

**Of Patriots and Quiet Men:
One Who Built Bridges on the Kwai**

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Of Patriots and Quiet Men

By Richard Salzberg

*Man keeps on moving 'cause he can't keep still
Man has to set his goals and climb up the hill*

– Van Morrison

An engaging old fellow named Woody may have served you a drink once. As a bartender at the Norfolk Yacht and Country Club for 30 years, if he did serve you a drink it was a good one, and he probably told you a joke with an experienced twinkle in his eye. Woody is good at his job because he likes it. What he likes best: “Meeting people and swapping sea stories.”

The last part is a little joke because, although he would never say so, Woody can swap better sea stories than anyone he has ever served. As a teenager just out of high school in Chattanooga, Stanley Woody joined the Navy in 1940. Asked why, the answer is simple: “Employment.” When Woody’s aunt did not quite understand, an older sister had to sign for him. His 22-year Navy career began in Norfolk.

“I got off the train at the old station at the end of East Main, near where Harbor Park is now.” The bright lights and neon-lit action of the old Navy town impressed the youngster as “a good place for liberty;” but Stanley was headed for 12 weeks of Basic Training. The first thing the Chief told the raw recruit from Tennessee: “Forget your first name.”

During the next five years Woody saw a lot of history being made, and he was a part of everything he saw. His very first ship was a legend, the USS Houston, the heavy cruiser that became known as “the Ghost of the Java Sea,” and the flagship of the fabled Asiatic Fleet. Woody was the youngest member of her 1100-man crew. He got to see a bit of the old world before full-scale war broke out, as the still sharply etched chain tattoo on his right wrist declares. (“I got that in Shanghai in 1941. I woke up the next morning and it felt like my whole arm was on fire.”)

On Dec. 7, 1941, the Houston was at sea, having been among the ships saved out of Subic Bay in the Philippines the week before by Admiral Hart’s foresight. For the next three months it was a continual battle at sea, one of the most remarkable and heroic sagas in any navy’s history. The Houston became part of a spirited but hopeless defense by a frayed, desperate armada of Australian, British, and Dutch ships which faced the mightiest of Japanese fleets as all of Asia was falling around them.

Leadership aboard ship was excellent. “Morale until the end was great. It was gung-ho. We were going to be victorious and come back home to the States.” At the very end, it was only the USS Houston and Australia’s HMAS Perth. They were almost safely away. Then, in one historian’s words, on “February 28, 1942, the two cruisers ran afoul of a fresh Japanese fleet. The courageous ships gave all in a suicidal charge into the midst of the enemy fleet. Both ships

went to the bottom, blasted apart by close-range shellfire and torpedoes. When the Houston went down, the US Asiatic Fleet ceased to exist.”

That was the Battle of the Java Sea. Like their comrades on the ground in the Philippines, Woody and his shipmates bought valuable time and had helped save Australia from falling to the Japanese war machine. But the price was one heavy with blood and years. Woody was among the 349 out of 1100 who somehow survived the sinking, the machine-gunning of sailors in the water by the Japanese (“Not many people know that.”), and a 30-mile swim to Java through shark-infested waters. “All I saw was the mountain tops off in the distance. I didn’t really swim. We were just like driftwood in the sea. It took me 20 hours.”

Japanese landing parties had preceded them, and the survivors were immediately rounded-up at bayonet point as they lay exhausted on the beach. “That first night was the worst night. You thought it would end, but it would never end.” The senior officers were separated from the group, and the sailors, now POWs, were put to work shipping the spoils of Java back to Japan. “I thought that maybe in a year’s time it would be over. I had no idea. It took a year just to sink-in that I was a prisoner.”

Woody was on Java for three months, then shipped in a freighter to Singapore for three more, working as one of Japan’s slave laborers the whole time. Then came Rangoon, Burma. From there he was put to work on the notorious Burma-Thailand Railway, with 280 men from the Houston and tens of thousands of other prisoners (60,000 Allied POWs, and 250,000 Thai and Burmese villagers). Known to history as “the Railway of Death,” the railroad’s deadly 400-mile path included the Bridge on the River Kwai.

More than 16,000 prisoners died from injuries, illness, starvation, and exhaustion. “I got all the tropical diseases,” Woody recalls, “malaria, beri beri, yellow jaundice. But our group was lucky. The Japs gave us plenty of quinine—candy-coated, too. I don’t know how they ever got those.” He laughs. “Write that down.”

The Railway was completed in 1944. After 18 months in Burma, Woody was sent to a camp in Saigon, then a part of French Indochina, for more labor on the docks. He had been there for a year when the war ended. How did he know it was over? “After they dropped the second bomb, we got up and all the guards were gone. I remember when I got captured, March 1, 1942—I’ll never forget that one—but I don’t remember what date I was liberated. I was so happy it didn’t matter.” Whenever it was, the 150-pounder from Chattanooga was now weighing in at 98 pounds.

As he grows older he has become more reflective. “The experience is coming back more and more. How I survived I’ll never know. Maybe camaraderie. That’s the key to everything. Comradeship.” He smiles thoughtfully. “United we stand.” Then, in a gravelly drawl: “Surviving the sinking was more extraordinary than surviving the captivity.” He does not mention the months of fighting as a “hotshell man” for his anti-aircraft gun in the Java Sea.

Today Woody sees positive changes in attitudes towards history and the military; and, although reluctant to talk too much about himself, the inquiries of “young kids, 25 or 30 year-olds, mean a lot to me.” Woody has five children of his own. Mary Lou, his wife of 52 years, died last year. A life lesson: “Working all this time has helped, especially if you like it.” He still enjoys his work at the Club, still five nights a week, from 5 to 9 or 10 p.m. He values the years of “friendships and the relationships with his customers.” How much longer will he continue to work? “As long as I can make the last drink.”

If slowing down is inevitable (“I drank to so many people’s health that I’ve about ruined my own.”), Woody still attends the reunions of the USS Houston survivors which take place in

Houston, Texas each year on March 1. Of the original 349 only about 75 are alive today. Asked about Patriotism, it is simply “love for your country, and a concern for the interests of the country.”

How does Stanley Woody want to be remembered? He answers quickly, “As a true American.” Then he adds with a smile: “To the bone.”

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