

This son of a poor potato farmer, one of our great air heroes, has a job to finish before he returns to the Nebraska home he loves



BEN KUROKI'S 59th MISSION

By Arnold Perl

PAGEANT herewith presents the second of its series of true Americans who are making the ideals of good citizenship a living, vital thing.

Ben Kuroki's dad owns a farm in Hershey, Nebraska, with a lot of shady trees on it. Learning of Ben's war record, you'd expect to find him lying under one of those trees, taking it easy. Because when Ben Kuroki, Nisei gunner of a B-29 Superfortress, walked out of Fort Dix last February with his discharge papers, he was one of the most decorated men in the Army. He had won three Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Presidential Citations, an Air Medal with six clusters. There were six battle stars on his European Theater ribbon and four on his Pacific ribbon. He had 58 combat missions to his credit.

But Ben Kuroki is still fighting. "I call it my '59th mission,'" he says. "This time I'm fighting prejudice in the U.S.A."

Kuroki had never made a public address in his life, but during the past ten months he has been lec-

turer, lobbyist, spokesman—a one-man campaign for the rights of all minorities. Nobody told Ben to do this; he isn't paid for it. But since his discharge Ben has averaged two speeches a day on the radio, at big rallies and at small gatherings. He has made junkets through Nebraska, Idaho, Utah, New York, New Jersey, California. "And even now, when people know my record, I still hit the same things a visiting Japanese spy might hit."

In Idaho he spoke to the town's best people, but had trouble getting served in a local coffeepot. In the East, hotel clerks try to wave him away. He was scheduled to go on a national radio program but at the last minute was yanked off. "Being a Japanese-American," he says wryly, "I was 'controversial!'"

Ben Kuroki walked out of the Army, last February, with a check for \$1,600, back pay and savings. "I've been riding on that," he says. "When that runs out, I'll figure out a way to keep going. But that's not the point; the point is that when people learn that ancestry, color of

skin or religion doesn't tell you all there is to know about a man, then I'll begin to feel my job is done."

I spent a breathless week with Kuroki. He started at 8:00 a.m. Monday, by answering two dozen business letters for the Japanese-American Citizens League, for which he sometimes speaks. A Nisei ex-GI wrote that he couldn't get a job in his home town because of racial feeling. Would Ben Kuroki help? A Nisei sailor asked what to do to reclaim his West Coast oyster beds, lost when he went into the service. Then Kuroki went to work for two hours on a book that is being written about his life by Ralph Martin, former *Stars and Stripes* editor. Finally he hopped off to Washington, visited Walter Reed hospital, interviewed three Nisei amputees, bearded half a dozen Congressmen, talked to Phil Murray of the CIO and to General Bradley, director of the Veterans Administration.

So go his days.

Ben Kuroki has a big family in Nebraska: father, mother and nine brothers and sisters. His father wonders when Ben is coming home to be a potato farmer. His mother asks about marriage. "How long is this rat race going to go on?" writes one of his brothers. "I don't know," says Ben.

Until December 7, 1941, Ben lived the ordinary life of a farm boy in Nebraska. He was born May 16, 1918, in the little town of Hershey. His father raised sugar beets and seed potatoes. He went to high school and got to be a first-rate basketball player.

The day after Pearl Harbor, Ben and his brother, Fred, got into the

old jalopy, drove 150 miles to Grand Island and enlisted. "It started right then," says Ben. "I had to fight for the right to fight. Up to that time most folks took me for what I was, a potato farmer's son. My parents happened to have been born in Japan, that's all."

But not so the Army. There he ran into racial discrimination head on. Ben volunteered for combat duty in the Air Force.

He was sent to Louisiana and spent the next five months mostly peeling potatoes. Finally he was assigned to the 93rd Bomb Group in England as a clerk. His application for combat duty was always getting lost.

Finally accepted for gunnery school, after five days of training he was sent to North Africa. His first missions were against targets in Africa, Italy and Austria. On his 24th mission, over Ploesti, Nazi oil center, only two of the nine ships in his squadron came back.

On his 30th and last mission in Europe, flak tore open the rear turret, cut his face, threw off his oxygen mask. Had it not been for the help of Gunner O'Connell, who held a spare mask over Ben's face, he would have died. "It's a funny thing," he says, "I've flown with a Polish gunner, a Jewish engineer, a German bombardier and a full-blooded Dakota Indian. Nobody ever takes the time to find out who your grandfather was when you're fighting. I saw men wounded, but the blood was always the same color."

He came back to America on the second anniversary of Pearl Harbor. "Ribbons were scarce at that time. I was something of a hero."

Newspapers interviewed him; he was written up in magazines. Then he was invited to address the influential Commonwealth Club, in San Francisco, with Henry Kaiser and ex-Governor Young of California. Ben was scared stiff. But he spoke.

He spoke of the record of Nisei troops which saw action at Salerno, at the Volturno, at Cassino, at Rome, at Livorno and at the invasion of Southern France. Their casualties were 9,230 men, three times the unit's original strength.

"Yet, in the official report on the need for evacuating Japanese-Americans from the West Coast," Ben added bitterly, "Gen. John DeWitt, in charge of evacuation for the Army, could say: 'A Jap is a Jap. They are a dangerous element, whether loyal or not.'"

Ben put in for combat duty in the Pacific. Again there was the familiar pattern of papers getting lost. Ben said he'd fly anything. The authorities said "impossible." There was a regulation barring soldiers of Japanese ancestry from combat duty in the Pacific.

Some friends from the Commonwealth Club, a San Francisco editor, a Congressman and others bombarded the office of the Secretary of War. They kept at it until finally he got a special dispensation.

His B-29 crew welcomed him. They christened the ship "Honorable Sad Saki."

Ben flew 28 more missions, including several on Tokyo. "Most of the fellows thought I was nuts, flying when I didn't have to," says Ben. "But I told them that the mail was so poor these days, bombing Nagasaki was the easiest way of keeping in touch with my rela-

tives." Then the war ended and Ben came home.

The day he hit San Francisco there was a special order: "Report to Mrs. Ogden Reid of the Herald-Tribune Forum at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York." Ben says: "There I was, a broken down GI who hadn't been paid in two months, with five cents in my pocket, needing a haircut, about to walk into a room with General Marshall and General Chennault."

He had little chance to prepare his speech, but he spoke of things that made him sore: returning Nisei GI's being kicked out of bars, Japanese-Americans' homes being burned, signs in Portland and Seattle, "No Jap Rats Allowed."

The speech was the beginning of his 59th mission. A lot of offers for jobs came in, but there also came pleas to Ben to keep on fighting for the things he stood for.

Ben Kuroki's \$1,600 has dwindled to a very small sum. His father still asks when he's coming back to the farm. He doesn't like living out of a suitcase, but he has decided to stick out his last mission. In the words of the credo of the Japanese-American Citizens League, this is what he's thinking about:

"America has permitted me to earn a livelihood, to worship, think, speak and act as I please. Although some may discriminate against me, I shall never become bitter or lose faith, for I know that such persons are not representative of the majority of the American people . . ."

Ben Kuroki, son of a potato farmer from Hershey, Nebraska, is a modern man of good will.