

February 1945 – World War II at 80 – Part 1

Battles on Luzon and Bombing of Dresden

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The month of February began with key battles on the island of Luzon in the Philippines.

Battle of Zig Zag Pass

On Feb. 1, the U.S. 38th Army Division, which had landed on Luzon on Jan. 9, engaged Japanese forces at the Battle of Zig Zag Pass.

The pass, today known as the Dalton or Balet Pass, was a curvy road passing between the Caraballo Sur and Sierra Madre Mountain ranges in Central Luzon.

The Japanese army had dug in along the pass with well disguised foxholes, tunnels and trenches.

It took eight days of intense battle before the 38th Division pushed out the enemy and secured the pass.

Four Morgan County men were involved in the action.

Myron Guy of Martinsville, a combat engineer with the 113th Engineers, served with the 38th Division at Zigzag Pass. He earned a bronze star for his service during that battle.

Paul Bay of Morgantown was also on scene for the action. The Tech 5 truck driver was with the Army's 151st Infantry Regiment of the 38th Division.

Serving with Bay in the 151st Infantry was Martinsville native Beryl D. Fultz.

Paragon native Harvey E. Bastin, Jr. was caught in the thick of the battle. An Army medic and litter bearer, Bastin served with the 113th Medical Battalion, which was assigned to the 38th Division.

As a liaison agent, he managed radio contact with the forward personnel of the Infantry Medical Section and directed litter bearers in the evacuation of casualties.

His most harrowing experience came when he served on a litter squad with Company C of the 113th Medical Battalion.

His squad saw a wounded soldier in a field during the middle of combat.

When they went out after him, they encountered enemy machine gun fire from Japanese forces.

The men were forced to hit the ground.

From their prone position, they courageously inched forward to the wounded man and put him on the litter, doing their best to protect him.

For the next 90 minutes, they remained trapped flat on the ground as enemy bullets whizzed over their heads.

Finally, they were able to withdraw from their position and take the wounded man to the battalion aid station.

Bastin received high accolades from his commanding officer for his brave duty.

He returned to Morgan County after the war, attended college, and became a teacher and later an administrator.

Bastin died in 2011 at the age of 86.

Battle of Manila

American forces entered the city of Manila on Feb. 3. The city, known as "the Pearl of the Orient," soon became a place of complete devastation.

The intense battle against Japanese forces lasted for a month and brought destruction to much of the city.

More than 16,000 Japanese soldiers died in the conflict, compared to 1,010 Americans who lost their lives and more than 5,000 wounded.

Tragically, more than 100,000 Filipino civilians were killed, the victims of either mass murder by the Japanese or bombing by U.S. forces.

Considered to be one of the most horrific urban battles of the war, the only redemptive outcome was the liberation of the city from over three years of Japanese military occupation.

Martinsville native Byron E. Wilson saw the destruction of Manila from overhead as he flew on C-47 transport planes as a crew



The walled city of Manila in the Philippines was laid waste during the battle for the island in May 1945. (Public domain photo)



ABOVE: U.S. infantrymen search for Japanese inside the ruins of Intramuros in Manila, Philippines. (Public domain photo)

LEFT: Dresden lies in ruins after Allied bombings in February 1945. (The Post-War Ruins of Dresden Through Rare Photographs, 1945, Rare Historical Photos)



Martinsville resident Myron Guy is shown in his service uniform in this May 1943 photo. (Courtesy photo)



Paul V. Bay, of Morgantown



Harvey E. Bastin, Jr. of Paragon



Byron E. Wilson, of Martinsville



Kurt Vonnegut

chief, bringing much needed supplies to the American and Philippine forces and the civilian population.

Wilson, an aerial engineer Tech Sergeant, began his military service with the Army Air Forces in April 1942.

He married Margaret Evelyn Reynolds, of Mooresville, in November 1941, five months prior to entering military service.

Following his training, he was assigned to the 375th Troop Carrier Group, 5th Air Force.

During his 23 months of service in the Pacific theater, he flew more than 1,000 hours in 90 different combat missions, dropping men and supplies for campaigns at New Guinea, New Britain, Admiralties, Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines.

Wilson returned home in May 1945.

He died in 2004 at the age of 84.

Bombing of Dresden

Combat operations in Germany intensified in February.

The city of Dresden in eastern Germany, near the border of Poland and the Czech Republic, was fire-bombed on Feb. 13-14.

Ninety percent of the city, inhabited by 600,000, was destroyed.

The bombing was controversial, as the city had no significant military presence. Its value as a target was the city's hub for both transport and industry.

Indianapolis native and future author Kurt Vonnegut was on the scene for the destruction.

A student at Cornell University, he withdrew from college in January 1943 and enlisted in the Army. Captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, Vonnegut was interned in Dresden as a POW.

When the bombs from U.S. planes started falling, Vonnegut took shelter in the meat locker of the slaughterhouse where he was confined.

He survived the onslaught and later translated

his experience of Dresden's destruction in his novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969.

The book catapulted him to fame.

On the same date the bombing began in Dresden, Paragon native Woodrow Bloucher went missing.

Bloucher had graduated from Eminence High School in 1933, was a tail gunner with the Army Air Forces.

His plane was shot down somewhere over Germany.

He was later declared killed in action.

Bloucher had almost completed the required 25 number of missions before his death.

He became one of six Eminence High School students who lost their lives in World War II.

Some good news came toward the end of the month, as Martinsville native Wayne Allerton Dooley finally arrived back in the United States.

Dooley was a civilian defense worker serving as a Merchant Seaman on board

one of the many ships bringing supplies to Europe.

In July 1942, his ship was torpedoed, killing 2,000 people.

He survived but was captured and became a POW in the German internment camp in Marlag-Milag Nord.

He remained there for three years along with 60 other Americans and 3,000 British citizens.

In early 1945, a diplomatic exchange with German Nationals confined in America was arranged, resulting in his freedom and the release of 46 other captured Americans.

Italy

In Italy, the month of February began with the award of a bronze star to Lester G. Hacker.

The Morgan County native was a PFC serving as a mechanic on B-24 Liberators with the Army Air Forces.

A crew chief for one of the four-engine bombers, he was responsible for making

sure the plane was always operational.

Hacker was so devoted to caring for the bomber that he went out and retrieved it whenever it had been grounded.

When the plane successfully completed its 65th mission, Hacker was rewarded with the coveted Bronze Star.

He spent three years in service with 20 months overseas.

His Bronze Star was another reminder that the men from Morgan County were making a significant impact in World War II.

Next time: Legendary Battle of Iwo Jima and Historic Flag Raising (February 1945 – Part 2)

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at <https://ronaldpmay.com> or contact him by email at ron@ronaldpmay.com. Check out his videos on YouTube at: World War II History & Stories with Ron May.