Bill Overmier had a good reason to join the Army in 1941; he needed gas money for his car – a yellow Chevy with red wheels, a black top and six horns. He related this and many more of his first hand experience in WWII to an audience of 65 people at the New Mexico Veterans’ Memorial on Saturday, April 13, 2013.

Bill was born in Mosquito Township near Decatur, IL. His mother contracted TB so the family moved to Los Lunas to help her fight the disease. He graduated from Albuquerque High School in 1937 and was working with his Dad as a carpenter when he enlisted.

Assigned to an Anti-Aircraft battery, Bill trained at Ft. Bliss, TX and then his unit was shipped to the Philippines where it was stationed at Fort Stotensberg when the war started. He spoke of the December air raids on Manila by the Japanese and the frustration that the 75mm guns of his unit couldn’t fire high enough to hit the bombers, They started fighting WWII with WWI equipment and ammunition – not up to the job.

His unit was moved to the six fortified islands in Manila Bay, starting with Corregidor and ending on Ft. Drum. They fought off Japanese air attacks daily until May, 1942 when the US Forces on Corregidor and the other islands surrendered. Kept in a POW camp in the Bataan Peninsula for awhile, he was one of several hundred POWs who were shipped to Japan and forced to work in the Mitsubishi Shipyard near Yokohama.

Among the experiences as a POW in Japan for 3 1/2 years that Bill related was the time when he saw 400 American B-29 bombers flying over Yokohama on their way to bomb Tokyo. Because many of the Japanese were making war materials in their homes, the US Army felt that the whole city was a military target. The homes were mostly wood and paper and the resulting fires were said to have killed over 100,000 persons.

Bill told the audience that one of the ships he had been working on was the conversion of an oil tanker to a light aircraft carrier. It was almost completed and tied up to a dock in the shipyard when one day six Navy Sp2c dive-bombers attacked it and sunk it right at the dock! Bill shouted and waved in his exuberance at that feat.

In 1945, Bill and the other POWs working in the shipyard were moved into tunnels nearby because of the constant US air raids. One day, one of the Japanese came up to him and used gestures and Pidgin English to tell him that a big bomb had been dropped on Japan. Bill just thought at first it was a blockbuster and didn’t find out until later it was the atomic bomb.

One day, some of the POWs were assembled and the head of the Japanese detachment guarding them announced: “Peace is Smiling” – the war was over. Bill and the other POWs were told not to tell others, which they promised to do (until they got out the door). Shipped from Yokohama to Tokyo, Bill finally was freed and returned home where he met his wife, Anna, of 65 years and became a successful engineer and builder.