Local Pilot Sees the End of the War

On September 2, 1945, exactly 75 years ago, the war with Japan was formally ended with the surrender of the Empire of Japan on board the USS Missouri anchored in Tokyo Bay. The number of people alive today that remember that day is declining quickly.

There was another, much less well-known surrender that took place three weeks earlier and 1,850 miles away at the Chihkiang Airfield in Hunan Province, China, and there is a local guy who remembers that event as if it was yesterday. I met Ed Larson late last year when another local old timer sent me an amazing survival-at-sea story Ed had written that took place off the north coast of Santa Cruz in 1953 following a routine night patrol flight along the coast.

Ed is a 95-year old Santa Cruz former aviator, author and artist. During World War II, he became one of the youngest pilots stationed in the China-Burma-India theater, and who flew an assortment of old, battered cargo planes over what was known as “the hump” to deliver needed supplies into China during the war.

The hump was the eastern end of the Himalayas and flying over it was a challenging and extremely dangerous operation due to the height of the mountains, the lack of reliable charts, an absence of radio navigation aids, no adequate airfields, and little weather information. Before his 21st birthday, he had already co-piloted five-round trip missions over the Himalayas from India to China. But Ed survived and lived to later write about his wartime experiences. He still lives in the Seabright neighborhood and has also published a book about local people and stories centered around the harbor and its characters and boats.

In August 1945, although the war in Asia was essentially over, Ed and his companions were still flying into and around China as there were still a lot of people and stuff to be moved around. His cargo was often Chinese soldiers who were still needed to defend areas against the scattered Japanese troops remaining in China, who had no idea they had lost the war. But they were also transporting fuel, bombs and ammunition.

He writes in his book, Spear-Carrier in a Backwater War, that Wednesday, August 22, began with bad weather, but that it would turn out to be a red-letter day in his interesting military career. Despite rain and wind, everyone he knew would have sold his soul to have been on the trip he and his crew flew that day. How he got picked he never really knew.
After delivering a load of American civilian passengers to Kunming in a Curtis C-46 Commando, they expected to head back to Luliang, but instead were told to stand by. After an hour and a half of coffee and doughnuts, they were told that they would be flying 23 Chinese generals to Chihkiang for the formal surrender of a Japanese delegation who were also flying in. Chihkiang (today Huaihua Zhijiang Airport) was built in 1942 and was the 2nd largest airfield in the Far East for the Allies during World War II. The airbase was the headquarters of the 14th Air Force Chinese-American Composite Wing, whose squadrons flew P-40 Warhawks.

In Ed’s words, this was an historic event and a plum for a couple of hometown hotshot pilots. They couldn’t get off the ground fast enough before someone changed their mind, and they went through the shortest preflight check in history.

The Japanese invasion of China had been disastrous and painful for the Chinese people and this surrender was a huge event. The generals weren’t dressed much better than the enlisted men that had been transporting earlier and they also hadn’t done much flying either. The flight went smoothly, but because of the weather, the runway at Chihkiang was pretty much mud and rocks. They circled the runway several times to survey the scene and make sure everything was OK. There were a number of C-47 Troop Carriers, Mustangs and P-47s Thunderbolts along the flight line and a lot of people walking around getting mud on their shoes.

They fortunately pulled off a soft gentle landing for the Chinese generals, taxied up to the flight line where a lot of military in uniforms were waiting, and shut down their engines. Some GIs were setting up some simple tables and folding metal chairs in a building close to the flight line. The tables were then covered with what looked to Ed like someone’s borrowed bed sheets.

Within about 45 minutes a Japanese Mitsubishi G4 came in over the hills from the east bearing a huge cross on the fuselage indicating her fighting days were over. She was followed by another enemy aircraft, a Mitsubishi Ki-57 “Topsy”, which was painted a rich dark green with opposing camouflage colors of red, burnt orange and yellow painted in a dazzling pattern. According to Ed, compared to their drab and dirty fighters and transports, the Ki-57 was the belle of the ball and he hated to see her get her shoes muddy.

Four individuals got out of the plane, Brigadier General Kiyoshi, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Japanese Imperial Army, along with what they were to learn were two staff and an interpreter. And they were now surrounded by over a hundred Chinese and American officers. After much bowing and saluting the Japanese and Chinese delegations were seated and the proceedings began.

The Japanese delegation was spotlessly turned out in fine uniforms complete with ribbons and other regalia. In contrast, Ed and his fellow officers and enlisted men were in plain suntan uniforms. Like their airplanes, they were drab, dirty, unkempt, and war weary, but
as bad as they looked, they were happy that the war was over. As for Ed, he was honored to have witnessed and played a role in these monumental proceedings, and imagined that those aboard the *USS Missouri* for the signing of the surrender by the Japanese to Douglas MacArthur would soon be feeling the same way.

A few hours later he was to learn why they had become part of this history-making event. The official surrender ceremony was scheduled to be held at Yushan in Kiangsi Province; but the runway there had been hit hard, that at the last minute they were forced to change the site to Chihkiang. On their flight back to Luliang, Ed and his co-pilot chuckled about their good fortune. Somewhere in central China, there were several airplanes full of fuming generals and probably a few admirals who had missed the big dance. They felt fine that they had done a good job of filling in for them.

Mitsubishi Ki-57 Topsy