

PRISONER OF WAR IN JAPAN

By Gordon H Scott

The following article was provided by Gordon Scott who as a 1st Lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps, Twentieth Air Force, Seventh Fighter Command, Fifteenth Fighter Group, Seventy-Eighth Fighter Squadron had to ditch his plane while on a mission over Japan and was held as a Prisoner of War in Japan until the end of World War II. As Gordon will tell you he was a proud member of I Flight, which was the best damn Flight in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

It was the third of July, 1945, and as the third assistant operations officer of the 78th Fighter Squadron, I was in the operations tent when we received the next day's FRAG from the 7th Fighter Command. The "FRAG" was an attack order which described the target, number of aircraft, route, ordnance, submarine rescue locations, frequencies, etc. in our orders to strike the Japanese fighter aircraft assembly plant located at Kasamigura Lake, about 50 miles northeast of Tokyo. This mission looked like a great chance to do some real damage to the Japanese war machine; and it was my turn to go get 'em! The ordnance for our 16 P-51Ds called for each plane to carry a load of six 5-inch high-velocity aerial rockets and two 165-gallon wing tanks. The 45th and 47th Fighter Squadrons were to provide us with high cover from attack by Japanese fighters during the attack. The 45th and 47th would have 16 planes per squadron, and each plane would have two 110-gallon drop-tanks. Captain Joe Fitzsimmons was the lead pilot, and I was flying his element in Code-X Red Flight. I posted the FRAG in the squadron area, and all of the assigned pilots from the three 15th Fighter Group Squadrons gathered together for an initial planning session before our "weenies and beemies" supper. As I was finishing my chow, I received a tap on the shoulder and was asked to report to the 7th Fighter Command briefing tent along with a few other selected mission pilots from the other two squadrons. At the briefing, we were introduced to a stranger in non-descript fatigues that identified himself as Mister Smith from the U.S. Army Military Intelligence Services Branch (MIS-X). Mr. Smith taught us how to send and receive coded messages about our location and situation in the event that we were shot down and captured. After a three-hour session, we pilots went back to our squadron areas, appreciative that there were plans already in place in the possibility that we were shot down. We also wondered why we few pilots were picked out of the 50 pilots that were scheduled to fly the next day. Later we realized that most of the chosen ones were 1st and 2nd lieutenants—no captains or majors. Could it be that we were the ones most likely to need this information? And, were we perhaps expendable? The next morning dawned and it was the Fourth of July, 1945. We went to the usual morning briefing; then pre-flight, start-up, taxiing, and take-off before joining up with the other squadrons; and all went well. As we passed over Kita Rock, some miles north of Iwo Jima, my number 4 man, Code-X Red Four, called in with a rough engine and reported he couldn't hold his position. He was told to return to Iwo Jima, and Code-X Spare was told to move in. My old buddy, 1st Lt. Tom McCullough, from our Class 44C flight training days, moved into position on my wing. We fifty P-51Ds climbed up to and met our B-29 navigator plane who would guide us to the target. The single B-29 with its navigator flew a lot slower than we normally would, but we remained with him until we reached our turn point at Chosi Point over Honshu, Japan. He united there along with our two escorts awaiting us. It was then that

47th Fighter Squadrons broke off and climbed up to their assigned escort-covering positions. When Joe, our leader, spotted our target airfield below the broken clouds, and the large, long aircraft assembly building, he fish-tailed us out to drop our 165-gallon drop-tanks. While in the descent, the shackle on my right tank hung up. With some fuel still in the nose of the tank, it rotated down and around and punched a hole in my right flap before rotating back up and damaging my right horizontal stabilizer. Looking back to my right in my rear-view mirror, I saw the tank finally break loose. I could also see that the stabilizer was badly dented. This wasn't good, but the aircraft was still performing adequately in the 20-degree dive; so I continued the attack. Joe put the squadron in a line-abreast formation as we dove toward the long assembly-line hangar with our gun-sight pippers on the building. Joe called for us to fire when within range. The sight was spectacular as almost simultaneously ninety-six 5" high-velocity aerial rockets roared through the sky and slammed into the side of the metal building and exploded inside as we passed over the hangar. On the airfield just beyond the hangar, I caught sight of a brand new radial-engine Japanese fighter in a bunker. Quickly switching to guns, I put my pipper on the aircraft and fired a good burst into the fighter. It exploded. At the same time, some of my incendiary rounds were striking the building in back of the bunker. As I passed over the burning fighter on the pull-out, a tremendous explosion occurred in the building, and I was blown up into the low overcast clouds. To control the instant vertical pitch-up, I shoved the stick full forward and rolled the elevator trim full forward. The plane was starting to nose over in -2 Gs, but was still climbing. By reducing the full throttle, I started in a descent in the clouds and finally broke out at just below 1,000 feet and pointing directly at the Japanese naval seaplane hangar on the lake. I put a short 50-caliber burst into the hangar, and then spied two amphibian observation bi-planes leaving the launch ramp. Dropping in behind the closest bi-plane, I exchanged shots with the tail gunner, and apparently I got the most hits as the Japanese plane splashed back into the water from about 50 feet up and exploded. The farthest bi-plane was at about 200 feet altitude when I put my pipper on the tail-gunner who was firing at me, and I emptied the rest of my 50-calibers into his aircraft. He exploded right in front of me, and I pulled hard right and up as pieces of his plane flew by me. I was exerting full forward elevator trim and forward pressure on the stick to keep from pitching up. I had been pretty busy for the previous little while, and about that time the engine started running rough. White smoke was coming out of all twelve stacks and the coolant temperature gauge pegged full hot! Reducing power did not help, and within a few seconds, the propeller froze into the "big X" position. I was in deep trouble! Looking at my altimeter, I was passing through 500 feet, but looking out the sides of my oil-covered windshield, I was just about to hit Lake Kasamigura in another 100 feet. I had a sudden realization that I was over Japan and not back home; and I didn't get an altimeter setting from the local Japanese airport after that 800-mile trip from Iwo Jima to Japan. It also flashed back to me that we had been taught that a P-51 was almost impossible to ditch safely; but with the prop frozen and the air-speed deteriorating rapidly, I realized I was going in the water without any alternate option. So, I bit the bullet, ducked my head, pulled the canopy jettison handle, and the canopy flew off, barely grazing my noggin. By that time I was at 90 miles an hour and skimming the ripples and little waves at about ten feet off the water. I lowered full flaps, and just at stall, released my forward pressure on the stick and put both of my hands on the K-14 gun sight a few inches in front of my face. Thinking back, it seems weird that in that predicament, 90 miles an hour

slowed down, and just before stopping, the aircooler scoop on the belly gulped in the water, and with the heavy engine up front, the nose of the aircraft pitched down toward the bottom of the lake an instant before going under, I took a deep breath and unbuckled my seat and shoulder harness. Pushing out of the seat with my back-pack-parachute and seat raft was very very difficult. I finally broke free and started scrambling back up to the surface of the lake. Oh how I needed that gulp of air by now, but I was glad to be rid of the plane which continued to head for the bottom of the lake. Then the weight of the parachute and raft pulled me under again; so I quickly unbuckled my chest and leg straps, and thank heavens the Mae West partially inflated when I yanked on the right lanyard. I then swam to the surface just before—I'm certain—my lungs collapsed. My life raft lanyard was hooked to my Mae West on the right clip and was starting to pull me under again. I then activated the left side of the Mae West to keep from sinking below the surface again. I was treading water with my legs like crazy; but a few seconds later, as I frantically treaded water, the life raft—and by now completely saturated parachute still clipped to the raft—began to pull me under again. I realized that if I wanted to inflate the raft and get into it, I had to release the two buckles from my soggy parachute which was still attached to the raft. So, I took a really deep breath, ducked under the surface again, and started pulling on the parachute lanyard hand over hand while thrashing my legs; but I was still sinking. The lanyard or rope attached to the parachute is supposed to be 15-foot long, and by now I had surely pulled more than 15 feet, and still no parachute. I needed air real bad, and had to let go and zoom to the surface with my lungs again about to collapse. I ducked under the water one more time and had the same negative results as I pulled and pulled on the parachute-raft lanyard; but I never reached the parachute or the raft. When I popped to the surface that time, I was completely spent, and with some water in my lungs. I was totally exhausted and was again being slowly pulled under the surface of the water. In desperation to live, I undipped the life raft lanyard and popped back up to the surface. This time I had good buoyancy with the two chambers of the Mae West life vest keeping my chin out of the water. When I returned to the States in October of 1945, I ran into my other '44-class buddy, 1st Lt. Charles Butler, whose plane I was flying that day. He told me that he had replaced the standard 15-foot life raft lanyard with a 25-foot one. He explained that he did this so he wouldn't get tangled in the shorter one if he ever had to bail out. Now he tells me! By now I was bobbing around, coughing up water, and trying to get my breathing back to normal. I was also so very surprised and glad that I was still alive. I looked around and discovered that I was in the middle of a very large lake and several miles from the nearest shore. To the west I saw a column of black smoke rising up over a thousand feet in the air from the airfield we had attacked just a few minutes earlier, and there were also two smaller fires and black smoke nearer my current position from where I had downed those two float planes. That direction looked awfully unfriendly too. I made a quick 180-degree wheelie and started swimming toward the eastern shore and the Pacific Ocean. I remembered our pre-flight briefing by Mr. Smith (MIS-X) that suggested that a U.S. Navy submarine would likely be stationed off the eastern shore, northeast of Chosi Point, to possibly rescue us unfortunate souls. For the next hour of breast-stroke swimming with the aid of my Mae West, I continued to see the towering plumes of black smoke rising in the west. Next, some Japanese fighter aircraft began arriving from the north to land at what was left of their airfield. A couple of them started circling over the

burning airfield, and I was able to again put on and inflate only the right side of my Mae West. That way, I was able to stay low in the water and swim toward the eastern shore. The sun was setting low in the west, and several small fishing boats started sailing my way. I had to partially submerge again by deflating my Mae West until the boats passed. One of them came so close that I could hear the crew chatting in Japanese! The last hour of swimming was out of the shipping lanes, and I was able to swim on my back toward the shore. Eventually I began getting into some reeds growing about 50 yards from the shore, and I finally felt that wonderful terra firma beneath me. The sun was down by this time, and dusk was slowly moving in. I spied a small village up a slope to my left about 200 yards away. I had finally made it to shore after more than four hours in that cold water. Fortunately it was July, and the water wasn't ice cold; but believe me, it was cold! My plan was to lay low until after dark, then skirt the village to the right, and head into the woods to the east and try to arrive at the designated pick-up point northeast of Chosi Point the next morning. Just before dark, as I lay in the reeds up to my chin in water, an old papa-san with five kids was poling through the shallow water in a flat-hulled boat, and was returning to the village dock. He poled to within about 30 yards of me as I slipped under the water. I stayed under as long as I could; but when I eased up for air, one of the little kids was looking back and spied me. The boy started screaming to the old man, who turned the boat around to see what the kid was yelling about, and he saw me. He immediately whipped the boat around again, and headed for shore. All five of the kids jumped out of the boat before it hit the shore and went screaming up the slope to the village. Not more than a minute passed before most of the people of the village came running down the slope with their rice knives, bamboo poles, pitchforks, and several old-type guns and rifles. It was probably lucky that my 45-caliber pistol fell out of its holster and sank as I struggled for my life out in the lake; so I was unarmed, but out-numbered at least a hundred to one. As I lay in the water and saw my imminent capture about to take place, I suddenly realized I had just avoided death in a 1000 to 1 chance with the crash and near-drowning episode, and here I was about to become a prisoner of war, or worse! I had been so busy for the past hour or so, I hadn't had much time to think about home; however, I now thought that perhaps I had a chance to again, someday, to see Pat and little Colleen, and the rest of my family back home. I was soon captured by the villagers, and my chances of survival grew dimmer and dimmer.

Every military man who flies has fears at times—perhaps the night before or the morning of the mission—that, "Maybe this is the day that it will happen to me." But we were young, oh so young, and at 22, confident that it always happened to the other guys. Not me! But now, about 12 hours had passed since my day began on Iwo Jima, 800 or so miles south of here, and I realized that it had happened to me, and I wouldn't be returning to our base, and I wouldn't be sleeping on that cot tonight; because I was about to be captured and become a prisoner of war of the Japanese. Here I was in waist-deep water on the bank of the Kasamigura Lake after luckily escaping death when I ditched my P5 ID about 5 hours ago; then I luckily avoided drowning when I tried to free myself from that sinking plane; then after about 4 hours of swimming and dodging fishing boats and low-flying planes overhead, I had been spotted. And now it seemed every resident of this little village was bearing down on me with their pitchforks, sticks, rice knives, and old antique guns. A thought flashed through my mind: This is a terrible way to celebrate the Fourth of July.

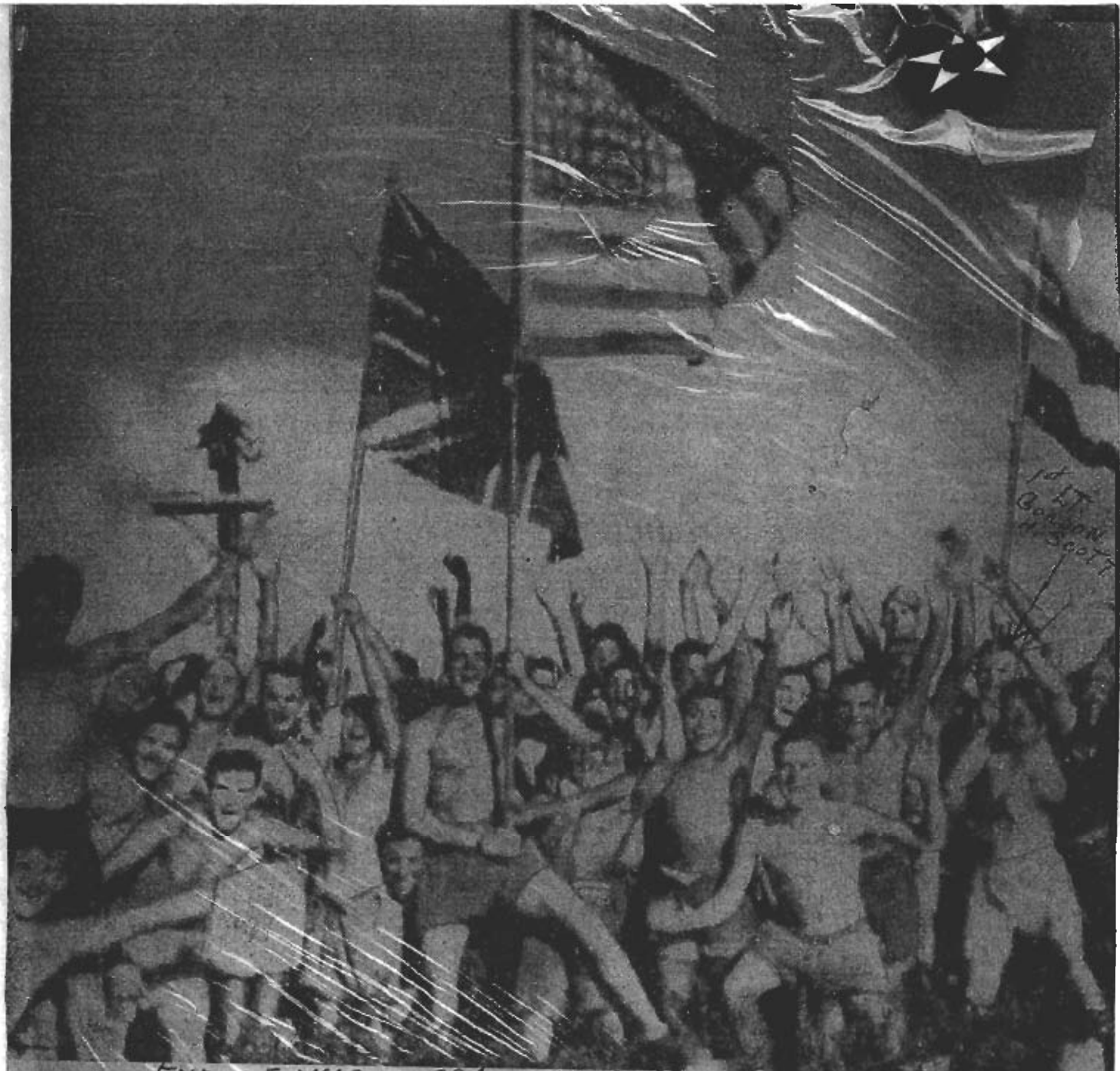
where my hands were tied tightly together in front of me, and my elbows were tied securely to my sides from the back. The crowd pushed and dragged me, as I tried desperately to stay on my feet, about a quarter of a mile to a little schoolhouse. We had never attacked any installation that far north before we were about 50 miles northeast of Tokyo—and the people were apparently doing their part for their country by getting quick justice on this aviator. The schoolhouse was quickly set up as a courtroom, and I was going to be tried and executed— that same day if everything went the way they hoped. A large crowd by now had packed the schoolroom, and it was very noisy with so much jabbering. I could not hear a single word of English. They were excited, and I might have been the very first American military man they had seen in this remote area. It seemed to me that they had plans to get revenge that very day. I was probably a sorry looking representative of the United States Army Air Corps. My flying suit was still sopping wet, and muddy and dirty from the falls on the bank of the lake and on the trek to the schoolhouse. They dragged me up a few steps and into the typical old country school. Inside the room, I knelt on a small child's stool in front of the teacher's desk. Standing at the desk was a very short, pompous, bald Japanese man who appeared to be in his 60s. He was apparently the town's prefect or magistrate and was going to conduct my trial and see that I paid for the damage I had been involved in doing to their airfield and assembly plant. I was obviously in very very deep trouble, and the large scarlet cape draped over his shoulders partially hiding his work clothes, told me he was likely self-appointed and not very much interested in international laws about prisoners of war. He had a large ugly scar etched diagonally across his right cheek, and a sneering scowl covered his face as he repeatedly pounded on the rickety old desk, and shouted in broken English, "Yonkee peeg you hab comeeted velly bad seen against Lising Sun! You must die!" From behind me a kendo stick came crashing down on the side of my head and right shoulder. I was afraid my ear was going to be torn off as the person repeatedly struck me six or seven times until I fell sideways onto the floor. My hands and arms were still tied and I was unable to move. As I lay on the floor, I wondered what was going to happen to me next. The room was loud with guttural sounds as the crowd pushed and shoved seemingly trying to get to me. About that time I heard louder and more authoritative voices from behind me, and four large hands grabbed my arms and lifted me off the creaky wooden floor, and stood me up straight. The old prefect stood up behind his desk, folded his arms in an authoritative manner and stared up at this "Yankee pig" that was standing defiantly in front of him. The prefect could not have been 5-foot tall. He made loud hissing sounds through his gold-capped teeth. After about a minute, he shouted out again so loudly that everyone in the packed room could hear, "You hab vilated Rand of Lising Sun. You weel be shot before sunset!" I had wondered a few minutes before what was going to happen to me next. Now I knew for sure. These people were really serious about this matter. They were going to do me in today, and I hadn't even had an opportunity to surrender to the Japanese military, and become a prisoner-of-war. The latter possibility was a miserable prospect, but I felt it might be preferred to what was happening to me now. As my imminent demise was setting up in my mind, another crashing blow came down on the side of my head from the brute with the kendo stick, apparently just to get my attention. He pointed me to the open door. (A kendo stick is a bamboo sword that mostly children fence with.) It was slow going through the tightly-packed crowd. Some of the men reached out and punched and kicked me, and

bleeding profusely from a bunch of wounds caused by the more enthusiastic knife wielders. Fortunately, most of the cuts were superficial; but they hurt! The crowd outside the schoolhouse had grown by now, and people packed each side of the path that led to a small cherry tree about twenty-five feet from the schoolhouse steps. Although the people were partially controlled by several older men, the protective lines would break occasionally, and men would reach out and hit me with their fists and slash at me with their knives. It was a painful and frightening few steps to the cherry tree at the end of the path and about five feet in front of a tall schoolyard wall. At the tree, I was twirled around by a pair of strong hands so I faced west for some reason, and I was tied tightly to the rather frail cherry tree. I thought, my gosh, they're going to shoot me right here! Two parallel lines of screaming, pushing, and shouting humanity were forming at the western end of the schoolyard. Several small children were climbing up the schoolyard wall to get a better view of the festivities that were about to commence. About 20 paces in front of me stood four local militia-men, still dressed in their work clothes and holding their antique, rusty old rifles. At this stage, I apparently wasn't going to go first class, for this was a comical-looking firing squad; but they were a firing squad, and they meant business. I would have preferred to have been somewhere else. With much fanfare, the old prefect marched up to the squad, adjusted his old, soiled and rumpled officers' field cap to a jaunty position on his bald head, and called the firing squad to attention. The whole operation might sound comical to some, but it was deadly serious to me. It was by now late evening, and the setting sun was just peeking out from beneath the low-lying clouds. The terribly bright rays of sunshine shone directly into my eyes, and I could barely make out the manual-of-arms gyrations the firing squad was going through at the direction of the prefect. Suddenly the prefect screamed an order, and the two large muscular men who had lifted me to my feet in the schoolhouse, walked toward me with rice sacks in their hands. They roughly pulled a sack over my head and down to my waist. They then tied a rope around me and tightly to the tree. The last thing I saw before my head was covered were the four riflemen with their rifles at their shoulders, the crowd with their fists raised high above their heads, and the prefect with his battered samurai sword raised. All ready for the kill. My thoughts suddenly flashed back to my wonderful wife of 3 years. Pat and that beautiful cotton-topped twenty-month-old daughter. Colleen, whom I had spent so little time with before I had to leave the states 15 months ago. It had been a great life so far, and up until today's events, I had no regrets. Time surprisingly seemed to be dragging right now, and I said a little prayer for the well-being of Pat and Colleen and all my family. I prayed they would all be well cared for in my absence. I seemed to have finally lost my confidence, and with my head still under the rice sack, tied to the tree, and the deafening sound of the crowd shouting, "Bonzai, Bonzai" for what reason I still don't know, I thought I surely had had it. Oddly, I wondered why I wasn't sweating as I'd seen so many villains about to be executed do in the movies, when I was a boy. Above the roar of the mob, I suddenly heard a strange chug-chug sound like an old Model-T Ford. The sound kept getting closer and the crowd's shouting began to fade as the chugging came to a stop. The strangers apparently pushed their way through the crowd and there was a lot of loud talking between them and the recognizable voice of the prefect. Someone had apparently notified the army, and these strangers were Japanese soldiers. Bless them. They saved my life! The firing-squad riflemen were seemingly unhappy that the execution was interrupted by the soldiers, and one or more of them ran up to me and hit me with their rifle butters above the right eye, just below

see the boots were those of Japanese soldiers, I was loaded into this old topless touring car that might have been a Model-T. They had put a wide board across the top of the back seat. That is where they sat me so I would be high above everybody and exhibited as a prize captive. We began our journey to where, I had no idea. I could smell wood burning and remembered before we left the school that I heard what were sticks and wood being loaded into the car. My rice-sack hood was still over my head so I could only see down toward my feet between my stomach and the loose rice sack. It was dark by then, and we chugged along for seemingly several hours in this strange old touring car that was apparently converted to burn wood for fuel. A rather remarkable invention I thought, and I wished I could have been able to see how they did it. I know we passed through many little villages and I was proudly put on display. We finally stopped at Choshi Point which was a small rail-junction town on the Pacific Ocean coast forty or fifty miles southeast of Kasamigura Lake. In Choshi Point, they held another trial, and the same decision was made for me to die. Then they paraded me through the streets of Choshi Point to the cheers and jeers of the crowds who lined the streets all the way to the train station. I was still blindfolded but I could see down between the sack and my body to the street. We proceeded to a waiting train, and as they dragged me up the steps into the passenger car, the crowd roared and pelted me with rocks, and I was glad to get inside the train. Once inside, I was thrown into a corner of the vestibule, and the train immediately chugged off. I didn't know at the time, but the destination was Tokyo, which was another hundred miles or so. The train moved very slowly, and at each of many, many stops while enroute, the passengers debarking and embarking took revenge on me by kicking, and punching, and spitting on me --all the way to the Tokyo train station. It took several hours, and we arrived at the station around midnight. From the bedlam of noise, I could tell there were lots of people in the Tokyo railroad station as I was paraded through the concourses with the continuous loud guttural screaming by the angry crowd. As I was being dragged through the streets after leaving the train station, I was able to make the two guards, through sign language, understand that I had to urinate. They obligingly led me down a dark alley, untied my right arm, and you can't imagine how much better I felt when I was able to relieve myself after those hours and hours of nerve-wracking experiences. The guards tied me up again, and we continued the walk until we finally arrived at the emperor's prison, Kempri Tai. Later, I realized that we were only a couple of blocks from the emperor's palace. These people were very big on trials as they took me to a conference room and conducted another quick trial. The results were apparently a little different this time; because it was now July 5th and I hadn't been executed on the 4th of July! However, they reiterated that I was still destined to be shot at sunrise! I was now a prisoner in the emperor's prison, and I saw the first American faces in this long long long day. In my cage were a bearded B-29 co-pilot and a B-29 navigator huddled back in the far corner of the cage. They were dressed in brown flight suits with the Army Air Forces insignia on their left shoulders. Well, they were alive; and maybe I would not die tomorrow morning! It seemed remarkable to me that I was still alive after this: the longest, most frightening, and most memorable day of my life. Oh yes, and perhaps it was my luckiest day too!



The P-51 aircraft that Gordon Scott flew while on Iwo Jima. He named his aircraft "Sparkin Eyes" after his wife Pat who had sparkling eyes then, and still does.



END OF WAR 29 AUGUST 1945
HAPPY DAY—Waving flags of the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands, Allied prisoners of war, released by the U. S. Navy at Omari, cheer and gesticulate wildly. They were the first to be freed on Japanese soil, according to a report from the Navy. Thousands of captives have been set free by the Yanks.
—International News soundphoto from U. S. Navy