A Fugitive Behind Japanese Lines

Private Leon Beck on Bataan 1941-1945

GORDON BROWNE

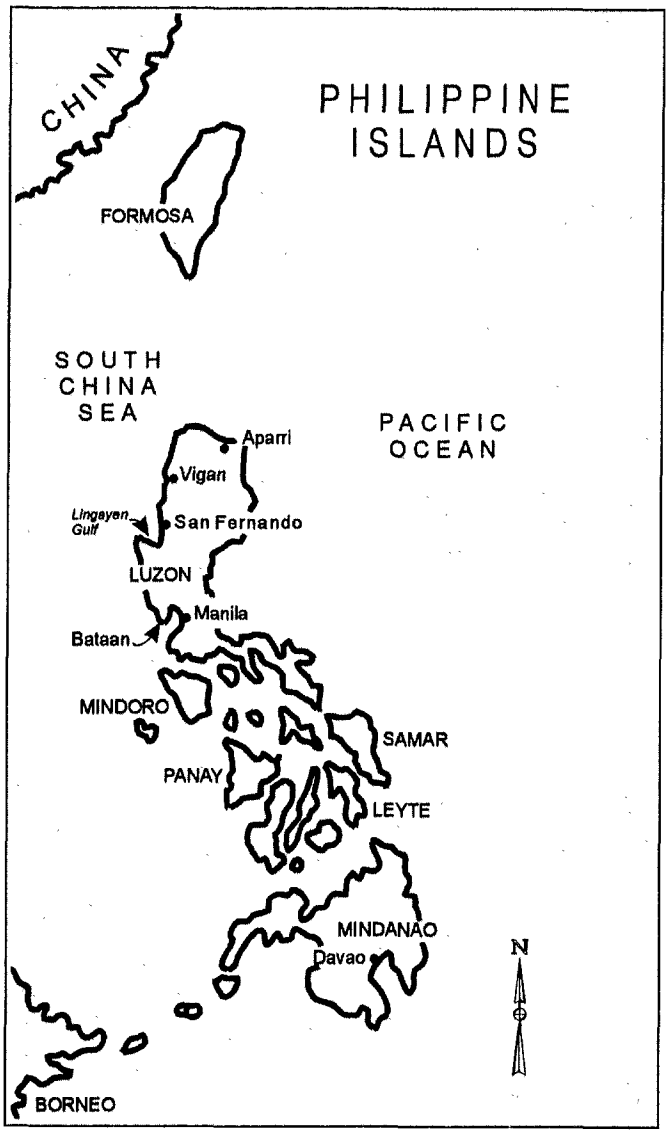
EDITOR'S NOTE: The events described in this article represent the actions of many Americans who found themselves isolated in the wake of the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in 1941, and are still relevant to Americans serving around the world today. The principles described here—taking care of your sick and wounded, conducting hit-and-run operations against a numerically superior enemy, enlisting the logistical intelligence support of the indigenous population, and maintaining communication with higher and adjacent units—are not limited to those attempting to evade capture. These principles apply as well to any units whose mission is to harass, interdict, and confuse the enemy, and to force him to commit forces far out of proportion to the friendly force opposing him. The heroism of Private Beck and his American and Filipino allies inflicted significant losses in men and materiel upon the Japanese, and contributed to ultimate victory.

As the truckloads of Japanese infantry drove by, the soldiers in the back jeered at their American prisoners, and some swung bamboo poles or golf clubs at the heads of those who were walking closest to the vehicles, connecting now and then, with deadly results. Such was the treatment of Americans captured in the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in December 1941, and as a result many Americans chose to attempt escape and evasion as an alternative to captivity.

Shortly after the initial air attacks on December 8, 1941, which wiped out most of the American air forces in the Philippines, Japanese ground forces began landing in Lingayen Gulf, 80 miles north of Manila (Map 1). The overwhelming Japanese offensive relentlessly pushed the Allies southward down Luzon Island, forcing them to retreat onto the Bataan Peninsula, where they set up a defensive line. By the beginning of January, the Japanese began their final offensive. The Americans and their Filipino comrades fought side by side for every foot of ground, but were slowly pushed back down the peninsula. One of these Americans was Private Leon Beck, an Oklahoman, a member of the 31st Infantry. The 31st, known in the Philippines as "Manila's Own," was the only all-American Infantry unit in the Philippines, and—because it had served in China and Siberia—it was looked upon as America's Foreign Legion. Leon Beck had volunteered to go to the Philippines and become a part of the 31st because he figured that was where the action would be. He arrived there in April 1941 and by the middle of December turned 20 years of age, just as the retreat to Bataan began.

The U.S. Army in the Pacific was grossly unprepared for a war with the Japanese Imperial Army. Leadership and training were poor among many of the officers and noncommissioned officers. The troops were likewise poorly trained and lacked the necessary supplies to fight an all-out war. As Leon Beck pointed out, "We had scads of the new 60mm mortars, but we didn't have any ammunition for them." And besides a lack of equipment, the Americans had underestimated the fighting ability of the Japanese soldier. It soon became apparent he was a tough, determined, and often ruthless adversary.

Once the battle for Bataan started, the Allies were soon in serious difficulty. The troops were put on half rations, which soon had to be cut in half and then cut again. After three months of continuous combat, the Americans and their Fili-



Map 1. Bataan Campaign, 6 January to 24 February 1942

pino allies were disillusioned and facing defeat. By April 9, 1942 the land-based forces were close to surrender. Their supplies and ammunition nearly gone, riddled with illnesses such as malaria, dysentery, and dengue fever, half-starved, and utterly demoralized by repeated defeats, they finally had to give up.

When the American surrender was announced on April 9, there were approximately 80,000 troops on Bataan Peninsula, of which 12,000 were Americans. Rounded up, the defeated American and Filipino soldiers stumbled along the route to prison camps, trying to hold up under the intense sun and the lack of food or medical attention. Starvation, disease, and the strain of marching without pause claimed the lives of many of the prisoners.

Once Leon Beck started on what is now known as the Bataan Death March, he realized that his chances of survival in a Japanese prison camp were slim, and that he had to escape if he wanted to stay alive. For the first 12 days, he begged friends from his company to join him and make a run for it. He knew how tough it was going to be and didn't want to do it all alone. The response from everyone was that the U.S. Army was going to be back in six months to retake the Philippine Islands, and they would soon be free and on their way back to the States.

Some of the captured Americans were put to work driving for the Japanese. Leon talked with one of them who informed him that he had to escape before they reached the town of San Fernando (Map 2). If he didn't, he would lose his chance, because all of the prisoners were put on trains that went directly to the O'Donnell prison camp north of Clark airfield. When the column reached the town of Lubao, Leon remembered, "We were put in a warehouse for the night, and as I tried to crawl out through everybody's legs to find a safe place to rest I got caught by the guards. They really worked me over and I guess they knocked me unconscious." One of his friends, Corporal Louis Read, saw him lying on the ground as they were being herded back out onto the march the next morning. Read said, "I left him lying on the ground for dead there in Lubao....Beck never showed up in the prison camp afterwards and I just assumed he was dead." When he came to, Leon recalled, "I saw what was going on and when the guards were busy and not looking in my direction I crawled away and hid in a nearby burnt-out building."

Leon spent the night in his hideout and had just enough strength the next morning to rejoin the march with the next group that came along. Fortunately, it included some men from the 31st Infantry. He said, "When we marched out of Lubao my buddies around me said that they'd watch the guards for me, but they didn't want to escape themselves. They were willing to help me and when they said it was okay I just rolled off the road and got under the first row of bushes. Once I got behind the first row of bushes they couldn't see me." By escaping from the column of prisoners, Leon Beck became a fugitive, an ordeal that was to last nearly three years, and his survival would be due largely to the support of pro-American Filipinos.

Ironically, the Filipinos' willingness to aid Americans was due to a great extent to actions of the Japanese themselves. One of the greatest errors on the part of the invading Japanese Imperial Army was their mistreatment of the Filipino people. Although the Japanese had publicly proclaimed a propaganda policy of "Asia for the Asiatics," their subsequent actions belied their words. This behavior helped create a great deal of sympathy for the Americans.

Among those civilians living in the Philippines were the Fassoth brothers, who played an important role in helping escaped American soldiers. Bill and Martin Fassoth had come to the Philippines 20 years earlier from Hawaii, and had a sugar plantation just north of Bataan in Pampanga Province. With the Japanese invasion, they had moved westward with their families toward the Zambales mountains along with a large number of Filipino friends and workers. With the Japanese pillaging through the flatlands, the brothers decided to go deeper up into the jungle-covered mountains. They created a camp, built the necessary buildings, and brought their people to it. Their contacts with the Filipinos enabled the Fassoths to set up a system of communication and supply.

On April 17, 1942, eight days after the surrender, two American soldiers stumbled into their camp. The soldiers were fed steamed rice with cooked snake meat and were given a place to rest. From then on a stream of soldiers came staggering in. In time the brothers gave Filipinos written notes to be given to any escaping soldiers they came upon. They built a barracks that could accommodate a hundred men, and the soldiers—mostly American—drifted into the camp half starved and sick with malaria and a variety of other ever-present tropical diseases. Looking back, Bill Fassoth recalled, "There must have been two or three hundred American Army boys who stayed with us in the camp over the next twelve months. In time the Americans recovered enough to go on a hunt or hike through the mountains, looking for other Americans who were forming guerrilla units."

It was this camp—and others like it—that Beck was to visit many times in the coming months, as he carried messages back and forth, at first coordinating efforts to evade Japanese patrols, then gathering intelligence on the enemy, and finally taking part in ambushes and other direct actions against the Japanese. But he would not reach the Fassoths' camp for some time after escaping from the Death March.

On the day of his escape, Leon Beck came out of his jungle hiding place once the column of prisoners passed and as quickly as he could moved off down the empty road. After a short distance, he left the road and swam across the Pasic River. In time, he came upon what he thought was an empty shack. Inside was an American officer, delirious and suffering from what Leon figured was sunstroke and dehydration. The next morning a Filipino boy came by and, finding the two Americans, told Leon that he knew where there were some American officers. Beck scribbled a note that said "I'm Private Leon Beck, Antitank Company, 31st Infantry and I have with me a very sick American captain named George E. Crane." The young boy took the note and returned later in the day with an answer, which read, "Come join us. I have a rifle for you," signed Lieutenant Colonel Peter D. Calyer, Executive Officer of the 31st Infantry.

Beck recalls, "In the dark they put Captain Crane and me into a dugout canoe and paddled us up the river to another shack. There were a number of people there including Lieutenant Colonel Calyer and an ordnance captain. Over the next few days some of the officers in the shack died. There was no way to bury them so Calyer took their personal effects and without much talk had the bodies placed in the river, where they floated away."

Leon came down with a severe case of malaria and was lying in the shack when he overheard a conversation between Colonel Calyer and the ordnance officer. A Filipino civilian had found a house for them in the barrio Natividad a few miles away and were ready to move them there. The ordnance officer was arguing that Beck was too sick to travel; he was going to die anyway and they should just leave him. Leon listened as Colonel Calyer replied, "Hell, he's an American soldier. When we move, he moves with us. And if he's too sick to move, we'll all just stay here until he gets a little better. We're not going to go off and leave him." From that day forward Leon had a soft spot in his heart for Colonel Calyer and less than friendly feelings for the ordnance officer.

When it finally came time to move Leon, the Filipinos placed him under a bundle of rice straw in a two-wheeled buffalo-drawn cart. Because the Japanese were everywhere, the group of officers and Beck moved from house to house every night. For some reason the Japanese never looked into the attics in the buildings they searched. "Whenever the Japanese would come into the building," Leon recalled, "we'd climb up into the attic of the house we were in and lie there under the tin roof. It's like about 210 degrees up there and you were always afraid the sweat coming off you would run down and drip on the [Japanese]."

While they were hiding out, Colonel Calyer formed the Luzon Guerrilla Force to establish security for the barrio people and tasked the mostly women and children who were there to alert everyone when Japanese patrols were in the area. Included along with this defensive early warning system was an intelligence network checking on where the Japanese were stockpiling their supplies, fuel, and ammunition.

On August 1, Colonel Gyles Merrill joined the group. He was a 60-year-old cavalry officer who had fought in the First World War and had been in the Philippines at the start of the Second World War. Because he outranked Lieutenant Colonel Calyer, he took command of the organization. To consolidate his command of the troops who were on-the-run behind enemy lines, he selected Private Beck as the man to carry his orders to the other camps that had American officers in them.

"I wouldn't say that it was a dangerous mission," Leon recalled. "First, it was easier to send a private than one of the captains. On top of that, I was picked because of my height [five feet, five inches]. I was small like the average Filipino and when I was walking around with a group of them I blended in. And lastly I was willing to go because I needed something to do. The strangest thing is that the whereabouts of Fassoth's camp in the Zambales Mountains was pretty well known to almost everyone except the Japanese." Along with Filipino guides, Leon went across Pampanga Province and made his way up into the hills to get all the officer volunteers and bring them back to barrio Natividad, where they were assigned a specific area on Luzon Island in which to organize guerrilla units.

The officers throughout Luzon were brought in under Colonel Merrill's command, and each was assigned an area of operation where he was expected to organize a guerrilla unit. There was no intention at this time of actually attacking or fighting the Japanese, who were heavily armed in comparison to the Americans and Filipinos. Along with a group of Filipinos, Leon had gone back onto the Bataan Peninsula scavenging for arms and ammunition. Aside from the lack of heavy armament, the Americans in general were not in any physical condition to mount active military operations. The idea was to organize and gain intelligence for the time when the U.S. Army returned, something everyone felt would be only a matter of months.

During this time, there was a serious question regarding

whether an American enlisted man had to become a guerrilla fighter. Colonel Merrill's policy was that the American officers had to, but it was up to the individual enlisted man whether he wanted to or not. He would have to volunteer. Based on the Japanese policy that any American caught carrying a weapon would be executed as a guerrilla, Merrill felt that it was dangerous enough just trying to survive behind the Japanese lines. As far as he was concerned, there was no good reason to make the life of the enlisted man more precarious then it already was. If a man honestly felt he did not want to carry a weapon and fight, he was relieved of any military duty.

Leon later admitted, "It was unbelievable how many enlisted men wouldn't get involved or carry a weapon. They just wanted to survive the war and figured that maybe their chances were better in a Japanese prison camp than [they were] on the loose. A lot of escaped soldiers made arrangements with the local Filipinos to contact the Japanese so they could go in and surrender themselves." At the same time, the Japanese passed the word to the escapees through the Filipino civilians that if they surrendered they would not be harmed, a promise that was not always honored.

Leon Beck was not one of those enlisted men who refused to bear arms. Besides an M-1 Garand rifle, in time he acquired two Astro Patent Spanish-made .38-caliber revolvers, which were similar to the American Colt revolver. He wore one on each hip, in hand-made goatskin holsters.

"It was around September 1942," Leon recalled, "when the [Japanese] began to make things hot for us in Natividad, so Colonel Merrill decided to move his headquarters from Pampanga Province west across the mountains into Zambales Province. The barrio of Natividad had a large garrison of Japanese soldiers and there was another garrison only two and a half miles away in the town of Santa Rita. We weren't looking for trouble at that time. We were trying to organize the Filipino people for intelligence purposes to prepare them for the time when the American Army did come back."

During this entire time, the Japanese had been well aware that large numbers of escaped Americans were wandering about the Philippine countryside, and by September 1942 had decided to round them up. Considering the number of American soldiers in the camp at any one time, it was a wonder that the enemy hadn't figured out much earlier where it was located. They had posted a reward for the capture of any member of the Fassoth family, placing flyers in all the barrios in Pampanga Province. No one in the Filipino community would give them up, but one of the local tribesmen, who had done some work for the camp, was captured when he went down onto the plains to buy some farm materials.

The captured native was taken to the main Japanese garrison at San Fernando and tortured until he agreed to lead them to the Fassoths' camp. In the meantime Bill Fassoth had been informed that the man had been taken and immediately dispatched a runner to warn everyone to be on the alert. The food supplies were hidden in the jungle and everyone moved out of the camp in different directions. But the Japanese did not attack immediately, and some of the Americans came back to the camp and were there when 200 Japanese soldiers attacked at 2:00 o'clock on the morning of September 25, 1942.

One of the Filipino kitchen workers heard them coming and gave the alarm. Of the 16 Americans who were there, ten escaped into the jungle while the others, too sick to run, were taken captive. The Japanese burned the buildings and broke up everything they found. One of the Americans who jumped out of the barracks window and hid in the jungle was 21-one year old Private Earl Oatman. Tall and skinny, he had been seriously ill with malaria and a number of other jungle illnesses for the first few months he was in the Fassoth brothers' camp. By September he had improved and by the time of the raid was in good enough physical condition to move out on his own. In time, he found his way into the camp that Colonel Merrill had established on the other side of the mountains in Zambales Province.

By the end of 1942, contact had been made with General Douglas MacArthur, who issued orders to Colonel Merrill to avoid actual combat unless absolutely necessary, and continue to organize the Filipino people into units that would concentrate on gathering intelligence for the Americans' return to the Philippines. Merrill's new camp was on a hill near the barrio of Bujaoen, about 12 miles from the town of San Marcelino, where the Japanese had a large garrison. The Japanese in the town no doubt knew of the existence of Merrill's camp but for some reason made no attempt to attack it. Usually their patrols got to within four miles of the Americans, and then turned back. Because the Japanese had effectively alienated the majority of the natives, they were never able to move out of their military compounds without word being spread immediately to communities in their path.

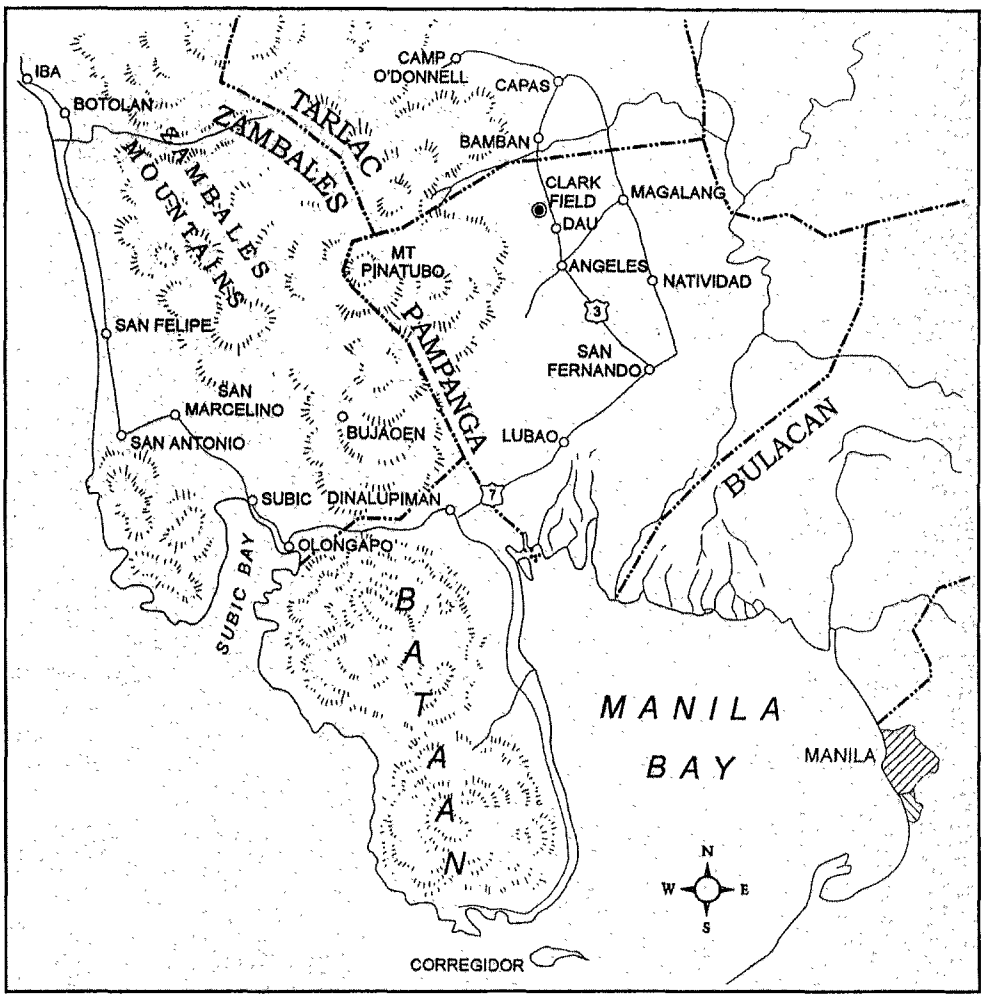
What fighting was being done in that part of Luzon involved the Filipino guerrilla groups known as the Huckbalahap (the Anti-Japanese People's Liberation Army), whom the American military considered to be Communists. The Huks had been hostile to the American forces before the war, but with the Japanese invasion they had shifted their attention and their hostility to the Japanese. With a common enemy, the Huks avoided conflict with the Americans, spending their time ambushing the Japanese, killing an estimated 5,000 over the course of the war. They also claimed to have killed 15,000 pro-Japanese Filipino collaborators during this same period.

The Japanese intensified their military activities in the spring of 1943, which had a marked effect on the group of enlisted men living near the headquarters compound. Privates Earl Oatman, Millard Hileman, Coleman Banks, Bill Ostrander, and Hank Winslow got together to talk about the precarious situation they were in and about possibly having to give themselves up to the Japanese. Coleman Banks was against the idea of surrendering, having already escaped once from a Japanese prison camp on Subic Bay. Finally, after much discussion, they decided among themselves that they didn't want to be guerrillas. The idea of individual survival seemed to have taken hold.

While the Americans were assessing their options and courses of action, in April 1943 the Japanese mounted an all-out drive to clear the mountains of American escapees and

Huk guerrillas. In Zambales Province they mounted a three-pronged attack in the direction of Colonel Merrill's headquarters. All of the trails came to a junction right outside the barrio Bujaoen. A half mile from the trail junction, Leon Beck and Major Roy Tuggle were asleep in one nipa palm shack, with Colonel Merrill and Lieutenant Colonel Calyer in a second, and Captains Crane and the ordnance captain in a third.

Sleeping in a shack at the road junction were two brothers, Arturo and Vincente Bernia, who had been helping the Fassoth brothers when they were in Pampanga Province. They were with a large group of guerrillas when the Japanese attacked. In the battle Vincente Bernia was killed, along with a large number of the Filipinos guerrillas. As Beck described it, "The [Japanese] just kicked the [daylights] out of everybody at the junction. In all, about 80 Filipinos were killed and the rest were surrounded and forced to surrender." In the confusion Colonel Merrill and the others were able to escape. They moved quickly up into the mountains where they established a new headquarters among the native tribes. The Japanese attacked another Fassoth camp in the late spring and came close to capturing everyone in it. Bill Fassoth estimated that there were about 60 Japanese soldiers and 20 Filipino collaborators. Bill and the others were just able to slip into the jungle, from which they watched as the camp was burned and the invaders made off with their food supply.



Map 2.

During this same time, those Americans who were not in the Fassoth camps were on the move as well. Because of an incident involving a theft by one of the natives, Oatman decided to leave the Filipino family with whom he had been living. He and Coleman Banks took off with only a small amount of rice and the clothes on their backs. They crossed over the mountains into Pampanga Province and hid out in the foothills for a time. One day, leaving Banks—who was sick and unable to travel—in one of the nipa palm shacks, Oatman went down into the lowlands to find some milk and sugar for him. When he returned to the shack he found that Coleman had been captured by the Japanese. Earl wandered about on his own, ending up with a small guerrilla group run by Private Fred Stamper, who had been in the Fassoth Camp with him back in 1942. Stamper stated flatly that he was going to fight and wasn't the least bit interested in going into any Jap prison camp. After a couple of weeks Earl left Stamper and his guerrilla group and struck out on his own. In a short time he was picked up by some Filipinos who turned him over to the Japanese authorities.

By the end of 1943 the Japanese had tightened the noose around those areas harboring Americans. The renewed Japanese military campaign of 1944 found Leon Beck in the small barrio of Lambac in Pampanga Province. The Japanese moved in quickly and came close to capturing both Leon and another American escapee, Private Blair Robinett, who just happened to be in the barrio with him when the Japanese arrived.

In time the villagers became alarmed at this game of cat-and-mouse and decided to move the two Americans out of the barrio and into a cave dug into the bank of the river that ran nearby. The cave was situated a couple of feet above the river and back under an overhang. The two Americans expected to spend few nights in their cave, but before it was over had spent 27 days there. One day they heard heavy rifle fire nearby and could tell from experience that it was from Japanese weapons. Immediately Leon decided that he had had enough of living in a cave, and the two Americans linked up with a group of Huk guerrillas who were commanded by Lieutenant Bill Gardner, a part Apache American Indian from the 31st Infantry, who had received a battlefield commission during the battle on Bataan. Captured on Bataan, Gardner had broken out of the prison camp. When

Leon met him, Gardner had with him two Filipino guerrilla fighters as guides. When they reached Merrill's camp and were reporting in, one of the men with Gardner got into an argument with one of the local guerrillas and a gunfight erupted. When the smoke cleared, both of the guerrilla guides with Gardener were dead, as well as the son of Captain Rodriguez, the local guerrilla commander.

Rodriguez made it known that Lieutenant Gardner had to be shot for killing his son. In a discussion with the Americans, who were not going to let them execute an American officer, Colonel Merrill told Lieutenant Gardner that he had to leave. Gardner escaped the next morning and fled over the mountains into Pampanga Province. Rodriguez sent two native trackers after him. They caught up with him and were able to hit him in the back with an arrow before he killed both of them. Later he would joke about an American Indian going all the way to the Philippines to get stuck with an arrow.

After leaving Gardner and Robinett, Beck wandered around Pampanga Province on his own. He wasn't interested in going back over the mountains to Merrill's headquarters. Thinking about it. Leon recalled, "I knew that I got a little bit stupid but I was bored. I got good and fed up with running with the same outfit. I could go off on my own and after awhile I'd run into someone or we'd look each other up. And the Philippine people were always ready to help because as long as there was an American in the vicinity they had hope that the American Army would come back and get rid of the [Japanese]."

He finally joined up with a Huckbalahap guerrilla squadron commanded by Luis Taruc, the co-founder of the Philippine Socialist Party, who said: "Leon was not only modest but what we call a regular guy. He easily won the trust and good will of his fellow guerrillas and was a fine example of what we think of as the Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln character."

"We had to move every night to a new location," Luis recalled. "There were around 70 to 80 men in each squadron but the number usually depended on the number of weapons we had. Those who joined the Huckbalahap were mostly young Filipino men who wanted to kill [Japanese]. When we weren't planning or attacking a Japanese patrol or outpost, we would go into one of the peaceful villages, stationing guards as lookouts while the rest of the guerrillas fighters would help the villagers in their daily routine of plowing, planting or harvesting." Commander Taruc related, "If, like in Leon's case, a guerrilla squadron had an American with them, they would make him stay in one of the houses so as not to attract too much attention. There were a large number of Filipino collaborators who were helping the Japanese capture the free roaming Americans."

"It was," Leon remembered, "a nomadic life. And I never used a disguise. I wore shorts that were cut off just below the knees and a tee shirt. I did wear a woven hat and shoulder cover made from palm leaves during the rainy season. I never worried about the [Japanese]. It was something that was always there but I didn't brood or worry about it." Leon added, "The heaviest weapon we had was the BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] which was a beautiful weapon. We would go back to Bataan scavenging for guns and ammunition. You could go in there and the chance of running into [an enemy] patrol was practically nil."

When asked why they didn't go over to the prison camps and break out some of the Americans, Leon explained, "Every friend I had went into the camps. Even if I was able to get them out, we couldn't take care of them. We were barely able to take care of ourselves. It wouldn't have done any good." Leon spent the next seven months wandering about the countryside with the Huk guerrillas. He and Robinett were together in one particularly successful attack on the Japanese which took place in the town of San Fernando. This was the same town where the Death March prisoners were put on trains for their trip to the O'Donnell prison camp. "There was a large sugar warehouse on the right side of the road," as Leon recalled, "and we ambushed two trucks full of [troops]." Robinett explained, "The normal system of hitting a convoy was to set a squad of riflemen on one side of the road and a Browning Automatic Rifle on the other. As the trucks came into range the BAR would sweep the windshields of the lead truck. The normal reaction of the driver was to swing off to the other side of the road where the riflemen were waiting. We pulled that trick a number of times and it always worked like a charm."

Leon recalled, "We had men in the ditches on both sides of the road and shot up the trucks as they came down the road. None of the Japanese survived. We took their rifles and ammunition. Up to this time the U.S. Government had not dropped any supplies in our sectors."

Leon remembered, "We [broke contact] once the shooting stopped. The [Japanese] kept a large garrison in the city of San Fernando, which was the provincial capitol, and it was only a short distance away. To my knowledge, [they] did not take any action against the civilians for this fight, but they did increase their patrols for several weeks and put armored cars at the head of the truck columns."

"Actually," Leon pointed out, "the most important aspect of the guerrilla warfare was not necessarily the fighting...but organizing the local units and having a cohesive unit with which to fight when the right time came. Sometimes the [Japanese] fired on us first and sometimes we fired first."

In 1944 Leon quit the Huk Squadron that he had been running with. "I was kind of operating on my own," he recalled. "I didn't have a formal job with them. I wasn't even in touch with Colonel Merrill. I was just 'free lancing'....I knew the topography and the lay of the land. I never did go back and operate with the Huks other than to take messages back and forth over the mountains." During the time that he was behind the Japanese lines he figured he must have made the trip over the mountains 20 times or more.

In August 1944 Leon decided to leave Pampanga Province. "I wandered back over the mountains into Zambales Province and joined back up with Colonel Merrill. Shortly after that the first American air raids on Luzon occurred. For the first time in two and a half years I began to believe that the end was in sight. That night several of us dug up some jugs of home brew that we had buried and had a nice drunk."

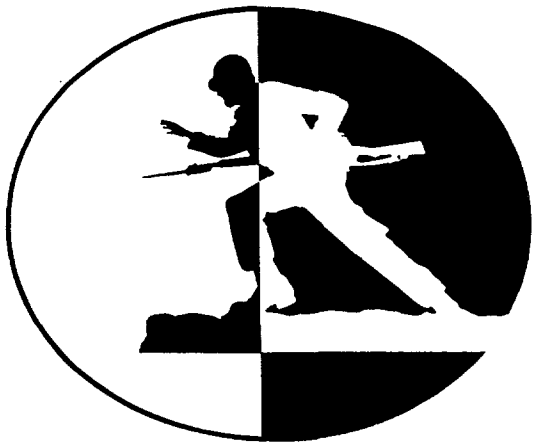
By December 1944 there were airdrops of munitions including carbines, BARs and Thompson submachine guns. Also in the airdrops were quinine tablets, underwear, waterproof matches, and dynamite. And the word came down from General MacArthur informing Colonel Merrill to activate the guerrilla units for the coming invasion of Luzon Island.

As Leon recalled, "In January of 1945, the [Japanese] started to pull back. We had started getting regular airdrops and for some reason or other, they dropped us more dynamite than anyone could have ever used. We had enough dynamite to blow Bataan off the map. They wanted us to blow all the bridges and communications lines and clear the air fields. The [Japanese] pulled back, abandoning the airfield near us. We found the strip had been booby-trapped with cluster bombs in holes all over the runway. We didn't have any experience in handling that stuff so we would dig around the bombs, tie a rope around them, hoist them up and swing them onto a cart filled with straw, and take them to the end of the runway and roll 'em off down the river bank. By the 29th of January of 1945, there were American planes landing and shortly after that I was given my orders to get my stuff together and head for home."

Of the 12,000 Americans soldiers who were on Bataan and Corregidor at the beginning of the war, it is estimated that 80 percent of them, or approximately 9,500, died before the war was over. Private Earl Oatman survived the Japanese prison camp and went home. Leon Beck was given orders to ship out but he refused. He was not going to leave the Philippines without his wife, Veneranda, whom he had married on August 15, 1944. He announced to his commanding officer that he would go AWOL rather then go home without her. Beck told both Colonel Merrill and Lieutenant Colonel Calyer, "I lived here almost three years and the Japs couldn't catch me and I know damn well the American troops can't catch me." He was at that moment on the wrong side of the mountains from where Veneranda was hiding out and the thought of crossing them again on foot was a bit too much. The Colonel agreed and cut him orders so he could get military transportation to go back and find his pregnant wife.

After Leon and his wife got back to the States, Leon put in for his back pay and benefits. He was informed that there was no proof that he was actually in the army during the two and a half years he was behind the lines fighting the Japanese. The Americans in the prison camps were paid because there was a record, made by the Japanese, stating who they were and in what prison camp they spent their time. The officers, who were behind the lines with Leon, were paid because they were officers, but Leon wasn't. It wasn't all that much money considering that he was only a private, but that didn't matter as far as the army paymasters were concerned.

This disagreement, in one form or another, went on for the next 50 years, and in 1996—54 years after Private Leon Beck rolled off the road into the jungle to escape from the Bataan Death March—the U.S. Government sent him two checks, which included the principle and interest for his back pay and benefits. The total was $55,065. On September 12, 1997, with his wife looking on, retired U.S. Army Master Sergeant Leon Beck was awarded the Bronze Star with V device and Oak Leaf Cluster for his meritorious service in the Philippines during the Second World War. The justification for the award described how he had successfully infiltrated Japanese lines, assisted Philippine civilians to safety under Japanese air attacks, trained Philippine guerrillas despite severe and debilitating illness, performed courier service through areas heavily patrolled by enemy forces, conducted intelligence and surveillance missions in heavily patrolled areas, and performed other actions that facilitated the coordination of guerrilla action with U.S. landings in Lingayen Gulf.

Private Leon Beck, the Oklahoma Kid, finally received the honors that he so justly deserved.

Gordon Browne is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and a veteran of the 2nd Reconnaissance Squadron of the famed 7th Cavalry. He is a free-lance writer who has just published a series of articles on the subject on the Unsung American Hero. In addition to Leon Beck, as represented here, the series includes a frontiersman who made peace with the Apache, a Midwest businessman who successfully toppled a criminal political organization, a police officer who exposed massive drug corruption in the New York Police Department, a captain of cavalry who was the real hero of the battle of the Little Big Horn, and a civil rights worker who took on the state of Mississippi and won a war against racism.