

# *Halloween Okinawa Style*

*by Frederick Wickert*

During the Korean War in the early 50's, I was stationed in Okinawa in the 546th Ammo Supply Squadron depot. It was one of the largest ammo and bomb dumps in the world.

Most now think of Okinawa as Japanese, but that is only partially true. Okinawa is the largest island in the Ryukyu chain. It is approximately the same size as the county I live in, in upstate New York. The first written records date back to 603 A.D. At the time the Chinese were sending missions to Okinawa, demanding tribute and submission, which the Okinawan's refused. The Chinese then invaded them and ruled for 500 years.

The first kingdom on Okinawa was established in the 12th century. In the 14th century it split into three kingdoms and for the next 200 years they enjoyed trade with China, Japan, Korea and the East Indies.

In 1609 Samurai warriors from Japan invaded them, demanded taxes, and manipulated their trade. This continued for 270 years. In 1854 Commodore Mathew Perry visited the royal palace. The United States, Great Britain, France and Russia were all attempting to open treaty relations with Okinawa. In 1868, Japan tightened its grip by sending a military detachment there. In 1879, tired of Okinawan objections to their military, Japan dissolved the Okinawan government and formally annexed the island kingdom. It was organized as the 47th district of Japan, and was supervised by a governor much like an American state.

During World War II the Ryukyu Island chain was unavoidable in any American offensive strategy in reaching Japan. Okinawa became the arena for one of the most hard fought battles of the war. The invasion began on April 1, 1945. The battle ended on June 20th. With American aid and occupation Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands made a steady recovery economically and by 1950, had resumed its foreign trade lines and established a civil government system.

By a 1951 U.S. - Japan peace treaty, America had complete administrative control of the Ryukyu's for an indefinite period. The United States returned administrative authority back to Japan May 15, 1972, and Okinawa became a prefecture district of Japan once more. The United States has continued to maintain several military bases there ever since.

The above has very little to do with my story other than to give uninformed readers the history of the island before my story takes place.

The time was 1954. The Korean War was still going' and I was sent by the U.S. Air Force for duty in Okinawa. Our small base was positioned across the road from a hamlet one mile from a sizeable town called Ishikawa. Members of the base spent much time in that town. In addition to a large number of bars, the town also boasted a very nice ocean beach. I often worked on town patrol in that town together with the Army Military Police.

The base had many Okinawa employees and we Air Police were augmented by a large contingent of Japanese security personnel brought from Japan under contract. They served as our interpreters in addition to providing the bulk of security. We became close friends with many of them.

In August we became aware of some strange behavior and whispers among the Okinawa population that puzzled us. Inquiring from the Japanese guards, we soon learned the cause. The Okinawa equivalent of Halloween was coming soon.

The people of Okinawa were superstitious people. They had a practice of burying their dead in some large ornate jars, which they then enclosed in small caves in the jungle and fields. The entrances were sealed with a large stone. An approach was made to the cave. At time of burial, and often on special holidays the people placed the finest pastries, a new pair of sandals, a bottle of sake with a bouquet of flowers in it, and two or three more bottles of sake and a bottle opener on the approach to the grave, so that the dearly departed spirit could enjoy some refreshment and have some new sandals for their comfort.

The beliefs of these people were supported by the fact that American G.I.'s were paid once a month in those days. If they were on a bit of a toot near the end of the month and their money ran out and their credit was exhausted, they took the booze from the grave sites to drink. The rodents usually took care of the pastries, so when the people visited the graves of the loved ones, they found the goodies had been consumed, reinforcing their beliefs of busy spirits.

On the upcoming day in August, we learned was a day most Okinawan people were afraid. They feared on that day after sunset, that the spirits of the dead came out of their graves and roamed about, creating mischief. They believed in something called "Magimoo," which we assumed was their word for ghost.

The people were sincere in their beliefs and superstitions and their fear was genuine. We learned people went to Ishikawa to visit the shops of the soothsayers. They purchased special kinds of incense, tied bundles of grasses treated with magic formula and with certain spells cast upon them. The more money the family had the more of these things they bought. They hung them over all the openings to their houses. They attached them to door frames and they tied them to stakes driven in the ground by the paths approaching their houses. These were all designed to ward off the evil spirits.

Two of my companions and I decided this was too good to let go by without some fun. When the night came, we waited until about an hour after dark. We took white bed sheets and flashlights with us. We walked off the base and wandered among the houses of the hamlet draped in the sheets, and turned flashlights on under the sheets. We walked in unsteady gyrations among the houses making moaning and howling noises. We thought after a while we were wasting our efforts, as we encountered no one at all. There was no one out and about that night. They were all locked up in their homes, afraid to venture out for fear of the Magimoo. Believing we had failed to alarm anyone, we returned to the base, removing the white sheets as we entered the main gate of the base.

On the next day, reports began coming in with many exaggerations of the ethereal white clad Magimoo that haunted the populace the night before. Unknown to us, people were peering out through cracks in their doorways to see what was making the noise, and shivered in fear at the white shrouded figures they saw moving about.

It became apparent in the next few days that some of the most neglected gravesites were suddenly blessed with newer and nicer offerings than had previously been offered, I suppose just as a little extra insurance. You know – just in case.