

February 16th

On this day in 1950, Tinian's last Japanese World War II holdout was captured by U.S. naval personnel.

Earlier in the day, Tinian resident Cristino S. Dela Cruz discovered a well-tended vegetable garden in an uninhabited area of northwestern Tinian just a short distance from where the atomic bombs were assembled during World War II.

Dela Cruz quickly reported his discovery to naval personnel and a search party was dispatched to investigate. The party eventually found a barely-visible trail which ran through a dense patch of reeds that surrounded Lake Hagoi just to the west of North Field.

The trail led to a well-camouflaged two-story shack made of wood and corrugated tin which was occupied by Susumu Muratu. After warning shots were fired, the 35 year old Muratu peacefully surrendered to Marine Staff Sergeant James E. Hinkel.

Following his capture, Muratu was flown to Saipan where he was questioned by acting naval administrator Lt. Commander James B. Johnson.

Muratu told Johnson that he was a civilian employee of *Nan'yō Kōhatsu Kabashiki Kaisha* (NKK) and had first come to Rota in 1934. Five years later, Muratu was transferred to Tinian where he worked as an NKK sugarcane laborer.

Following the U.S. invasion of Tinian in 1944, Muratu took refuge in the Lake Hagoi district. For the next six years, Muratu led a secret life immediately adjacent to the largest military airfield in the world.

In addition to growing vegetables, Muratu cultivated tobacco and caught birds and bats with a homemade rifle. Four or five nights a month, Muratu walked to a nearby beach where he netted fish. He hid his fishing gear in a shoreline cave.

Muratu informed Johnson that he knew that the war was over thanks to Japanese text that he read in American magazines and that he was unaware of any other Japanese holdouts on the island.

An inspection of his shack encountered a sizable collection of equipment, tools, and supplies, much of it U.S. issued, that Muratu had collected during nightly forays.

Although Muratu was fully self-sufficient and had a good supply of food, he appeared emaciated and admitted to being in poor health.

When told that he would be repatriated to his home in Japan, Muratu stated that he did not want to return as he had no trade or family and was in poor physical shape. His post-Saipan fate has yet to be documented.

Muratu was one of several Japanese civilians and military personnel who held out in the Marianas for years following the end of World War II.



Photo caption: Members of the Saipan Insular Constabulary transport Muratu to naval administration officials for questioning. The escort party was led by Sheriff Jesus "Kumoi" Guerrero (front passenger seat). Also present are Insular Constabulary members Pedro Attao (behind the wheel) and Manuel "Kiyu" Villagomez (Photo courtesy of the CNMI Historic Preservation Office).