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This April marked 81 years since the Bataan Death March in the Bataan Peninsula during World War II. And a recently rediscovered cache of letters gives a frontline account of the service and sacrifice of the Harrodsburg Tankers. 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.



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Kentucky Army National Guard Sgt. Jennings Bryan "J.B." Scanlon mobilized to the Philippine Islands with the 192nd Tank Battalion shortly before World War II began in the Pacific. Captured, he took part of the Bataan Death March and died shortly after in a POW Camp. (Photo courtesy of the Harrodsburg veterans' community).

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, William Jennings Bryan Scanlon, owned a grocery store during the early to mid-1900s at 957 Mooreland Avenue in Harrodsburg. Scanlon's son Jennings Bryan Scanlon Jr., who they all called J.B., worked at the store. J.B. also served with the Kentucky National Guard's 38th Tank Company of Harrodsburg.

Now known as the "Harrodsburg Tankers" the unit's 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, designated as Delta Company, 192nd Tank Battalion, was federalized on Nov. 25, 1940, at their home station in Harrodsburg and within two days, was moved to Fort Knox for preparatory training. The Tankers were scheduled to be there from Nov. 28, 1940 through Aug. 31, 1941. At the time, two nations were showing 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 began at 6 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 were being taught in an actual classroom and not in the barracks where other indoor training was held. In the same letter, he also described the training taken by other soldiers in his unit; night maneuvers, meals, and even what they did in their off-time. Some soldiers were able to "hitch a ride" home for the weekend, if given permission.

In other letters, Scanlon described 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 made no mention of going to war, and seemed unbothered about being at Fort Knox. The last letter in the collection is dated May 1941, over six months before the attacks on Pearl Harbor.

In the next group of letters, Scanlon was writing from Fort Polk, Louisiana. While there, much like his letters from Fort Knox, he wrote about his training and getting to see a bit of the surrounding area. In a letter postmarked Sept. 4, 1941, Scanlon wrote: "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. Scanlon described their living area as a "big pine woods about 15 miles from Alexandria". He said the woods were filled with lizards and snakes and he had a difficult time managing to keep clean clothes and a warm bath but was managing well. Scanlon also mentioned that one of the other soldiers suffered an accident. At first, they thought his back was broken, but it turned out the soldier's kidneys were crushed. Scanlon noted, "he will probably be a cripple for life."

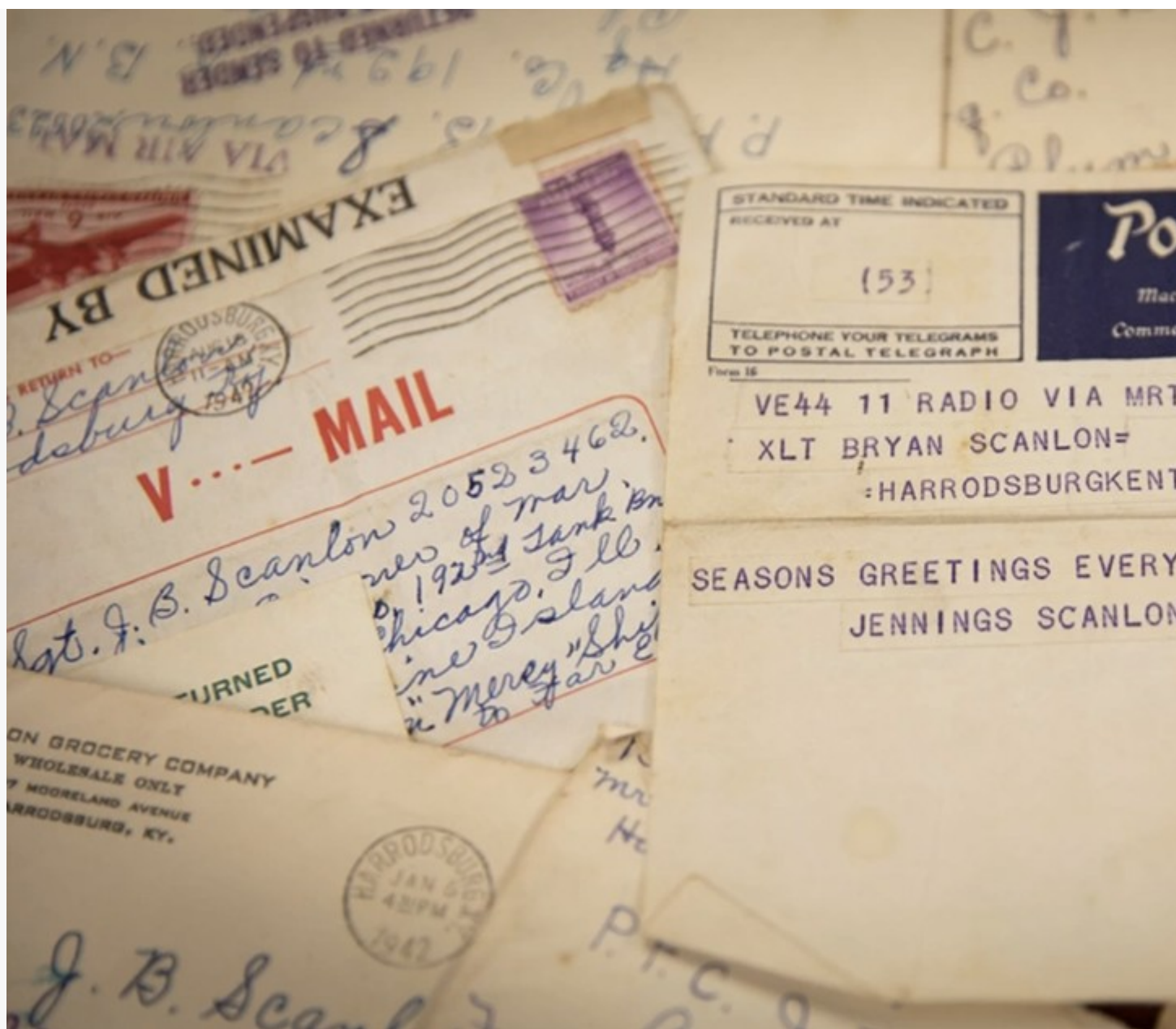


Photo Submitted

The last telegram sent by Kentucky Army National Guard Sgt. Jennings Bryan Scanlon from Manila, Philippines Island, dated Dec. 28, 1941. This telegram and the return to sender letters in the background were donated to the Kentucky National Guard by an anonymous veteran who found them at an estate auction in Harrodsburg. The letters in the background are from his family and were returned to sender after Scanlon was captured by Japanese forces. (U.S. Army photo by Sfc.

Andy Dickson).

It wasn't until Sept. 30, 1941, that Scanlon began to talk about why the Tankers had been federalized and sent away from home. He wrote, "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 noted that he had received a letter from a friend back home, J.P. Hatchett, and Hatchett was afraid of being drafted, even though Scanlon didn't believe he would pass the physical. In addition, he talked about how he hoped to be getting sent back to Fort Knox soon. He hadn't showered in about a week, almost everyone had no money, and no one knew the next time they will be getting paid.

By Oct. 18, 1941, Scanlon and the rest of the Tankers must have been hearing more information. They received rounds of typhoid and yellow fever vaccines and knew they would be heading to San Francisco soon. Whether they would be shipped overseas was a topic of speculation. He wrote: "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 before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941, many in the 192nd Tank Battalion believed an attack in the Philippines was unlikely, but they thought an attack was "impossible." By Oct. 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 wrote to his mother that he could see the Golden Gate Bridge and the city. While there he was able to eat well and the barracks were nice and "artistic" he said.

There are several gaps between the letters. Scanlon referenced other events that he wrote in other letters but the letters are lost; most likely stored elsewhere with the Scanlon family back in Harrodsburg. The handwritten letter dated Oct. 25 from San Francisco is the last one in the J.B. Scanlon collection. The last two bits of communication in the collection are postal telegraphs: typed strips with short communications printed out from a telegraph machine and glued to a half sheet of paper.

The telegraphs were addressed to: Mooreland Avenue. They read:

**STILL AT FT STOTSEN BUC[R]G P I 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 Scanlon, dated 3:56 p.m., Dec. 30, 1941, read:

**SEASONS GREETINGS EVERYTHING OKAY LOVE=
JENNINGS SCANLON.**

The next series of letters are nine 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 Pfc. 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. The letters were dated from Nov. 10, 1941, to 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 last three letters were addressed to:

**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 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, Scanlon’s family had received the telegrams. The letter continued: “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 could not be recipients of V-Mail.

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

In the collection there 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 Ullo, sent them a letter. It was a blanket letter where service member’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, he 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 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, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the commander of allied forces in the southwest Pacific area, led allied forces and took back the Bataan Peninsula and Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Shortly after, there were confirmation letters in the collection acknowledging Scanlon's death.

In a signed letter dated Oct. 30, 1945, MacArthur wrote:

"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.”

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