

Chapter 29 – Epilogue

“Leapfrogging,” the strategy of bypassing heavily fortified Japanese positions and concentrating on strategically important islands that were not well defended, was the key to Japan’s unconditional surrender on the USS Missouri on September 2, 1945.

This strategy allowed United States forces to reach Japan more quickly without expending the time, manpower and supplies to capture every Japanese-held island on the way. The troops on islands that had been bypassed, such as major Japanese bases at Rabaul and Wewak, were left to wither on the vine.

The overall leapfrogging strategy involved two prongs: Admiral Chester Nimitz, with a smaller land force and larger fleet, advanced north and captured the Gilbert and Marshall Islands and the Marianas. The southern prong, led by General Douglas MacArthur, with larger land forces and pilots from the 5th Air Force, took the Solomons, New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago and the Philippines.

The best strategy is only as good as the men trained and motivated to implement it.

The 39th Fighter Squadron of the Fifth Air Force demonstrated this remarkable effort and achievement in microcosm. Many of its pilots were youngsters who had never been off the ground, much less flown an airplane, on December 7, 1941. Rushed through training and initially assigned airplanes seriously inferior to those they would meet in combat, they never faltered in their determination to win this war - or in their belief that, no matter how many setbacks they suffered, they would win it.

What is astonishing about their determination and performance are the challenges they faced daily. Weather was frequently a greater peril than the enemy, as the pilots faced a solid front of fog and clouds hovering over the eastern coast of New Guinea. This front might be 1,000 miles long and 100 miles deep and our planes had difficulty getting under it, over it, through it or around it.

War and danger are synonymous. But each time these men climbed into the cockpits of their fighter planes, they had to be keenly aware that death—and particularly grisly death—might well await them. Beyond the high probability of crashing on take off, being lost in weather or exploding in aerial combat, they knew that capture by the enemy would almost certainly result in torture and execution.

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It was a particularly ghastly aspect of their peril that they would be beheaded, not only by out-of-control Japanese soldiers, but also under Japanese Imperial policy. It was one of the travesties of the war that execution by beheading would be imposed on captured pilots by this supposedly civilized government as some kind of sick system of honor.

When the war ended, these beheadings and other atrocities were discovered and investigated, and the perpetrators were tried and, when convicted, punished. It is one of the great strengths of this book that these crucial post-war events are recounted in detail. More than an epilogue, it is a detailed exploration of the minds and motivations of the men on both sides of this terrible conflict.

When I arrived as a young naval officer in the Pacific shortly before the end of the war in 1945, it was too late to see much of the action. I was, however, able to view, first hand, the results of their heroism.

The course of history in World War II would have been altered greatly if it had not been for the determination and sacrifice of the men of the 39th Fighter Squadron, who, together with other members of the 5th Air Force, stopped the Japanese onslaught dead in its tracks.

Author Ken Dooley takes us on a crusade, island by island, as men of the 39th Fighter Squadron meet and defeat a determined and brutal enemy. His writing is well paced, and you can feel his enthusiasm as he recounts the stories of remarkable young men who gave so much under the most difficult circumstances. He does an excellent job of weaving the stories – ranging from a future Ace apologizing to a housewife for buzzing her clothesline to ferocious air battles during while some pilots of the 39th paid the ultimate price.

The photography and maps are well captioned and help immeasurably in understanding the brilliant island-hopping strategy of General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz.

When young men go to war, their families are with them in love, spirit and often wrenching anxiety. When a warrior fails to return, the loss is suffered by his loved one for years to come. What are the obligations of the officials, both civilian and military, to these young men?

In the popular imagination, they are depicted in elaborate funeral ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. But the reality can be far different. The bodies of battle casualties often stay where they fell – the harsh realities of warfare preventing their recovery. Even when physical recovery is not

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possible, however, there is a solemn obligation for responsible officials to treat the families both compassionately and truthfully.

Ken Dooley describes a different kind of treatment given to the family of Robert Thorpe. This fallen hero's family was victimized by a deliberate pattern of official deceit stretching over a period of more than 60 years.

Although the exact location of Thorpe's remains were documented in a map drawn in 1948 during the war crime trials in Yokohama, the Thorpe family was told his remains were "unrecoverable."

The records of the court martial were also listed as "secret" until Ken Dooley got copies of them in 2007 under the Freedom of Information Act. While his heroism remains a secret to most of the nation, Thorpe's home State of Rhode Island has not forgotten.

When Rhode Island Representative Peter Martin, a member of the RI House Committee on Veteran affairs, learned about the sacrifice of Lt. Robert Thorpe from Dooley, he took steps to provide posthumous recognition to the Thorpe family.

Martin introduced resolutions honoring 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, as well as, Captain Lewis Lockhart, Thorpe's wingman on his last flight.

A ceremony was held in the RI House Chamber on May 17, 2013.

Thanks to the efforts of Martin and Sgt. Major Edward Kane, the Thorpe family is now able to visit a monument honoring Robert E. Thorpe at the Rhode Island Veterans Cemetery in Exeter, RI.

J. William Middendorf
Former Secretary of the Navy