

LEO WINFREE HAS STORIES TO TELL

Baxter, Putnam Co., TN

by Megan Trotter

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Korean War veteran Leo Winfree sits with his wife of 60 years, Yasuko in their Baxter home.

BAXTER — Air Force veteran Leo Winfree of Baxter saw a lot of things during his



service in the Korean War. With more than 2,200 civilian deaths every day of the war and more than 36,900 deaths of United States soldiers through the whole war, he has seen horrors, but he has good moments, too.

“I could tell you a lot of stories about stuff we did,” Winfree said. “I could write a book on this stuff. It was a time in my life when I was enthusiastic about adventure. ... Like you brand cattle, your brain’s branded with certain memories, certain traumas. I call them brands. Everybody that’s ever been out of a box, out of house or out of a holler has got brain brands. Some are good, some are bad. It wasn’t all bad.”

THREE-DAY DISASTER

He tells about the time he had a three-day pass in Itazuki, Japan, and decided to visit a friend in the Air Force stationed about 300 miles away. They decided they wanted to climb the 5,673-foot Mt. Daisen.

“We started up the mountain, but had made the mistake of taking too much beer,” Winfree said. “Though (my friend’s) wife, who was not drinking, kept urging us on, we never reached the top of the mountain. We were too drunk. We came down and went back to Miho airbase where we continued our party there.”

The next day Winfree went back to a nearby base and tried to get on a flight headed back toward the base in Itazuki.

“I put on my parachute and my May West (life jacket), but I was still hung-over and had a hard time getting them on,” Winfree said. “By this time the plane was revving its engine. The loadmaster approached and asked for my orders. I couldn’t find them. Then

he asked to see my dog tags. I couldn't find them either. Somewhere between the mountain climb and this morning, I had lost both my orders and my dog tags. We argued and he called the control tower to have an officer escort me off the plane."

Angry, Winfree got on a train headed to Itazuki instead. The train stopped at the tunnel dug seven miles under the ocean that would take him between two of Japan's islands. Because of heavy rain, it was flooded. Instead, Winfree was put on a boat, arrived in another town and started hitchhiking his way toward Itazuki. But this was not the end of Winfree's troubles. As he came to a town named Ongagawa, the large dike broke, causing ocean water to surge inland.



"Within minutes, houses were floating, people were screaming for help and drowning," Winfree said.

He threw himself into rescue efforts, helping others drag those in danger to shore. All of the houses in the village were swept away, and newspapers claimed that 59 people had died, though later Winfree learned that it was even

more than that.

(Pictured: Sergeant Leo Winfree US Air Force Korean War 1950/1954. Served: Korea, Occupation of Japan 5th Air Force, 8th Fighter Bomber Wing).

Once he had done all he could do to help in the disaster, Winfree met some Japanese truck drivers who agreed to take him toward the base he was still trying to reach. They dropped him off about a fourth of a mile from the base. After a short walk, he arrived — exhausted, wet and frustrated. What should have been a short plane ride back to base had turned into a nightmare.

It was not until he got the chance to tell the story of his adventure that he heard the sobering news. The plane that Winfree had been trying to get on had crashed into the side of the mountain. There were no survivors.

Amy Wheelock, Winfree's daughter, said, "I wonder how many people are alive today, including myself, all the grandkids, the people he pulled out of the water and all their descendants because he lost his dog tags."

MORE CLOSE CALLS

During his service, Winfree narrowly dodged death again and again. There was the time he was nearby when an airplane crashed, sending part of the plane's propeller hurtling toward him. He ducked and it grazed his head, cutting a small groove into the bone of his skull. He ended up with stitches and a concussion, but if the propeller had come in a few inches lower, the results would have been deadly.

There was also the time that he spent three days hunkered down on the USS Randal during Typhoon Marie because the ship was not able to dock in the shallow harbor of Busan, Korea.

“After the ship docked, the captain told us all that he had been to sea for 20 years and had never been in a storm like this one,” Winfree said. “He said there were gusts of 170 knots and that the ship had listed three times to the point that it should have capsized. Each time a swell up-righted the ship.”

BOXERS IN THE BAR

He also enjoys telling the story of a bar fight he saw first-hand. Winfree had volunteered to transport the men who were competing in an annual military boxing match. After the competition, the men returned to the bus, eager for some drinks. Winfree knew of a spot and drove them to a nearby bar. Once there, trouble started when one of the sailors started mocking the other men, not knowing they were all boxers.

“One of the worst things you can call an airman is a bus driver because we wore a uniform that looked like a bus driver uniform,” Winfree said. “I will never forget the guy saying, ‘You bus drivers come in all shapes and sizes.’ Then they all got to laughing and I thought, ‘Oh boy, the fight’s on.’ ... Not being a boxer, I proceeded to find a corner and turned over a table and shielded myself with it.”

The eight to 10 boxers there that night lunged at the approximately 40 drunken sailors in the bar. Less than 10 minutes later, all of the sailors were either knocked out or retreating. Hearing sirens in the distance, the boxers slipped out of the bar and were never caught.

“A few days later, I got to thinking. Those sailors will live and die and not understand what happened and why it happened,” Winfree laughed. “It was a bar fight of all bar fights.”

FAMILY LIFE

While serving in Japan, Winfree also met and married his wife, Yasuko, whom he celebrated his 60th wedding anniversary with this past October. They met through her brother, who was also an Air Force pilot, and who often went fishing with Winfree in their down time. The couple married after a brief courtship, despite the fact that getting married to a Japanese citizen during occupation involved a lot of red tape.

Yasuko’s family came from a long line of samurai and she is the granddaughter of the emperor’s personal bodyguard. Three of her brothers served during World War II, and one died in the sinking of his aircraft carrier, while other family members died in the bombing of Hiroshima. She is also related to Mineichi Koga, vice admiral of the Imperial Japanese Navy who succeeded Yamamota as admiral of the fleet during World War II.

Together Winfree and his wife have four children: Alvin, who became a civil engineer; Keith who was in the national guard; Scott who is a lieutenant in the Cookeville Police Department; and Amy who is a mechanical engineer. They have 13 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

In looking back on his 60 year-marriage, Winfree referenced the Ballad of East and West by Rudyard Kipling.

“East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet.’ I guess we proved them wrong,” he said.

(**Leo Winfree**, b. 8 October 1931, Baxter, Putnam Co., TN, md on the 22nd of October 1952, Fukuoka, Ken, Japan to **Yasuko “Tye” Koga**, b. 28 January 1933, Hokido, Ken, Japan, d/o **Taro Koga & Nobu Hagashida**. Leo Winfree, s/o **Homer Clarence Winfree** (1894-1978) & **Stocia Myrtle Maddux** (1894-1976). Children of Leo and Yasuko (Koga) Winfree are: Baxter Alvin Winfree, Keith Taro Winfree, James A. Scott Winfree & Amy Lee Winfree.)



WINFREE BROTHERS

L to R: **Clarence Harold Winfree**, Army Air Force WWII (13 March 1943 - 9 February 1946), Stationed: Edwards AFB, B-24 Pilot, Flew West Coast Shore Patrols, b. 11 August 1924, Baxter, Putnam Co., TN; **Alvin Nelson Winfree**, PFC US Army WWII (1946 – 1948), Occupational Force of Japan 24th Inf. Div. 21st Reg., Radio Operator, b. 8 June 1927, Detroit, Wayne Co., MI – d. 25 March 2010, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN & **Leo Winfree**, US Air Force Korean War 1950-1954, Served Korea, Occupation of Japan 5th Air Force, 8th Fighter Bomber Wing, b. 8 October 1931, Baxter, Putnam Co., TN.

Picture hanging in the Putnam County Veterans Hall, Cookeville, TN.

*Read more about the Winfree files and the History of Putnam Co., TN at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>