

My Father and I and Saburo Sakai

Colonel Francis R. Stevens, Jr., USA-Retired



Lt Saburo Sakai served as a combat pilot with the Japanese Armed forces from 1934 to 1945 becoming the leading aviation ace in the Pacific during World War Two. He shot down 64 Chinese and Allied forces airplanes. Photo courtesy of Dariusz Tyminski.

My quest began sometime shortly after World War II. I was a young boy (probably around 10 or 11) when my grandfather told me the story of how my father, Lt Colonel Francis R. Stevens, had been killed in the skies over New Guinea early in the War. In the spring of 1942, Dad was assigned to O.P.D., Operations Division in the War Department, what Colonel Red Reeder, who replaced Dad a few months later, referred to as General Marshall's command post. General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the US Army, was concerned that he was not getting a clear and complete picture of General Douglas MacArthur's activities in the Pacific Theater. MacArthur's dispatches kept calling for more of everything: more troops, more equipment, more supplies; but they provided precious little in the way of information as to what MacArthur planned on doing with all of this added capability. The good General's approach appeared to be that, if he didn't tell higher headquarters what he was planning to do, they couldn't tell him to stop doing it. So General Marshall decided to send my Dad and a highly qualified Air Corps officer, Lt. Colonel Samuel E. Anderson, on a fact-finding mission to figure out what MacArthur was up to.

At about that same time, President Roosevelt, the Commander-in-Chief of all US forces, was having the very same problem with his commander in the Pacific Theater. And he had another problem to deal with: a protégé named Lyndon Baines Johnson, a young Congressman from Texas, and a Commander in the Navy Reserve, had, on 8 December 1941, volunteered to go on active duty. Johnson was champing at the bit, eager to get an assignment to a combat theater.

Roosevelt was not at all happy at the prospect of his Congressmen and Senators heading for the front. And being politicians, once one of them did it, the rest would feel compelled to do the same in an effort to present an image of heroism and total commitment to fighting the Nation's far-flung battles. So Roosevelt solved both problems by sending Johnson on temporary duty to Australia on the same mission on which Marshall had sent Dad. While the young Congressman was away, the President promulgated an edict that prohibited members of the House and Senate from active service -- they could serve in Congress or they could serve in the Armed Forces, but they could not do both.

Halfway across the Pacific, the three men met up with each other. Once they realized that they were there for the same purpose, they resolved to combine forces and continue on as a team.

They visited MacArthur's headquarters together, and together they resolved to get as close as they could to the war front. So they made a side trip to southern New Guinea to take part in a bombing mission over a Japanese base in northern New Guinea. It was on this mission that my father was killed, when his plane was shot down by a Japanese Zero fighter.

My grandfather concluded by adding that he believed that there were films of the action buried away in some musty Air Force archive. I did not give it much thought until about 10 years later when, as a cadet at West Point, I was on a summer trip to observe operations at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

During one of the briefings we received there, we were told that this base housed one of the Air Force's largest archives; so I paid it a visit to see if it possibly held a copy of the film of my father's plane being shot down. Armed with only the date and a general location, I made inquiry at the front desk and was told, after a brief search, that such film was not to be found. A subsequent visit to the archives at the Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, met with similar results.

The next stage in the search came seven years later, when I was reading a magazine, titled *Man's World*, in a barber shop in Kaiserslautern, Germany. It contained an article entitled "The World's Greatest Air Combat Photos," which included a series of pictures showing a twin-engined bomber, like my father's, being shot down over a body of water, and going in. I wrote the magazine and asked if they could identify the date and location of the photos in question. They wrote back promptly to advise that they did not know the answers to my questions, but offered the name and address of the man who had put the article together, one Martin Caidin (author of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *Lost in Space*, and many other books, magazine articles, and studies).

I wrote Mr Caidin to ask him the same questions. He wrote back, also very promptly, to advise that these were not the pictures I was looking for. The letterhead clearly indicated that Mr Martin Caidin was a professional historian; so I decided to ask him to help me in my quest for the elusive photos, and to offer to pay him for this help.



Johnson , USNR,
Stevens,
1942

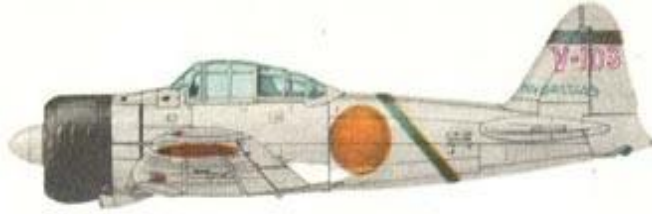
Lt CDR Lydon B.
and Lt CDR Francis R.
USAAF, in Australia,

I first wrote my sister to ask if she would go in with me to cover the cost of securing Mr Caidin's services. I estimated that it would cost about \$1,000 (a princely sum back in 1963), but probably not enough to cover the price of the services of someone of what I was later to learn was Mr Caidin's considerable reputation. My sister wrote back right away to say that she would be most happy to contribute \$500 to the project.

From left to right: Lt CDR Lyndon B. Johnson, USNR, and Lt CDR Francis R. Stevens, USAAF, in Australia, 1942

By that time, I had received military orders to proceed to New York City to attend Columbia University, with the goal of obtaining a Masters Degree in English Literature, preparatory to an assignment as an instructor in the English Department at the US Military Academy, West Point, NY. Since Mr Caidin lived on Long Island, and since the ten months that the delay would entail was of little consequence, given the almost twenty years that I had been in search of these photographs, I decided to wait until I arrived in New York, when I would be able to meet him face-to-face.

The following January found me and Nancy, my new bride, in the heart of New York City at a coffee shop on Park Avenue. Having just arrived at this, my new duty station, I decided that I should check in with First Army Headquarters on Governor's Island, which would be responsible for me during the year and a half that I would be attending Columbia. When I got through on the phone to the appropriate office, I was told that they were most happy that I had finally called in because the White House had been trying to reach me, and I was to call the office of the Defense Adviser to the President immediately.



Saburo Sakai's A6M2 "Zero" airplane, Tainan Kokutai, Bali Island, 1942.

Here I must digress to add some historical perspective. This was January 1964, less than two months since the tragic death of President John F. Kennedy, and the succession to the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, the same US Navy Commander Johnson who was with my father on the day that he was killed.

When I called the number given me by the people at Governor's Island, I reached a very pleasant woman in the White House who instructed me to call a number in New York City and to ask for a Martin Caidin. Now this was curious indeed, since I had planned on trying to reach this very same Mr Caidin in the near future. Still operating from the pay phone in the Park Avenue coffee shop, I called the number she had given me and found myself talking to Mr Caidin himself. He advised me that he was in a hotel less than two blocks from the coffee shop and asked if I could come right over. So my wife and I shortly finished our coffee and made the brief walk to his hotel.

We arrived to find Caidin and another writer named Edward Hymoff, dressed in T-shirts and baggy pants, in a fairly spacious hotel suite, the walls of which were covered with printed sheets, photographs, pieces of paper with notes scribbled on them, and various other scraps of data. It turned out that the two of them were holed up in this hotel room for the duration, not to emerge until they had completed the history of the brief military career of the first sitting Congressman to serve in uniform in WWII, and the only one to see combat, the man who was now the Nation's new President.

As soon as I had introduced myself and my wife, I told Mr Caidin of our earlier correspondence and of my plan to contact him to ask that he take on the mission of finding the long-sought photographs (and of my intention to offer to pay him for his efforts), whereupon he hastened to assure me that he had never intended to accept any money for such an undertaking. He then took me up to one of the paper-covered walls to show me:

- A series of pictures of my father's plane being shot down (the very photos that had been the object of my quest).
- A picture of the man who had piloted the Japanese Zero that had fired the fatal bullets, the famous air ace, Saburo Sakai.
- A group photo of Sakai and the other pilots in his fighter squadron, taken just seconds before the siren sounded announcing the impending arrival of the flight of B-26's, which included the "Wabash Cannonball," my Dad's airplane.
- A letter written by Sakai, recounting in considerable detail the events that unfolded in the short time between the taking of this last photo and my father's plane crashing into the waters off Lae,

in northern New Guinea - to include a second-by-second description of how he had attacked the "Wabash Cannonball" and shot it down.

It was, as you can imagine, quite an emotional moment for me.

I was able to add one anecdote of interest to Caidin and Hymoff, the story I have seen in print several times since, of how Dad wound up on the plane that Lyndon Johnson was supposed to ride on that fateful mission. What happened was that Johnson had originally gotten on the "Wabash Cannonball," but had forgotten to take his camera with him. While he was retrieving his camera, Dad, unaware that Johnson had designs on sitting there, climbed into the seat that his friend had recently vacated. When Johnson returned to claim his place, Dad, in a lighthearted manner, told him that he would just have to find himself another airplane to ride that day. As fate would have it, the plane that Johnson wound up on developed engine trouble and never made it to the target, while the "Wabash Cannonball" was not to return from the mission. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The next chapter of the story is my meeting with Saburo Sakai some 25 years later. Knowing now who killed my father, I resolved that I would one day meet him. I did not make any extraordinary efforts to bring this to pass, but did keep my eye open for any opportunity. The first such came 15 years later when I was attending the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama as an Army exchange student. One of my classmates was a Colonel (later a Major General) in the Japanese Air Force. He told me that he knew of Saburo Sakai and that, if I ever came to Japan, he would try to arrange a meeting. However, before I could take advantage of his offer, I was fortunate enough to meet Sakai-san through the following series of events.

In July of 1987, three years after I had retired from a 27-year Army career, I was living with my family in Tacoma, Washington, where we had moved in pursuit of my new career in computer systems. One day, my wife came upon an article in the local newspaper telling of how Saburo Sakai had been in nearby Yakima, Washington the previous weekend as the guest-of-honor at a large air show. The article went on to say that this was an annual show and that Sakai was often invited to attend. The next year, Nancy was on the lookout for Sakai's possible return, and her watchfulness paid off. One Sunday morning, she opened the paper to learn that Sakai was once again to be at the Yakima Air Show on that very day.

I immediately called a neighbor who was involved in aviation in that part of the country and got from him the name and telephone number of the manager of the Yakima Air Field. However, all calls to this gentleman's office went unanswered (apparently they left no one in the office during the show). Before I could become discouraged by this unhappy turn of events, Nancy put a jacket on me and said, "Let's go over there and see if we can't manage to meet him without any pre-arrangement." While it seemed to me that we were about to set out on a four-hour wild-geese-chase, I got into the car with her and set off for the other side of the Cascade Mountains, into the central Washington valley that shelters Yakima and its renowned apple orchards.

When we arrived two hours later, I went up to the first police officer we saw and asked where we might find Saburo Sakai. He told me where the VIP pavilion was located, but advised that there had been a threat against Sakai's life and he thought it therefore unlikely that I would be allowed to see him. Although hardly encouraged by this news, we headed toward the pavilion, where we

were met by a huge hulk of a police officer, who turned out to be Sakai's body guard (and well chosen for the task he was, standing about 6½ feet tall and weighing at least 250 pounds, of what appeared to be pretty solid muscle). When I told him that I wanted to see Saburo Sakai, he quite naturally asked why. Unable to think of a less ominous reason, I came straight out with the fact that he had killed my father some 45 years earlier; and I had since felt compelled to try to meet him. The officer eyed me with considerable (and understandable) suspicion.

After considering it for several moments, he apparently decided that my story was too implausible to be anything but the unvarnished truth. He thereupon said that he could not promise me anything but that he would try to arrange a meeting. With that, and after thoroughly searching both myself and my wife, he left us standing behind the pavilion under the watchful eye of two other police officers.

Several minutes passed before he reappeared. He walked straight at me and leaned over to whisper as he walked by, "You owe me." Behind him was an Japanese gentleman of benevolent demeanor. I had finally met the man who killed my father.

Although he had made many trips to the States and had sent his daughter to school here in America, eventually giving her hand in marriage to an officer in the United States Army, he speaks practically no English. Fortunately he was accompanied by an interpreter, Jim Crossley, who spent the next twenty minutes or so translating for us, as first Sakai-san apologized for killing my father and I, in turn, assured him that I bore him no malice whatsoever, since his act was performed as the duty of a soldier, as was my father's death his duty and his fate as a soldier.

The following year, Sakai-san accepted our invitation to spend the night in our home on the last day of the next edition of the annual Yakima Air Show. He arrived late in the afternoon with a large golf bag and a small satchel containing all of his other clothing and travel needs. He proved to be a gracious house-guest and a most witty and engaging gentleman. He began by asking me if I had any article of clothing that had belonged to my father. When I retrieved my father's old West Point sweater that I had been carrying with me since I first left home to attend the Military Academy myself, he set it on a coffee table in the middle of the living room and said a very brief Shinto prayer over it. He then explained through our interpreter for the evening, a young lady whom neither of us had ever met, that this prayer, from one warrior to another whom he had slain, would assure my father an elevation to several levels in heaven above wherever it was that he had been originally relegated on his own merits. While I am not a very religious person myself, I was both moved by this gesture on the part of this most intriguing gentleman but also reassured that, somehow, my father would in fact benefit substantially from this simple yet sincere and powerful ceremony.

It is interesting to note that, at this point, the young Japanese-American girl who had, almost by chance, wound up as our interpreter that evening, was reduced to tears and was hard-pressed to continue to fulfill her duties for this and the succeeding series of discussions - that were to grow even more interesting and emotional. This entire series of events was completely spontaneous; yet it could not have been more dramatic and emotional had it been carefully staged by one of the masters of the theater.

Sakai-san next brought out the leather pilot's helmet and white, silk scarf that he had worn the day he shot my father down. While this had quite an emotional impact on not only myself, my wife, and our three sons, who were with us on this most fascinating of evenings, what he related to us next was even more intriguing. For this was the helmet and scarf that he had also worn several months later, on the day that he took two bullets in the head in combat over Guadalcanal, after which he flew the four hours it took to return to his home base in Rabaul. It was quite clear where the bullets had entered his head, one of them having ricocheted off the metal rim of his goggles, the second having torn through the leather of the helmet near the temple. The idea that he could have survived these wounds, much less continued to fly for four hours after that, was all but inconceivable. From left to right: Colonel Francis R. Stevens, Jr., United States Army-Retired, and Saburo Sakai.



Cornel Francis R. Stevens, Jr., United States Army-Retired, and Saburo Sakai

When he showed us the scarf, the first thing that we noticed was that it was quite tattered, but in a relatively symmetrical and clean-cut way. The damage, rather than being the result of the ravages of time, had occurred in one brief and traumatic encounter. The explanation was quite simple. His canopy had been blown away in the same attack that had caused his wounds; but this proved a blessing of sorts in that it kept a steady rush of air blowing into the cockpit, helping him maintain consciousness. However, his wounds were so severe that, more than once, in order to shock himself into fuller consciousness, he had to aggravate the pain by striking his open wounds. In spite of this, he several times passed out, only to be awakened by the reinforced strength of the wind rushing into his cockpit as his plane plummeted straight down toward the sea below. All this while his scarf was whipping violently in the steady stream of wind that was blowing through the open cockpit. That it remained in one piece, albeit most tattered, is a testimonial to the skill of the craftsmen who had originally woven its fine silk fibers.

When we later told Sakai-san that our eldest daughter was attending flight training in Arizona in preparation to become a pilot in the US Air Force, he was greatly moved. He saw this as a continuation of the warrior line - and it seemed important to him that it was in the field of aviation. And what was most interesting to us, given Japan's singular lack of progress into the feminist movement of recent years, was that he was delighted to find that it was a girl, not a boy who was to carry this tradition into the next generation. Demonstrating a progressiveness that is

apparently shared by few of his countrymen, particularly of his generation, he seemed to view all of this as most symbolic of a new and better age.

With that, he took the tattered scarf and tore from it a piece, which he handed to me. I was instructed to give it to my daughter and tell her to carry it with her whenever she flew - that, if she did so, whatever gods there be would surely protect her from any possible danger in the air.

With this the poor interpreter was once again reduced to uncontrollable tears - but at that point, I don't think that there was a dry eye in the room.

My daughter still carries this most powerful of talismans; and, while I am still not much of a believer in things supernatural, I rest much easier when she is flying, knowing that she has that simple scrap of silk with her.

And thus ended my quest, with a new-found friend, the man who killed my father.

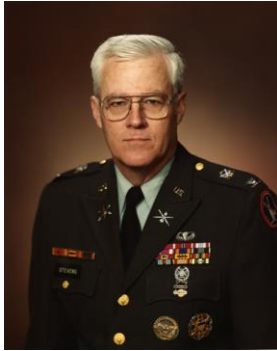
10 Jul 98



On September 2000, while attending a dinner at Atsugi Naval Base, Saburo Sakai suffered a heart attack when he extended his hand over the table to greet an American officer. He died at the hospital a few hours later at the age of 84.

Rest quietly now most honourable warrior. You did your duty, in war and in peace.

Contributor



Colonel Francis R. Stevens, Jr., USA-Ret (BS, United States Military Academy at West Point; MA Columbia University) served in the artillery for 27 years, in command positions from platoon through army garrison, and in staff assignments at every level from battalion to the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Served one combat tour as Executive Officer of an Automatic Weapons Battalion in Vietnam. After completing his final Army tour in command of Fort Myer, Virginia, he retired in 1984. He spent nine years working for a Defense contractor, putting together major computer systems for the Army (war games and Command & Control systems). Completed his career serving for five years as a consultant to the US Congress, House Appropriations Committee, analyzing military readiness, as well as large-scale computer systems government-wide. Colonel Stevens is a graduate of the Artillery Advanced Course, the Armed Forces Staff College, and the Air War College.