

My Weekend with a Kamikaze Pilot

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"Erika, I'm sorry, but I'm stuck up here. The snowstorm is pounding away and all the roads are closed. You'll have to pick him up at the airport tomorrow and entertain him until I can get to Minneapolis."

"Dad, please, no way. I have a major research project due and I am working a 55-hour week at the airport. I don't even know this guy, what the heck am I going to do with this old geezer for a weekend?"

"He's interesting, just talk to him. I hope to be there by Sunday afternoon..." and with that, my dad hung up.

The "him" that he was talking about is Masijiro "Mike" Kawato, a WWII Japanese airman (Zero pilot to be exact), speculated to be the pilot that shot down Pappy Boyington. My dad had made friends with him during his research into recovering old warbirds in the Guadalcanal area. Mike and my dad, both pilots, hit it off and became lifelong friends. I was a twenty years old pilot the day I picked him up at the airport and began my mission of Entertainment Director for what I thought was a crazy kamikaze pilot. I drove up to baggage claim looking for a guy in full samurai gear with a kamikaze headband, and found instead; a demure,

hysterically deadpan funny, polite, and reserved gentleman who didn't look like a he could squish a spider.

Twenty-five years later, I have learned the difference between kamikaze and fighter pilots, Shinto beliefs and war from my Marine dad. I have also learned, on my own, about being a pilot, human nature, integrity and honor. At the time, I couldn't understand why anyone would want to make friends with an enemy that had killed 19 American pilots. I just didn't realize the treasure that was sitting beside me while I groaned about what to do with him.

What do you do to entertain any pilot? Bring them to the air museum of course. I worked and flew out of Flying Cloud Airport southwest of Minneapolis, Minn. which held the Planes of Fame East Museum. I took for granted the old warbirds which routinely flew in and out of this field. Not just on display, but actual flying war birds. I made about \$5/hour working at Elliot Beechcraft and could hardly afford to pay for our admission into the museum, so I was trying to namedrop and finagle my way in (yes, pilots are cheap and always looking for a discount) so I told the person at the counter that I worked on the field and that I was bringing Mike Kawato in to show him around. I was hoping they knew who he was, but the guy at the ticket counter couldn't care less about who either of us were. "\$18 for two adults please." I rolled my eyes and took him in.



We strolled through the main hangar and oohed and awed at the gorgeous airplanes, and as we turned the corner, there, in full glass display, was an exhibit about Masijiro "Mike" Kawato. Mike got there before me and said, "Oh, look! Me! That's me!" Inside was a black and white photo of a 18-year-old Japanese kid with a leather helmet and deer-in-the-headlights expression. At the top of the display, it said: "WWII Japanese fighter ace, Masajiro Kawato." There were also iconic images of Japanese pilots, a kamikaze headband, and a flight suit which

the pilots wore. One of the museum volunteers overheard our discovery conversation and finally made the connection with the case I was pleading at the ticket counter: We had an actual enemy pilot in our presence. Phone calls were made, volunteers scurried, and soon Bob Pond, avid aviation collector and owner of the museum, strode in and asked Mike to come sit with him for a few minutes. When any two pilots sit down and tell stories, it tends to draw in more fliers and within moments, there were at least a dozen pilots (many veterans) sitting at the table with Mike, firing questions at him.

Mike's English was broken and choppy, but I think he understood more than he ever let on. He had a twinkle in his eye as he answered the questions the way he wanted to, rather than answer the question. I also realized that Mike had no qualms with capitalism and explained to the men in the room that most of their questions could be answered in his book, which was titled (tongue in cheek towards "Pappy" Boyington's book, "Baa Baa Black Sheep") "Bye, Bye, Blacksheep" and was available for sale.

As I sat and watched the spectacle, I didn't know that Mike had 17 bullet wounds in his body. I didn't know that he had been downed five times and that during his fifth down he had meant it to be a suicide crash into an American destroyer. He was steered off course from return fire which ripped one of his wings and cartwheeled him into the ocean rather than hit the destroyer. Honor and perceived failure made him chose death rather than be captured by the Americans, so he fired his pistol into his right temple, only to find that the gun was empty. He reloaded and tried again. This time, the gun fired, but it only grazed his skull and knocked him unconscious. He drifted for three days and finally hid out on a nearby island for three months. He was eventually picked up by Americans and taken to a P.O.W. hospital in Australia. During this time, back in Japan, he was declared dead and a funeral was held in his honor. Three and a half years after leaving for war, Kawato came back home and got to visit the altar where his funeral was held.

Since Mike was talking to warbird enthusiasts that day, he didn't mention to them that in 1976 he had flown his single-engine Piper Comanche nonstop from Tokyo to California — more than 5,000 miles in 35 hours and 15 minutes. Instead, he gave them riveting accounts of aerial combat between his Japanese Zero and American F4U Corsairs. He recounted watching an unusual sight of an F4U Corsair chasing a Zero and right behind him, another F4U being chased by a Zero. The lead Zero burst into flames and then moments later, the F4U went down in flames. Watching this from 6,000 feet above the ocean, Kawato dove and joined the battle by lining up behind the second F4U that was chasing a Zero. At 1,000 feet above the ocean, Kawato hit his target. The American pilot was forced to bail out of his disabled aircraft. It was later confirmed/rumored that the American pilot was Pappy Boyington. Yes, there has been debate about this, but we will let the story ride as told.

My dad eventually made it through the snowstorm and met up with Mike and me for dinner at the end of our second day. They teased each other about who would get the cute waitress (both men were divorced), how each must be a horrible pilot, and the thread that all

pilots hold that weaves their passion of the sky together. Both men acknowledged what soldiers and pilots had to do in war and both honored the sacrifice of all those young lives, on both sides, lost to disagreement. Watching these two men, with the wisdom of age and the experience of life, find mutual respect despite culturally different backgrounds, taught me a lesson that became crisper as I moved through my own life. I have learned that enemies are often in that position by circumstance and that our enemies often bring out the best in us.

In 2008, Mike passed away at the age of 76. Cancer was his ultimate enemy and the employees at Starbucks on Dash Point Rd in Federal Way, Wash. probably didn't know they were serving coffee to a former enemy. All they knew is that he came in several times a week with his best friend, was always polite, said "thank you" constantly, and smiled the knowing smile of someone who had faced death, repeatedly, and lived to talk about it, repeatedly.



Erika Armstrong has spent the last twenty-five years in aviation. From FBO front desk to the captain's seat of a Boeing 727, she's seen it all.