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In 1944 the Army established a large medical supply depot on the island of Leyte in the Philippines to serve the entire Pacific Theatre of Operations.



We had our own Japanese Prisoner of War stockade with 200-250 POW's to serve as our labor pool. I ran the Receiving Department and each day a dozen or more POW's were assigned to my operations. On rare occasions I was lucky enough to get one of the two POW's who spoke English to act as an interpreter. But on most days we communicated solely through sign language. And we did so very effectively. In the process, we developed a good working relationship and achieved a good deal of mutual respect - or so I thought.

The hard working POW's were well disciplined and cooperative. As a result we loosened up on security and the walking armed guards detail was eliminated. Instead, each department head was given a pistol and a pistol belt to wear. The hot, humid, weather subjected us to frequent fungus infections if we wore anything tight against our bodies. Accordingly, I removed my pistol belt whenever I sat down at the desk in my office which was in one corner of the receiving warehouse. However, sometimes when I went out into the warehouse itself I'd forget to buckle up.

One day I was in the far corner of the receiving warehouse when I saw a POW make a beeline for my office – 100 feet away.. He grabbed the pistol belt off my desk and headed in my direction. Like the proverbial drowning man I saw my entire life passing before me as I awaited my imminent demise.

But instead of removing the pistol from its holster, the POW ran up to me and handed me the belt.. Somehow, while in shock, I was able to buckle up. And just as I did I saw my commanding officer walk around the corner and into the warehouse.

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From his vantage point, the POW had seen the officer coming and his quick action saved me from the discipline I so richly deserved.

Prior to establishing the depot in Leyte, my outfit was temporarily stationed in New Guinea. We transferred to the Philippines via a 25-ship convoy, consisting mostly of LST's, a journey requiring several days.. The deck of my LST was jammed with a variety of military vehicles – so much so that it was a challenge to find a bit of steel deck to serve as my bed for the night. Sometimes the only space I could find was dangerously near the edge of the deck and in order to avoid falling overboard in my sleep I tied myself to the railing with a length of rope.

Starting at dawn and until dark on our last day at sea, we were repeatedly attacked by a series of small groups of Japanese planes, many flown by Kamikaze pilots. They dove into our ships and did succeed in sinking three. But many of the Kamikazes dove into the sea at great distances from our ships. This gave the appearance that at least some of these pilots - who knew they could not return alive - just wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. This caused me later to wonder about the effectiveness of this means of warfare. Some of the planes flew over, strafing our ships, and I remember diving under a truck on our deck for cover.

That night we landed on the beach at Leyte just after dark. A large group of Japanese planes attacked the beach which was jammed with ships of all types and many huge supply dumps All lights were immediately extinguished, of course.. Those of us who had just arrived ran back into our LST for its (questionable) safety but we were immediately ordered to return to the beach We stood under the dark skies filled with the darkened silhouettes of circling planes – both Japanese and American, watching the tracer bullets light up an otherwise darkened sky. When the attacking Japanese planes finally left, an “all clear” signal was sounded. Then the entire beach was lit up again like a later day Las Vegas Strip. And all the planes in the sky turned their lights on.

Suddenly and simultaneously all the planes circling overhead extinguished their lights - except one plane. And that plane was immediately shot down! The story we heard later was that the when the Japanese flew away in the dark they often left one suicide plane behind and so that when all the beach lights came on that sole Japanese would have his pick of “juicy” supply dumps to dive into. But the Americans had come up with a defense. By radio they were ordered to extinguish their lights and the one who did not could be presumed to be a Japanese plane whose pilot was not privy to the same radio frequency.

Many years after the war (in 1971) I visited my business firm's Japanese subsidiary in Tokyo for a week. Near the end of our visit, our Japanese Vice President hosted a dinner at his home. After a sumptuous meal with more than ample quantities of wine, he told us of his experience in the war. He had been a member of the Japanese air force and after he had achieved “ace” status as a fighter pilot, he was called home to take responsibility for training a group of

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would-be Kamikazes. He was assigned to teach only one class because – and this I had never heard before – the instructor was required to make the suicide mission along with his students. Only our dropping the A-bomb and ending the war just days before his class was ready to graduate stopped him from making this final sacrifice for the Emperor.