

~ SUMMER - 2017 ~

OBON SOCIETY

Connecting Families..... Healing Hearts



U.S. Marine Marvin Strombo with captured flags in the South Pacific; 1944

The Marvin Strombo Story **Part 1**

The holiday season is a good time for us to pause, and take a look back at a very busy year for OBON SOCIETY and one remarkable story whose message traveled around the world.

Last February OBON SOCIETY received a rather ordinary email. We receive emails like this practically everyday, so didn't think much about it.

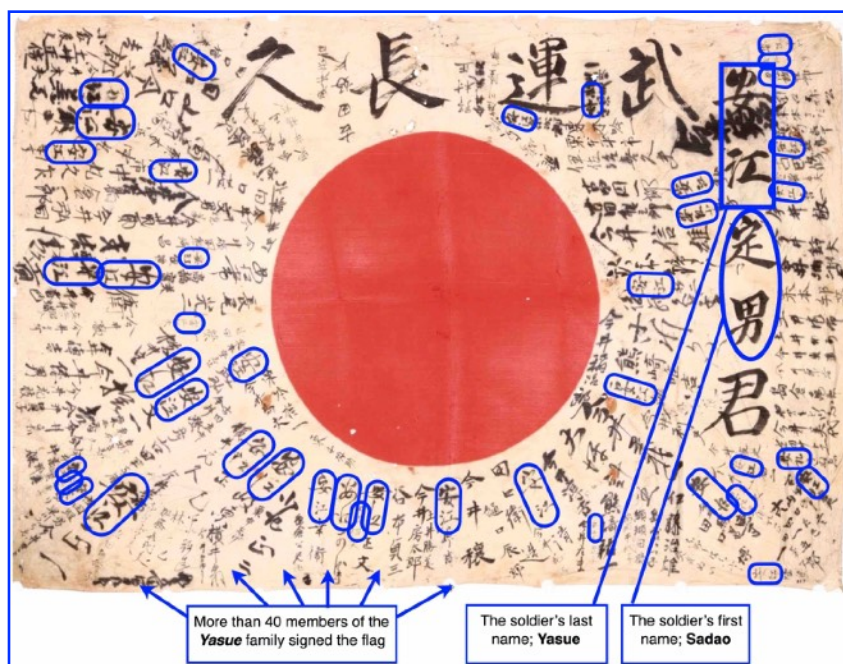
Subject
Flag return

Message

Hello, My name is Sandra Williamson. My father Marvin Strombo would like to return his flag, however, he does not want to put it in the mail. We have a friend who is traveling to Oregon this week. Is there any way he could hand the flag personally to someone there? Please let me know if this is a possibility.

We replied to Sandra exactly like we do every email and assured her we would be honored to receive her father's flag and conduct a search.

Their family friend, Joseph Tachovsky, stopped by on his way to a conference and delivered the flag. At first glance we noticed that many signatures matched the name of the soldier who once carried this flag. From past experiences we knew that the young man who carried this flag must have been surrounded by uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews.



But even more significantly was the fact that this came to us from a living veteran of WWII. Whenever OBON SOCIETY is contacted by a veteran we give their request a *'high priority'* and *'fast track'* attention. We immediately set to work on this flag.

The numerous matching family names gave our scholars an abundance of clues. Within a couple weeks they had determined which region in Japan this soldier had lived. Deeper research traced this item into a specific community, and eventually to the house of a local farmer.

We had found the family. Now we had to make contact.



Tatsuya Yasue

Breaking such unexpected news to a family member is delicate work. OBON SOCIETY called on a Shinto Priest to have the first conversation with Mr. Tatsuya Yasue. He listened intently to the surprising information about his brother's flag and then asked...

"Is the person who has my brother's flag the same person who brought it home from the war?"

The priest responded, "Yes."

What followed was a very long pause. Perhaps as long as two minutes of silence, then the brother asked the priest another question."



Sadao Yasue

"Do you think this person might know how my brother died, and where?"

The priest relayed this conversation to us. When we heard the questions the family was asking about their missing brother we were convinced his memory was very much alive. This was a unique situation. There was only one person on earth who could answer that question for this family, and he lived in Montana.

We realized that if Mr. Strombo were in good health and willing to travel, maybe he could meet this family and answer their questions about the missing brother. There was only one way to find out....we had to meet Mr. Strombo face to face and assess his health. We loaded the car and set off.



From Astoria, we followed the Columbia River, through Washington state, into Idaho and finally across the Bitterroots and into Montana. It was a long drive but eventually we arrived at Missoula and found the neat, tidy house where Marvin lives with his daughter Sandra and her husband.



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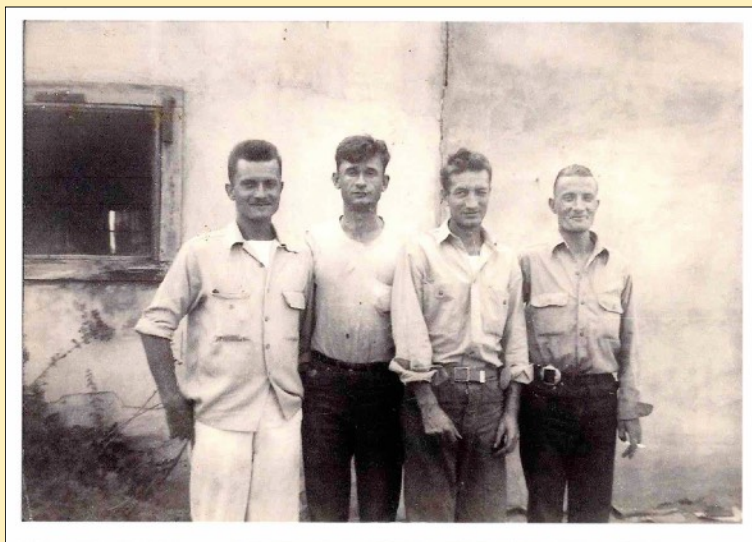
Just as we hoped, we found Marvin to be a healthy, alert and charming gentleman, with a sharp memory and a polite demeanor. At the age of 92 he still splits firewood. We had a long conversation and dinner with Marvin during which time this fascinating story unfolded of his life back when he was a teenager.



Marvin was born and grew up on a remote Montana ranch, far from any city or conveniences. He, along with his four brothers and sister, worked from daylight to dark to help the family survive. It was a hardscrabble life of endless labor for these children, but this ranching life formed these boys into tough, strong and brave young men.



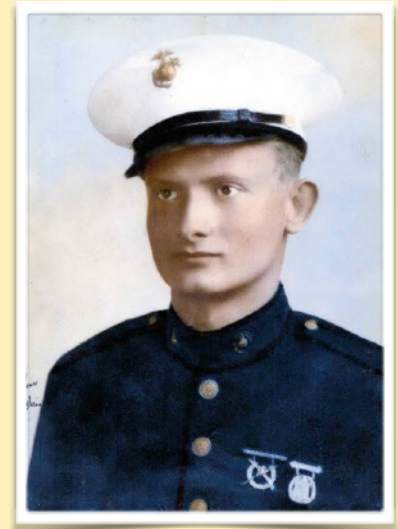
By the time Marvin graduated from high school in 1943 the war was on and three of his brothers were already in the military. Marvin indicated that he wanted to join the Marines but his mother objected to the idea. The family was already well represented in the military and offering another son was too high of a risk. Besides, Marvin was more useful remaining on the ranch and helping his father with the work.



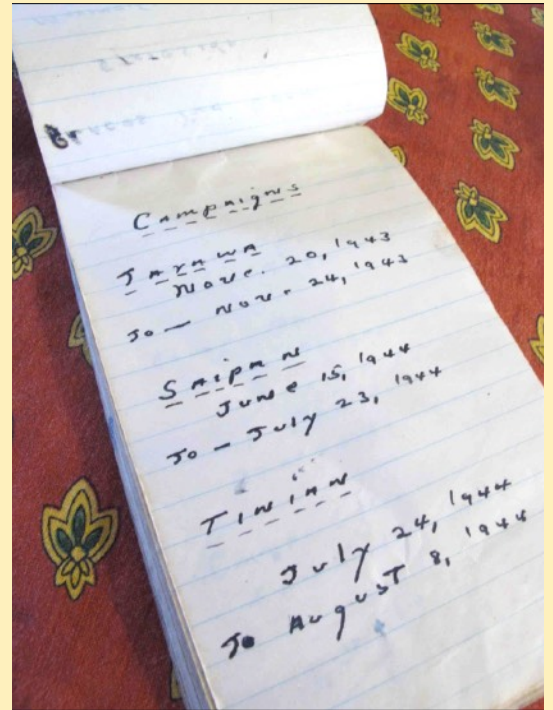
Marvin graduated from high school in the Spring of 1943 and he still recalls that it was that same year when he saw an electric light for the first time.

Having grown up with kerosene lamps and candles Marvin thought electric lights was astonishing. He put a chair next to the wall switch....and sat there flipping that switch up and down....again and again....all night long. He marveling how, with the flick of his finger, the entire room would be filled with light, and then fall into complete blackness.

Marvin remained at home all summer and worked around the ranch, but despite his mother's objections, he joined the Marines in August of that year. He passed boot camp with ease and was sent to the front lines in the battle for the Pacific.



Marvin's war experience was extensive. He fought in some of the hardest and most bitter campaigns of the entire Pacific war. His itinerary was neatly recorded in his pocket notebook, noting the name of each island battle and the dates he arrived and left.



After the surrender of the Japanese Marvin was sent to Nagasaki to oversee the city until the occupational forces could arrive. From there he returned to the states and back home to Montana.

Two of the Strombo boys had fought in the front lines of Europe while Marvin and brother Oliver had fought in the front lines of the Pacific. They came home with shrapnel under their skin, scars, hearing loss and nightmares, but all four boys survived the war.

We can only imagine how many sleepless nights their poor mother must have spent worrying about her four sons during the war. They were scattered on both sides of the globe; the occasional letters probably only added to the stress. But we can easily imagine the unspeakable joy she felt that day when all four boys were safely back on the ranch seated at the table and ready to devour one of her home-cooked dinners.



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Our assessment of Marvin health convinced us that he was in excellent shape and could endure the trip with no problems. But when we asked whether he would be interested in going to Japan he wanted to think about it. Several days later Marvin asked one question, "*How many hours is the trip to Japan?*"

Upon learning the flight took about ten hours Marvin immediately agreed to go.

He later explained that he made a trip each year to Portland, Oregon to visit his daughter, which was a 13 hour drive, and he knew that if he could sit in a car for that long he could certainly sit in a plane for ten hours.

Marvin was willing to go, so we next had to speak to the family in Japan. Sometimes the return of personal items is a deeply emotional occasion and they only want close family members to attend. Others ask to have the return take place by a priest in a Shrine, or sometimes by government officials. OBON SOCIETY always follows each family's wishes.

Upon speaking with the Yasue family and asking whether they would be interested in meeting Marvin, their reply came without hesitation.

"Yes!"

The trip was on!

OBON SOCIETY now had to transform this idea into an actual plan. This was not going to be easy. Marvin is 93 years old; Mr. Yasue is 89 and lives in a remote, mountainous region. We had hundreds of details to consider in order to make this distant meeting a reality.

Initially we planned to keep the group as small as possible. Four people can fit in two hotel rooms, two train seats and one taxi; four people can sit at one table or fit inside the same Japanese elevator. But this plan was changed when Marvin's two daughters and granddaughter offered to come along.

Next we planned to make our trip in the month of May or June, to avoid the heat of summer and peak tourists season. But this plan was changed when Mr. Yasue explained he is too busy for any interruptions in May because he must plant his rice and garden, and he is far too busy in June because he must harvest his tea. As a 89 year old active farmer he must plant and harvest when the season is right.



The Yasue family stated they preferred to receive their brother's flag on August 15th. That took care of deciding *when* we would travel. All that remained were the details.

OBON SOCIETY could not leave anything to chance; Marvin's health and safety were the top priority and of the upmost concern. This would require careful planning and a lot of thought.

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OBON SOCIETY staff in America and Japan examined every possible travel route, train schedule, hotel and restaurant. The walking distance between train stations and how many stairs were involved in each route was studied and discussed. The middle of August is peak travel season, so every train ticket, hotel, restaurant and bus had to be reserved in advance. Finally, after five months of planning, preparation our itinerary was locked in, and we were ready to go.

Everyone we spoke to felt this was a heartwarming story and encouraged us to get it in the news. However, every media outlet we contacted, from AARP Magazine to mainstream national news, declined having any interest in the story. Most didn't even bother to reply.

Finally, the Kyodo News (a Japanese news bureau that provides content to other media outlets) sent a reporter from Los Angeles and at the last moment the Associated Press in Portland picked up on the story. This attracted the attention of a local Portland station who interviewed Marvin two days before our departure.



Some people are nervous or intimidated when faced with a camera, but Marvin was as natural and relaxed as any well-rehearsed professional. He never flinched. The media loved him and his story.

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Finally August 10th arrived. It was the day of our departure.

We assembled at the Portland Airport. Marvin, his two daughters Brenda, Sandra and granddaughter Emily, along with family friend Joseph would be making the trip. Two OBON SOCIETY staff would be accompanying them to Japan, along with a young filmmaker whom OBON SOCIETY recruited to document the journey. Other OBON SOCIETY staff would join us in Japan.

Associated Press's initial story received a good response so they asked to follow Marvin through the airport. The Asian bureau of AP would pick up the story in Japan, we were informed.

(Below Brenda helps her father conceal the microphone as the AP journalist adjusts her camera.)



Delta Airlines has a convenient, direct flight to Tokyo from Portland. The Delta staff met Marvin at the ticket counter and escorted him into their lounge to wait for the departure.



Some of the Portland based Delta flight crew had seen Marvin on the television and recognized him as he boarded the plane. Even the captain came back during the flight to greet their special guest. Marvin had an excellent seat and good service. All he had to do is sit back and relax.

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The flight across the ocean was smooth and easy. Marvin stayed awake almost the entire way. This was going to be a big adventure...the next stop was Tokyo, Japan.



COMING SOON:

Marvin in Japan PART II

If you would like to be a part of this humanitarian work
we welcome your support.

Checks can be mailed to:

**OBON SOCIETY
P.O. Box 282
Astoria, Oregon 97103**

**On-line Credit Card / PayPal
donations**

<http://obonsociety.org/donate/>

*Thank you very much for
your generous contribution
towards OBON SOCIETY*

OBON SOCIETY is a 501(C)(3)

Consult your accountant to learn how deductions from your taxes benefits you.

***If you have a flag, or know someone who does, please contact OBON SOCIETY.
We will return it to its proper family in Japan and happily answer any questions you might have.***