

An American “Gaijin¹” Abroad and JOE BUTTERFLY² by Richard L. Rodgers

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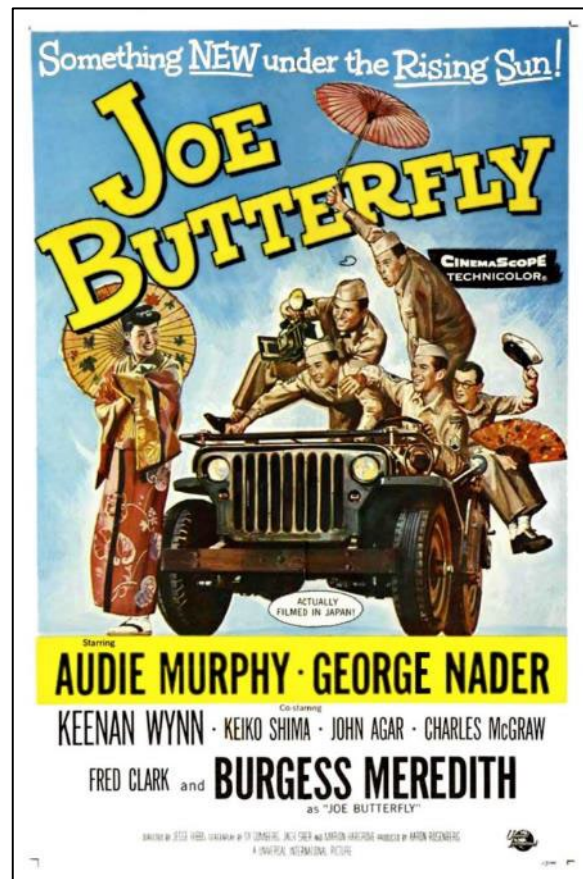
JOE BUTTERFLY was released in 1957 by Universal-International starring Audie Murphy. A typical summary from an entertainment columnist might say ...

“In 1956 Audie Murphy traveled to Japan to film his only comedy, *Joe Butterfly*. Released in the summer of 1957, this light-hearted movie has been favorably received by audiences in both countries. Audie Murphy plays the role of Private John Woodley, an Army correspondent, working for a military magazine publication called “*Yank*”. The film’s timeframe is right after the war and its setting is in Tokyo. When Private Woodley accidentally takes a picture of one of the many “Tokyo Roses” still believed to be in the area, *Yank* magazine rushes to publish an exclusive scoop on Woodley’s unexpected snapshot resulting in lots of humor and fun. Movie veterans Keenan Wynn, John Agar, Fred Clark, and Burgess Meredith give fine support in their roles designed to help Murphy break away from his more traditional roles in other films. New to the American-screen is the lovely and talented Kieko Shima, a

Japanese film star who also delivers a fine performance.”

That was a typical summary. *Chotto matte kudasai*³ as I offer another which is atypical.

As background I will introduce you to my Japanese stepmother. Her name, before marrying my father, was Waka Nobori - or



¹ Pronounced “guy-jean”.

² Audie Murphy’s seventeenth movie, *Joe Butterfly*, can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/v28BcemFtTI>

³ Japanese to English translation: *please, wait a moment*.

“Waka”. She was born before the war on the small island of Tokunoshima (Toku-noshima) in the Okinawan-Island chain. She survived the Battle of Okinawa and the war and later met my father – a U.S. Navy hospital corpsman – in Okinawa during the final days of the Vietnam war. My dad, previously divorced, was already the father of five energetic northeast Texas boys who were still living in the States.

Dad somehow managed to convince Waka to marry him. Incredibly, he also convinced her to take on the herculean task of helping raise his brood of boys. Our ages ranged from about 8 to 14. Making matters more interesting, we couldn’t speak a lick⁴ of Japanese either. To Waka’s great credit and as a tribute to her courage and commitment, she moved to the States and persevered for over 50 years with my father and brothers. She and he both recently passed away in quick succession and are now buried together in northeast Texas.

Waka tried to teach her American children some of the Japanese culture. She started at the dinner table which made a great classroom. All of us mastered the art of using *ohashi* (chopsticks) and discovered that seaweed (*nori*) was *oishii* (delicious) when placed on *gohon* (rice). Instead of lathering up a pile of grilled ribs with sticky barbeque sauce, we passed a plate of fresh *sushi* garnished with small amounts of pungent *wasabi*. As with any new culture, our stomachs and appetites helped us adapt.

We learned other expressions too including how to properly address people.

My brothers and I struggled to use the Japanese word for “mother”, *okasan*, when we addressed her. When said properly, it sounds like “o-KAH-san”. But when we delivered it with a Texas drawl, it didn’t quite work and sounded more like “oh-kee-san”. Not wanting to earn Waka’s disapproval, we tried other approaches. Sometimes we called her “Waka-san”. My mother pointed out this was much too formal and not supposed to be used among family members. Something more personable was required.

So, as good Texas boys might do, we improvised and combined “Wa-ka” and “oka-san” and came up with *Kasan*. She



Lead actress Keiko Shima attempts to coach Audie Murphy off camera in the proper use of ohashi (chopsticks). Photo courtesy of M.D. Marks

⁴ Pardon my childhood vernacular. It means my brothers and I couldn’t speak any language except Texan.

liked it and said “*daijoubu*”⁵. Pleased with ourselves, we were certain her approval was an accurate measure of our cleverness.⁶

Did Audie have similar experiences when he studied Japanese during filming? It wouldn’t surprise me.⁷ He was a stickler for detail and would want to say things right.

Other Japanese expressions – some modern and some that were not – were picked up. Without offering up a discussion on Japanese cuss words, two other early terms my brothers and I picked up were *gaijin* and *butterfly*.

We heard the word *gaijin* a lot. When asked, Kasan said that in Japan, American military service members were *gaijin*. Kasan told us the word meant “foreigner” but after the war, all foreigners were American military. Kasan could write the word in *kanji* – the Japanese symbolic form of writing – but I couldn’t read it. I needed a better way to store the new word in my growing Japanese



*Joe Butterfly (Burgess Meredith) delivers a carton to American gaijin Private Woodley (Audie Murphy).
Movie still #1834-18 courtesy of Universal-International.*

lexicon. Thinking hard I reasoned that it was spelled G-I-J-I-N-N or “*gijinn*”.

Maybe you wonder why.

I assumed the military acronym “G.I.”⁸ was the source of the first syllable. It seemed reasonable. I also remembered the word *jinn* was a term

used for a mischievous devil who lived in a bottle. Maybe this was a description of a sailor in some local bar. As a Navy-brat, I certainly had spotted my fair-share of drunken sailors. Again, my logic seemed good. It didn’t take long to convinced myself I was right and that even the most learned etymologist from Oxford or Cambridge would agree with me.⁹

I am just as certain that *gaijin* was one of the first local expressions Audie Murphy and the rest of the film crew learned after they arrived at the Tokyo International Airport¹⁰.

But what about *Butterfly*? That’s an American word – isn’t it?

⁵ Pronounced *dai-jo-bo*, it translates to “its okay”.

⁶ Actually, I now know that *kasan* is an ancient word used in Japan and is a shortened form of *okasan* by Japanese children. To be clear, five boys from Texas did not invent it.

⁷ I read in a Stars and Stripes article that Burgess Meredith was actually taking Japanese lessons from an airline stewardess while flying to Japan to make the film.

⁸ The abbreviation G.I. meant “government issue” and later came to mean during World War II an American military service member.

⁹ They wouldn’t. *Gaijin* means “foreigner” and its roots are embedded in Chinese – like many other Japanese words. The word has been around for many centuries and was used by the locals when talking about the Portuguese traders that came to Japan in 1543.

¹⁰ Today, Tokyo International Airport has been renamed to Haneda Airport.

Kasan told me the English word *Butterfly* was adopted by the Japanese after the war, but it wasn't a winged insect. No, no – they had a different word for that¹¹. From their point of view *Butterfly* took on a totally different meaning. In Japan – especially in U.S. military districts – a *Butterfly* is someone who flits about from person to person. According to Kasan, there was an influx of “butterflies” that emerged from rubble of the war when the American occupation and rebuilding process began. To be clear, Kasan explained that a *butterfly* could be applied to a chatty, gossipy teenager or a philandering bar patron. Gender and nationality were not important. But back in 1945, it was particularly applicable to a local national who gravitated toward an unaccompanied American service member who happened to be “over there”.¹²

Back to the movie.

Burgess Meredith, as Joe Butterfly, was a likeable *butterfly* despite thick eye makeup and obviously dyed hair. Joe Butterfly moved from one American G.I. to another trying to provide some needed good or service. In post-war Japan, American's *were* the land of opportunity and in Japan, we needed lots of stuff.

We can't be sure if Joe Butterfly was a con-artist. He was definitely a smooth-talking businessman who spoke reasonably good but broken English. It is true he was chased by Japanese police at the beginning of the film – but for reasons we aren't sure of. What we *are* sure of is that Joe Butterfly always seemed to deliver the goods under



Audie Murphy is fitted in the garb of a traditional Japanese warrior in preparation for a scene in JOE BUTTERFLY. Photo courtesy of M.D. Marks

suspicious circumstances but always with honor and a degree of dependability.

Kasan may have scoffed at Mr. Meredith's appearance and makeup. On the other hand, I think she would have enjoyed his portrayal of Joe Butterfly despite his occasional use of the “L-sound” while delivering his lines.

There is no doubt in my mind that Audie Murphy and his fellow actors shared some of the same learning experiences that my brothers and I had. As *gaijin*, especially

¹¹ Cho: a Japanese butterfly in the form of a winged insect.

¹² If a Japanese citizen described a *gaijin* as a “butterfly”, it was usually a warning. There were, and still are, a lot of American *GI-jin* “butterflies” in Japan too.

when we moved to Japan, we indoctrinated ourselves by trying to fit in, showing respect, and attempting to please our hosts. Learning to bow, taking off our shoes in a building, eating with *ohashi*, sleeping on a *futon* spread out on a *tatami*¹³ floor, etc., etc., ad infinitum¹⁴ – it's all part of the process. Sure, we make mistakes along the way but it's exotic, it's fun, and helps define the American gaijin's experience abroad.

Japanese are no different either when they visit America. They want to fit in too. Most quickly learn to eat barbeque and some will even buy cowboy boots and a Stetson if they visit Texas.¹⁵

I can't prove it, but I think that Audie Murphy and his comrades had the time of their lives while making the film. They really seem to enjoy themselves.

Back to me.

Like Audie, I never lived or visited Japan until I was a middle-aged adult. After service in the Army, I began a career as a teacher in the Texas and eventually qualified for an early retirement. My wife and I used this as an opportunity to start new teaching careers as federal employees in a DoDEA¹⁶ school at Camp Zama U.S. Army Base and just a hop, skip, and a jump away from Tokyo.

My duties as a DoDEA teacher included being a yearbook advisor which required skill in the use of professional-grade cameras. In this capacity I taught students how to get



YANK correspondent-photographer Pvt. John Woodley being escorted to a ship on the American docks at Yokohama Bay at the beginning of the film JOE BUTTERFLY. Photo courtesy of M.D. Marks.



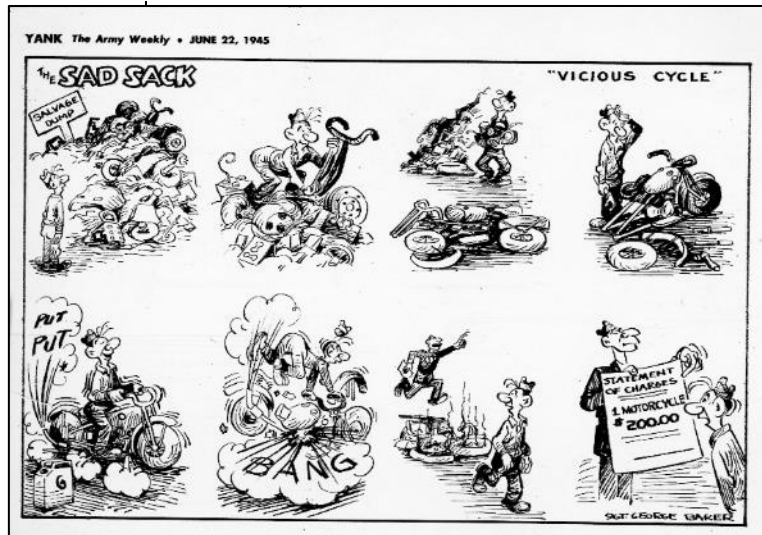
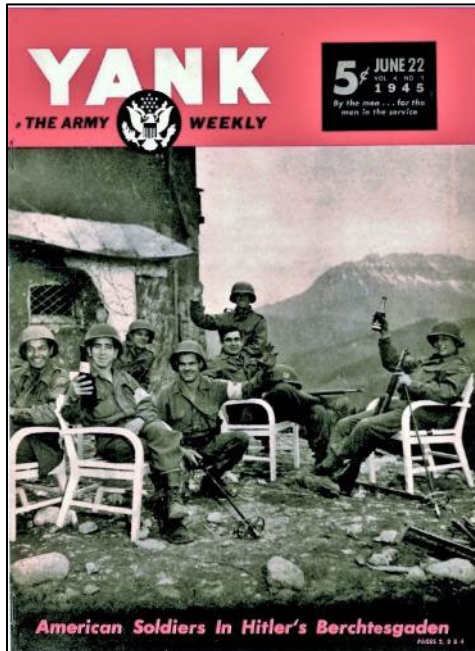
Willard Willingham and Audie Murphy on the USS Los Angeles at the Yokohama docks during an off-scene moment. Photo courtesy of Lilo Macguire.

¹³ A futon is a thick Japanese cushion used to sit or sleep on. A tatami mat is the traditional woven flooring made from rushes or rice stalks.

¹⁴ Note the clever way I mixed Latin with my use of Japanese. Kasan would be proud.

¹⁵ During the summer of 2007, Maria and I brought twelve Japanese guests to stay our home in the Dallas area. Before the last day of their vacation, at their request we had a final meal of barbeque brisket. More than one of them also had a pair of Tony Llama boots and a new Stetson. A few wore Texas Ranger ballcaps.

¹⁶ Department of Defense Education Agency



Front cover of the June 22, 1945, issue of YANK magazine and an inside cartoon section featuring "Sad Sack" by cartoonist Sergeant George Baker. Images courtesy of M.D. Marks.

published as freelance sports photographers with *Stars and Stripes* newspaper – one of the oldest still-surviving newspapers in America with a world-wide distribution¹⁷. My students' pictures were published frequently for many years in the *Stripes* and I was privileged to write several local stories for the paper too.

In the process, I got to know *Stars and Stripes* management well. They were just down the road from our school, and I was invited to access their private reference library when I made an inquiry about the filming of JOE BUTTERFLY.¹⁸

I wondered: was YANK magazine really modeled after *Stars and Stripes*? Secretly, I hoped so. As an unofficial and published member of the *Stripe's* team, wouldn't that make me sort of like a Yank correspondent?

I liked the idea on multiple levels. Not only was it cool being a *Stripes* contributor, it seemed that the number of similarities between Audie and I were growing.

Thinking this through, I theorized that Universal-International avoided using the *Stars and Stripes* name because of liability and political concerns. Universal would be required to submit the script for pre-approval to the US Army Japan Public Affairs Office before filming any military service members, facilities, or equipment.¹⁹ Uncle Sam and *Stripes* could not afford an international incident made in their name in the event Universal goofed and made some kind of cinematic *faux pas*²⁰.

I was sure I was right.

¹⁷ Founded by an act of Congress in 1863 with a readership in every U.S. military base in the world. *Stripes* likes to brag that they have the largest newspaper daily paper-route in the world.

¹⁸ A list of *Stars and Stripes* articles can be found at the end of the article.

¹⁹ I discussed the approval process with friend and Pacific Director of *Stars and Stripes*, Mr. John Panaciewicz. He saw the merits of my theory and said it was legally and politically better not to use the *Stripes* name in the film.

²⁰ A French term for an embarrassing social blunder. In Texas, a *faux pas* might be result from eating beans before attending church. (Pardon the hyperbole but it makes the point.)

But – I was wrong. *Yank* Magazine really *did* exist.²¹ It was a weekly magazine organized and staffed by enlisted members of the Army while managed by a few officers – just like in the movie too. It's first publication was in 1942. They even had their own cartoonists.

Too bad Universal didn't bring Bill Mauldin²² in as a character to sketch cartoons for *Yank* magazine. Cinematically, I think it would have worked and besides – it would have shored up my misplaced belief that *YANK* was really *Stars and Stripes*. This would have saved my bruised ego.

As it turned out, there were no international incidents although the movie did open with the Japanese surrender and one or two U.S. Navy warships. To put that event in the best possible light while ensuring no one was offended, Universal made sure that the only disrespect shown during the surrender scene was by an Army



A vintage suitcase travel sticker for the luxurious Nikkatsu Hotel located next to the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, Japan.

private (Audie Murphy) to a rival Navy *Trend*²³ magazine correspondent (Keenan Wynn) who was deliberately kicked off a Navy warship's gun turret into the waters of Yokohama Bay. Without the benefit of seeing any opinion polls, I am reasonably sure that soldiers and Japanese applauded the result of that good-spirited scene. Well done, Universal.

Likewise, the local Japanese population was delighted that some of their Tokyo locations were showcased in the film. Exquisite parks, sculpted gardens, and traditional architecture just outside the Japanese Imperial Palace was used for this purpose. A *Stars and Stripes* article I found mentioned that film directors and production staff were conducting press interviews and at the Nikkahatsu Hotel just across the street from the emperor's palace. The same clipping said Audie Murphy was spotted eating breakfast there.

Another *Stripes* article referred to the



Audie Murphy relaxing between scenes with soldiers taken in August 1956. The photograph contributor is George Martin, and he is to the right of Audie.

²¹ You can me *baka-san*. ("Mr. Stupid). I don't mind – *daijobo*.

²² Bill Mauldin, a friend of Audie Murphy, was a two-time Pulitzer-prize cartoonist who worked for *Stars and Stripes* and created the award-winning cartoon series "Willie and Joe." He also appeared in the John Huston film *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE* with Audie Murphy.

²³ Unlike *Yank* magazine, I could find no references to a Navy magazine called *Trend*. I suspect it may have been created to introduce an element of rivalry into the film.



Japanese fighter pilots of the 244th Sentai, Chofu Air Base, Tokyo, (November 7, 1944).

production company booking rooms for the cast and crew at the New Mori Hotel which had nine acres of ornamental lawns, manicured gardens, a terraced waterfall, and independently standing hotel rooms built to look like small houses in the traditional Japanese style. All were used in the film. It turned out that the New Mori Hotel was ideally suited for production work.

In yet another *Stripes* article I learned that a lot of the interior shots were filmed in a large, aircraft hangar at Chofu U.S. Army Airfield. Apparently, closed sets were erected by the production company with the help of the military for scenes not requiring culturally elaborate backdrops.

On a historical note, Chofu U.S. Army Airfield, was a former Japanese Imperial Airbase during World War II. Turned over to the U.S. Army after the September 6, 1945,

surrender, the airfield would eventually be returned to the Japanese government decades later in 1972. When transferred back, the Japanese converted it into a very small regional airport which today still launches puddle-hopper flights to outlying Japanese islands. In fact, my wife and I flew three times a year for several years by plane and helicopter from Chofu Airport to a small volcanic island²⁴ in the Izu Island chain off the east coast of Tokyo. To this end, I enjoyed sitting in the small one-room airport terminal waiting for my flight with just a few islanders. As I did so, I imagined the filming of *JOE BUTTERFLY* and would look at the hangars. I thought about the enthusiasm of the small Japanese children who sang and acted in the movie. They were just like the young island students I was going to teach.

²⁴ Maria and I taught on the island of Mikurajima at a K-9 grade public school with an enrollment of 29 students. The experience was one of the best and most unforgettable in our professional lives.

While the movie's script is not without criticism – I honestly believe that most viewers – civilian, military, American, and Japanese alike, appreciated – as many still do now – the studio's careful and considerate approach to how it was filmed. In terms of its culture, beauty, industry, courtesy, history, hospitality, and respect, JOE BUTTERFLY shows the Japan I have come to know and love.

Finally, I'm not sure if the word *gaijin* was ever actually used in the movie. *Butterfly* may not have been explicitly defined either and was left to our imaginations to figure

out. To those who didn't figure it out, I hope Kasan's explanations along with some of my own experiences improved your perception of the movie and what it meant to the U.S. military, overseas U.S. civilians, and the local Japanese people if not the entire Japanese nation. It was certainly an unacknowledged high point in Japanese-American relations during the 1950's.

As an American *gaijin* still abroad, *sayonara*.

– Richard Rodgers
Audie Murphy Research Foundation
Overseas Correspondent, Japan



Audie Murphy and Keiko Shima. Photo courtesy of M.D. Marks.

Appendix: *An Index of Pacific Stars and Stripes*, articles on the filming of JOE BUTTERFLY

- June 6, 1956: "U.I. Cameras to Roll", by Airman First Class Ed Poutas, Staff Writer
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2322>
- July 6, 1956: "On The Town"; by Al Ricketts, Entertainment Columnist
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2324>
- July 12, 1956: "Light, Camera, Action; New Order in 1st Cav"
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2326>
- July 12, 1956: "On The Town"; by Al Ricketts, Entertainment Columnist
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2327>
- July 13, 1956: "Butterfly Filming to Start"
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2328>
- July 18, 1956: "On The Town" by Al Ricketts, Entertainment Columnist
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2405>
- July 20, 1956: Photo, "Knight of Old"
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2329>
- July 26, 1956: "On the Town" by Al Ricketts, Entertainment Columnist
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2332>
- August 5, 1956: "On the Town" by Al Ricketts, Entertainment Columnist
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2335>
- August 8, 1956: " 'Joe Butterfly' in Chrysalis" by Andrew Headland, Jr., Staff Writer
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2336>
- August 11, 1956: "Old Insignia Sought for Joe Butterfly"
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2338>
- August 13, 1956: Photo, "Audie Murphy gives little leaguers autographs"
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2339>
- August 14, 1956: "Location at the New Mori" by Norm Sklarewitz, Staff Writer
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2340>
- September 19, 1956: "Training Can't be Too Tough" by MSGT I. G. Edmonds, USAF
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2348>
- June 1, 1957: "Joe Butterfly' Gets OK From N.Y. Critics"
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2368>
- July 6, 1957: "On the Town" by Al Ricketts, Entertainment Columnist
<https://www.audiemurphy.com/msgb/viewtopic.php?t=2369>