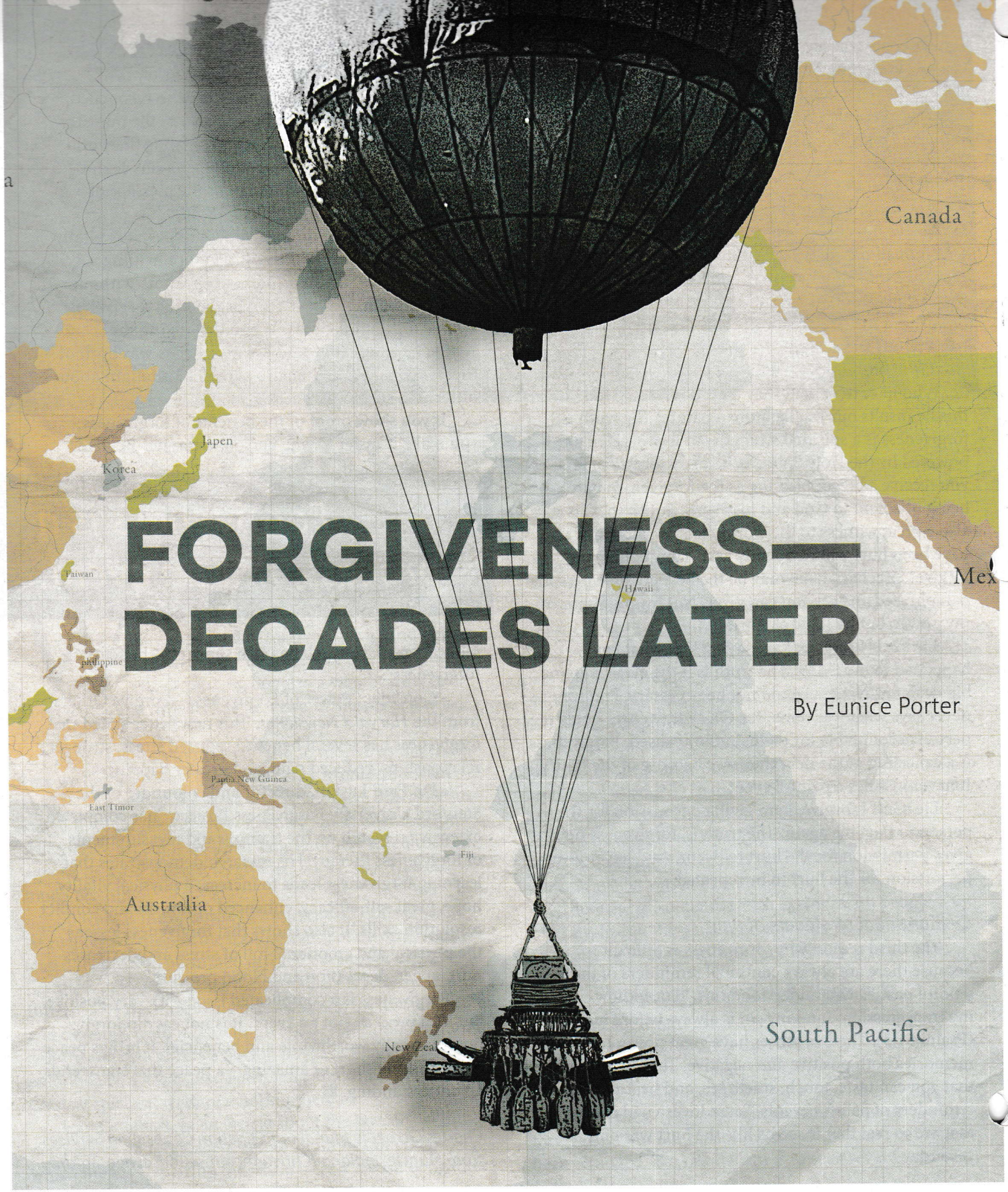


FORGIVENESS— DECADES LATER

By Eunice Porter

This story is about forgiveness many years following the incident. It spans two continents separated by the Pacific Ocean and is between two ethnicities who were enemies during World War II. It has a bit of a personal meaning for me because my family lived only 65 miles away, and even as a 7-year-old, in a national culture where the war effort dominated each day's news, I vividly remember my mother relating what she had read in the evening newspaper one night. The shock of it greatly affected my family, and its impact has stayed with me all these many years. (Who knew as a second grader that some day I would make it my mission to speak to civic groups about this little-known fact of World War II? Much less with some modern invention known as PowerPoint.)

THE INCIDENT

Archie Mitchell, a young minister in the little town of Bly, Oregon, and his wife, Elsie, who was five months pregnant, took their Sunday school class on a fishing trip and picnic the Saturday morning of May 5, 1945. The weather had been nicer than usual for that time of year, which undoubtedly played a part—temperatures were in the 60s, conducive for such an outing. The minister's wife had been plagued by pregnancy sickness and wasn't planning to go originally, but on Friday she felt better and even baked a chocolate cake to take along. They crammed four lively boys and a girl into their car, along with their fishing gear and picnic lunch.

When they arrived at the Leonard Creek site, Archie let everyone out of the car while he went to turn it around. As he began walking to join the group, someone shouted that there was a strange object hanging from a tree. "Don't touch it!" Archie yelled, just as a loud explosion shook the ground, sending Elsie and the children to the ground, splayed out in a circle resembling the spokes of a wheel. They all died. Archie contacted a road grader working nearby, who hurried to the forest service ranger station. Two rangers returned to the site with supplies—obviously too late. One remained at the site until late evening when Navy personnel from Washington State arrived to investigate the mysterious happening.

The article my mother read to us from the newspaper mentioned that these people were killed by an explosion of unknown origin, but the grapevine soon let us know that it was a Japanese balloon bomb.

JAPANESE BALLOONS

A strategy Japan had for fighting the war was to distract the United States government by setting fires to the forests on the west coast of the U.S. The Japanese went to work creating balloon bombs that were made from many layers of mulberry paper glued together and filled with hydrogen and a detonating device. They were large—about 70 feet in length. Young girls, still in their teens, were conscripted by the Japanese government to make these bombs from Japanese paper (washi), which were launched so that the jet stream would propel them across the Pacific to their intended target. Experts estimate it took between 30 and 60 hours for a balloon bomb to reach North America's West Coast. The young ladies never knew why they were making the paper, only that they were involved in a war effort for their country.

More than 9,000 balloons were launched between November 1944 and May 1945. The U.S. government, as well as several forest service employees, knew of them, but with communication being secretive at that time, everything was hush-hush as far as letting civilians know what was going on. Forests were wet during those months, and the military didn't feel the bombs posed any real threat to the country, which further added to their secrecy.

The explosion came from a Japanese balloon bomb.

The bomb that killed the Sunday school class in Bly, Oregon, had draped over the tree still with its detonator intact. Once someone pulled on one of its parts, it exploded, creating a crater 12 feet in diameter. Those young lives lost that day were the only casualties incurred on the mainland during World War II. The citizens of Bly were told to keep the incident secret until after the war ended.

A GO-BETWEEN

John Takeshita was a youth when he was sent to the Japanese internment concentration camp Tule Lake, which was located just south of the Oregon border in California, about 60 miles from where the bombing incident took place. While there, he heard rumors about the horrible news.

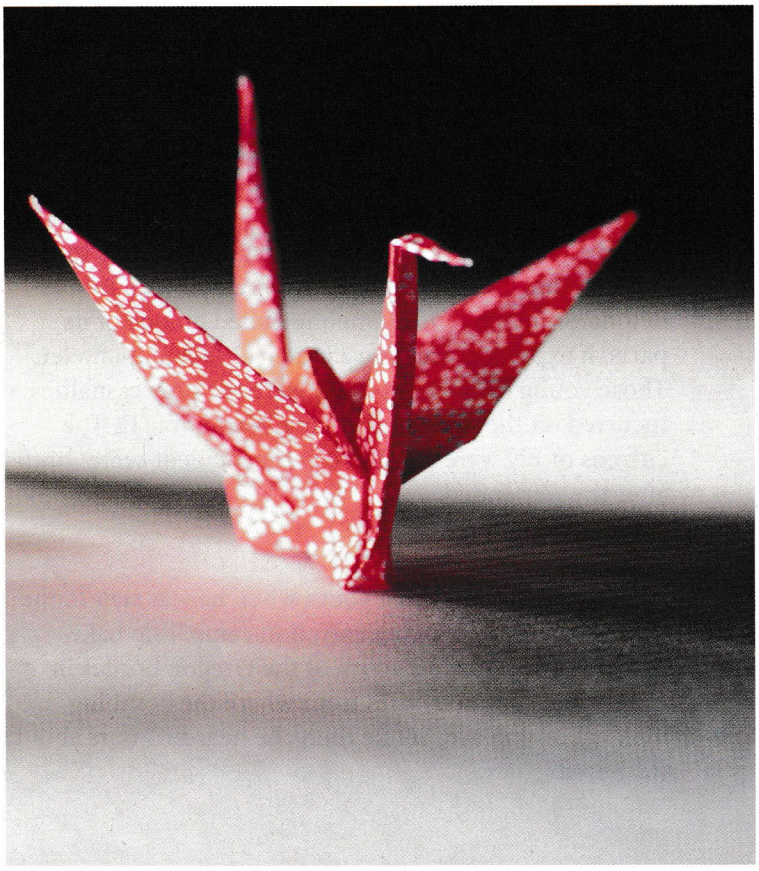
John later became a university professor, and he frequently visited Japan. On one trip in the 1980s, John visited with a childhood friend and was surprised to learn that his wife was one of the girls who worked on the bomb project. So the rumors he had heard many years before were true.

On another of those visits he overheard a Japanese teacher telling her students about the bomb incident. She stated, "Only six lives were lost." Hearing that, John did some research and presented her with the names and ages of the casualties. She looked at the piece of paper and remarked, "Those were someone's children!" The incident then took on a much different tone.

RECONCILIATION BEGINS

Forty years after the bombing, four of the Japanese ladies who had so laboriously worked on the balloon project learned the names of the young casualties, and they experienced guilt for their part in the tragedy. Following a Japanese tradition, these Japanese women decided to fold 1,000 paper cranes and travel in person to lay them at the memorial site.

How would the residents of Bly react to their visit?



This was not something easy to do. How would the residents of Bly react to their visit? After all, they were instrumental in this heinous crime. Perhaps the people of Bly still held it against them and would resent having to dig up these old memories.

With fear and trepidation they and their families embarked on the transoceanic journey to the west coast of the U.S.; once there they boarded a bus for the remote Oregon site of the bombing. As the miles lessened, their fears increased. Perhaps they had made a grievous mistake in even attempting this trip. The closer they came to the monument commemorating that tragic 1945 event, the more fear enveloped them. What would happen when they finally reached their destination and faced their once enemies?

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Several people were waiting at the memorial site when the bus carrying the Japanese women and their families arrived. As they disembarked, they were greeted with smiles, hugs, and chatter. Following their initial meeting and placement of the cranes at the stone memorial, the Japanese visitors were invited to a big potluck dinner at the church where Archie Mitchell ministered in 1945. Instead of hatred permeating the air, there was joy and celebration reminiscent of true Christian forgiveness—not to mention an abundance of good food.

What had been a journey full of doubts for these ladies turned out to be a catalyst for release of the guilt they had been harboring for their actions that aided in the tragedy four decades previously. While not easy for some of the relatives of those who died, these Christians exemplified the teachings of the Master they followed. If Christ on the cross could forgive those who killed him, they too could forgive people who had a part in this WWII tragedy. Reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer, the Bly, Oregon, Christians forgave those who "trespassed against" them so many years prior, resulting in a feeling of relief for all involved. ■

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ON PAPER WINGS

In 2004 Ilana Sol of Portland, Oregon, produced and directed a documentary entitled "On Paper Wings" (www.onpaperwingsthemovie.com). This film is sure to touch everyone's heart with actual narratives by the Japanese ladies and relatives of the Bly casualties.