

HEROES

Ben Kuroki, American

West Coast draft boards got orders last week to start reclassifying their U.S. born Japanese for induction into the armed forces. The announcement was not even of academic interest to one member of the Nisei, 25-year-old Ben Kuroki.

Ben Kuroki is a technical sergeant in the U.S. Army Air Forces, a qualified turret gunner in B-24 Liberator bombers, veteran of 30 heavy bombing missions against the enemy, survivor of the ruthless, costly raid on the Ploesti oilfields of Rumania, winner of two Distinguished Flying Crosses, wearer of the coveted Air Medal with four oak-leaf clusters.

Ben Kuroki may have been the first person of Japanese descent to watch the Pacific surf curl on the beach at Santa Monica since the great evacuation of Japanese from California after Pearl Harbor. He was there last week, with several hundred other battle-weary U.S. airmen, resting in the luxury of the former Edgewater Beach Club, now an Air Forces redistribution center. Like his comrades, he slept late, guzzled orange juice and fresh milk, tried to unwind and get toned up.

Earned Repose. He had earned his rest. Few men can ever have gone through more plain hell trying to find a place in the special hell of battle. Ben Kuroki's father was a seed-potato grower in Hershey, Neb., a town of about 500 people. Ben and his kid brother Fred (now overseas with an engineer outfit) volunteered for the Army two days after Pearl Harbor, were accepted a month later. Ben landed in the Air Forces and started to run his personal gantlet at Sheppard Field, Tex.

"It seemed like everybody was cold," Ben remembered. "Maybe I was self-conscious but it kind of got to working on my mind."

He was isolated in a barracks corner. Other soldiers stared at him glumly. He feared the drunks most; they always wanted to fight. Ben tried first for air cadet, then for mechanic. He was sent to clerical school in Colorado, then shipped to Barksdale Field, La., one of 40 new clerks. As usual he was the last to be assigned, spent a miserable 15 days on the dirtiest of K.P. jobs.

Then he got his first break: assignment as communications clerk in one of four Liberator squadrons in Brigadier General Ted Timberlake's group, now famed as "Ted's Flying Circus" (TIME, Oct. 18). Ben kept his fingers crossed, never even went to near-by Shreveport for fear of getting into trouble. Twice when the squadron moved (to Florida, then England) they talked of leaving him behind. Both times he begged to go, made it.

Earned Action. In England he volunteered for gunnery training. Once trained, he coaxed a strictly temporary training

assignment. He was good. A month later he was taken on as waist gunner by 23-year-old Major J. B. Epting. On their first combat mission, over Bizerte in Tunisia, the tail gunner was wounded and Ben moved aft. Steady behavior and crack gunnery in combat had done the job. He belonged.

Ben earned one D.F.C. for 25 combat missions, another for the Ploesti raid.

"We went in at 50 feet into terrible antiaircraft fire," he remembers. "Our planes would crash and we could see our buddies burning in their planes. Our group commander's plane was hit and he gunned it up so his men could get out. I saw three chutes leave, but I don't think two of the men landed alive. Then the commander dove his plane right into the biggest building in town. No man who went to Ploesti will ever forget it."

Only two of the nine Liberators in



SERGEANT KUROKI, D.F.C.
Finally, he belonged.

Ben's "Eager Beaver" squadron came back. The sight of empty bunks and mess lines haunted him; he could not sleep for three nights. Yet when his prescribed 25 missions had been fulfilled, he turned down a chance to fly home, volunteered instead for an extra five.

Four of them were over Germany, and on the last one his luck almost ran out. He was flying as top-turret gunner over Munster when a flak burst hit the turret dome, shattered his goggles, tore off his oxygen mask. Copilot and radioman pulled him down and revived him with an emergency mask. After that, Ben got his orders for home.

When he is ready for combat again, Ben Kuroki hopes to go to the Pacific theater. His roommate at Santa Monica now is Tail Gunner Edward Bates, who lost a brother in the Pacific. Says Ben: "I promised him the first Zero I get will be for his brother."