

## Heroic Lepanto youth paid ultimate price in WWII

*By MARISSA HOLIMAN*

Tribune News Staff

There is a saying which simply states, "Freedom is not free!" World War II proved such statements as this to be very true. The fight which the U.S. entered with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941 was the most expensive, expansive and deadly war in the history of the world. As a result, it continues to be one of the most interesting and fascinating pieces of history for people world-wide.

The soldiers who fought in this war, many of whom never returned, have since been called "The Greatest Generation". It was a generation which encompassed every walk of life in the United States. From huge cities to small hamlets to country farms, men and women in all walks of life answered the call to serve their country.

One of those men, William Atha Gay, briefly called Lepanto home and was a man who fully experienced the horrors of war first hand. In the end, as so many did, he paid the ultimate price by giving his life for his country.

Gay was born July 29, 1912 in Brooksville, Mississippi, the son of Thomas Sephalon Gay (Lieutenant USNR WWI) and Maddie Woodlief Jamison Gay. The family moved to Lepanto when Gay was a teenager where he attended Lepanto High School until his father died in 1929. The family then moved to Memphis, the town Gay considered to be his home town.

After graduation from high school, Gay attended Arkansas State College in Jonesboro. Upon leaving State and trying to get a job, however, he like, many people during the depression, found no work of any kind.

"He even tried to get a job chopping cotton," said his mother later. Unable to get work, he left the army of the unemployed and joined Uncle Sam's army and was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia.

Not satisfied with being just a grunt, Gay set his sights on becoming an officer. As fortune would have it, the opportunity soon presented itself. He took the



entrance examination for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and passed receiving a Regular Army appointment to the academy.

While there, he excelled in the military, athletic and academic aspects of cadet life.

Militarily, within months of his arrival at West Point, he was appointed Captain of his company due, in part, to his ranking of 29th out of 300 in his class. Athletically, although he had never seen a lacrosse game before arriving at the Academy, he turned out to be one for the Army's best players. Academically, he graduated 18th in the class of 1938.

Later that same year, on Sept. 5, Gay married his longtime sweetheart, Elenor Dark in a ceremony at Alexander City, Ala.

Gay's time in the peace-time army was relatively uneventful being stationed in the Philippines at post McKinley, Manila, P.I. training Pilipino officers and Filipino soldiers for service in the U.S. Army.

The life there was enjoyable until May 1941 when things changed drastically. Among the sudden changes was that Eleanor, along with the other base dependents, was suddenly evacuated.

As is often the case with the military's brightest and best officers when countries begin anticipating war, Gay was quickly promoted from Lieutenant to Captain in October then to Major in December. Events began to occur rapidly after this.

Although details prior to and immediately after the Japanese invasion are sketchy, citations indicate that he served as assistant to the Luzon Force Engineer from March 12 to April 9, 1942. Those same records state that Gay made notable, often heroic, contributions to the Philippine Defense Campaign by directing and supervising engineer, construction and demolition along the entire front contributing materially to the prolonged defense of Bataan.

He later served on the staff of Brigadier General Hugh Casey until Casey left with General Douglas MacArthur. He then he served on the staff of Major General Edward King evacuating to Camp O'Donnell near Manila when Bataan fell obviously thankful not to have taken part in the famous "death march."

While at O'Donnell, he suffered from malnutrition, as did most soldiers there, but was cited for his service there. An important part of these services was the difficult task of securing and distributing food, water, shelter and medical supplies for the columns of prisoners of war as they arrived at the camp.

Then, late in 1942, it was reported that Gay, after twice escaping enemy forces, was among those captured during the fall of Camp O'Donnell. Records are sketchy about what occurred after this, but eventually he reached Cabanatuan POW Camp on Luzon, where he was confined until early Dec. 1944 when he was moved to Billibid Prison Hospital in Manila.

During his 3 ½ years as a POW, Gay learned to speak Spanish in anticipation of someday returning to the Philippines to help the Filipino people, for whom he had developed a deep affection.

"He was always concerned about the welfare of others above himself, always unselfish," said his wife Eleanor.

The capture of Gay prompted an article in the Memphis Commercial Appeal on Dec. 13, 1944. In the article, his mother said Gay was, "a typical Tri-States boy," meaning he was hardworking and persevering.

While in Manila Gay wrote to Eleanor the day before he was to board the Japanese war ship, Oryoku Maru in Subic Bay Pacific Islands. Gay gave the letters to another soldier to keep and send to his wife if and when he was rescued. She did not receive the letters until August 1945, eight months after the Major's death.

The first letter was dated Nov. 1, 1944:

"My darling sweetheart, Eleanor,

Within 5 days it will be exactly 3 years and 6 months since I have feasted my eyes on your beauties and enjoyed the companionship of the only real pal as well as lover that I have. Without the many letters and pictures that I have received from you since we began to get mail last February my life would be very dreary. I do not know how many letters I have received for rather than loose this set I buried them at Cabanatuan.

If you receive this letter from hands other than mine, you can be sure that I have shipped to Japan and all plans to avert such a thing have gone away. 3 weeks ago tomorrow they moved all of us from Cabanatuan except about 750 sick, lame and medicos. If we leave here we will leave about 500 of the same. Do not worry anymore than you can help, my precious. The outcome is in the hands of the gods. I can assure that nothing our hosts can do can kill me. I can live now as the Filipines do on almost nothing. They may practically starve me beyond recognition but they can't kill me. I'll be back to you whole if not completely sound.

One time, in August, they had me down to 135 lbs. but in the ensuing months I gained some back. Our food is all starch, rice camotes and cassava. Meat is unheard of practically. We have had many ups and downs in quantity and here I think that our ration is 200 grams of rice per day. Try living on that. I am not writing this to worry you but to let you know that all is not rosy but I am in good shape and will continue to be no matter what happens. I am more bald than ever and almost deaf in my right ear but those are very minor complaints.

I have never worried about your welfare but I have and did worry about you during that time when I knew you could not know what had happened to me. My dear I have lived those hours, months, and days with you as though I were at your side. They were hard for me to bear but from your letters I know that those days of terrific strain are past and you are as happy as can be under the circumstances.

I have not stopped working since the surrender. The first day I hit prison Camp at O'Donnel, I worked on the water supply and have progressed from job to job through both camps until now no one is working.

Have you ever thought of getting out of the Army my sweetheart? Would it mean much to you to leave some of the friends you have made? This is just a thought for the future out it is one on which I have spent much time. I have seen the Army at its worst and in some instances at its best and rather than degenerate into what I have seen some do, I'm getting out. I am entire confident that I can handle any situation I under take with an even break."

The second letter had a date of December 13, 1944:

"My dearest darling sweetheart,

Last night our friends sprang a surprise on us and within an hour and a half we are supposed to leave for the boat ride. Needless to say, you can imagine my mental state. Our friends are as usual using too little and arriving too late. Today we have been here two months and one day. Tomorrow 9 weeks. Tomorrow 8 weeks ago, Mac's forces landed on Leyte. He talks too much and does to little. We will do our best but I think it will not be enough. This means to me a delay of another year. I am trying not to be optimistic.

Last night, I more or less arranged my mind to make a change in my attitude toward life. Up to now I have always been a fighter, the job coming first. From the time we get together, we will come first the job will get done without too much effort. I want you, a family, a home, a permanent one, and a chance to live. Just as we please and that please contains plenty. I am thinking seriously of quitting the army. I have run into too much grief in it we will find a more

compliant occupation. Study Spanish hard; learn to play chess. I am going to take up Russian...

Keep your chin up sweetheart...Keep loving me sweetheart, I know you will, just as I love you more & more everyday. Keep the old chin up, we will keep those promises and complete a wonderful life. Don't spend all our money on government bonds if we can not get rid of them soon. The interest rate according to my estimate of what you have told me, let it lie fallow in the bank if this is all we will get. I am not quite so patriotic as you. I have given my all."

The day after Gay wrote these letters, Dec. 14, 1944, he, along with 1619 fellow American POW's were packed into the Oryoku Maru, a hell ship, in preparation of leaving Manila thinking they were being transferred to Japan. Hell Ships were unmarked Japanese freighters used to transport American POW's and were literally packed inside the ship like sardines in a can, deprived of food or water.

That morning U.S. Navy planes from the USS Hornet attacked the unmarked ship, causing it to sink the following day. 286 men were killed or shot in the water while trying to escape. Approximately 942 POW's were reported by the Japanese to have lost their lives in this ironic twist of fate with victory and freedom just months away. Gay's body was never recovered. He was 32 years old.

In memory of Major William Atha Gay, a headstone was placed in Woodlawn Cemetery in Jonesboro next to his parents and sister Martha.

His decorations included the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal, and the Purple Heart. His name is on the wall of the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial.

Former Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, who was permanently wounded during fighting in the Italian Alps, when asked if he considered himself a hero responded, "The real heroes of war are the soldiers that didn't return."

That sentiment would, no doubt, be echoed by Major William Gay if he had lived to return to his beloved Eleanor. However, Gay became a "real hero" to his country's everlasting thanks.

**Copyright 2009- Marissa Holiman & Tri-City Tribune; Samantha Martin, Editor**

Contributed by Kaye Holiman.