

Happy 90th birthday, Tad Nagaki.

If I could light 90 birthday candles today, I would light them — all for you. If I could shout “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” from New Jersey to Nebraska, I would echo my voice across the land — for you. If I could sparkle the sky with fireworks, I would ignite the shooting stars — for you. If I could wave a thousand flags, I would wave Old Glory — all for you. Tad Nagaki of Alliance, Nebraska, you have EARNED the title — American hero.

I will never, ever, ever forget that day so long ago when you and a six-man team of American liberators risked their lives to rescue me and 1,500 Allied prisoners from the Japanese-held Weihsien concentration camp in China.

August 17, 1945. Who could forget that day? Americans were spilling from a low-flying B-24 bomber, dangling from parachutes that looked like giant poppies. They were dropping into the fields beyond the barbed wire and those barrier walls.

I dashed to the barracks windows in time to see the American star emblazoned on the plane. America’s rescuing angels had come. Six gorgeous American men, sun-bronzed, with meat on their bones. I was 12 years old. For three years, my brothers and sister and I had been captives. For five and a half years, warring armies had separated us from our missionary parents.

Now the Americans had come.

Weihsien went mad. I raced for the entrance gate and was swept off my feet by the pandemonium. Men ripped off their shirts and waved at the bomber circling above. Prisoners ran in circles and pounded the skies with their fists. They wept, hugged, cursed, and danced. Waves of prisoners swept past armed Japanese guards into the fields beyond the camp.

Remember that B-24 called “The Armored Angel”? Remember us children trailing you everywhere? Remember our cutting off chunks of your hair for souvenirs? Remember Major Staiger’s teaching us to sing “You Are My Sunshine”?

My heart flipped somersaults over every one of you. We wanted your autographs. We wanted your buttons. We wanted snips of your hair. We wanted pieces of parachute. You men gave us our first taste of Juicy Fruit gum. We children chewed it and passed the sticky wads from mouth to mouth.

You want to know about falling in love? We fell in love with America that day. We fell in love with six American heroes.

You — Sgt. Tad Nagaki — were the Japanese-American interpreter on that rescue team. We adored you. Before the war, you had been a high school football, baseball, and track star in small-town Nebraska. In Weihsien, in the long days we waited to be evacuated from the camp, you played catcher for the American prisoners when they played the British prisoners in softball.

I wish I could make a rumpus across America today for every hero on that rescue team. But you’re the only living member left.

So today, from around the world, we former prisoners salute you, Tad Nagaki. Heroes like you — YOU saved the world.

Mary Taylor Preville Haddonfield, New Jersey

Congratulations to Tad on his 90th birthday.

We met each other 65 years ago, not in America or in England but in far off China. We both have August 17, 1945 indelibly etched into our memories.

Tad was a member of “Operation Duck”. The official report reads as follows:-

“The Duck Team in a B-24 arrived over the target at approx 9:30 a.m. Owing to the very scanty photographic and other information with which they had been provided, they could not immediately locate the Civilian Assembly Camp where 1,500 Allied civilians were interned. A sweep was made over the area at approx 2,000 ft. and as no fire was drawn, subsequent flights were made at lower altitudes... When the B-24 was down to 500 feet a compound was located in which hundreds of people were collected, waving up to the plane. It was presumed that this was the objective. The B-24 dropped down to 450 ft and the seven men jumped, landing in high growing goaliang fields. By the time the men had rolled up their chutes, the crowds of internees had rushed out to meet them”.

I was 15-years-old, lying in the concentration camp’s hospital sick bay, recovering from a very high fever. Suddenly the drone of an aircraft broke the quietness. The plane came lower and lower and circled the camp. A shout went up, “It’s American” and visibly on the B-24 we read its name, “The Armored

Angel”. The waving arms of the prisoners assured the pilot that he had found his target. The plane circled gaining height and then we saw, to our great joy, seven parachutists dangling in the air as they descended. There was no holding the internees who rushed passed the guards at the gate. Our American rescuers were carried shoulder high into the camp.

In the following days more containers with food were parachuted into the camp. It was sometime before we could be evacuated as the railway line had been bombed.

Thank you Tad for your valuable part as interpreter. I have your signature in my autograph album. Also, an entry in my diary for August 28, 1945.... “At 4 p.m. there was a Britain vs. America softball match. Peter and Tad played. The score was 6-7.”

On my eventual return to England I did my nursing training, and then married Patrick who is a Baptist Minister (now retired). We have three daughters, two are nurses. The third is the Manager of American Airlines Premium Services at Heathrow - Europe - and Asia. The latter includes visits to Shanghai, so I retain my link with USA and China.

Beryl Goodland Gorsley, England, UK

To the Editor,

I was recently put in touch with Kay Rictor who was a schoolgirl when Tad Nagaki came to Weihsien Internment camp in 1945 with the rest of the seven man Duck Mission to rescue the internees at this camp in north China. I was also one of those internees. In fact I was born in the camp, received surgery by an American surgeon who was helped by a medical colleague in the camp, and am still going strong today! I live in England and would like to wish Tad, the last surviving member of the Duck Mission team, a wonderfully enjoyable birthday on January 25!

My sister, Libby, walked into the Weihsien camp as a toddler with my mother and father. I was born a little later in 1943. I required surgery and another internee, an American surgeon from the Peking Union Medical College (set up initially by the Rockefeller Foundation) together with another doctor internee operated on me on July 4, 1943. I needed careful feeding to survive. Kay Rictor (then twelve years old) remembers helping my mother feed me. My mother spoke little of the years spent in the camp, but she did speak of the American pilots who parachuted down into fields nearby to liberate us. Sadly my mother died last year. She was aged 92 years. My father died in 1959, so many years ago.

After my mother’s death, I tried to find where the surgeon who operated on me all those years ago was now living. It seems he and his son, also in the camp, have since died. Instead I came to meet (through e-mail) Kay Rictor who was one of the many children from Chefoo School who were also interned at Weihsien. It is through Kay that I have heard of Tad who I am told is now farming in Alliance, NE. My mother would have been so interested to know of Tad and his bravery. All of us who lived through those years of interment can only be truly grateful for the mission they undertook, even if the men considered they were only doing their job. It was a risky task and no doubt no one was certain how the Japanese guards would react. Mum often spoke of how the Americans would play many times over the loudspeaker the song: “Don’t fence me in” - I guess if your homeland was Nebraska, fences would dramatically accentuate one’s loss of freedom.

So Tad, here is one person you probably never knew about. Just a little two-year-old when you came to free us in 1945. I am writing to thank you for your special part in my life and that of my whole family. I am also wanting to wish you a truly marvelous birthday party. THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart. My sister is also alive and she lives near Montreal, Canada. So two Weihsien internees live on!

Susan Dobson, Bedford, England, UK

I honor you, Tad Nagaki, on your 90th birthday. I honor you for your heroism in liberating Weihsien — for liberating me.

I remember eating egg shells and abominable food that often made me gag. I remember a boil on my leg that wouldn’t heal and daily roll calls, numbering off in Japanese — “ichi, nee, san, she....” I remember freezing our fingers making coal balls with a recipe of mud and coal dust.

But, oh, do I remember the day the Americans came. The unfamiliar sound of a low-flying plane interrupted us in a music class in the church right there by the gate. For-

get the music! Were we about to be bombed? We rushed out, gazing at the sky. There we saw the American star on a plane as it flew so low over the ball field. When I saw the parachutes, I dashed through that barrier gate into the goaliang fields to welcome you American heroes.

After almost three years in Japanese concentration camps and after 5 ½ years of not seeing Daddy and Mummy, what does a hungry, 74-lb., 11-year-old remember of liberators? FREEDOM. Then the B-29s brought candy and chewing gum. I stuffed about five sticks of gum into my mouth all at one time and chewed them all day until my jaws ached and then saved the wad so I could chew it all again.

Your coming told us the war was over. You were one of seven brave young men who volunteered for a very dangerous mission. Thank you, Tad Nagaki. You gave us FREEDOM. You opened a door to a whole new world of opportunities.

John H. Taylor, MD Dayton, OH

Dear Editor,

Last year, on January 30th, My husband Mahlon Horton and I, Audrey Nordmo Horton, had a very moving experience. We were driving from our home in Kamloops, BC, Canada to South Carolina and we made Alliance, Nebraska our most strategic stop.

Dianne Johnson of Alliance Tractor & Impl. Co was so helpful in emailing us and being a go-between for us and Tad as to making the meeting place connection there at the store a reality. And the modern convenience of the cell phone kept us and Tad in contact.

At the store we had the personal privilege of meeting Tad Nagaki and thanking him from the bottom of both of our hearts for delivering me. The whole experience was made possible because of Mary Preville locating our heroes. During our visit with Tad he kept saying he would have to call Mary and tell her about his day. She is such an important figure in his life.

Thank you, Mr. Nagaki for risking your life to save our lives. I will never forget the exhilaration and the surrealism I felt when walking bare footed outside those ominous walls with its watch towers and barbed wires which had imprisoned us for two years. Were we really free? Why were the Japanese soldiers just letting us rush outside those previously closed gates? And then God allowed our heroes a safe entrance into the only world we had known for two whole years and the glorious liberation process started.

Our heroes showered us from the skies with such rich foods our stomachs couldn’t tolerate. I remember sitting and eating a can of strawberry jam—a big mistake as it way too sweet for my shrunken stomach—the C-rations were eagerly received and the chewing gum was most welcome

My, what a culture shock we started experiencing when the soldiers entered with their wake up music at 6:30 a.m. and their ways of the outside world to which we were strangers. And we kept on experiencing culture shocks on our journey to our home countries in which we were strangers. We had indeed been so secluded from the outside world.

I really wonder what the soldiers thought of us and our little community which had been so shut off from interaction with outsiders.

Thank you again Mr. Nagaki for your successful effort which changed my life and the lives of all the 1500 internees of the Civic Assembly Center of Weihsien, Shantung, China that memorable day of August 17, 1945.

Audrey Nordmo Horton Kamloops, BC, Canada

Congratulations to Tad Nagaki on his 90th Birthday. My heartfelt thanks and from my family as well. I was born in Weihsien camp and was under two years when you arrived but I heard of the elation when you appeared. I was in the care of an older gal and we ran to the opened gates to greet all of you - a miracle for us.

A big salute to you.

Angela Louise Cox Elliott Vancouver, BC, Canada

A humble birthday salute to a real hero, Tad Nagaki of Alliance, on his 90th!

His actions in the 1945 liberation of the Japanese prisoner camp, Weihsien, are an inspiration to us all!

Harold J. Sydnam, former Sergeant of Marines Bellingham, WA, USA

My name is Kathleen (Nordmo) Rictor. I live in Ocean Shores, Washington.

Tad . . . I will always remember that day in August when you and the rest of the Duck Team came to Weihsien to rescue us. Little did we know that it was a dangerous task you had taken on, as we were just school children. I was 15 years old and will never forget the sound of the plane, us running out of our classroom to watch the plane, seeing the flag and realizing it was indeed American, then watching the parachutes in the sky — never having seen that before — and all of us running to the gate and running out of the gate to welcome you. Folks were screaming, some crying, some just watching, then you came into the camp and we followed you around. Thank you for being part of that rescue.

This comes with so many thanks and with many, many wishes for a wonderful 90th birthday. With fond memories

Kathleen Rictor Ocean Shores, WA

Dear Tad,

Congratulations on your 90th. I was with the 14th Air Force-Flying Tigers, 69th Depot Repair Squadron / 301st Air Depot Group, Kunming, China. I have been communicating with Mary Preville for quite some time. You and others on the Duck Mission did a great deed in rescuing Mary and others. Wishing you the best in 2010.

Marty Oxenburg Philadelphia, USA

Dear Editor,

I am so glad to hear from Mary Preville that you are happy to publish letters about Tad Nagaki with his 90th birthday coming later this month. I was a 14-year-old schoolboy in Weihsien concentration camp where Tad was one of the seven Americans who parachuted on August 17, 1945 just outside our camp. What a day!

I kept a diary starting on Wednesday, Aug 15 and continued writing until long after some of us left Weihsien on Sept 25. There is so much to say, but I think you will be interested to see my entry for Thurs, Aug 23 which gives the most detail about Tad. You can see from this, and the further entries, that Tad made a great impression. He was such an inspirational young man, and we hung on his words.

Thursday, August 23, 1945

“In the evening there was a softball game England v. America. After the first innings, three Americans came, J. Moore (RF), P. Orlick (S.S.) and Tad Nagaki (C). Tad is in my mind the best catcher in camp. I was told he couldn’t peg fast ‘cause he strained a muscle but he was as quick as anything, getting some which meant a quick spring. He was very springy although he played in boots. He had some good hard hits. P. Orlick made a very good shortstop. He had a hardball peg, a flick of the wrist. He made about the most hits—a very well placed bunt down first. He also squirmed bases. J. Moore had hardly played before — being brought up in an English school. He made a good hard hit at the pitcher—a cricket drive. The ball went over second base and he got first base. He also did some good work at right-field.”

Yours sincerely,

Peter Bazire Bath, England

My first grade students loved hearing the story of Tad Nagaki. My grandfather’s sister was teaching at Yenching University when the Japanese invaded. She was placed under house arrest and later transferred to Weihsien. Near the end of the war, seven very brave Americans parachuted in and liberated the camp. Tad Nagaki was one of them.

My first graders were especially impressed that Mr. Nagaki jumped out of an airplane. They were eager to write to him - a real hero. And they were honored when he wrote back. They were excited that a real hero would write, not to the principal, but to a group of six and seven-year-olds - to first graders!

Thank you, Tad Nagaki, for taking the risks you took and saving the people of Weihsien. Thank you for giving my class the lessons in patriotism and citizenship that you gave. Thank you for concern for the student whose father was in Iraq. (Yes, he was able to come home safely!) And thank you for allowing me to share your story with my class.

Happy Birthday!

Marti Kramer Suddarth grand-niece of Dr. Martha Morrison Kramer, internee at Weihsien Corydon, IN

My one big wish and prayer is that my Pete was here. He was a

member of the team that liberated the Weihsien Concentration Camp, along with Tad Nagaki. Pete was radio operator on the mission, and, at age 21, the youngest member of the team.

If Pete were alive, he would be in Alliance in a flash to celebrate your 90th birthday with you, Tad.

Pete, himself, desperately wanted to be a member of the team to liberate Weihsien. But he wore glasses and didn’t think he would be accepted to parachute. When they were giving the eye exam to volunteers for the mission, Pete hid his glasses and memorized the eye chart by listening to the men in the line in front of him. They also did I.Q. tests. Pete was selected for the team. But on the first practice jump, his glasses almost flew off his head. From then on, whenever he jumped, he always taped his glasses to his head.

My Pete didn’t talk much about this rescue, but my family considers their father and all members of the team as World War II heroes.

I, myself, can’t even imagine jumping out of an airplane at 400 feet. You are a hero, Tad Nagaki. I wish you a healthy and joyful birthday.

Carol Orlick, widow of Pvt. Peter Orlick The Queens, NY

Dear Editor,

I will never forget that day! August 17, 1945 . . .

I am one of the 1,500 plus in Weihsien Internment Camp in North China, who was so thrilled to see the big American B-24 flying over our camp. I remember we were in class but the minute we heard the roar we rushed outside to see this huge plane that was flying over us. We found ourselves running in circles chasing it and then it rose up higher, so we stopped and wailed thinking it was going away. Instead once it reached a better height we were amazed to see these small figures jumping out and then their many colored parachutes blossomed and more slowly they descended, landing in a Chinese cemetery outside the entrance to Camp. The Japanese guards just stood there as we crowded through the gate so excited and happy. Being barefoot I soon slowed up with all the prickles on my feet but as I waited, quite quickly the crowd was returning with those seven wonderful parachutists who came to liberate us.

It is a day I will never forget. I was so grateful, especially when I heard how all seven had volunteered not knowing whether they would be shot down before they could reach us. Also they came as soon as possible as there was a rumor that all the Japanese prisoners would be shot as soon they had surrendered. From then on everything changed — plenty of food being parachuted down and we could now walk in the countryside. We were woken every morning at 6 a.m. with “Oh what a beautiful morning,” over the loud speakers. Best of all those of us of the Chefoo School could, at last after five years or more, be reunited with our families. All because Tad and the other brave men volunteered to come and set us free. We can never thank you enough Tad and your courageous companions.

Congratulations on your 90th Birthday.

Mary Broughton Darfield, New Zealand.

Dear Uncle Sam from America,

Four years old in 1945, I am still completely amnesic as to the 873 days I spent in a Concentration Camp, a compound in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by guns, high walls, electrified barbed wires . . . and Japs.

Then . . . World War II finally ended.

As time went on, I had a dream . . . I had this nightmare that came back to me, night after night - always the same dream and just before I wake up, I see myself bare footed, almost naked in the middle of a light brown dirty slope, surrounded by big dark grey stones, under a blue sky without clouds and the sun shining bright.

People running all over the place.

Collective hysteria. I don’t understand what is going on. I am completely panicked. Somebody picks me up - that is when I wake up.

It happened in Weihsien one hot summer day of 1945! We were on the point of being liberated by the Americans.

Out here in Europe we will never forget all of you guys from America and other countries that cured “Mother Earth” from these horrible, hysterical, sneaky, dirty, sadistic, deadly

. . . viruses.

Let us not forget your six comrades that parachuted with you from the “Armored Angel”, a B-24 bomber that flew over Weihsien . . . on August 17, 1945 to liberate us.

There are thousands of Uncle Sam all over your country. Those who fought in the Pacific, in Europe, landed in Normandy, were trapped in Bastogne and all the soldiers who lost their lives for our liberty*.

Dear Tad, we would like to congratulate you for your 90th birthday and feel that you deserve to be honored and respected by your fellow citizens and the whole wide World.

(*LIBERTY: The right and power to act, believe, or express oneself in a manner of one’s own choosing.)

Leopold Corroy-le-Grand, Belgium

Dear Tad,

I wish you a very happy 90th birthday, full of fun and friendship!

Time flies... I still remember those unbelievable parachutes and the mad dash towards the gates - and through the gates! to freedom.

Those of us from Weihsien will never forget what we owe to seven very courageous men who chose to come and liberate our prison camp in August 1945.

I was a little girl then and cannot remember any of you personally, but never mind, even though I’m 70 now, that day, time stood still. I won’t ever forget the laughter and the cries, the colors, the sticky heat, the dust, ...and the heady feeling of freedom!

I’m so very grateful. Thank you.

Jeanne Pander Brussels, Belgium.

Dear Tad,

You won’t know me today, but I am one of the 1,500 or so inmates of the Weihsien Camp that you so bravely helped to liberate on August 17, 1945 when you and your Duck Mission teammates parachuted down to us from 400 feet on that sweltering hot summer day.

I was playing ping-pong in Kitchen One with my friend Stanley Thompson that day when we suddenly heard the roar of a huge aircraft just overhead. Stan and I dropped our ping-pong paddles and raced out into the brilliant sunshine to see this strange sight. Later we learned that the plane was a B-24 Liberator from the U.S. Army Air Force. We were totally thrilled! We had spent four years of our young lives as civilian prisoners of the Japanese and had almost forgotten what freedom was like!

Tad, you were one of those seven heroes who came that day and set me free!

THANK YOU! THANK YOU, TAD NAGAKI!

I will never forget what you did for me that day by setting me free! I had been separated from my dear parents for all the years of the war and could hardly remember what it was like to live with my own family. But you helped to bring that sad part of my life to an end! You will always be enshrined in my heart, as long as I live, as one of my heroes! I am so grateful to you! With profound respect,

David Birch British Columbia, Canada

Dear Sirs,

Please pass on my congratulations to Tad on his 90th birthday. I was a 15-year-old when Tad parachuted into Weihsien to liberate us.

You, Tad, were a real hero to us boys and we were particularly intrigued by the pistol you always wore on your chest next to your shoulder. I don’t think the other liberators carried pistols there.

Thanks for your part in liberating us. We can never thank you enough.

With congratulations, love and thanks,

Douglas Sadler Manchester, England

I would like to salute Tad Nagaki on the occasion of his 90th Birthday. I am sending this from Leeds in England. I will always remember that great day in August 1945, when the US parachutists came to give us our freedom. I so would like to thank him very much for his part in this. Sincerely,

Beryl Laverick Leeds, England