He dove for the dirt as a shell whizzed over his head. But it found its mark. After hitting the trees, the shell splintered into shrapnel, striking a man standing guard behind him. Dug in behind a riverbank, Weldon Hamilton hastily wiped away the man’s blood that splattered on his cheek. Covered in dirt, half starved and beyond exhaustion, he had only one terrified thought.

“I wanted to run,” he said. “But, during war, the most feared thing is being a coward. You know your friends are watching you, and, no matter what, you have to act brave, even if you’re shaking in your boots.”

And Hamilton was shaking in his boots. But even later, when his boots and the rest of his possessions were gone, he still didn’t run.

But don’t even think of calling Hamilton a hero. “I’m just a survivor,” he said.
This survivor is one of the more than 78,000 U.S. and Philippine soldiers who, after surrendering to the Japanese in 1942, were forced to march more than 65 miles through the scorching heat of the Philippine jungles to prison camps. Fifteen thousand soldiers died during one of the most devastating events of World War II — the Bataan Death March.

Hamilton may have been one of the lucky ones who made it out alive, but he doesn’t credit his survival to luck. “I’m made from tough stock,” he said.

Hamilton’s “tough stock” comes from a rough childhood. He grew up on a small farm in Kansas during the Depression that began in 1929. But while his family struggled to survive, a much bigger struggle was brewing overseas. War was looming, and, like many men of his time, Hamilton wanted to serve his country. After a brief stint at Kansas Western University, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps in October 1940. Shortly after, he boarded a ship and was one of the last soldiers headed for the Philippines.

The ship sailed just 18 days before America entered the war. Hamilton and his unit, the 34th Pursuit Squadron, were assigned to Nichols Field on the outskirts of Manila. But their assignment there lasted only nine days.

“On Nov. 29, we were told to grab our things and go,” he said.

As they rushed to nearby Del Carmen Field, disaster struck. Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the United States was launched into war. But while most of the world focused on Hawaii, Hamilton and thousands of others were trying to stay alive in the Philippines.

“The Japanese bombers attacked, and it was a disaster,” Hamilton said. “Our planes went up the first day, and they were almost all lost. They strafed the rest on the ground. Without air power, we were transformed into infantry.”

The grounded soldiers retreated to the beaches of the tiny Bataan Peninsula, where they struggled to hold off the Japanese. But the fighting took its toll. Cut off from supplies and support, sick and near starvation, the men started to fall.

“We were completely out of food,” Hamilton said. “So, we ate the 26th cavalry — every single horse.”

The Bataan soldiers also were out of options. It was either surrender or die. After four months of fighting, Maj. Gen. Edward P. King, the commanding officer of the forces on Bataan, ordered the 78,000 U.S. and Philippine soldiers to surrender on April 9.

And then the nightmare got even worse.
The march
Russell A. Grokett Sr., a survivor of Bataan, described the surrender in his biography, “Twelve Hundred Days:” “When the surrender came, men were waiting in huddled groups. Many weeping unashamedly, Filipino and American alike.”

As Grokett recalled, many men started to run, but they were ordered to stand, and the Japanese began to strip them of their possessions. Watches, canteens, wallets, rings, anything of value was soon gone.

“They split us up into groups of about 300,” Hamilton said. “We were then ordered to march.”

The men were to march from Mariveles to San Fernando, a 100-kilometer (62 miles) walk, then another 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) to Camp O’Donnell. But the Japanese had made no provisions for food or water. So, the already sick and half-starved men grew steadily weaker.

“The only food I had for eight days was a ball of rice the size of a golf ball,” Hamilton said. “But lack of food was the least of our problems.”

The men were dying of thirst. They desperately searched for water along the way, and many would drink anything, no matter how dirty.

Clarence Larson, a Bataan survivor, recalled the scene in his book, “A Long March Home:” “One of our stops was at a bridge. ... The water you couldn’t even see because there was a green scum covering it. Some of the guys jumped in ... and started to fill their canteens. I did not, as there was a dead soldier, perhaps several, that had been in the water a couple of days, and in 100-degree sunshine you could imagine the smell.”

For many, this drink became their last.

“It became a game for the Japanese,” Hamilton said. “They would lower their bayonets and run for anyone trying to drink. Either you were bayonetted or shot.”

Those who escaped a quick death were in for a slower torture. The contaminated water caused severe diarrhea and vomiting. And if you fell out?

“You were dead,” Hamilton said. “It was miserable. I was so tired I felt like I couldn’t take another step. But then I would hear someone being shot. It was like the Angel of Death was right behind me.”
Hamilton kept going, but many weren’t able. Fifteen thousand soldiers died or were murdered on the 65-mile march to prison camps. And more than 26,000 others would die in the next two months at the camps.

“I was determined to survive,” Hamilton said. “I didn’t make it through that march to die in a prison camp.”

Before his nightmare was over, Hamilton would withstand more than three years of torture, beatings, forced labor and near starvation at Japanese prison camps.

And then, one day, just as quickly as they came, the Japanese left.

“They just tiptoed out,” Hamilton said. “There we were, 1,800 of us. We heard there were Americans on the tip of the island so we stole a train and went there.

“The first thing I did was call my mom,” he added. “I told her I was alive and on my way home. It was an amazingly happy day for me.”

Hamilton made it home in October 1945. His body was ridden with disease — beriberi, dysentery and scurvy — and his doctor’s prognosis was grim. But in time, he recovered both physically and mentally. He married his childhood sweetheart, had five children and continued his service in the military. He was a cook in the Air Force, retiring as a chief warrant officer after 29 years of service.

And the Bataan Death March went down in the history books as one of the most devastating events of World War II. But it didn’t stay there.

**Tribute to the past**

More than 45 years after the death march, a few New Mexico State Army ROTC officers and cadets decided to remember history — their way. Not by recalling it with a lecture or a movie, but by reliving it.

They were successful. This year marked the 13th annual Bataan Memorial Death March, a grueling 26.2-mile march through the New Mexico desert to honor the sacrifices of soldiers like Hamilton.

“I think the memorial march is a wonderful way to remember the soldiers who died so many years ago,” Hamilton said. “I’m always amazed and touched at how enthusiastic people are to attend and participate.

“It’s amazing to be a part of history,” he added. “But I really don’t feel like I did anything brave,” he said. “I did what most people would do in my situation — I survived.”

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