

Blister Gunner Parachuted into Japan

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

We prefer to avoid war stories—too many sad tales, too many heroes, too many regular G.I's just doing their jobs. There is no way to do justice to everyone's story, or even a few. But, this account is different and tragic. It is also difficult to write..

Its central figure was a Baraboo youth. He and his suicidal Japanese attacker now share unique recognition in an unlikely place in a country we once hated. They hated us, too. But there is a surprise ending to this two part story.

From football to a B29

There is a reason that there are a lot of pictures of the 1943 BHS football team around town. Undefeated, they had only one touchdown scored upon them all season, while racking up 232 total points against their opponents. There in the 1944 school annual, front row and fourth from the left, is tackle Otto Baumgarten Jr. His look-alike brother Ted is just down the line. Otto is also shown in one of the cameo photos at the bottom of the page.

You'll also find this tall and lanky athlete in the photo of the basketball squad. Turn the page and there he is on the track team. The newspaper later mentioned Baumgarten, "whose exploits on the gridiron are still vivid memories among sports fans here." They were a proud bunch, those hardy members of Otto's fated generations which came of age in World War II. They would not shrink from the duty soon to be imposed upon them.

The Army Air Force

Otto Baumgarten did not graduate in the spring of 1944. With the draft looming, immediate enlistment offered the young men more choices of assignment. Twenty-two senior men had already gone, and Otto joined the Army Air Force in February, 1944. January of 1945 found Sgt Baumgarten in the Pacific Theater of operations, probably in the Mariana Islands.

This was serious business. In a superb example of investigative reporting, Mike Berg of Elva, WI has traced the military history of Baumgarten and his bomber in a book titled "The Crew of the Empire Express". Today's article considers the copious material from Berg's book, as does some of the material in a follow-up story.



Otto Baumgarten Jr., a tackle on the 1943 Baraboo High School football team, who parachuted from his stricken B29 bomber, only to be executed perhaps only days before the war ended.

Berg's 111 page report is highly condensed here, and we recommend his account as exceptionally readable. It is likely that Berg will hold a book signing at the Booksmith on July 18, noon to about 2 P.M. at the Booksmith.

As a blister gunner on a B29, Otto's job called for nerves of steel. At 19, he appears to have been the youngest of the eleven-man crew of his bomber, the Empire Express. Several raids were made, flying the 12 hour round trip stretch over water from Tinian Island. As spring wore on they bombed several Japanese targets, including Tokyo.

Over Kyushu in May.

As well-trained and disciplined as was the crew of the Empire Express, and as well as each man knew his job, they were not prepared for what happened on May 7, 1945 over Kyushu, Japan. As they approached the slope of Mount Hachiman just ahead, a Japanese KI-45 fighter appeared, piloted by a patriotic and perhaps suicidal Japanese pilot. M/Sgt. Tsutomu Murata flew his plane almost head-on into the Empire Express, clipping ten feet off a wing.

This sent both planes into a spiral of death on the mountainside. Only Otto and two other crewmen were able to escape the death-plunge near Sanko-Mura village. The other 8 men perished in the mountainside crash—as did Japanese pilot Murata and his co-pilot. It appears that the three surviving Americans were quickly captured and taken to a Nakatsu police station, and then to Fukuota, a seaport.

Following local outrage over a bombing of that city, a General Fukushima declared that they and some other prisoners were to be “disposed of without trial”. Japanese records indicate that on June 20, 1945 some American prisoners were killed. At least eight, perhaps including Otto and his fellow airmen were taken to a nearby school and beheaded.

Sgt. Otto Baumgarten's remains were never located. The atomic bomb would be dropped in a little over a month and the war would end. Life was over for 19 year old Otto, but there is much more to his story. It is shared with that of the Japanese pilot, Murata. An unusual account will follow.
