

# Remembering one World War II soldier

What Memorial Day means to each of us is certain to be personal. To me, and to many of us in our 70s, memories of World War II call up feelings to which, as our numbers dwindle, we respond with increasing urgency.

In mid-April of this year, my husband, Edward, and I joined a group of 15 Army veterans, relatives of veterans, and flew to the Japanese island of Okinawa to acknowledge and celebrate the 55 years of peace between our two nations since the last land battle of World War II — the 82-day battle which has been called the Typhoon of Steel.

I had a mission to perform on Okinawa in which photographs of and by the family would play a surprising role. Hearing of our plans, my brother, Bill, the archivist of the family, relayed a request he had received for pictures and biographical material about our father to be part of an exhibit sponsored by the Ryukyuan/American Historical Research Association. As Alex Ishihara, director of the Association, put it, "All we really know about General Buckner is that he was Commander of the Tenth Army, and that he died."

I recall the "Victory On Okinawa" banner headline carried by the Baltimore News-Post of June 21, 1945, followed by the report: "Victory was proclaimed only three days after Lt. General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. was killed by a Japanese shell burst as he watched the final, decisive assault."

The assembling of facts and photos illustrating our father's life became an absorbing task for my brother and me. E-mail flew back and forth between Kansas City, Mo., and Ashland. In a 1890 photo taken at White Sulphur Springs, Va., we found father as a tubby toddler in a Sunday-best family grouping. At nine, he is in Paris atop the Eiffel Tower, with his young brother and considerably older father, Simon Bolivar Buckner, Sr., a Lt. General of the Confederate Army.

During World War I, a studio portrait shows him as a flight instructor of military pilots, suited up in helmet, goggles, and leather flight jacket. A 1943 poster-sized photo taken during the Japanese occupation of the Aleutian Islands shows him in bulky battle dress, ready for a

## Mary B. Brubaker



Photo courtesy Mary B. Brubaker

### U.S. Army Flight Instructor S.B. Brubaker, Jr., shown in 1918

flight in frigid winter weather.

My favorite picture of him and my then high school kid brother, Bill, is of the two of them beside a sunny, reedy duck pond in Golden Gate Park, beaming at the photographer, who is certainly my mother, holding her trusty twin-lens Rolleiflex, with which she took so many artful pictures in the square format.

These, and a surprising find, a series of 30 color transparencies that my father took of people and country scenes of Okinawa, I placed with care at the bottom of my one suitcase. Word must have sparked Okinawan interest in

these 55-year-old slides, because no sooner were we off the plane at Naha airport, than microphones and video cameras were thrust at us, and among all the warm welcome given these veterans of the Army's 96th Division "Dead-eyes," as they were called, was the persistent question: "Where are the pictures?"

Weary as I was from the long flight, I was obliged to open my bag, flail through shirts, shoes, toiletries and undergarments (cameras meanwhile grinding away) and transfer my precious cargo into the hands, hands I trusted, of the man who would be with us every day of our trip — the head of the Historical Research Association.

To our delight, nearly each day of that week, some of my father's pictures came out in one or another of the city newspapers, or was aired on a local TV station. And on Easter, April 23, a whole spread of pages of them appeared — the people, their houses, their turtle-back tombs, wayside scenes ...

Another task awaited me that week. I was asked to unveil a street sign at Torii Station, the headquarters of the Tenth Area Support Group. It was a great honor to pull the gauzy sheet from a sign that said "Buckner Boulevard," an honor compounded by the fact that the sheets feeding into the boulevard were also named for distinguished heroes in the Pacific war theatre.

The afternoon retreat ceremony followed, and the 15 of us sat under a canopy watching the troops march, and listening as the bugler accompanied the lowering of the two flags, the Japanese red and white, and the American red, white and blue. I took a photo from where I sat, and later had a long look at the print when I got home. Just beyond the soldiers standing at "Present Arms," the picture shows the two Japanese "torii" or gates, that mark the entrance to Torii Station. These gates arch over the entrance to and exit from Buckner Boulevard. As I studied that snapshot, words from a familiar psalm came to me:

"The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

*Mary B. Brubaker lives in Ashland*