

U. S. ARMY

VETERAN: AUSTIN KARR

INTERVIEWED BY: OMAR MUSFY

Throughout life, individuals are faced with many hardships and challenges. But little matches the chaos and carnage of a world war. Austin Karr, a POW during World War II, had to endure months of agony in Japanese worker camps. Stationed on the island of Corregidor, Mr. Karr was among thousands of personnel who were captured after weeks of continuous bombing by Japanese war planes. As a prisoner of war, Karr was transferred from camp to camp on work details which included picking vegetables and chopping wood for the mess halls. Many of his friends were beaten and some were even killed, but ironically Mr. Karr has no animosity for his captors. Today he points out that he was "fortunate" because he was never beaten, never injured by gunfire or bombings, and he survived the war.

After being liberated, Mr. Karr returned to the United States and was reunited with his family and future wife. He was awarded numerous medals, including the Purple Heart. He now resides in Baytown as a retired Exxon engineer.

I learned alot about human nature and the human spirit from this interview. Austin Karr—a hero in every sense of the word.

Q: How and why did you join the service?

A: After high school I was trying to find work and finally found some in a grocery store. I moved from a little town to Tulsa. I delivered hand bills all over town. This just didn't seem like the thing I wanted to do at the time, so I decided I'd go down to the recruiting office. They painted such a rosy picture of the Philippines that I just decided that I would sign up. I tried to get my mother to give me permission to go, and I finally talked her into it. We went from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, and that's where I was inducted into the service. Afterwards we went by train to San Francisco. That is a disembarkment place for people going to the Philippines or wherever. We rode on a liner called the *USS Washington*. When we docked we got on a ferry and went to Corregidor and were then assigned to a "tent city." After training we were assigned to a battery.

Q: Were you ever under fire?

A: On December 29th at about noon, I heard them planes coming. In a little bit the bombs dropped and at that time I was out on the top part of Corregidor. We had dug trenches in case they dropped bombs. You'd be sitting in a foxhole and praying and reading the Bible. Shortly after that I was sent to Fort Hughes to work on the anti-aircraft.

Q: What kind of weapons were on the island?

A: We had 14-inch guns and 12-inch mortars, and then we had a few little 155 cannons. The 14-inch guns and the cannons were used for protection against the enemy ships, and the anti-aircraft were to take care of the flying planes.

Q: What was your main objective on the island?

A: To protect the main waterway that was coming into Manila.

Q: What was an average day on the island like?

A: The average day involved washing up, putting on your clothes to take calisthenics, and then coming back inside to get ready to go to breakfast and shower. After that you would go to the batteries where you were stationed and train on how to load ammunition into the mortars or rifles. After that you could have lunch and then your day was over. Then you could go to the picture show or go play pool.

Q: Do you remember the actual day that you were taken as a prisoner of war?

A: You better believe it! On May 6, 1942, the day after my birthday, I was captured. I was frightened. We didn't know what they were gonna do. There were lots of stories that they would shoot you or kill you, and they really did that to many--every chance they had. We lined up and we didn't have anything to eat or drink. We stayed there for two or three weeks and then we were loaded onto ships and taken to Manila and unloaded there. They made us walk down a long boulevard trying to humiliate us, and then took us to a place called Bilabet Prison. This was originally for the Philippine people, but was converted to a POW camp. It was very crowded. If it was made to hold 100, then they would fill it with 175. They fed us fish that was wormy and the whole place stunk. We also had rice and lima beans; whatever they didn't want. When I first went into the camp I weighed about 225, and when I came out I weighed about 145. Then we were all moved to one camp with all of the prisoners. It was called Camp 1. The prisoners who marched the Death March and all were there. We worked on wood chopping detail, and as an extra treat, we got rice crust.

Q: What was your general opinion of those who kept you prisoner?

A: I didn't hate the people, I just didn't like the way they treated us. I knew that I was a prisoner of war, and I did what I was supposed to do because I knew that I was supposed to. They beat many and I thought that was awful cruel of them. They could have given us more food, but what could I do? I suppose I would feel worse if some of the things that were done to some were done to me. I was fortunate that no one in my area tried to run away. If you tried to escape, they hung you up and killed you so that everyone could see what happened to you.

Q: Was your family informed that you were a prisoner of war, and do you know what their reaction was?

A: Yes, they were told. Of course your mother is going to feel anxious. Everyone was anxious to hear from me. They didn't know where I was and were not able to hear from me.