

IT'S BETTER TO BE LUCKY THAN GOOD

THE STORY OF 2ND LT LAMAR GILLETT

By: Thomas McKelvey Cleaver



"It's better to be lucky than good," says Lamar Gillett, the only P-35 pilot in World War II to shoot down a Japanese Zero. "I was lucky I was behind the Zero instead of in front of him. I was lucky when I landed back at Clark that the guys who were shooting at me didn't give enough lead. I was lucky my C.O. on Bataan sent me to Corregidor to get the chewing-out he was in for and wasn't there for the shelling that killed him." As a survivor of the Bataan Death March and three years of Japanese captivity, two years of it spent as a slave on Shikoku, Lamar Gillett is a lucky man indeed.

The Philippines were armed almost too late. As the Battle of Britain raged, the 24th Pursuit Group at Clark Field was still flying the ancient Boeing P-26 "Peashooter" and had only just received 12 obsolete Seversky P-35s sent on from the 1st Pursuit Group following their re-equipment with the first P-40s.

The 17th Pursuit Squadron was detached from the 1st Pursuit Group in late

November 1940 and sent to the Philippines. Upon arrival in December, there were no aircraft to fly. The Air Corps remedied this by sending 45 P-35As to the Philippines in February 1941. The P-35A began life as the EP-1-106, an export version of the original P-35 ordered by the Swedish Air Force. 60 of a total 120 were delivered in early 1940; the remaining 60 were seized by the Air Corps before delivery, to bolster the small number of "modern" fighters the Air Corps had.

Powered by a 1,050 horsepower Pratt & Whitney Wasp, the P-35A had 100 more horses available than the original P-35, giving it a top speed of 310 m.p.h. With two .30 caliber machine guns in the nose and a .50 caliber weapon in each wing, it was marginally better-armed than its predecessor. Unfortunately, the P-35As arrived with their instruments and placards in Swedish, making them difficult to fly and maintain.

Lamar Gillett had graduated from Imperial College outside El Centro in July 1940, and volunteered for the Air Corps that fall. "I was in the first class to graduate from Stockton in April 1941," he recalled. "We actually did most of our training at Mather Field outside Sacramento, since they were still constructing the field at Stockton." Second Lieutenant Gillett arrived in the Philippines a month later, assigned to the 17th Pursuit Squadron. "At the time, they were at a gunnery camp in northern Luzon while Nichols Field was being completed. They were operating P-35As and still had a few P-26s. As a very junior pilot, I got to fly what was available, which meant I got to put in quite a bit of time in the P-26. Of all the planes I flew in the Air Force over 25 years, it was my favorite."

While most in the 17th cursed the P-35As, Gillett was happy to fly them whenever the schedule allowed. "I became quite proficient in that airplane, which - as it turned out - was fortunate," he recalled. When new Curtiss P-40Es arrived in September, the 17th PS was happy to hand down the Severskys to the 20th and 34th Pursuit Squadrons who together with the 17th formed the 4th Composite

Group. Several P-35As were kept on strength; while Gillett did get time in the P-40Es, he continued to build time and experience in the P-35As.

As war clouds gathered, the P-35As lost their shiny pre-war natural metal finish under a quickly-applied coat of olive drab paint. "There wasn't enough paint in the Philippines to paint them right," Gillett explained. "They had no primer, so the paint was applied directly over the bare metal. The first time you flew one through a rainstorm - and there were a lot of rainstorms in the Philippines - a lot of the paint came off. After only a few flights the airplanes looked like they had been through a war already."

War came on December 8. The squadron was scrambled upon getting word of the Pearl Harbor attack, but met no incoming enemy bombers. The Japanese plan for a coordinated strike had been hamstrung by fog covering the airfields on Formosa, which prevented the Tainan Air Corps from taking off until nearly noon. By the time they did arrive, almost all the American fighters at Clark, Nichols and Del Carmen were undergoing a very slow refueling. As the Japanese bombers soared over the fields at 10,000 feet - above the effective range of the American anti-aircraft guns - the Zeros dove to strafe the fields. When they flew away, most of the American fighter force had been destroyed without ever turning a propeller blade or firing a shot in anger.

Two days later, the 17th was ordered to escort 16 P-35As of the 34th Pursuit Squadron on an attack against targets on the invasion beaches in northern Luzon. Gillett thought he was about to see action. As he waited in line for takeoff, Lieutenant Kreusel - "who was senior to me" - jumped on the wing and told him to go see the squadron C.O., Boyd D. "Buzz" Wagner. "He told he'd hold the plane for me so I got out. I went to Wagner's airplane but he was just ready to take off. When I got back to my plane, Kreusel was taxiing away. He'd stolen it!"

Gillett was fortunate. The American anti-aircraft artillery was manned by the

ex-cavalrymen of the New Mexico National Guard, who promptly shot down three of the P-40s. "Those guys couldn't tell a P-35 from a P-40 from a Zero. If it flew, they shot at it! I think they shot down as many of our airplanes as the Japs did." Eight of the sixteen P-35As in the attack force suffered engine problems and were forced to return to Del Carmen, leaving a very depleted force to make a strafing attack on the Japanese. 1st Lieutenant Sam Morrett, C.O. of the 34th, led a diving attack. He hit a minesweeper that exploded as his P-35A flew over it. In the midst of all this, Buzz Wagner scored the first victories that would make him the first ace of the USAAF of the war.

Within the next two weeks, the American forces in the Philippines were reeling from unrelenting Japanese attacks. Following successful landings on Northern Luzon Island and at Lingayen Gulf, no one knew where the next strike would happen.

On Christmas Eve, Gillett was sent in to Clark Field to pick up a damaged P-40 that had been repaired. A sudden raid managed to destroy the newly-repaired airplane before he could touch it. At that point, Captain Moore, C.O. of the 20th P.S., received word of a landing at Lamon Bay on the west side of Luzon. If they were really there, the American forces gathered around Manila would be threatened. Moore asked for volunteers to fly a reconnaissance mission. "The guys in the 20th had found out how bad the P-35 was against the Zero, and there weren't too many volunteers." Gillett was among the few who raised their hands.

Led by squadron Executive Officer Lt. Anderson, Gillett and two other pilots he didn't know manned the four P-35s that were pulled out from under the trees. "They were not in the best of shape," Gillett recalled, "and only mine and one other started up right away. Anderson signaled us to go ahead and take off."

Once airborne, Gillett noticed the other P-35A was flying wing to him. "He thought I was Lt. Anderson, but I knew he had to be senior to me because I was

about the most junior Second Lieutenant in the Philippines. I slid back to fly wing on him, but he slid back again. Finally I just took the lead and headed out toward the coast. I knew if I took off from Clark Field and headed west to the ocean, then turned south and followed the shoreline, I would come across Lamon Bay. But I wasn't sure how far south it was."

The sky was overcast with the threat of rain in Lamon Bay as Japanese troops clambered over the sides of their transports and into the waiting invasion barges. The white wakes of other barges moving out from the other transports in the bay pointed the way to shore. Just to the north, the bad weather forced the two Americans lower and lower as they headed down the coast. "I was at about 900 feet when we came over the hills and there was the Japanese fleet in the bay," Gillett recalled. "I started counting the transports. I had gotten up to about 50 when two destroyers spotted us and opened fire."

Gillett didn't know that, above him, Petty Officer Toshio Kikuchi of the Tainan Air Group had been assigned as part of the air cover and was equally befuddled by the weather. When he saw the ships' anti-aircraft open fire, he dove to investigate.

"I was trying to evade the anti-aircraft fire, when all of a sudden a Zero popped out of the overcast practically right beside me," Gillett remembers. "I don't think he ever saw me, because he immediately turned away. I just turned immediately to my right and was directly on his tail. I opened fire, and realized the tracers from my wing guns were converging ahead of him. I couldn't throttle back to open the distance, but then he just dove and headed for the ocean as I realized my two 30-caliber nose guns were tearing up the rear fuselage in back of the cockpit. They tell you not to get target fixation, but I just stuck right behind him, firing all the way till he impacted the ocean, on fire all over. Looking back, I think I probably killed him with the first burst, but I was too green to know that."

Turning after the Zero separated Gillett from his wingman. "I pulled out and I was right over an invasion barge with a tank in it and the Japs were jumping over the sides into the water. Just past it, there were other ships and I fired at them. I turned, strafed another ship, then came back on that barge with the tank and shot at it and it rolled over and sank. Just at that moment, I ran out of ammo, because I'd wasted so much shooting at that Zero. I pulled up, saw four Zeros headed toward me, and climbed up into the overcast."

Once hidden in the clouds, Gillett leveled off and set course for Clark. "I wasn't instrument-rated, but I stayed in the clouds because I didn't want the Japs to see where I was going. They had Nichols Field and Clark Field pretty well covered, and they knew where we'd be going and chase us there and shoot us down when we tried to land." After a few minutes of this, Gillett felt safe to drop out of the clouds. "I looked out through the rain and saw another airplane in the distance with a radial engine. I couldn't tell if it was a Zero or maybe my wingman."

Gillett saw Clark Field in the distance and turned to enter the landing pattern. "Just as I dropped my gear, I felt the impact of bullets in the airplane. I thought to myself that airplane I'd seen was a Zero and now he'd gotten me. I pulled up the gear, dove across the field and into one of the canyons beyond. I looked around and didn't see anyone, so I turned back to Clark and got a green flare and landed."

As Gillett taxied in, a Sergeant ran out and told him the field was under attack. "I shut down, and got out of the plane and watched the bombers come overhead. Our anti-aircraft was pathetic. I later figured out they were the ones who shot me up when I tried to land the first try. There were 24 .50-caliber holes in my airplane from just behind the cockpit to the tail. I was lucky they were as bad with their shooting as they were with airplane identification."

After the attack, Gillett caught a ride to the 20th Pursuit Squadron, where he

found the unknown Lieutenant who had flown with him. "We were talking, and he told me how Lieutenant Anderson had shot down a Zero over the invasion fleet. He described the whole thing and I told him, 'That wasn't Lieutenant Anderson, that was me! Anderson never took off.'" Lamar Gillett had just become the only P-35 pilot to ever shoot down an enemy airplane, but for nearly 40 years the historians would get it wrong, with Anderson - who was later killed - being credited with it due to the mix-up of who flew which airplanes that took off that day.

By early January, the remaining American fighters were ordered to fly to Bataan Field, where they could provide air support to the troops retreating into the peninsula. Unfortunately, with a radial engine, the P-35A had enough resemblance to the Zero that nervous Army gunners shot down the aircraft as they circled to land. "I was headed to the field when suddenly I was fired on," Gillett remembered. "There was oil all over my windshield and when I glanced at my instruments, the oil pressure was zero. I slid open the cockpit and rolled inverted to bail out, and then saw the field right below me, so I rolled upright and brought her in dead stick." When the ground crews were able to examine the airplane, Gillett was informed it would take ten days to change the engine and repair the plane. "I was ordered to become an infantryman."

The Army Air Corps men on Bataan removed the machine guns from their aircraft and manned beach defenses, since it was obvious the Japanese would attempt to land behind the American lines that stretched across the base of the Bataan peninsula. "They came in barges at night, and we managed to stop them on three occasions," Gillett explained.

After a week of this, Gillett managed to get back to the field to find out the status of his P-35A. There he discovered that on January 11 - two days previously - the two remaining flyable P-35As had been ordered to fly out to Del Monte Field, in Mindanao. "The P-35A had a wet wing, so it had the longest range of any of

our fighters. It also had a large baggage compartment right behind the cockpit. Each of those planes left for Mindanao with two other pilots crammed in there."

At Del Monte, the two P-35As were among the last four American fighters to fly combat in the Philippines. The last mission was undertaken by 1st Lt. John Brownell, who flew to Negros Island to pick up two Americans surrounded by the Japanese. He squeezed them in and returned to Del Monte. "John Brownell was one of the last pilots to get a ride out of the Philippines," Gillett related. "After the war, when we came back from Japan, he made sure we were fed and well-treated. We were friends the rest of our Air Force careers, and afterwards till he died in 1996."

Gillett's fate was sealed with the departure of the last P-35As. He rejoined the group of Air Corps infantrymen he'd been with, commanded by Lieutenant Sloan. "One day a few weeks later, I complained to a Colonel about the World War I ammunition we were being given to use. There were a lot of duds and a lot of misfires," Gillett recalled. "He got terribly angry with me, asked who my commanding officer was, and when I told him he told me to have Sloan go over to Corregidor to explain himself to the Colonel in charge of ordnance." When Gillett related this to Sloan, he was told to go to Corregidor himself and explain things. "I ended up on Corregidor for three days, until I could see that Colonel. When I told him why I was there he told me to return to my unit and he would take care of that colonel." When Gillett got back, he discovered Sloan and the other two officers he was friends with had been killed by friendly fire when the Japanese had attempted another landing and artillery fire had been called in from Corregidor.

For Lamar Gillett and the others on Bataan, the end came on April 9, 1942, when they were ordered to surrender. He was among the 10,000 starving Americans who were marched to Camp O'Donnell in what would become known as "The Bataan Death March." Once they got there, "there were more dead and

dying Americans to bury and care for than there were those of us well enough to care for them." That summer he was moved to Cabanatuan prison camp in central Luzon. In December, he and several hundred other POWs were placed aboard Japanese freighters, to be sent to the home islands as slave laborers. His ship was attacked, but not sunk, by an American submarine and later survived a typhoon. After a four-week voyage, he was imprisoned on Japan, where he spent the next two and a half years at various locations as slave laborer. He was repatriated at the end of the war and arrived in the United States at the end of October 1945.

Gillett flew a total 15 combat missions in both P-35As and P-40s during the fall of the Philippines. He remained in the Air Force after the war and retired as a Lt. Col. in 1964.

"A Guest of the Emperor" by Thomas McKelvey Cleaver

Richard Lamar Gillett became a Prisoner of War on April 9, 1942, and was finally liberated in Japan by American forces in early September, 1945.

His run of luck continued. "I have wondered all my life why it was that I survived when so many didn't."

Taken from the Philippines in October 1942, Gillett and 500 other American prisoners landed in Honshu that November. "We had come from the Philippines, where it was hot, and here in Japan it was a very cold winter. We really suffered," he recalled. The prisoners had only the clothes they had surrendered in. "When they took us to the barracks, they gave each of us three blankets, but they were more like what we would call winter sheets here. The only way we could stay warm at night was to sleep

with three or four of us together. Then when we did get warm, that meant the fleas we all had would get active, so then you couldn't sleep."

Conditions at the camp were so bad that by the spring of 1943, 105 Americans had died. "They died from neglect. We had a lot of diseases from poor diet in the Philippines - scurvy, malaria, beriberi, pellagra - that were exacerbated in the cold of the Japanese winter. Men had what we called 'electric beriberi,' where your feet swelled up, and they couldn't wear shoes. Their feet turned black from frostbite and their toes fell off.

When the Japanese would order us outside, they had to crawl."

Fortunately, Gillett was in a bit better shape than some of his comrades. "Back in the Philippines, when we all came down with scurvy, the American doctors convinced the Japanese to give them limes to pass out to us. When they did, the limes were so bitter that many men bit into them and couldn't stand it, so they threw them away. I was determined to survive, so I picked up those limes that had been thrown away and ate them. I did that every time they were handed out, so I managed to cure myself of scurvy before being taken to Japan."

Gillett remembers one guard in particular. "He probably killed a lot of us. He had a bamboo stick, and he would come up behind a man and hit him in the head, or on his back. Since the man was already in poor shape, the effect of the beating combined with the diseases was enough to kill many of them."

Gillett recalls one event that brings to mind a far darker side of the

Pacific War, namely the Japanese experiments with biological warfare (which has only been admitted as true by a Japanese court in a ruling on August 27, 2002 and has yet to be fully admitted to by the Japanese government).

"We'd been there a few months when they came in one day and injected each of us with a big hypodermic; it seemed to me to be the size you'd use on a horse. It hurt like hell, and by that night every one of us was sick as a dog and our arms had turned black and blue from the point of the injection on down. For the next three days, they didn't make us go to work, which was very strange. After we recovered, they came in again and injected us with something, only this time none of us got sick. I have no idea what exactly happened, but I think it was some sort of experiment with a vaccine against something."

Gillett was put to work in a steel factory, where they produced fuel drums for the Japanese Army. "The prisoners would construct these drums, they were about the size of an American 55-gallon drum. My job was to test them for leaks. I had to put the drum in water that was so cold there was ice in it. I would fill the can with air and then watch for leaks and mark them to be re-welded. I finally decided to put my marks several inches from where the leak really was, which was all I could do for the war effort."

Gillett recalls that out of 100 drums, he was only required to test two or three. "I know all the others were as poorly constructed as the ones I tested. That was our way of sabotaging them." After a few months in the steel factory, Gillett was caught mis-marking a drum by a Japanese officer

and two soldiers, who beat him so badly he was put into the hospital. "That was the worst beating I ever got from them," he says, in a very matter-of-fact tone.

The beating may have ultimately saved Gillett's life. While he was in the hospital, a Japanese civilian came to the facility, to pick men to go to work in a small machine shop that supplied sub-assemblies of various items to the larger factory. The man chose the sickest prisoners, who were then moved to a small house near the machine shop, where they would live for the next year as workers. "The Japanese guards were still responsible for feeding us," Gillett explained, "but the civilians we worked beside started to give us bits of the food they had." In fact, the American prisoners and the Japanese civilians with whom they worked became friendly, with the Japanese teaching the language to the Americans among other things. "The young ones wanted to know about America, so once we could talk, I filled their heads with every piece of propaganda about America I could think of." After telling one young man how good cherries were in America, Gillett remembers him bringing two cherries to work the next day. "He gave me one and asked me to eat it and tell him how it compared to an American cherry. I remember it was about the size of a walnut. It was the first fresh fruit I had eaten since we'd surrendered. I told him it was pretty good, and he gave me the other one. I think my memory of those cherries is the best minute I had in the entire time."

After his retirement from the Air Force, Gillett visited Japan with his

wife, and was able to find the steel factory he had been held at and the machine shop where he had worked. An older worker in the machine shop told Gillett's guide that he remembered "Lieutenant Gillett." At first disbelieving, Gillett listened to the man describe where each piece of machinery had been in the shop and who was responsible for working on what. "He was the young man who had given me the cherries." Gillett learned that the workers had risked their own lives to give food to the prisoners. "If they had been discovered by the guards, they would have been very severely punished. I have to say that I never bore any animosity to the Japanese civilians I met during the war, but I have still not found myself able to forgive the guards or forget their cruelty."

In the fall of 1944, Gillett was transferred to POW camp Zentsuji, on the southern island of Shikoku. The Americans in this camp were men who had been captured at Guam at the beginning of the war. "They had been well-treated, in comparison to us.

When they surrendered, they were each able to pack a footlocker which they brought with them to Japan. They looked at us like a bunch of filthy rabble, which is what we were, and thought we were making their life worse because we had such bad attitudes toward the guards." Gillett has nothing more to say about these men, other than to remember that while there he didn't have to work as hard as he had before.

In early 1945, he was transferred to another prison camp, Rokuroshi, back on Honshu. "We were on the west coast of the island, at a camp up in

the mountains. Our job was to dig up stumps after the Japanese had cut down the trees, so they could extend their terraces for farming." Gillett and the few hundred other Americans there would continue this work through the end of the war.

When the end came, the only thing the men in the camp knew about it was they heard the guards talk about the Americans having dropped some strange new bomb. "A few days later, the camp commander came out and told us that the war was over, and said we were no longer Prisoners of War but we were now "guests of the emperor". He said that we would have to stay in the camp 'guests' until Americans could come for us."

Within a matter of weeks, the B-29s from the Marianas went from dropping incendiaries over the cities of Japan to dropping supplies of food and clothing and medicine to the POW camps in the country. "I remember when the B-29s came," Gillett recalls. "They had to circle down into the valley, and then their bomb bays came open and this mass of color exploded from the different parachutes. I was outside, and these containers were coming down over us. Some of them had clothes and such inside, and they floated down, but the ones with food in them were downright dangerous. They were twice as heavy as the parachutes were designed to be used with, the airplanes were in a dive when they dropped them, and when they hit they broke open and the canned goods were like cluster bombs. When they hit the tiled roofs of the buildings we lived in, the tiles were knocked loose and fell on a couple of the other prisoners. I remember thinking that after

three and a half years as a prisoner, I didn't want to be killed by a can of beans." One of the food containers was two 55-gallon drums welded together and filled with canned goods. "When it hit, it dug a trench about three feet deep and about 50 yards long. I was standing there looking at it, when all of a sudden another parachute landed right beside me with a pair of GI boots. I picked them up, and they were 9 /12-D - that was my size!"

After putting on the new boots, Gillett examined the broken container, which had spewed food all over. "There was a case of peaches, and the impact had exploded all the tops of the cans. I picked one up and took a drink of the peach juice and that was wonderful. Then I found a can of corned beef that had been flattened and corned beef was oozing out. I pulled it out with my fingers and ate it. There I was in my new boots, eating corned beef and drinking peach juice. I was in hog heaven!"

That night, the POWs ate like they hadn't eaten in years. "Men were eating, going outside to puke it up and then coming back in and eating some more. The next day, the Japanese let us take showers. It was so strange to look at a man whose legs were thinner than the arm of a healthy person, with a belly that made him look like he was three months pregnant."

Two weeks later, American personnel showed up at the camp, driving two jeeps and a truck with other supplies. They were a medical team, sent to examine the prisoners. "When I arrived in the Philippines after flight school, I weighed about 170 pounds. When we surrendered at Bataan, I was down to about 135. When I was weighed that day, I was 114 pounds."

These days, Gillett finds himself thinking more often of the war and his experiences. "I've mellowed over the years. I can now think of the Japanese guards as acting the way they were taught in the society they lived in, where the idea of surrendering to the enemy was so dishonorable they couldn't conceive of doing it themselves. I can understand it, but I can't forgive it. When I look back on it all, I have a hard time believing how lucky I was when so many weren't."