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## Bataan survivor finds mercy

**RUFFIN PREVOST** Gazette Wyoming Bureau

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Leonard Robinson, left, chats with Ron Wood, chairman of the Wyoming Veterans Commission. Robinson spoke on Friday in Cody, sharing with members of the commission and others his story as prisoner of war in Japan during World War II.

RUFFIN PREVOST/Gazette Staff

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**C**ODY - Just before the Japanese began bombing Clark Field in the Philippines, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Leonard Robinson and two of his friends were off getting lunch for the others in his platoon.

Robinson got separated and missed his ride back, but the truck carrying his friends was struck by two bombs, and both men were killed.

"I figured that, by the grace of God, there's usually a survivor to everything, and I will be that survivor," Robinson said Friday.

What Robinson didn't know then was that he would live through one of the most brutal experiences of any prisoner of World War II, surviving the infamous Bataan Death March and more than three years of forced labor under inhuman conditions.

Robinson, 90, a retired Casper minister, spoke on Friday to the Wyoming Veterans Commission and others gathered in Cody for today's dedication of the state's World War II Memorial.

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Robinson was in the first group of soldiers who were captured and forced to march 60 miles with no food or water following the Battle of Bataan, in April 1942.

Men were beaten, shot or stabbed for helping those who had fallen, for drinking filthy water from puddles or for no reason. Robinson and his friends sucked the water from sugar cane tossed by Filipinos, who would have been killed for helping Americans.

They spent one night in a cockfighting pit, and another in a narrow-gauge boxcar.

"It was 100 men to a car. You couldn't even sit down. Men would die and they could not even fall, it was so tight," Robinson said.

During a six-week stay at one of the first camps, 1,700 of 7,000 prisoners died from dehydration, starvation and a host of diseases common among prisoners.

"At one time or another, I've had scurvy, yellow jaundice, wet beriberi, malaria, dengue fever, dry beriberi and a heart attack that left me in a coma for 17 days," Robinson said.

"With malaria, I had a fever of 107.5. You get brain damage at 105, so don't blame me," he joked, one of many laughs Robinson elicited about his ordeal.

In the fall of 1943, Robinson and other prisoners were transported to Japan, where they were forced to work on docks in the port city of Niigata. Each man loaded 15 tons of iron a day. Later, they hauled 200-pound sacks of soybeans.

Robinson, who weighed a lean 185 pounds before the war, checked his weight in prison and was 102 pounds. He figures he may have weighed as little as 95 pounds at one point. At the edge of starvation, the men ate anything they could find.

"No dog or cat ever got through prison camp alive," he said.

"At one time or another, I ate dog, cat, donkey, lizard, octopus, snail, seal and grasshoppers, which are not bad until the hopper part gets caught in your throat," Robinson said.

"And if you ever have a choice between horse meat and mule meat, take the mule. It's always a little sweeter," he said.

British and American doctors cared for the men under horrible conditions, performing minor miracles with the crudest instruments.

"One doctor performed the best surgery I've ever seen," he said of an appendectomy on an American soldier.

"He used a razor blade he had carried for 17 years, and bent some spoon handles back and used those to retract his incision. He took that appendix out, sewed him up with a needle and thread, and that man survived," Robinson said.

After the Japanese surrendered, Robinson and the other prisoners were still detained, but Americans began dropping food from planes into the prison camps.

"I gained 24 pounds in the first 10 days on American food," he said, adding that he gained 47 pounds in his first six weeks of freedom.

During his ordeal, Robinson relied on his faith in God to help him through.

In one bombing raid, a piece of shrapnel surely would have pierced his heart were it not for a copy of the New Testament that Robinson kept in his vest pocket. "I felt something awfully hot over my heart, and I reached down in my pocket and there was a piece of hot shrapnel" lodged in the small Bible, he said.

"I lived my life by the 23rd Psalm," he said, reciting the portion of the Bible verse that says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

By the time he had traveled on a ship back to the United States, Robinson focused on a different section of the same psalm.

"We arrived at the Golden Gate Bridge, and through the fog I saw San Francisco, and knew we were back home. 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,' " he said.

Contact Ruffin Prevost at [rprevost@billingsgazette.com](mailto:rprevost@billingsgazette.com) or 307-527-7250.

Along with Gov. Dave Freudenthal and Mayor Nancy Brown, Leonard Robinson will speak at 10 a.m. today at the dedication of Wyoming's World War II Memorial, on Highway 14-16-20 in Cody, just west of Yellowstone Regional Airport.