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This article may be used as an

“Article of Interest” for students in grades 4-6 in preparation for the Basic Skills Reading Test. Test questions, pre-reading questions and activities and after-reading questions and activities follow the article.

“March Of Time”

by

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Patience, patience, Rick Peterson kept telling himself. Don't ask too many questions. Don't make him mad.

It took years. But eventually, Peterson coaxed his friend, Alf R. Larson, to spill his World War II story. Larson survived the Bataan Death March and 41 months as a prisoner of war. It's a powerful story and horrific. So much so that Larson, now 81, had pushed it aside in his brain for 55 years.

Even his wife and children didn't know much of it. “That's why he married me. I didn't ask a bunch of questions,” said his wife, Jane. She said that only half joking.

But Peterson was busting to know Larson's story. Somehow, he decided it was his mission to get his friend's war experiences on paper. “We need to remember the sacrifices these people made for us and for our freedom,” Peterson said. “Freedom is not free.”

“He just kept wearing me down,” Larson said. First, he let Peterson take notes. Then, he used a tape recorder. At first, the 54-page story was for the Larson family. Now revised and expanded to 77 pages, it's posted on the internet. “Back To Bataan: A Survivor's Story” is the title.

Larson was born in Sweden. He grew up in Duluth and now lives in Crystal. He and Peterson met at the Minnesota Zoo. That's where Larson was a longtime volunteer and Peterson worked in sales.

Peterson has been fascinated with World War II since he was 4 or 5. He remembers touching his father's olive drab uniform with all the ribbons on it. His dad was a combat pilot in the Army Air Corps. He won the Air Medal for flying 35 missions over Germany. "But he didn't talk about it either," Peterson said of his father.

"Yep," Larson said. "There are some episodes you'd just as soon forget."

He swallowed hard and continued. "I had a hard time telling about this. It brought back a lot of memories. Some I didn't mind. Some were traumatic. I'll tell the truth. My voice actually broke a couple of times."

His wife said softly, "He's tough."

Few veterans who were in the thick of things want to tell tales, Larson said. He meets with other Bataan and Corregidor survivors once a month at the American Legion Post 251 in Robbinsdale. Seldom do they speak of the war. When it comes up, it's usually what he calls GI teasing. "We had it soft, " a vet will say, tongue-in-cheek.

A 70- or 80-mile walk wouldn't be so bad for men who were fed and in shape, Larson said. But U.S. and Filipino soldiers were already starving. Four of the six days of the march, in over 100 degree heat, Staff Sgt. Larson was given no food or water. The last two days he received a small ball of rice.

"Men went stark raving mad with thirst...if people would fall down and couldn't go any further, the Japanese would either bayonet or shoot them. They also would bayonet prisoners who couldn't keep up. Those who stepped out of line or had fallen out of ranks were beaten with clubs and/or rifle butts. Some American prisoners who couldn't keep up were run over by Japanese vehicles. I saw the remains of an American soldier who had been run over by a tank. I didn't see the actual event, but the Japanese just left his remains in the middle of the road. We could see them as we walked by."

But Larson managed to carry a symbol of hope. It was a forbidden little New Testament with Psalms. An Army chaplain had given it to him. Once he made it to the prisoner-of-war camps, he was able to read his Bible several times a day.

The 23rd Psalm was his comfort, especially after a bombing raid. Sometimes there were weeks of daily bombing. "My philosophy was, "The good Lord willing, I'll make it through the day." Just the one day. He didn't allow himself to think about the next day. Yet he never allowed himself to give up hope, he said.

"Have you seen the film "The Bridge on the River Kwai?" Do you remember that little tin shack the colonel was put in? They built one like that at Clark Field. It was

designed to be very uncomfortable. It was a small cubicle made of sheet metal with no openings in it except a door. The door was a piece of sheet metal with no openings in it. The door had hinges on it and would open up, shut, and lock. They built it so you couldn't stand up and couldn't lay straight out. You had to curl up or squat. The building sat right out in the sun and did it get hot since it was made of sheet metal. I was put in that shack as punishment (because a prisoner had escaped) for three days, without food or water."

Larson was punished because he was a platoon sergeant in charge of three barracks. Another time, a prisoner escaped. Larson was confined in the tin shack for seven days for that, too. If a Japanese guard hadn't slipped him some food and water, Larson surely would have died. As it was, he had to be carried back to the barracks. He was put into his bunk. He got to rest for a few days. Then he was put back to work.

Larson was in great shape before his capture. That's one reason he survived. He had always been athletic. Other soldiers napped during the heat of the Philippines. Larson bicycled.

Larson's mother was back in Duluth. She saw a newsreel in movie theater about the Bataan Death March. She thought she spotted her son—alive! So she paid to go back to the theater many times to see if it was really him in the film. "She believed it was, and it kept her hopes up," he said.

For the soldiers, hope was hard to keep. Americans were forced to bow to every Japanese person, no matter what the rank. The Japanese gave a 100-pound sack of rice to any Filipino who turned in an escaped American prisoner.

Many GIs came down with malaria. So did Larson. They had no medical supplies ever. The Japanese had taken them. The Americans couldn't even brush their teeth. Their breath was so bad you "could cut it with a knife," Larson said.

"The Japanese didn't use anesthetics when they operated on prisoners. If we had a tooth problem, the medical officer would pull them with a pair of pliers. We didn't have any anesthetic or medical supplies for anything! One POW in our camp had been captured on Wake Island. His own corpsmen operated on him for appendicitis. For anesthetic, seven Marines held him down."

GI prisoners worked seven days a week. They quarried rock for runway repairs. Food was a cup of steamed rice twice a day. One day 200 Americans at Clark Field Concentration Camp were given a pig so rancid that the Japanese wouldn't eat it. The Americans cooked and devoured it, maggots and all.

A year and a half after capture, Larson and 1,161 other American prisoners were crammed into a Japanese cargo ship hold for 23 days. It was so crowded they couldn't sit or lie down, only squat. The Japanese needed laborers so the GIs were taken from the

Philippines to Formosa and then to Japan. The ship was even fired upon by U.S. submarines because there were no Red Cross markings.

Larson was forced to work as a lathe operator seven days a week, 12 hours a day, in Japan.

The Japanese surrendered on August, 1945. U.S. planes flew over and dropped food. Japanese civilians brought in rice, fish, and soybeans. Larson was tall but thin as a scarecrow at less than 100 pounds. But he had the sense to eat lightly. Some GIs gluttoned themselves. Their stomachs nearly burst. The men were returned to the Philippines for treatment and then sent to the U.S. The first night of liberty in San Francisco, they were still on the lookout for food, Larson said. "People would plan out for a month what they would eat."

Then he showed up unannounced in October 1945, at home in Duluth. He fell into his mother's arms. They both cried in relief. The last thing he wanted to do was answer questions about the war. He spent time in the woods, alone. There, he practiced not thinking about what he had endured.

In November, his parents insisted he meet the daughter of their friends. His first sight of her was stirring gravy. "Boy, that's for me!" he thought. It turned out the woman would become his wife. They had a son and two daughters.

Larson never awoke screaming with nightmares, as she thought he might. In fact, he re-enlisted in the Army in 1948. He left the Army for good in 1954. The Larson's moved to Crystal, where they've been ever since. Larson is in good health, except for knees injured during the war when rocks fell on them.

Larson had no interest in returning to the Philippines. So his friend Rick Peterson went for him. For 10 or 15 minutes on the 58th anniversary of the Death March, Peterson walked a piece of the path. He took photos for Larson.

The trek made Peterson marvel at the GIs strength. When he got home, Peterson again told Larson, "You've got to put this story out so that people don't forget, so they realize the sacrifices.

Replied Larson, "Just don't make me out to be a hero." To him, the heroes are those who didn't get to come home.

Questions for this article "March of Time"

1. The Bataan Death March happened during:

- A. World War I.
 - B. World War II.
 - C. the Vietnam War.
 - D. the Civil War.
2. According to Larson, what did he say was “traumatic?”
- A. his time in high school
 - B. memories about his experiences during the war
 - C. getting married
 - D. the end of the war
3. After reading this article, the reader knows that Larson
- A. is still a young man.
 - B. was a very brave man.
 - C. was born in Duluth, Minnesota.
 - D. was a combat pilot.
4. According to the article, why was Larson punished by the Japanese soldiers?
- A. He had tried to escape.
 - B. He was caught reading his Bible.
 - C. He stole some food.
 - D. One of his men tried to escape.
5. In paragraph two, “it” refers to
- A. Peterson’s injuries.
 - B. the time he spent as a prisoner of war.
 - C. the time it took to tell his story to Peterson.
 - D. the time it took to coax Peterson to tell his story.
6. In paragraph 13, who is being quoted?
- A. Rick Peterson
 - B. Rick Peterson’s father
 - C. Alf Larson
 - D. the writer of this article
7. After reading this article, the reader knows that Larson
- A. was happy to talk about his war experiences.

- B. has visited Japan several times after the war.
- C. found it very hard to talk about his war experiences.
- D. will soon visit Sweden, where he was born.

8. In paragraph two, “spill” means

- A. drop.
- B. break.
- C. tell.
- D. forget.

After-reading questions and activities:

1. Do a little research: How and when did Memorial Day become a national holiday? Why was it started?
2. The movie “The Bridge on the River Kwai” is mentioned in this article. If you have the chance, rent the movie and watch it with some friends. You might enjoy it very much and learn a lot about a very important episode in World War II.
3. Did you observe Memorial Day this year? How?
4. Make a list of questions you would ask Alf Larson if you could interview him.
5. What does the word “Patriotism” mean to you?

Pre-reading questions and activities:

1. The following words are used in this article. Find the meanings of the words you don't understand. (You can try guessing first.) Then, write your own sentences for these words:

- a. eventually
- b. horrific
- c. olive drab
- d. episodes
- e. traumatic
- f. seldom
- g. stark
- h. raving
- i. bayonet
- j. remains (noun)
- k. chaplain
- l. cubicle
- m. platoon
- n. barracks
- o. malaria

- p. anesthetics
- q. corpsmen
- r. appendicitis
- s. quarried
- t. rancid
- u. trek
- v. marvel
- w. coaxed.

2. The following countries are mentioned in this article: On a world map, locate these countries: Japan, Philippines, Sweden.