it. We got this not and this colonel, this American colonel, that was in the camp read the note to all the men. It said, “Boys, your worry is over. The war is over. Stay in camp. We’re going to try to fly you out as soon as possible.” And it said, “There’ll be plenty of food, clothes, and medicine within an hour and fifteen minutes.” And they dropped us some cigarettes, candy bars. That the boys made up out of their footlockers on this aircraft carriers.

We were all out watching and we heard a deep roaring coming over the mountains which was a big airplane that looked like a B-29, I don’t know. I know we hadn’t seen one during the war that looked any longer than a match that was that high. We never saw such a plane. It flew over the camp twice. The third time the red lights were blinking on the belly of this plane. And we were all looking up. And it looked like just like the bottom turned wrong-side outwards. Here came about thirteen parachutes flying into camp. There were three hundred men in this camp and all this stuff fell in there that

nobody got hit, that was American. We had all kind of food, clothes, and medicine. We made us a table and we decided to eat a big meal. Lyle Harlow and myself and a buddy ate a bowl of split pea soup and we had to push back, couldn't hold any more. So we kept eating a little along, between meals, until we got to feeling pretty good.

The Americans had not come in after us, so we decided to march out. This American colonel told us we couldn't do that. We told him that he could stay here, we was going. And we lined up in lines of four and he got in the front rank. We marched through this little town over to a depot. There was a train sitting at the depot. We had one old boy that knew a lot about railroading by the name of Elkins from Arkansas. He climbed up in the cab with this engineer and told him that if there was any monkey-stuff that he'd throw him overboard. So we went through thirteen tunnels, met the Americans at Nagota. We got there and they'd taken us down to a Red Cross ship. They'd made us take off all our clothes and throw them over the ship in the ocean and put a towel over our eyes and sprayed us like a bunch of sheep. Then they let us go to the showers and they issued navy clothes—two denim pants, black slippers, white hat. And the processed us and fed us.

They'd taken us in our barges over to a little—they'd taken us over to these LST boats, and put us on a picture show and we spent the night. The next morning, the headed for Yokahama. We got to Yokahama Bay, we put us on another big ship and we spent the night. Then next morning, they loaded us on trucks and took us on out to Asugi Air Base. We caught a four-motored plane to Okinowa and rested there a few days and then we caught a twin-engine bomber, a B-24 on to Nichol's Field at Manila. When we got to Manila, we got off the plane and there was an eating joint beside the runway. We was

sitting there eating and here went a lady down through there with an overseas cap on, sergeant stripes on. I asked this soldier, I said, "What is that?" He said, "That's a WAC." I said, "What's a WAC?" And he said, "We got women in the Army." And I said, "The Japs told us that but I told them they was lying. We didn't believe that."

So they'd taken us on into Manalupa, to a rest camp. And we stayed down there seventeen days, rested up and eat. Then they brought us back to Manila and we caught a ship, back to the States. I think it was then October 16th when I arrived back at Frisco. When we'd gotten to Frisco, they'd taken us out to Letterman's Hospital. There I stayed four or five more days. They put us on a Red Cross train and taken us across the States to White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia where it used to be a summer resort and they'd turned it into an army hospital. We stayed there about a week. We'd all got our furloughs fixing to come home. There was four or five boys from Harrodsburg at the same hospital.

The night I was getting ready to come home, I had my suitcase packed. The medical captain came up to my room and said, "I got bad news for you." I said, What's that, Captain?" He said, "I can't let you go home. They found a spot on your lung and you and another boy from Harrodsburg Cecil Vandivier. He has to stay, too." Well, I jumped straight up and I told him, "Captain, I haven't been home for four years and I done called my mother that I've made arrangements and I'm coming." And I said, "I hate to stay here." And he said, "If it was up to me, I'd let you go, but that's the General's orders." So, it made me so sick, I layed back down. About thirty minutes, four or five boys came up to my room that was from Harrodsburg and hollered, "Get up, boy, let's go." I told them the story that the Captain said I couldn't go. I said, "I'm not going." They said, "Let's go." And I said, "No, I'm not going without my furlough." They said,

"We picked up your furlough with ours down there. You'll be in the clear." So I jumped out and grabbed my suitcase and away we went.

The furlough was for thirty days and I stayed home thirty days and wired in for an extension for fifteen days and I got that. I was dreading to go back. Got back up there, they'd changed officers and I told this Captain what had happened. And he said, "I don't blame you. We'll start all over new." So he gave me some skin tests. Run a tube down my throat and told me, "How'd you like to go back home for thirty more days." And I said, "Suit me fine." And he said, "I'm going to inject this into a guinea pig and if the guinea pig lives, then you'll get your discharge and if it doesn't, you'll have to go to Fort Simmons, Colorado to the sanatorium." So all the thirty days I was home, I was sweating out that guinea pig. When I got back up there, I asked this Captain how that pig was and he said that he was fat as a mole. So, he let me get out then and I went to Camp Atterberry, May the 20th, 1946 and I was discharged.