

# Melbourne WWII POW who waited 76 years for his Purple Heart dies at age 98

[Rick Neale](#), Florida Today Published 1:42 p.m. ET July 31, 2019

Tom Pechacek, a WWII POW received his Purple Heart 76 years later. Malcolm Denmark, FLORIDA TODAY

Melbourne World War II prisoner of war Tom Pechacek, who was wounded during the December 1941 bombing of Wake Island and waited 76 years to receive his Purple Heart, has died at age 98. American Legion Post 163 in Eau Gallie will honor Pechacek during a celebration of life at 1 p.m. Saturday. The post address is 1795 N. Harbor City Blvd., Melbourne.

"He's been involved with this American Legion for at least 60 years," said Arthur Loretto, second vice commander. He will serve as chaplain during Saturday's service.

"(His death) has impacted anyone who's known him for 55 years up to somebody who just met him for the first time," Loretto said.

"Such a humble gentleman — especially after what he went through," he said.



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Tom Pechacek, 98, of Melbourne received his World War II Purple Heart 76 years after he was taken prisoner on Wake Island in December 1941. *(Photo: MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY)*

Pechacek was a corporal with the U.S. Marine Corps 1st Defense Battalion when Japanese forces overwhelmed Wake Island, a tiny Pacific atoll.

He was captured among more than 1,600 U.S. troops and civilians — and he spent four years imprisoned in grueling conditions in China, Korea and Japan. He was forced to labor underground in a coal mine and load salt onto ships.

After Japan surrendered to the Allies, Pechacek was rescued from captivity on Sept. 16, 1945. He had no idea atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.



Pechacek died July 22. He will be interred during a future private ceremony at Cape Canaveral National Cemetery. Officials will create an educational display honoring Pechacek at the Brevard Veterans Memorial Center museum on Merritt Island, Loretta said.

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Tom Pechacek received his World War II Purple Heart in April 2018. *(Photo: MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY)*

During a May 2018 FLORIDA TODAY interview in his Eau Gallie living room, Pechacek said he had been turned off by military paperwork requirements to receive a Purple Heart — "so I said the hell with it" decades ago.

Loretta and his wife, Donna, secretly corresponded with the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis to get Pechacek his Purple

Heart. American Legion Post 163 officials surprised him with the medal in April 2018 during their annual POW-MIA Recognition Day ceremony.

Saturday, American Legion Riders will assemble on Sarno Road in Melbourne, then escort his ashes past his home off Croton Road to the post on U.S. 1. The memorial ceremony will feature a 21-gun salute, and his Purple Heart will be displayed.

Early next year, Loretta said American Legion Post 163 leaders will auction off Pechacek's military memorabilia collection, per his wishes. Proceeds will benefit the legion's Boys State and Girls State programs. Pechacek donated \$1,000 annual scholarships to the programs for many years.

Pechacek worked at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station for 28 years as a Pan Am duty supervisor and foreman supporting the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs.