

Hero Of Thirty Bombing Missions Tells Story Of Ploesti Oil Field Raid

(By CHARLES H. CRAIG)

"I didn't join the army with the intention of fighting in Europe," Ben Kuroki, widely publicized Japanese-American gunner of Hershey just returned from the European front, said yesterday. "I joined to avenge Pearl Harbor."

After more than a year in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Staff Sergeant Kuroki asked for and obtained five bombing missions in addition to those assigned him, asked for and obtained a release from duties in Europe in the hope that he might carry a message of death and destruction from loyal Japanese-Americans in the United States to the land of his ancestors.

Survivor of 30 bombing missions, Kuroki said, "Regardless of our ancestry, when we're under fire under that flag we're all Americans. I was fighting for my citizenship and for my country. Our German bombardier also was fighting for our America."

Most terrifying experience that can come to any man is a raid such as that on the Ploesti oil fields in Rumania, Kuroki said. For his work during that raid he was awarded the distinguished flying cross. He also holds the air medal.

"Every move in that raid was planned, studied and rehearsed in advance," Kuroki said. "To us, in starting, it was just another raid. When it was over, it was a memory never to be erased."

"Flying for 2,400 miles at low level, sweeping in over the target area at 50 to 100 feet altitude with hell breaking loose all around, it was no pleasure jaunt."

"When it was over, we found we had lost heavily. Men I knew well were dead. Others were terribly wounded. I couldn't sleep for three days and nights after it was over. We lost so many buddies. I'd try to eat and would have no appetite."

"It was far more terrible than I can describe. Off to the right of our ship I saw the wing of a Liberator strike a smokestack. She plummeted to the ground and absolutely disintegrated in a terrible explosion. Several of our ships hit and burned but our bombs did a lot of damage."

"We were out 13 hours on that raid. It was not only nerve-racking. It was body-racking. I was stiff and sore for a week."

"When we go out on those bombing missions we always pray. You have heard there are no atheists in fox holes. There aren't any in big bombers either. Usually the chaplains come out and lead us in prayer before we start."

"That day we prayed, too, but we prayed more than ever before in our lives. I guess I prayed a dozen times that day."

"The raid worked like clock-work but we were flying so low a man with a shotgun could have hit us. We lost a lot of men and ships but also we did a lot of damage."

"It seems like a miracle to me

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--Kuroki

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but our ship got home without even a single bullet hole in it."

Many times decorated Kuroki is a native Nebraskan. His parents are Mr. and Mrs. S. Kuroki of Hershey, who have farmed in that community for the past 14 years. The Kurokis have always been highly regarded. Sgt. Kuroki says he is sincerely appreciative of the treatment accorded Japanese-Americans in this and other Nebraska communities.

When the news of the treacherous attack of Dec. 7, 1941, was flashed to the world the Kurokis didn't wait long to do something about it. Ben Kuroki and an older brother, Fred, drove to Grand Island, nearest army recruiting station, the following day to enlist in the U. S. army. Another brother, Henry, has since enlisted.

Suspicion held up their enlistment for some time but on Jan. 5, 1942, they became a part of the army. They asked for duty in the Pacific area to help avenge the attack.

"It was a long, uphill fight," says Sgt. Kuroki. "Everywhere we went people were suspicious of us. They kept wondering if we would let them down. I was sent to Fort Logan, near Denver, and given clerical instruction. My outfit was ready to take off and I was to be left behind. I begged them, with tears in my eyes, to take me along."

"Eventually the permission came thru and I was ordered to duty in England. There, I was a clerk with not very much to do. I kept asking for combat duty and after a while I got it."

"But those were tough months. The pilots were afraid of me. They kept remembering the treachery of Pearl Harbor and knew that I was a Japanese-American. I was one of the very few Japanese-Americans in combat zones. People kept staring at me so I couldn't eat."

"After a while I was assigned to a Liberator as a gunner and gradually the fellows got used to me and knew I was fighting for them. But the battle to prove myself was tough."

"If I get a chance to go into combat in the Pacific theater I will probably have the same fight to overcome this feeling of antagonism. But I'm willing to take what I have to. My mission still is to help avenge Pearl Harbor, because I'm an American."

Kuroki was attached to Ted's Traveling Circus, named for Gen. Ted Timberlake and so called because of wide travels thru Europe, Africa and the Middle East. He was assigned both as top turret and tail gunner.

It was on his last flight—one of the five volunteer missions—that Kuroki came nearest to disaster. Flying at 19,000 feet over Germany a huge piece of shrapnel tore off the top of the blister and Kuroki lost his oxygen mask. Just as he was passing out the navigator and another crew member dragged him to safety and revived him.

During the course of his experience Kuroki made three trips to Africa. His Liberator helped to blast Rommel out of Tunisia and was part of the group that pounded Sicily ahead of the invasion. He said the sight of the Allied convoy heading toward Sicily was the most remarkable he ever witnessed.

Kuroki paid high tribute to the pilot of his plane, Major J. B. Epling of Tupelo, Miss. "He was only 22 years old," Kuroki said. "But the best pilot in the world. If it weren't for him I wouldn't be back in Nebraska today."

"His skill in handling the ship was uncanny. Once all four engines went out when a gas lock developed. The major told us to stand by to jump as we fell from 22,000 feet to 2,000 but at that altitude he righted the ship and we came thru."

"Another time we were lost in mountainous territory and got ready to jump again but the major found a small valley and made a perfect landing. For military reasons I can't tell you where that was."

Incidentally Kuroki has never made a parachute jump. "I

even a scratch. He says his bombers were never hit by a fighter plane and only occasionally by anti-aircraft. "We had the best of all pilots," he reiterated.

"One of the grandest sights in the world is the Statue of Liberty and the lights of New York," Kuroki says. After the darkness of the cities of Europe, New York looked wonderful as we came into sight in the night."

Kuroki had his first glass of real milk in over a year when he reached New York. While overseas he had but two dishes

in the African desert with all my clothes on. We had a pint of water a day and nobody had a bath for three months. There was no entertainment and nobody even bothered to shave."

Kuroki will report in California Jan. 5 for further assignment. He wants his service to be against the Japanese military machine. He's a good gunner and he's going to shoot straight if he gets the chance, Kuroki says. He's not going to forget Pearl Harbor.

The war department has approved publication of this interview).

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Incidentally Kuorki has never made a parachute jump. "I

hope I never have to,"

"My first mission was on Dec. 13, 1942. That was an unlucky date but our radio operator's birthday was that day so we came thru okay."

During his 30 missions Kuroki has never been wounded, not by even a scratch. He says his bombers were never hit by a fighter plane and only occasionally by anti-aircraft. "We had the best of all pilots," he reiterated.

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