

Bryghte Godbold Oral History Interview

M1: He didn't say "about 5,700" or "as many as 5,700." He just made a flat statement. And that, based on everything I've read and heard since I read his book, sounds high to me, but he obviously had to have a -- I mean, he didn't pull that figure out of thin air, I wouldn't think.

BRYGHTE GODBOLD: I've never given too much thought to the matter of how many casualties that were imposed on the Japanese, but I expect that Devereux's estimates and the book, his book, may have made this clear, well based on the Japanese losses for ships that were sunk off Wake, and that's probably why most of the losses occurred. The Japanese losses on the day of the attack, or landing, were probably not very high, and I don't have any idea of what high means, but there weren't thousands of Japanese killed on the day of the assault. I would guess that the number was in the low hundreds, on the day of the assault. In addition, you had some Japanese aircrews that were lost, but I expect the prominent number of Japanese were those that were aboard the ships that were sunk. I don't know whether that's helpful to you or not, because I really have never given much thought to that. Always, from my experience, the estimates of casualties imposed, whether

you're talking about World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or Wake Island, were high on whichever side was imposing the casualties. I think this is just almost a fact; it isn't a truism. I would think that the number of 5,700 was based on what I have just told you, and I would have guessed that it was high, but how high, I don't know. As I indicated a few moments ago, I've never really given much thought to how many casualties.

M1: Well, I pulled some information off the Marine Corps website the other day, and it estimated the casualties at 1,500. Gregory Urwin, who I think you've talked to, said "between 900 and 1,000." So there's a great disparity there, and...

BG: I would be inclined to go somewhere in the middle range, between the low estimate and Major Devereux's estimate. Off the cuff, it seems high to me, but like you, I'm sure that he didn't pull this figure out of the air. And I don't imagine that he had access to Japanese records at the time he wrote his book, and so, some place in the Japanese bureaucracy there are probably accurate numbers, but whether anyone could ever get them is problematical.

M1: You had served with Devereux previously, is that correct?

BG: Yeah.

M1: And you knew him pretty well.

BG: Yes, I knew him quite well.

M1: How would you describe him, personality-wise? Was he quiet, outspoken?

BG: Devereux was a quiet man, a reserved man, more of an introvert than an extrovert, a man of impeccable character. You could trust his word. But he was not a charismatic type of leader. He was a thoughtful, careful man. He was a courageous --

M1: Did he communicate this sense of trustworthiness to the men under him?

BG: Oh, yes, yes. A man that you would trust to lead you and I had great respect for him. He was not a man that you would call likeable, companionable, but he was highly respected, and wanted things done right. He was not a meddler; he didn't try to tell you how to do your job.

M1: Where had you served with him before Wake?

BG: I'd served with him in San Diego, in the same outfit that I was in at Wake Island, but I'd been in this outfit for what, a year before we left San Diego. He was in the organization at that time. He was a man of impeccable dress and always looked the part of a Marine, very careful about his appearance, and insisted on officers and Marines dressing properly.

M1: Even in prison camp, right?

BG: Even in prison camp.

M1: Incidentally, I spoke with Charlie Harrison recently, and he said to give you his regards.

BG: Good. Harrison was a good Marine. He doing all right?

M1: Pretty well. He said that he's had to have some counseling from the VA because he just had so much bad memories locked up inside his head, but he said he was doing all right.

BG: That's a penalty you have to pay for being intelligent.

M1: Yeah, yeah right. (laughter)

BG: Somebody like me don't have to worry about that kind of...
(laughter)

M1: Well, he said that he saw a lot worse in Korea and in Vietnam than he ever did at Wake.

BG: I wasn't in Vietnam; I was in Korea at the same time.

M1: Right, right. Well, I thought it was amazing that he rose through the ranks, all the way from a private to a lieutenant colonel. That's pretty amazing, isn't it?

BG: Absolutely first class.

M1: Now let's see. Oh, I wanted to ask you. We touched on this before when we were talking. I know that you went into the Marine Corps right out of Auburn University, right?

BG: Yes.

M1: Were you in some kind of an officer training program there at Auburn?

BG: I was in the Army ROTC. In those days, students who went to Auburn and many other schools were required to take two years of Army ROTC. Then as you entered the junior year, you could opt to continue in it, and if you continued till your graduation you got a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army Reserve. And I was chosen as one of two highest ROTC graduates by the president of the university, and we were offered direct commissions in the Marine Corps as a regular commission. Commission was probationary for two years. You couldn't marry, and they could separate you from the Marine Corps without the usual procedure. And at the end of two years, you took an examination. All of you came in at the same time, took an examination and that examination plus your fitness reports for the two years that you had been in the service were considered, and you got your permanent commission then, not as probationary commission, and you also got your rank on the lineal list. And I was fortunate enough among the hundred plus officers who entered in the same category as I did, from other universities and colleges, to end up number three on the list of people.

M1: I see. And what year did you graduate from Auburn?

BG: Nineteen thirty-six.

M1: I see. I wasn't aware that the ROTC in the universities was so active back in that early...

BG: Oh yeah. Yeah, just as I mentioned, there must have been a hundred universities and colleges that required ROTC for the first two years, of all male students, and as long as you were physically fit, and then the option to continue in your junior and senior year. If you decided to continue, you got nine dollars a month. They paid you then, and that was an incentive to many students recognizing that nine dollars was a lot more useful than it is...

M1: (laughs) Yeah, it went a lot further, didn't it? So, had you any overseas assignments before you went to Wake?

BG: I was on board ship; I was the junior officer of the Marine detachment on the USS *Pensacola*. I joined that detachment directly out of basic school. We all went to basic school in Philadelphia (phone rings) for nine months, and then my first assignment was in that Marine detachment on the USS *Pensacola*. And I spent a year on the *Pensacola*, and the ship was in the Pacific. In those days, the ships went to sea a great deal of the time, and we spent time in Alaskan waters and Hawaiian waters.

M1: *Pensacola* was a cruiser?

BG: Cruiser, a heavy cruiser.

M1: In talking to a number of the enlisted men who were on Wake, I got the feeling that they all thought that the Japanese were probably going to execute them after they surrendered. Did you have any fears along those lines?

BG: None. I'm sure that I thought about death, but it was really not a problem to me. I gave it relatively little thought. Had the feeling that the Japanese were very interested in building a reputation as a first-rate nation that adhered to the generally accepted rules of international law and of the customs and traditions of the military. That didn't obtain, as you know, in some Japanese commands, such as in the Philippines, but I had the impression that the Japanese Marines who landed at Wake were professional soldiers and Marines and that their leaders were professional. That doesn't mean you liked them by any means, but our treatment, after we were captured, was not pleasant, but there was no physical torture. So I never worried about this, but there was also the eventuality always in your mind that some Jap will decide that he doesn't want you around.

M1: Yeah. Well, I can't remember, I think it was Frank Gross I was talking to, and he said something about, they lined the men up when they surrendered, and there was Japanese there with machineguns trained on them, and he was expecting to

just get blown away at any moment, and apparently, some officer came around and talked to the guy with the machinegun and then after that, everything was okay, but he said he was fully expecting to get shot. That would have been a deterrent to most of the men wanting to surrender, it seems to me. I mean, if they thought they were going to get killed anyway, they probably might have been more prone to want to go out fighting than be gunned down by their captors. He said that they got the idea from what the Japanese had done like in Manchuria, with some of the Chinese over there, but I think there was just a lot of hostility between the Japanese and the Chinese that maybe didn't exist between the --

BG: Yeah, and they treated the Chinese as an inferior race of people, and vice versa.

M1: Right, yeah, yeah. Did you know Cunningham at all?

BG: No, I didn't know Cunningham. I'd met him. He and I came to Wake, as I recall, on the same ship which arrived there only a week before the war started, and of course, traveling out on the ship, I visited with him. And I don't believe I ever saw him, if so, only in passing, in the week that I was on Wake before the war started, and I didn't see him at all during the fighting. So I had general impressions about him gained mostly from casual

conversations on the ship during the week or so that it took to get to Wake.

M1: Right. Was it considered at all unusual for a Navy man to be put in an overall command of an island where only a very small group of the men were Navy?

BG: No, not at all, because while there were very few Navy people at the time, it was to be a submarine base and a Navy air station, so he was brought out then as I guess the first commanding officer of the island, and the same thing obtained at most all of the other islands in the Pacific. Where there was an airbase and a sub base, or even one of them, a Navy officer was in command, and the Marines were there to defend the island, and were under the overall command of the Navy commander of the island. If the war hadn't come along and in probably three or four months, there would have been a commanding officer of the Naval air station and commanding officer of the submarine base, and then an island commander, and that was Cunningham, and then a Marine defense force, commanding officer of all these units report to Cunningham. So it's not unusual. And, it was the proper way to do it.

M1: Yeah, yeah. This, by the way, is the 60th anniversary of the failed invasion attempt.

BG: (inaudible) (laughter)

M1: Yeah, I just happened to think of that on the way over here this morning. There on that last day, after the Japanese got ashore, we talked a little bit about the situation the last time we were discussing it, and I'm just wondering -- this is just an off-the-wall question, but how long do you think the Marines could have held out if they hadn't surrendered when they did? Was it a matter of hours, or could they conceivably have held out for a few days?

BG: Without help?

M1: Yeah.

BG: Tough question.

M1: Let me --

BG: Two days. Two or three days. Here's the reason for my answer, is that knowing what you know after the island was surrendered, that the capabilities that were still available about the fight on the ground, would have permitted the fighting to have gone on that day, and the Marines were in position that they could have repelled any major landing during that day. Japanese would probably been able to reinforce their forces the next night, that is the night of the day of the surrender. On the second day, the day after the surrender, the Marines could probably have still held out. By then, the Japanese would have been able to bring more aircraft, more naval gunfire against the

Marines and would have been able to direct it more specifically against the strong points, if you will, of the Marines there. And during the second night after the surrender, I think the Japanese would have been determined to get this assault completed, and probably on the second or at the most the third day, without help, the Marines would probably have had to surrender.

M1: Well, and if help had come, how much help would it have taken, do you think?

BG: It would have taken the help to destroy or drive away the naval forces, the Japanese naval forces, so that the island could not be reinforced, the Japanese.

M1: And that was my understanding, and again, I may be wrong on this, but from what I read, the Japanese had 1,500 to 2,000 men that they could commit as landing forces. Do you think the bulk of these troops were already ashore?

BG: No. I don't think so.

M1: You think as many as half of them were ashore?

BG: Maybe.

M1: Well, they had used the cover of darkness pretty effectively to get ashore, and of course, the element of surprise was over, and the sun was up by the time the surrender actually took place so you could see what was going on; whereas, for several hours there, the Marines

were pretty much fighting blindly. I also heard that there were only 200 Marines with the taskforce that was on its way to relieve Wake, 200 that were to be landed on the island as reinforcements. Is that your understanding, or do you know?

BG: I would guess that that's probably the correct number, but I don't really know.

M1: Would that few or that many, as the case may be, have made a difference, if they could have gotten ashore to join your forces?

BG: Knowing the type of units people that were coming, as I recall, there were no infantry Marine units. They were defense, battalion type of people, not organized as infantry, certainly capable of fighting and capable of fighting well, but we're not landing a marine infantry company of 200 men who were armed with the machineguns and mortars and so on designed for close infantry combat. So, I don't think that, as far as the help in fighting the Japanese on the island is concerned, that this force, the relief force that was coming, would have made any measurable impact. The relief force, the only way that it could make a difference would be to drive the Japanese away from the island. This would entail sinking that carrier -- so damaging, and I can't tell you how many carriers that

were there -- and driving the transports or sinking the transport so that the Japanese lost control of the waters off Wake. In that case, if that had happened -- and I have no idea whether it could or couldn't, because I don't know the relative strengths of the Japanese navy and our own Navy in those waters -- if that could have happened, and the Navy, our Navy, would be able to launch air strikes against the Japanese on the ground there, the island might have been held. It would be very important that you understand, that was a lot of ifs. And it also must be kept in mind that the Japanese had airbases in the Marshalls, roughly 700 miles away, and could have mounted bomber attacks repeatedly on our Navy forces there, and on us on the island. So just so many ifs here; I'm giving you the most optimistic scenario.

M1: Right, right, right. Was there a shortage of ammunition among the Marines on the island at all?

BG: I'm not aware that there was. Whether there was enough ammunition to fight in heavy combat more than 24 hours, I just don't know. But I don't believe lack of ammunition, or rifles and machineguns and that type of weapon, which would be useful in infantry fighting, I don't believe that was a problem. There was, as far as I know, no problem of lack of ammunition for the antiaircraft guns nor for the

seacoast artillery. I don't think there was really a problem. We're talking about a two or three day fight, and that's about all that could have been put up there.

M1: Do you think that the radio messages from Wake, based on the information they had at the command post, gave an unnecessarily gloomy perspective to the situation there, and that might've been a factor in convincing the taskforce to turn around and go back?

BG: I have no idea, really don't, because I'm not too familiar with the radio traffic. I just don't have any idea about that. I just had never really thought about it.

M1: Well. When you were transported to China as a POW, did anybody in the States know where you people were? Did you have any contact with anybody, your families or anyone, during the period that you were there?

BG: When we arrived at Shanghai, the Japanese brought reporters aboard and there were photographs taken, and there were some interviews, and I'm sure those interviews and photographs were transmitted to parts of the Western world. Now how far they got down to families, in Alabama, for example, I don't know. Then after we got to the prison camp outside of Shanghai, the Japanese brought reporters to the camp and they took photographs, and those photographs were made available (inaudible), and I know they were made

available in short time. But as far as direct communications, there was none for some months. We were allowed to write a letter, and whether it ever got home or not, I don't know.

M1: Do you know whether your family knew whether you were dead or alive during this time?

BG: Oh, they knew I was alive at the time, shortly after the time that we arrived in China, whether this is a week or two weeks or two months, but it wasn't any longer than a couple of months.

M1: I see, okay. Did you have contact with representatives of the Red Cross and things like that?

BG: Red Cross came to the camp, I think officially, once, brought an inspection party aboard, which walked around with the Japanese and looked at the camp and talked with a few people, and brought some individual packages of food with them. But I don't recall having personally talked to any of the Red Cross people. I imagine that they talked to the senior American military officer. There was a Marine lieutenant colonel, (inaudible) colonel (inaudible). We got some Red Cross packages a couple of times there after this, and over a four-year period, that doesn't mean you got very much. But as I recall, there was only one official Red Cross visit to the camp. There may have been

other visits that we didn't know about, they just came and talked to the Japanese, but we would have probably known if they...

M1: You were pretty much cut off from all contact with the outside world. I mean, it was --

BG: Yes, but we knew what was going on in the war because we had clandestine radios. So I knew, the next morning, about the Battle of Midway.

M1: I guess there was some celebrating went on.

BG: Very quietly, because not many people had the information, because we had a radio in my room in the barracks, and it came on every night about after the camp was secured. And there were probably two or three other radios in the camp, too. The information that was received was not widely disseminated from any one of the sources -- but I expect people kept reasonably up to date -- because people who possessed the radios knew that the penalty for this might have been death -- might have been.

M1: Is there anything that comes to mind, of a significant nature, that we haven't talked about at all?

BG: That's sort of difficult to say. And I gather you've already surmised that the prisoner of war experience that I had, and the other people at Wake Island had who were sent to China, was considerably different from the treatment

that was received by those that were captured in the Philippines, for example. So, it's hard for me to say that we were treated brutally. It's easy to say that you were at times treated harshly, but mostly, our experience was boredom and being hungry, rather than being starved and being physically abused. The reasons for this, you probably already know from the interviews, were several. One, we were located in China, and the Japanese didn't (bell begins chiming) call a simple thing to go out and confiscate grain, (bell stops chiming) flour, occasionally some meat, and other food items from the Chinese, and pay them in Japanese military scrip, which had relatively little value. So we were able to be sustained, physically, a lot better than if we'd been in Japan, where we certainly couldn't have lived at a high scale we were living at there. And so that's one reason we were treated (inaudible). Second, we were located outside of a major international city, which was controlled by the Japanese, but you had a presence of Russians and high-ranking Chinese who were friendly to the Japanese, and Italians, and so they just became sort of a showplace for them -- not that they brought visitors in, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). They also were able to confiscate athletic gear, recreational gear and so on, and bring it out there

and dump it on the camp and say, "Ya'll use it." They allowed us to have all sorts of recreational activities, and we benefited from. I was the recreation officer for the camp for two years, and during that time, the physical abilities of the prisoners, and their desire to participate in softball and volleyball and so on, decreased as the effect of less than ample food began to become apparent. Also, the Japanese command there was more enlightened, I expect, or maybe more distant from the fighting, than you would find in say, the Philippines, and they didn't have the great animosity maybe towards the Americans that you would find in other places where half the fighting was. And, the commanding officers of the camp were usually very senior colonels who were no longer able to go, or maybe inept enough that they didn't send them to war any longer, so they didn't have any great desire to make life unbearable. So there were a number of reasons there, and I'm not trying to say that this was a very nice place to be, but it was certainly not comparable to what happened to a lot of other Americans.

M1: Did you know a Marine named LeRoy Schneider?

BG: What's his name?

M1: LeRoy Schneider.

BG: I probably did, but I --

M1: Well, I had talked to him on the phone, and he was apparently really kicked around a lot by the Japanese during his confinement there, and as a matter of fact, one of his kidneys was injured so badly that he had to have it removed after he got home.

BG: Where was he? Was he in the Shanghai camp?

M1: As far as I know, yeah. On the other hand, I've talked -- some of the men that were wounded and left on Wake and were taken to Japan, they were apparently treated very well.

BG: I know of few, if any, incidents of Marines at the Shanghai camp being physically injured in a serious way. All of us had one or two occasions where somebody hit us with a rifle butt, and (laughs) most of the time, we deserved it.

(laughter) But I'm not aware of any one being seriously hurt like being more than hospitalized for a night or two, and I think I would have known about it, because being the recreation officer of the camp, I had more freedom to go to the various barracks and entrée to the various barracks, both civilian and military, in carrying out the job I had. And I was appointed by the American military, not by the Japanese, but I was accepted by the Japanese, who were told that "this officer, this captain, is our recreation officer, and he'll be responsible for the athletic fields and the equipment, and running the library and so on." And

the Japanese came to me often, and if they had any problem, and took it out on me. Else helpful (inaudible). But I'm just not aware of people being injured; assaulted physically, yes. But I must say that I was put into solitary confinement for three days, but I brought it on myself. (laughter) And it wasn't (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

M1: Well, maybe you're just more philosophical than some of these guys. I mean (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

BG: Oh yeah, I'm sure that's right. Also, as time goes on, events gain in stature. That's a human characteristic that all of us have. Things get more lurid and more dangerous and more... I don't know. (laughs)

M1: More dramatic. Well listen, I really appreciate you spending this time with me again.

BG: I don't know whether I've been helpful --

M1: It's been very helpful, and --

END OF AUDIO FILE