

War Stories

By Drew Bratcher

Photographs by David Deal

These veterans—each from a different war—stepped onto the battlefield to serve their country and were forever changed

“THIS IS YOUR COUNTRY”

On December 8, 1941, Joe Ichiuji burned inside as he listened on a radio to President Roosevelt declare war on Japan for the attack on Pearl Harbor. The young soldier, stationed with the Army's 41st Division at Fort Lewis near Seattle, hoped for the chance to fight for his country.

Ichiuji had been born and raised in the Northern California town of Salinas. His parents were Japanese immigrants who had come to America to start a new life. They'd opened a shoe shop and done well. California had become home.

Within weeks of Roosevelt's speech, Ichiuji's commanding officer handed him discharge papers and sent him packing. According to the War Department, all local Japanese-Americans were suspect in what it believed would be an attack on the West Coast.

Upon his arrival at the train station in Salinas, his parents, sister, and five brothers greeted him with more bad

news: They'd been assigned to an internment camp in Arizona.

Months later, the Ichiujis arrived by train at Poston, the largest of ten American camps. Guards greeted them with machine guns and escorted them through a barbed-wire fence to their tiny room in the middle of the desert.

In 1943, the War Department—realizing that many able bodies that might aid in the war effort were languishing in the camps—decided to give Japanese-American men a loyalty test. Those who renounced the Japanese emperor and swore allegiance to the United States Army could join the 422nd Combat Team, a unit of Japanese-Americans. Ichiuji was among the first to sign up.

Before he left, his father looked him in the eye. “This is your country,” he said. “Do your best to defend it.”

Ichiuji, who now lives in Rockville, was assigned to the unit's 522nd Battalion and fought in Italy and in

northeast France near the Vosges Mountains, where a lost American battalion was surrounded by Germans. In a fusillade of bullets, Ichiuji's unit broke through the lines and rescued 211 soldiers at the cost of some 800 casualties.

In the spring of 1945, the 522nd joined the invasion of Germany and discovered just how hellish things had been for Hitler's enemies. In the bone-littered forests around Munch, Ichiuji's battalion came upon Kaufering IV Hurlach, a satellite of the Dachau concentration camp. The soldiers found Jewish prisoners in striped uniforms crouched in the dirt carving strips of meat from the carcass of a dead animal.

Seeing the barbed wire and barracks, Ichiuji thought of his family, who would remain in the internment camp in Arizona until 1946.

He emptied his bags and gave the prisoners his rations.

MAYDAY!

In November 1991, dark clouds drifted across the Iraqi desert near Basra where William Andrews was flying his fighter jet, preparing to drop cluster bombs.

Operation Desert Storm had taken a toll on Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard, which had set fire to oil wells in its retreat from Kuwait. Andrews found a hole in the clouds and dipped through.

Three days earlier, Andrews had helped rescue a team of American special forces from an advancing Iraqi platoon. The Iraqis had closed to within a hundred yards of the Americans, and a stray bomb could have killed his compatriots. Back at base, Andrews and fellow airmen celebrated with backslaps and cold beer when they learned they'd saved the soldiers.

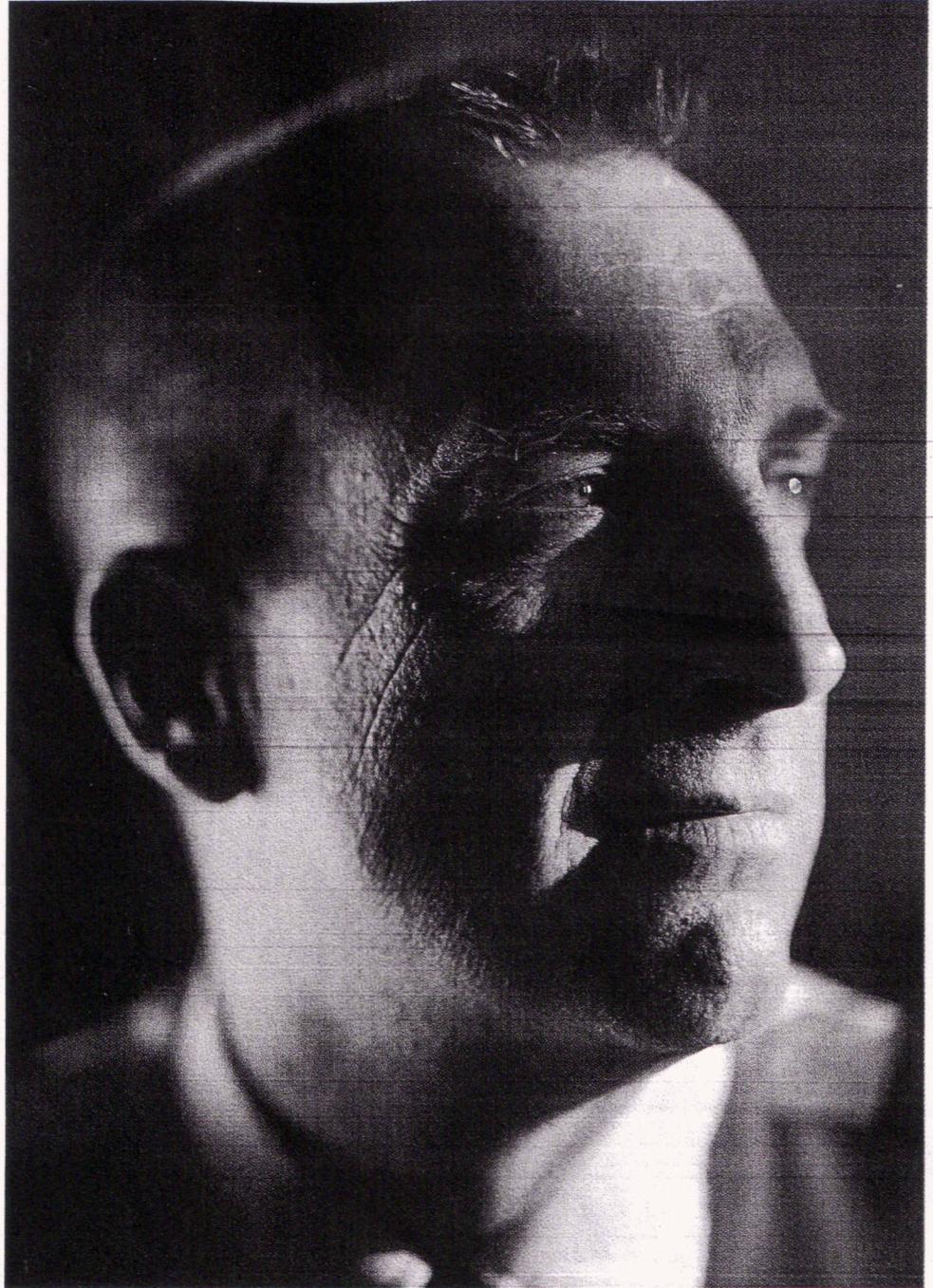
Now in the sky again, Andrews turned at a right angle to find his targets. A moment later, a blast from the ground sent his plane spinning out of control. Andrews yanked the ejection handle below his seat and in a deafening roar was launched into the air.

Floating above the battlefield, he radioed, "Mayday! Mayday!" He heard machine-gun fire and tried to steer his parachute downwind from Iraqi troops but ran out of time. He slammed into the hard sand. In the pool of his deflated parachute, he clutched his right leg. It was broken.

Sitting up, Andrews saw Iraqis with AK-47s running toward him. An Iraqi soldier nearby readied a missile launcher, aiming at an American F-16 flying overhead. Andrews snatched up his radio. Just as the missile blasted, he yelled into his handset, "Break right!" The plane veered. The missile missed.

Enemy bullets sleeted the sand around Andrews. He thrust his hands into the air in surrender.

During the chaos of a ground action that night, Andrews crawled away from



■ Air Force pilot William Andrews helped rescue American special forces in Operation Desert Storm before he was shot down, captured by the Iraqis, and tortured.

his captors and hid in a bunker. But an Iraqi patrol found him at dawn and sent him to Baghdad, where he was interrogated and tortured.

A week later, a Red Cross plane carried Andrews and other prisoners away, with F-15s at each wing.

"It was like a bear hug," says Andrews, who now teaches at the National Defense University's War College in

DC. "Like a big embrace from a loved one."

At Andrews Air Force Base, he underwent surgery on his leg. When he awoke in the recovery room, he flashed back to the torture in Baghdad.

"I just have one question," he asked the nurses. "Is this the United States?"

They said, "Yes." He passed out, a smile on his face.