

## Wave<sup>1</sup>

By Kate Dahlstedt

My father was a regular G.I. He and his fellow troops issued supplies to the European front and followed behind combat troops, always trailing through the destruction after the battle, but never being aimed at, never firing back. Finally, Europe was liberated. Japan was the next front. My father, like so many others, was ordered to invade that beautiful land. He was sent there as a combatant. He was sent there to kill and perhaps be killed. After a few months in the Philippines he was on shipboard with the other soldiers, crowded and lonely for home.

They were all terrified of what waited ahead, invading enemy territory, a Pacific island they had never seen before. Europe had been vaguely familiar, reminiscent of home. But, Japan was another world, and the Japanese soldier a foreboding and unknown entity. My father, like many of his counterparts, kept his deepest fears inside. If he had dared let himself fully feel his own terror, he would have been lost to himself, given over to that other sphere where nothing makes sense anymore. The die had been cast. He was on his way. He was in the hands of fate now. All he could do was hold fast to hope.

One day flowed into the next. Playing cards, smoking cigarettes, talking about girlfriends waiting back home and the job or house they'd have someday; anything to keep from feeling where they were going, what they were doing, what lay ahead. And truly they did not know what lay ahead. How could anyone? Beyond imagining. Beyond all human comprehension.

And then the news... A radio dispatch... A bomb, the biggest, was breaking down the enemy. There was cheering and laughter and hope that the end was near, that their dreams of home would really come true. They could pick up where they had left off, and life, their lives, would go on as planned. Now they glued themselves to the radio listening for updates, making bets, making promises to God. Finally, it came, three days later, another bomb, another city, Japan had surrendered. Relief raced through every muscle. My father breathed his deepest breath. The war was over. He had been spared.

The ship came alive. Music could be heard in the mess hall. Nervous laughter was everywhere. My father wrote letters home, one to his mother with facts and

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reassurance, one to his sweetheart with love and dreams. He imagined a few more months of that drab green and army rations, then the boat ride home. A few more months of jeeps and guns and he'd put it all behind him. He still didn't know what none of them knew, the price they had paid. With the end in sight anything seemed bearable. Anything *seemed* bearable.

He didn't feel the shock waves then. They were imperceptible, distorted, clouded by the unreality of victory. And when he saw, his mouth agape, the ravaged earth, the rubble city, the people gone for miles around, he still didn't know that he was changed forever. There was no going home again, home to innocence or home to glory. No one will ever be home that way again.

My father didn't talk much about those times, and most people who knew him never knew his story. He wept when he told me of those days, not only for what he saw, but for what cannot be seen. His life was spared, and thousands more, but he was never sure it was an even trade.

He didn't know me then, riding through those leveled streets, silently taking in the smoke and stench that filled the air. He had not even dreamed me as he watched the children shuffling through the wreckage for something familiar to hang on to. He couldn't imagine then that what he saw was only the beginning of a wave so great that I would feel it too someday, that all of us would feel it deep in our marrow forever.

My father went on to have a good life. He was a gentle man who always felt blessed. He died recently in a memory care facility. Surprisingly, in his final days, although he no longer remembered my mother, he began telling anyone who would listen that he had been in Hiroshima after the bomb dropped. That event became the central focus of his identity when most of who he was otherwise had left him, and as he faced his own death.

My father was very happy having a family, grandchildren and great grandchildren. But he never lost sight of the wave, the human evil that always lurked. And in his quiet moments when he looked out over the ocean he felt sad and shameful and angry about the human capacity for such savagery. And I believe he knew, though he never said it out loud, that since that time we have all been existentially searching, like children through the wreckage, for something safe to hang on to.