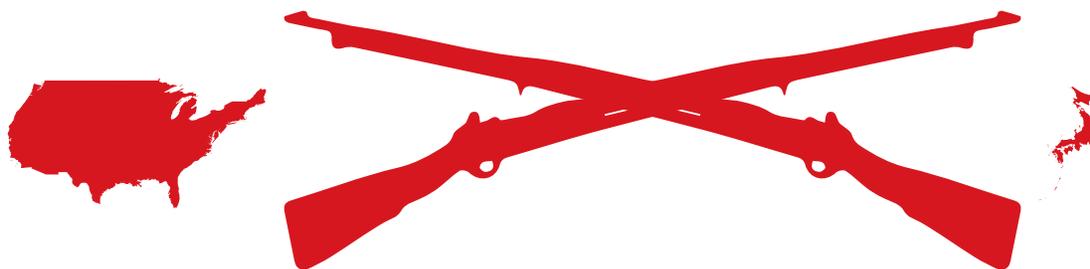


THE ARISAKA



FROM TOYO KOGYO TO PHILADELPHIA

By M. Kelly Tillery

As a young boy growing up in a quiet suburb of New Orleans, I often ventured into a dusty closet in the utility room adjacent to our carport. There, amongst numerous rakes, hoes, brooms and miscellaneous tools was an out of place item – an implement of war from another time and place. A 7.7 mm, bolt-action Japanese Army Type 99 Arisaka rifle.

that always ended with him singing a lovely Japanese lullaby as we drifted off. While we dreamed of military adventures, my father prayed that his sons would never have to see what he had at 19 in the stinking jungles and bloody beaches of a half dozen Pacific islands. He always said he fought so we would not have to.

It is an ominous weapon, yet not the quality of similar U.S. ordnance of its era. In that pre-Sony/Lexus time, “Made in Japan” had a decidedly different meaning than it does today. I often held this rifle for hours on end in my back yard and thought about the men who made it, the man to whom it was issued and who last fired it, and my father, U.S. Marine Corps Corporal Allen Jere Tillery (USMC No. 841175), one of the last men to be at the killing end of it. It inspired me to a life of inquiry about history, war, law, politics and why men act as they do.

Like many Baby Boomers, I often went to bed asking my father, “What did you do in the war, Daddy?” Yes, in the 1950s and even early 1960s “the” War was World War II. Korea was a “police action” and we still had the good sense to have only “advisors” in Vietnam. My father had lots of war stories to tell, as he served in the South Pacific for 2½ years fighting the Japanese Imperial Army at the point.

My brother and I listened wide-eyed to his tales of combat

This weapon, the Arisaka, which came to inspire me has quite a history. It is named for Col. Nariakira Arisaka (1852-1915), head of the Japanese commission that directed the development of a new army rifle in the 1890s. It was a considerable advancement over the rifle it replaced, the 8 mm Murata, the first indigenously produced Japanese rifle, in use since 1880. The Empire of Japan, less than 50 years earlier a closed, feudal society, was in the 1890s a rising industrial and military power which would soon, in 1905, shock the world by defeating the once mighty Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese War. The Land of the Rising Sun had come a long way since 1853 when U.S. Admiral Matthew Perry sailed his “black ships” into Tokyo Bay and compelled that insular nation to open up, or be leveled by cannon fire. It did and Perry’s insult was repaid with a vengeance on Dec. 7, 1941.

From 1898 on, Japan produced more than 6.4 million of various types of Arisakas before the last few shoddy, “last ditch” versions were cobbled together in July of 1945 from



Corporal Allen Jere Tillery (hand on helmet) was stationed in the South Pacific during World War II. Photos courtesy of M. Kelly Tillery

scrap as the Empire collapsed. It was state of the art for a long time, comparable to the British Lee-Enfield, the German Mauser or the American Springfield. It was the primary personal weapon of virtually every Japanese soldier on every God-forsaken island and atoll from Saipan and Tinian to Guam and Iwo Jima. U.S. Marines bearing superior, semi-automatic M-1 Garand rifles or carbines faced off against the Emperor's best bearing Arisakas.

The Arisaka is curious in several respects. Mine bears many scars of battle and has been fired many times, no doubt even killed one or more U.S. troops. The Type 99 includes a flip-down, wire monopod under the barrel to allow the user to steady the weapon to fire in the prone position. Unfortunately, the wire is rather flimsy and provides a wobbly firing platform. Many were removed and discarded as a nuisance in the field. It also has a unique safety, operated by pressing in the large knurled disc at the rear of the bolt and rotating it in a 1/8 clockwise turn. It also includes a rather optimistic, winged, "anti-aircraft" sight that theoretically permits the user to lead a speeding aircraft and shoot it down. Neither Corporal Tillery nor I are aware of any instance of a U.S. aircraft being shot by, much less downed by, an Arisaka. But it could take down a Marine at 400 meters.

The model I have, a Type 99, is so designated by the last two digits of the Japanese year of the reign of the then Emperor, Hirohito. Thus, in Japanese calendar year 2599, or Gregorian calendar year 1939, the Type 99 was first produced.

Though a spoil of war taken from an unwilling donor on

the field of battle by a victor, and I having possession, it is, I suppose, technically still the property of the Emperor, now Akihito (son of Hirohito). Each Arisaka was originally stamped on its receiver with the symbol of The Emperor – a 16-petal Chrysanthemum, indicating that it was the property of the Emperor, not the soldier who carried it and not the Imperial Army.

However, only Arisakas, like mine, taken in the field still bear this gentle, but bold symbol. After the war, in one of its final standing orders, the Imperial Army Staff ordered that the Chrysanthemum be ground off all weapons before they were officially surrendered to U.S. forces, as a way of saving face. Short of a personal appeal accompanied by an apology, the Emperor will not be getting my Arisaka back anytime soon.

Mine bears the Chrysanthemum and the Kanji characters Shiki (Type) and Kojuko (99) on the top of the receiver.

九九式

It also bears a Serial Number with Armory designations:

㊦ 87975 ㊦㊦㊦

The first small symbol (kana) and number means this rifle was number 87,975 in Series 30, the first series of 100,000 manufactured in 1939, two years before Pearl Harbor and five years before Aug. 15, 1944 when Corporal Tillery acquired it. The second symbol means it was produced at the Togo Kogyo Arsenal. It probably saw lots of action before its bearer met his demise on Tinian in 1944.

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Corporal Tillery with fellow Marines in the South Pacific.

This arsenal was operated by a private contractor, Togo Kogyo Co., Ltd., a prominent manufacturer of machine tools and vehicles. It produced 557,000 Type 99 Arisakas between 1939 and 1945. In 1984, the company changed its name to Mazda Motor Corporation, now headquartered in Hiroshima. If I had known the same company that made this rifle also made my 1989 RX-7 sports car, I would have bought a Ford.

It also includes an early model Type 30 Bayonet with a hooked quillion and markings indicating it was manufactured at another arsenal, the Kokura Arsenal in Kokura, Japan.

The 16-inch blade includes a “blood gutter.” G.I. lore has it that this indentation along the length of the blade allows blood to seep out of a wound preventing a vacuum and permitting the attacker to easily withdraw it from a victim. In reality, it is merely a design feature to enhance strength of the blade. My father says he was taught in boot camp that the quickest way to remove your bayonet from a victim was to pull the trigger. Such was war at the point in 1944.

The ancient Japanese city of Kokura had been the primary target of the

second atomic bomb drop (Fat Man) on Aug. 9, 1945. Major Charles Sweeney turned his B-29, “Bock’s Car,” toward Nagasaki, his secondary target, when he could not see Kokura, then obscured by clouds and smoke from the recent fire-

I try to explain that facility with mechanical things does not necessarily translate to iPhones and computers.

bombing of nearby Yahata. Kokura had first been spared atomic infamy only three days before when Colonel Paul Tibbitts flying the “Enola Gay” found clear skies above Hiroshima to drop the first atomic bomb (Little Boy) and

needed not visit his secondary target, Kokura. My aunt Xenia Tillery, also a lawyer, tells me her uncle, Sgt. Joseph S. Stiborik was Tibbitts’ radar operator on that historic mission.

The Enola Gay took off that fateful day, Aug. 6, 1945, at 2:45 a.m., from North Field, Tinian Island about a year after the U.S. Marines obliterated a crack Japanese Army defending it. Shortly after the assault troops departed, Corporal Allen J. Tillery, serving as an interpreter with the 8th Marine Regiment Battalion Intelligence Section, would encounter the bearer of my Arisaka on the opposite end of the island.

My father had been trained by the Marine Corps to kill Japanese soldiers, but also to speak and read Japanese in order to acquire intelligence from captured troops and often to persuade holdouts in the field to surrender. Today at 86, he still delights in surprising Japanese tourists with his rusty idiom. His vocabulary, however, is decidedly military, so he has to be reminded not to ask waiters at sushi restaurants how many Nambu machine guns are in the kitchen.

Tinian, in The Marianas, an island 12 miles long and four miles across was in



Corporal Tillery served in the South Pacific for 2 ½ years with the U.S. Marines.

1944 defended by 9,000 battle-hardened Japanese Imperial Troops under command of Colonel Kioshi Ogata, a veteran of the Sino-Japanese War. His core 4,000-man 50th Regiment had seen lots of action in Manchuria. Although most perished at hands of U.S. Marine invaders, as many as 800 remained armed and hiding in caves throughout the island, ready to fight to the death for the Emperor. Surrender was disgrace. It was not an option.

It was just such a small group of Japanese soldiers that Corporal Tillery encountered that hot August 1944 day in a cave on the southern end of Tinian Island, in the face of a cliff on the Karorinasu plateau near Marupo Springs, the scene of fierce fighting not a few weeks before.

Tillery's 15-man patrol had been tasked with killing or capturing the soldiers hiding in the caves who had been firing on truck convoys at the base of the cliffs and whom had recently killed a Navy Sea-Bee driving a truck on the road. Perhaps this was the last kill of my Arisaka. In six months, the patrol would have more than 140 encounters with Japanese troops like this first one.

The last shots from my Ariska fired in anger were directed to the point Marine at the head of this patrol on Aug. 15, 1944. Two Japanese soldiers fired, missed and then retreated into the cave.

Corporal Tillery was given the unenviable job of crawling up the cliff to get near the cave to coax its denizens out. In his flawless and distinct Japanese, the Marine Corporal explained that the battle was over, they were surrounded, that if they

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THE RESOLUTION EXPERTS



put down their weapons and exited the cave with hands up, no harm would come to them and that to die now was useless. No sooner had the last foreign word passed the Marine's lips, did the soldiers yell "Banzai! Banzai!" and several hand grenades exploded in the cave. One tried to run out with weapon in hand, but was met with a hail of M-1 and Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) fire.

When the smoke cleared, the distorted bodies of four or five Japanese soldiers were found near the mouth of the cave. They had committed Seppuku ("stomach-cutting" – the act of the dishonored samurai warrior disemboweling himself with a short sword – a tant), though with the modern and more effective means of a hand grenade held against the belly.

The cave was filled with supplies, weapons and ammunition. They could have held out and killed more U.S. troops for a long time. In 1965, 20 years after the war ended, two Japanese soldiers wandered out of the jungle on Guam and surrendered to a local policeman.

All of the cave's contents were destroyed except a couple of Arisakas and a Nambu light machine gun that Corporal Tillery took with him. He gave one Arisaka to his tent mate who was an aide to a morale officer, and as such, had connections. The tent mate got a carpenter to build a crate to ship the two souvenirs to his mother in Nashville, Tenn. She, in turn, shipped the Corporal's Arisaka to his mother (my grandmother) Lake Erie Johnston Tillery, in Shreveport, La., where the Corporal found it when he returned from war on Oct. 7, 1945, nine years to the day before I was born.

The Corporal, or Allen J. as I like to call him, married, moved to suburban New Orleans, and literally hung out his shingle to practice law above a bank on the Mississippi River, near smelly stockyards and an illegal casino. The Arisaka lay in storage, only to be found by my curious little hands at about the age of 10 that began my musings.

Hurricane Betsy hit New Orleans with a vengeance in 1965 and our home was flooded with six feet of muck, mire and Gulf water. Like my baseball card collection, my mother's silverware



Corporal Tillery was trained to speak and read Japanese as an interpreter with the 8th Marine Regiment Battalion Section.

and almost all our household goods, the Arisaka was submerged in this toxic soup for a few days. We survived and rebuilt and I found the Arisaka. It was rusted, inoperable and generally a mess. I was saddened and knew my father would be, too.

I resolved to restore it and present to the Corporal. Though only 11 years old, I was rather handy, a fact which never ceases to amuse my children. I try to explain that facility with mechanical things does not necessarily translate to iPhones and computers.

I worked diligently in secret for several months on my project. When complete, the Arisaka looked almost new, except for the battle scars, and was operable. I even bought some ammunition for it, but never did fire it. Aug. 15, 1944, Marupo Springs, Tinian remains the last time and place this killing tool was fired.

When I presented it to the Corporal, I thought I saw a tear in the eye of the old Marine. He proudly kept it visible, near his books, in his library and I often sat holding it there and thinking.

Unbeknownst to me, not a few months before in June 1965, he had completed a manuscript about his war experiences, "Well and Smartly Done – A Remembrance of War, 1943-1945." For reasons still unknown to me, he did not show it to me until 20 years later when he inscribed a bound copy, "For Kelly – a codification of all the war stories and sea-tales that you will never have to listen to again." It includes

a vivid and detailed description of that fateful day when he acquired the Arisaka.

Fast-forward 40 years to late August 2005 – Hurricane Katrina delivers a body blow to the New Orleans area, depositing up to 18 feet of water in my parents' home in Chalmette. Once again, the Arisaka joined their worldly goods under the deluge, this time for weeks.

Allen J. eventually retrieved the Arisaka from its damp and muddy resting place, but reported that it was an ugly, rusty mess. I asked him to ship it to me so I could try to restore it, again, as I had 40 years before. He did and I tried. But it was too far gone. Or at least beyond my humble ability to revive it.

I located a retired Marine, Ronald H. Morgan, near our vacation home in Vermont who restores weapons as a hobby. I brought him the patient and he promised to make it shine. And he did. The Corporal would be pleased.

I shall return to New Orleans soon and present the Arisaka to my father – again. Until then, I still often hold it and think of how grateful I am that some 56-year-old Tokyo lawyer, son of a 50th Regiment Japanese soldier, is not sitting in his library holding my father's M-1. ■

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