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The stories behind the flags

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Book touts good-luck items Japanese soldiers took to war

BY CHRIS KRIDLER • FLORIDA TODAY • JULY 6, 2008

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There were thousands of fluttering flags on the Pacific battlefields of World War II, and each told a story: a tale of a soldier who went to war carrying the good wishes of the people who loved him, slogans of courage and wishes for luck, religious symbols and exquisite images.

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Japanese good-luck flags, unlike the American Stars and Stripes, were unique, presented by families to soldiers who left home expecting to die.

Michael Bortner was just a kid when he learned about them. He'd been studying flags for a Cub Scout project and saw a signed Japanese flag in a book.

"I thought, 'That is one of the neatest flags I've ever seen,'"

He started talking to his family about what they knew about the flags.

"A number of my relatives had fought in the Pacific, and my dad was a pilot during the war," he said, "and they started then digging out things that were war souvenirs."

American soldiers often came home from World War II with trophies, treasured items that belonged to the enemy. Among the most popular items were the good-luck flags.

Bortner, now a dentist with a bachelor's degree in history and a master's in anthropology who lives in Melbourne Beach, roamed military shows as a kid in Southern California, looking for the flags. He started what would become a stunning collection and the source material for his new book, "Imperial Japanese Good Luck Flags and One-Thousand Stitch Belts."

"As I started to collect them, guys would say to me, 'Why are you collecting those?' And I would say: 'Because they're neat. Look, they're all different.' And they would say, 'They're not different. They're just a bunch of Japanese names.' I didn't care. I liked flags."

Soon, however, Bortner began to realize the flags had more than different names on them. Some had writing in the sun in the center, some didn't.



Michael Bortner is an expert collector of Japanese World War II artifacts. This mannequin wears a thousand-stitch headband (that once had good-luck coins sewn to it), along with a good luck flag as a sash, on a military school-style uniform. (Chris Kridler, FLORIDA TODAY)

THE BOOK

What: "Imperial Japanese Good Luck Flags and One-Thousand Stitch Belts" by Michael Bortner, from Schiffer Publishing
Details: 320 pages, more than 650 images, hardcover
Price: \$79.95
Info: Bortner's Web site, www.gethistorytoday.com

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Variations included flags with stamps from shrines; animal drawings, especially tigers, which represented fierceness and tenacity; and military insignia.

Though Japan was a society steeped in custom, he concluded, a lot of different flags fell outside the norm. They were personal, even creative, objects that signified not just loyalty, but devotion to family and home.

A mother or wife might send her soldier off with more than just a flag. Thousand-stitch belts were sewn with a thousand red knots that could represent a thousand Japanese flags or well wishes from one's countrymen.

"The knots were only allowed to be placed by women," Bortner said.

At first, only women born in the year of the tiger could sew them.

The lucky objects, which also might include banners, caps and vests, were presented to the soldiers at big going-away parties.

"It was a huge honor for you and your family, should you die in battle," Bortner said. "No one was expected to go off to war and actually survive, which is kind of a foreign way of thinking of things, certainly not like ours. We would expect our guys to go off and fight, keep their head down and come home. So what the Japanese would do is they would throw these huge parties for these guys that were going to go into the service."

Sometimes, the thousand-stitch belts concealed paper good-luck charms decorated with stamps from shrines or wooden amulets. Sometimes, the objects were more personal — hair or a letter.

One belt featured in his book contained an envelope that said, "Please open." Inside, "in case of death," was a promise of payment to anyone who would deliver the soldier's body to his brother.

"I get choked up when I read that stuff," Bortner admitted.

The powerful details in the book, along with the colorful photographs, caught the eye of Robert Biondi, senior editor at Schiffer Publishing.

"We've done some previous books on World War II Japanese uniforms and anything they would've used in combat equipment," said Biondi, who runs the military history division, "and one thing that kept coming up is, a lot of these flags you see in the period pictures, there was really no good reference book on them."

Awareness of Japan's wartime culture may be growing. Thousand-stitch belts were depicted in the movie "Letters From Iwo Jima," Biondi said, and collecting such items is getting more popular. "The whole thing is just very fascinating."

While a growing number of collectors value the Japanese war artifacts now, American soldiers during World War II might have been even crazier for them.

"Reproductions were really popular," Bortner said. "Everybody wanted one, and the biggest fakers during the war of these signed flags were the Seabees (of the Navy's Construction Battalions). They would get white material, sheets, parachutes, whatever they could get. They'd take a bucket and draw a circle around, they'd paint it in, and then they would fake characters. And then they would sell them."

Bortner has photos of Japanese families and soldiers with the flags and other items; he also has photos of American soldiers holding them.

Now, flags sell for \$125 and up; photos, for \$10 to \$100; stitch caps, for \$250 to \$350; belts, for \$150 to \$300; and vests, for up to \$600, he said.

Yet few people in Japan treasure the artifacts of the war.

"We tend to really revere our World War II generation, and we tend to look back almost fondly on those times," Bortner said. "The Japanese are not that way. At the end of the war, their culture was basically transformed into a pacifist culture. And so now, through their education and stuff, they look at that time as a very foolish time. . . . They're not proud of it. They lost the war. A number of bad things happened. So

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they're not really into it."

When he asked one of his friends, a former Japanese military pilot, what he thought of so many of the artifacts ending up with American collectors, his friend responded that he was pleased that someone was treating the items with respect.

"A lot of the stuff is just being tossed," Bortner said.

All of it is a sober reminder of the consequences of war. Soldiers who lost their flags were captured or, in some cases, killed. Some of the flags show damage from bullets or bloodstains.


Interestingly, some Japanese-Americans who joined the U.S. forces, wanting to prove their loyalty as their families were interned in camps, actually carried thousand-stitch belts that their mothers sewed for them.

There's little Bortner would add to his collection. He says he doesn't have room to display the hundreds of items at his home, which he shares with his wife, Andrea, and two children. He has about every variation he can think of.

He anticipates that values will continue to rise, especially with the publication of his book. Filled with interesting facts and photos of artifacts and Japanese and American soldiers, there is no other source like it. Professional translators helped him unravel the meanings of the words on the flags and other items. Now a second book is in the works.

"It's been a labor of love," he said.

Contact Kridler at 242-3633 or ckridler@floridatoday.com.

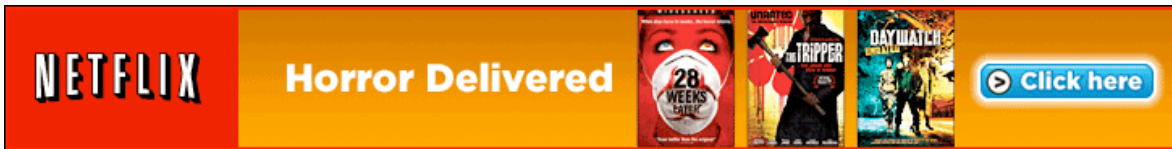
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