

Thomas Rowland

Service History of Cohen Thomas Rowland (Tom) as told to John N. Hackney, Jr. in June of 2001 during a visit to his home in Holly Springs, N.C. along with Mills Stevens of Wendell and Thames Lee of Raleigh. All three are cousins of my wife's father – Thomas F. Bridgers – a kinship through his Grandmother Barbara Rowland Bridgers (Mrs. James P.) (Cohen) Thomas Rowland Relates:

When I graduated from High School in June of 1941, there was no opportunity for this farm boy to go to college. My best friend and I decided to join the Army. The recruiter in Raleigh asked us where we would like to go to take basic training. Having never traveled far from Wake County, we asked him what were the most distant training camps we could choose. He said these were Schofield Barracks on Oahu, Hawaii, or Fort Stotsenberg, near Clark Field on Luzon, Philippines Islands. Having never heard of either place, we asked which one was most distant. Of course, that was Fort Stotsenberg, P.I. So we chose to go there for our basic training. We arrived there, some thirteen thousand miles from home in July of 1941, and immediately started our seventeen-week basic training program to become infantry soldiers. Upon completion of this training, we were assigned to an infantry weapons company stationed in Manila, P. I. The Japanese attack on Manila 7 December 1941 came as quite a surprise to us as newly minted infantry soldiers. When Japanese ships showed up at Linguayan Gulf on North western Luzon, General Douglas MacArthur who was at the time in the service of the Philippine Government training the Philippine army took charge of all U. S Army and Philippine Army troops and went into a defense plan set up years earlier to pull all U. S. forces into a line at the end of the Bataan Peninsular near the town of Angeles to try to hold out until reinforcement could arrive. Our air corp. was mainly based at Clark Field just five miles northwest of Angeles and the Mariveles mountains protected the Northern flank of Bataan and Manila Bay the Southern flank with the Navy base at Subic Bay just over the mountains to the west and the Fortified Island of Corrigedor at the mouth of Manila Bay to the southwest with its Flanker islands of Caballo and El Fraile and Fort Drum. When the Japs arrived from the north on their way to Manila, the fighting started along our holding line. Over the next three months we would fight until overrun and then back up to another holding line. This was done about five times. Help never arrived and by April our food and ammo had been used up and we were backed into a corner of Bataan near the fishing village of Marveilles on Manila Bay opposite Corrigedor, some thirty five miles west through the Bataan jungle from Angeles. Most of us were sick and hungry, when our leaders were forced to surrender. In April 1942 Corrigedor was the only land still held by the U.S. and the Philippine armies. The Japanese herded us together and we began the thirty-five mile march back through the Bataan jungle to Angeles. At fifteen degrees north latitude, the temperature varied between eighty-five and a hundred degrees in the jungle. The first thing the Japanese had us do was to throw away our hats. We were not allowed to stop to rest or get a drink of water. Men that dropped out weak or sick were simply bayoneted by the Japanese and left in the roadside ditches. Philippino peasants that tried to help were run off. I learned later that they did bury the dead men along the route. Those of us that survived the march were put on rail cars of the narrow gauge Railroad that ran north from Manila to the Luang on the North Coast and taken to Caabanatuan prison camp on the north end of the Pampanga Plains in Central Luzon. Conditions there were very poor, and we were fed only a small amount of rice daily.

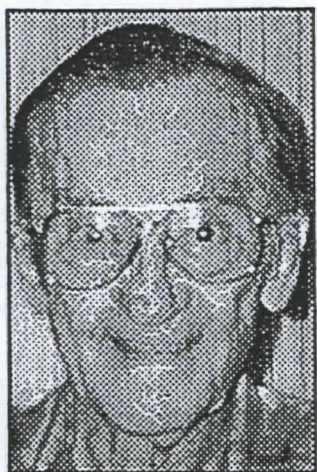
When the Japanese asked me what my job had been in the U.S. Army, I did not dare tell them I had been a machine gunner, so I told them I was a truck driver. For the next year, I drove a Japanese truck hauling supplies from Manila to our prison camp. Sometime in mid 1943, the Japanese began shipping able-bodied POW's back to Japan to work in their coal mines. This was done in the empty cargo holds of Japanese merchant ships that brought supplies to their Army through Manila Harbor and were returning to Japan empty. The ships were not marked as carrying U.S. POW's, and I learned later that U.S. Submarines sank several on the trip back to Japan. My turn to be shipped to Japan came in early 1944. The conditions in a hot merchant ship cargo hold were terrible and some of our POW's died on the way. When we got to Japan, a group of us were sent to a Japanese POW camp next to a coal mine on the island of Kyushu, near Hondo, across the Sea of Japan about 30 miles East of Nagasaki. We were put to work on the all night shift in the mine, and had a quota of coal we had to meet. The food was a bit better than we got in the Philippines, but no one was able to keep from losing weight. As time passed, we noticed air raid activity in our area of Southwest Japan, which encouraged us to think that American forces were getting closer. Time passed slowly. One morning in early August of 1945, our night shift had just ended, and we came out into the early morning sun's brightness to warm up after being down in the cold coal mine all night. Suddenly the air raid siren sounded, and we could see two contrails high overhead, moving across the Sea of Japan westward toward the city of Nagasaki. As we continued to watch, we saw to the West the brightest light we had ever seen. No one knew what it was but many seconds later we were knocked to the ground by a shock wave. Before we could rise again we were knocked down again as the shock wave bounced off the mountain behind us. We did not know it at the time but we had witnessed the explosion of the second atomic bomb over Nagasaki. Two days later the Japanese prison guards disappeared. With no knowledge of what was happening, we decided if help was on its way, it would land first at Yokohama/Tokyo, some 900 hundred miles Northeast of where we were located. We walked to the nearest Japanese police station, and asked for train passage to Tokyo. We were put on the train to ride all day, and would spend the night in another police station along the way. After 3 days of travel, we arrived in Tokyo. There we found teams of the U. S. Army's Recovered Personnel Division waiting to process us out. We could not believe the treatment we got from the arriving U.S. Army. After being medically examined and outfitted with new Army equipment, we were put aboard ships to be transported back to the U.S.A. After recovering from this ordeal, I decided to re-enlist in the Army, and served out my 30 years, before retiring back to the farm in Wake County. In my later service, I never told of my P.O.W. experiences until during the Korean War. My outfit was about to ship overseas and I had been told I would not have to do this again, so I was transferred to another stateside outfit. I am very proud of my service to my country but have never told my story anywhere before.

Over lunch that day in June of 2001, Mills Stevens, Thames Lee, and John N. Hackney, Jr, heard Tom Rowland's tale of his WW II experiences.

DEATH NOTICES

Cohen Thomas Rowland

FUQUAY-VARINA - Cohen Thomas Rowland, 80 years old, passed away Thursday, July 3, 2003.



He served in WWII and was one of the Battling Bastards of Bataan. He survived the Bataan Death March and was a POW for 3 1/2 years. He was awarded three Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star among many other medals. He retired from the Military in 1963 and he was honored and proud to serve his country.

He is preceded in death by brothers, Bennett and Bill.

Survived by his wife, Alice of Fuquay-Varina. He had three daughters, Candy Brookbank of Greenville, NC, Rhonda Larson of Greenville, SC, Terri Wilkenson of Raleigh; three sons, Bruce Rowland of Brentwood, TN, Rick Rowland of Angier, Kyle Rowland of Birmingham, AL, and their spouses; thirteen grandchildren; and three great grandchildren; three sisters, Eva Doris (Edie) Rowland of Fuquay-Varina, Helen Spivey of Willow Spring, Shirley Ransdell of Garner.

Visitation will be held at Montlawn Funeral Home Monday, July 7, 2003 from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and graveside service will follow at 1 p.m.

Officiating will be Tom Westfall of New Hope Presbyterian Church.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to New Hope Presbyterian Church PO Box 98 Willow Spring, NC 27592.

Thames L. Lee
2223 Wheeler Rd.
Raleigh, NC 27607-6646

June 11, 2001

Dear John,

I deeply appreciate the pictures. They are real good pictures and when I look at them I can see a lot of history that goes back beyond a lifetime. I treasure those pictures, John and again thanks.

Yes the day we spent touring the area or neighborhood where uncle Furman grew up, and where I spent my youth as well as Tom and Mills spent their youth, the memories of those days gone by were good and sweet.

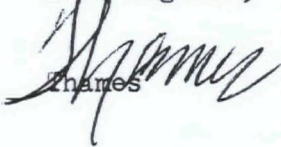
I can speak for Mills and Tom in saying that we were honored with having you come up and we could show you around. It was a good day, indeed.

I was especially happy to have Tom with us and he seemed pleased to open up as much as he did about his days in the Japanese prison camp. He is a pretty strong person.

One day we will get together again and, yes, eat bar-b-cue. When the weather is real hot I will have to stay in as I cannot take the heat any more, but will catch some cool weather and come over to Wilson.

We enjoyed your vist, come back again anytime, give my love to Ann.

Best regards,


Thames