

Joe Garagiola is still beating the odds

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A year ago, when he was 83, Joe Garagiola, former major league player and more recently in the midst of a fine career of broadcasting, felt his world collapsing. A tumor had been found behind his right eye. Two specialists told him they could do nothing about it, but another, neurosurgeon, Dr. Joseph Zabramski, of the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix examined Joe and told him, "I can do this." After a six hour operation to remove a growing tumor behind and around the right eyeball, Dr. Zabramski told Joe's wife in the waiting room, her husband was going to be all right and he has been ever since.

Sgt. Garagiola, had been my jeep driver when our tank battalion in the Philippines was relieved of line duty after the U.S. had built a Japanese prison camp near the Port of Manila and we have remained close friends since.

"I told Dr. Zabramski to just do the surgery," said Joe. "I could not see myself hitting pop flies to St. Peter, so no matter what the risk, I was ready to give it a chance. The surgery worked and we were able to call wife Audrie into my hospital room and tell her I was going to make it. The six hour operation was a success."

Neurosurgeon Dr. Andrew Shetter and Radiation Oncologist Dr. David Brachman both used highly targeted radiation beams to destroy lesions in the body using Gamma Knife and CyberKnife radiosurgery in small rather than large doses.

Garagiola said later to the writer, Catherine Menor, who later wrote a story about the operation. "Dr. Z knew that the operation would be long and difficult, and complex."

It was, but it worked. Garagiola, always the jokester, said, "Mine was the easy part. I was either going to make it or not. If not, I'd be catching pop flies for St. Peter. That's true," said Zabramski, "I did not want to be remembered as the guy who traded Joe to the Angels." Now this year later, it looks like Sgt. Garagiola is going to be just dandy. He is already joking about the surgery and getting well. There was no malignancy and the doctors got all of the potential cancer growth from around and behind the eye, which before surgery was actually pushing Joe's eye out of his socket and he was surely on the way to blindness.

Sgt. Joe sent me a note saying, "Tom, I don't remember much except it was a six hour surgery. That was one of three surgeries in 2009 and I am progressing rapidly. For this, I thank God. At our advancing ages, we both hope they don't give us the steal sign. Stay well. Stay strong, we had our times in the Philippines ."

I suppose, our most interesting and disappointing time in the islands was when a Japanese prisoner in our camp came up to me and said he had a Samurai sword which he had hidden along with some essence of perfume buried near the WaWa Dam about 50 miles from Manila. I took some prisoners and Joe and followed a little map the prisoners had. We found the perfume in bottles and brought it back to the camp but discovered it had cork stops instead of metal and the majority of the perfume had dissipated, but we made use of the essence aroma by pouring it in the latrines at our POW Camp No. 1.

The Samurai sword was magnificent and brought back to the USA .

Garagiola remembers all of those adventures, plus the fact that we had no escapees from No. 1 and carries that memory pridefully. He also mentioned no one tried to escape.

"The Filipinos would have killed them on the spot," said Joe. "I have always maintained that, and I stick by that claim, that you and I didn't win the war, but then we didn't lose it either."