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Non Fiction

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## TRAFFIC TROUBLES

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By

Robert P. Herbst

It was shortly after World War II when I arrived in Japan. Things were still a bit grim. There was still evidence of the terrible bombing Japan had sustained everywhere I looked.



This is the Military side of the base. The Base Photo Lab was just off to the right out of this picture. My duty station was as a photographer at the military side of Tokyo International Airport in Haneda, Japan. The Airport was divided into two halves, the civilian side and the

military side. There was no dividing line as such, just an understanding and traffic was freely permitted either way.

As part of my job I photographed sporting events. On this one auspicious occasion I was to photograph a Basketball game and then rush the pictures to the Army newspaper in downtown Tokyo, Japan. It was one of those rush jobs the Base Commander had said must be done.



Once having taken the pictures, I rushed to our little photo lab on the military side of the base and processed the pictures. The pictures were a great success but I still had to get them to the Newspaper in downtown Tokyo.

I quickly did a wet print of the negatives and hung the negatives up to dry while I was gone. A wet print is where you shove the wet negatives into the projector and print them before drying them. Not a good idea but it's what you need to do when speed is important.

With the negatives still dripping wet on the drying rack I shoved the prints into an envelope specially marked with the address where I was going and started for the motor pool to pick up my Jeep and driver.

Somewhere along the line the driver who was supposed to chauffeur me down and back got lost. I was going to have to do the driving by myself. Now things started to get interesting.

I had absolutely no idea of how to get to where I was going, or better yet, how to get back to the base after I delivered the pictures. The man at the motor pool asked me if I knew how to

get to the Newspaper office and I answered, "Sure I do, where's my Jeep?" Even so, he handed me a sheet of directions to get me there.

I was about to jump into the Jeep and take off for parts unknown when the man asked, "Don't you want the rest of this stuff?"

What the heck, I'll take anything for free. The man handed me a web belt with a fully loaded .45 cal. automatic pistol in a holster hanging from it. I got out of the Jeep and strapped the gun to my waist. Standing back a bit I took stock of my situation.

I was armed, my driver had not shown up to do what he was scheduled to do, I had a military Jeep with the words, "Military Courier Do Not Delay" stenciled on the side, I had a full tank of gasoline and the man at the motor pool was about to turn me loose on Tokyo without my having to sign any kind of release. In short I was, at that time, armed and quite dangerous.

Once again I jumped into the Jeep and made ready to depart when the motor pool man stopped me again asking, "Are you sure you know how to drive one of these things?"

"Hell Yes!" I answered, "I've been driving for years."

I started the engine, jammed it into gear and popped the clutch. The Jeep lurched forward almost throwing me over backwards. The motor pool man was laughing so hard he almost fell over. He had left the jeep in four wheel drive low range for me. If I hadn't been so embarrassed I would have gotten out of the jeep and used the .45 on him. Without another word I straightened out the gear bok and took off with a roar.

Getting the pictures delivered was no trick at all. I had a set of directions to get me there. Getting back was another story altogether. There were lots of one way streets involved. I wasn't very long before I realized I lost very lost. It was pitch dark and I suddenly found myself on a huge traffic circle outside the Imperial Palace in the middle of downtown Tokyo.

Recognizing I was headed in the wrong direction, I looked around for anything familiar. It must have been on my second or third time around the circle when I spotted a sign with an arrow pointing up a exceptionally wide street and the sign said, "TOKYO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT". This is where I wanted to go but I was in the wrong lane and almost past the intersection.

Somehow I had to go around the circle again and get myself into the proper lane to turn off to my left onto the street I wanted to be on. Traffic was heavy for midnight but I dodged in and out of lanes until I was where I wanted to be. In my excitement I momentarily forgot I was in Japan and not back home.

I pulled a hard left hand turn into the four lane highway the sign had indicated went to Tokyo International. There were two lanes of traffic, then a set of Trolley tracks, then another two lanes of traffic. This was separated from a like situation on the other side of a huge hedge growing on a traffic island.

My problem was that in my excitement to get back on the right road for the Tokyo International Airport I was had turned up the far right hand lane into oncoming traffic. They drive on the other side of the road in Japan.

I suddenly found myself headed straight at four lanes of oncoming traffic and a trolley car all of which appeared to have no intention of stopping and I had no where to go. The only thing I could do was yank the wheel hard and put the jeep into a two wheel left hand turn and go like crazy.

Crossing the first two lanes, I bounced the jeep over the waiting platform for the trolley tracks, avoiding the trolley car by inches, as the waiting passengers scattered in every

conceivable direction. I raced across the next two lanes as the oncoming traffic bore down on me from the right hand side.

I jammed the transmission into four wheel drive just before I smashed through the hedge only yards ahead of the oncoming cars, only to find four more lanes of traffic and a trolley car headed at me; this time from the left hand side.

I continued across the next two lanes and over another trolley waiting area, scattering another bunch of people who were waiting for the trolley going in the other direction. I pulled a hard right in the far left lane where I hit the gas and did my level best not to let anyone catch up with me until I was far away from the scene of confusion and devastation I had caused.

I found out the next day I had made the headlines in the Tokyo Times. THANK GOD, no one on our base ever found out it was me that did it. All the police knew was that it was some crazy American in a jeep, apparently armed and considered dangerous. There was some speculation the driver of the jeep was either not aware the war with Japan was over, or was intent on starting a new one.

The guy at the motor pool did ask me where all the leaves and twigs stuck in the grill had come from. I gave him a blank stare and said, "I dunno." I handed the gun back to him and left while he was still trying to get the leaves and twigs out of the front of the Jeep.

Later I found the driver that was supposed to have driven me was being held responsible for all the damage but he had an iron clad alibi, he'd been in the hospital at the time.

The guy at the motor pool was in big trouble because he had turned the Jeep and a loaded gun over to someone he neither knew or made sign the jeep out of the motor pool.

I returned to the Photo Lab the next morning and the only thing they asked me was if I was sure the pictures got to the Newspaper on time. Of this, I was quite sure. For once in my life, I got off Scott free.

There was a huge front page write up of the fiasco in front of the Imperial Palace in the middle of the night, by some armed madman in a stolen Army Jeep. They knew it was an Army Jeep because it had been seen leaving the Army base in Tokyo shortly before the devastation occurred. However, I dared not seem too interested in the article. So long as they thought it was an Army Jeep no one was going to look too closely at the Air Force. Besides, the article was all in Japanese. Even so, I suppose I should have saved the picture of the huge hole in the hedge.

I can tell this tale now, This happened 50 years ago and I think, even by Japanese law, I'm well past the Statute of Limitation. Even so, I think I'll postpone my next trip to Japan indefinitely.