

THE ADVOCATE-MESSENGER

LOOKING BACK

WEEKEND EDITION, JULY 10-12, 2020 A7

Sgt. Sampson survives Japanese captivity

(Editor's note: This is the second part of a two-part article that continues the story of Ernest L. Sampson, a former Harrodsburg Tanker, who survived Japanese captivity during World War II. Information was provided by Lt. Lt. Cody Stagner, Kentucky National Guard Public Affairs, and photos were made by National Guard Sgt. Jeffrey Brown.)

BY BRENDA S. EDWARDS
Contributing writer

Sgt. Ernest L. Sampson, 1, signed to fulfill a one-year term of military service in the Kentucky Army National Guard in 1940. In 1940, the 96th Tank Company, better known as the Harrodsburg Tankers, was called to federal service and was redesignated as Company D, 103rd Tank Battalion. Prior to the United States entering the Second World War, the 103rd Tank Battalion proved superior among other armor units during large training maneuvers at Camp Fids, Louisiana.

General George S. Patton, while observing their training in 1941, said in regards to their performance, the only way to get a tank company to function is have them all be country boys from the same home town. After these country boys certified their skills during large-scale training exercises in Louisiana, the Kennedys immediately had their bonds in Harrodsburg put to a test in battle and survival on the world stage.

In late October 1941, the Sampsons and the Harrodsburg Tankers boarded a ship and set sail for the Philippines Islands, where they were expected to take part in Operation FLINT (Philippines, Luzon, Manila) along with the 104th Tank Battalion.

Assigned to Ft. Stotsenburg, on the Batan Peninsula of Luzon Island, they awaited maneuvers with the 104th by enjoying the idyllic life. Many enjoyed boating, movies and swimming or fishing, badminton, horseback, or horse a football around.

Following suspicious enemy activity in the China Sea shortly after their arrival, the 103rd was ordered to guard Clark Field at Clark Air Base. The Philippine Air Force base was connected to Ft. Stotsenburg, and allowed Allied forces to run bombing and reconnaissance missions in the China Sea.

On Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor, located in Oahu, Hawaii, became the target of surprise attacks carried out by Japanese warplanes.

Only hours after Pearl Harbor was attacked, the onslaught of bombing raids ended 5,000 miles west at Clark Air Base where the Harrodsburg Tankers, an armored unit trained in tank-on-tank combat, could do very little against the onslaught of planes flying overhead.

They watched in horror and disbelief as hundreds of Japanese bombers rained down munitions on Allied bases and troops, resulting in the deaths of many soldiers, including and refueling at Clark Field.

Pvt. Robert H. Brown, a fellow Kennedys and active duty soldier assigned to their unit that it was suddenly activated, was the first armor casualty of the war. A parade field at Ft. Knox was renamed in his honor. Brown's field is still in use today.

Other Tankers, including Sampson, regrouped after the raid and continued the battle alongside Filipinos at the Battle of Batan from Jan. 11-April 9, 1942.

After the surrender of Allied troops at the Batan, Sampson and a few other members in his company decided they were not yet ready to raise the white flag, according to Jim Ochs, who was a tankman at the time.

In the middle of the first night of surrender, they split from the group and made their way to the southern coast of the Batan Peninsula. Sampson and his comrades found a boat, hid the women in garages,



ABOVE LEFT: Sgt. Ernest Logan Sampson's tombstone in Spring Hill Cemetery in Harrodsburg. ABOVE RIGHT: Sgt. Ernest Logan Sampson.

and forced him to drive around Corregidor Island at the entrance of Manila Bay. It was a severely fortified island that held the remaining contingent of Allied forces in the Philippines.

Unfortunately, the Japanese forces caught up to Sampson, again. Assigned to guard about 100 prisoners, Sampson valiantly fought against the Japanese, one last time, at the Battle of Corregidor, May 6, 1942.

With no reinforcements and numbers left to run, Sampson joined more than 60,000 Americans and Filipino prisoners of war taken captive by the Imperial Army and taken to prison camps.

Sampson, taken prisoner at Corregidor, spent two weeks for the large ride off the island.

Other Tankers who surrendered during the fall of Batan were already on their way, but in a more enduring manner.

The other group of Tankers began captivity while being forced-marched from Marikina, near the southern tip of the Batan, to a train station in San Fernando, where they boarded boxcars for transport to the nearest holding camp, Camp O'Donnell.

The unit survived

All Kennedys survived the 60-mile walk to San Fernando, while more than 2,500 Filipinos and 500 other Americans died in the Bataan Death March.

Prisoners on the march lost their lives due to dehydration, starvation, infection, disease, and brutal physical abuse from their marauding captors.

Sampson's trip to his camp was arguably less brutal. They started by sea, taking a barge to Manila, but the barge stopped 100 yards from shore and captives were forced to swim the rest of the way.

Sampson marched through Manila to Bilibid Prison before transfer to Calapan, where a camp being run by the prisoners of war held captive them.

He stayed at Camp Cabanatuan for two years in overcrowded barracks, sleeping on bamboo mats without mattresses, bedding or mosquito netting.

The work detail consisted of cutting wood for the kitchens, farming in the rice paddies, and working in the fields.

Sampson was a skilled mechanic and was eventually selected to work at the airfield.

Aside from the occasional bread and a variety of vegetables, wet rice was the main food for these prisoners.

Overheating with Allied Troops, the Japanese captors lacked the means to properly and safely feed them, soot them, or house them.

Ten Tankers died at Calapan and another two died at the airfield camp on the

Philippine island. Three others lost their lives at Camp O'Donnell.

Ten more Tankers did not survive a transfer from the Philippines to Japan aboard the various freighters used as transport carriers.

Due to the high mortality rate of the human cargo, the Japanese freighters called "sea ships" were used to transport prisoners of World War II.

On July 17, 1944, Sampson was taken with more than 1,500 prisoners to the port at Manila where he boarded the Nishino Maru, a Japanese battleship bound to mainland Japan.

Conditions horrible

The ship resulted in the taking sun at Manila Bay for seven days before departing. Temperatures in the holding area were estimated to consistently result in more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

As part of a convoy with other Japanese ships, the Nishino Maru and other ships fell subject to targeting by American submarines. Several lives were lost at sea.

On Aug. 2, 1944, the freighter and its cargo arrived at Maki, Japan.

Sampson was offloaded and assigned to Camp Narum 25-B (a.k.a. Nagoya #2), where he endured with three other men, sleeping on straw mats and pillows made of canvas and stuffed with corn husks.

As common punishment to their captives, the Japanese beat them with sticks, clubs or rifle butts. They also made them stand out in the cold at the position of attention for long periods of time while being denied water, food, or even clothing.

The main purpose for this camp was to provide a labor force at the Nippon Wharf Manufacturing Company in Nagoya. Sampson was forced to work eight hours each day and rode train cars to the factory with Japanese soldiers.

One of their greatest past-times was talking with others about food. Survivors claimed the act of speaking about specific meals together somehow freed their hunger, momentarily, as if they had just eaten, according to BatuanProject.com.

Sampson's journal, the most interesting artifact recovered by Andrew Ryan, possibly corroborates this claim. The majority of handwritten pages involve food as he lists various recipes and wrote page after page detailing how to create the perfect hearty meal when he returned home.

As the war waged on, Allied Forces regrouped victims in Europe and pushed into Japan, calling for their surrender.

In early August 1945, continuous unanswered requests to lay down their arms prompted the dropping of two atomic bombs by Americans on Japanese soil — first on Hiroshima, then Nagasaki.



ABOVE RIGHT: Sgt. Ernest Logan Sampson.

On Aug. 15, prisoners of war heard the emperor speak to his people over a live radio broadcast. Interpreters translated to the Americans how the Japanese emperor had surrendered his army.

The Japanese emperor officially surrendered September 2, 1945.

Meanwhile, Sampson's life at the Camp Narum flipped upside down as the tables turned in his favor.

Guards abandoned their posts at camp, and B-29s dropped fifty-gallon barrels of supplies to the former prisoners of war.

Returns to U.S.

Sampson accepted short-term residence at the camp with his friends. They secured their own perimeter with rifles left behind by the guards. They ate whatever food they had left, and what was dropped out of the sky by the B-29s. He and other prisoners collected 6,000 yen and bought a local Japanese working boat. They ate real beef from the 1,400-pound half for six meals, without rationing, while waiting for a ride home.

On Sept. 12, 1945, they were escorted by American troops to southern Japan, where they received medical treatment aboard the U.S.S. Hescow.

Sampson returned to the Philippines for additional medical treatment before setting sail for the U.S., arriving at Seattle Washington on Oct. 9, 1945.

It took several months before Army released Sampson. Recovery was slow after enduring such poor conditions while in captivity.

Pvt. Sampson was promoted to the rank of sergeant and released to his home in Harrodsburg before his discharge on April 6, 1946.

He lived through Japanese air raids, the Battle of Batan, the Battle of Corregidor, the Bataan Death March, Japanese hell ships and numerous prison camps. He endured more than 1,200 days at the hands of a brutal enemy.

His perseverance, strength, honor and personal courage is matched by very few. He is a true hero of the Kentucky Army National Guard.

Only 37 of the 66 Harrodsburg Tankers taken prisoner of war survived this tragic tale from World War II.

Sampson followed his wounds with his wife, Sadie McElroy, and lived out his remaining days on his farm in Mercer County.

He died (Dec. 1, 2001), and is buried at Spring Hill Cemetery in Harrodsburg.

A tank, on display in Harrodsburg, commemorates the Harrodsburg Tankers, who endured capture and placement in prisoner-of-war camps by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II.

FROM OUR FILES

100 YEARS AGO - 1920

Miss Georgia Ooten, 22, of Danville, was shot three times yesterday in Dayton, Ohio, when she was a typist in the Lindsey Building. Her condition has greatly improved following a transfusion of blood given by her friend. The shooter is W.C. Wyong, 45, who is a doctor and owner of the girl, and confessed to shooting her. According to Mrs. Lila Moore, manager of the rooming house where Miss Ooten and Wyong met, said she told Wyong he was much too old for Ooten. Wyong is quoted as saying, he didn't care if he was old enough to be her grandfather, "but her love will make me young again." Miss Ooten said while recovering at the hospital, "I looked upon Mr. Wyong as I would on a father. He brought clothes for me out of kindness. Recently I would have nothing to do with him and he grew very angry."

75 YEARS AGO - 1945

Work on the City Restaurant was completed this morning and the palatial eating cafe is now a place of beauty. The restaurant has been enlarged so that there will be plenty of room for everyone. There will also be a section reserved for women only, which will be quite an addition over the old system.

George W. Hardy, who lives

A plea for an ordinance to control

at the living place on Cane Run Avenue in Harrodsburg, has an archaic that in his opinion is the oldest thing of its kind in Kentucky, if not the United States. Mr. Hardy says his wife's grandmother, Mrs. Hamilton, who would have been 125 years old were she still alive, gave this chair to his wife and told her at the time that she had inherited it from her grandmother, who had come into possession of it through her grandmother. The chair is a large and cozy one, with a leather split bottom and Hardy is convinced that it is 250 years old. Mr. Hardy, who is 77, carried a market through the Civil War and now spends much of his time in this comfortable chair on his front veranda watching the younger generation speed by in automobiles, some of them at the rate of 40 or more miles an hour.

Master James Lillard Rice, son of Mr. and Mrs. William J. Rice, celebrated his third birthday at a party at the home of his grandparents Mr. and Mrs. L.L. Robinson on Fourth Street. Those present were Caroline and Billy Hoffman, Clifford L. and Bobby Coker and George Bruce Lewis.

Sergeant George D. Barker, son of Mr. and Mrs. E.D. Barker of Route 1, Danville, is a member of a signal service company which re-

cently played a part in the recent linking of Calcutta with China, by telephone. Before entering service, Barker was employed by the Boyle Bank and Trust Company.

50 YEARS AGO - 1970

As Steve Stevens was appointed as principal of Danville Blue Junior High School, and a classroom unit for emotionally disturbed children at Edna Toller Elementary School, Stevens succeeds Ken Snowden, who was appointed as assistant superintendent of Danville City Schools following the resignation last month of Russell Goodknight.

Work on leveling the site of the new Boyle County Middle School has begun, including the clearing of trees. The school is to be located west of the main Boyle County High School complex, separated by an expanse of greenery. The school will take the pressure off other schools, some of which are crowded, and will permit a more efficient instructional program to keep pace with the changing educational standards.

25 YEARS AGO - 1995

Crab Orchard is offering a reward for information on a crime that occurred after the Fourth of

July celebration in town on July 4-5. About 40 flags were stolen and the city commission is offering a \$200 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the thieves.

The Danville Board of Education gave classified employees rates of 20 to 2 cents an hour. A starting condition with no experience will make 4.00 an hour under the new salary schedule, while a starting secretary to the superintendent with five years' experience will make \$9.32 an hour. The highest classified level pays 15.50 an hour under the new schedule.

MacDowell Road now will be called the name it goes by anyway: Battlefield Road. The Boyle County Fiscal Court approved the name change after 24 residents on the road submitted a petition. The name change will affect the section from Perryville to the county line.

The Housing Authority of Danville will receive a \$113,500 grant from a Department of Housing and Urban Development program designed to combat drug-related crime and offer drug abuse programs. The two-year grant will be used to increase police patrols of Housing Authority areas and provide educational and leadership programs.