For many Americans, Memorial Day means barbecues, road trips and beaches. For James Bollich, it’s another day to remember comrades who died around him during the Bataan Death March of World War II.

Some were beaten and shot for trying to steal sips of water. At a prisoner of war camp, Bollich buried hundreds of bodies, weary from weeks of chronic diarrhea and infectious diseases.

Bollich’s own weight hovered at about 100 pounds. Yet, he is here to see another Memorial Day — and remember.
presented him with the Congressional Medal of Honor Friday when U.S. Rep. Clay Higgins presented him with the Congressional Gold Medal during a ceremony at the Veterans Home in Jennings.

An estimated 68,000 American and Filipino soldiers were part of the 1942 march from the Philippine peninsula of Bataan to a prisoner of war facility at Camp O’Donnell. Japanese captors gave the prisoners no food, water or rest in a five-day march that claimed between 600 and 800 lives. Hundreds more died in captivity.

Bollich is believed to be one of fewer than 40 survivors who are still alive. The Congressional recognition will be welcomed next to his Bronze Stars, Purple Heart and vast collection of military honors.

“It’s kind of late, coming out after so many years,” said Bollich. “But it’s a medal that is going to be given to all of the American and Filipino soldiers that fought on Bataan and Corregidor.

“They’re giving it to the few of us that are still alive. Eventually, those who have passed away are going to get it through next of kin.”

‘A Soldier’s Story’

Bollich recounted his Bataan experience in a 1993 memoir, “Bataan Death March: A Soldier’s Story” on Pelican Publishing. In 1940, he left Southwestern Louisiana Institute, now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, to join the Army Air Corps.

After training at Fort Polk, Bollich arrived in the Philippines 18 days before the war began. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, they also began a four-month assault at Bataan that cut off the area from food and vital resources.

Gen. Edward King surrendered April 8, 1942, which sparked the troops’ harrowing, 66-mile walk to their POW camp.

“There were artesian wells right on the side of the road,” said Bollich. “We needed water or we were going to die.

“We rushed the water wells. The minute we’d leave the road, the Japanese would start shooting. If you were lucky, you got a drink of water and got back on the road. If you were unlucky, you died from the Japanese bullets.

“At night, the Japanese couldn’t see as well. We were able to get water whether they wanted to give it to us or not. But as far as food and rest, it was tough.”

Burying the dead

Death became commonplace once Bollich moved to a prison camp in Manchuria. POWs who tried to escape were forced to dig their own graves and executed on site.

Assigned to burial detail, Bollich remembers burying 15 or 20 soldiers a day, numbers that increased as the weeks and months passed.

“We buried them in holes that held about 20 bodies. But those bodies were skin and bones,” he said. “Most had died from dysentery, which is the most horrible way to die in the world.

“It’s not like a heart attack. Some of the guys lasted several weeks or a month or two. It was real painful.”

Bollich survived bouts with pneumonia, malaria, scurvy and hepatitis.

Unhappy trips home

After three and a half years in captivity, Bollich and his fellow POWs were liberated by Russian soldiers. But he faced more frightening encounters en route to freedom.

Bound for Okinawa and sailing in a typhoon, the ship carrying Bollich hit a mine. All sailors in the engine room and a few POWs were killed.

Later, B-24 bombers carried POWs to Manila. The bomb bay doors opened on one aircraft, sending 20 POWs to their death in the South China Sea.

When Bollich finally returned to Louisiana, he was getting a haircut and heard an officer talking about a local POW who had two brothers killed in Europe. Bollich immediately knew the officer was talking about his brothers, Andrew and Stephen.

Grief-stricken, Bollich was grateful that the news didn’t come earlier.

“Had I known while I was a POW, that would have made it a lot harder. To survive like we did, you had to have something to go back to. For a lot of people, it was a girlfriend or family. In my case, it was family.

“I remember all the good times we had. I didn’t want anybody to go tell my poor mother I had died. She had already heard two of her sons had been killed.”

Answered prayers

A graduate of SLI who did research in Australia under a Fulbright Scholarship, Bollich has been a retired geologist since 1986. He has written 13 books and done numerous speeches and videos about his Bataan experience.

His mission on this Memorial Day and beyond is to make sure Bataan POWs who didn’t come home are never forgotten.

“My prayers have been more than answered,” he said. “I had a lot more than 10 years since the war ended. But all I wanted was 10 years in freedom die in a clean bed.”