

RICE FARMING

By JACKSON SELLERS

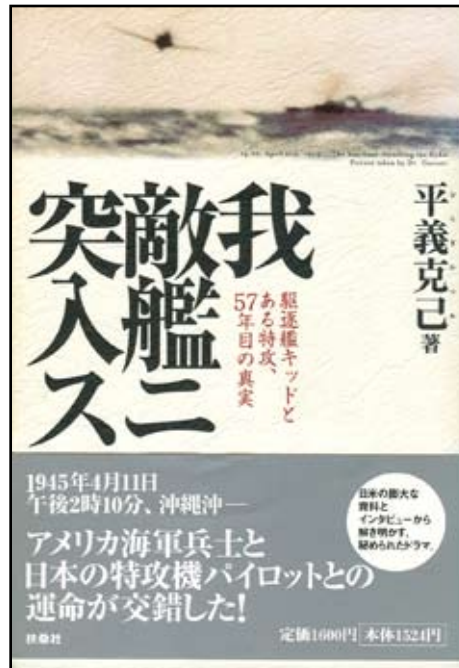
Lake Forest, California

May 20, 2009

STOOPING in mud, a Japanese rice farmer plants seedlings in a field on Shikoku, a major island among the many in Japan's archipelago. It's a common sight at this time of year, but I am truly amazed by it. You see, I know this guy, he is a friend of mine, not in Japan but in Southern California. He is Katsumi "Kats" Hiragi, a San Diego lawyer and author who has visited Yoshi and me at our Lake Forest home, which is roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego. I have known him for years, ever since he wrote a book that identified and profiled a Japanese *kamikaze* pilot who crashed his aircraft into the *USS Kidd* off Okinawa in 1945, killing 38 American sailors and injuring 55. At bottom right are a couple of paintings showing the *kamikaze* plane attacking the destroyer. I am much interested in the *Kidd* because she is a *Fletcher*-class sister of the *USS Colahan*, the ship of my youth, the heroine of a book I wrote. The *Colahan*, too, was engaged in the Okinawa campaign. A few days after the *Kidd* suffered awesome damage in April 1945, the *Colahan* was attacked. Like the *Kidd*, she blazed away at her attacker. Unlike the *Kidd*, she successfully destroyed the would-be killer and steamed on her way without a scratch. Most warships die eventually. The *Colahan* lies on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean about 40 miles southwest of San Diego, the 1966 victim of U.S. Navy target practice. But the *Kidd* still lives as a memorial ship in Baton Rouge,



Louisiana. It was in Baton Rouge where Kats Hiragi of San Diego, on lawyerly business, took the time to tour the *Kidd* and became curious about the young Japanese pilot who was willing, even eager, to die in a suicidal World War II mission. Much research and many interviews in Japan produced a book, the cover of which is scanned at right. I cannot read Kats Hiragi's book. My Japanese is not good enough. At best, I struggle with stories written for Japanese first-graders. But Professor Shozo Usami, a friend in Tokyo, could read it, and was happy to do so, since he has a lifelong interest in naval history. It was Shozo who introduced me to Kats. Oh, "introduced" may not be the right word. Shozo provided me with contact information obtained from the book's Tokyo publisher, so



that Kats and I could strike up an email dialogue that has continued to this day. My naval history book, *The Original Tomcat*, focuses primarily on the *Colahan*, but at one point in the writing of it, I men-

tioned the *kamikaze* attack on the *Kidd*, then wrote:

It is seldom that we can identify the kamikaze pilots who perpetrated such terrible damage. But in the USS Kidd's case, a Japanese book published in 2002 ... names the Kidd-smashing pilot as Lieutenant Junior Grade Shigeju Yaguchi, a graduate of Taga Technical College, which is now Ibaragi University. The 286-page book is devoted entirely to the Kidd and the Japanese pilot who gave his life to kill and maim all those American sailors. Its title is "Ware Tekikan ni Totsunyu Su," which literally means "I Am Going to Crash Into an Enemy Ship," but its author, San Diego attorney Katsumi Hiragi, prefers "Going In for the Kill" if the book is ever published in Eng-



Kats Hiragi rides a rice planting tractor. It's easier than planting seedlings by hand.

lish. Hiragi came to America as a teenager in the 1960s and later became interested in the Kidd when business took him to Louisiana.

Two months ago, when Yoshi and I were staying at remote Kashikojima in Japan's Ise-Shima region, the phone rang in our hotel room. It was Kats Hiragi. I wasn't really surprised. I knew he was in Japan, visiting with his mother in Hiroshima and taking her to see *sumo* wrestling in Osaka. I also knew he had my itinerary and could track me down no matter where I was. We chatted about his astounding plans to stay in Japan for an extended period of time and become a rice farmer. Here was a lawyer and author who wanted to grow rice! Amazing! Kats said he was following my advice, which went something like this: *Keep a detailed journal and take lots of photos. There is a book in here somewhere.* Last week I sent out a report on Miyajima, a beautiful Shinto shrine island off Hiroshima, and I heard from him again in an email with attached pictures.

Jack and Yoshi:

Nice piece on Miyajima. I have not visited the island for some time now, but it is always a source



Miyajima's Torii

of pride and joy for Hiroshima natives like me. I hope everyone enjoyed reading it as much as I did. Now, back to my rice farming venture. We planted the seedlings on May 4th, mostly by riding a vehicle specially designed for planting, as can be seen from the photo. But the edges of the field had to be planted by hand. I'll have you know that hand-planting is backbreaking work. Being stooped over for an extended time, while planting by hand, is not my idea of fun. But when I was growing up, my parents and many others did the same each year. Rice planting vehicles were invented, I think, in the late '60s or early '70s, but we did not have one at home. So, as long as I can remember, we did it by hand. The field is muddy and it was really difficult to pull my feet out of the mud and move forward. I almost fell a couple of times, but being young and athletic kept me upright (ha, ha, ha). All in all, I enjoyed the experience, and would do it again.



Kats Hiragi's flooded rice field, five months from harvesting.

A week later, I had to spray herbicide, and that was easy. Harvesting is expected around the first week of September, and a new crop of rice will be available a couple of weeks later. Anyone wishing to taste it will have to make arrangements to travel to Japan at that time, as rice cannot be imported or brought back to the United States. I do not know why. See you. – Kats Hiragi

September harvesting, huh? No shipping to America, huh? Well, Yoshi and I can still get a taste of Kats Hiragi's first crop. We will return to Japan in October and stay there into November, this time going to the Tohoku and Kanto regions, far north of Kats Hiragi's nostalgic Shikoku rice farming adventure. But perhaps Kats can send a small package to my sister-in-law's home in Shibukawa. It will be waiting for us, and her maid will surely cook a pot for us. We will evaluate it. I'm no expert on rice, but Yoshi certainly is.