

The Estley Schick Swords

by Dennis Ellingsen

August 14, 1945: Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces ending World War II. Most of us have heard about the disarmament of Japan of all weapons, which included firearms as well as swords that were held in armories and in private households. I had heard stories about warehouses stacked to the ceilings with weapons that were scheduled to be dropped into Tokyo Bay. And indeed they were. But before many of these weapons went to the watery grave, allied soldiers were allowed to bring back war souvenirs. At one point when the U.S. soldiers were boarding to ship back home, trucks full of swords were emptied as the swords were handed out to each GI as they hit the gang plank. It is said that because of this action there were more Japanese swords in the U.S.A. after the War than there were in Japan.

To try and gain back some of the swords that were deemed National Treasures, Japan sent individuals who were knowledgeable about swords to the U.S.A. to find the swords and return them to Japan. The older, historic swords Japan wanted back, but not the weapons of war like the *Gunto* Army swords or military swords that had been produced in great numbers.

The swords that were brought back by the GIs were termed "bring back swords," and the papers that accompanied the swords were termed "bring back papers." Over time the papers that were brought back were typically lost, so a papered souvenir sword is a rarity. The swords in this article are what are called the *gunto* (military swords), and the time frame for these swords is 1868 to 1945. It was 1868 that marked the end of the Samurai war-

rior, and it was then forbidden for anyone to carry a sword other than the military.

In 1868 the Type 19 military sword was conceived. The Type 8 and Type 19 closely resembled European and American swords of the time, with a wraparound hand guard (also known as a D-Guard) and a chrome plated scabbard. This sword is sometimes referred to as the dress, or parade, saber.

In response to rising nationalism within the armed forces, a new style of sword was designed for the Japanese military in 1934. The *shin gunto* (new military sword) Type 94 was styled after a traditional *slung tachi* of the Kamakura period (1185-1332). *Gun* is the Japanese word for military and *to* (pronounced toe) is the Japanese word for sword. This was a commissioned officers sword. In 1935 another *shin gunto* sword appeared for

the Army non-commissioned officer (NCO) and is often referred to as the NCO *shin gunto* Type 95. The officers swords were purchased by the officer whereas the NCO swords were provided by the military. Changes developed with the Type 94 officers sword, and the sword in this article is one of those changes that occurred in 1943 thus making this what collectors call a Type 3 sword.

This brief description

will help to familiarize one with the Japanese sword as told in this story. The study of Japanese swords is quite fascinating and traditions of the Japanese sword date back 1000 years or more.

My story starts in the spring of 2010 when I received a call about a man who had some swords. Since I had a slight interest and knowledge on the subject of Japanese swords, I was

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Type 19 Dress Sword



Estley Schick in 1944.

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encouraged to call this person. The call to Estley Schick in Eugene, Oregon, was one I will never forget. After my introduction

Estley said that he was ninety one and a half years old and had some swords for 65 years but really had no direction or use for them anymore.

That piqued my interest, and I arranged to meet with him to view these swords. When I arrived I was told the call had initiated an in-house treasure hunt as they were not sure where they had them stored. They were found and sat in a rack by the fireplace for me to view. I knew the swords could wait so I proceeded to ask questions and take notes for over two hours on the story about Estley Schick and the swords.

Estley Schick had a sharp memory of his life in the military during the 1940s and was eager to share the memories he had. I was eager to listen too. While he was attending school in 1941, he signed up for ROTC and as a result of the War began an active role in the Army. In 1943 he became a part of the Army Airborne 11th division. He was stationed at many Army bases stateside; and eventually in 1943 he boarded a Liberty ship destined for the Pacific Theater of War. Estley's journey to New Guinea, Leyte, Luzon, Okinawa and then to Japan was a story to hear; but, not being a student of the War, I felt very inept at

piecing this part of his story together. After all it was the swords that I wanted to know about.

But before I get to that part, Estley told me a story that caused me to sit up and take note. In his words he said that there was a fire fight with the Japanese on one of the islands that became pretty ferocious. The Japanese were on a hill and decided to attack. Anticipating this, the Americans had two machine gun emplacements on either side of the trail where the attack came about. It was a crossfire situation. In the heat of the battle a very large Japanese soldier charged with sword in hands and was going to take out one of the machine gun operators with the sword. Someone saw this event coming and yelled "Duck!", at which time Estley and the machine gunners one fox-hole over did just that. The sword missed the GI but came down on the machine gun barrel and cut the barrel in half.

I had heard this type story (urban legend) before about the sword and barrel cut, and I had to question Estley again when I went back to talk

to him one more time. I became a believer as to this actually happening as some of the blanks were filled in about this event. First, the Japanese soldier was an extremely large man. Secondly, Estley said if it would have been a Browning water cooled machine gun this would not have been likely. However the machine gun in question was the variety that was air cooled; and when they became too hot or red hot, the barrel was replaced. Estley said that there were gloves supplied with the barrels; and it was shown that when the barrel got red hot the barrel could easily be bent using one's gloved hands. Estley said that he saw the cut barrel; and after talking and learning from this man, I believe him.

After Japan surrendered, Estley was sent to an airfield in Sendai, Japan, arriving there in late August or early September, 1945. The reason he landed in Sendai, which is 300 miles north of Tokyo, is that this was one of the few airfields still intact after the War. From there he went to the Tokyo area where it was a waiting game before he got orders to return to the United States. Estley waited until late November, 1945. In the meantime, while waiting for the orders to deploy, Estley traveled around Japan. During his travels he happened on to a truck that was going to a warehouse. The truck was loaded with weapons that had been surrendered because of General MacArthur's order to disarm Japan. Since this was early on in the surrender, there was no procedure for getting war souvenirs. Estley inquired as to getting some of these items, and the officer in charge said he could have one sword. With five swords in hand the officer challenged him about one sword only; but Estley said yes that he had one sword, one rapier, one short sword, one saber and one dagger. The officer apparently was amused by this so he let him pass. Estley said he could have pulled rank on him, but that wasn't need-

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Estley Schick in 1945.

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ed.

While in Japan, Estley ran into a person who needed money desperately so he made Estley a real deal on a kimono. It was not something he wanted, but it was very reasonable and beautiful. So the five swords and the kimono were brought back from Japan and left in storage for the most part. The kimono is quite lovely and graces the walls of Estley's home. It was moved from wall to wall as the decor changed. The swords on the other hand had remained stored and untouched.

Estley never had an interest in the swords so he did not study them nor did he know what he had. Be assured there were no Japanese National Treasures here. Save for the one short sword (*wak-izashi*) the other four were military *gunto* swords. But unbeknownst to Estley these four swords represent a collection of the three styles of Japan's military sword weaponry between the years 1868 and 1945. There are a bazillion variations of these three swords, but these really are excellent samples of war time swords.



Type 95 NCO Sword



Type 94 Officers Sword

Swords were a tradition for Japan, and two of the swords represent what is called the *kyu-gunto*, dress or parade sword. These were stamped out and produced in large quantities. Its design was influenced by the

European D-guard swords which were also a popular style in U.S. history. The handles or grips were brass for the most part, and the blades were typically not sharpened. There are exceptions as stated above in the myriad of

variations. The *kyu-gunto* does not typically command collector interest save for the many variations that exist.

The second sword was the Type 94 *shin gunto* sword as mentioned

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above. These swords had wooden handles and were wrapped with fabric tape. The *saya* (scabbard) was painted steel. There were also many variations of these swords. Some have manufactured blades while others had hand forged blades, but all had to be approved by the government. The reason as mentioned was because the officers had to purchase their own swords and therefore might have blades or parts that they preferred. These have a sameness to them but again the variations abound. This is also called the commissioned officers sword.

The third sword is a Type 95 *shin gunto* which looks like the Type 94 sword; however its construction is very different. These swords are solely factory made. The handles are cast metal that look and appear like a fabric wrapped handle. Many of these blades have a serial number stamped into the blade, and all the scabbards are metal. This is referred to as the non commissioned officers (NCO) sword.

To summarize: all the *saya* (scabbards) for the

military swords are metal. The manufacture of these swords was typically factory made. The approval for these swords used in military service was done by the Japanese government. The swords all have the iconic cherry blossoms depicted somewhere on the swords. (For tech speak: the *menuki* -ornament, *kashira* -butt cap, *tsuba* -guard.) All these swords are today classified as weapons by the Japanese, unlike the older historic swords that are deemed art objects or National Treasures. The swords can also be categorized as army swords, officers swords and NCO swords.

I had no knowledge on Japanese military swords before I saw Estley's swords. Estley Schick had little use for the swords that were war souvenirs, and he did not have family who had expressed interest in these items. As a result of this Estley and I came to terms that I would become the caretaker to these items. I would pass them to my son so their legacy would continue. These swords will stay together as a history of a conflict and a legacy to that conflict. One of the

swords required repair, which was executed by Michael Bell. The type 94 sword wrappings had become undone, and Michael used period color and style wrappings and completely repaired this wonderful sword. Michael has been trained in the making and restoration of Japanese swords so the work done was correct and proper for this sword. It should be noted that Michael studied under one of the Japanese sword smiths that were sent to the U.S.A. to look for the National Treasures.

The education that I gathered from these swords has been greatly increased from conversations and from three books that deal with this subject in great detail. *Swords of Imperial Japan 1868-1945* by Jim Dawson, *Military Swords of 1868-1945* by Richard Fuller and Ron Gregory and *The Samurai Sword – A Handbook* by John Yumoto. These are excellent books on the subject of military Japanese swords, and I have gained a new awareness on this subject through these books.

I also came in contact with Takehito Jimbo who was gracious with his information on the markings and readings of the Japanese icons and language on the swords. Two of the swords had wooden tags attached with Japanese writing. Takehito translated these wooden tags as the surrender tags which were sometimes attached in hopes that the swords would find their way back to the fam-



Above: The wooden surrender tags once attached to the swords. Below: Mr. Schick with the kimono that has hung in his home since his return from Japan.



ilies that had to surrender them at War's end. He also translated the tang markings on the Type 94 officers sword as being made by Hiromitsu and dated

December, 1944.

First account history is fading fast; but through my meeting with Estley Schick, the history of these items will be preserved. □