

Local POW group getting smaller

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World War II veteran and former POW Edwin Joe is shown in his Bakersfield home. In the background are enlarge photographs of Joe, when he was a tail gunner in an American bomber, and his wife, Gloria, who was in the Coast Guard during World War II.

Photo courtesy of DIANNE HARDISTY

Once there were more than 30. Now there are only two. And when they are gone, likely the Cessna-Sergeant Chapter of the American Ex-Prisoners of War will cease to exist.

There is a faint hope that the Bakersfield organization of mostly World War II veterans will be "saved" by comrades stepping out of the shadow of obscurity and signing up for membership.

But the reality is that World War II veterans are dying off at a national rate of more than 1,000 a day, according to the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. It is unlikely that a veteran of that war -- a veteran who also happens to be a former prisoner of war -- is living in our midst, just waiting to join the Cessna-Sergeant Chapter.

American former prisoners of war from any conflict can join. But the majority of the U.S. captives came out of World War II, when more than 130,000 were taken prisoner on European and Pacific battlefields. In the Korean War, about 7,100 were reported captured and interned. After the Vietnam War, when 725 were reported captured, the number of American POWs dwindled to single digits in subsequent wars. The numbers are higher if "missing in action" are included.

Former World War II Army Air Corps gunner Edwin Joe and former Army infantryman James Wilson are the only remaining former POWs in the Bakersfield chapter. Veterans' widows, sons and daughters also can be members. The Cessna-Sergeant Chapter is headed by Richard Ornelas, the son of Korean War POW Isaac Ornelas, who died five years ago. But to be recognized by the national organization (see www.AXPOW.org), the unit must have former POWs as members.

"We will keep going as long as they want to keep going," said Ornelas, explaining the chapter is like an extended family, helping and supporting veterans, their relatives and survivors.

Ornelas is convinced there are former POWs living in Kern County, but "they are taking care of their own situations on their own."

Seeking camaraderie, Joe joined the chapter in the mid-1970s, shortly after it was formed. Wilson joined in 2000, when his wife, Mary, spotted a meeting announcement in *The Californian* and thought the unit would be a good place for her husband to get help.

In the chapter, both men say they found the support and understanding that only can be given by comrades who have experienced the same horrors of war and imprisonment. Both say they miss their friends and brothers who have passed away.

Joe, 88, and Wilson, 87, know when they are gone, the book likely will be closed on the Cessna-Sergeant Chapter. It is a story that is being told nationwide. The *Air Force Times* recently reported that two to three chapters a month are closing. In addition to the loss of support, the closures mean the loss of a public reminder of the sacrifices POWs made for their country. —

Born in China, Joe was brought to Bakersfield as a 2-year-old to be reunited with his father, who ran a combination pharmacy and gambling hall on 21st Street. The father and son lived in a basement under the business.

He graduated from Bakersfield High School in 1940, the same year Joe said police cracked down on gambling, prompting the pair to move to Mississippi, where his father re-established his gambling business. Joe soon moved to Houston, where he became a cook in a restaurant. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, Joe joined the Army Air Corps.

Joe wanted to be a pilot. Instead he was sent to a week of training and became a tail gunner on an A-20 bomber.

As part of a three-man crew, he flew 55 missions in an airplane named Built for Action.

On Sept. 29, 1944, the crew volunteered for a mission over Bitburg, Germany. Returning to their base in England, their plane was hit by anti-aircraft guns. The pilot crashed and died in the plane. Joe and the turret gunner parachuted to safety.

Joe said the pair became separated, with the turret gunner being attacked and killed by German townspeople when he landed. Joe managed to hide for seven days until he was discovered by German troops. He and other captives were hauled in coal cars to Stalag IV, near the border of Poland, where he was held for 10 months.

As the end of the war neared, the German guards marched the POWs for 83 days before they set them free. Soon Joe and his comrades found the allied lines, and they were on their way home to the U.S.

Joe received shrapnel wounds in his leg in an earlier air battle. When he was captured, his feet were frostbitten and he had to be carried. In recognition of his injuries, he was awarded two Purple Hearts.

Although Joe reluctantly gives details about his captivity, his daughter, Kathy, notes that he was forced to sleep in a dirt trench under a metal grate and was given potato water to drink. He lost 25 pounds from his already slight frame.

"All I wanted to do is eat," Joe recalled of his release.

Joe was discharged from the service in Houston. He met his wife, Gloria, on a trip to New Orleans. After the couple married, Joe and his bride moved to Bakersfield, where he opened a grocery store. For a short time, he also operated a Hawaiian restaurant with a partner. A stroke forced his retirement and the closure of Eddie's Market on East Brundage Lane.

Gloria and her twin sister, Lorraine, also joined the service during the war. Five of their six brothers were already in overseas service.

Edwin J. Joe (also known as Jeong Shew Wing) and Gloria Toy Gim Jee are included in the book "Duty & Honor: A Tribute to Chinese American World War II Veterans of Southern California."

Gloria died last year. Edwin uses a wheelchair. The walls of his northeast Bakersfield home are filled with pictures of their three adult children, and their many grandchildren and great grandchildren.

No doubt his family's presence accounts for the nearly constant smile on his face.

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