THE JAPANESE YASAKUNI SHRINE SOLDIERS
BEREAVED FAMILY MEDAL

FRANK F. LOCKMAN, OMSA #3619

For almost seven hundred years the Samurai warriors were taught that they were
descendants of divine beings, and as such they would become Gods upon their death.
The last shogunate dynasty fell in the year 1868 and thus ended the role of the
Samurai. At that time Shintoism became the state religion of Japan and the Emperor
was revered as a living god.

In the same year (1868) Yasakuni Shrine was established on Kudan Hill in Tokyo. The
shrine is known as "The Patriots Shrine" or "The Shrine of Religious Souls," e.g. the
souls of all those who were killed in war were enshrined at Yasakuni. It was the
guardian shrine of Japan and second only to the Emperor in religious importance.
Although the government of the Meiji Emperors was constitutionally formed in 1889,
the army ever so slowly began asserting itself once again. By the 1930's the army was
at the height of its influence. Then, in October 1941, General Hideko Tojo became
Prime Minister. From such a position he had almost total control over the civil
government. He instilled into the armed forces the old Samurai ideology that the
soldier was divine and wars divinely sanctioned; therefore, if one died heroically in
battle, one would become a god and join the guardian spirits at Yasakuni Shrine.

This was most evident during the final days of World War II. The Japanese Kamikaze
(Divine Wind) pilots gave their lives by the hundreds for their country. Before their
last suicide mission each pilot's final act was to sit down and write a "death
statement." One such statement reads as follows:

"Flight Petty Officer 1st Class Ataru Shimamura, Ohka Squadron
17th Term, Category B, Graduate Naval Training Course, Age 20

"I shall fall, smiling and singing songs. Please visit and worship at
Yasakuni Shrine this spring. There I shall be a cherry blossom,
smiling, with many other colleagues. I died smiling, so please
smile. Please do not cry. Make my death meaningful." 

The surviving kamikaze pilots of the KHA (manned rocket bomb) squadrons meet
each year at Yasakuni Shrine on March 21st. Their nickname is "The Thunder Gods."

THE MEDAL This is not an official Japanese government medal. The Shinto
priests at Yasakuni Shrine give the medals to the families of soldiers (armed forces
personnel) who were killed in action. After praying at the shrine the families leave
a donation in exchange for the medal. The medal is unique, having a brooch, ribbon
and pendant; however, it in no way is made up like the typical medal as we envision it.

RIBBON It is a silk-like purple cord, 1/8 inch in diameter, 12 inches long, and
includes a 1 inch tassel at each end. The cord is tied in a knot, with one inch loops
extending from the top and to both sides. The two tasseled ends hang 2 inches below
the knot.

PENDANT The pendant is 1.5mm in thickness and made of a dull white non-
magnetic metal. It is 25mm in diameter and in the shape of a five-petaled cherry
blossom with a leaf between the petals. On the reverse are Japanese characters which roughly translate into "soldiers medal." A knob suspension, 4 mm high and 2.5 mm wide is soldered to the top of the center petal of the cherry blossom. Through the knob passes a 7 mm ring while another 7 mm ring connects the first ring to the center of the knot.

**BROOCH** The brooch is a simple safety pin with a curled loop in the center. Through this loop passes a 7 mm ring which is attached around the top loop of the cord.

The overall length of the medal from the top of the safety pin brooch to the end of the tassels is approximately 115 mm (4-1/2 inches). The width at the widest part, the bows, is about 50 mm (2 inches).

(The author is an insurance agent residing in Yucca Valley, California. He is one of the "Chosen Few" veterans of the 1st Marine Division in Korea and retired as a MSgt in 1968 after 20 years USMC service. His collecting interests focus on wound badges, wound medals and related documents.)
Often, particularly in non-medal collecting circles, mention of German medals or decorations conjures up visions almost exclusively of awards for military feats and bravery on the field of combat. This notion has been reinforced through the years in literature and by the media, particularly when focusing on the era around WWI and on the Third Reich (1933-1945) with their numerous Iron Cross variations and vast array of other military decorations.

While this may have some basis in fact, the reality, particularly in the case of the decorations of the German states near the turn of the century, is quite different. Though awards for military valor were common, there were also many others given for civil pursuits. Awards were issued for lifesaving (Lebensrettung), arts and sciences (Kunst und Wissenschaft), volunteer firefighting (Freiwilligen Feuerwehr), agriculture (Landwirtschaft), nursing and care for the wounded (Krankenpflege), and meritorious labor (Treue in der Arbeit), to name just a few of many types. In addition, awards to commemorate such diverse events as royal birthdays, ascensions to thrones, installation jubilees, royal proclamations, long service/employment in royal courts and deeds of valor during disasters such as floods or fires were awarded with regularity by several German states.

Wedding anniversaries were no exception. Weddings among members of reigning families, given the relatively limited number of available candidates of the same general age group and parallel noble standing, traditionally were cause for considerable merrymaking, as they often implied the continuation of the family line and thus position of influence. In addition, at this time royal houses enjoyed a considerable amount of popularity among their subjects. A quick review of two common German states, weddings jubilee medals, medals for the tie that binds.