Bataan Death March survivor recalls war atrocities in
'A Soldier's Journal'

By Vana J. Plaisance
Staff Writer

Retired geologist James Bollich is a quiet, gentle man with a talented appreciation for nature. The living room of his Lafayette residence features his own original stained glass windows depicting hummingbirds and stained glass panels of forget-me-nots. The former serviceman says there are few things wrong with the country, but that it is still the best in the world.

The artist, it would seem, chooses to focus on the beauty of the world. However, Bollich's 'vision of reality,' also conveyed in his paintings and wood carvings hung about the room, are in stark contrast to his early life experiences.

In looking around the residence, the eyes cannot help but land and remain on a hanging display case with a picture of a much younger Bollich as a serviceman in the Philippine Islands in the Pacific theater of war. Surrounded by the smiling face are 12 military medals, including the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the Prisoner Of War medal and the President's Citation. Several of the medals are from the Philippines government.

The World War II memorabilia, a tribute to Bollich and a reminder of a dark period in the nation's history, appear in stark contrast to the tranquility and artistry of the room. In speaking with the former serviceman, it seems remarkable that he is even alive to tell his story.

Sgt. James Bollich is a survivor of the infamous Bataan Death March. While stationed in the Philippine Islands in the Pacific theater of war, he was one of nearly 8,000 prisoners captured by the Japanese after American Gen. Edward P. King Jr. surrendered the Bataan Peninsula.

"Nobody knows exactly how many men died on the walk," Bollich said, "but the War Department estimates about 100,000 either died or were killed on the march." In the first five weeks of confinement, another 1,000 prisoners died.

The former prisoner of war describes his experiences in a new book, "A Soldier's Journal," published by Carlton Press, Inc., New York, and released last spring. After 50 years of silence, Bollich tells the story of his grueling war experience and survival of 3 years as a prisoner of war. The author also speaks in tribute to those voices that will never be heard again and illustrates the saga in his first attempt at pen and ink sketches.

James Bollich, a former prisoner of war describes his experiences in a new book, "A Soldier's Journal."

"It had been suppressed so long inside him. He was too quiet," Mrs. Bollich said. "I think to have something so corrosive inside is not good. It was a catharsis for him to talk about it." Born and raised on a farm, Bollich's pre-war physical condition was strong and healthy, but eventually went from 165 pounds to about 90 pounds while a prisoner of war. However, he was determined to fight for his life as long as he could - and tried to keep a strong mental outlook.

"A lot of the guys gave up," he explained. "It's easy to die in a situation like that, but hard to stay alive." After the first prison site, Camp O'Donnell, Bollich was moved to Cabanatuan and later spent the last six months of imprisonment in the freezing cold of Manchuria, where he worked in a factory. While in the prison camp, he endured beatings by the Japanese and solitary confinement, including standing at attention from 5 a.m. until 11 a.m. each day, and also served on a burial detail.

"During that first winter all the dead were placed in a storage building. That was necessary because the ground was frozen solid, making it impossible to dig graves," Bollich wrote. "When we reached the bodies, we found them stacked like cordwood, because they were still frozen solid. They were all naked. They looked like skeletons with skin stretched over their bones. The one difference was many of the bodies were lemon yellow in color. They had died from hepatitis."

Bollich nearly lost his life when an in-camp aircraft began bombing ammunition and aircraft factories near the prison camp. American military intelligence didn't know where the prisoners were, and the Japanese had broken international rules of war by placing the prisoners near potential air strikes.

"Every raid they made on the town, we'd sweat bloody murder," he explained. "...When we saw those bombs coming down, I figured that's it. The Japs might drop 20-30, but the Americans dropped hundreds and hundreds at one time. The sky was black with those things coming down."

Finally in 1945, Bollich and the other prisoners were liberated by the Russians a few weeks after the signing of the armistice. Following lengthy hospitalizations, the former prisoner of war returned to his home in Southwest Louisiana.

Bollich dedicates "A Soldier's Journal" to "my brothers, Andrew and Stephen, who lost their lives in the European theater of operations, and to all the brave soldiers who died in battle and in prison in war camps during World War II."

In the book, former state senator Jesse James Bollich, a former prisoner of war describes his experiences in a new book, "A Soldier's Journal."

The former serviceman is all about and takes it for granted, he reflected. "But if they ever lost it, they'd know what it really means."

Knowles provides a foreword and poem. The senator, also a member of the U.S. Air Corps assigned to the 27th Bombardment Group, participated in the 1940 maneuvers in the Philippines.

"I, as well as others, do not consider ourselves heroes, but rather survivors," Bollich writes in the introduction. "Why some survived, and others did not, no one will ever know. Did I survive because of the canteen of water I found on the Bataan Death March? Was it the can of warm rice that I picked up in the mud at the water well, where we madly made a dash for a drink? Not all of us succeeded or returned. Was it the timely picking and eating of leaves to stop my dysentery shortly after confinement at Camp O'Donnell prison camp? I do not know."

While a prisoner, Bollich said, it was frustrating to dream of freedom and then wake up to discover he was a prisoner. For 10 years after liberation, he would have nightmares of being a prisoner once more - and then wake up to discover he was free. After the war, Bollich poured his thoughts and energy into his education. Attending college under the GI Bill, he studied geology at the University of New Mexico, he met his wife, Celia, also a geology student. Bollich also worked towards a Ph.D. at the University of Wyoming. He received a Fulbright Scholarship to do geological research at the University of Queensland in Australia. After working in Houston for a while, the Bollichs returned to Lafayette in the mid 1950s.

Although he survived man's inhumanity to man at its worst, Bollich is not bitter towards the Japanese or his own country for sending him to the Philippines. Instead, he signs each copy of "A Soldier's Journal" with the words: God Bless America. The former serviceman says there are things wrong with the country, but that it is still the best in the world. In addition, Bollich opposes people burning the flag and finding fault with the country. And, he believes in a strong military.

"People don't really know what their freedom is all about and take it for granted," he reflected. "But if they ever lost it, they'd know what it really means."