

# POW honored for records of fellow inmates who died

By Robert Burns

The Associated Press

**WASHINGTON** — Through four harsh summers and three brutal winters in North Korea, the "Tiger Group" of American POWs wasted away. Some froze. Some starved. Some were executed.

In all, about 500 of the original 758 captives died.

Secretly, almost miraculously, one survivor recorded each loss.

He is Wayne "Johnnie" Johnson, an 18-year-old private first class, six days at the war front, when North Koreans captured him and hundreds of other soldiers of the Army's 24th Infantry Division in July 1950 near Chochiwon, South Korea.

Now 64 and living in Phoenix, Ariz., Johnson talks uneasily of how he defiantly documented death for more than three years as a prisoner of war. It was a painful experience, which left permanent physical and psychological scars on the young man from Lima, Ohio.

In tiny handwriting, he clandestinely recorded each death, including about 100 during a nine-day "death march" in November 1950 along the Yalu River. Most were soldiers. Some were civilians, a few nuns, a Korean boy the guys called Johnny.

"I just felt like someone would want to know when these people had died," Johnson says.

His captors forbade record-keeping, but Johnson quietly persisted. When the war's end brought freedom, he smuggled out his notes in a toothpaste tube.

If Johnson had not chronicled the death occurring around him, no one would have; more than 2,100 Americans are listed as unaccounted for from the 1950-53 Korean War. All are presumed dead, but their bodies were not found.

In August, the Army awarded Johnson the Silver Star, one of the U.S. military's most prestigious honors, in a long-delayed salute to his courage and ingenuity.

That his deed went officially unwarded for more than four decades is an example of how

thoroughly the United States tried to forget a war that took more than 50,000 American lives and ended in an unsatisfying stalemate.

On scraps of paper carefully hidden from prison guards, Johnson wrote down each fall-on comrade's name, rank, Army unit, date of death and hometown. There was no room for details or explanations: just cold, bare facts.

"... William Griffith, F.34, 11-1-50, Pittsburgh, Pa." "F" was Johnson's designator for private first class; 34 meant the 34th Infantry Regiment.

"... Leonard Provost, P.21, 2-14-51, Santa Clara, N.Y." "P" meant private; 21 was the 21st Infantry Regiment, Johnson's unit.

On and on it goes.

First on Johnson's initial list were three or four fellow prisoners killed by an American warplane that strafed the small building in which they were held shortly after being captured. Stirred by the frightening, fatal wounds those men suffered, Johnson decided he should keep track of the deaths he would witness.

About 1 1/2 years later the "Tiger Group," as they called themselves, was put in a POW camp along the Yalu River. In October 1951, Johnson copied his notes scribbled on scrap paper onto a few small sheets he stole from the camp's Chinese guards. He used stolen ink, which he mixed with soot to make it last longer. A stolen pen point was attached to a piece of sugar cane.

When he wasn't adding to the list, Johnson kept it in a mud wall of his prison shack until a guard found it. Johnson recalls the Chinese camp commander's reaction.

"He threatened me. He hit me with the butt of his pistol," Johnson said. The officer pummeled Johnson about the neck, arms and head with a stiff leather whip and assured him he would never return home if he broke the rules again.

Unbeknownst to the Chinese, however, Johnson had kept a second copy of his list hidden in an empty space

beneath his shack's floor. His cryptic chronicling went on.

In August 1953, the Red Cross gave prisoners being repatriated the next day a small green cloth bag of toiletries that included a metal tube of toothpaste. Johnson washed out the toothpaste, rolled up his list and hid it in the tube. Soon he was aboard the USS Black, headed across the Pacific for home.

"The List," as Johnson's tattered tabulation of tragedy has been dubbed, came to light in the Defense Department after Sgt. Victoria Bingham, an Army researcher dealing with Korean War POWs, got wind of what Johnson had done. She caught up with him in 1995 at a reunion of former POWs in Sacramento, Calif.

Johnson had shared his list with Army debriefers after the war, but some of the information fell through the cracks and was not passed to victims' families.

Officials at Bingham's office, which is in charge of accounting for servicemen missing from the Korean and other wars, are using Johnson's list to cross-check their incomplete database. Larry Greer, spokesman for the Defense POW-MIA Office, said it has enabled the Pentagon to determine for the first time that some men listed as missing had been prisoners of war.

Johnson is proud of his Silver Star but still is haunted by memories. He said he frequently relives a particularly horrifying moment of the 1950 death march.

On the morning of Nov. 1, a North Korean colonel the prisoners called "Tiger" halted the procession. He climbed atop a dirt mound and ordered 1st Lt. Cordus Thornton of Dallas to join him. The colonel wanted to show the prisoners the price they would pay if they straggled and slowed up the march.

"He put his pistol to (Thornton's) head and shot him," Johnson said. "It splattered his skull and brains on us right there in the front row. That stays with you a long time."