

In the days and nights leading up to April 1, 1945, Lt. Col. William A. Kuretich missed his home and family in Kansas. He had been given his Operation Iceberg orders, which – he described later to his children – were as thick as a Montgomery Ward catalog. He memorized every page. Operation Iceberg was the code name for the Battle of Okinawa. Seventy years ago this week, the last major land battle of World War II unfolded. It would eventually lead to atomic bombs being used against Japan and the country's surrender in August.

All of that was a long way off for Kuretich, who was in charge of controlling U.S. bomber aircraft over the island of Okinawa. "Bombardment is still continuing," he wrote in his journal from a ship off the Okinawa coast on March 29, 1945. "Weather is like off the California coast. Pretty cold. Saw two planes (ours) run together. Another alert – and a full moon. It looks the same in Kansas." Kuretich, a U.S. Marine Corps officer, was advised that same year by the military to change his last name so it would have less of an Eastern European sound. He changed it to Kurtis. His two children, Bill and Jean, eventually became well-known Kansans in their own right. But at the end of March in 1945, Kuretich missed home and family as he prepared for battle.

"(Japanese) fleet is coming out. From Japan proper. We are up, pretty close to shore – our battleship and cruisers are shelling the preferred beaches – Lots of noise and the smell of gunpowder is prevalent. Some return fire – Also my birthday – thirty-one years old – unbelievable." THE BATTLE OF OKINAWA From December 1941 to August 1945, America was at war. The fighting never reached the shores of the continental United States, and yet World War II touched the lives of everyone. And everyone joined the effort to win the war. American families rationed gas and sugar, grew Victory Gardens and salvaged scrap metal. Cities such as Wichita were transformed almost overnight into major manufacturing centers. The first generation of his family to be born on Kansas soil, Kuretich graduated from Hope High School and Emporia State University. After college, he attended naval flight school, was appointed a naval aviator in 1937 and was ordered to duty with the Marines in San Diego. He served throughout World War II and the Korean War.

The Okinawa Campaign lasted from April 1 to June 22, 1945. It was the largest amphibious landing in the Pacific Theater. More than 280,000 soldiers battled 130,000 Japanese soldiers. In addition, the island had 430,000 civilians living within its towns and villages. The U.S. military needed the air bases on Okinawa as part of the projected invasion of Japan, roughly 350 miles away. FINDING HIS WORDS Growing up, William Kuretich had two dreams. One was to go to college and become an aviator; the second was to own a farm.

When he left the Marine Corps as a brigadier general in 1956, he moved his family to Independence. He worked first as a contract administrator with International Telephone and Telegraph Co. and then as vice president of the Parkersburg Division of Textron in Coffeyville. In 1960, his wife, Wilma, inherited her parents' farm south of Independence. It wasn't until 1968 that the Kurtis family discovered the farm was the 1869 homestead of Laura Ingalls and her family. Ingalls wrote the famed "Little House" series of books. Jean Schodorf, Kuretich's daughter and a former Republican state senator from Wichita, found her father's journal in a laundry basket tucked away in a closet a year after his death in 2001.

“It was a huge surprise,” she said. “You never think of your parents as participating on the scale that he did.” During his lifetime, he never talked much about Operation Iceberg or the Battle of Okinawa, she said. Her older brother, Bill Kurtis, nationally known television journalist, remembers only two stories his father told about the battle. “The real thing they were scared of were the kamikaze pilots,” Kurtis said. Japan’s kamikaze pilots took part in suicide missions, crashing their airplanes – loaded with explosives – into U.S. warships. The tactic resulted in significant casualties for U.S. servicemen in the opening days of the battle.

Kuretich was in charge of directing U.S. bombers over Okinawa. When it came time for the bombers to deploy, weather prevented the pilots from hitting their primary target on Okinawa. Kuretich gave them approval to hit a second target. “The secondary target was controversial,” Kurtis remembers his father telling him. “They were to unload their bombs as they flew over their own troops, Army troops who were pinned down on one side of a mountain. “Our artillery couldn’t get to them (the Japanese) because they were protected by the mountain. My dad said, ‘Let’s try it.’

The 15 planes began to circle around the mountain and began delivering their payloads. Every one of those 500-pound bombs hit their target with the exception of the last plane.” That plane’s bomb skipped off the ground and landed in a U.S. Army tent, he said. Fortunately, “it was a dud.” A military photo taken by U.S. forces shows Kuretich using a 500-pound bomb as a desk on Okinawa. The caption says: “Capture of Japanese headquarters in the honey-combed caves of Kushi-take Mountain, which had been pounded by Marine planes based at Yontan Airfield signifying the final phase of the struggle for Okinawa. The teamwork of all organized enemy resistance on the key base and remnants of the (Japanese) army were driven into the sea.”

Kuretich wrote in his journal: “I have never even imagined such a spectacle as I witnessed today – everything on a huge scale.” Two days later, he wrote: “Haven’t had my clothes off since landing – dirty and sleepy and tired – dug my own fox hole tonight and deep too in which I am writing this dope. What an experience – Have given up trying to get helmets and gas masks after almost getting shot more than once – just missed a booby trap – sleeping with my gun ready – last night plenty nervous.” As the battle continued, news came that the German military had been shattered by Allied forces. Adolf Hitler was dead. The German surrender came on May 7, but it didn’t become official until May 8.

Although America celebrated V-E Day – Victory in Europe – the celebration was short-lived. There was still a war on with Japan, and U.S. military forces were gearing up to invade. It wasn’t until Aug. 14, 1945, that fighting ceased with Japan and World War II was finally over. “They say those old vets don’t talk much about their experiences,” Kurtis said. “He didn’t except for those two stories. He truly was part of that Greatest Generation.”

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