

50 Years After the War

The People Who Were There Recall the Major Events of World War II

Tom Infield

From the Introduction

When I was a kid in the '50s and '60s, it seemed that everybody's dad was a war veteran. Mine, too. But my parents broke up when I was only eight, and I never had much chance to know my father. By the time I was grown and wanted to hear about his experience as a ball-turret gunner on a B-17 bomber, it was too late. He had died, far too young.



Eventually, I decided to seek answers to my questions about my dad's life in the Eighth Air Force by tracking down 390th Bomb Group members he had flown with and asking them about their experiences. I ran into a remarkable cast of storytellers, then in their mid-60s: an ex-pilot from Bellingham, Washington; a former gunner from Long Island; a one-time navigator from a suburb of Chicago. All wanted me to understand that war, as they saw it, had little to do with heroics. For their generation, war was simply duty: A man did what a man had to do.

Though brought up during the Depression, they had never thought of themselves as deprived when they were kids. No one had had money. Straight from school, with no worldly experience, they had enlisted in the Army Air Force. The Army had shipped them across the Atlantic to airfields in England. Within days, they were fighting Germans in an alien, sub-zero world miles above the ground. It was bewildering, terrifying, and exhilarating all at once. "It was the kind of thing you'd never do again," James E. Keelan, the navigator, told me. "But I wouldn't take a million dollars for it now."

I had liked talking to these men. They embodied what we have come to think of as the American character. They were plain-spoken and unassuming, a little embarrassed at their own display of emotion in recalling men who were long dead. They were sentimental without being sappy, patriotic without being jingoistic.

This volume contains most of their stories, from Dominic P. Gentile's recollection of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor--I thought, is this how they do maneuvers on Sunday morning? Then we saw the red ball on one of the planes, and we knew this wasn't maneuvers--to first-hand accounts of the atomic bomb strike on Hiroshima.

Fifty years after World War II may have turned out to be the best time to ask questions. For decades, many of these veterans had kept their feelings bottled up. Arthur C. Dietrich, a GI who late in the war was witness to the Nazi camp at Ohrdruf, put it this way: You got home and thanked your lucky stars that you made it in one piece. And then you went on with your life. You thought about it a lot, but didn't talk about it much.

But now in their 70s, most of them, they have realized they aren't going to live forever. Many want to share what the war was like in real life, not Hollywood. I have never met so many people interested in keeping the peace as these folks.