

BEHIND THE BRIDGES AT TOKO-RI

By Richard F. Kaufman, Ph.D.

James A. Michener wrote the novel *The Bridges at Toko-ri* from his experiences as a war correspondent with the Seventh Fleet in Korea, dispatching stories on life aboard the carriers *Essex* (CV 9) and *Valley Forge* (CV 45). The novel tells the story of a civilian attorney recalled to active duty as a reserve Naval Aviator who is shot down over hostile North Korea. The enlisted helicopter pilot and crewman who try to rescue him are also shot down, and all three end up in a ditch fighting for their lives. Following Michener's death in 1997, the Library of Congress released the notes and journals that he compiled during the war, revealing many of the real characters and events behind the scenes of the popular story.



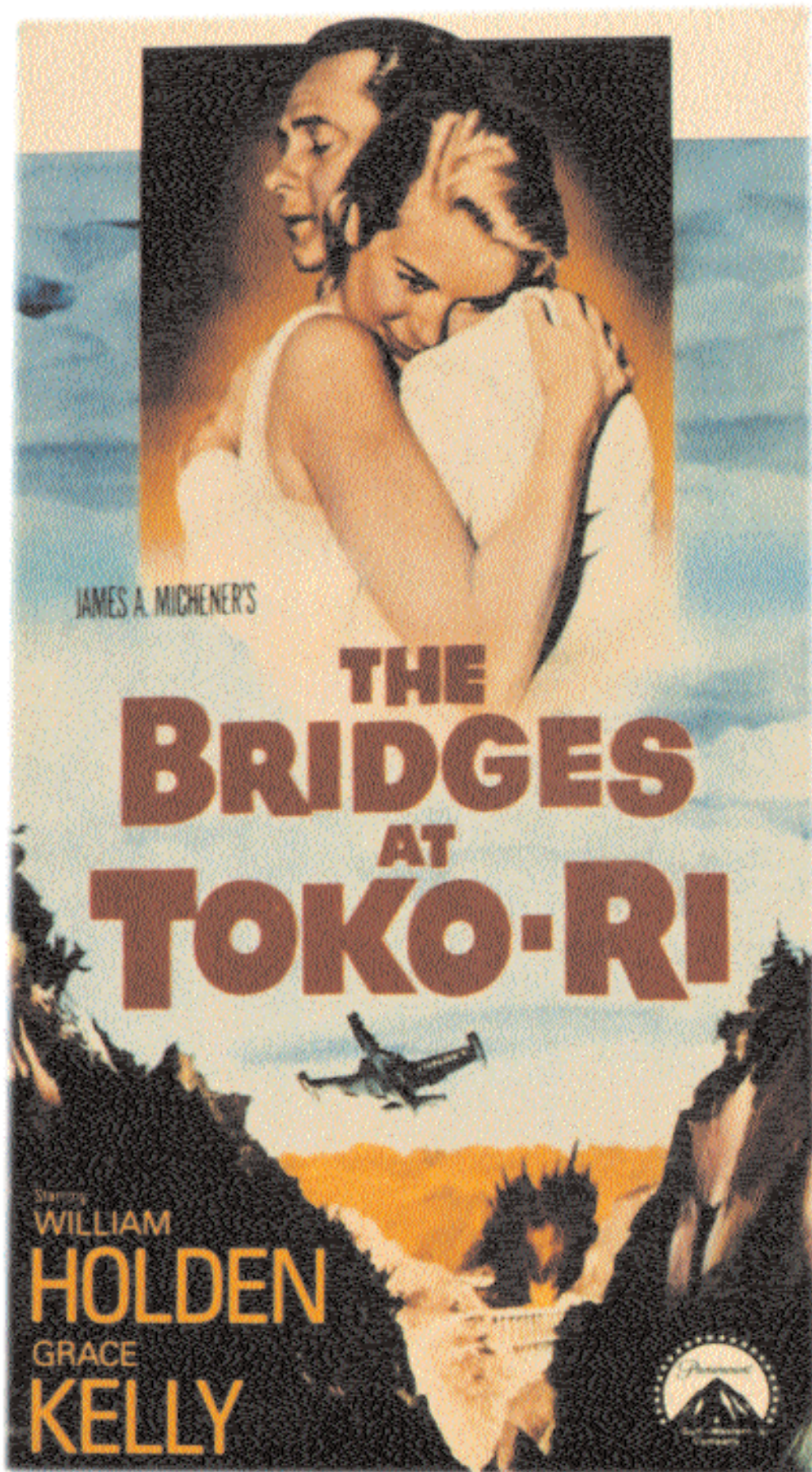
Soon after his arrival aboard *Valley Forge* in January 1952, Michener witnessed what was to become the central theme for his book. Early on 8 February, Rear Admiral John Perry, Commander Carrier Division 1, and his staff were alerted to engage in a possible rescue attempt of an escaped prisoner of war (POW) pilot, Lieutenant (jg) Harry Ettinger of Composite Squadron (VC) 35, who had been shot down in December 1951. Friendly guerilla forces

removed the ailing Ettinger from a POW camp and took him to the Wonsan area, where they contacted U.S. intelligence units for a possible rescue.

It was a routine job for Chief (AP) Duane Thorin and Petty Officer Ernest Crawford, who manned the duty HO3S-1 helicopter aboard *Rochester* (CA 124) that



James A. Michener (circa 1952), opposite inset, served as a war correspondent on board *Valley Forge* (CV 45), opposite top, and *Essex* (CV 9). His wartime experience formed the basis of the novel *The Bridges at Toko-ri*. The story's central character was inspired by Lt. Donald S. Brubaker, above, a pilot with VF-194 aboard *Valley Forge*. Soon after it was published, the book became a popular movie, right (courtesy James H. Farmer).





Right, Chief (AP) Duane Thorin flew an HO3S-1, like the one above, in an attempt to retrieve escaped POW pilot Lt. (jg) Harry Ettinger. Thorin exits his helicopter sporting his signature green ball cap.



morning. A member of the intelligence group replaced Crawford, and the HO3S-1 was loaded with supplies for delivery to agents on the ground. As Ettinger climbed aboard at the rendezvous point, the helicopter crashed. Meanwhile, the rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) aircraft overhead were under heavy fire. Lt. John P. McKenna of VC-3 was fatally shot down in an F4U-5N *Corsair*, and four AD *Skyraiders* were forced to land due to battle damage. An HO3S-1 from *Greer County* (LST 799) was launched to try to reach Thorin, Ettinger and the crewman but was riddled with bullets. After two attempts the stricken helicopter departed the scene, safely landing aboard *St. Paul* (CA 73).

An hour later, four AD-3s from Fighter Squadron (VF) 194 and two F4Us from VF-653 led by Lieutenant Commander Robert Schreiber, CO of VF-194, were scheduled to hit three railroad bridges on the Kowon-Yangdok-Samdong-ni rail line. Aerial reconnaissance photographs from F9F *Panther* photo planes showed that the targeted stone bridges lay in a deep valley with heavily defended guns atop surrounding hills, which required a hit-and-run attack.

A single coordinated dive-bombing attack was planned in which each AD would drop two or three

1,000-pound delay-fused bombs, and the F4Us would drop 250-pound bombs on the bridges. Only two of the three bridges were destroyed, so Schreiber called for a second attack, during which VF-194 pilot Ensign Marvin S. Broomhead's AD was hit in the engine. Too low to bail out, he landed the *Skyraider* wheels up on a small, snow-covered clearing atop a mountain. Moments before touching down a small arms bullet grazed his temple, causing him to crash-land, breaking both ankles and a vertebra. Pulling himself out of the cockpit, he crawled clear of the wreckage to watch his circling comrades who

were anxiously calling for the rescue helicopters from *Rochester* and *Greer County*, which were not available.

The cruiser *Manchester* (CL 83), however, had an HO3S-1 that was used for shore gun spotting, but it was more than 100 miles away. Despite the distance, pilots

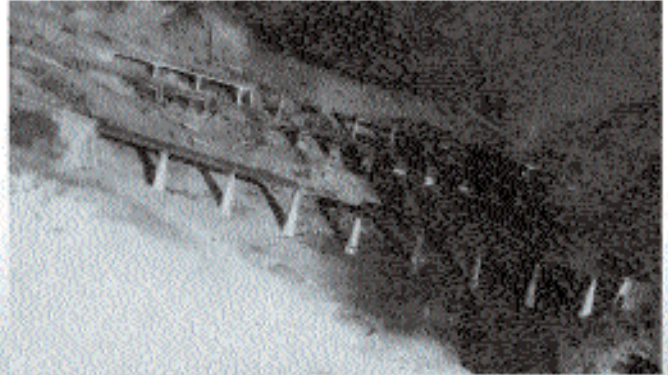
Lt. Edward
Moore and
Marine Corps 1st
Lt. Kenneth
Henry answered



Left, LCdr. Robert Schreiber led attacks against the bridges by planes of VF-194 and VF-653. Right and below, successful aerial strikes on railroad bridges hampered the enemy's supply efforts throughout the war.

the call and headed inland, finding Broomhead surrounded by enemy troops on the mountain top. Suddenly their helicopter sputtered from enemy ground fire and rolled over next to the AD wreckage, injuring Henry in the process. Broomhead's squadron mates frantically called for a fourth helicopter. A rescue attempt by an Air Force helo was driven off by heavy ground fire and 60-knot winds.

Broomhead could not get up with both ankles broken, Henry was down with a sprained knee, and Lt. Moore



CV45-K25-1/97
10 May 52
Schreiber VF194
AD #406
CU 045460



F4Us of VF-653, left, and AD-3s of VF-194 flew the real wartime strikes against the bridges of the Kowon-Yangdok-Samdong-ni rail line. Michener dedicated his book to Commander Beebe “jet pilot” for his help in its preparation, which accounts for the use of jets in the story rather than the prop aircraft that were actually flown.



was not about to leave them. With dusk approaching and the RESCAP planes running out of gas and ammunition, hope for a rescue was lost. All three were now alone in the darkness facing Chinese Communist troops coming up the hill.

By the following morning, the only visible trace of the three airmen was a large circle of what appeared to be blood in the snow near the wreckage. Actually, it was mostly dye marker from life vests that had spread through the snow, creating a huge red circle around the aircraft that gave the appearance of a massacre.

James Michener news-dispatched the death scene of the three airmen from his post aboard *Valley Forge*, believing that Chinese soldiers had killed them during the night (in reality, all three survived their ordeal and were repatriated as POWs after the war). His United Press article “An Epic in Failure” and International News Service story titled “Heroes Fail to Save Pal” hit the national news a week after the incident. A more detailed dialog of the episode titled “All for One” appeared in *Readers Digest* in July 1952, and became the inspiration for a magazine novel called “The Bridges at Toko-ri,” which appeared in *Life* magazine on 6 July 1953. Its popularity blossomed into the best-selling 1954 book and movie.

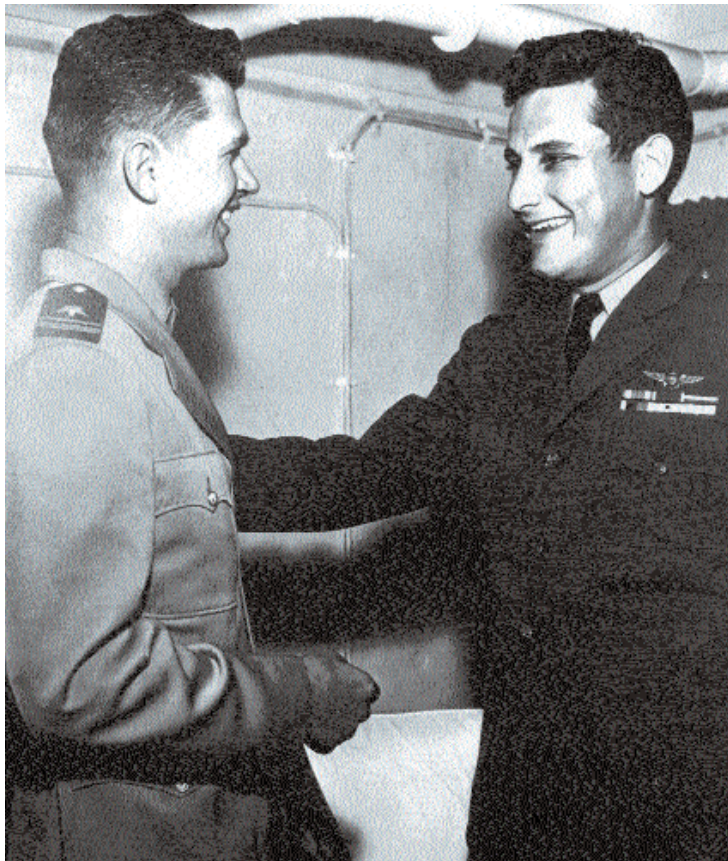
For many years, Cdr. Paul N. Gray, CO of Attack Squadron 54 aboard *Essex*, was rumored to be the basis for *The Bridges at Toko-ri*'s central character, “Brubaker.” However, the author’s notes reveal that the character was patterned after Lieutenant Donald S. Brubaker of VF-194 aboard *Valley Forge*, whom Michener interviewed on 5 December 1951 and, like his literary counterpart, was recalled to active duty as a Naval Reserve pilot. The final death scene, however, was taken from the above-mentioned incident of Brubaker’s squadron mate, Ens. Broomhead.

During his stay aboard the carriers of Task Force 77, Michener wrote several other magazine articles about Naval Aviation, such as “The Forgotten Heroes of Korea,” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 10 May 1952, in which he expanded on the story of Cdr.

Gray and others. Gray was a tenacious and gifted AD *Skyraider* pilot who made low-level bombing runs against hard-to-reach targets and inflicted great damage to the enemy, but at the cost of some shootdowns and near-misses, prompting RAdm. Perry to ground him. The enthusiastic response to this article laid the groundwork for a cast of other characters that Michener would later use in *The Bridges at Toko-ri*, including “RAdm. George Tarrant” (based on RAdm. Perry); “CAG Wayne Lee” (Cdr. Marshall U. Beebe, Commander Air Group 5); and “Nestor Gamidge” (Chief (AP) Thorin).

Later, “The Forgotten Heroes of Korea” article became a hot commodity to the movie industry. Michener had sold the rights to Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer Studios, which in turn altered the narratives to fit another story by naval officer Cdr. Harry Burns, “The Case of the Blind Pilot,” published in the 29 November 1952 *Saturday Evening Post*. The combined story became the movie *Men of the Fighting Lady*, which supposedly portrayed the true experiences of Cdr. Gray and “blind pilot” Ens. Kenneth A. Schechter. In reality, the “blind pilot” affair occurred long after Cdr. Gray had returned to the United States.

Ens. Schechter of VF-194 was flying an AD from *Valley Forge* north of Kowon on 22 March 1952 and was severely wounded by an enemy shell that struck his canopy and exploded. Blinded by blood and suffering from shock, he was unable to see to maintain control of his airplane. Lt. (jg) Howard Thayer, hearing his squadron mate’s call for assistance and observing his erratic maneuvers, joined up on the damaged plane and literally “flew” it by radioing instructions to the completely blinded pilot. Thayer’s controlling was so competent and reassuring that the wounded man elected



Above, after VF-194 pilot Ens. Kenneth A. Schechter, right, was temporarily blinded during combat in March 1952, squadron mate Lt. (jg) Howard Thayer, left, talked him down to a successful landing. Below, the ordeal of VF-194 pilot Ensign Marvin S. Broomhead—seen here upon his release as a POW at the end of the war—provided key inspiration for Michener’s plot.

to proceed to a landing strip rather than bail out. Depending entirely on Thayer’s directions, Schechter flew the *Skyraider* more than 100 miles “blind” to make a perfect wheels-up landing at a small emergency airstrip. Schechter was immediately evacuated by helicopter to a hospital ship.

Ironically, the Broomhead story and the Schechter story were related. Two months before Broomhead was shot down on 4 December 1951, he had received a Red Cross telegram that his wife was injured in a car accident. He was allowed to return to San Diego on emergency leave where he found his wife in critical condition, disabled and a permanent paraplegic at the Balboa Naval Hospital.



Six weeks later he returned to the carrier but was shot down and presumed dead on his third flight. Michener was aware of these facts because on several occasions he had corresponded with George Schechter, father of “blind pilot” Ens. Kenneth Schechter, about Broomhead’s wife who was in the hospital bed directly across the hall from his son. Michener contacted Broomhead’s wife, but for whatever reasons, he chose not to expand his storyline beyond the death climax of the three airmen on a hilltop. Instead, he wrote about a fictitious happy “Brubaker” in a good-bye scene with his wife in the luxurious surroundings of the Fujiya (Fuji-san in the story) Hotel. In reality, the greater paradox, perhaps, was the repatriation of a crippled Broomhead (his two fractured ankles and compressed vertebra were left untreated by his captors) coming home to a paraplegic wife in a wheelchair.

True wartime events such as these colored Michener’s perception of the war, and provided him with a depth of experience that translated into the characters in his renowned book. Michener wrote *The Bridges at Toko-ri* as a tragedy based on true wartime events of Naval Aviation personnel he knew. It would become the seminal novel on Naval Aviation in the Korean War.



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