

Death March left permanent mark on WWII veterans

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Unlike much of America, John Emerick has never needed Memorial Day to remember those who died in war. He saw U.S. and Filipino soldiers bayoneted for trying to sneak a drink of water. He heard the final screams of fellow servicemen who were shot because they could not march fast enough to suit their Japanese captors. Emerick cannot forget these casualties of war, no matter how hard he might try.

He is one of the last thousand or so survivors of the Bataan Death March, which happened 60 years ago, during the early stages of World War II. After coming home, he spent years wondering why he had lived when so many alongside him had died.

"I should never have made 24 and I've made it to 84," said Emerick, a silver-haired man who lives quietly with his wife, Theresa, in Finleyville.

The Death March, one of the cruelest chapters in American history, may not mean much to schoolchildren or holiday weekend picnickers, but it has defined each day of Emerick's postwar life. He hates to talk about Bataan, yet he does because he worries that the ordeal is forgotten except by those who lived through it.

Bataan is a torrid peninsula west of Manila in the Philippines. American forces dug in there against the advancing Japanese after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.

Emerick, who had enlisted in the Army Air Corps and was picked to be a pilot, instead found himself converted to an infantryman. He was among 12,000 American and 63,000 Filipino soldiers given the job of stopping the Japanese. Their assignment proved impossible, as they had little food, water or ammunition.

With a massacre looming, the U.S. commander surrendered his forces at Bataan Peninsula on April 9, 1942.

Emerick would never forget his own capture. The Japanese soldier who disarmed him wore a shiny class ring from the University of Oregon. "He spoke better English than I did," Emerick said.

After the defeat came the death march.

The prisoners, lacking food and water, were forced to walk about 65 miles to a Japanese compound.

Precise records of the death toll do not exist. By most accounts, about 70,000 soldiers began the march. An estimated 7,000 to 10,000 died along the way from various causes -- dysentery, beatings, heat stroke and executions for any disobedience.

Emerick said some men, desperate for a drink of water, broke ranks when they spotted artesian wells that loomed like oases. Many were shot dead, others beheaded or buried alive in graves they had been forced to dig.

Those who survived were turned into slave laborers in prison camps scattered from Manchuria to Japan. Emerick served a total of 42 months in six camps, where nearly half the prisoners died from abuse or malnutrition.

Emerick's band of POWs became miners whose only compensation was a bowl of rice three times a day, provided that each loaded four cars of copper before lunch and another four afterward.

The days and nights blurred together. Nothing changed except the levels of torment.

In this hellhole, Emerick said, he kept up his spirits by plotting with his two best friends how they might annoy the Japanese guards without making them murderous. His pals, Andy Miller of Albuquerque, N.M., and Dominic Pellegrino of Springfield, Mass., also survived the prison camp.

Looking back, he does not know how they made it.

Emerick stood 6 feet 3 inches tall and weighed 98 pounds when he was liberated Sept. 12, 1945. His normal weight was 175 pounds.

Regular meals soon put the pounds back on, but he could not recapture everything he lost.

He married Theresa two months after his release, but, by his own account, he was a bad husband. He drank to excess most days, tempering himself only when he reported for his new stateside job with the U.S. Bureau of Mines.

"I don't know how my wife or my mother put up with me," he says now.

Alcohol did not ease his pain or the nightmares. He quit drinking more than 50 years ago, but he did not feel healed.

Emerick was not alone.

Over the years, three of his acquaintances who survived Bataan and its aftermath committed suicide. All of them seemingly were successful men with families.

In 1975, 30 years after the Bataan survivors were liberated, came a breakthrough. It was the end of the Vietnam era, and many returning soldiers were being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Emerick had it, as did countless other veterans of earlier wars.

He and three other Pittsburgh-area men who had survived Japanese prison camps -- Joseph Vater, Kenneth Curley and Harry Menozzi -- turned into political activists.

They agitated for and got a pilot program in Pittsburgh to improve medical treatment of former prisoners of war. The Department of Veterans Affairs followed up with specific programs nationally to help treat all 60,000 surviving POWs.

Even now that he understands his ailment, Emerick still has difficult days.

"You think with time it would go away, but it's a permanent fixture," he said of the night tremors.

On Memorial Day weekend, the old chant of the Bataan forces rumbles through his brain. He recites it for generations who otherwise cannot imagine what happened in the Philippines:

*"We're the Battling Bastards of Bataan,
No mama, no papa, no Uncle Sam,
No aunts, no uncles, no cousins, no nieces,
No pills, no planes, no artillery pieces,
And nobody gives a damn!"*

Article found at <http://www.post-gazette.com/nation/20020526memorial3.asp>