

# Focus



Cecil Sims, in photo at left, survived the Bataan Death March and more than three years in Japanese prison camps. A native of Harrodsburg, he now lives in Danville. Maurice E. "Jack" Wilson, shown above, has one room in his Harrodsburg home filled with war

THE KENTUCKY ADVOCATE, Danville, Kentucky, Sunday, May 27, 1984

## The 'Philippine Defenders'

### Veterans of historic ordeal to receive belated honor

By JO WITT Staff Writer

Cecil Sims was in the hospital receiving radiation treatment for cancer when he learned that he would be awarded a Bronze Star for fighting in the Philippines in World War II. An army official called him about sending in the necessary paperwork, and Sims turned the task over to his wife, Mary.

"I didn't have much feelings about it," says the 67-year-old Sims, who lives in Danville and is a retired elementary school principal. "Once a heavy smoker — a habit he attributes to nervousness — Sims has difficulty breathing and walks with a cane. The only time he talks about the war is when someone asks. "I lived out back years ago I had to attempt to forget a lot, or I couldn't have been as well as I am."

Sims is one of 23 men alive today who served in Company D of the 196th Tank Battalion, composed primarily of Harrodsburg residents. Twenty-five of the company's original 66 members died in the war — either in the early battles in the Philippines or, after the surrender of Bataan and Corregidor, in Japanese prison camps.

The "Philippine defenders," as they are called, experienced what has gone down in history as one of the most humiliating defeats ever handed the United States. Sent under sealed orders to the Philippines less than a month before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Harrodsburg men joined thousands of other American soldiers in a region no one knew would become a war zone.

But when Clark Field was bombed — only hours after Pearl Harbor — the troops found themselves scattered and disoriented, fighting against a Japanese invasion with outmoded equipment and inadequate supplies. Vastly outnumbered, the American army finally surrendered in the spring of 1942, and 70,000 American soldiers and Filipino fighters and civilians were taken into captivity and forced on a 35-mile trek now called the Bataan Death March.

Ten thousand people — more than 2,000 of them Americans — died on the march, which has become infamous for the atrocities committed by the Japanese. The prisoners were forced to travel with almost no food, water or rest, and many were shot or bayoneted by their captors when they stopped or fell out of rank.

Those who survived the march spent more than three years in prison camps in the Philippines and Japan.

Now, 42 years later, the Army is awarding the Philippine defenders Bronze Stars in recognition of their valor in combat. Any soldier who served between Dec. 7, 1941, and May 10, 1942 is eligible, says Sgt. Al D'Ambrino, recruiting officer for the Kentucky National Guard in Harrodsburg. Most of the defenders from Kentucky came from Mercer County, says D'Ambrino. So far 38

— or their survivors — have been located. "I'm still hoping that through publicity in the news media others will contact me," he said. In order to receive the award, veterans or their survivors need to fill out an application, with supporting documents, including discharge papers or death certificates. When the awards are in, they will be presented in a ceremony this fall, probably at the Mercer County Fairgrounds, said D'Ambrino. Ceremonies have already been held in North Carolina and California, he said. D'Ambrino isn't sure why it's taken the Army so long to recognize these men. "It's just something that fell through the cracks."

How do the veterans feel about receiving the citation? "There's been very little reaction from them," says D'Ambrino. "I don't know if it's the hurt, the non-recognition, the delay. They haven't had much response."

Either VanArndall, a widow who lives in Harrodsburg, believes the recognition to her husband and the other men is long overdue. "Historians claim they were in the most important battle of the war because they held the dam off and gave the country a chance to get on its feet."

Mrs. VanArndall is a gray-haired woman, friendly and hospitable to a visitor. She talks in a straightforward manner about her husband George, or "Jimmy," as she and friends called him. She was married twice — the first time erroneously — that Jimmy had died on an unmarked Japanese ship sunk by the United States. "As a result I got two Purple Hearts," she says, pulling them out of a dresser drawer filled with things from the war years. "Of course, you're supposed to destroy the first one, but I never did. I just kind of pushed them away."

Also in the drawer are seven yellow postcards, stamped with the seal of the Japanese Imperial Army, that she received from her husband while he was a prisoner. They are for the most part impersonal, with multiple-choice messages about the prisoner's health and welfare marked — presumably as the prisoner requested. At the bottom of each is space for a brief personal message. One informed Mrs. VanArndall that her husband had received a photograph of their only child, a son born after the war started.

After the war, some of her husband's friends wanted to tell her what they'd known of Jimmy before he died. "I told them, 'I don't want to hear about it.'"

she recalls. "It's been bad enough to wonder what it was like."

Burgin resident Cecil Vandiver was one of several local men who made a tape recording of his war memories for the Kentucky Historical Society in 1961. A transcription of the recordings was put in a notebook originally planned to be sealed in the Bataan War Memorial dedicated in Harrodsburg that year.

But the notebook was never placed in the monument. Instead, it went to the Mercer County Library.

"It was just like a nightmare," Vandiver said in his account of the Bataan Death March. "I can't remember the number of days we walked or anything. Every water hole was the scene of a lot of people killed, because we were so thirsty that we would crawl on in regardless of the Japanese and they would bayonet us down."

"It was just plain hell. It was death every day. We'd see death all around us and on each side of us. Every afternoon about sundown, they'd pull some men out of ranks and we'd hear rifle fire in the distance. Never came back. Every morning at sunrise they'd do the same thing."

Vandiver, 64, says he wouldn't have survived the march if it hadn't been for Harold Moore, another member of the company who now lives in Danville. Moore held him up when he would have fallen out of line.

Asked how he feels about receiving the Bronze Star, Vandiver answers without hesitation: "Make me feel proud."

Cecil Sims allows himself a grin when he talks about some of the ways he found to outsmart his Japanese captors. The prison guards were notorious for beating prisoners frequently, often for nothing more than failing to understand the Japanese language. Sims learned quickly that the way to minimize a beating was to spring back at attention after every blow, begging for mercy only made things worse.

"You didn't give in," says Sims. "You stood your ground and if they were going to do something to you, you took it. I had too much courage to let them know they were getting the best of me."

Even on the Death March, when he was "more or less in a stupor," Sims was determined to survive. "I'd always make it a point never to be near the front of the line," he recalls, because people there always had to resume marching first. Then, further back, on the other hand, often got a longer rest — sometimes as much as a couple of days.

Sims contracted several serious diseases and spent 18 months in a makeshift hospital at a prison camp in the Philippines before being transferred to a camp in Japan, where he worked unloading ships.

Asked how the war affected him, Sims states

into the distance and slowly shakes his head. "I don't know how I can answer that question," he says after a moment. Then he shakes his head again.

Every now and then, Maurice E. "Jack" Wilson dreams he's still fighting.

Other times the 72-year-old Harrodsburg native spends most of the night sitting on the side of his bed because his legs hurt too much for him to sleep.

While he was a prisoner of war in Japan, Wilson permanently injured his back as he fell from a railway trestle where he was working. Paralyzed at first, Wilson eventually managed to learn to walk, but he was never able to sit his feet properly.

The Japanese called him "Paddie," he says. "Because I looked like a duck paddling my feet when I walked." Now he wears braces on both legs.

Wilson says he doesn't mind talking about his experiences in the Philippines and Japan. In fact, he's become a kind of unofficial historian of company D.

One room in his Harrodsburg home is filled with framed pictures and mementos of the war, and at least a dozen scrapbooks document not only life in the prison camps, but what happened to Wilson's friends after the war.

Until his health deteriorated, Wilson and his wife, Rosalyn, attended nearly all the conventions for veterans and the survivors of Bataan and Corregidor. Even now, he makes it a point to correspond with comrades from the war. "I mail 100 Christmas cards. Not because I expect to get any back — although I usually get 80 to 90."

Wilson says he made it a personal crusade to see that the Bataan Memorial was put up in Harrodsburg, and now he is helping D'Ambrino gather the names and whereabouts of the men who are eligible for the Bronze Star.

"I belong to all the veterans' organizations," says Wilson, pulling an arm's-length plastic binder full of cards from his wallet. "I think that's the best money I ever spent."

Wilson also has a large collection of books about the war. "Whenever I see a book come out written by a boy in prison camp, I buy it," he says. "I've read 'em all two or three times at least. It's something to pass the time off."

He's had a lot of time on his hands since the war, because his disability has kept him from holding a job. "I tried to raise a tobacco crop when I first got back but I had to hire it all done, so I quit and gave it up."

Wilson is bitter about his injuries, about the fact that he hasn't been able to work. Neither the Bronze Star nor the seven citations he has already received can change that. But to Wilson, just being a survivor is a reward. "I came out in a bad shape," he says, "but I was still lucky."

## Earth's fate may rest in hands of nuclear club's new members

By CHARLES J. HANLEY Associated Press Writer

BUEENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Gray-haired, mild-mannered, quietly dressed, Carlos Menem passed unnoted down Buenos Aires streets. But the fate of the Earth may rest as much in the hands of men like him as in the doomsday computers of the superpowers.

The retired admiral, until recently Argentina's nuclear energy chief, has led his country into the "nuclear club" of the atomic age — those nations able to

produce nuclear bomb material on their own.

The Argentinean leader, then in his 50s, is proud of his nation's achievement. But his new uranium-enrichment plant stands as a symbol of how technology and Third World scientists are outstripping international controls designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons.

India, in 1974, was the last nation known to have tested an atomic explosive device, making it the sixth acknowledged nuclear power, with the United States, Soviet Union, Britain, France and

China.

But since then, Israel, South Africa, Pakistan and now Argentina — all of which reject the 1978 treaty against nuclear weapons proliferation — have achieved the status of potential bomb-holders. Still, others may aspire to the "club."

"With the spread of nuclear technology and equipment, it may be that the first nuclear conflict will break out between nations other than the U.S. and U.S.S.R.," Paul Leventhal, president of the privately financed Nuclear Con-

trol Institute, says in a Washington, D.C., interview.

Economic forces underlie the push to "go nuclear." Developing nations short on oil use nuclear power as the route to energy independence. Harressed nuclear-equipment manufacturers, largely out of the U.S. market because of safety worries, see the developing world as the way to keep business alive.

Although they reject international safeguards against nuclear weapons development, India, Israel, Pakistan and Argentina

have little trouble buying technology for advanced facilities, or developing their own.

Leading South American nations — Argentina, Brazil and Chile — appear ready to sidestep the treaty permanently.

A final ingredient in the proliferation mix, U.S. critics say, is the Reagan administration's decision to relax restrictions on American nuclear exports.

The Reagan administration argues that a policy of simply denying such exports to nations with

"unsafeguarded" nuclear programs will not keep them from crossing atomic thresholds.

In Congress, both houses have passed amendments to close loopholes in U.S. law that allowed exports last year.

U.S. Defense Department analysts estimate 10 nations will be capable of manufacturing nuclear weapons by the year 2000. The list includes advanced countries — Mexico, Japan, Sweden and Australia — that show no inclination to build a bomb.