



*Turtle & Audrey*

## Remembering "Turtle"

Forty nine years ago, the poignant picture of a young Nisei soldier seemed to leap from the pages of Life magazine, startling many Americans in a nation at war with Japan. It was a period of anti-Asian paranoia, internment camps and shattered lives. But there, in Life magazine, was a photo of the 100th's Yoshinao "Turtle" Omiya, 24, waiting for medical help at Stark General Hospital in Charleston, S.C.

He sat barefoot and huddled in warm clothes – it was a bitter cold winter – leaning against a wall, two cotton swabs over his eyes. Like the rest of the wounded soldiers with him, Omiya had just arrived in the U.S. aboard a hospital ship from Italy. The photo caption read: "Blind Nisei – An American Hero Loses His Sight at the Crossing of the Volturno."

The Life magazine exposure prompted a flood of mail and gifts while Omiya recuperated at a rehabilitation in Pennsylvania.

That incident remained fresh in Omiya's mind in the early 1980s when I visited the veteran at his Moiliili home. "Those Army nurses kissed me so hard, I thought my lips would fall off," said the silver-haired Omiya with a smile. "One nurse in particular loved to comb my hair because it was so nice and black."

The friendly nurses, the blistering winters on the Mainland and the hostile, muddy battlefields of Europe were far away in time and space as we talked in the living room of Omiya's home. Omiya had lived in that house since 1947 with his mother, who took care of her son for more than 35 years. Matsu Omiya was 52 years old when she learned through friends about Turtle's serious injury, one that deeply affected the closely knit family.

Before the start of World War II, Omiya's parents ran a small grocery store in Moiliili near the

present Star Super Market and a baseball field that provided much joy during Omiya's youth. He was a member of the 1937-38 McKinley High School baseball championship team and it was this sport that earned Omiya his nickname.

"I was crouched behind the plate as a catcher, wearing a mask and oversized chest protector," Omiya said. "A friend remarked that I looked like a turtle underneath all that gear, and I became Turtle to friends ever since."

Omiya smiled – he smiled often during our conversation – as he recalled his moments with the 100th, the "Purple Heart Battalion." He sat on a couch, facing a recessed nook in a wall that contained family pictures (Omiya's father died in 1941) and an old clock that could not tell time any more. In a sense, time stopped for Omiya in Italy in early November 1943, as soldiers of the 100th crossed the Volturno River for the third time. In single file, the troops moved up Hill 600 through thick olive groves. The forests, cut through by the Germans so that their machine guns could focus on the 100th, was the site of many casualties, many land mines.

"I was on the lower part of the hill – the fourth man in the formation – and our messenger Alekoki happened to trip a Bouncing Betty, which explodes like an umbrella," said Omiya, whose executive officer was Spark Matsunaga. "The irony was that those who stood directly under the umbrella of the explosion were not even touched. But those of us on the outskirts were not so lucky. Yasuo Kawano, our walkie-talkie operator was killed, Sparky got hit on the leg and you know what happened to me."

What happened next happened in a flash. Literally. Omiya, carrying a gun tripod, looked up, wondering why the company had stopped moving. In that split second, steel fragments of the exploding mine ("all I saw was a blue flash") punctured





*Turtle was a good ball player,  
Camp McCoy 1942*



*1984*

Omiya's right eye, shattered it, leaving his left eye "dried up" from the concussion. A single piece of steel. A wayward fragment. Omiya was not injured in any other way from the explosion, but the wound he suffered was devastating.

"Doc" Hosaka and medic Billy Kobashigawa tended to Turtle right away; however, Omiya could not be evacuated until the next day. Many others had also been seriously hurt on Hill 600. Alekoki, Ken Otagaki and others stood watch over Turtle through the night.

Omiya was eventually moved from hospitals in the war zone to Tunisia, North Africa, and then to Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. It was at Valley Forge Hospital that Earl Finch, a friend of the 100th, made arrangements for Omiya to visit New Jersey, acquire a seeing-eye dog, Audrey, and receive training. Together, Omiya and his golden-haired Audrey made the long journey home by airplane, crossing a continent and ocean. Upon landing, Omiya was sent immediately to a makeshift hospital at St. Louis High School. There, Omiya's family saw him for the first time since he left Hawaii three years before. Up to their reunion, the Life photo was imprinted in the memory of Omiya's family.

"The Life magazine picture was such a blow, it was so sad," said Bessie Kawabata, Omiya's sister. "When Turtle was first injured, we didn't hear about it from the military, and I still don't know why. Other people told us, other people heard it on the radio. I remember feeling shocked when I saw his picture, and later when I saw him."

Audrey's presence softened the harsh reality of Omiya's condition. "She was protective, like a football player," recalled Omiya. "If I accidentally bumped into something, she'd slink on her belly and be ashamed. She slept by my feet, and helped me make the bed by pulling on the bedspread. She also rolled over on her back when I took a sunbath."

Omiya lost Audrey one day when, out of harness, she playfully ran across the street to greet another dog and was fatally injured by a passing car. Although a second German Shepherd, Lady Audrey, served her master faithfully for 10 years, she never really replaced Omiya's first Audrey. Omiya's smile disappeared for the first time. "I loved her," he said softly.

After the second Audrey died, there were no more dogs for Omiya. Profound sadness at the loss of a faithful companion every few years seemed too much to bear. For several years, Omiya worked as cardbox box assembler and later as a masseur. Omiya never married. He didn't want pity, but Omiya, like sighted people, also had moments of darkness that went beyond blindness. Moments of despair.

He found comfort in religion during the 1950s, hoping that somehow his sight might be restored. But Omiya subsequently went through a period of disillusionment. Through it all, his mother, sister and other family members stood by him, caring daily for his physical and emotional well-being.

Kawabata remembered her brother as "so trusting of others. He thought the world was like it was 50 years ago. But even as he lay blind and helpless in a hospital bed in 1944, someone stole his only radio, his link to the outside world."

In the late 1970s, Omiya found some enjoyment in planning and taking trips by himself to Las Vegas. Omiya also participated in some social functions that were sponsored through the decades by the veterans of the 100th. Like many other Nisei soldiers who spoke little of their experiences, Omiya blended quietly into the ever-changing society around him. Their extraordinary wartime service and experiences are known only to a few. The Nisei soldiers, for the most part, kept their memories to themselves. Some, like Omiya, fought another kind of war within their minds and hearts.

Omiya died peacefully in June 1984.

*Thelma Chang*

