

THE MILK RUN EPILOGUE

My "MILK RUN THAT TURNED SOUR" story was initially put to pen in 1980 and updated in 1989. At the time the event occurred, our crash and subsequent rescue behind enemy lines by an Australian coast-watcher was not an unusual event by 1943 Southwest Pacific Theater standards. However, the developments that took place forty-seven years later did make it very unique. This additional material is too long to be a P.S. (post script) and too late to be a N.B. (note bene) to the original material, so I'll call this sequel an Epilogue. By whatever name, it was a million-to-one long shot!

In early 1990, I got a telephone call one Monday night from a Larry Hickey, President of International Research and Publishing Co. in Boulder, Colorado. He explained that he was a member of an international club of military historians whose hobby was to research and clarify the inconsistencies of World War II combat intelligence reports. His area of interest was the Southwest Pacific in general and New Guinea in particular. He asked if I had any specific records of my 1942-1943 combat experiences with the 8th Attack Squadron (3rd Attack Group of the 5th Air Force). I pointed out that my tour was a rather unspectacular sequence of crashes, near crashes, and assorted mishaps which, like the proverbial cat, I was lucky to have survived, but if my flight log and personal diary would be of help, I'd be glad to make them available to further his project. I asked Hickey "Why do you think anyone gives a hoot about what really happened 47 years ago?" He explained that his counterpart in Japan, a Tokyo dentist named Dr. Yasuho Izawa, had access to the detailed combat records of the 24th Sentai (a composite Army group having three squadrons of fighter, light bomber and escort planes based out of Wewak with forward bases at Madang, Lae, and Salamaua) that often opposed the 3rd Group in aerial combat. Wouldn't it be interesting to try to match up their records with the official USAF records?

In response to this challenge, I gave Hickey a 1990 assignment --find out what the 24th Sentai and the USAF Historical Section (Maxwell Field, Alabama) show happened on 9 July, 1943 at 8:17 A.M., 20 miles South of Salamaua. I assumed it would be at least six months before he would reply, if at all. On the following Saturday morning (4 1/2 days later) Hickey phoned to say that his research team had come up with a perfect match of U.S. and Japanese records--a Capt. Wm. Webster flying an 8th Sqdn B-25 had been shot down on the date, time and place indicated by a flight of 7 Oscar-type fighters led by a Warrant Officer Katsuaki Kira. Further research disclosed that W/O Kira had survived WWII as the 2nd leading Japanese ace, was now living on Kyushu Island, and "Would you like to meet him?" What a needle in a haystack discovery!

I immediately said I was already planning to come to Japan next October for the wedding of the daughter of a Japanese couple we had befriended in 1957, and perhaps Mr. Kira could come to Tokyo for a "reunion" at that time. So, with Dr. Izawa's help, I established correspondence with Mr. Kira with his daughter (a Japan Airlines stewardess) as our translator. Upon the promise that there would be no live TV publicity of our meeting, he agreed to come up to Tokyo with her (700 miles) with expenses to be paid by my Japanese banker friend. During our four-sided correspondence, International Research found out from Dr. Izawa that Kira had published a 100 page paperback in the early 1950's about his wartime experiences. They secured a copy, had it translated into English, and thus I had a good preliminary introduction to my one-time adversary.

The long awaited meeting with Kira was scheduled for 12 Oct. 1990 at 2:00 P.M. My wife and I were staying at the new Tokyo Hilton for the week, and my Japanese banker host had booked an Executive Conference Suite on the 37th Floor for that afternoon. The banker's son, Michinobu, a bright law school student with excellent language skills in both English and French, acted as my interpreter. He and I "waited under the clock" in the Hilton lobby, and right on time in came Mr. Kira and his attractive daughter, Emiko. With mixed feelings, I gave my best limited Japanese obeisant greeting in response to his reserved cordiality. We adjourned to our meeting room and the next seven hours flew by all too swiftly.

Mr. Kira was the prototype of a successful Japanese executive. About 5 ft 6 inches, and a solid 160 pounds, his face looked like a combination of Gorbachev and Yamamoto. He wore a handsome tailor-made single-breasted dark gray woolen worsted suit, a white shirt with French cuffs and gold cuff-links, and a blue patterned silk tie. He had a ruddy complexion, bright eyes (no glasses), and a fringe of close-cropped gray hair. The feature that I particularly noticed were his well-manicured graceful hands that seemed to be constantly moving while he talked, maneuvered his plane with hand signs as all pilots are prone to do, or while smoking his strong Japanese cigarettes. (It later developed he was a three-pack-a-day man who already had been diagnosed with stomach cancer.) He had a strong guttural voice in a growling tone even when he was smiling, which made him difficult to "read". However, through his daughter/interpreter he responded willingly to my many questions about his pilot training and his wartime experiences. Here is a summary of his career as gleaned from his writings and my notes taken at our meeting.

Born in Kyushu in March 1919, he caught "aerial fever" in the 4th grade. At age 17 he signed up for pilot training and out of 6000 applicants, he received one of the 100 appointments. After eighteen months of general

academic as well as aviation courses plus 200 hours of flight training, he received his enlisted pilot designation. In July 1937 he was sent to Manchuria to fly combat in the Nakajima 95, a fixed gear, single wing fighter we called Nate, and he rotated between Manchuria, Formosa, and Japan. In late December 1941 he was transferred down to the Philippines flying the Nakajima 97 for the Battle of Manila. This fixed gear plane proved to be too slow even for the limited US air opposition, so he was sent back to Manchuria for the spring and summer of 1942 where he ended up with 7 official "kills". In late 1942 he joined the 24th Sentai and was transferred to Palembang in Sumatra where they were equipped with new Hayabusa fighters, very similar in appearance and performance to the famed Zero but not equipped for naval carrier operation. (We called this type "Oscar") He soon became a crack shot specializing in head-on frontal attacks. The 24th Sentai moved down to Wewak on the north coast of New Guinea in May 1943 for combat duty. Each of the three squadrons initially had 25 planes and 40 pilots, only 20% of them being commissioned officers while the rest were warrant officers and sergeants. Each category had separate mess halls and "comfort houses". He shot down his first US plane, a B-24, on May 24 and a P-39 in June. His published journal reports his next kill as a lone B-25 weather plane on the morning of 9 July. "I closed to within 50 yards and saw that the turret-gun was not firing. We put many shots into the fuselage and the right engine burned brightly with much smoke. Got him! Finally the gear fell out and even then the enemy was still flying. It was being very obstinate about its inevitable fall. Soon exhausted, it plunged into the sea and exploded on impact. We looked but saw no survivors." (It still gives me a curious feeling to read my own obituary written by my executioner.) As previously reported in "Milk Run" story, four out of the five of us in the plane did survive the crash, the long swim to the tiny volcanic island, and our chance rescue by the Coast-watcher and his natives. Fortunately for the sake of this story and my two subsequent children, my burns and bruises healed quickly and I returned to combat flying in three weeks.

Little did I know at that time that my path would soon cross Mr. Kira's with much different results. In the early morning of 17 August 1943, nine squadrons of B-25 strafers of the 5th Air Force with seven squadrons of covering P-38s made the 600 mile low-level flight to Wewak to strafe and bomb the four Japanese airdromes. The three squadrons of the 3rd Group (8th, 90th, and 13th) led the attack with Group Commander Donald P. Hall leading the 8th. I led the three plane flight on the left side of DP's flight and Marty Radnik led the right three plane flight. The 8th's target was the Boram Airstrip and DP hit it right on the button! Many planes were lined up on their dirt strip waiting to take off at the moment we pulled up over the trees and went roaring down the strip where as a rare coincidence, the 24th Sentai was based. Kira's description of being at "ground zero" during the 17 Aug 1943 attack on Wewak's airfields is vivid. "The first nine B-25s (our 8th

Squadron) came in quickly over the tops of the coconut trees. Wow! There was no time to run to the air raid trenches, so I hid behind some nearby trees. I was naked and had no weapon. My tent caught fire and I was frightened." He initially thought we were dropping "midget paratroopers" until the 20# parachute cluster bombs started exploding. The Sentai had just received 60 new Type 3 Hein fighters the previous day and were scheduled to take off on their own attack mission at 0800. Kira ran to the palm revetment where his plane had been dispersed and while it had only minor damage, his beloved crew chief suffered major stomach wounds from shrapnel. Kira wrote "The flames of the burning planes and supplies were dreadful, and the black smoke from the four airfields spread out to the west like a big smoke screen. It was a ghastly spectacle! Gazing at it, my eyes were blurred with tears of disappointment." U.S. strike reports claimed over 200 Japanese planes destroyed that day, possibly an over-enthusiastic estimate. Japanese records showed 82 planes destroyed and another 50 damaged. Despite these discrepancies, Kira attributed the eventual collapse of the Japanese Army air effort in New Guinea to this Wewak attack which not only destroyed planes, fuel, and ammunition, but more important their water purification system which never was suitably repaired. This led to a greater incidence of other jungle illnesses. His own malaria became uncontrollable and he had to be airlifted back to Japan in Nov. 1943 for medical treatment. After hearing his story about his 17 Aug bombing, I didn't feel quite as badly about my 9 July experience.

By Oct. 1944, he was back in combat in the Philippines with the 200th Sentai, scoring heavily against U.S. B-24s, P-40s, and an occasional P-38. The US naval fighter pilots grew very aggressive and the 200th suffered heavy losses. He was next sent to Okinawa to train young kamikaze pilots, and this proved to be very disheartening. The pilot shortage got so critical that in April 45, he was ordered to lead a suicide mission twice--the first time the weather was so bad that he couldn't find the target readily and had to bring his young pupils back before they ran out of fuel. The second time, on taxiing out to the end of the dirt strip, one wheel fell into a soft filled-in bomb crater and nosed up, bending the propeller too badly for flight. His journal reports "At the end of June 1945, we withdrew back to Tokyo, and we were supposed to be part of a special attack unit in 'Operation Ketsu-go' on 20 Aug. On 13 Aug we were headed for Kyushu but on the way we learned the war had ended. 'Operation Ketsu-go' was a plan for all the surviving aircraft of the Army and Navy--a total of 8000--to attack all together on the enemy fleet. It would have been a glorious finale!"

Thus ended Kira's WWII combat flying wherein he had logged over 5000 flying hours, most of it on patrols, and he had 7 kills in Manchuria and then a total of 21 confirmed U.S. planes shot down from May 43 to May 45.

After the Japanese surrender in Aug 45, the Japanese professional airmen, soldiers, and sailors that survived the rigors of war had an equally difficult time back home. The civilians blamed all of their hardships on the military, regardless of each man's individual role or his personal success. Kira, after three years literally on the beach scrounging whatever odd jobs he could, got married in 1949 and with his wife opened a small fish fry stand.. This allowed him to regain a measure of self esteem. In the early 1950's, the new Japanese Self Defense Force authorized the rebirth of the Japanese Air Force and Kira was selected to be a senior flight instructor. Inasmuch as the SDF was going to be equipped with USAF planes and support equipment, Kira and the other air veterans had to take 12 months schooling in USAF instruction techniques, equipment, and even the English language before they were permitted to instruct. (Kira did not appreciate this requirement.) He amassed over 10,000 flying hours, mostly in the back seat of a T-33, the trainer version of the F-80. Upon reaching the SDF mandatory retirement age of 50 for pilot instructors, he was hired by Toto Kiki, a large Japanese plumbing fixture manufacturer, to be the resident manager of their workers' living complex with dormitories, feeding and recreation facilities for 800 women employees. ("Good job, but too many women!") He retired from this in 1984 at the age of 65. Thus, with three small pensions, a frugal wife, a paid up mortgage, two married daughters, and a grandson who liked fishing and baseball, Mr. Kira had every right to be content with his life's work.

Here are some random thoughts he disclosed upon my questioning: What U.S. plane did you like to fight? Smiling, he chose the P-39, the P-40, and the B-24 . What U.S. plane did he fear the most? This was the only answer he gave in English --"P-38 Rightning - too good!" The rest of the time he answered in Japanese through his daughter. Which of your bases did you prefer? He said he normally flew out of Wewak with advance refueling missions out of Madang, Lae, and Salamaua. He had one mission escorting bombers from Wewak to Rabaul but he didn't like it there because of the sulphur smell (probably Mother, Daughter, or Vulcan volcanoes) and the bad tasting water. He had no mementos of his New Guinea duty--the few personal belongings and photos he had were either destroyed in the 17 Aug 43 attack at his campsite or lost in his air evacuation as a malaria casualty in Nov 43. Of the 120 pilots Kira served with in the 24th Sentai, only 5 survived to the end of WWII, and only he and one other were alive at the time of our meeting. In response to my specific questions about captured U.S. airmen, he said he had heard of some downed crewmen captured in the Wewak area, but he did not know their fate. He asked very few questions about my training or service. We closed out our combat recollection discussion period with a mutual agreement that the score of the Kira versus Webster series was tied at 1 to 1, and we happily left it there.

About 6:30 P.M. we adjourned from the Hotel and went to a very fancy traditional Japanese restaurant where my banker host and his wife had arranged for a sumptuous ten course dinner with all kinds of interesting but unidentifiable Japanese dishes, small servings and exquisitely decorated. Interspersed with adequate amounts of sake and other wines, we had a delightful social evening discussing with Kira and his daughter and our host family the role that Japan should or could play in the development of the Pacific Rim and whether they should participate in the Desert Shield/Desert Storm operation by sending Japanese troops, a direct violation of their own SDF by-laws. Kira's position was that the people should realize that sending forces to the Persian Gulf was the reasonable act. "At least we could help out with the rear echelon support personnel. If Japan can't do that, we should not be able to go traveling abroad as an international citizen. It is natural for us to share in this burden."!

Kira and I exchanged gifts--we gave him an Italian silk tie and a stainless steel toilet kit and he gave us inlaid Damascene jewelry that is a specialty of his home island of Kyushu, a lapel pin for Betty and a tie clasp for me. We finished off the evening about 9 P.M. with a champagne toast to our fallen comrades, to our families, and to our two countries mutual cooperation. We shook hands one last time and tearfully parted, promising to keep in touch by mail.

What was my lasting impression of Katsuaki Kira? A professional fighter pilot who was good at his trade, well aware of the men he had killed and the grief he had caused for their families, yet unrepentant for his actions and sorry only because he wound up on the losing side. Nevertheless he had ended up winning his own struggle which under the circumstances proved to be very impressive. I didn't expect him to be otherwise, and I admired him for his tenacity and his positive attitude. He gave us a great performance! Our meeting solved no great military, social, or political problems, but it did answer a long smoldering question in my mind as to "Who Shot Cock Robin".

About a year later, I received a Japanese grief card from Kira's daughter informing us of her father's death from cancer and stating that one of his last instructions to her was to tell Gen. Webster that he was glad that he had been able to meet with me the previous October. Too bad I didn't get to know him better -- I could have learned to like him.

Sayonara, Kira-san!

9 July 1997

Wm. H. Webster
B/Gen. USAFRet.