

December 1st

On this day in 1945, a band of 47 Japanese soldiers surrendered to American forces on Saipan three months after the end of World War II.

These men, led by Imperial Army Captain Sakae Oba, had roamed the hills of Saipan for sixteen months despite intensive efforts by the American military to capture or kill them.

A member of the Japanese 18th Infantry Regiment, Oba participated in the fierce six-week battle for Saipan in the summer of 1944 which culminated in a final Japanese attack against American lines on the morning of 7 July.

Surviving this attack, Oba led his remaining men, numbering just over 50, into the rugged hills of central Saipan where he intended to hold out until the arrival of Japanese reinforcements.

Reinforcements never came, and Oba and his group, which at one point came to include nearly 200 civilians, spent the next sixteen months moving from place to place to avoid capture.

The jungle-covered western slopes of Mt. Tapochau served as their main base of operations.

American forces soon learned of Oba's identity but in spite of repeated attempts, they were unsuccessful in capturing him.

Because of his elusiveness, Oba was nicknamed "The Fox" by his American adversaries.

During their lengthy hold out, Oba's men separated into smaller groups to avoid detection.

His men routinely entered the main Japanese civilian internment camp at Susupe to gather intelligence and they pilfered food, clothing and weapons from American supply dumps.

Although Japan formally surrendered to allied forces on 2 September 1945, Oba and his men refused to give up.

Finally, in late November 1945, written orders issued by Major General Umahachi Amo authorizing Oba to surrender.

On the morning of 1 December, a line of Japanese troops, led by Oba and his second in command, Lt. Tanaka, marched into the parking lot of the Stateside Theater (an outdoor stage) in Chalan Laulau.

Here, with his men at attention and the Japanese flag flying, Oba yielded his sword to Lt. Colonel Howard G. Kurgis, commanding officer of the 18th Marine Antiaircraft Battalion.

Following the surrender ceremony, the Japanese troops were taken to the POW stockade. He later assisted U.S. forces with their efforts to effect the surrender of Japanese military personnel and civilians who were hiding in rugged parts of the island.

After his return to Japan, Oba had a successful career as a businessman and community leader in Aichi Prefecture.

He and several of his former comrades-in-arms returned to Saipan in the early 1980s during which they held a ceremony at the site of their surrender.

Oba's story was documented by historian and former Saipan World War II veteran Don Jones in his book "Oba, The Last Samurai" which was published in 1986.

Jones was also instrumental in arranging for Kurgis to return Oba's sword which Kurgis had kept for several decades.

Three years ago, Japanese and American filmmakers joined forces to produce a drama documentary about Oba's Saipan exploits titled "Miracle of the Pacific: The Man called Fox" which had a premier showing on Saipan in February 2011.



Oba leads his men past the Stateside Theater whose parking lot served as the site of the surrender ceremony.



Lt. Colonel Kurgis accepts Oba's sword, a ceremonial gesture that officially concluded the surrender ceremony.