



FORGIVENESS AT

# Wakayama

By Ferron A. Olson

**O**n September 25, 1945, I awoke in my bunk on the deck of our landing ship, *LST-952*. After the punishment the ocean had given us, I was relieved that we had arrived in Japan. It was World War II, and my U.S. Army Signal Corps unit was assigned to set up newly developed communications for the top command of the Sixth Army in its part of Japan's occupation. I saw a scattering of lights on the mountainside and thought they must be from a few homes. No doubt the Japanese occupants were staring at the hundreds of American ships sailing in to take control of their country.

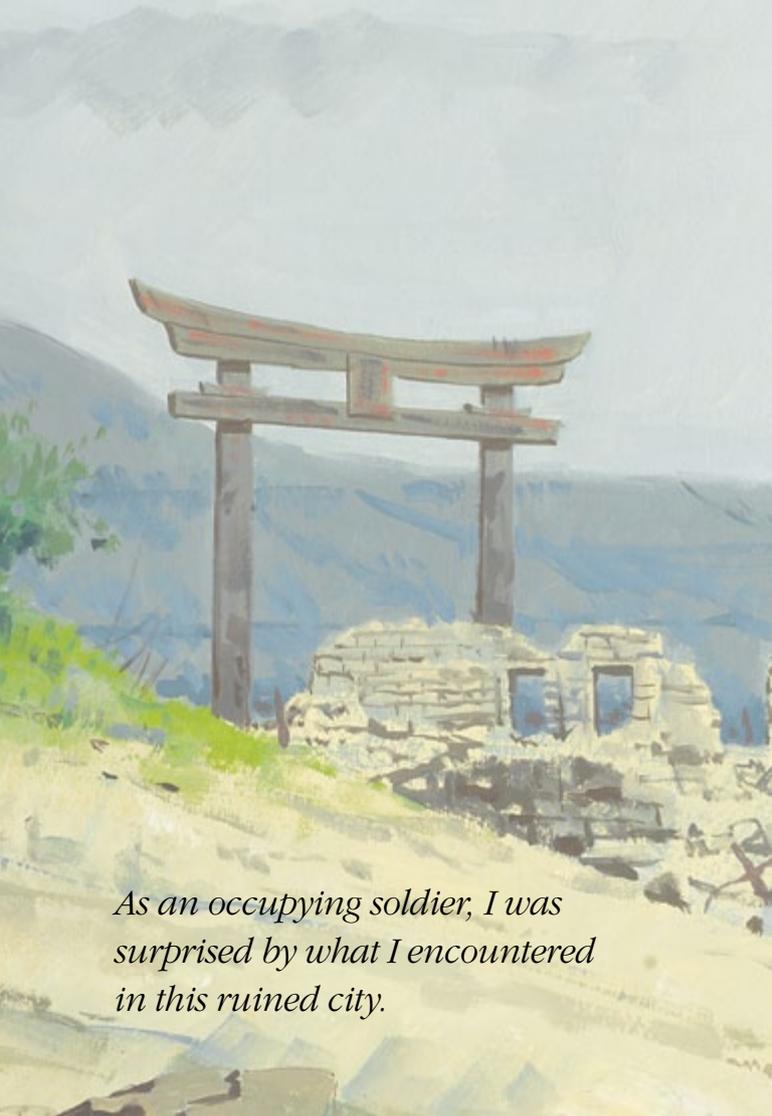
I wondered how I would feel if it were the Japanese army taking control of *my* beloved home. I recalled the things I had learned about their action in this war, starting with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Bitterness swept over me toward them.

Three days later, with our communications running smoothly, some of my buddies and I had the opportunity

to relax. Staff Sergeant Carl Campbell asked John Moard and me if we would like to go with him in a jeep to see Wakayama, a city about the same size as Salt Lake City. With our carbines in our hands, John and I got in the jeep with Carl, who had his gun in a mount on the dashboard. We knew we had to be ready.

Our jeep drove over a slight rise and the city lay there before us. Carl made a sound of amazement as he jerked the jeep to an abrupt stop. "Did we do that to them?" he blurted out.

We just sat there, the throbbing of the little jeep's motor the only sound we could hear. John broke the silence as he said with a hushed voice, "I've heard about firebombing, but I had no idea it left this—just ashes." As we scanned the scene, we realized that nothing but concrete or stone remained, and even then, there wasn't much of that. Metal was twisted and scorched. All of it had happened in a single day: July 9.



*As an occupying soldier, I was surprised by what I encountered in this ruined city.*

Carl asked, “Where are the people? I see a few, but thousands lived here.”

“Probably dead,” John answered.

As silence settled over us, I envisioned what had happened in this once-beautiful valley. Wave after wave of bombers had swooped over the mountains, carpeting the city with firebombs. I shuddered as I said, “The Japanese must really hate us.”

As we slowly moved through the ashes, John pointed and said, “Look. There are a few buildings still standing. And people have started rebuilding.” As our jeep neared them, men, women, and children stopped what they were doing, smiled, and waved at us. I sat there stone-faced and muttered, “Who is putting them up to this? Why are they pretending to welcome us?”

Carl stopped the jeep in front of a building that the firebombing had missed. We thought it might be a shrine or a Buddhist temple. Suddenly the door opened and some

Japanese men and women stepped out. With friendly smiles, they beckoned us to enter.

We jumped out of the jeep with carbines hung over our shoulders. A lady held the door open for us. After removing our shoes and hats, we entered. We were amazed at the beauty inside—rich cloths and beautiful ornamentation. Everyone welcomed us humbly and sincerely, apparently pleased by our respect for their building. One woman gave each of us a trinket.

As I looked into their eyes, their spirits touched mine, and I felt an amazing change in my feelings toward them. My bitterness melted and I realized that these people accepted me as an individual. They honored me even though my country had heaped destruction on them and their friends and families.

I placed a 10 yen note in the temple’s collection plate. Carl and John did the same as we reverently left the building. The people gave us friendly bows, which we awkwardly returned along with smiles of respect.

Once in the jeep, we felt awkward holding our carbines, so we placed them on the floor. Silently we drove away, and I thought about what had happened in that shrine and the amazing transformation I felt toward the people there.

Then I thought about the Japanese people and how friendly they had seemed toward us; I realized that their waves and those big smiles were sincere. They weren’t putting on a front. Even after all that the war had done to them, they felt good toward me. Shame swept over me as I remembered my earlier rude thoughts. As I reflected further, I decided that if they could forgive me, an American soldier, in spite of what the war had done to them, then I could do the same and love these sweet Japanese people as individuals.

I pondered all that had happened and remembered that all people are God’s children. He loves all of us. I then recalled my recent reading of the scriptures: forgiveness is a fundamental element of the gospel. I must forgive others their trespasses for Heavenly Father to forgive me mine (see 3 Nephi 13:14–15). I really needed that forgiveness, because I had not loved these people before I entered their shrine. I did now. A sweet sense of peace swept over me. I smiled and waved to another group of Japanese as we passed by. ■