

‘He’s My Biggest Hero’

Commander Remembers His Grandfather, Enola Gay Pilot

BY RICK MONTGOMERY
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WHITEMAN AIR FORCE BASE, Mo. — In the hallway outside his new office, Brig. Gen. Paul W. Tibbets IV walks daily past a black-and-white glossy of his late grandfather, who piloted the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan 70 years ago Thursday.

Their eyes meet, and the grandson, 48, is reminded of what Paul Tibbets Jr. told him long ago about pursuing a career in the U.S. Air Force.

Be yourself. Follow your own passion to serve. In effect, Granddad was saying, “Don’t live in my shadow.”

Tibbets IV said he took the advice to heart. “He was setting me free,” he said.

If the elder Tibbets helped his grandson be his own airman, the outcome reflects a stunning case of history coming full circle for the 509th Bomb Wing, based at Whiteman near Knob Noster.

In June, Tibbets IV was put in command of the unit whose origins go back to that mission his grandfather led over the Japanese city of Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. Tibbets Jr. was the first commander of the 509th Composite Group, which executed the bombing run and targeted Nagasaki three days later with another pilot at the helm.

The devastation wrought by the two weapons — the first bomb dubbed “Little Boy,” the second “Fat Man” — hastened Japan’s surrender. The end of World War II marked the beginning of the age of nuclear arms, which have not been used in warfare since.

“If he were here he’d tell you, ‘I never lost one night’s sleep after

that mission,’” said Tibbets IV. “The reason is he knew the lives that were saved” on both sides of the fighting because the United States didn’t carry out a planned invasion of the Japanese mainland.

Tibbets Jr. died in 2007 at age 92. Concerned that his grave site might draw anti-nuclear protesters, he asked his family to cremate his remains and scatter the ashes over the English Channel, Tibbets IV said.

At the headquarters of the 509th Bomb Wing, which maintains the world’s only fleet of B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, Tibbets IV spent an hour earlier this week recalling his grandfather and the mission he had kept under tight wraps for several months before carrying it out.

During 509th troop preparations in a remote airfield in Utah, “my grandfather was the only one who was briefed on the weapon itself,” Tibbets IV said. “He was the only one who knew the magnitude of what they were going to be doing.”

As for the B-29 Superfortress that would drop Little Boy, the pilot chose to name the aircraft after his mother, Enola Gay Tibbets.

She had been supportive of her son’s decision not to pursue a medical career, which disappointed his father, Tibbets IV was only a toddler when his great-grandmother died, but he said according to family lore, her belly “started to jiggle from laughing” when told by her son after the bombing that the plane had “Enola Gay” emblazoned outside the cockpit.

“He told me she was very honored,” said Tibbets IV.

As a boy, Tibbets IV didn’t have a lot of contact with his grandfather. The two lived several states from each other — Tibbets IV in Alabama



ALLISON LONG/KANSAS CITY STAR/TNS
A photograph of then-Air Force Col. Paul Tibbets Jr. hangs at Whiteman Air Force Base near Knob Noster, Mo. His grandson, Brig. Gen. Paul Tibbets IV, is commander of the 509th Bomb Wing at Whiteman. Tibbets Jr. was the pilot of the Enola Gay, which dropped the first atomic bomb used in warfare on Hiroshima, Japan, on Aug. 6, 1945.

and Tibbets Jr. in Ohio, where he helped launch an air taxi service that grew to be the world’s largest. He had retired from the Air Force as a brigadier general in the 1960s.

After Tibbets IV chose an Air Force path (unlike his father, Paul

Tibbets III, who served as an Army reservist), the two flying Tibbetses became kindred spirits. Granddad spoke more openly about his historic role in the war.

He recalled how the atomic blast over Hiroshima “kicked us pretty

good” and that fillings in the crew’s teeth tingled from the jolt of radiation.

Crews earlier had dropped leaflets warning of destruction and urging surrender. But it never was lost on Tibbets Jr. that surrender came only after the deaths of more than 100,000 Japanese civilians.

“People asked him all the time ... ‘Doesn’t it bother you?’” said Tibbets IV. “And he’d say, ‘I was given an order by the president of the United States (Missouri’s own Harry Truman), to go and prepare to execute this mission when called on. I’m not a politician. I execute orders given to me by the president.’

“And, yes, we’re also human beings, right? But here’s what he told me: ‘Paul, we knew if this was successful it could bring this war to an end.’”

Decades after the war, Tibbets Jr. gave public talks attended by his grandson, who would pilot combat runs over Kosovo and Afghanistan during Granddad’s lifetime.

The younger Tibbets was moved by the many times he saw World War II veterans stepping up to thank his grandfather for sparing them from what would have been a horrific ground invasion.

“It’s an honor to be a Paul Tibbets,” said Tibbets IV. “No doubt, he’s my biggest hero.”

At a recent town hall meeting at Whiteman, the new commander of the 509th spoke of “upholding the legacy” of World War II airmen and other troops.

“It’s not that we look at the past to live there,” Tibbets IV advised his charges. “We look at the past to learn from it and move forward.”

Hiroshima

Those ‘With Same Scar’ Find Peace At Nursing Homes

EDITOR’S NOTE — On two days in August 1945, U.S. planes dropped atomic bombs, one on Hiroshima, one on Nagasaki, the first and only time nuclear weapons have been used in war. Japan surrendered on Aug. 15, ending World War II. This story looks at the psychological scars left on survivors in a Hiroshima nursing home, 70 years later.

BY KAORI HITOMI
Associated Press

HIROSHIMA, Japan — Ayako Ishii was 19 and in love for the first time: She was studying the art of flower arranging in Kyoto and fell for her teacher. It was not to be, for the same reason her many subsequent attempts to find love were not to be.

When the man’s family found out that Ishii was from Hiroshima, they banned their relationship from developing further.

“There are many things I could have said, but I didn’t as my heart was closed and I was resigned,” Ishii, now 78, said with a cynical laugh. Beneath her neatly coiffed gray hair, her eyes glittered, as if they were filled with tears.

Even those who survived the Aug. 6, 1945, A-bomb attack on Hiroshima were transformed by it. They were harmed not only physically but mentally, long before post-traumatic stress disorder was even a diagnosis. Many lost relatives — sometimes all of them. They were stigmatized by people fearful that the radiation they were exposed to could cause disease and birth defects.

Many grew old with no one to care for them, which is why Ishii’s nursing home, Mutsumi-en or “Garden of Amity,” opened in 1970. Now some 600 Hiroshima survivors live in a total of four nursing homes intended just for them.

“This place is where people marked with the same scar huddle together,” said Dr. Nanao Kamata, director of the organization that runs the nursing homes and a medical doctor who devoted his life to caring for the victims. “What we can do is to give them a chance to live an easy and happy life when they come here.”

Ishii was 9 on Aug. 6, 1945, when the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima exploded about two kilometers (1.2 miles) from her home. She said she was thrown the distance of three houses by the blast. She suffered only minor cuts and torn clothes, and her family survived as well, but that did not matter to potential suitors and their families years later.

On some nights, Ishii said, she still sheds tears thinking about her first love.

When she approached 30, she concluded that she was not going to find a husband or have children. She decided she needed to support herself, and landed a job as a

telephone company operator — a coveted job for women at that time.

After retiring, she came to Mutsumi-en, where, she said, she has found peace. She joins music sessions at the home and goes on outings, including to her favorite hot springs in Hiroshima.

The home, a five-story concrete building, is drab on the outside, but inside photographs and calligraphy done by the residents cover the walls. A hanging decoration of origami paper cranes, a symbol for peace and the gift from students who visited, brightens up the linoleum-floor corridor.

Rooms are shared by four to six residents, their favorite snacks and tea cups laid out

on side tables. Many hobble with their hunched backs, and some clutch onto crutches, but that doesn’t stop them from taking a walk to the park and going to shop nearby.

Ishii’s facility is free for its residents; the waiting list extends five years. The other three homes, which cater to those requiring more intensive care, charge fees that are much lower standard care homes. Nagasaki, site of the second A-bomb attack three days after Hiroshima, has two similar facilities.

The nursing home has a view of the Motoyasu River that seems peaceful to a visitor, but it seems only to agitate resident Toshio Okada. As he stands on a balcony, his face scrunches up and his

body twists as if he is trying to avoid looking at the water.

The retired high school science teacher is married with an adult daughter. While discrimination did not keep him from having a family, he remembers fellow students at a Tokyo university gossiping about him when they learned where he was from.

It’s a far darker memory that may affect his reaction to the water. Seventy years ago, when he was 10, he saw bodies in this river. They floated upstream and downstream with the changes of the tide.

“I am trying to avert my eyes from memory. I am trying not to remember my suffering,” he says, flinging his hand as if trying to push the memories away.

Masao Nakazawa, a Japanese psychiatrist who has been treating atomic bomb survivors since the 1970s, calls the psychological scars they carry “the worst PTSD in human history.” Even today, he sees flashbacks triggered by factors as simple as a flashing light, a certain smell, or just the scenery.

Despite the pain it brings, talking about their experience is one way to heal, Nakazawa said.

Mutsumi-en accepts about 30 school visits a year to give a younger generation a chance to meet and listen to Hiroshima survivors. It’s an opportunity Okada never misses. Care workers say they think opening up this way has helped him, though he simply

shrugs and says he only does it because he was asked.

On a July afternoon, Okada leaned forward as he and other residents told their stories to high school students from Tokyo, 800 kilometers (500 miles) away. He drew a map to show them how, after the attack, he made it across the obliterated city to return home.

The students fired questions at first, then grew quieter and just listened, some welling up with tears.

When it came time to leave, the aging storytellers stood at the entrance to see their fresh-faced visitors off. Okada smiled shyly and waved, until they could no longer be seen.



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