Lee Roach's Story
by Lee Charlie Roach
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I was raised on a farm six and one half miles northwest of Field, New Mexico and did nearly everything there was to do with farming. I worked for about one dollar a day when I wasn't in school. I went to school at Field and played baseball and basketball in High School. After I got out of high school in 1939, I went to work at Field, New Mexico, for Mack Johnson, at a Grocery, Hardware, Gas & Oil of all kinds. I worked there until April of 1941 when I got drafted.

I was sent to Santa Fe, New Mexico first, then hauled on a bus to Albuquerque, N. M. We got on a train at Albuquerque and went to El Paso, Texas. I was put in Battery E 200th C.A. We were issued army clothes. Nothing fit very good. There were five men to a half tent and the bottom half was wood. Our drill field was dirt with rocks to stump your toe on. I think the wind blew every day! James Hamilton from Clovis was our First Sergeant and when he said something he meant it.

T. B. Bryant, Staff Sergeant of the Motor Pool, later asked me if I wanted to drive a truck. I said, "Yes, anything is better than this." We would go out at night on maneuvers. There would be fifty or sixty trucks all blacked out. It was rough traveling thirty or forty miles an hour with only black out lights at night. After we completed all of our training, they cooked up a trip for us over New Mexico. About 1,800 men and a lot of trucks went first to Deming, New Mexico, T. or C., Albuquerque, Roswell, and Carlsbad. It was a rough trip but we enjoyed it. We were gone about a week.

We got our orders after we returned to El Paso, Texas and shipped out the first part of September, 1941. We didn't know where we were going when they put us on a train going west. On arriving in San Francisco, Calif. they put us on barges and took us to Angel Island. It was not very far from San Francisco. We were there about a week and then we were gone again. We boarded the President Coolidge, a wonderful liner (but we still didn't know where we were going). We made it to Hawaii and was there about a day before going on.

After we left Hawaii, for the first time, I heard the name of the Philippine Islands. One of the men who worked on the ship said a lot of you guys have got a one way ticket over here. He sure knew what he was talking about and he was sure right.

After eighteen days and nights we landed in Manila on the Philippine Islands on the 26th of September 1941. We got off the Coolidge and were loaded into busses. They took us to Ft. Stotsenberg about 70 miles north. Ft. Stotsenberg was next to Clark Airfield. We had open barracks with no windows. It wasn't too bad after we got settled in.
When we got to camp we were issued live ammunition. We didn't get to use live ammunition in basic training. We knew something was going to happen! We trained a lot at night tracking planes [by tracking them] with search lights.

On December 7, 1941, we got news Pearl Harbor had been bombed by the Japanese. We had all of our guns at Clark Airfield. About 10 o'clock we got word they were coming after us. The Air Force got all the planes way up high to get the Japanese planes. Well, they didn't come then and our planes were low on fuel, so they landed to refuel and the refueling trucks came out on the field to fuel all of the planes about 12 noon. The pilots went to the chow shack to eat.

While our planes were all on the ground; here came 54 Japanese high bombers and they unloaded on us. We lost nearly all the planes. Planes and people on the airfield were on fire and burning. Over a hundred men out on the field were killed. Right behind the bombers, fifty or more Japanese fighters came in and tried to kill the rest of us. This lasted about two hours and we were lucky to live through all of that!

After the first alert I never did get back to my barracks. Our gun battery was right by the airstrip. We just sat around our guns waiting for the Japanese; and the chow truck. I had a bunch of pictures of the Philippines and the trip over. I didn't get to get them or any clothes. None of us that I know of got to go back and get anything. Most of the barracks were destroyed and some burning.

We moved out to Bataan with just what we had on our backs. We would move at night and the Japanese would try to kill us in the daytime.

The next day the 515th Coast Artillery was formed as part of the 200th Coast Artillery. We backed south a ways to form a strong line on Bataan. They would dive bomb us in the day time and we would move at night and dig our guns in before daylight. We moved every day until we ran out of shells for the big artillery.

We destroyed our big guns and anything else we could. All but our rifles. They were not any good against those big tanks. They said they might just kill us all so General King and General Wainwright surrendered us to the Japanese. We didn't know what was going to happen.

The Japanese came up to us in tanks, took all of our guns, and put them in a big pile. We weren't all together. Our gun crews were scattered all over Bataan. There were about 100 men in our crew. They put us on trucks and carried us a ways that evening to a bull pen. We had no food, water, or nothing but the dirt. The Japanese would set us out in the sun for two or three hours without anything to eat or drink. We went three days and nights in
that tropical heat with nothing to eat or drink. That's what hurt so many Americans on the death march.

Lots of our boys didn't make it. We helped each other when we could but you can help only so much. We were all pretty weak. The ones that couldn't make it the Japanese soldiers would kill them and let them lay beside the dirt road.

We finally made it to Camp O'Donnell and were put in an old barracks. A bunch of us slept under the barracks for a month. I guess there were too many to get us all inside. We finally got some rice to eat and water to drink. You couldn't drink the water until it was boiled and sometime you would stand in line for hours to get some water.

Soon people were dying like flies with malaria and dysentery. There were so many sick americans that we didn't have enough well people to bury the dead. We dug the graves big enough for ten men to tie side by side. You couldn't dig but about 18 inches deep and then you hit solid rock. We buried 78 one day and every day there was a bunch to bury. We used a pick and shovel to dig the graves. After about five or six months of that they moved all that were able to go to Cabanatuan Camp. Doc Springer and I were on burial detail and we stayed there at Camp O'Donnell waiting for the sick to get better or or die. We got better food then and more of it.

After two months or so, they marched us to a train station three or four miles away and put us in little boxcars like sardines with no windows and the doors were shut. We spent most of a day on that trip. I don't know how we made it in the heat. We had to walk about four or five miles to Cabanatuan Camp. It was a lot bigger than Camp O'Donnell.

Rainy season hit about the time I got to Cabanatuan Camp. If 20 or 30 men died during a day, they were all put in the same hole. We buried men every day at Cabanataun Camp. Burial detail was bad during rainy season.

After I got to Cabanatuan Camp we had work detail. Some of us would cut wood to cook rice; some would carry the wood in. Once we moved a big barracks by hand and foot. The barracks didn't have a floor in it. Logs were placed under the barracks and about 60 or 70 guys carried it about three miles.

The Japanese had a big garden. It was about 20 acres. They would have about 100 man carry water from a little river in 5 gallon buckets to water different plants. If they caught you stealing anything out of the garden they would nearly kill you.
I got sent on a detail to Nichols Field close to Manila. It was the worst detail in the world I guess. The Japanese had mine cars to move dirt building laterals for more runways for their airplanes. This detail was all pick and shovel work in rain or shine. Three of us had to get about ten cars a day and push them a long ways by hand. We had to walk about two miles to work and if we were lucky we got one day a month off. A lot of our guys got killed on that job. I was there on that detail about 13 months then they sent some of us to Bilibed prison. Was I ever glad to go! That was a mean job.

A lot of us were loaded on a big freighter after about a week. There were 750 in one hold for 18 days and nights. We had steel floors to sit or stand on. You couldn't lay down at all during that 18 days. We got a little rice twice a day and less than a pint of water a day. A lot of our guys died on that ship. We didn't have any bath rooms at all; just some buckets to use. There was no way to take a bath or clean up during that time, and it was really bad in that heat.

One night, way after dark, we saw the sky all light up behind us. The Americans had sunk a ship behind us and we didn't know if American prisoners were on it or not. We thought we were next because the ships were not marked and the Americans didn't know we were in them.

We finally made it to Japan. After we all got off the ship we found some water to drink. The water was bad and we didn't know it. Nearly all of us got sick and were sick for a long time. I was so sick that when I had to run I would fall then get up and go again.

The Japanese put us in a graphite factory working with the powdered stuff. It sure was a mess to work with.

In 1944, about August, the Japanese moved us to an old barracks to work on a dirt and rock moving detail. There were no doors or heat and by then it was cold. They gave us three blankets and that's all for us to sleep on a wood floor. We had onion soup which was mostly water and very little rice to eat. It wasn't long until the Americans went to bombing Osaka. The bombers would circle over us after they had dropped their bombs. The Japanese would run us up in the hills close by and make us lay face down. They thought we couldn't see the bombers: but we did. At night we could see the fires from the bombing.

The Japanese never did give us much to eat. They would give us the same soup for about three months at a time. We called it "whistle weed" soup. All of the soup was just colored water. We got about half a canteen cup at a time. Sometimes we got coffee made out of burned rice.

The Japanese moved us again the first part of 1945. They moved us up farther north, close to some big boat docks. There were some big warehouses at the docks and they
were unloading thousands of sacks of grain on the docks. We carried the grain into the warehouses and stacked it. Then they brought some railroad boxcars up to the warehouses and we loaded the grain in the box cars. Most of the sacks would weigh about 200 lbs each and it took four guys to lift them up with hay hooks at each corner. They would lift it up and put it on your back behind your neck and you would carry it out to the car. There were about 12 men to a car and we had to load three cars a day. At that time I didn't weigh 125 lbs. They had 2 x 12 planks for us to walk up and put the sacks in the boxcars.

They let us off one day a month. One of those days I layed down on the sacks of grain in the warehouse and went to sleep. The sound of planes woke me up and I ran outside. Everybody was already in their foxholes; everybody but me. I ran up north and jumped in a foxhole. There were four P-51 fighters high up circling and pretty soon they came straight down; one at a time, trying to hit the ships at the docks. They missed the ships and hit our warehouse. A bomb came through the roof and hit right where I had been sleeping. Boy was I lucky that time!

The first part of July 1945, about nine in the morning; my friend and I were upstairs in a shack they had us living in. It was raining slow and easy. I heard some planes and when I looked out at the other docks I saw a fire. In a few minutes the building next to us was on fire and soon our building was on fire. We got out of there with nothing but what we had on.

American planes had dropped phosphorus bombs and burned the whole town down in just a little while. We were just left out in the rain. The next day they put us in an old abandoned brick factory about two miles from where we were and then we got to walk to work every day. All we got to eat at that time was cooked burned wheat.

We had a Japanese put over our kitchen then and he told our other cooks, "if you can get some rice or barley in here we will all eat better". So when the American planes would come over; the Japanese would head for the foxholes and we would head for the warehouse; get some grain and take it to the mess hall. We kept the mess hall in rice and barley and got more to eat.

A few days later, about noon, here came a big American bomber all by himself way up high. We found out later it was a B-29. There was a big factory of some kind by the road where we walked to work and this plane dropped a bomb right in the middle of that building. That building and everything in it was torn all to pieces. Windows were blown out of buildings across the road from the big factory.

After we got back in that evening, the Japanese brought men and women over for our doctor and medics to help. The Japanese were bombed a lot after that. A lot of them that lived were in an awful mess. We kept on working every day for awhile.

We heard about the big bomb and the Japanese were really excited. We didn't really know what was going on at that time. Then one morning we got up to go to work but we
didn't go. We knew something had happened. The next day we didn't work and we heard the war was over.

All the Japanese left and took everything with them. There was nothing to eat at all; but we made it. Somehow we got a radio and we heard on it for all prison camps to put something on the roof so they could spot us from the air.

The Americans told us they would drop us food until they could get to us in about 3 or 4 days. Here came a big bomber flying real low and it dropped 55 gal. barrels of food and clothes. A lot of the can goods bursted but we got it and ate it with our hands. We were in "hog heaven" then. We didn't worry about the clothes; we just ate. We ate all that was dropped. Some food was dropped in muddy rice paddys and we ate it anyway.

We would walk up there to the docks to see if we could see any American ships but we didn't. In about three or four days here came another plane. It was pretty high and it dropped 54 parachutes of K-rations; three cases to each chute. All the chutes opened but one. We got all of them and we ate like pigs. I mean we had it made then we thought. We would get a case of K-rations per man and get after it!

About a week later we heard on the radio that some officers would come and get us on a train. They did. We rode all night on the train and got to Tokyo and there they gave us all new clothes. At first they told us we would fly out of Japan but a typhoon hit and we were put on a ship. We went to Manila, in the Philippine Islands.

At Manila we were put in some barracks. Everybody was wonderful to us. At night they had food cooked and you could go in there and eat anytime you wanted to. We went to some outside picture shows. We hadn't seen a picture show in four years.

I was in Manila about ten days. My brother Robert "Jinks" was in Manila and I didn't know it until I got home. He said he found out where I was the day after I left.

We were supposed to fly out of Manila but we didn't. There was another typhoon so we were put on another boat. We were in the typhoon for two or three days on the way to San Francisco. They took us to Letterman General Hospital when we arrived at San Francisco.

I stayed at the hospital only at night. I went to see lots of things out there: Alcatraz Prison and other interesting places. I gained about a pound a day. I guess it didn't hurt me, eating like that. I was there about a week.

Home Again
We were put on a train in California and went to Bruns Hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We got there about ten o'clock the next night. I never had called home because my folks lived out in the country and didn't have a phone. The next day I called my aunt, Mrs. Charlie (Lefa) Roach, at St. Vrain, New Mexico. She had a store there. Uncle Charlie and Aunt Lefa went out to Field to tell my folks when I would come home.

I went home on a Greyhound bus and my folks met me at St. Vrain that night. We had a great visit at St. Vrain and later went out to the home place, about fifteen miles north of St. Vrain. It was sure good to get home.

I got home about a week before Halloween. On Halloween I went to a carnival they had at Field. I visited with people I hadn't seen in a long time. It was great to be back and see all of those people again.

When I got home, cars were high and I didn't buy one then. Some of the guys that got back when I did bought a new car and spent the rest of their money for whiskey. They were broke in 90 days. Cars back then cost about $2,800 on the black market and that was a lot of money then. I met Jim Littlejohn and he wanted to sell his Harley Davidson cycle. I always wanted one so I bought it. My brother, Odis, had a cycle and we rode around a lot together.

One Sunday I was over at Melrose, New Mexico riding around and I saw another brother, Roy, over there and he had two good looking girls with him. They were the Edmonston twins: Eunice "Blondie" and Una "Colie". Roy was with Blondie. That was OK with me. I saw right away that Colie was my kind of a girl friend. A few days later Colie had a softball game at Ranchvale, N. Mex. I wanted to see it! I just got on my cycle and went over to watch it. After the game, I asked Colie if she wanted to go to Clovis.

She did and we went on my cycle and took in the city of Clovis, New Mexico! We really had a good time on the cycle. I met her folks, Raymond and Mary Edmonston, when I took her home. Raymond was real interested in hearing a little about my army days. He liked to talk about that.

I bought a service station and cafe in Clovis and ran them for a few years. I finally got discharged March 29th, 1946. I still ran the service station and Roy and Harold Kilmer helped me some with it. I sure didn't get rich in that station.

Colie and I decided to get married and on May 12, 1946, at a little church at Field, Jessie Allen married us. We had a double wedding with Roy and Blondie and went on a trip for about a week. We had a real good time.

My brother Roy was pastor of the little church at St. Vrain. Colie and I went there nearly every Sunday for about two years after we were married.
I sold the station and worked for the AT&SF Railroad for a while. I did carpenter work for awhile and a little later got a chance to go to work at the Clovis Air Base. I worked there for twenty six years and retired in April of 1978.

Colie and I had two wonderful boys, Darryl and Gerryl. They finished High School in Melrose, N. Mex. At that time we lived close to Grier, N. Mex. We had 160 acres with a new house on the place. We liked it fine. It was a good place to raise two boys.

The boys got out of school and they got married. Darryl married Vicky Booth and they have two girls: Carrie and Kelli. Gerryl married Deanna Bright and they have two boys: Wesley and Lance.

Every since I got back from the prison camp we enjoy going to the mountains somewhere each year. We all love them in the summer. We go to Tennessee where my folks came from and Branson, Missouri. We have been lucky to have seen a lot of this country.

We moved back to Clovis in 1975 so we could go a lot more and not have any stock to see after. I retired from the Air Base in 1978 and we joined the Good Sam's Camper Club. In 1988, Arline and Ray Burns, Colie's sister and brother-in-law; Colie and I went to Canada in Ray and Arline's motor home. We were gone 28 days, saw beautiful country, and had a wonderful time. We go to different places all over the country and meet a lot of people in the different parks and mountains. In closing let me say, "We like to go and see the country and meet people."

Edited by Harold Kilmer
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