

Oak Ridger recalls his time in Nagasaki at the end of World War II

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 26, 2012)

Oral histories are valuable resources and give insight into our history. Carolyn Krause provides the following:

"I think it is curious that I grew up near Three Mile Island, spent three months in Nagasaki and ended up in Oak Ridge," said Carl Bretz, 86, recently in an interview.

Bretz grew up around Harrisburg, Pa., near the future site of the worst nuclear power plant accident in U.S. history.

He spent three months as a clerk typist with a U.S. Army battalion attached to the Marines in Nagasaki, Japan. He arrived there about six weeks after the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb Aug. 9, 1945, on Nagasaki.

This weapon, which ended World War II, was the second and last atomic bomb to be detonated over a populated area. It also prevented a U.S. invasion of Japan that was projected to kill millions on both sides,

In 1994, after marrying Oak Ridge family counselor Rosemary Burns, whom he had met at a Unitarian Universalist conference in Radford, Va., Bretz retired here.

The methods for producing plutonium in a nuclear reactor and separating it from uranium were pioneered at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, as were many technologies used in nuclear power plants. The larger reactors at Hanford, Wash., produced the plutonium used in the atomic bomb that exploded over Nagasaki.

The bomb killed almost 74,000 people and injured another 74,000. Several hundred thousand more people eventually succumbed to illnesses resulting from the bomb's radioactive fallout.

"We commandeered a school as a barracks and office headquarters," said Bretz of his arrival in Nagasaki, which occurred after the Army had determined that the area no longer had hazardous radiation levels.

"We went in with loaded rifles but there was no resistance. The people disappeared. After we got settled, people started trickling back. Some of the children had sores, I assumed, from radiation burns. It was remarkable how they accepted the occupation by the U.S. military. I was utterly amazed."

Bretz served as clerk typist with the Army Construction Engineer Battalion, which participated in the occupation of Japan by the Allied Powers, led by the U.S. The occupation transformed Japan into a democracy.

Bretz was in Nagasaki and other towns on Kyushu Island from September 1945 through April 1946. The Construction Engineer Battalion built an airstrip and bridges in the area. Bretz helped dig a latrine outside the school when they first arrived.

As a clerk-typist, Bretz kept records, got battalion members ready for discharge and opened and closed battalion offices. He also wrote many letters home to his parents from Nagasaki.

He took photos and kept photos taken by a battalion photographer. One photo shows a damaged Catholic church (Nagasaki has had a Portuguese population since the 16th century) and another shows the Mitsubishi torpedo lab.

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He made copies of his Army records and kept World War II memorabilia, including his Army uniform and Japanese flags. Most of these collections have been transferred to the American Museum of Science and Energy.

Copies of his letters and a DVD and transcript of an interview with him will be available soon at the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History in the Oak Ridge Public Library and eventually on the COROH website.

Bretz is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister. But in the early 1940s when he was a high school student, he elected to take the commercial, not the academic, track. His grandfather had been a farmer and his father a railroader, and Bretz was not expected to go to college. He opted for working at a less strenuous job, so he took typing classes in high school in Marysville, Pa.

After graduation in 1943, he worked in a Pennsylvania Farm Bureau Insurance Company in Harrisburg but hated the job. Then he was drafted. He took basic training at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. Most of the privates ended up fighting—and in some cases dying—in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 in Europe.

Because of his typing skills, Bretz avoided combat. He was sent to work as a clerk typist at Army camps in Pennsylvania, Alabama and Mississippi. Bretz was stationed on Oahu Island in Hawaii when the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

After the war, with assistance from the GI bill, Bretz attended and graduated from Albright College in Reading, Pa. One of the students he knew there was a Japanese woman who had been in a Japanese internment camp in America during the war.

Bretz had studied to become an Evangelical United Brethren pastor at Albright's seminary. Then he decided to attend graduate school at Boston College, where he earned a master's degree in the psychology of religion. He became an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and held chaplain or parish positions in New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Iowa.

Bretz also worked for the Alabama state government's mental health department from 1972 until his retirement in 1988. Part of the time he worked for Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, helping mental health patients transition from long-term treatment in the hospital to community-based care.

A widower, Bretz has three grown children in Florida, Massachusetts and New Mexico from his first marriage. He lives in an Oak Ridge retirement center and enjoys reading and weaving placemats and other items on a loom he has owned since 1971. Every Tuesday he goes to the Appalachian Art Craft Center to weave on a 200-year-old loom there.

He is pleased to have his letters home, photos, recorded oral history, Army records, and other memorabilia from World War II and postwar Japan preserved in Oak Ridge.

NEXT WEEK: Carolyn continues with Carl Bretz's impressions of Nagasaki shortly after it was devastated by the last atomic bomb dropped on a populated area, as revealed in his letters to his parents.

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Carl Bretz in the Army uniform he wore in 1945