

Moment of Valor *By Sonny Hays-Eberts*

I received a phone call from Bill Willie encouraging me to call his brother Robert and talk to him about another brother, Eugene, who was involved in the defense of the Philippines at the start of World War II. Between that time and the time that we met, I was struck by the similarity of the family name and Willys, the name of the famed, durable workhorse jeep of the same war. The resemblance would be more than passing, as I discovered the Willie family also served our country with distinction and honor over many years. While this story focuses on the trials of Eugene, it must also mention the ultimate sacrifice of Ila, who fell under mortar fire in the far-away land of Korea, the uncles who served in WWI, and all six of the brothers who served and the sons who followed in their footsteps of service. Not only did the men of the Willie family contribute to the war effort, but also the sisters served as "Rosie the Riveter" welders to help build ships.

However, the space and theme of the column dictate that we focus on Eugene, whose story follows, based on the narrative he recorded for his family.

Eugene Willie's story:

When I heard we were going to the Philippines I was really happy. I thought, "Boy, now I won't be in combat, because Germany is the only one we will be fighting." I was surely fooled on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese bombed Clark Field. I was in the mess hall when the raid started and all I could think of was getting to my barracks and getting my automatic weapon. It was the closest one to the airfield. I ran down and got my weapon and started back to where the rest of the men were. As I ran I could see dust kicking up all around me. I didn't realize what it was until the raid was over and then I knew it was a Jap fighter plane firing at me. Then I got sick and vomited because the bullets were only three or four inches from my feet. I am telling this as a preliminary leading up to what happened. Two days later they came back to bomb and strafe Clark Field again. At that time we were in the field camouflaged in the jungle about a mile from the airfield. It was overcast that day with a ceiling of about 500 feet and when they dropped below the clouds they had overshot the airfield. In order to gain altitude they jettisoned their bombs and dropped them right on us. When I saw them coming I dropped flat on the ground behind a tree that had about an eighteen-inch trunk. I had a buddy standing a quarter of the way around the tree from me leaning against the tree and when they dropped their bombs he got filled with shrapnel from head to toe and I didn't even get touched!

After the raid was over a captain yelled, "Let's get some shovels and get this covered up." I nearly went berserk when I had to cover Dick Guest's nephew's brains up. I lost eight buddies that day. I went over to pull one man out from one of those bamboo shacks he was under and when I grabbed his feet to pull him out he looked like a dirty dish rag. He was blown in two in the middle and all that was holding his body together was a piece of flesh about the size of my finger. I got his body out and you couldn't tell if it was even a human. I finally looked in his billfold because that was the only way you could identify who it was. He was another good buddy by the name of English.

After that we retreated to Bataan and I got malaria and was in the hospital for five days with the Japanese bombing within 300 yards of the hospital. After I got out the Japanese broke through our line and we retreated to Mariveles and lined up our trucks up on the runway bumper to bumper and our men set fire to all of them by soaking them with gasoline. We then started back up to the front lines to our buddies that were surrounded there. When we started back up the road there was a Marine MP standing guard at the docks with a loaded gun and he asked us where we were going. We told him "Back to the front, to find our outfit," and he said "No, you are not." We just kept walking toward the front and he slapped a shell in the chamber and told us, "I have orders to see that you get on that boat for Corregidor." On the way the Japanese were firing at the boat and some of the shells came within fifty feet of the boat.

When we got to Corregidor it was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire as the Japanese started firing on us from Bataan as our troops on Bataan had surrendered. We went twenty-seven days and nights under a continuous artillery barrage. I was with "D Battery" which had fourteen-inch guns. While I was there I had another malaria attack and because the artillery was too heavy they put me down in the powder room. While I was down there the Japanese were firing on our gun battery and chunks of concrete were falling down on me but I was so sick I wasn't even scared. The next day they got me to the hospital in Malinta tunnel and I was there until the day Wainwright surrendered. I had just been discharged from the hospital that morning and went to Supply to check out my automatic rifle and they wouldn't give it to me. I asked them why and they told me they didn't know, that it was ordered from the big brass. I started back down the tunnel and I saw Wainwright and an aide walking toward the entrance of the tunnel with his aide carrying a bamboo pole with a white flag on the end of it. Nosey me, I thought, "I am going to find out what is going on," and so I followed them out of the tunnel. They walked out about fifty feet from the entrance and the aide raised the pole and started waving it. That is when I knew we were surrendering.

That is when hell started for the POW's. Pretty soon the Japanese soldiers came marching through the tunnel looking us prisoners over. They were really brutal as they had lost 4,000 men before they even set foot on the island.

After the surrender they put us in a seaplane hangar built of sheet metal, right next to the bay, 130 degrees inside. We couldn't stay inside so we slept and ate on the beach. We stayed on the island for about a month and ate what food we could steal as they never gave us a bite of food themselves all the time. We nearly starved to death there.

They put us on landing barges and took us to Manila to Bilibid Prison which had been a Philippine Federal Prison before the war. They kept us there for four days and then put us on a train to Cabanatuan Prison Camp, about a hundred miles from Manila. When we got there I had another malaria attack plus I had dysentery. They then told our officers to organize a work detail. The officer in my barracks told me I had to go on the detail. I said, "No way," and he got all shook up and said if I refused they would shoot us all. I told him that they would just have to shoot you all because I am not going. Nothing happened.

I was so sick with malaria and dysentery that they finally put me in the so-called Japanese hospital across the road from the main camp. It was a room about twenty feet square with nothing but the bare floor and one army blanket to sleep on. There was no medicine and only cooked sweet potato tops to eat. I got down to where I weighed only 85 pounds and was so weak that if I stepped off a six-inch step I would fall flat on my face and it would take me thirty minutes to get back on my feet. If it hadn't been for two buddies of mine, Bandoni and Cota, stealing food and bringing it to me I would have died right there. In fact when we go to bed at night I would hear the Corpsmen say to each other, "Well, Willie won't be with us in the morning." But I would wake up and go to shake the guy sleeping next to me he would be cold and stiff as a board. That happened a number of times when I was in the hospital.

One day the Japanese sent the American doctors to check the patients' health and there was a Marine doctor by the last name of Williams that checked me over and told me I was well enough to go back over to the main camp. I begged him to let me stay in the hospital and he agreed to let me stay until they came back again to check us over. About two weeks later they came back and he told me I was well enough to go back to the main camp. I told him I couldn't go back as I couldn't eat that rice and he said, "Dammit, you will have to eat it or die because you are going back to the main camp." I was so mad at him that if I hadn't been so weak I think I would have killed him. However, God knew what He was

doing and on reflection I thank God for Him doing what He did. I realized afterwards that if I hadn't gone back to the main camp I would have died in that hospital as I would have given up. God created that anger in me in order to make me want to fight again. So you see God works in wondrous ways to accomplish what He wants to do. I don't know if that doctor made it back home or not but I thank God for sending him across my path.

It is surely strange that God would spare my life when I was not even following Him and waited to convict me until I started going back to church. The first sermon the minister gave hit me about how good He has been to me and I can't even remember what the sermon was about. All I was doing was reliving my whole life over again. While the sermon was going on it hit me like a bolt of lightning of His goodness to me. I said, OK God, I see what You did for me a sinner, now it is time for me to do something for You. That is what I have tried to do since, though at times I fall short as we all do.

After this, October 8, 1942, they loaded us on the prison ship *Oroyoko Maru* to take us to Manchuria. They tried to force us all to go down the hold and they were going to batten down the hatches so we would all be packed in like sardines and a lot of us refused to go down and they threatened to shoot us, but we stood our ground. The boat was so crowded that I didn't lie down to sleep for eighteen days but sat on a winch the whole time. On the eighth of October, about ten thirty in the morning, I was standing on deck about midship when an American submarine threw two torpedoes at us. The first one missed the bow about a foot. I thought we had surely had it then. There were thirty-one water-tight compartments on the ship and eleven of them filled before they could get them closed. We never did abandon ship. When we arrived at Taiwan they took us off the boat and put us on the decks stark naked and turned the fire hoses on us in front of 10,000 gaping Chinese men and women. The water was cold but it felt good to get a bath even with ice water!

We arrived in Seoul, Korea, on November 11, 1942 in 25 below zero weather. All I had on was a pair of pants and a blue chambray shirt and one shoe. I couldn't wear the other shoe because I had a bad sore on one foot. They sat us down beside the tracks for about an hour and a half and then put us on the train to Manchuria. After we arrived in Manchuria 202 men died in the first two months. The ground was frozen four feet deep and we couldn't bury them so the Japs stored the bodies in an old cavalry barn. The Japanese and American doctor went in and performed autopsies on them and found that everyone had died of starvation. You can hardly live on Chinese cabbage and barley soup especially if there is very few grains of barley in it.

After we were there a few months I went to bed one night with an attack of malaria and a high fever. When I woke up the next morning I was blind as a bat in both eyes and didn't see for seventeen days. When I regained my sight I could only see out of one eye because the Japanese had treated my eyes with Mercurochrome, which scarred the cornea.

In October of 1944 the Americans sent a flight of bombers to bomb some factories where we were at Mukden. I saw them coming and they were coming right straight toward the prison camp. At about the angle that they would drop their bombs they made a right turn and started for an ammunition factory, but one of the planes pulled out of formation to the left and didn't turn. At that time he let his bombs go and they fell right in the camp killing nineteen men. They dropped only two bombs in the camp. Five hundred pounders. One of them landed within four feet of my feet. I didn't get a scratch but had men killed all around me, one of whom was my friend from Virginia by the name of Sutton.

I could see all this happen and never have any feeling at all. I thought to myself, "God will I be this way when I get home?" It really bothered me, in fact it scared me, but thank God it didn't last when I went back home.

On December 7, 1944, the Americans sent a flight of a hundred bombers to bomb the city again. This time they didn't hit our camp but we saw quite an air show with thirty-eight Japanese planes shot down and not a loss of any of our planes.

On August 15, 1945 the Americans dropped a rescue team to free us. The Japanese captured them and brought them in to the camp with all their equipment and disarmed. We didn't know what to think of it as they weren't mistreating them as they would have mistreated us prisoners. We sneaked over and peeked in the window of the Japanese headquarters and saw the captain of the rescue team with his 45 strapped on his hips again. That is when we thought the war was over but we didn't know until the 20th and the captain came over to our side and told us it was over. He asked us not to make any demonstration. We didn't, but just turned and walked away without even a "Hooray". I don't think we could believe it after three and one-half years of captivity.

On September 15, 1945, we left Manchuria by train for Seoul, Korea. As we were waiting to depart the Russians had a lot of Korean women and children waiting to board another train. We were waiting in the station to board the train and the Russians gave orders to the women and children to board another train on the siding. They made a rush to get on the train, in fact it was a stampede. There was a woman with a little girl

about two years old and the mob separated her from her mother and took the mother right along with them and left the little girl standing alone on the top landing crying. I can still see that mother trying to claw her way over the heads of the mob to get back up to her little girl. A Russian soldier grabbed the woman and put her on the train. I can still see that little girl standing all alone crying her heart out. I wonder what ever happened to her.

We got off the train at Seoul, Korea, and were put on a US Liberty ship *USS Coburn* for Okinawa. On the way to Okinawa we ran into a typhoon when we were about fifty miles from port when they ordered us to pull back out to sea to ride it out as the harbor was too shallow and they were afraid the ship would get beached. After about two days we got orders to turn around and proceed back to harbor. I was standing on the fantail watching the wake of the propellers and thought I would just go down and shave and then go eat breakfast. I had just started for the hold back of the bridge when I heard them call, "Mine, starboard side!" I looked back and saw the mine about 75 feet away from the ship on the starboard side. The next thing I knew we had hit it! When it hit it blew a hole 14 feet high and 27 feet long in the engine room. All but two of the ten men in the engine room got out alive. The ship sank about four feet instantly. The men were pouring out of the holds en masse; I knew I couldn't get down to get my life preserver. The thought went through my mind, "God, You have let me come through all of that and is this the way it is going to end for me?" Thank God, He spared me. I wish He had spared all of those who were killed.
- Eugene Willie

Not only should the members of the Willie Family be proud of those who now reside in Arlington National and Santa Fe Memorial Cemeteries, we all should. Eugene passed away five years ago. I hope the retelling of his story helps to keep it alive; it does not deserve to be lost. I find it a compelling and inspiring story of how one man lost his humanity in the horror of one of the most inhumane locations (Japanese POW camps) in an inhumane situation (war) and found it again. It is one of the millions of stories of war, and the sheer number of such stories does not diminish their power, but rather magnifies it.
- Sonny Hays-Eberts

Ft. Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, TX is one of the largest national cemeteries in the U.S. There are over 110,000 graves there making it the fourth largest national cemetery behind Long Island National Cemetery, Calverton National Cemetery, NY and of course Arlington. It is not very far from Brooke Army Medical Center where they treat many of the casualties from Iraq & Afghanistan.

- Patrice Broome