

the Community

my life

Hiroshima

by Walter R. Wolf

In recognition of the on-going efforts of the Santa Barbara-based Nuclear Age Peace Foundation and the 56th anniversary of my being drafted into service in World War II, it seems appropriate to recall and record my feelings from the most memorable period of my military service, one that I will never forget.

In mid-August of 1945, I was a 24-year old private in the U.S. Army, stationed near the city of Tacloban on the island of Leyte in the Philippines, where one otherwise uneventful evening turned out to be the most exciting night of my life.

It was raining lightly and all was quiet. About 10 p.m. a huge wave of sound suddenly roared across the base: *The war is over! The war is over!* Instantly, the sky lit up with the sights and sounds of sheer joy! Rockets, flares, and gunfire from every ship in the area, and there were hundreds of ships, for this was the home of the Navy's Fifth Fleet. All across the horizon and all night long, the display went on. This was the ultimate fireworks show.

"The war is over," the most wonderful words we could have ever hoped to hear, because at that time all of the Allied Forces in the Pacific were being groomed for the ultimate test—the invasion of the Japanese homeland. Not a happy prospect.

At the moment of our hearing that magical message the first-ever atomic bombs had already been dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Preparations for the surrender were under way. V-J Day made the war's end official, but no, we weren't going home; we were going to Japan as part of the Army of Occupation.

About two weeks later, our convoy entered the smooth waters of Japan's famous Inland Sea, its picturesque islands with their nearly vertical faces rising out of the water. This approach would have been absolutely impossible in wartime. The waters were heavily mined, and the faces of these solid rock islands were dotted with caves, each cave containing an artillery piece that could be rolled into position, fired, and then pulled back. Whatever enemy shipping might venture into those waters would be dead ducks. There wasn't a soldier or sailor in that entire convoy who was-



The author, Walter R. Wolf, stands in his wartime garb, before his sobering trip into a destroyed Hiroshima.

n't giving thanks that the shooting was over.

My unit, the 116th Engineering Combat Battalion (part of the 41st Infantry Division), went ashore in landing craft at the Japanese Naval Air Station, a seaplane base near the town of Hiro, a few miles from the main Japanese Naval Base at Kure. We were armed, but encountered no resistance. Rather, we were met by a relatively small group of somber Japanese civilians. All of them were cautious, apprehensive about what might happen. Wonderfully, nothing happened. There was no need for us to show off. The Japanese were quiet and polite, honoring us with the characteristic deep bows. My impression was that they, too, were grateful that the war was over. They must

have been concerned about their future, but it couldn't possibly be as bad as the years of war they had already endured.

Being a combat engineering unit, we had trucks, graders, bulldozers, and lots of shovels. One of our unit's roles was to use our equipment and expertise to clear away debris of fallen buildings so that roads could be made passable and any thus-cleared ground could be cultivated by the Japanese. Our efforts soon extended into the much larger city of Kure. It had been flattened and burned by many bombs from many planes over many months. There were major areas to be cleared.

We had heard stories about Hiroshima and were curious to see it for ourselves. It wasn't far past Kure,

but it was strictly off-limits to visitors. If we were to see Hiroshima, we would have to go during some off-duty time and it would have to look legitimate. There being no limit to GI ingenuity, an unofficial work detail of about 12 of us was soon organized. It would take place on the second Sunday of October, just two months since that first-ever atomic bomb had blasted Hiroshima. Who knew about radiation?

Our plan was simple: Drive up to the Military Police checkpoint in a much-used GI dump truck with a bunch of GIs in soiled fatigues standing in the bed of the truck with their shovels, and then let the driver talk his way past the MPs. Every outfit has a few grizzled veterans who could pull off such a deal. Ours did a splendid job. We were on our way to see Hiroshima.

Nothing we had heard could have prepared us for what we were about to see!

Hiroshima was built on a broad river delta with good-sized hills on three sides. As we drove over the crest of a hill, we were suddenly looking out over a vast wasteland of what had just two months earlier been a major Japanese city. Some buildings were still standing, but at odd angles, cold and lonely monuments among hundreds of other buildings that had been reduced to piles of rubble.

As we rode around the city, we were greatly relieved to find that the Japanese had disposed of the remains of the deceased. What a hellish job that must have been.

They had also cleared away enough debris from some main streets to partially open them for the few vehicles still operating. The burned-out hulks of cars, trucks, and streetcars that had been in the city on that fateful day were everywhere.

There already were some temporary power poles rigged up and a few streetcars running. Many of the original power poles had been built in a steel truss-like arrangement. From our vantage point high in the bed of our truck, we could see a pattern to these toppled poles, each one pointing away from what must have been the center of the blast.

One very substantial stone building, a power station, was still standing, but it had been displaced a foot or

more. The power for those few operating streetcars was not coming from that station.

Contrasting with the ruins of major buildings were countless stone foundations of what must have been small factories, shops, and homes. Everything that was combustible had gone up in smoke; the balance was just so much debris. Occasionally within these foundations we saw the rusted remains of a lathe or drill press or other machine, each one a silent reminder that pre-war Japan had been famous for its cottage industries, supporting larger nearby industries. The most poignant of these were the remains of sewing machines.

In another part of this now-quiet city, we walked around a cemetery with row upon row of closely positioned polished monolithic stones, each one now leaning against a neighboring stone, and all tilted away from the center of the blast. Even the ancestors had been impacted in that one awful moment.

Surrounded by this destruction it was almost impossible to grasp that this once major city had been destroyed, not by thousands of bombs over many months but in a single indescribable flash from a single bomb. We were stunned.

As GIs who would certainly have been in the middle of any final attack on the Japanese homeland, we were very grateful that the war was over, but it was a heavy and sobering experience to be standing on that homeland ourselves and seeing the awful price that was paid that day in Hiroshima.

The ride back to our base was very quiet.

Now, 55 years later, as I reflect back on that unforgettable day, I am again faced with an inescapable conclusion: Surely mankind was put on this earth for a more noble purpose than to take up arms against each other or to incinerate each other.

Please, God, by whatever name you may be called, help us learn and embody that understanding. Please!

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