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A Civilian POW in the Turmoil of WWII

By *Sophie Braccini*



Herb Brown in his apartment at Aegis Photo Sophie Braccini

Who remembers Wake Island? For most of us, the war in the Pacific started with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and moved to the Philippines before encompassing the whole Orient. But four hours after attacking Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Army swarmed Wake Island, an atoll 2000 miles south west of Honolulu where the U.S. Navy was building a base. Young Herb Brown, a twenty two year old civilian, was taken by surprise along with 450 marines and some 1200 civilians. The young man endured forty four months of the harshest captivity, which reduced his body to eighty nine pounds and stripped him of his humanity.

Now an 89 year old resident at Aegis in Moraga, Brown wants to testify about his piece of history. "We were attacked four hours after Pearl Harbor," he remembers, "we had received a telegraphic communication about the attack but were completely unprepared."

After repulsing a first attempted Japanese landing, the Americans were outnumbered by reinforced enemy troops and the atoll fell on December 23rd, twelve days after the first attack.

"I was petrified when it started," remembers Brown. The Marines gave him a gun and he defended the atoll ace with the rest of them. "We were out numbered ten to one, they had fifty three ships, two aircraft carriers and planes. They had blown up seven out of our 10 planes on the first day." The US relief party that had been assembled was ordered to turn around and never reached Wake, leaving it easy prey.

"I was prisoner on the island for a few days and then sent to the Chinese camp of Woosung on a Japanese boat named the Nitta Maru," recalls Brown, "the place had been deserted and was dilapidated. There started 44 months of captivity that took me to 4 different camps in China and Japan, each time getting to a worse place."

The former prisoner of war does not like to relive this painful past. Ann Randolph, a therapist at Aegis, helps him with remembering and putting things in writing. "You have no idea what it's like to wake up every morning to the sight of a gun and bayonet, to be constantly threatened and beaten, to see your companions being executed, to be constantly starving." Brown believes he owes his life to his "nasty disposition"; otherwise he thinks it would have been easier to just give up and die. "I was a trouble maker, I would have done anything to survive; cheat, steal. The sadism you are exposed to brings out the worst in human beings."

When he came back in 1945, weighing 89 pounds, no military service was there for him. No financial help, no doctors, nothing. His mother took care of him. He learned to eat normally again and started to fight the diseases he had contracted in the camps: malaria, dysentery, and beriberi, a nervous system ailment caused by vitamin B1 deficiency. If he is today in a wheel chair, Brown owes it to that condition.

In 1985, one year after his retirement, he finally got an honorable discharge from the US Navy and received veteran status. His standing remains confused since he was never a registered combatant. Interestingly enough, Brown spent most of his professional life in the Orient in international trades. His apartment at Aegis contains some of the art pieces he gathered. Brown lived in Rossmoor until 8 years ago when he lost his wife of 63 years. His best friend, who lives in Moraga, enticed him to move to Aegis.

Candice Moses, the marketing director at Aegis, has heard Herb tell his stories many times and was touched by it. She is looking for ways for the old POW to connect with local veterans with whom to share his story. To contact Herb Brown, call Aegis at 925 377-7900.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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