

Terminal Encounters

By: David Hampton

Iwakuni Military Base, Japan – August 5, 1945

Unquestionably a perfect way to die when one considered it: a thrilling jet-coaster-like ride to a relatively painless demise while engaged in what you enjoyed most, lauded as a patriotic hero, though posthumously of course, and serving the wishes of your Creator while embracing His divine wind. Perfect!

That thought stream was not the first to swirl through Shoichi Tanaka's mind regarding the subject of imminent death...his own. The first was an avalanche of stark, visceral, scrotum contracting, piss-pants fear. Fortunately, if but for sanitary reasons, the hero thing seemed to stick pretty good now as he walked to his barracks following a briefing by the air commander and two surreptitious shots of Saki.

But, he wondered aloud, "Would I have returned, if I knew this was how it would end?"

San Francisco, California – December 9, 1941

The Tanaka family had been huddled in virtual seclusion following the events in Hawaii two days earlier. The hateful stares of the occidentals had intensified to the point where a misstep in speech or action could possibly lead to immediate violence. So they remained sequestered in their modest rental home in the Nihonmachi district... Japantown, like proverbial rats trapped in a sinking ship wondering when and how the surging waves of war would engulf them. A few minutes before, word had arrived from neighbor Hachiro Shin related to their latter concern. Now, Shoichi's father Toshi, stood gazing out a window following Shin's progress as the elderly man shuffled back to his home on an otherwise deserted street.

"So, we are to be penned like chickens for the duration of this conflict." Toshi sighed, each word progressively fogging the glass near his lips while clarifying a cheerless future.

"Perhaps, my husband, he is mistaken," murmured Akemi, perched on a low couch next to their adolescent daughter Naoko. "He has not been immune to gossip over the years."

Toshi turned away from the window and slowly paced the small room. "This is not mere tongue wagging I fear, it makes sense. It's what I would do."

These incongruous words from his father, finally and completely, ripped seventeen year old Shoichi's attention from the book he was attempting to read while seated cross legged on a chair in the corner. "You would imprison us?"

"In time of war, I would imprison my enemy," Toshi said as he continued to pace. "America was attacked without provocation by Japan. Even though we are American citizens we look like the enemy. We cannot help that, but America must protect herself as best she can."

Shoichi laid the book aside and stared defiantly at his father. "I will not be put in a cage...I would rather fight for my homeland."

"You cannot fight for the United States, the government will not let you," Toshi replied irritably.

"You misunderstand father...I would fight for my real homeland."

A light, morning bay breeze stirred his close cropped hair, and conflicting thoughts hammered his brain, as Shoichi stood grasping a rail at the stern of the tramp steamer and observed the swelling fog as it slowly consumed the new Golden Gate Bridge. *What a joke he thought, we came to America to be free, now I must leave for the same reason.* His parents were not aware of his intentions or his absence for he had left in the pre-dawn darkness. Directed by his youthful reckoning, it was pretty much a win-win proposition he thought. If America lost the war he should be able to return home with the occupying force. If Japan lost, he would return home as an American citizen with some story about being kidnapped and forced to fight for Japan. Surely they would believe him and things would return to normal. He would miss his family while away, but most of all he would miss Robert Easley, his best friend. The sole scion of an affluent white family whose patriarch was a doctor, Robert accepted Shoichi as an equal and they had been inseparable since first grade. Over the past two years Dr. Easley had even taught the boys how to fly his old Curtiss Jenny biplane. Shoichi proved to be a stick stud natural and he hoped that skill might prove providential in the land of the rising sun.

The bridge vanished, as did Shoichi's reverie when a large, greasy deckhand grabbed his arm, spun him around and shoved a mop into his hand. "Pull your weight boy, this ain't no pleasure cruise," he growled.

The man lumbered away and Shoichi bent to his task.

Four weeks, six ports and three ships later, Shoichi's fitful sleep was punctured by shouts from above. He rose from a seamy bunk and scurried across the cramped communal cabin to a grimy porthole. He grabbed a towel from the floor and rubbed it around the glass for several moments before realizing the view was primarily impaired from the opposite side. Forsaking the towel, Shoichi peered through the misted glass into the misted morning as an imposing landmass crept toward him as stealthily as a panther to its prey. Although youthful eyes had once danced along this ragged shoreline thirteen years earlier, Shoichi had no memory of it. Japan, his motherland, was an intriguing mystery. A mystery he inherently knew should be indulged cautiously and prudently, yet completely.

A moldy canvas bag slouched against his leg was the only companion that shared the space at the head of the gangway as Shoichi, in a ragged fur-collared jacket, contemplated his next transition into an ambiguous future. Most of the crew had since departed and the uniformed soldiers at the foot of the teak-planked walkway were of particular interest. He had no papers and no pre-formulated plan to disembark. Unfortunately, maybe fortunately depending on the outcome, his statue-like presence cemented to the upper threshold of the ribbon of wood had captured the attention of the two men below. Their riveted gaze spoke to him more clearly than any utterance, and like twin cobras their eyes lured him helplessly, futilely down the gangplank. *Thank the*

great Omoikane he pondered as he approached the unsmiling men, his parents continued to speak their native tongue while at home in America. Nonetheless, it took several moments for him to realize the smaller man had asked him for his papers, and in that brief interim, the larger man started fondling the bayoneted rifle at his side.

“My name is Shoichi Tanaka. I do not have any papers, but I can explain,” Shoichi stated in halting Japanese.

The rifle suddenly seemed quite endearing to the more imposing soldier.

“I come from America...” Shoichi explained.

The rifle responded to that revelation and the soldier’s intimate attentions by instantly becoming horizontal, the blade on its business end glinted eagerly in the early morning sun.

“...But I’m here to fight for my homeland, for Japan,” Shoichi pleaded in his undisciplined syntax as he leaned away from the threatening blade.

The stoic, noncommittal expression of the smaller soldier never wavered, although Shoichi sensed his examination of the young man before him was tinged more with amusement than alarm. Then, after what seemed like a wordless eternity... “And how exactly do you intend to do that?” He intoned.

A thousand perfectly engineered, glistening silver responses swirled through his young roulette wheel brain until, “I don’t know,” rolled into an accommodating slot and through Shoichi’s trembling lips.

“Perhaps we can be of assistance in that regard.” The diminutive soldier replied as he nodded to his anxious compatriot.

The large uniformed man slung the firearm over his shoulder, like a swain to be savored later, grabbed a handful of jacket beneath Shoichi’s shoulder blades and pushed him roughly along the malodorous dock while the other soldier trailed in their wake.

Tokyo in early January was brisk, dry and sunny. Like an equivocal tortoise, Shoichi’s head was thrust deeply into the fur collar of his seedy jacket, his bare hands interred under the tightly folded arms across his chest as he trudged along a street that undoubtedly resembled an ant colony from the air. He had never observed so many Japanese people in one place bereft of a single white face, and all appeared to have a Mad Hatter’s work ethic. The ambient temperature appeared to drop a few degrees as the soldiers led him into the shadow of a gray nondescript two-story wooden building that Shoichi assumed was the military recruitment center. His personal core temperature plummeted upon noticing the stark metal bars that adorned virtually every window.

Forty eight hours later, youthful exuberance a long forgotten aberration, Shoichi looked the part of a bilge rat as he was directed by a guard into a brightly lit room occupied by a metal table, empty metal chair and companion metal chair that supported the khaki clothed, crop wielding, spare and humorless form of Colonel Maro Hosokawa. The guard deposited him in the vacant chair, left the room and closed the door behind him with an echoing clunk. Shoichi looked at the hardened man across the table for all of two seconds before his gaze was forced to a personal lap examination by the penetrating black eyes of the Colonel. Even when the officer started the slow evocative tapping on the

table with the riding crop, the boy's eyes stubbornly refused to be pried from his crotch. "Who are you?" the Colonel finally queried in crisp, even English.

"Shoichi...Shoichi Tanaka."

"I mean who are you?"

"I am Shoichi..."

The crop finally broke the bond between eyes and loins as it slammed violently on the table. It also animated Shoichi's arms for a moment as they jerked reflexively to protect his face.

"Are you an American spy?" Hosokawa pressed.

Shoichi slowly lowered his arms. "No, I was born here. I want to fight for Japan."

"Why?"

"Because, Japan is my homeland." Shoichi whimpered.

"America is your homeland." Hosokawa stormed, "Now why?"

Shoichi once again became enamored with his body below the table. "They were going to lock up all the Japanese people. I didn't want to go to prison so I came here to be a soldier."

Colonel Hosokawa stared at the top of the young man's head for several seconds, then rose, walked to the door and tapped it with his crop. The door opened slightly and the Colonel snapped in Japanese to the guard beyond. "Shoot him."

The words shook loose a logjam of desperate thoughts in Shoichi's mind as he turned to see the Colonel stepping through the doorway. The best he could quickly transition into speech was, "I can fly!"

The Colonel stopped in midstride and turned back to study the pathetic young man in tattered clothing. "What do you mean, you can fly?"

"I'm a pilot, I can fly an airplane." Shoichi offered.

Colonel Hosokawa pondered with the crop against his knee a few strokes, then reentered the room and closed the door.

Hamamatsu Air Base, Japan – January 15, 1942

Dressed identically in khaki pants, shirts and jackets, with leather boots rising almost to their knees, ten young Japanese men emerged from the rear door of the freshly landed Kawasaki Ki-56 transport plane and walked briskly in single file along the tarmac toward the headquarters building of the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force training base. Fourth in line, Shoichi felt rather pleased with himself despite Colonel Hosokawa's decision to send him to test pilot training as a sacrificial stand-in for homegrown flyers. In the Colonel's words, "If anyone is to be killed testing our new planes, it should be someone like you. We need our real pilots for the war." *Hell, it beat getting shot, or shot at, and he loved the uniform.* Suddenly, a bright scarlet plane sucked the ten young faces straight up as it noisily passed overhead at low altitude. They followed its progress intently, and as if steering it to the ground with their incorporated gaze, the red aircraft banked sharply scraping its port wing on the runway, then promptly performed a somersault routine for the rapt audience prior to bursting into flames. By this time the procession had stopped dead in their new boots, with mouths collectively open like a mute chorus line. They most likely would have stood there all day, but apparently impersonating statues was not on the test pilot curriculum, so the training officer inspired them to resume marching with

some obscure Nipponese expressions rendered several octaves above normal speech levels.

That night as he lay on his tatami at floor level and stared in the muted light at the assorted lumps of other soldiers on mats scattered about, Shoichi contemplated his situation. His confidence level rested several digits below that of earlier in the day, before the fiery crash that he found out later killed an instructor and student pilot. He had never witnessed a crash. Immersed thoroughly in his tender naiveté, it hadn't really occurred to him, since flying came so easy, that it could also be a dangerous endeavor; especially in unfamiliar aircraft. It also occurred to him he may never see America again, except on the receiving end of several thirty caliber calling cards.

Shoichi and the nine other student pilots in his group spent the next several days in ground school straining at the leash. Finally Captain Hiraki, their sole instructor, declared they would each be joining him in the Kyushu trainer the next day for their first forays into the ether. At this juncture in the Pacific war, Admiral Yamamoto's aerial strategy directed most of Japan's experienced flyers to the front, leaving precious few to train new pilots. Typically, the instructors were former civilian pilots with no war experience. Captain Hiraki wore this description like an Armani. There were no cheers in response to his announcement; celebration as it were would come later. That sort of behavior in front of an officer would reward one with forty whacks...or more. Amid the restrained students Shoichi wondered if Captain Hiraki was aware he could fly. Shoichi wasn't allowed to speak unless responding to a specific question and that one had never been asked. Perhaps he would get the opportunity tomorrow. If so, he would show the Captain his stuff, maybe get a promotion.

In the barracks that night, after a mess hall experience of cabbage rolls and bean curd soup, Shoichi and his contemporaries whooped it up over a communal bucket of rice beer provided by an all knowing noncom who conveniently freed them of their meager and burdensome Yen.

A rat-faced young man named Moto held his woven reed cup aloft and yelled, "Tomorrow we fly!"

A slightly plump potential airman named Shobo responded with his cup, "Or, tomorrow we die!"

Shoichi ignored the others and kept dipping his Nippon stein into the new experience.

The bright sunlight that graced the nine aspiring airmen lined up on the tarmac did little to dispel the chill of the winter morning. Their intense anticipation, however; made them oblivious to the temperature. They turned as one to the west as a bright red two-seater Kyushu trainer rolled toward them. The plane and the prop stopped about the same time several yards away and Captain Hiraki, nattily attired in a fur-collared leather flight jacket complete with flowing scarf, deplaned and marched up to the group. He glared at them for several moments, then finally screeched, "Where's Tanaka?"

The young men responded to this question by trading looks with each other and shuffling their feet.

The Captain left the squirming students and charged off to the nearby barracks. He approached one of the bamboo structures, slung the door open and peered inside. Shoichi was stretched out on his mat with open mouth and limbs pointing to the four winds. Hiraki stomped over to the unsuspecting sleeper and kicked him in the ribs, eliciting a satisfying yelp. Shoichi scrambled to his feet and rubbed his side. "Get your miserable ass dressed and on the field before I have you shot!" Hiraki yelled.

"Sir?" Shoichi pleaded.

"What, you flea?"

Shoichi pointed to his genitalia.

"Piss, then come immediately!" Hiraki growled as he stormed out of the hut.

Shoichi spent the next few hours standing uncomfortably on the tarmac waiting for his turn in the trainer. Naturally, he was relegated to last after his miserable faux faux. Not only did his head feel like someone was hammering to get out, his stomach was making ominous gurgling sounds that were loud enough to cause the other guys to eye him anxiously. Eons later the Kyushu K10W1 rolled to a stop several yards away and disgorged the next to last student who heaved his breakfast as soon as he touched the ground then stumbled over to the eight other men who were now bunched in the shade of a hangar. Seated in the rear cockpit with a Cheshire Cat smile, Captain Hiraki motioned for Shoichi to join him.

Shoichi clambered up into the plane and strapped himself in. Within a few minutes they were at cruising altitude. The Captain yelled above the cabin noise, "American...I was told you know how to fly an airplane. Is that true?"

Shoichi nodded his head, but the result was so painful he resorted to a loud "Yes!"

"Then show me how to do it," yelled the Captain.

"Now?"

"Yes, now!"

"Okay," Shoichi chirped. "We used to do this in San Francisco."

Shoichi stabbed the plane into a hard bank while pulling the stick into his gut. The resultant G-forces squeezed off a staccato burst through Shoichi's tensed sphincter muscles that was so loud Captain Hiraki instinctively ducked thinking it was machine gun fire. This unfortunately put him in prime position to receive the full brunt of the fresh fart that had been simmering for hours in the young flyer's lower regions; it swiftly rushed over the back of Shoichi's seat and parted the wilting nose hairs of the Captain. The instructor gagged loudly and fumbled for his oxygen mask. Just as he got it strapped on, the whites of his eyes signaled it was too late. Enough cabbage flavored methane gas inhabited his olfactory receptors to convince the contents of his stomach to seek the light of day. It was a valiant effort by the ole breadbasket, but the mask got in the way and rapidly filled. The Captain gagged again and ripped the mask off his face scattering chunks of abdominal debris about the cabin. The fumes from this discharge merged with the lingering stench of the beer, cabbage, bean curd fart creating a symbiotic fist that slammed into Hiraki's spare tire, forcing out the rest of what remained there. This rude activity from the rear seat was not lost on Shoichi. He leveled the plane and was able to don his mask before the noxious vapors found their next victim.

"Do you want me to land?" Shoichi asked.

Captain Hiraki tried to rub his eyes, but forgot he was wearing goggles and smeared the lenses with the pernicious mix covering his hands, which brought them in close proximity to his nose, which nearly caused another eruption. Fighting back the surge, Hiraki shouted, "Can you land?"

"I think so."

"You think so?" Hiraki yelled.

"Yes, yes I can land."

Shoichi banked the Kyushu into a landing approach and a few minutes later set the big trainer down smoothly on the runway. He taxied the plane over to the hangar that shaded the other students and shut it down. Captain Hiraki immediately pulled the canopy back, sucked in the fresh air like a man with three fingers above the water and glared at Shoichi. "Get out," he growled.

The young pilot unbuckled his harness, climbed down from the plane and walked over to join the other young men. The Captain slowly extricated himself and wiped his pants and jacket continuously as he slowly made his way to the group. They jumped to their feet and stood at attention as the Captain approached. Hiraki stopped in front of the men and opened his mouth to say something when Shoichi suddenly stepped forward and bowed. "Honorable Captain, please forgive me for getting sick in the plane and soiling your clothes."

A few titters from the students were expelled and quickly quenched as Captain Hiraki stared at Shoichi for several moments. A grin fought for control of the corner of his mouth, but he won the match and yelled, "Dismissed. Go to your quarters."

The next morning Shoichi stood at attention in the small bamboo enclosure Captain Hiraki referred to as his office. Seated behind a rickety table piled with paperwork, Hiraki studied the young man for several moments. Finally he inquired, "Are you American or Japanese?"

"I suppose I am both, but I am here to fight for my homeland. I traveled a long way on my own to get here."

Hiraki squinted at Shoichi as he considered the response. He shook his head vaguely and sighed. "Have you soloed?"

"You mean flown by myself?"

"Yes, by yourself."

"No, I've always had Doc or Robert with me."

"Who is this Doc?" Hiraki asked.

"He owns the Jenny, he taught me how to fly."

"Who is Robert?"

"He is my friend from school."

"So you have flown without your instructor?"

"Yes."

"Then you have soloed," remarked the Captain. "You will fly with me tomorrow so I can judge your abilities." Hiraki paused, then looked Shoichi in the eye. "You will purge your body of all things before we fly. Do you understand this?"

Shoichi grinned and saluted so smartly the resultant smack was probably heard outside the building. "Thank you sir."

The Captain grunted his response, "Dismissed."

Eight weeks later, his classmates still working the trainer, Shoichi was assigned to shakedown Japan's newest aerial fighting machine, the J2M Raiden Thunderbolt. Designed by Jiro Horikoshi who created the Zero, Japan's state-of-the-art fighter that wreaked such havoc at Pearl Harbor, the Raiden featured an oversized Mitsubishi Kasei engine with fourteen cylinders that pumped out almost two thousand horsepower. By this time Shoichi had logged several hours in the Zero and the veteran test pilots at the base accepted the young enthusiastic rookie with the weird accent as one of their own.

Walking to the Raiden on that warm morning in late March, Shoichi mused under his breath, "Look at that plane. I can't believe it, I'm a real fighter pilot. Course I'm not going to shoot anything, but still I'm a fighter pilot. This is fuckin' fun." He looked up and stabbed his arm to the sky. "Mom, dad, hey Robert look at Shoichi burnin' up the wild blue."

He climbed up to the cockpit and strapped himself in. His surroundings were familiar; he had digested all the manuals and sat in the fighter's seat several times...on the ground. He laughed to himself as he thought; this is my maiden Raiden flight. Shoichi sealed the cockpit, started the mighty engine and marveled at the roar of the twin radials. He taxied out to the runway apron, tached up to fifteen thousand RPM's and checked the engine related gauges. Backing off the throttle Shoichi asked and received clearance from the tower then hammered it again and let the plane take him away.

The Raiden performed beautifully as Shoichi completed each test procedure on the checklist crafted by operations, until thirty minutes into the flight when he began experiencing problems with the propeller pitch mechanism. Shoichi touched his hand to his throat and radioed the tower, "JJ235 requesting clearance for landing, pitch keeps sticking."

"Cleared on zero one left."

The plane circled the field and descended evenly like a feather in a vacuum. As the wheels of the fighter struck the pavement the right landing gear collapsed. The Raiden jerked to the side and Shoichi knew immediately what had happened...another test pilot had been killed after a similar incident when the failed gear caused the wing to dip and strike the pavement resulting in a flip and fire. Shoichi's craft veered off the runway from the lopsided touch down. He hit the throttle in an attempt to regain altitude, but all the plane could muster was a few inches. Then the right ball dropped into the right slot at the right time. Shoichi grabbed a lever and retracted the landing gear, leveled the plane and brought it in for a belly landing on the wide expanse of grass adjacent to the runway. The prop bit into the turf and kicked grassy chunks into the fray as the Raiden zoomed along on its gut resembling a huge lawnmower with the blade set too low. An eternity later the fighter lurched to a stop, a microsecond after that Shoichi was kissing the ground several yards away.

Iwakuni Military Base, Japan – August 5, 1945

Shoichi lay on his mat absentmindedly following the antics of a lizard that scurried along the bamboo ceiling. He smiled to himself as he recalled the almost fatal forced landing in the Raiden Hurricane years before. He was lauded at the time by his fellow test pilots for saving the plane. It almost felt like a kid's adventure story now. The Raidens continued to experience periodic engine problems through the years and were never manufactured

in great numbers as its creator had envisioned. Of course, very little visualized by the Japanese had come to pass following the initial blush of victories up to Midway. Most recently, the devastating carnage at Okinawa a few weeks before with over one hundred thousand soldiers killed and a loss of nearly eight thousand aircraft set the Japanese home islands up for one last battle for survival. Shoichi had just learned during the base meeting that he was to be intimately involved in that battle, and ironically his lance was to be a Raiden. More ironically, instead of doing everything he could to salvage the plane, he was to ensure its destruction; sticking around in the cockpit to make sure. The tentacles of the Tokkotai, the special attack force that sent soldiers on one way journeys to their Maker, had finally found their way to the still young but wizened Japanese-American test pilot with nothing left to test. Shoichi sighed and sat up to finish the letter he had started:

Dearest Mother, Father and Naoko,

I am sorry that I could not say goodbye in person when I left for Japan, but if you knew of my plans I'm certain you would not have allowed me to go. I assumed at the time the war would only last a few months and our people would be victorious. I was terribly wrong and now I will never see you again in this life.

I became a test pilot here and never had to fire on Americans, but in two days I must forfeit my life for Japan as a Kamikaze. I do not want to do it, but have no choice in the matter. I don't know if this letter will get to you, but my superior officer said we could all write our parents to let them know of our sacrifice. I pray that something will happen to prevent my suicide, but if not, though I fly to my final destination with the rising sun headband, I will be thinking of my American family all the while.

*Your loving son,
Shoichi*

P.S. Tell Robert I had fun flying while I was here, up to now that is.

Later, at twilight, the dying sun reflected his mood as Shoichi trudged to the base headquarters building. He found the pilot briefing room there deserted when he entered. Great, he thought, early for my own funeral. A prominent clock on the wall indicated 1855 hours as he seated himself in a wooden chair. At precisely 1900 Commander Toyama entered the room followed closely by Lieutenants Yakuta and Ichiro, young pilots he had met a few days before. The Lieutenants each took chairs as Toyama moved to the head of the room and stood looking at them.

After a few moments, the Commander cleared his throat, then picked up a wooden wand and pointed to a circled area on the large map of the south Pacific hung on the wall behind him. "Intelligence indicates there is a convoy of two carrier battle groups in this general area just north of Iwo Jima. This American convoy gentlemen, is the target of our Kamikaze raid the day after tomorrow. Your assignment in the morning is one of reconnaissance. You are to confirm their exact location. Also Ichiro, your plane

is equipped with a camera; you are to photograph the ships in the convoy. Your group will depart the base at 0330 hours arriving over your quarry at sunrise," he said.

Shoichi looked at the two men sitting next to him and raised his hand.

"Tanaka, what is it?" he asked.

"Are we the only ones participating in this mission?"

"Yes, we wish to maintain a minimal profile to prevent enemy intervention," the Commander replied.

Lieutenant Ichiro raised his hand.

"Ichiro?" the Commander asked.

"Does that mean we are not to engage the enemy?"

"That is correct. Under no circumstances are you to engage. If the Americans scramble their planes you are to return to base immediately. Experience tells us they will most likely ignore your incursion if you maintain altitude since there are only three planes in your group. Take your photographs and get back here," the Commander replied. Toyama tapped the stick on his palm while he studied the three men. "If there are no more questions you are dismissed. And, make certain to get adequate rest, this is a vitally important mission," the Commander ordered.

Clouds refused to obstruct the stars' clear command of the early morning sky at 0345 on August 6, 1945. Yakuta and Ichiro were assigned A6M8 Zeros that had been held in reserve to protect the home islands, Shoichi piloted a war weary J2M3 Raiden for the mission that had just got underway. The three airmen were at altitude and headed south toward Iwo Jima.

Almost two hours later the monochromatic morning tentatively transformed into multiple shades of pinks and purples as the infant sun sampled the distant eastern horizon. The marginal light was more than adequate to illuminate the dark ships with long white tails that revealed themselves in the ocean several thousand feet below. For fifteen minutes Shoichi and Yakuta flew wing for Ichiro as he made passes over the American armada.

The sun cleared the horizon and its light enabled Shoichi to discern movement on the deck of the leading aircraft carrier. He keyed his mike. "It appears they are preparing to launch aircraft Lieutenant Ichiro," Shoichi cautioned.

"Acknowledged, Tanaka. I have what we need, let's return to Iwakuni."

The three planes banked together and accelerated back to a northern heading.

"Do you think they will follow us?" Yakuta asked.

"No, they want to save all their weapons so they can blow Japan off the map with them," Ichiro replied. "We will surprise them tomorrow when we kiss their big decks with our planes full of bombs."

Ichiro's witty comment engendered no response as each pilot contemplated the reality and ramifications of their return journey.

Several minutes later Shoichi retrieved a camera from his flight bag and broke the uneasy silence. "Fellows, I brought my Yashica. I'm going to take pictures of my flying buddies to send home with my farewell letter."

Ichiro throttled ahead, maneuvered the Zero to the right of Shoichi's plane then fell back in line. "That's better," he remarked.

"Why did you do that?" Shoichi asked.

“This is my best side,” Ichiro laughed.

Shoichi grinned and snapped shots of Ichiro as the other man waved from his cockpit. Then Shoichi turned to his left and took photos of Yakuta who held up his fingers in the V for victory sign that the British favored. Shoichi chuckled as he clicked the shutter, “I will tell my parents you two are the greatest heroes of the war...after me of course.”

A few minutes later Ichiro flew ahead several yards to slip back in formation. He glanced back to gauge the position of the other two flyers and noticed a three plane bomber group cruising high above them. “Enemy bombers at eleven o’clock,” he warned.

Shoichi and Yakuta jerked their heads up simultaneously. “What are they?” Yakuta asked.

“Looks like B-29’s,” Shoichi replied as he peered into the blue.

“Let’s fall back then go up and take a look,” Ichiro said.

The Zeros and the Raiden slowed until the pilots could see the bombers ahead of them. “Follow me,” Ichiro instructed.

Ichiro pulled his Zero into a steep climb with Shoichi and Yakuta lined up on his tail. They resumed their formation a few hundred yards above and behind the three Superfortresses. Ichiro radioed the base. “This is E11243 base, over.”

“This is base.”

“We are following three American B-29’s headed your way. Do you wish us to engage them?” Ichiro asked.

Several moments passed, then Ichiro inquired, “Base?”

“Acknowledged E11243, I’m waiting for the Commander.”

Five minutes later Commander Toyama’s voice crackled over the radio. “You are not to engage.”

“Sir, the bombers are flying very slow and have no fighter escort,” Ichiro reported.

“You could get shot down by their gunners; we need your planes for our mission tomorrow.”

Ichiro paused in thought a few moments, then replied. “Sir, I will respect your orders, but since we are to sacrifice our lives for the Emperor, I humbly ask can we not do so against these planes by crashing into them? They are surely on their way to bomb us.”

There was a long pause, during which Shoichi reflected. Would I rather crash into a plane now and kill myself, or crash into a ship tomorrow and kill myself? I think I’ll vote for tomorrow.

“Your offer of sacrifice today is appreciated Lieutenant, but the ships are a more important target. The carriers are swarming with planes that will inflict much more damage than three bombers. Besides, small American bomber groups have been flying over Japan for a few weeks without dropping bombs. They are probably just scouting. Return to base immediately.” Toyama ordered.

“Yes sir.” Ichiro replied. He glanced at Shoichi in the plane next to him. Shoichi shrugged his shoulders, thought for a moment then waved to get Ichiro’s attention as he started to turn away. Shoichi held his camera up and pointed to the bombers below. Ichiro grinned and nodded. Shoichi peeled off in the Raiden and edged alongside the

lead B-29. He could see the crew members in the large Plexiglas cockpit gazing at him. He waved and started taking pictures of the bomber.

The bomber's co-pilot squinted through the canopy at Shoichi's Raiden. "Look at the fuckin' Nipper, Paul. What's he doing?"

"Looks like he's taking pictures for the folks back home, Bob. Smile and wave," the pilot laughed.

Bob waved a one fingered salute to the Japanese fighter. Shoichi lowered the camera and returned the favor. Then he grinned and climbed away. He rejoined the formation with Ichiro and Yakuta and they sped away from the bombers.

A clear sunny morning welcomed the three Japanese fighters when they landed at Iwakuni at 0730 hours. Shoichi, Yakuta and Ichiro climbed from their planes and walked together to the headquarters building. Ichiro slapped Shoichi on the back. "Get some good photos?"

"Yeah, I could see them in the cockpit giving me the finger," Shoichi replied as he patted the Yashica in his hand.

"How did you know they wouldn't fire on you?" Yakuta asked.

"Because there were no gunners at the turrets," Ichiro interjected. "I still wish I could have rammed them."

"But then you wouldn't be here to have beer with us tonight," Shoichi laughed.

"I suppose you're right. At least now I'll know when I'm enjoying my last drink," Ichiro remarked.

They approached the headquarters building and Shoichi turned to the other two men. "You guys go ahead; I'm going to have Asano develop this film so I can include some photos in my letter home. I'll join you in the briefing room in a couple of minutes."

Shoichi entered an office on the other side of the building and walked over to a soldier seated behind a cluttered table. He handed the camera to him. "Corporal Asano, I need you to develop the film in this camera as soon as possible. Commander Toyama will want to see some of the photographs."

"Yes sir," Asano replied as he took the camera and disappeared through a door behind him. Shoichi turned and walked out.

Later, a hand cranked timer on a shelf emitted a pronounced ding and Asano glanced at a large clock on the wall. It read 0815 hours. He removed the negatives from the fixative bath and hung them carefully on a line stretched across the room. Then he uncovered a sizable magnifying glass and began to inspect the images. The fifth photograph featured the expansive glass domed front of an airplane. It occupied most of the frame. There was large text painted at an angle underneath the cockpit. Asano squinted through the glass and spelled out the letters. "E, N, O, L, A..." Suddenly, the building began to shudder. A few seconds later a loud rumble like distant thunder filtered through the walls. "Oh shit," Asano muttered, "We're being bombed." He hurried out of the room leaving the door slightly ajar. A few moments later a violent wind ripped the door completely off allowing bright light and vestiges of the wind to invade the previously darkened chamber. The negatives pinned to the line twisted and scuffed in the breeze emulating dry leaves clinging to life in a late autumn gust. Then slowly... inexorably, the images fogged over like accelerated cataracts.