

BEN KUROKI'S STORY



INTRODUCTION

Technical Sergeant Ben Kuroki, an American of Japanese ancestry, returned to the United States in December of 1943 after 30 heavy combat missions in North Africa and Axis Europe. On February 4, 1944, he spoke before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. His story, that of a Japanese American aerial gunner in the U. S. Army's Eighth Air Force, is one of the most stirring to come out of the war. Ben Kuroki, a native of Nebraska, has won two Distinguished Flying Crosses, one for the historic raid on Romania's Ploesti oil fields, and wears an Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters. His record as a soldier of the United States is proof of President Roosevelt's statement that Americanism is not, and never has been, a matter of race or ancestry. Tech. Sgt. Ben Kuroki fights on today, firm in his faith in America and for the future of all loyal Americans of Japanese ancestry. Although he has fulfilled his tour of duty overseas, Sgt. Kuroki has already applied for a double hazard, for a part in the war against the fascist overlords of Japan. Today he is training at a western air base for a part in the war in the Pacific.

The Japanese American Citizens League is reprinting Sgt. Kuroki's story so that more Americans may know for what Ben Kuroki and thousands of American soldiers of Japanese ancestry are fighting.

An Address by Sergeant Ben Kuroki

U. S. Army Air Force
Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, Calif.

February 4, 1944

I want to thank you gentlemen, especially Mr. Deutsch and Mr. Ward, for inviting me to speak to you today. This is a great honor, and I really appreciate it. I just hope that I won't disappoint you. People who are going to make speeches usually start out by saying that they don't know how to, but in my case it's really true. A soldier's job is to fight, not talk, but I'll do the best I can.

I've spent most of my life in Hershey, Nebraska, which isn't where they make Hershey candy bars. Hershey is so small that probably none of you has ever heard of it. Before the war the population was about 500; now I guess it's about 300.

I didn't even live in Hershey; my father had a farm a mile north of town. I remember the farmers used to go to town every Saturday night and stand in groups on the street corners talking about their cows and horses. We've lived on that farm since 1928, and after I finished high school I helped my father work it until the war came along.

The last two years are what really matter, though, and maybe I can tell you something about them, even if I don't know much about making speeches. That's one thing the Army didn't teach me, though it taught me a lot of other things, and the experience I went through as a result of being in the Army taught me even more.

I learned more about democracy, for one thing, than you'll find in all the books, because I saw it in action. When you live with men under combat conditions for 15 months, you begin to understand what brotherhood, equality, tolerance and unselfishness really mean. They're no longer just words.

Under fire, a man's ancestry, what he did before the war, or even his present rank, don't matter at all. You're fighting as a team—that's the only way a bomber crew can fight—you're fighting for each other's life and for your country, and whether you realize it at the time or not, you're living and proving democracy.

Something happened on my first mission that might give you an idea of what I mean. We were in a flak zone—the anti-aircraft was terribly accurate—and we had a flock of fighters attacking us.

A shell burst right above the tail, and flak poured down. Our tail gunner was a young kid named Dawley, from New Jersey. The piece that got him was so big it tore a four-inch hole through a quarter of an inch of aluminum and double-welded steel. It caught him just above the ear. It

went through his fur helmet, and in so far we couldn't even see it when we got to him.

I was firing the right waist gun on our Liberator that day. All of a sudden I heard him yell over the interphone: "I'm hit in the head, let's get the hell out of here!"

We couldn't leave the guns until we'd shaken the Messerschmitts that were after us—it would have been suicide—but in a few minutes the tunnel gunner and I were able to get back to the tail.

We pulled Dawley back into the fuselage, so that we could work on him and at the same time watch out for more fighters. Then we took off our fur jackets and covered him up. It was about 10 below zero and we were about freezing to death.

He was in terrible shape; I can't even begin to describe the look of pain on his face. He was semi-conscious, but he couldn't open his mouth to speak. His lips seemed to be parched, as though he was dying of thirst. We couldn't understand how he was still alive.

I called the radio operator, because he's the one who is supposed to administer first aid on a Liberator, but instead the co-pilot, a first lieutenant, came back. He was going to give Dawley a morphine injection, but I stopped him. They'd taught us in gunnery school not to give morphine for head injuries; it might kill the man instantly. The co-pilot had either forgotten or was so excited he could think only of stopping the pain.

Anyway, I motioned to him—we couldn't hear each other above the roar of the motors—I pointed to my head and shook it. The co-pilot evidently understood, because he didn't give Dawley the morphine.

That tail gunner lived to fly and fight again, and the last I heard he had completed his tour of duty. Whether or not I was instrumental in saving his life by stopping that morphine injection isn't important—it was just that we had to work together regardless of rank or ancestry.

The tunnel gunner that helped me with him was Jewish, I'm a Japanese American, the bombardier of our crew was a German, the left waist gunner was an Irishman. Later I flew with an American Indian pilot and a Polish tunnel gunner. What difference did it make? We had a job to do, and we did it with a kind of comradeship that was the finest thing in the world.

That first mission was over Bizerte; it was the 13th of December, 1942, and we'd just arrived in French North Africa from England two days before. When I say "we" I'm talking about the outfit I was serving with; it was Brig. Gen. Ted Timberlake's Liberator bomber group, which everybody over there called "Ted's Traveling Circus" because it got around so much back and forth between England and Africa. In fact, it got around so much it kept German military intelligence guessing, trying to figure out where it was from week to week.

It was a funny thing—I'd just been assigned to a crew the day before we left England, although the group had been based there for about four months. I'd finished gunnery school more than a month before, and ever

since I'd been trying to get assigned to a crew. It wasn't easy; I'd talked to the pilot whenever I knew there was going to be an opening in a crew, and each pilot would assign me temporarily and then replace me when the time came for permanent assignment.

I understood well enough how they felt; and they knew I was as good as any man they did assign, but still they were uneasy. But I wanted to get into combat more than anything in the world, so I kept after it.

In fact, it had been one continual struggle from the beginning of my Army career, and I felt that I had done pretty well to get overseas and to gunnery school.

Two days after Pearl Harbor, my brother Fred and I drove 150 miles to Grand Island, Nebraska, to enlist in the Army Air Force. We were held up for nearly a month because of all the confusion and misunderstanding in Army camps at that time. For the first time in our lives we found out what prejudice was.

I began to realize right then that I had a couple of strikes on me to begin with, and that I was going to be fighting two battles instead of one—against the Axis and against intolerance among my fellow-Americans.

Finally, after two more trips to Grand Island and three telephone calls, Fred and I were accepted at the recruiting station at North Platte, and sent to Sheppard Field, Texas, for basic training.

There was so much prejudice among the recruits there, that I wondered if it would always be like that; if I would ever be able to overcome it. Even now I would rather go through my bombing missions again than face that kind of prejudice.

My kid brother Fred could hardly stand it. He'd come back to the barracks at night and bury his head in his pillow and actually cry. We were not only away from home for the first time, but because of this discrimination, we were the loneliest two soldiers in the Army.

After basic I was sent to clerical school at Fort Logan, Colorado, and then to Barksdale Field near Shreveport, Louisiana, for permanent assignment. Of the 40 clerks sent to Barksdale, I was the last one assigned. I spent about a month at Barksdale, most of it on K. P. You've all heard the Air Forces motto, "Keep 'Em Flying." Well, my motto was "Keep 'Em Peeling"; they called me "Keep 'Em Peeling" Kuroki in those days.

The most discouraging thing about that was the fact that I had no assurance that I ever would be assigned. About the only thing that kept me going were the wonderful letters of encouragement I received from home. My sister would write me that I had to realize that Americans were shocked by Pearl Harbor, and that many of them were unable to distinguish between Japanese and Americans of Japanese descent. I still was without a friend in the Army, though, and that made it bad. There was only one boy who was kind to me at all—he used to get my mail for me when I was on K. P. and couldn't get away.

I was finally assigned to a squadron in General Timberlake's bomber group, which had been formed at Barksdale and was ready to move to

Fort Myers, Florida, for final training. A few days before we were to leave, the commanding officer of my squadron called me in and told me I wasn't going; and that I was to be transferred to another outfit.

That was about the worst news I had ever heard. I asked him why, and he said that he had nothing to do with it. He started asking me questions then—how I liked the Army, and so forth. I told him pretty bluntly about the prejudice I was encountering, and that I didn't even go into town because I couldn't enjoy a minute of it when I did. He seemed sympathetic enough, but he said there was nothing he could do to stop my being transferred.

But, my words must have had some effect, because the day before the group left, he called me back and told me to pack my bags, that I was going with them.

At Fort Myers I did clerical work for about three months. I gradually began to win over some of the soldiers, and the boy who used to get my mail for me at Barksdale became a good friend of mine. We were in a truck accident one day, and I was able to help him. After that we were inseparable.

When the group had finished training and was ready to go overseas, I was given orders, as I had been at Barksdale, transferring me out of my squadron. This was even worse than the time at Barksdale, because I really wanted to go overseas and had been counting on it for three months.

General Timberlake—he was then a colonel—was already with the air echelon of the group, so I couldn't see him. I went to see the squadron adjutant and begged him, with tears streaming down my face, to take me along. He said there was nothing he could do about it, that it wasn't because I was of Japanese descent. But he did agree to talk it over with the group adjutant, and in about an hour he came back with the good news that I would remain with the outfit. I was about the happiest guy in the world just then.

We shipped north right after that and sailed from New York on the last day of August, 1942. Ours was the first Liberator group sent to the European theater. As soon as we had our base set up in England, I applied for combat duty. I had to beg for that too, but at last I was sent to gunnery school.

It wasn't much schooling—about a week, I guess—a lot different from the way it is now, when every crew member goes to school for months in this country. I really learned to shoot the hard way, in combat.

As a result of the recommendations of the armament officer, I was accepted on Major J. B. Epting's crew as an auxiliary member; we were to go out on a raid the next day, but it was cancelled because of the weather. About a week later I was permanently assigned to his crew. The next day we flew to Africa and my tour of duty began. Once again I'd received a break just in the nick of time.

We were glad to get away from the cold, fog, rain and mud of

England. Boy, Africa seemed like heaven for the first two days. It was dry and warm and the sun was shining. It was interesting, too, at first. I met my first live Arab. The Arabs used to come out to the base peddling tangerines and oranges and eggs, foods we hadn't seen for months in England. I remember in London they were asking 18 shillings—about \$.50—for a pound of grapes; one of our boys even asked the vendor if they had golden seeds in them.

One of our gunners made a deal with an Arab—a filthy barefoot old man dressed in something that looked like grandma's nightgown. The gunner told him he would trade the plane for six eggs delivered every day for six months. So every day the Arab would bring him six eggs. Then he would go over to the plane and pat it and smile, thinking of the day when it would be his. He wondered what he thought when we took off one day and didn't come back.

After the second night in Africa we weren't so sure it was an improvement on England. It started to rain and kept on raining until we finally couldn't operate at all. We had no tents or barracks or any place to sleep. Some of the boys slept under the plane until it got too muddy. I picked the flight deck inside for myself, but gave it up so that Major Epting could sleep there. I slept in the top turret.

If you have any idea of the size of a top turret on a Liberator, you can imagine how comfortable I was. I had to sit up, and all night I would bump into switches which would snap on and wake me up. One night of that was enough for me.

We'd left England in such a hurry that we didn't have mess kits. All the time we were in French North Africa we ate our canned hash and hard-tack out of sardine cans.

And the mud—I've never seen such gooeey mud. Our group flew about three or four missions from that base and then the planes couldn't even get off the ground. They'd start to take off and sink into the mud all the way up to the belly, and then we'd have to unload the bombs, dig the ship out, reload and try again. It was a mess. After about 18 days we gave up and moved out of there.

From French North Africa we went to the Libyan desert, near Tobruk, not long after the Germans had surrendered it. Tobruk was the most desolate place I have ever seen; it was full of abandoned tanks and guns and broken buildings. Only a church had escaped complete destruction, and no living person dwelt in that city.

But as far as we were concerned, we were glad to get out of our mud-hole in North Africa, but not for long. We were in Libya three months. In all that time, were able to take a bath only once, and that was when we were given leave to fly to an Egyptian city for that specific purpose. That was the only time we shaved, too; we must have looked like a convention of Rip Van Winkles before we left.

There were no laundry facilities; we were allowed only a pint of water

a day for everything. This water we drew from a well, which we had to abandon after a while when we found some dead Germans in it.

We were at least 300 miles from any town, excepting the dead city of Tobruk. We had no entertainment of any kind out there on the desert; when we weren't on raids we just lay around in our tents, or took walks in the desert.

The most dismal Christmas eve of my life I spent on the Libyan desert. It was cold, and we didn't even have tents to sleep under. We slept in our clothes and didn't even take off our shoes. Our morale was certainly low that night, as we thought of the fun we could be having in the States, and of our families and friends back there. But it's things like that, as well as actually fighting together, that bring men close to one another, as close as brothers.

Our group was going on raids about every other day while we were in the desert, and they were all pretty rough. We bombed Rommel's shipping lines over and over at Bizerte, Tunis, Sousse and Tripoli in Africa. Then we started in on Sicily and Italy.

We had some boys of Italian parentage flying with us, and whenever we took off to bomb Naples or Rome I'd kid them about bombing their honorable ancestors. "We're really going to make the spaghetti fly today," I'd say, and they'd retort that they couldn't wait to knock the rice out of my dishonorable ancestors.

Naples was always a rough target. It was the "flack city" of the Italian theater. The flak burst so thick and black you couldn't even see the planes a hundred yards behind you. Yet our raids over there were called spectacular examples of precision bombing.

We participated in the first American raid on Rome last July. It was the biggest surprise I'd had so far; we thought we were going to run into heavy opposition, and we were almost disappointed when we found hardly any.

We bombed Sicily and Southern Italy at altitudes of about 25,000 feet, and it really gets cold at that height. One time over Palermo it was 42 below zero. I froze two oxygen masks; after that I had to suck on the hose to get any oxygen.

Even at that height we could see our bombs breaking exactly on their targets, and as much as an hour after we had left the targets we could see the smoke rising from the fires we had caused.

It gave you a funny feeling; you couldn't help but think of the people being hurt down there. I wasn't particularly religious before the war, but I always said a prayer, and I knew for sure my pal Kettering, the radio operator, did too, for the innocent people we were destroying on raids like that.

But we were in no position to be sentimental about it. The people know they were in danger, and they could have gotten out. Besides, we weren't fighting against individual people, but against ideas. It was Hitlerism or democracy, and we couldn't afford to let it be Hitlerism. And so,



Returning from his service in Europe, Tech. Sgt. Ben Kuroki visited the JACL office in Denver while en route to a new assignment. He is shown here with Joe Masaoka of the JACL's Denver office. Sgt. Kuroki is a member of the North Platte, Neb., chapter of the JACL.

unfortunately, it was German and Italian lives or ours. That was the only way you could look at it.

It was a happy day when after three months of Libya, we received orders to return to England. We took off from Tobruk at midnight. There was no formation; the planes left at two-minute intervals, and each was on its own.

The next morning, instead of seeing daylight, we looked out over a blanket of clouds without any opening. We had had to go up to about 10,000 feet to get over the clouds, and now we couldn't go under them, for fear of crashing into mountains.

We were lost. The navigator could do nothing, and the radio operator, though he was working like mad, couldn't get his messages through because of the weather. Finally he got a message, but by that time we didn't have enough gas to get to the airfield that had answered us. We'd already been up 11 hours and 20 minutes with a 10-hours' supply of gas. We expected to go down any minute.

The pilot called back that anyone who wanted to bail out could do so. Nobody did; I know I had so much faith in Major Epting's flying ability that I wouldn't leave until he did. All of a sudden, and it seemed like a miracle to us who were tensely waiting for the crash, there was a tiny rift in the clouds. Epting didn't wait one second; he just dove right into it, and made a perfect landing in a valley that wasn't big enough to land a cub in safely.

We had just gotten out of the plane when a swarm of Arabs surrounded us. There must have been a hundred of them, and they were armed with rifles, spears, and some with clubs. When we saw them coming we debated whether we should shoot at them or try to talk to them. We decided to talk to them, but we couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand us.

They didn't hurt us, but they certainly weren't friendly. They took everything away from us—guns, wallets and everything we had in our pockets—and they wouldn't let us near the plane.

We had no idea where we were, but in a few minutes a Spanish officer came up and arrested us, and we found that we had landed in Spanish Morocco. The officer marched all of us, our crew and the Arabs, into a native village about two miles away. The procession we made caused more excitement, I guess, than that village had had in its entire history.

The natives all thought I was Chinese, but Kettering, our radio operator, explained to the Spanish soldiers that I was Japanese American. That created quite a stir when it got around. Most of the people, both Spanish and Arabs, flatly refused to believe it, and later it took the American embassy to prove it to them.

In a few days we were flown to Spain in a German plane and interned in a mountain village. We thought we'd be there for the duration, but within two months, through methods I can't reveal, we were in England.

From England we bombed targets in Germany and began preparations

for the raid on the Romanian oil fields at Ploesti, preparations that were to last three months and take us back to the Libyan desert. In England our group practiced low-level bombing. We practice-bombed our own airfields, each plane having its own specific target. That way our bombardiers got accustomed to finding targets at low altitude.

After nearly a month in England we returned to Africa. This time our base was set up near the city of Bengasi in Libya. Here we had a complete dummy target of what we later learned were the Ploesti refineries.

Up to this time I had been a tail gunner, but now I was assigned to the top turret, the position I held throughout the rest of my missions. To celebrate the event, Kettering painted in big red letters across the glass dome of the turret these words: "Top Turret Gunner Most Honorable Son, Sgt. Ben Kuroki." "Most Honorable Son" was what they usually called me—that or "Hara-kiri." They were a great bunch over there.

Every day that we weren't on missions, 175 liberators loaded with practice bombs would take off in groups at regular intervals and bomb duplicates of the real target. On these practice raids, each group rather than each plane had its specific target, so that it was really a dress rehearsal of the actual raid. Some of the planes flew so low that they came back with their bomb-bay doors torn off. And we sure scared the daylight out of the natives; we had to dodge groups of Arabs and their camels all over that desert.

Despite the heat we had to do double work, because we had only a skeleton ground crew—our real base was still in England. We'd go up into 10 to 20-below-zero temperatures and then come back into 100-above heat. It was no wonder that a lot of the boys came down with colds.

We had fewer sandstorms and they didn't last as long as when we had been stationed near Tobruk. What really worried us were the poisonous sandviper snakes and scorpions. The scorpions especially—big two-inch long devils with curving tails were thick as flies. We'd find them in our blankets and everywhere else. If you got stung by one of them, you really knew it; you'd be sick as a dog for at least a day.

The month preceding the Ploesti raid we were taking part in the invasion of Sicily, bombing Messina, Palermo and various airfields. It's unusual for heavy bombers to bomb airfields, but we were assigned that job so that it would be impossible for enemy fighter planes to take off from those fields and strafe our ground troops as they landed.

During all our practice for Ploesti we were intensely curious as to what our target was going to be. Rumors of all kinds were floating around, but no one thought it would be Ploesti because no one could imagine how we could carry enough gas to get there and back.

Our base was guarded by British anti-aircraft gunners, and we used to ask them what they thought about our flying so low. They said it was an advantage from the point of view of escaping the heavy anti-aircraft fire, but that we would be dead ducks for anything smaller than 40 millimeter

cannon. Right then we began to think of the approaching raid as a "suicide" mission.

The last week in July every crew member in every group was restricted to the base until after the mission, but it was not until the day before we left that we were told the target was the Romanian oil fields. That was news all right. You hardly ever hear of an oil field being bombed—the only other one I know of was in Burma. We were really surprised. There had been a couple of rumors that our target was to be Ploesti, but nobody had put any stock in them—it seemed too improbable.

We were briefed all that day and into the night. The American engineer who had constructed the Ploesti refineries talked to us; he knew the exact location of every refinery and every cracking and distilling plant. The information he gave us proved invaluable the next day. They showed us motion pictures which gave details of the individual targets of each group.

In the afternoon Major General Brereton, commanding general of the Ninth Air Force, came around in a staff car and talked to us for almost an hour. He said we were going on the most important and one of the most dangerous missions in the history of heavy bombardment, that it had been planned in Washington months before. He told us that Ploesti supplied one-third of all Germany's oil and nearly all of Italy's, that it was timed, furthermore, to cut Hitler's fuel supply as his divisions rushed to defend it against the coming Allied invasion.

When he finished, our group commander—not General Timberlake, who had just been promoted from colonel and was now a wing commander, but the new group commander—briefed us again, and went into minute details of the takeoff the next morning. He tried to encourage us as much as possible.

"I'll get my damn ship over the target if it falls apart," he said.

He got his ship over the target all right—we were close behind him. And we saw it when it fell apart, flaming to the earth.

That afternoon before the raid he emphasized that nobody had to go who didn't want to; it was really a volunteer mission. No one declined, but we were all very tense. Someone had mentioned that even if all planes were lost it would be worth the price, and that started more talk about its being a suicide mission.

We didn't sleep very much that night, and there was none of the joking that usually went on among our crew. We tried hard to sleep, because we knew it would be a long trip and we had to be at our best, but you can imagine how easy it was.

The first sergeant blew the whistle at four in the morning. While we ate breakfast the ground crews, who had been working on the planes for the last two days, gave them a final checking over. Those planes were beautiful, parked wing to wing in a long line on the runway.

We took off at the crack of dawn. It was a perfect summer day, warm and balmy. The lead plane of the group started out, and the others followed at precise intervals until finally the whole group was in the sky in

perfect formation. Our group joined other groups from nearby fields at pre-arranged places. It was all split-second timing.

We were keyed up. We knew it was going to be the biggest thing we had ever done, and we were determined it would be the best. It was the same with the ground crews; they had always taken great pride in the ships, but this time they had gone overboard to get them in perfect condition. They shared our excitement and anxiety, too.

From Bengasi we flew straight over the Mediterranean. It was very calm and blue that day. We were going along at about 5,000 feet when suddenly we saw one of the planes ahead take a straight nose-dive. It went down like a bullet, crashed in the water and exploded. For half an hour we could see the smoke from it. It gave a haunting feeling, as of approaching disaster—we could see that not a man on that plane had a chance to escape.

A couple of hours after we left Bengasi, we were crossing the mountains of Italy, going up sometimes as high as 10,000 feet to get over them. Then the Adriatic and into Jugoslavia, through Bulgaria and across the Danube into Rumania.

Over the Danube valley, in Romania, we went down to about 300 feet, so low that we could easily see people in the streets of Romanian towns waving at us as we went over. They must have thought we were friendly bombers because we were flying so low. Or maybe they recognized the white star on our wings and were glad that we were coming.

About 10 miles from the target we dropped to 50 feet, following the contours of the land, up over hills and down into valleys. Our pilot would head straight for those hills, and every time I thought sure we'd crash right into them, but he would pull us up just in time, and just enough to get over the ridge, and then down into the next valley. Coming back we were flying part of the way at five and 10 feet off the ground, and some of the planes returned to base with tree tops and even cornstalks in their bomb-bays.

We had a very good pilot. He was our squadron leader, Lt. Col. K. O. Dessert, and his copilot was our regular pilot, Major Epting.

This was the 24th mission I had flown with Major Epting and the same crew, except for Dawley, the tail gunner who was hurt during our first raid. Our ship was named in Major Epting's honor; his home town is Tupelo, Mississippi, and so we called the plane "Tupelo Lass."

The major, who is 23 years old, is one of the best pilots I've ever seen. He pulled us out of a lot of tough spots when we thought we were gone.

And between Major Epting and Col. Dessert they got us through Ploesti without a scratch, but it was a miracle that they did.

We came into the oil fields at about 50 feet and went up to about 75 to bomb. The plane I was on was leading the last squadron of the second group over. Five miles from the target, heavy anti-aircraft started pounding us. When we saw the red flash of those guns we thought we'd never make it. We really started praying then. We figured that if they started

shooting at us with the big guns at that distance, they would surely get us with smaller and more maneuverable batteries. We remembered the British anti-aircraft men who had said we'd be dead ducks for anything under a 40 millimeter cannon. At our height you could have brought a Liberator down with a shotgun.

Ploesti was wrapped in a smoke screen which made it very difficult to find the targets. When we got over, the refineries were already blazing from the bombs and guns of the planes ahead of us.

Red tracers from the small ground guns had been zig-zagging all around us for half a mile or more, and the guns themselves were sending up terrific barrages. Just as we hit the target, gas tanks started exploding. One 10,000 gallon tank blew up right in front of us, shooting pillars of flaming gas 500 feet in the air. It was like a nightmare. We couldn't believe our eyes when we saw that blazing tank high above us. The pilot had to swerve sharply to the right to avoid what was really a cloud of fire. It was so hot it felt as though we were flying through a furnace.

The worst I saw, though, was the plane to the right of us. Light flak must have hit the gas, because all of a sudden it was burning from one end to the other. It sank right down, as though no power on earth could hold it in the air for even a second. When it hit the ground it exploded.

Every man on that ship was a friend of mine, and I knew the position each was flying. I'd seen planes go down before, but always from a high altitude, and then you don't see the crash. This way it seemed I could reach out and touch those men.

The most pitiful thing was that ship's co-pilot. He was an 18-year-old kid who'd lied about his age to get into aviation cadet training. We always called him Junior. When our regular co-pilot, who was firing the right waist gun that day, saw Junior's ship go down, he let loose with his gun like a crazy man. Junior was his best friend.

Then we saw flak hit our group commander's plane. In a second it was burning from the bomb-bay's back. He pulled it up as high as he could get it; it was fantastic to see that blazing Liberator climbing straight up. As soon as he started climbing, one man jumped out, and when he could get it no higher, two more came out. Every one of us knew he had pulled it up in order to give those men a chance. Then, knowing he was done for, he deliberately dove it into the highest building in Ploesti. The instant he hit, his ship exploded.

We left Ploesti a ruin. Huge clouds of smoke and fire billowed from the ground as we pulled away from the target. It was like a war movie, seeing those masses of flames rolling toward you, and white flashes of 20-millimeter cannon-fire bursting alongside of you.

We got back to camp 13 hours after we had taken off. It was the longest bombing mission ever flown, and that explains why it was necessary to do it at low altitude. If we had bombed at the usual level, we would never have had enough gas to get back.

It was also the most dangerous mission in the history of heavy bom-

bardment, ranking as a battle in itself. It is officially regarded not as the Ploesti raid but as "the battle of Ploesti."

There was no line at the mess hall that night. Even though we were starved, we couldn't eat when we thought of the men that should have been standing in line and weren't.

And even though we were dead tired, we couldn't sleep. I know I didn't sleep for several nights after that. The ground crews kept the runway lights on all night, and many of them stayed up until morning, though they knew the planes they had worked so hard on and their friends, the men who flew them, weren't coming back.

The next morning was rough, too. We always got up at six o'clock, and there was always a lot of yelling back and forth between the tents—sometimes we'd throw rocks at each other's tents. The only yelling we heard that morning was our co-pilot calling for his friend Junior, although he had seen him go down in flames the day before.

Ploesti was my 24th mission. For most of the crew it was the 25th; in other words, it completed their tour of duty for them. I was assigned to another crew for my last mission.

For a long time I had been thinking about volunteering for an extra five missions. I wanted to do that for my kid brother; he wasn't overseas then. The day after my 25th, I asked my commanding officer if I could go on five more. He said I should go home; in fact, there were orders out already for me to do so, and a plane ticket to the States waiting for me. But he finally gave me permission, and I stayed with the crew I had flown with on what was supposed to be my last raid.

It took me three months to get those five missions in, the weather was so bad. And then when I came home it was by banana boat and not airplane. I was sure burned up about that.

It was at this time that I flew with the only full-blooded American Indian pilot in the European theater; everybody called him "Chief," but his name was Homer Moran, and he was from South Dakota. Four of those extra five missions I flew from England over Germany.

I nearly got it on the 30th mission, my last one. We were over Munster, in Germany, and a shell exploded right above the glass dome of my top turret. It smashed the dome, ripped my helmet off, smashed my goggle and interphone. The concussion threw me back against the seat, but I didn't get a scratch. I thought the ship had blown apart, the noise of that explosion was so loud. I passed out, because my oxygen mask had been torn off, but the radio operator and the engineer pulled me out of the turret and fixed me up with an emergency mask.

Things like that aren't explained just by luck. I must have had a guardian angel flying with me that time and on the other missions, too. They say there are no atheists in foxholes; I can tell you for sure there are none in heavy bombers either.

I left England the first of December. They wanted me to stay over there, with my outfit, as chief clerk in operations, but from the beginning

I have felt my combat career would not be over until I had fought in the South Pacific, and so I asked to come home for a brief rest and then be assigned to a Liberator group in the South Pacific.

It was December 7, two years to the day after Pearl Harbor, when our ship reached New York. I thought I was a pretty tough sergeant, but when I saw the Statue of Liberty and the sunlight catching those tall buildings, I damn near cried. I knew I had come home, and I felt so lucky to have gotten through all those bombing missions without a scratch that I said a prayer of thankfulness as I leaned against the rail. I only wished that all my buddies could have come home, too.

I spoke earlier of having two battles to fight—against the Axis and against intolerance. They are really the same battle, I think, for we will have lost the war if our military victory is not followed by a better understanding among peoples.

I certainly don't propose to defend Japan. When I visit Tokyo it will be in a Liberator bomber. But I do believe that loyal Americans of Japanese descent are entitled to the democratic rights which Jefferson propounded, Washington fought for and Lincoln died for.

In my own case, I have almost won the battle against intolerance; I have many close friends, in the Army now—my best friends, as I am theirs—where two years ago I had none. But I have by no means completely won that battle. Especially now, after the widespread publicity given the recent atrocity stories, I find prejudice once again directed against me, and neither my uniform nor the medals which are visible proof of what I have been through, have been able to stop it. I don't know for sure that it is safe for me to walk the streets of my own country.

All this is disappointing, not so much to me personally any more, but rather with reference to my fight against intolerance. I had thought that after Ploesti and 29 other missions it was just short of a miracle I got through them, I wouldn't have to fight for acceptance among my own people all over again.

In most cases, I don't, and to those few who help breed fascism in America by spreading such prejudice, I can only reply in the words of the Japanese American creed: "Though some individuals 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."

The people who wrote that creed are the thousands of Japanese Americans whom certain groups want deported immediately. These Japanese Americans have spent their lives proving their loyalty to the United States, as their sons and brothers are proving it now on the bloody battlefield of Italy. It is for them, in the solemn hope that they will be treated justly rather than with hysterical passion, that I speak today.

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