POW honored for records of fellow inmates who died

By Robert Burns

WASHINGTON — Through four harsh summers and three bitter winters in North Korea, the “Tiger Group” of American POWs was all but forgotten. Some were executed. In all, about 100 of the original 1,000 captives died. Secretly, almost miraculously, one survivor recorded each loss.

He is Wayne “Johnnie” Johnson, a 17-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 26th Infantry Division in July 1953 near Chichilin, South Korea.

Now 44 and living in Phoenix, Ariz., Johnson talks usually 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 Atlanta, Ga.

In tiny handwriting, he clandestinely recorded his death counts, including about 100 during a nine-day “death march” in November 1950 along the Yalu River. Most were soldiers. Some were civilians. A few were Chinese boys called “gooks.”

“I just felt like someone should 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 known more than 2,000 Americans were 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, and he accepted the citation at his counseling salary.

That his deed went unheralded for more than 40 years is an example of how thoroughly the United States tried to forget the war that took more than 50,000 American lives and ended in an undetermined stalemate.

On scraps of paper carefully hidden from prison guards, Johnson wrote down each fallen comrade’s name, rank, Army unit, date of death and hometown. There was no room for details or explanations; just cold, hard facts.

“... William Griffith, F-34, 1-100, Pittsburgh, Pa. “F” was Johnson’s designator for private first class; 34 meant the 34th Infantry Regiment.”

“... Leonard Provois, F-31, 2-14-51, Santa Clara, N.Y.” “F” meant private; 31 was the 31st Infantry Regiment, Johnson’s unit.

And so 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 if he would witness.

About 10 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 a salt 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 his 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 punched me in the face and with a stiff leather whip and assured me he would never return home if he broke the rules again.”

Unknown 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 chronicle 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 Hawk, 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 1968 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 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 ordered the prisoners called “Tigers” to halt the procession. He climbed atop a dirt mound and ordered Maj. L. 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.

“Just put his pistol to (Thornton’s) head and shoot him,” Johnson said. “It splattered his skull and brains on us right there in the front row. That stays with you a long time.”