

Pelican Rapids is home to so many remarkable people with incredible stories. But sometimes, it's our senior citizens who carry some of the most remarkable life stories. Pelican Valley Health Center is dedicated to honoring and recognizing the lives and stories of our residents and tenants. Many are a living reminder of the history of our area and our country and many were part of important world events. We are honoring our residents with a Senior Spotlight to shine a light on these incredible accomplishments. In honor of Memorial Day, we are featuring the story of Riverfront Manor tenant Jack Marko.

It was March 1941. A 21 year old Jack Marko was getting tired of living at home and looking for a new adventure. His number for the draft was down on the list so he figured he might as well go ahead and sign up for the Navy. A few short months later, Jack was shipping out for the Navy to embark on what would become a four year journey. He and his crew were sailing towards Pearl Harbor when they heard the news it had been attacked by the Japanese on December 7, 1941. They arrived about a day after the attack. "It was horrible. We were on the way over and didn't know if we'd be next," Jack said. "When we arrived, there were bodies all over. It was just horrible. We ended up staying for about two weeks just to help clean up." With America's involvement in World War II triggered by the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jack was thrust in to war. They sailed around the Pacific Ocean, getting attacked a few times. "Our ship was hit three times," recalled Jack. "Once a bomb was dropped on the back of the ship. We lost 37 boys that day. The captain told us to abandon ship but the chaplain said no, man the fire hoses. We got the fire out and kept going." They finally made their way to Iwo Jima in March of 1945. They had come in right after the fierce battle to claim the island when Jack had the opportunity to witness one of the most memorable moments of the war, the raising of the flag. "When they raised that flag, there was big hollering, screaming. We knew then the war was coming to an end," Jack said. But for them, it wasn't just yet.

The ship began sailing towards Japan, this time with something on board that no one knew about until after the fact. Something that would change the course of the war. "We didn't know it at the time but the detonator piece for the atomic bomb was on our ship," said Jack. "They didn't tell us until they were about ready to drop the bomb. When we found out the plan to drop an atomic bomb, we were just hoping it'd work." That atomic bomb, codenamed "Little Boy," would be dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Jack's ship was just a few miles off the coast. "When that bomb went off, there was a big black cloud," Jack recalled. Some men from the ship went ashore afterwards to help other troops on the ground there. The sight of the devastation left behind from the atomic bomb was devastating. "It was horrible," Jack said.

After a short time in Hiroshima, Jack was headed towards Tokyo, not knowing what to expect. “When I heard I’d be going, that was scary. I told the guys well, I’m going to Tokyo and I’ll probably never see you again,” said Jack. When they got close to shore, they saw big guns pointed at them. “When we were heading in, they were all shooting at us. Bullets were flying everywhere,” he recalled. They made it to shore and had a surprise reaction from the local people. “They were welcoming; they were happy the war was almost over,” he said.

When Japan official surrendered on September 2, 1945, they headed for home. “We had been gone for a few years but didn’t even realize it. Being in combat was the worst. We were getting bombed so much and we went six months without seeing land once. But, we had a great group of guys,” said Jack. The most exciting part of their long journey came when they reached New York City. “When we saw the Statue of Liberty, there was a lot of screaming for joy. We had a bunch of POWs on the ship too, they were just bones. They were all happy to see that we were officially home,” he said. “It was a beautiful sight.”

Now a lively 92 years old, Jack still is very proud of his service. He has saved a yearbook style book from one of the ships he was on, the USS Bataan, and proudly shows it off still. Thank you Jack, for your service. Pelican Valley Health Center salutes you!

