

Portraits of Courage



Edgbert Hudson

*"Courage
doesn't always roar.
Sometimes courage is the
quiet voice at the end of the
day saying I will try again
tomorrow."*

Mary Ann Radmacher

Ed Hudson defines courage. He epitomizes it. As a Japanese prisoner of war, he survived through determination and courage. Read about the last surviving member of the famed Lost Battalion on the next page.

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Determined to survive

The messages on the back of Edgbert Hudson's car say all you need to know about the 86-year old Bridgeport native.

Two ribbon-shaped magnetic decals carry the messages, "Freedom Isn't Free" and "Support Our Troops." Just below those is a red, white and blue sticker, "FREEDOM." The freedom sign is worn, much like Hudson, but the message is clear, as clear today as it was in 1942 when he became a Japanese prisoner of war.

Hudson was a 22-year-old farm boy when he, his cousin Warren Atkinson and his dear friend Bedford Kennedy joined the Army on Nov. 25, 1940. The National Guard unit they joined in Decatur had been mobilized into the regular Army.

The three enlisted in Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery of the 36th Division. Training would take them from Camp Bowie in Brownwood to Louisiana and then to the Philippines.

While en route to his assignment, Hudson ran into a couple of Bridgeport soldiers on Angels Island who warned him against going to the Philippines.

"We just came from there and we believe there is going to be a war between the USA and Japan," they told Hudson.

"This was a surprise to me because I had no intention of not going," said Hudson.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hudson headed with his battalion to Brisbane, Australia, by way of Suva, Fiji Islands.

The young soldiers helped dig trenches for the anti-aircraft weapons, load bombs and refuel planes. The 400-troop battalion included soldiers from Wise County, Jacksboro, Wichita Falls and Abilene.

The Japanese began their invasion of Java during the night of Feb. 28, 1942, recalled Hudson. By then, the fighter squadron and the 19th bomb group had left for Australia, leaving the 2nd Battalion without air support.

"We were just sacrificed," said Hudson. "Washington wouldn't grant permission to fly us to Australia."

American troops totaled about 550 and the Australians had 2,500 troops on Java, facing more than 40,000 Japanese invaders.

"I'd like people to know that we had no choice whatsoever. We could die or surrender," said Hudson. "There was no way to survive on Java. We had no

airplanes, there were no reinforcements available, supplies were limited and there was no way to get off the island."

For the next 3 1/2 years, the members of what became known as "The Lost Battalion" experienced a living hell as prisoners of war, and those were the lucky ones, the ones who were able to return home.

They first spent seven months in a camp in Batavia, suffering daily beatings. They then boarded a rusty, foul-smelling ship, where they slept in unbearable heat in 4-to-5 foot cubicles.

"Space was so limited, one had to sleep then sit up and let your comrade sleep," said Hudson. "The only time we were allowed topside was to get our ration of rice and to use the makeshift toilet that extended over the side of the ship. The trip to Singapore took only three days, although it seems like a long time under those conditions."

The battalion spent its first Christmas in captivity in Camp Changi, a large British military post that had been converted into a prisoner of war camp. By January, they were in Thanbyuzayat, the staging area for the northern end of the "Death Railroad." For the next year, Hudson and his fellow soldiers would be responsible for building a 260-mile railroad through the dense jungle of Burma, and they would do it all by hand.

Hudson said they got an idea of what was in store for them when a Japanese lieutenant colonel addressed them upon their arrival in camp:

"You are only a few remaining skeletons after the invasion of West Asia ... I will not treat you badly for the sake of humanity as you have no fighting left at all.

"We will build the railroad if we have to build it over the white man's body. It gives me great pleasure to have a fast moving, defeated nation in my power...work cheerfully at my command!"

From that time on, Hudson said the memories are embedded in his mind,

never to be forgotten. He watched comrades fall ill and die. He watched those who had lost hope die. He felt his clothes and shoes deteriorate over the months in the jungle heat and rain, until he was left with nothing but shorts.

When the malaria, beri beri, dysentery and tropical ulcers would become too much and prisoners were unable to work, those who were able to continue had to make up the work of those who couldn't. They could not return to camp at the end of the day until the allotted amount of work was completed.

"I became very ill with tropical ulcers on both feet," said Hudson. The doctor treating him on sick call finally said there was nothing more he could do and sent him to a hospital camp 20 miles away.

"Only 15 percent of the workers were allowed to be at this camp at a time," said Hudson. "This hospital camp was anything but a hospital camp. I made it into a bamboo hut and laid next to my friend, Bert Jones of Bridgeport. I hardly recognized him. He was skin and bones. His right foot was covered in maggots."

Jones' right leg was then amputated in an effort to save his life and after he was returned to his bed next to Hudson, the doctor told Hudson, "Don't be surprised if he doesn't wake up."

"It was miraculous how fast he recovered," said Hudson. "They left one maggot in his leg and he said he had more pain from that one than from all the ones that covered his leg at first. I know because I had two under my big toe."

The flies were so bad in the hospital camp that Hudson said he had to eat under mosquito netting. The bamboo walls left nothing to the imagination, as he heard fellow soldiers suffer and die.

"Of the 60 Americans in this so-called hospital, 40 died. That's how lucky I was," said Hudson.

After treatment for his ulcers, Hudson went right back to work. Because he couldn't stand on his ulcerated feet, he sat

while using his pic and shovel.

When the railroad was finally completed, Hudson joined about 50 other prisoners who were sent up country to rebuild bridges. After they worked all day on the bridges, American planes would fly over at night and bomb them. Shortly thereafter, the war ended and Hudson left with two blankets, two pairs of shorts and his eating utensils. When he made it to a hospital in Calcutta, India, he was greeted by his friend Bert Jones, who came walking up to him on an artificial leg, made for him by some Australians from a wooden folding chair.

Hudson will never forget his first taste of American food, a hamburger and a Coca Cola. He will also never forget the feeling he had when he arrived back home in Bridgeport.

He arrived by bus in Decatur and a friend drove him to Bridgeport, leaving him at the gate to his family's farm.

"Walking from there down to my house was the strangest feeling I've ever had in my life," he said.

Sitting with his wife Betty in their beautiful home overlooking Lake Bridgeport, Hudson recalls the many vivid memories of the Lost Battalion.

"We had a superb bunch of people, very courageous, very dedicated to the United States of America," said the last surviving Wise County member.

Hudson recalls a time when an allied soldier asked him, "You've got 150 guys over there with every nationality. How do they all get along?"

Hudson's response: "You pick out one and tell him he's not an American and you see what he says."

"People talk about freedom and why we're in Iraq. You get it taken away from you and you realize how important it is," said Hudson.

Those years in captivity had a long-lasting effect on Hudson. Upon his return home, he had bouts of malaria, depression and nervousness. The annual reunion with fellow Lost Battalion members helped, as the survivors talked more and more about their experience.

"I lived it six months at a time. I survived through courage and determination...that's the key to most anything," Hudson concluded. He would prefer that the attention not only be on him, adding with tears in his eyes, "It's so sad we can't name all the other members of the Lost Battalion."

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