

Yesteryears: A veteran's journey, Part 1: Discarded scrapbook had tales to tell

BY DAVID A. MAURER Oct 3, 2016

First of a three-part series.

The excited words coming through the telephone receiver expressed the depth of emotions that can result when a lost family heirloom finds its way back home.

As soon as The Daily Progress opened for business this past Monday morning, Betty Jo Dominick, the daughter of the late Hayne W. Dominick, placed a call to the paper's newsroom. She was responding to the Yesteryears column that had run the previous day.

The story was about a discarded scrapbook that contained numerous items having to do with her father's experiences during World War II. This included surviving the infamous Bataan Death March and spending subsequent years as a prisoner of the Japanese.

Rick and Martha Aydelette had found the album in a trash bin during a visit to a consignment shop in Greensboro, North Carolina. After learning via the internet that Dominick had been a successful businessman and community leader in Charlottesville, the couple had reached out to the newspaper in an effort to find a relative and give him or her the scrapbook.

The numerous telephone calls and emails in response to the search are a testament to the high regard in which many people still hold Dominick and his family.

"I am incredibly thankful and mystified by this find," Dominick said after learning about the scrapbook, which contains photographs and items that had belonged to her father. "Another scrapbook was mailed to me in the past few years that had been in an attic in South Carolina.

"It made me aware of articles from a Martinsville newspaper in 1945 that I had never read. My father wasn't keen on telling his daughter the gruesome details of the march, so he referred me to books.

"I wrote my junior year term paper on Bataan and, while growing up, read many interviews in our local papers. For years, my father dictated his account to my mother, but after her early death in 1986, the tapes were lost. That would be a miracle to have those surface."

Dominick also remarked about the dramatic contrast between her father's "chilling tone" in the 1945 interviews and the "watered-down" version he gave her as a young girl. He had been back in his hometown of Martinsville for just three weeks when he sat down with newspaper reporter Kay Thompson and related what he had gone through during his 1,216 days as a POW.

The extensive interviews resulted in an extraordinary 12-part series in the Martinsville newspaper. These yellowed-with-age stories are contained in the found scrapbook.

As many direct-combat veterans learn, the human brain has a remarkable capacity for burying difficult memories. Dominick's accounts are so powerful, in part, because they were fresh in his mind when he sat down with the journalist.

The stories are told in Dominick's voice, which gives his words an almost surreal immediacy. The series started on Nov. 21, 1945, and opens with him returning home from Japan on a Navy transport ship.

For the first 12 days of the ocean voyage, the American sailors manning the ship had left the returning POWs to their thoughts. Then an apologetic seaman approached Dominick, and asked him if he would mind telling him about his experiences as a POW.

The returning Army sergeant told the sailor about the same thing he would later tell Thompson. He was willing to relate his story only to let people know what his fallen buddies had gone through.

Dominick enlisted in the Army on June 16, 1941, and became an armorer in the Army Air Corps. He arrived in the Philippines with the 34th Pursuit Squadron on Nov. 21, 1941.

Although everyone was talking about the possibility of war, Dominick said he never imagined that the Japanese would attack the United States. In fact, he and the guys in his unit thought the war would be against Germany, and they were disappointed that they had been moved far from where the action would be.

On Dec. 5, 1941, Dominick's commanding officer told them that war could be expected with Japan within the next few days. After the officer left, Dominick and his friends laughed and joked about the dire warning.

"What was he trying to do, scare us?" Dominick had asked rhetorically. "Why, every man in the group knew the Japanese weren't crazy enough to attack America."

Next: Fighting for survival.

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David A. Maurer

Yesteryears: A veteran's journey, Part 2: Six days of marching into horror

BY DAVID A. MAURER Oct 8, 2016

Second of three parts.

The wailing alert that sent Sgt. Hayne Dominick running to man a gun emplacement came at 6 a.m. Dec. 8, 1941.

Because the Philippines are 18 hours ahead of Hawaiian time, word had just reached him that the Japanese were attacking American ships and bases at Pearl Harbor. Two days later, the Japanese bombed Del Carmen, where Dominick was stationed with the Army's 34th Pursuit Squadron.

Although Dominick had been trained to arm and maintain airplanes, he soon was fighting as an infantryman. With antiaircraft ability consisting of just 20 small-caliber machine guns, the Japanese pilots had little to fear as they bombed and strafed the beleaguered Americans.

The lack of modern aircraft capable of opposing the high-flying Japanese bombers caused some of the American fighter pilots to shed tears of frustration. Nonetheless, they continued to fight valiantly and managed to sink a number of enemy transport ships off the coast of Luzon, as well as the battleship Haruna.

A blow to the Americans' high morale came on Christmas Day, when they were ordered to retreat 70 miles to the eastern side of the Bataan peninsula. By then, the Japanese had landed about 200,000 troops and were continuing the buildup. Opposing them were fewer than 10,000 Americans and about 75,000 Filipino soldiers.

What kept the morale of the scrappy underdogs high were repeated messages that help was on the way. In early January 1942, Dominick and the other 217 enlisted men in his unit were integrated into the 71st Infantry Division of the Filipino Army.

The division, which was led by American officers, was ordered to Agaloma Bay. Its job was to oppose an expected landing of Japanese infantry, and this threat kept the men in their fighting positions around the clock.

The landing came at 3:30 a.m. Jan. 23. Dominick and the others fired blindly into the "utter darkness" as an estimated 500 Japanese charged ashore.

The landing was beaten back during fierce fighting. As the first light of morning began illuminating the beach, hundreds of Japanese corpses were seen turning in the surf and strewn along the shoreline. For 14 days and nights, the Japanese continued throwing thousands of men against the beleaguered defenders.

Periodically, a few Japanese would manage to break through the line of defense, but they were quickly dispatched in hand-to-hand fighting. Despite staggering odds, each attack was repulsed.

This heroic stand is especially impressive because of the poor equipment and ammunition the defenders had. During the height of the battle, Dominick said, only two hand grenades out of a box of 48 exploded when thrown.

American and Filipino losses were heavy, but Japanese losses were much higher. It was imperative for the Japanese to take the Philippines, but the costly butcher bill at Agaloma Bay convinced them to make inroads elsewhere.

There was plenty of fight left in Dominick, but when he came down with malaria on April 3, it knocked him off his feet. When his temperature reached 106.2 degrees, he was sent back to a field hospital.

The need to keep the ever-thinning defenses manned was so acute that Dominick returned to his outfit after four days. He was still sick, but so were many others.

The gutsy Virginian was preparing to return to the front lines on April 9, 1942, when Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright, the commander of all American and Filipino forces, surrendered to the Japanese. A few weeks after his return to the U.S. in late 1945, Dominick said the following about that terrible day.

"The thought of surrender hadn't been even remotely a part of our thinking," the Martinsville native told newspaper reporter Kay Thompson. "No one had thought what to expect, or what it would mean.

"We were too stunned, even after the capitulation, to realize what had happened to us. I am certain that if any man on Bataan had realized what was in store for him, he would never have laid down his arms. I wouldn't have.

"The Japanese had assured Wainwright that the soldiers in his command would be well treated. It was one of the most egregious lies told during that costly conflict. As soon as the Japanese had corralled the defenseless men into groups, they stripped them of everything but their shirts, pants and boots. From that point on, with few exceptions, the Japanese set aside any semblance of human decency.

For the next six days, the prisoners were marched to a railhead at San Fernando, about 65 miles away. During the trek, the Japanese wrote in blood one of the most disgraceful entries in their national history.

What became known as the Bataan Death March has been called one of the worst atrocities in modern warfare. Dominick was never able to fully describe the horrors he witnessed and endured along the torturous route.

When a Japanese soldier demanded from Dominick a watch he didn't have, the enraged man was about to kill him with a sword. Only a yell from a nearby Japanese officer kept the man from killing Dominick on the spot.

During the march, the Japanese shot or bayoneted any POW who fell, couldn't keep up or tried to get a drink of water from a puddle or spring along the way. Some prisoners were beheaded for sport, and others were summarily executed as examples to the others.

It isn't known how many people the Japanese killed during the march. The estimate runs between 7,000 and 10,000 people.

As terrible as the march was, the agony was just beginning.

Next: Life as a POW.

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http://www.dailyprogress.com/lifestyles/yesteryears-a-veteran-s-journey-part-gnawing-hunger-toil-diseases/article_ee5bb692-9189-11e6-b8a7-370879ce5912.html

Yesteryears: A veteran's journey, Part 3: Gnawing hunger, toil, diseases -- and hope

BY DAVID A. MAURER Oct 15, 2016

Last in a three-part series.

The horrors of the Bataan Death March were magnified by the fact that nearly all the POWs were sick with malaria, dysentery or both.

By the time Sgt. Hayne W. Dominick reached the barbed-wire enclosure at Camp O'Donnell on April 20, 1942, he was dizzy with exhaustion. He also was starving to death, and the lack of water was torturous.

When the surviving Americans arrived at the camp, there was only one water tap. Dangerously dehydrated, they had to stand in line for hours to get one canteen of water.

One day, after inching along in the water line for what seemed like an eternity, Dominick was the 10th man from the faucet when the Japanese cut the water off. His fellow soldiers shared their water with him.

Once at the camp, the POWs started receiving sparse rations of rice and beans. But most of the men couldn't eat the beans, because it made their diarrhea and dysentery worse.

There was no place for the men to even wash their hands, much less their filthy clothing. Dominick said a hurried trip to one of the slit trenches used as latrines was a "painful, nauseating experience."

During the first weeks in the camp, 50 to 75 Americans were dying every day. Although Dominick was sick and weak, he helped bury at least 100 men. The dead were buried in graves just three feet deep, because if they went deeper, the graves would fill with water.

The conditions in the camp were so deplorable that the Japanese wouldn't enter it. When Dominick was sent to a new camp at nearby Cabanatuan on June 1, 1942, he hoped for better conditions.

The new camp was as awful as the first. For three months, Dominick helped bury 30 to 50 soldiers a day. He estimated that in total he helped bury at least 2,700 men.

When the Martinsville man became ill with cerebral malaria, it seemed certain he would end up in the cemetery outside camp. The Japanese provided no medical care or supplies, and Dominick slipped into delirium and then unconsciousness.

Only the care from an American doctor, and a small supply of quinine he had hidden from the Japanese, saved Dominick's life. He never fully recovered, and this illness led to his coming down with what was diagnosed as beriberi of the cardiac in April 1943.

For months, the Virginian fought for his life, and he somehow managed to survive. After being returned to a work detail, he was almost beaten to death by a guard who gave him an order in Japanese he didn't understand.

When two POWs escaped from another work detail, the Japanese executed 10 Americans in reprisal. One of the doomed men had a brother in camp, and the Japanese forced him to watch the killing of his sibling. The surviving brother later told Dominick what happened.

"He told me how Ross and the nine other boys came to attention before the Japanese firing squad, saluted and shouted with unwavering voices in ringing unison: 'God bless America,'" Dominick related years later. "He said he heard Ross call to him: 'Take it easy, Jack. I'll be all right. And take care of Mother.' As he told me the story from a seared soul, Jack Betts said simply, 'I was so choked up, Dominick, I couldn't even answer him.'"

In June 1944, Dominick was packed with other Americans into a railroad boxcar that carried them to Manila. Once there, he and about 1,000 other POWs were thrown into the hold of a cargo ship bound for Japan.

Conditions in the fetid, sweltering hold were even worse than the squalid POW camps. Periodically, a few dozen POWs were allowed topside for a breathing spell, and to use the crude latrine attached to the ship's railing.

The prisoners were given two canteen cups of rice and two cups of water a day. When Dominick became a POW, he weighed about 160 pounds. When he went into the hold, he weighed 120 pounds, but was down to 110 pounds by the time the ship reached Japan.

The ordeal had lasted 62 days and nights. Once on the mainland of Japan, the men were forced to work in a coal mine.

The brutality of the Japanese didn't lessen, and, by October, the POWs were having to deal with the cold. Dominick later said the cold turned out to be something of a blessing, because most of the ill effects of malaria disappeared.

By reading between the lines of stolen Japanese newspapers, the POWs were learning that Japan was nearing defeat. Starting in July 1945, they began hearing the thumping from distant bombing raids.

The camp Dominick was in was just 30 miles from Hiroshima. Because it was shielded by terrain, he didn't know that the city had been obliterated on Aug. 6, 1945, by an atomic bomb.

The effect of that bomb, and one other dropped on Nagasaki three days later, ended the war. On Aug. 22, three American bombers flying just above the treetops dropped food, clothing, medical supplies and other necessities to their countrymen below.

One of the former POWs made an American flag, and it was raised above the camp after the Japanese flag was torn down. Airdrops of supplies continued until Sept. 13, when a train arrived to take the Americans to a seaport town for evacuation back home.

After 1,216 days as a POW of the Japanese, the war was over for Dominick. His lasting act of devotion to those who had suffered and died at his side was to bear witness to the countless atrocities they had endured.

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