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Few of the Doolittle raiders ever did more

The toll time exacts on the veterans of both war and peace is all too often a walker, a cane or a few seasons tube-tied to an oxygen tank.

But the years — 89, so far — have not yet run down Jacob DeShazer, one of the last survivors of those 30 seconds over Tokyo known as the Doolittle Raid.

DeShazer didn't need one of the wheelchairs the makers of "Pearl Harbor" provided when they flew him to Hawaii for the movie's premiere last May.

He didn't need a helping hand with the usual crowd of autograph hounds waiting for him at the Doolittle Raiders' 60th reunion last month in South Carolina. ("A string of people a mile long," DeShazer said. "My name's the longest, so I get behind. This time I took to writing 'JD.' That way I could keep up.")

And when DeShazer arrived at Portland's veterans' hospital Tuesday for an eye exam, he didn't need to worry that anyone would find fault with the way he looks at things.

DeShazer, you see, has the vision. His eyes were opened in a Japanese prison camp in 1944. Two years after he bailed out of his B-25, one of his Japanese captors handed him a Bible. His gaze remained steady during the 30 years he subsequently spent in Japan as a missionary, and his prescription remains the same:

"Except that a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

DeShazer's story has a plot that puts "Pearl Harbor" to shame. On April 18, 1942, he was aboard one of the 16 B-25s that left the carrier deck of the Hornet with enough fuel to reach Tokyo, 668 miles away, and not enough to get back.

He was among the 75 fliers who, after the bombs dropped, bailed out over or crash-landed in China, and one of the eight who were captured. DeShazer spent the next 40 months in 8-by-11-foot cells in occupied Nanking and Peking.

When he later wrote about the experience in a religious tract titled "I Was a Prisoner of Japan," one of those converted to Christianity by his testimony was Mitsuo Fuchida, the legendary Japanese pilot who led the first wave of bombers out of the clouds over Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941.

Fuchida, Gordon Prange wrote in the pilot's biography, wasn't initially intrigued by Christianity: "He simply wanted to understand DeShazer."

It's an epic tale, and if you want to go back, DeShazer will take you there. He'll describe James Doolittle and the 14 hours they were airborne on that desperate raid. He'll slip back inside that prison cell. He may even drop the names of the movie stars he met at the "Pearl Harbor" premiere.

"I think there was one or two of them, but my ears aren't too good," DeShazer said. "I didn't catch who they were."

For almost 60 years now, DeShazer has had his priorities straight. He's much less impressed with his life than he is with what God did with it, taking a guy who bombed Japan in a plane called "The Bat Out of Hell" and, after 40 months of humility, molding him into a missionary.

Since returning from Japan in 1977, DeShazer has been living in Salem. An ordained Free Methodist minister, he still talks to church groups on a weekly basis; he'll be speaking at the community church in Gales Creek today. His daughter, Carol, is helping him distribute a book, DeShazer said, that has sold 23,000 copies in Japan.

He knows he only has so much time to sell a few more. Even with the bum ear, he can sense the tollkeeper in the distance.

"I'm feeling old, but I don't see anything bad about it," DeShazer said. "Death isn't so terrible. Christians die with a lot of hope. I'm sure there's going to be an eternity. He's the God of life, not the God of death. He's supplied the blessings as I go along."

Before we part in the V.A. waiting room, DeShazer hands me a copy of his book. Because there's no one else in line, waiting on his memories, he has taken the time to sign his full name.

He doesn't linger on goodbye. He wouldn't allow that we might not see each other again.

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