



CHARLES HOUSE

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Dear Neil:

In response to your questions on how I entered the Naval Weather Service, my experiences leading up to my assignment to Alaska, evading the Japanese, and the ultimate necessity of surrendering. The other portion covering the experience as a POW cover a three year period and would take too much time to answer at present, but will supply more details later if you find the following of interest in your History of The Naval Weather Service. You have my permission to use any or all of the following material.

In the fall of 1934, I was transferred from the USS Portland to the US Naval Air Station, Lakehurst, New Jersey to attend the Lighter Than Air School, in the hopes of becoming a crew member of the USS Macon, a large dirigible. Before the Lighter Than Air School finished the following spring the USS Macon crashed off Point Sur, California putting a crimp in the Lighter Than Air Program in the United States Navy. This was a serious blow to me, as my strongest desire and ambition was to become a crewman on a dirigible.

When our school was finished I found myself as one of a few non-rated men on the station and was assigned to a more or less permanent mess cook duty. Sgt. "Dutch" Hoffman USMC was living

in the barracks and counseled me on the advantages of becoming a Navy weather man. Sgt. Hoffman arranged a meeting with Lcdr. Reichelderfer, the Executive Officer and the Acting Aerological Officer, who transferred me to the Aerological Office for duty. A short time later Lt. Orville became Aerological Officer and I worked under him for the next year and a half. My opportunity for the Primary Aerographer's School came in January 1937 and I graduated in May 1937. After that I served with weather units on the USS Saratoga, USS California, and on the U S Naval Air Station, San Diego, California where I was serving at the start of World War II.

Things happened fast after the Start of World War II. Radio Silence by all ships at sea created very large blank spots on weather maps as weather reports from ocean going ships in the Pacific were discontinued. As weather systems moved from West to East there was no way predicting the weather for the west coast of the United States and Alaska. This necessiated the opening of a chain of weather reporting stations on Attu, Kiska, Adak, and Atka in the Aleutian Islands. The weathermen to run these weather stations turned out to be Aerographers Mates, First Class House, Hudson, Lynch, and Omang. We were ordered into Patrol Wing Four at NAS Seattle to await our equipment and transportation to Alaska.

We left Seattle on 14th April, 1942 on the USS Grant for transportation to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. There we worked on the Aerological Station under Chief Darr. Assignments to the islands

were made by drawing slips from a hat. Omang drew Attu, and House, Kiska. Hudson drew Adak and Lynch, Atka. It was decided to move Omang and his crew onto Attu and House onto Kiska right away. The signs of war were evident at Dutch Harbor. Every morning just before dawn we would leave our warm bunks and file out to trenches with rifles at the ready. This was a daily routine, except on Wednesday, when we were allowed to stay in bed and carry on a holiday routine. This was to fool the Japanese, supposedly they would not find us sleeping on a Sunday morning as they did at Pearl Harbor.

Early in May I left Dutch Harbor on the USS Williamson, and Omang and his crew were on the USS Casco bound for Attu. As the ship was short handed we were pressed into service on the gun crews. On the second night out, as we steamed West through the Bering Sea, the OD made his rounds and said, "Shoot at anything you see, there are no friendly forces in this area". That incident brought me into the war, from now on it could be me. After that when on gun duty I kept my finger on the trigger and constantly combed the horizon for enemy ships.

We steamed into Kiska Harbor on 18 May, 1942 for a glimpse of three solitary buildings, which was to be my home for the next several years, I thought. We anchored in the harbor and the Skipper sent a signalman and a quartermaster ashore to stand on top of a high hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Instructions to these two men were to signal back immediately to the ship, if

they saw any ships or planes, and they would be left on the island and the ship would put to sea to be ready for battle in unrestricted waters. The thought passed through my mind that he was being skittish about the military situation at Kiska, and we were expected to remain there permanently.

The ship sent a refrigerator repairman ashore to repair the walk-in icebox so we could store our meat supply. The ship unloaded a six-month supply of provisions on the beach with a motor launch. A strong South Wind was blowing and we had to stand in the water, chest deep, and hold the launch so it wouldn't broach.

After about 45 minutes in the cold water the launch left and we headed for the bunkhouse and for a hot shower to thaw out and we seemed no worse for the experience. We were then alone, ten men against the world and the Japanese. We had to work late that night getting our supplies in the refrigerator and the storeroom. That food was our only chance to survive the next six months. The next few days were spent in getting settled and starting a three hourly weather reporting routine. General Boliver Buckner, the Alaskan Defence Commander flew in with a flight of PBYS for a visit. We spent most of the day walking over the Island to study terrain. He impressed on me that the most important thing outside of the regular weather reporting was that we report any enemy sightings immediately by radio.

After General Buckner left a couple of PBYS stayed under

Lcdr. Russel and they scouted for Japanese Forces. There was a large stack of aviation gasoline barrels on the beach. With a punt we would tow a barrel of gasoline out to the anchored planes, and let the barrel float upright, while we pumped the gasoline into the planes. This was a long tedious task, but the aircrews got some rest, while we were refueling, before going on another patrol. The patrols returned to Dutch Harbor and we continued to settle in.

On the 24th of May, 1942 a Japanese plane flew over. We checked the recognition books and identified it as a type 97 and prepared a sighting message for Dutch Harbor. We were unable to raise Dutch as they were used to working us on a three hour schedule and didn't answer. We opened up on the emergency band and raised Sitka, who got us in touch with Dutch Harbor. They came right back and asked for an altitude course and speed of the plane. This was sent right back. Dutch Harbor then came through and inquired if we had really seen an airplane. This I thought was ridiculous and I just ignored that message. That night we were listening to a report on a short wave radio station in San Francisco, and they predicted a Japanese attack on Alaska on the West Coast of the United States within ten days. We assumed that the basis for the prediction was our sighting report.

We then started preparations in case of an attack upon Kiska. We dug zig-zag trenches so we would have some protection against bombing or strafing. Tents were set up, in two places away from the main camp, and stocked with food and ammunition in case

our buildings got knocked out. In just a few days the prediction of attack came true. Our Radioman woke us up early one morning by yelling ATTACK, ATTACK, ATTACK. We could neither see nor hear anything, then the radioman explained that the radio operator at Dutch Harbor was describing an attack on Dutch Harbor. It was repulsed and tried again the following day but repulsed. I often wonder if it was a coincidence or did the Japanese have intelligence and plan the initial attack on Dutch on a Wednesday morning?

We certainly didn't want to get caught, so we carefully estimated and plotted the Japanese position using a 10 knot speed. At night we slept in our clothes with our guns at the ready.

By June 6, 1942 we figured the Japanese were well past Kiska on their return to Japan and we relaxed and undressed for bed. Just after 0200 hours on 7 June, 1942, Winfrey AG3 sleeping in the bunk above me shouted ATTACK ATTACK. I told him to go back to bed, it is not time to get up, and that he was having a bad dream. Wimpy then turned on the lights and showed me a bullet hole in his leg. About that time I observed window glass in our bunk room being broken by bullets. Our outside lookout had chosen this time to come in and make a cup of coffee. We dressed hurriedly and Turner turned the heating stove up full, and I stuffed all the communication ciphers into the hot stove. During this time I observed the glass cases covering the selsym wind recording instruments breaking from Japanese bullets. As I ran from the building the first light permitted the observation of

many Japanese landing craft moving up the inner harbor with machine guns blasting away from their bows. AG2c Turner, who had been outside for a couple of minutes and adjusted to the light suggested that we spread out and move up the hill toward the low clouds for cover. As we spread and moved the Japanese would shoot at us, we would drop down and they would train on another moving target. In this early morning light the tracer bullets looked like baseballs curving toward us. Luckily for us we could dodge the tracer and because of the distance the tracers had traveled they were lighter and consequently higher than the regular bullets, which I could see hitting the dirt short of their mark. In about 300 yards we reached the cover of fog and were not visible to the gunners. I scrambled madly up the hill until overcome by exhaustion and lay on the ground for a rest. The sound of footsteps seemed to be closing in. I pressed my ear to the ground and listened to the rhythmic beat and realized it was my heartbeat. Reason took over and I analyzed my situation. I was alone, not warmly dressed, but had grabbed a couple of gray blankets as I ran outside. The Japanese were landing in Force and I would assume that they would knock out our facilities and leave, so I must evade them until they left Kiska. For that day I moved next to some gray rocks and covered with gray blankets and did not make a move until darkness. During the day there was some shooting in different places and a few planes flying around by afternoon. A summer day in Alaska is very long especially when one is alone, in danger and your whole world just pulled out from under you. The goal for the

first night was to locate some of the food, a gun and some ammunition that was stashed in a ravine a couple of miles Southeast of my present position.

As soon as darkness arrived I set off in haste trying to get to the food cache. I became overheated and would gulp water from the small streams and grab up mouthfulls of snow from drifts. This made me nauseated and I threw up what food I had left in my stomach.

After crisscrossing the area several times, I was unable to locate the cache and the sky was lighting in the East. I then decided to go to the Southeast coast of the island. Just as daylight arrived I was crossing a stream and fell in. I was soaked to my neck. As the sun warmed, I decided to dry my clothes by spreading them on the grass to dry. Just at that time a Japanese patrol boat anchored just off shore and remained there all day. That pinned me down. I rolled up in my blankets and stayed in the creek ravine. That was no place for me, so decided to move inland up the hill. During the night I passed a creek bank that looked like it would make a good cave. My only tools for digging was a handful of 30-30 shells and it turned out to be slow digging so I gave up that idea.

As dawn was breaking, I settled on a small meadow by a stream, that gave me a full view of the harbor, but it also put me in plain view. I tried to sleep most of the day curled up in my gray blanket by some gray rocks. It proved to be an interesting

place as I watched the ships come and go, and the patrol boat was methodically taking soundings of the outer harbor with a lead line. A couple of days had passed since I had last eaten, my thoughts turned to food. The only thing available for food was limited vegetation; tundra grass, wild celery, and lupine bulbs. An old fur trapper that I had met at Dutch Harbor had told me "There is nothing poisonous growing in the Aleutian Islands", so I decided to start eating the vegetation. The wild celery was bitter, so I eliminated that, and concentrated on lupine bulbs and tundra. On the eighth day I realized that I had not had a bowel movement, so decided to concentrate on filling up with tundra. The tundra didn't seem to agree with me, as I became very sick and nauseated, then an urge for a bowel movement. The stool was mostly undigested tundra mixed with clotted blood.

All this happened during midday and I was in plain view of several ships in the outer harbor. I began thinking that this was a poor place to stay, but in a day or so a PBV made a bombing approach over my area toward the main harbor. Flack from the AA guns was falling all around me. That made up my mind and I would move out with the coming night to a cove on the North Central coastline. It turned out to be a bad night for traveling as a steady rain set in. Upon approaching the north coast I saw a cave in a steep bank just above a small creek. That looked like a good home, so I crawled in to sleep. The rain was dripping from the cave roof and got my blankets wet. The wind shifted to

the Northwest and there was colder temperature and a few snow flurries to add to my discomfort.

By experimenting with my environment I was able to subsist at that location for another forty days. There was a plentiful supply of new tundra for food. By this time I discovered that I could eat the inside, tender part of the stem. It was tasty, something like fresh corn. I was able to eat enough tundra for a daily bowel movement. Angle worms from the nearby stream provided some protein even though they were a little bitter. The dry tundra from last year made a very good shelter, by placing a two foot layer on the ground and folding my blankets over that. The blankets were covered with another 18 inches of tundra. I simply crawled in between the blankets for a nice dry, warm and soft bed. It was easy to change my sleeping routine back to nights by gathering my tundra, and filling a canvas hood, doubling as a water bucket, in the early morning hours. The day was spent eating the tundra. I was careless in sorting out the coarse parts of the tundra and throwing the new fresh grass over my haystack. The rain followed the green grass right through and I got wet in a rainstorm. After that I was careful to keep the grass separated and the dry grass would absorb the rain a few inches on top, leaving it dry and warm below.

I had a pencil but nothing to write on, so I kept track of time by making a mark on the pencil every day, and every seventh day was a larger mark. What does one do with all that time? Think - think of how I might get out of this situation. There

didn't seem to be any desirable alternatives. The only hope was that there might be an invasion, but that seemed improbable at the time think of my wife and young daughter that I had left behind, wondering if I might ever see them again . . . thinking with some satisfaction that I had taken out the maximum amount of government life insurance on them Thinking and sometimes dreaming of American style food.

If I were looking for seclusion, I had found it. There were no human beings in sight, however, one day a dog came running up, stopped and stared at me, then ran off. Another time a fighter plane came down the ravine with his machine guns blazing away. For a minute I thought he was after me, but he continued seaward, spraying bullets into the water. On another occasion I was awakened by a very sharp explosion from the other side of the island and could feel the ground tremor. B-17 raids were becoming quite frequent. One day a B-17 put on a good show. The plane was producing a very good condensation trail and with this he drew a large circle over the island, then double crossed the circle indicating a target.

On the 48th day I was on my way to the creek for some water when I fainted. This called for some soul searching; if I remained there I would surely die. I then carefully wrote my name on an old canvas hunting jacket that I was wearing so that my remains would be identifiable, if found. If I surrendered to the Japanese they might kill me, but it was my only lease left for life. Surrender with it's chance of execution, surrender

with it's shame and humiliation, and surrender with it's uncertainties was the only option. Early the next morning I started the slow climb over the hill to surrender. By going in a straight line, I thought some time might be saved, however, one incline proved too steep and I slid back down. Then I had to take the long way back.

As I neared the summit by midmorning, a Japanese AA gun emplacement came into view. There was patchy fog moving past and I would simply drop into the tall tundra when it cleared and walk toward the gun emplacement during the fog. I got right close to the gun and was then faced with the surrender act, as it was humiliating and scary. Traditionally a white flag is used, so I ripped off a piece from my undershorts and waved it as I marched in. Some of the Japanese marines ran toward me and assisted me as I was pretty lean and gaunt at that time. They would indicate which persons I should salute. They poured some tea and gave me some biscuits. A flight of B-17's were approaching the island, so two marines took me a short distance from the sand bagged gun revetment and stayed with me while their AA gun shot at the planes. The B-17's made their bombing run and left.

The officer in charge of the gun seemed to be in a nasty mood. He barked orders to a couple of soldiers and they jammed their bayonets into place with the cold click of steel. Then he motioned for me to follow him. I was apprehensive and the thought passed through my mind that he might just take me down the path and have the bayonets stuck into me.

After a short while the camp headquarters came into view and I had the feeling of being spared again. The change that the Japanese had made was phenomenal; they had completed over twenty-four buildings in the short space of forty-nine days that I was hiding out. Arriving back of the headquarters, they had me set on a grass sack. A large ring of Japanese formed a large ring around me and just stared. I had the feeling of a monkey in a zoo. They served me some tea, and dinner, then later some tea and biscuits. The ring remained constant for several hours with some dropping out and others taking their place. Late in the afternoon, I was put into our old power station, given some grass sacks and blankets for a bed.

The Japanese curiosity did not stop as a long line formed at the window and they would have a minute or so to look at me then move off. Darkness put an end to the staring and for the first night for a long time I had the protection of a building. A rather steady rain beat on the shingle roof. It sure felt cozy to have shelter again. That night a guard checked me about every 30 minutes by shining a bright flashlight into my eyes, and woke me to see if I was alright. The next morning a doctor arrived and checked me over. He told me McCandless SC 2c and Gaffy SIC were captured on the first morning. They were running through the fog and ran right into a battalion of Jap soldiers that had landed up the coast and were marching into our camp from the rear. Our hospital corpsmen and Winfrey AG3 came in after a couple of days and the Japanese doctor took the bullet out of Winfrey's leg.

The doctor also informed me that by the end of 11 days nine of the men had checked in, with only one survivor out, and presumed dead.

The Japanese laid down some rules of my confinement. I was to stay in the powerhouse, and was allowed to go to the toilet, go to the pond between the headquarters and the bay for my morning washup and for washing my dishes and my clothes. They continued to give me all I could eat and my health came back fast. The line dwindled at the windows, only when a ship arrived would there be a new line at the window. Japanese reporters and photographers came by frequently for pictures and stories. Several of the Japanese would come in for a friendly visit. One I remember well, I called him BF, for Best Friend, for his homely wit reminded me of Benjamin Franklin. He was a reporter for a Tokyo newspaper before the war and was drafted, being used as a servant in the officer's quarters next door. He was dissatisfied about the war disrupting his life and landing him in a place like Kiska. He also had a liking for alcohol, which he pinched from the officers mess and stored in the attic of the power house. He would enter through a window with a bag full of liquor bottles and deposit them in the attic. He would always put his finger on his lip and say, "No speak". He usually brought me some goodies. On one occasion he was bringing me some raw eggs, and when he crawled through the window, the eggs broke in his pocket. He stuck his hand in the pocket and withdrew it - dripping with egg and shell, extending the hand toward me and said, "For you!" It

took a bit of doing to show appreciation without laughing. On another occasion he decided that we should get drunk. I participated very sparingly but he managed to hang on quite a load, and spent several hours telling me about his life. Shortly after that he disappeared from the scene.

Another frequent caller was an enlisted pilot that flew one of the Zeros on floats. He was also a very good artist and made portraits of me on several occasions. He was intent on teaching me Japanese and would write the alphabets for me to practice. One evening he came in and sketched some destroyers, and said, "Your country's warships right out there." He was correct for the next day we had a firing run and their range was just right as the path of shell explosions ran right through the middle of the camp. I was watching out the window and a Jap soldier was jumping into the shell holes for protection, but he kept diving from one hole to the next and it looked humorous to me and I laughed. He saw me, and the next day he made a point of pushing me off the walkway on my way back from the washing pond. The Executive Officer of the Station saw him push me, and he really chewed him out!

The Jap officer with a strong German accent decided he must interrogate me. He asked many questions, and finally finished up with "Who do you think will win the war?" My reply was, "I hope someone does soon.". For some reason he did not send the report forward, but it was left in his quarters when the Japs

departed hurriedly from Kiska the following year. The interrogation was sent to Washington. It was shown to my bother who was on duty with the Navy Photographic Lab there during the war.

One day when he had the command post duty there were overcast skies but lots of air activity. A bomb made a direct hit on the headquarters building on the kitchen stove. It came right through the side of the building. My meals usually came from that stove. I noticed that lunch had been sent to the Japs but nothing had arrived for me. I asked the OD where my lunch was and he replied, "Keep waiting!". After a short wait I tried again, and got another "Keep waiting". Shortly I tried again and he sent me up the hill to a mess hall to get my own rice. On the way back another bomb run was made. I dove for the ground and covered my rice dish with my body. A bomb landed very close and splashed mud all over me. The soil under the tundra was a heavy clay type and bombs would penetrate three or four feet and the clay would hold most of the shrapnel with the force of the explosion mostly upward.

Shortly the Japanese decided my health was good and that I must now start working. Each morning I would go to the beach at the head of the bay and fill sandbags all day. Most of the Japs working on these details were civilian workers and we had a good time together as we worked and talked. During air raids the executive officer told me always to return to my bunk at the powerhouse, but on one occasion there was a large flight of P-38's and P-39's that came over very quickly and I went into a tunnel near the bay with the Jap workers. It was a good raid, as it

knocked out 10 buildings and there was a lot of Japs killed by strafing. The ground really rocked during the bombing!

Just as soon as things settled down I went back to the powerhouse and the executive officer was standing on the walkway in front of a leveled powerhouse. His battle station was a command post dugout just across the walkway from the powerhouse. He looked at me and said, "You are a very lucky man." That night things looked critical for me. It was 7:00 pm and I had no place to spend the night, but the executive officer came by and asked me where I was staying, I told him that I didn't know, but in just a few minutes a Japanese sailor took me to the Japanese bath house and gave me a stack of blankets. He told me to sleep in the bathhouse. A quick inspection showed that the bath house was riddled with bullet holes. I curled up in a big wooden tub, but couldn't get completely comfortable. The next day they had mass funerals. The Japanese seem to have more respect for the dead than the living. We stood at attention most of the day as the coffins were carried by. There were some killed by the strafing on the ships and they were brought ashore by launch and the processions filed past. Just where the burial grounds were, I am not sure, but they went out of sight to the North East.

I continued working on the sand detail until the 19th of September 1942, when the executive officer informed me that I was going to Japan tomorrow. The next morning he told me to shave and I informed him that I did not have a razor. He came

back shortly with one.

As I left to board the ship my workmates at the beach gave me a rousing send off. After the war Captain J. S. Russell USN was writing up the Japanese offensive in the Aleutians and he asked the Japanese Executive Officer from Kiska if he knew House. His reply was, "Yes, he was a fine fellow and we all liked him." I think I can explain my conduct as a prisoner as I adopted the old sayings, "Never bite the hand that feeds you", and "God helps those who help themselves."

Sincerely,

Charles House
Charles House

P S

It is so hard to not say a lot, after all it was a three-year experience and would develop nicely into a series of articles.

The Invasion of Kiska - Covered
Hiding out from the Japanese - Covered
Learning to Live with the Japanese - Covered
My Trip to Japan on the Nagata Maru
Solitary Confinement at O'Funa
Work Camp at Yokohama
Tokyo Military Hospital
Camp Hospital
Shinagawa P O W Hospital
Back to Work at the Shipyards
The Steel Mills of Kamishi
The Invasion
The War is Over

When you talk of exploits of navy weathermen I would like to relate the action of one who never came back. This tale was relayed to me by CDR Meir USN the senior survivor from the USS Houston. He last saw Walter Glenn Lee AGI on the deck by #2 turret with his theodolite giving relative bearings and elevations angles to the bridge. After all fire control gear had been knocked out by bombs. Walter Glenn Lee perished with the ship.