

Letters from Bataan: A Kentucky POW's letters found after 75 years

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This month marks 81 years since the Bataan Death March in the Bataan Peninsula during World War II.

Almost every member of the military can tell you the power of receiving mail during times of training; it's hard to remember but many years ago, letter writing was the only form of communication while in basic training and overseas deployments for centuries before the days of cell phones and the internet.

Finding the letters, as a historian, is also very vital to putting together the story of how our troops lived while at training. The author tends to write a detailed picture of their day-to-day life, how they spent their training, who was with them, and how they spent their off time.

Recently, a small ammunition can full of letters was given to the Kentucky National Guard for preservation; the family who lived in the home had all passed and an estate auction was underway.

An anonymous Kentucky Guard veteran in the area had attended the auction and knew the family that lived in the home.

The home belonged to a member of the Scanlon family. The patriarch of the family owned a grocery store during the early to mid-1900s in Harrodsburg, Kentucky., at 957 Mooreland Avenue, a Mr. William Jennings Bryan Scanlon.

Mr. Scanlon's son, who they all called J.B., worked at the store, and who had served with the Kentucky National Guard's 38th Tank Company out of Harrodsburg.

The 38th Tank Company, now known as the "Harrodsburg Tankers" and their mobilization in the Pacific is well-documented in monographs and books, Wikipedia, and even through the Harrodsburg Historical Society.

Many of the survivors of the Prisoner-of-War (POW) camps have been documented in oral histories and interviews throughout the years. But through these letters, we're able to get another look at how the tankers were preparing for federalization and take a look at the first few days in the Philippines.

According to Kentucky National Guard records, the unit, now designated as Delta Co., 192nd Tank Battalion, was federalized on Nov. 25, 1940 at their home station in Harrodsburg and within two days, was moved to Fort Knox, Kentucky. for preparatory training, scheduled to be there from Nov. 28, 1940 through Aug. 31, 1941.

At the time, two nations were showings signs of starting military activity; Germany in the European

theater and Japan in the Pacific Theater. The 192nd Tank Battalion, which also had companies in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Illinois, were to begin their training and head to the Philippines in the hopes of preventing island attacks by the Japanese.

While stationed at Fort Knox, Scanlon wrote home quite a bit.

From the earliest dated letter in the collection, dated Feb. 19, 1941, Scanlon was one of a few taking classes on radios and radio communications.

In fact, the Scanlon family kept a newspaper clipping from an unknown periodical with an unknown date titled "J. B. Scanlon completes radio course, Ft. Knox" and describes the course as radio theory at the Armor Force School and he received an excellent rating when he received his diploma on May 12.

In the letter, he describes how the classes begin at 6:00 a.m. and that "we have to wear clean clothes, shoes shined, hair cut short, and have to be at school on time" since the classes are being taught in an actual classroom and not in the barracks where other indoor training is held.

In the same letter, he also describes the training taken by other Soldiers in his unit; night maneuvers, meals, and even what they do in their off-time.

In today's standards, the drive time between Fort Knox and Harrodsburg is approximately two hours. Some Soldiers were able to "hitch a ride" home for the weekend, if given permission.

In other letters, he describes how he was able to go shopping in Louisville and see a University of Tennessee versus University of Kentucky game.

In all the letters while at Fort Knox, Scanlon does not make any mention of going to war, and seems to be unbothered about being at Fort Knox for very long. With consideration that the last letter in this collection is dated May 1941, over six months before the attacks on Pearl Harbor, there is quite a bit of understanding why there is no mention.

In the next group of letters, Scanlon is writing from Fort Polk, Louisiana. While there, much like his letters from Fort Knox, he writes about some of his training and getting to see a bit of the surrounding area.

He writes in a letter postmarked Sept. 4, 1941, "We are now camped at an Army airport about 2 miles out of Tallulah, Louisiana. We have those large tents with about ten sleeping in them. We will stay here for a couple of days and move to Tremont, Louisiana for a couple months of maneuvering."

By Sept. 12, they were moved down to Alexandria, Louisiana. and describes their living area as a "big pine woods about 15 miles from Alexandria". According to Scanlon, the woods are filled with lizards and snakes and has a difficult time managing to keep clean clothes and a warm bath but is managing

well.

Scanlon also mentions that one of the other Soldiers suffered an accident that, at first, thought his back was broken. As it turns out, the Soldier's kidneys were crushed and Scanlon noted, "he will probably be a cripple for life".

It isn't until Sept. 30, 1941 when Scanlon begins to talk about why they were federalized and sent away from home.

Scanlon writes, "We are now at Camp Polk, Louisiana and will be here for a couple of weeks and then I don't know where we will go. Some are talking about going to the Philippine Islands. I don't think we will though."

In the letter, he also notes that he received a letter from a friend back home, J.P. Hatchett, and Hatchett is afraid he is going to be draft, even though Scanlon doesn't believe he will pass the exams, [physicals].

In addition, he talks about how he hopes to be getting sent back to Fort Knox soon. He hadn't showered in about a week, almost everyone has no money, and no one knows the next time they will be getting paid.

By Oct. 18, 1941, Scanlon and the rest of the 192nd Tank Battalion must be hearing more information. They received rounds of typhoid and yellow fever vaccines and know they will be heading to San Francisco soon.

But whether they will be shipped overseas is still a topic of conversation.

He writes, "As the general conversation goes, we have to wait for an Act which some say is called the Neutrality Act before they can send selectees or National Guard or foreign service."

"Most of the boys hate to leave the U.S. and only about 5 percent want to go. I don't especially care to go but... it will be a very educational trip."

"We will really be lucky to go as we will be outposts on the Island and the odds are we will never be in war. The only way we will be in war is for Japan to try and capture the Philippines. This is very impossible as there is a very large U.S. Army and Marines stationed there and also the Philippine Army. It is too far for Germany to ever try to capture."

Less than two months from the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941, the 192nd Tank Battalion had conversation that the not only was an attack in the Philippines unlikely, but they thought an attack was "impossible".

By October 25, 1941, the tank battalion had moved to a small island off the coast of San Francisco, California, called Angel Island. From his room, Scanlon writes to his mother that he can see the Golden Gate Bridge and the city. While there he is able to eat well and the barracks are nice and “artistic”.

While reading through the series of letters that were donated, I have noticed several gaps between the letters. Scanlon references other events that he wrote in other letters but the letters are lost; most likely stored elsewhere with the Scanlon family back in Harrodsburg.

Sadly, the letter date Oct. 25 from San Francisco is the last hand written letter in from J.B. Scanlon in the collection.

The last two bits of communication in the collection are postal telegraphs: typed strips with short communications that are printed out from a telegraph machine that are glued to a half sheet of paper.

The first few lines tell who to send the telegraph to: Moreland Avenue, Harrodsburg, Kentucky.

They read:

STILL AT FT STOTSENBUC[R]G PI AM OK DON'T WORRY=
JENNINGS BRYAN SCANLON JR.
FT PI AM OK.

The telegraph was dated Dec. 19, 1941, 12 days after Japan started their “impossible” attack on the Philippines.

One last telegraph from J.B. Scanlon, dated 3:56 p.m., Dec. 30, 1941, in the same format as the last read:

SEASONS GREETINGS EVERYTHING OKAY LOVE=
JENNINGS SCANLON.

The next series of letters are 9 in total, all from home. Some of the letters are still sealed, some opened. The first six are sealed, to the address in San Francisco. They are marked to P.F.C. J.B. Scanlon with his service number and stamped by the postal service to the Philippines. But then they were all stamped return to sender, service suspended.

All of the letters were dated the following: Nov. 10, 1941; Dec. 1, 1941; Dec. 15, 1941; Dec. 22, 1941; Jan. 5, 1942; and Jan. 13, 1942.

The first letter returned was postmarked Nov. 10, 1941, almost a month before the attacks began. By the time the letters were routed to the islands, there is a good chance the attacks had already begun.

Before World War II started, mail was placed in cargo ships and sent in bulk to troops serving in both the Pacific and Europe. Placement in aircraft was at a premium; the travel was faster but rates were higher and much riskier.

The addresses had changed with the last three letters, each addressed to the following:

P.F.C. J.B. Scanlon [Service Number]
American Prisoner of War
Formerly with Hq. Co. 192nd T.K.B.N.
Philippine Islands,
c/o Postmaster, Chicago, Ill.
If possible, send on relief ships to Far East

The first letter with the new address was unsealed and the first sentence began:

Dear J.B.,
I haven't heard from you for so long, and we got word that letters might be sent on the Relief Ships to the Philippines.

According to the letter, his family did receive the telegrams.

She added:

How brave you all were, we listened on the radio all the time until the fall of Bataan. There is a gloom over H-burg [Harrodsburg] but we have hopes of seeing you all, hoping soon that you all will be sent home. Praying and praying for you all. (Everybody is).
We all send love and good luck.
Mom, Dad. Don and Mary Frances.

The Scanlon family's next two attempts to get mail to their son were unfruitful; the next attempt, a letter dated the same day as the last, was blocked because it was addressed to a POW and the censors stated that the addressee was not officially listed as a POW.

The last letter, sent on Aug. 17, 1942 by "Victory" Mail, or V-Mail, a new way of sending letters to troops in World War II, was returned for the same reason with an addition: prisoners of war cannot be recipients of V-Mail.

However, the family noted that they got the letter he wrote on Feb. 24, 1942, which is not part of the collection donated.

Among the collection are many letters of correspondence kept by the family from the War Department and legal notices pertaining to Scanlon being “Missing in Action”.

On May 21, 1942, the adjutant general, Maj. Gen. James Alexander Ulio, sent them a letter. It was a blanket letter where servicemember’s names are typed in.

The letter began:

Dear Mr. [Bryan] Scanlon,

According to the War Department records, you have been designated as the emergency addressee of Private First Class Jennings B. Scanlon [Service number redacted], who, according to the latest information available, was serving in the Philippine Islands at the time of the final surrender.

I deeply regret that it is impossible for me to give you more information than is contained in this letter. In the last days before the surrender of Bataan, there were casualties which were not reported to the War Department. Conceivably the same is true of the surrender of Corregidor and possibly of other islands of the Philippines. The Japanese Government has indicated its intention of conforming to the terms of the Geneva Convention with respect to the interchange of information regarding prisoners of war. At some future date, this Government will receive through Geneva a list of persons who have been taken prisoners of war. Until that time the War Department cannot give you positive information.

According to an interview with Staff Sgt. Albert Moore, a survivor of the march and the POW camps, him and another Soldier found Scanlon in one of the trenches, starving and weighing almost 80 pounds.

“We fed him the good potatoes, the good food that we had, and fed him his last meal, gave him a good bath, gave him a good meal,” said Moore. “The next morning, he was dead.”

Scanlon died on July 8, 1942, less than three months after the march.

It is not apparent from the collection of legal documents and letters in the donation when the Scanlon family were notified of his death.

In February 1945, General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of allied forces in the southwest Pacific area, lead allied forces and took back the Bataan Peninsula and Manila, the capital.

It was shortly after that time, that there were confirmation letters in the collection acknowledging Scanlon’s death.

In a signed letter dated Oct. 30, 1945 from MacArthur, he writes:

Dear Mr. Scanlon,

My deepest sympathy goes to you in the death of your son, Sergeant Jennings B. Scanlon, while a prisoner of war of the enemy.

You may have some consolation in the memory that he, along with his comrades-in-arms who died on Bataan and Corregidor and in prison camps, gave his life for his country. It was largely their sacrifices which stopped the enemy in the Philippines and gave us the time to arm ourselves for our return to the Philippines and the final defeat of Japan. Their names will be enshrined in our country's glory forever. In your son's death I have lost a gallant comrade and mourn with you.

Very faithfully,

Douglas MacArthur

In total, 66 Soldiers deployed to the Philippines from Delta Company, 192nd Tank Battalion. Only 37 returned home, many needed extended medical attention, some discharged, some continue to serve in Korea.

Scanlon was memorialized by Brig. Gen. Stephen G. Henry, the commandant of the Armored Force School at Fort Knox as a symbol of all the armored forces.

In his Oct. 6, 1942 speech at a flag raising ceremony for Scanlon, Henry remarked to the war production crowd in attendance:

Because we lost the Battle of the Philippines doesn't mean that Private Scanlon wasn't a good Soldier. He and his 192nd Tank Battalion were superior, well-trained, fearless fighters – but, alas, it takes more than this to win a modern war.

They didn't have the equipment; they didn't have the planes; they didn't have the tanks; they didn't have the tank landing barges which you are challenged now to turn out...

I want to dedicate this flag this afternoon to Private Jennings Scanlon of Harrodsburg, Kentucky, as a pledge to him that you and I will carry on the work he started. As each of you pass this flag from day to day, I hope you'll look at this flag; that you'll remember that it's Private Scanlon's flag; that we raised it here today for him.