

NOTE: A slightly shorter version of this draft was published on page 71 of the October 5, 2000 issue of The Santa Barbara 'Independent'. A two-page postscript was added October 8, 2004.

A SANTA BARBARA EX-G-I'S INTRODUCTION TO JAPAN AND  
HIROSHIMA By Walt Wolf September 23, 2000

In recognition of the on-going efforts of the Santa Barbara-based Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, on this fifty-seventh anniversary of the day that I was drafted into service in World War II, it seems appropriate to recall and record one brief portion of my military service; the one that I shall never forget.

Fifty-five years ago this month, I was a 24 year old Private in the U.S. Army, stationed at the 4th Replacement Depot near the town of Tacloban on the island of Leyte in the Philippines, awaiting assignment to the 41st Infantry Division.

Three weeks earlier, I had been temporarily stationed on the beach about 15 miles away, 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 ten o'clock, a huge wave of sound roared over 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 5th 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, for at that time, all of the Allied Forces in the Pacific were being physically and mentally 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 two Atomic Bombs had already been dropped in Japan and preparations were being made for the surrender. 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.

Our convoy of ships made its way from the Philippines to Buckner Bay in Okinawa, where we joined forces with many more ships and headed into the North China Sea to ride out a horrible typhoon that leveled much of that part of Okinawa.

Days later, our convoy very cautiously entered the calm waters of Japan through the famous Inland Sea, its picturesque rocky islands with their nearly vertical faces rising out of the water. This approach would have been absolutely impossible in war-time! 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

brought into position, fired, and then pulled back. Whatever shipping might be caught in those channels would be dead ducks! There wasn't a soldier or sailor in the entire convoy who wasn't giving thanks that the shooting was over!

My unit, the 116th Engineering Combat Battalion, went ashore in landing craft at the Japanese Naval Air Station, a seaplane base, near a town called 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, including a newspaper photographer. All of them were cautious; more than slightly apprehensive about what was going to happen. Wonderfully, nothing happened! There was no need for us to show off. The Japanese were quiet and polite, honoring us with their 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.

In typical Army fashion, we stood around awaiting orders to do something or to go someplace. As we surveyed this all-new-to-us-country, we were surrounded by bomb-damaged buildings and equipment. I was personally fascinated with the nearby airplanes because prior to my being drafted in 1943, I had been designing airplanes for our Navy at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank.

After an hour or so, we received orders and marched about a mile to what had been Japanese Naval Aviator's barracks. This elite group had had the benefits of relatively good quarters which had somehow managed to escape significant bomb damage. There were four large two-story wooden barracks, a mess hall, a recreation hall and a number of smaller buildings. This would be our battalion's home base.

Being a combat engineering outfit, 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 the roads could be used and so that any thus-cleared ground could be cultivated by the Japanese. Our efforts soon extended from the local area into the much larger and much more seriously damaged industrial city of Kure. It had been flattened and burned by many bombs from many planes over many months. Major areas needed to be cleared and made usable.

We G-Is had heard stories about Hiroshima and were curious to see it for ourselves. We knew that it was not very far past Kure, but we also knew that it strictly off-limits. If we were to see Hiroshima, it would have to be during some off-duty time and it would have to look legitimate. There being no limit to G-I ingenuity, an unofficial work party of about 12 of us was soon organized. It would

take place on the second Sunday of October; just 2 months since that first-ever Atomic Bomb had blasted Hiroshima! Who knew about radiation?

Our plan was simple; drive up to the Military Police check-point in a much used G-I dump truck, with a bunch of G-I's in soiled fatigues standing in the bed of the truck with shovels and hoes and rakes, and then let our driver talk his way past the M-P's. Every outfit had 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. This somewhat bowl-like shape may have concentrated the Atomic Bomb's blast within this bowl while providing some degree of protection to those buildings and people who were fortunate enough to be in the lee of the hills. As we drove over the crest of a hill, we were suddenly looking out over a waste-land of what just 2 months before had been a thriving and essentially undamaged major Japanese city! Some buildings were still standing, but at odd angles; cold and lonely monuments among the hundreds of other buildings which had been reduced to piles of stone and metal 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. These vehicles certainly had not been within the city at the time of the blast! The burned-out hulks of cars, trucks and streetcars that had been in the city on that fateful day were everywhere.

These ingenious people had already rigged up some temporary power poles and had a few streetcars running. Many of the original power poles had been built of steel members in a truss-like arrangement. From our vantage point, high in the bed of our truck, we could see a pattern to the downed power poles, each one pointing away from 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 by the force of the blast. The power for the few operating streetcars was not coming from that plant!

Contrasting with the ruins of major buildings were countless stone foundations of what must have been small shops and individual homes. Everything that was combustible had gone up in smoke; the balance just so much debris. Occasionally, within these foundations, we saw the remains of a lathe or a drill press or some other machine, each one a silent reminder that 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 area of this now-quiet city, we walked around a cemetery with row upon row of closely positioned traditional Japanese 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 recently thriving city had been destroyed, not by months of air raids, but rather in a single, indescribable flash from a single bomb! We were stunned!

As G-Is who would certainly have otherwise 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 to see the price that was paid that day in Hiroshima.

The ride back to our base was very quiet.

The 55 years since that eventful day have reinforced my own belief that war, any war, inevitably leads to more war! Surely, mankind was put upon 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 all learn and embody that understanding. Please!

**POSTSCRIPT:** In October, 2000, The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation held a special presentation at Westmont College featuring exhibits of materials from the two atomic bomb blasts in Japan and two soulful oral presentations by survivors of those two blasts. After the conclusion of the program, I turned to an oriental lady who had been seated immediately behind my wife and me. After commenting to this total stranger just how emotionally moved I was by these men's stories, I said that Hiroshima was not just a distant story to me, but very close in my mind, because, as a member of the U.S. Army of Occupation, I had been in Hiroshima myself, just two months after that fateful blast.

She expressed great interest and asked how that had happened. I related how I had traveled from the Philippines to Japan by troopship as part of the 41st Infantry Division and that our particular unit had come ashore in wooden landing craft, wading ashore on a concrete ramp at the Japanese Naval Seaplane Base near the town of Hiro, a few miles from the main Japanese Naval Base at Kure.

I added that we had been greeted by a small group of very somber Japanese civilians, each one bowing deeply to this first group of U.S. Soldiers in this area.

This lady smiled sweetly, and with a totally non-assuming air, told of her being

part of the contingent of Japanese awaiting our arrival. She knew all about it! What a coincidence; our meeting half a world away, fifty-five years later.

Her story was fascinating. She was American-born of Japanese parents who had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1920's. She had been educated at the University of California in Berkeley. She had returned to Japan for a visit before Pearl Harbor, but was soon found herself trapped there. Immediately following the Japanese surrender, the U.S. Army sought out all Japanese-Americans in Japan, selected those with good language skills and pressed them into service as interpreters.

She had those skills, was living in this town of Hiro and became part of the first group of Japanese civilians my Army outfit encountered that day in 1945.

Now, all these years later, this charming lady, Helen Takeda, was standing next to my wife and me at Westmont, each of us stunned by the improbability of it all. She introduced us to her husband, Hiro\* Takeda, and quickly told him our story. There were unabashed hugs and smiles and tears. She and her husband were living in Santa Barbara and were very active in the Santa Barbara-Toba City Sister City Organization. My wife and I saw her again at one of their functions about a year ago, where we learned that her husband had recently passed away. The three of us hugged again, briefly recapturing those tender moments from that afternoon at Westmont. We haven't seen her since. We hope she is well.

\* Hiro, the first name of the man she married some years later is also the name of the town where she was living when my Army outfit came ashore.

Another of life's improbabilities? Well, why not? WRW 10/8/04