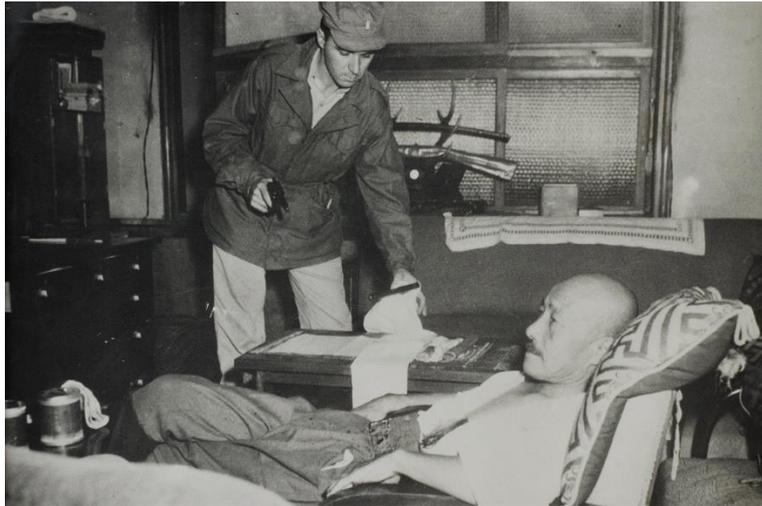


This Week in Saratoga County History

Saratoga Springs Man Involved in Capture of Tojo

Submitted by Chris Carola, September 10, 2020

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John Wilpers' capture of Japanese warlord Hidecki Tojo

Late on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 1945, U.S. Army 1st Lt. Jack Wilpers, a 25-year-old bookie's son from Saratoga Springs, busted into the home of the world's most hated living person. What he did over the next couple of hours would change history.

John J. Wilpers Jr. was born on Nov. 11, 1919 (the one-year anniversary of the end of World War I) in Albany, where his father ran speakeasies during Prohibition. By the mid-1930s, Jack Sr., a bookie at Saratoga Race Course during the racing season, had resettled the family -- wife Nellie, daughter Peggy and Jack Jr. -- in an apartment on Broadway, where Peggy would open a women's clothing store that was a local fixture for decades.

Jack Jr. graduated from St. Peter's Academy (now Saratoga Central Catholic High School) in 1937. He graduated from St. Michael's College in Toronto, Canada, in June 1942 and joined the Army two months later. In August 1944, he shipped out to the Pacific, where he was reassigned to the Counter Intelligence Corps.

Wilpers' unit spent nine-plus months in the Philippines following the U.S. invasion that started on Oct. 20, 1944, led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. When Japan announced its surrender on Aug. 15, 1945, Wilpers' CIC detachment was among the first U.S. troops to arrive in the defeated nation to begin the U.S.-led occupation.

On Sept. 11, nine days after Japan's formal surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, Wilpers was part of a five-man CIC detail tasked with arresting Hideki Tojo, the retired general and former prime minister who led Japan for most of the war.

A crowd of Allied reporters and photographers was already outside Tojo's tidy suburban Tokyo home when the CIC officers arrived. As they waited for Tojo to emerge, a gunshot was heard from inside the house.

Wilpers and the major in command of the CIC detail rushed to the front door and shouldered it open. Wilpers then kicked in a second door to a den, where Tojo had just shot himself in the chest with an American-made .32-caliber pistol. He had missed his heart but was severely wounded. Tojo sat slumped in a chair as the press jammed into the room, shouting questions and snapping photos.

One of the photos, taken by Yank magazine's Sgt. George Burns, a newspaper photographer from Albany, showed Lt. Wilpers aiming his sidearm at Tojo while picking up the wounded man's handgun. It would become one of the most famous images from the end of World War II.

Wilpers ordered Tojo's doctor to treat the wounded man, and although he initially refused, the physician reluctantly complied when the American officer urged him to do so, at gunpoint.

An American medical team eventually arrived and stabilized Tojo's condition before transporting him to an Army hospital to recover. His war crimes trial started the next year. Convicted in the fall of 1948, Tojo was executed by hanging on Dec. 23, 1948.

Tojo's botched suicide made global headlines, and Wilpers' name appeared in Associated Press dispatches and other news accounts that were published in newspapers across the U.S.

A year after arriving back in the U.S. in 1946, Wilpers joined the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency. He spent 28 years with the spy agency, retiring in 1975. Wilpers married Marian Meyer in 1949, and together they raised five children at the couple's home in Garrett Park, Maryland, outside Washington.

In February 2010, during a special ceremony arranged by the Pentagon, Wilpers finally received a Bronze Star for his key role in capturing Tojo and keeping him alive to face trial for war crimes.

Marian Wilpers died in 2006. Jack Wilpers, the last surviving member of the CIC detail that captured Tojo, died at 93 on Feb. 28, 2013.