



## OCCUPIED IN JAPAN

At the end of WWII and during the first full year of Occupied Japan, older troops were rotating home as their accumulative points allowed. Newer soldiers like me had only a few bitter experiences of war. I was a PFC in the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Paratroop Division.

Ex-Japanese soldiers mostly hid from sight and sometimes tried to continue the war against us. But the Japanese people suffered abuse from a few Americans too. However, most of the natives welcomed us with friendliness.

The first few months after the war, we ate most meals outside as we moved up and down the country. Typical of army life, we lined up to pass by the cooks, who slapped a pile of something called “C- ration food” onto our mess kits.

When we finished eating, we stood in another line near four metal barrels. The first barrel was for leftovers from our mess. We turned our mess kits upside down and

slammed every bit of food into the barrel. Then we stepped to the next barrel, full of hot, soapy water, and sloshed the kit around. The next two barrels contained clear hot water to rinse our eating utensils.

Near the garbage barrel, Japanese men, women, and children (dressed in oversized britches) pushed and shoved, retrieving whatever food fell in. Most of the time, older Japanese overpowered the kids and grabbed the leftovers.

At that garbage barrel, I saw Masao Otomo for the first time. He was so little that most often he seemed to get beat out for a bite to eat. I joined other soldiers in handing food directly to the kids before cleaning the mess kit. I picked Masao to share my food.

He always smiled and joked with my buddy and me. We knew he was joking by the way he blinked his eyes, apparently questioning why we didn't laugh until he did. He was the funniest, serious little boy in the world. I began to watch for him at every garbage barrel lineup.

"Hey, GI," Masao yelled to me. "Me stay with you, GI?" Through signs, signals and jumbled talks, we discovered Masao was an orphan. His family had been killed in the American bombing raids.

When our company moved north, we slipped Masao into our truck, and shared our ponchos and blankets for sleeping on the ground. Our officers looked the other way and Masao "belonged" to Billy B. Davis and me. A round-faced, scrawny kid, Masao was only 4 feet 2 inches tall and 14 years old. I was over 6 feet tall but only 16 years old. However, we were ages apart in our life's roles.

Today, many younger folks do not know that near the end of WWII, here at home, seventeen years old boys were being drafted. And many under aged boys lied about their age to join in the fight for our country.

Our Division had moved from the Tokyo area to the far end of Honshu and Hokkaido Islands. Every city in Japan lay in ruins. We saw bombed-out buildings, rubble-filled streets and hungry people everywhere as we paraded through cities and villages to show our presence. We rode in Army trucks to the outskirts of a town – marched through it and reloaded at the far side.

Other times we rode trains. Army troops always had exclusive use of certain passenger cars on trains. Even when only a handful of soldiers rode, the citizens could not use military cars, but were required to crowd and cram in other cars.

Sgt. Borders grinned and invited a grown man into our car. Then, in a vicious pretense of preparing the Japanese man for a parachute jump, he pushed him from our car as we sped north. Some soldiers cheered. Masao, Billy B. and I watched in horror. We pressed our faces against the small windows to see the man bounce, flip, and crash into pilings and rocks along the deep ditch. Sergeant Borders pointed to us and declared a similar fate would befall us if we told anybody. “You young guys just don’t know how much I hate the Japs.” He was not turned in.

But we broke the rules by keeping Masao with us. Masao and I exchanged English and Japanese. We pointed or touched objects to learn the names. His English increased to fluency before my Japanese became tolerable.

The older soldiers had “room-boys” to clean their muddy combat boots, wash clothes, make the cots and keep mosquito nets in working condition. These “room-boys”

were full-grown girls. In our company, Billy B. and I were unique. We had a real room-boy ---Masao. I had a steady girlfriend back in Arkansas and Billy B. had a sweetheart in Louisiana. Masao appreciated the dedication to our commitments back home. Actually we were too young to know any advantages of having a girl for a room-boy.

Billy B. and I figured our room-boy did a better job at keeping our boots clean and our clothes washed than the “Ojosans”. He didn’t keep us awake at night, either. He slept on a makeshift cot between us and stored his accumulated GI soap and goodies under his cot. At the PX, soldiers bought a carton of cigarettes every week with our ration cards. Since I didn’t smoke, Masao disappeared into town and sold our ‘stuff’ on the black market. He got more money than my month’s pay (even with Jump Pay added). He liked to show us his wad of money from sales. But we didn’t think of his ever-increasing yen as real money.

One or two cigarettes paid for a couple of hour’s labor. It cost me five Camels to have a tailor cut down a GI uniform to Masao’s midget size. Our company commander ordered me to remove the division patch from Masao’s uniform; but he still looked like a compact American soldier.

Severe cold winter slowed outdoor training. The missing glass in every window of our partly bombed out Japanese barracks forced us to sleep in arctic bags, and we could not depend on the old coal furnaces for steady heat. Snow was about four feet deep.

One night Masao stood guard duty with me at the huge coal pile. Local townspeople had been slipping under the wire fence and running off with precious pieces of coal. I shouldered my M-1 rifle and marched slowly around the coal pile, while Masao

handed out big hunks of coal to needy citizens coming to the fence. I figured the Army would hang me if I was caught, but I knew the extremely cold nights made sleeping hard in paper-walled, thin-shelled homes.

A soft-spoken Japanese ex-soldier invited Masao and me to his home after making several round-trips to the coal pile. We went the following Saturday and were introduced to his wife and their two school-aged daughters. I nodded a lot and Masao relayed our conversations. The main topic was about my life back home. They were assured that I knew every movie star pictured in an old "Life Magazine". (I sort of told it as fact).

The petite girls danced for us while twirling umbrellas with bright pink cherry blossoms printed all over them. Their dresses looked like geisha kimonos I had seen in pictures. Our visit remained formal and I felt like a country boy who had gone uptown. I clapped after each dance and frequently thanked the parents. They bowed and thanked me, too.

We ate the evening meal with them. I did the honors of opening a large can of GI issue peaches that I brought from camp. That was our meal.

We accepted an invitation to spend the night and visit. We all huddled under a blanket on the floor of the only room. Everybody's feet and knees bumped as we closed in tightly. A small metal pot with one tiny piece of smoldering coal was placed in the center under our blanket.

The smoke filtered around my neck, but didn't have the same good smell of red oak burning in our stove back home. We laughed and talked but mostly nodded to acknowledge what others said. My butt and back were freezing, but my shoulders and

front were getting hot under the blanket -- reminding me of our old wood fireplace in Arkansas.

A coal-oil lamp burned while we talked, and bedtime came without a warning when Mamasan blew out the lamp. Solo trips were made outside for the toilet. The one-hole privy stunk worse than the coal. Every time the door opened, a whiff of the “honey-bucket” odor jumped me.

The girls rolled out little cane mattresses, side by side, in the same room where we had sat. They gave me a quilt and a bag of rice hulls for a pillow. The others shared quilts.

I returned to Arkansas early 1947 and left a big bag full of Yen for my friend. He added them to his sack. Masao and I kept in touch a few years. He wrote more letters than I did. I was busy chasing girls (my sweetheart having found another boyfriend while I was overseas.) I returned to high school and went to college.

Masao entered the university in Sendai, working toward a chemical engineering degree. He wrote that he was not required to take final exams because of his excellent grades, especially in physics.

I came home with stacks of Japanese yen. With each letter, I enclosed yen for my friend’s school and living expenses. The yen held little value to me, but added to his supply, it fed and put Masao through college.

Our letters slowed as my Japanese room-boy and I slid into busy lives.

After I failed to answer several of his letters, Masao wrote my mother to inquire of my health and activities. Time passed.

I ended that original story several years ago. With a copy of my story, a Baptist Missionary, on a visit to Japan, took the article and copies of my old letters and found Masao. We have written many letters and caught-up on missing years. He became a principal of a highly ranked High School and also a University. He married; his son is a medical doctor, and his daughter is a Chemist.

I think of Masao often as the years pass. I would like to sit with my old friend or walk the streets of Sendai to refresh our memories. We had it good during those bad days.