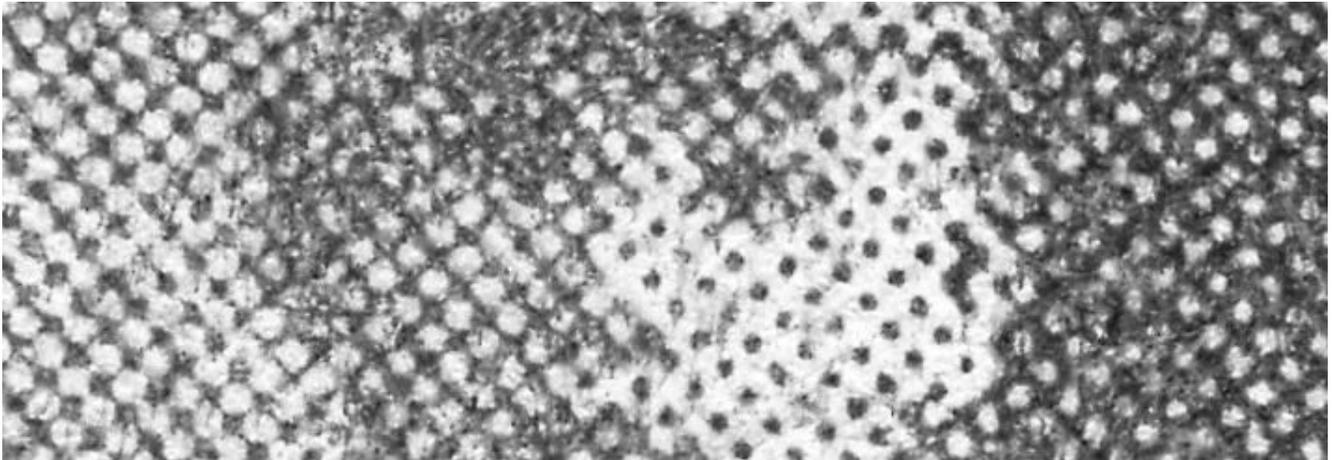


OBON SOCIETY: Three Returns in November

November 2019 Japan Trip



Connecting the Dots

Earlier this year we were sent four boxes of battlefield souvenirs that had been kept in a Canada since the end of WWII. The person who sent us these items turned out to be one of the most interesting and compelling individuals we had ever met, although we didn't know that at the time.

Our staff researched each item he sent, as we do everything, and soon, by *connecting the dots*, we had found the family belonging to one tiny photo album. We communicated with the gentleman who sent us this album and he wanted to meet this family personally, which became more complex than what anyone would imagine because of the demands of his unique career and also because he resides in Nairobi, Kenya, which is a long, long ways away from Japan.

Our staff connected more dots which connected to another family, and then another. While this was happening our research team headquartered in Tokyo had a growing number of issues for us to resolve so, in the end, we decided to make a trip to Japan ourselves, meet with staff and return all three items. Also, we would meet up with the gentleman from Nairobi.

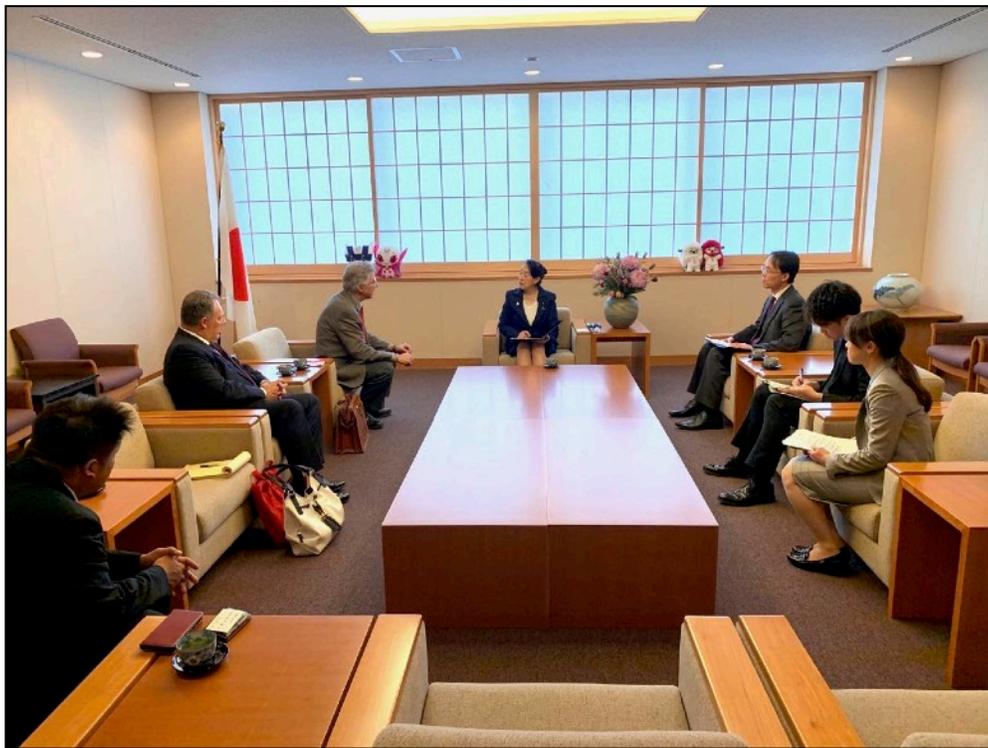


We spent hours in meetings with colleagues who had many questions about how to streamline our search process and how to merge our operations into a more efficient team.

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Later that evening Dr. Jarat Chopra flew in from Africa and we enjoyed a late night bowl of noodles as we became acquainted and talked about the upcoming days. The following morning we had meetings with Shinto Priests and with the Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Later we had press conferences at the famous *Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan* and with the *Kansai Press Club* in Osaka.



With the media behind us it was time to return the items to their families. First was the photo album Dr. Chopra had sent us which we traced to the Shikata family. Dr. Chopra had tried for 30 years to return these items and his 22 hours of flight time from Nairobi to Japan was proof of his sincerity. Many members of this community gathered to witness the return of this family's missing brother item.



O BON SOCIETY had scanned several of the photos and enlarged them for the community to see. To our surprise Mr. Shikata immediately recognized this family portrait and identified himself in shorts and white tee shirt. The purpose of this photo, Mr. Shikata explained, was to reassure the older brothers at war that everyone, including women and children, were working in the rice fields growing food for the family during their absence.



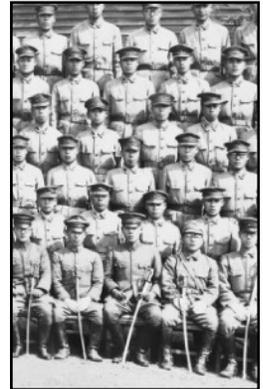
After visiting the family graves to welcome home their brother's missing spirit, the Shikata family invited us into their home for sweets, tea and more conversation.

In this photo album was a small clipping that appeared in a local newspaper during the war. Apparently his mother had clipped out and sent to her son while he was stationed in the Philippines seventy-five years ago. It was through this small article that O BON SOCIETY scholars found clues, *connected the dots* and quickly located the correct family.



Hideo Shikata

The following day we were up early and traveled to another *return*, this one was scheduled to take place in the office of the mayor in a medium sized city within Shizuoka Prefecture. Local staffers escorted us into a small room where we met the nephew of the missing soldier. Mr. Nagasawa arrived with several envelopes of photos and papers, of all that existed of his missing uncle.



Left: We moved to the mayor's office for short speeches and a simple *returning* ceremony. Mr. Nagasawa brought along the portrait of his missing uncle.

Above: The mayor and local officials closely examined the flag, noting the signatures of many prominent families who continue to reside in the local area.



This flag had been on display in the Chippewa County Historical Society in Wisconsin for many years and it was the staff of the museum who felt this personal item belongs back with the family in Japan.

A couple days later we were escorted into the office of the Vice-mayor of Kyoto city where the next *returning* ceremony was scheduled to occur which involved a personal item belonging to a former resident of this city.

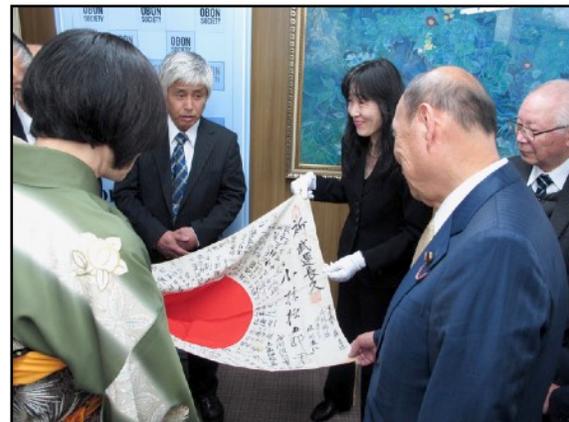


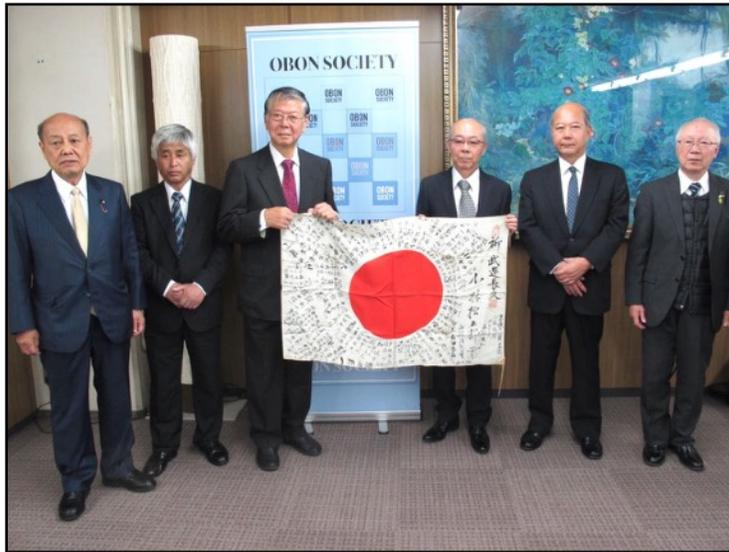
The vice-mayor Ms. Murakami was attired in a traditional kimono for this ceremony.

Appearing to represent the Kobayashi family and receive his remains was four nephews who came dressed in their formal attire. They brought along a small portrait of their missing uncle.



Above: The nephews brought a small portrait of their uncle Matsugoro Kobayashi, apparently taken while he was in the Philippines.
Below: Keiko handed the personal flag to the eldest nephew which was immediately unfurled and examined for signatures.





At the conclusion of this ceremony the eldest of the nephews was eager to tell us about a remarkable event. After his recent retirement from work he fulfilled a long-held promise to visit the famous thirty-three shrines of the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage. During the walk from shrine to shrine he contemplated his ancestors and prayed for them. Within a week of returning home from this pilgrimage he received the call that his missing uncle's remains had been found.

Dr. Jarat Chopra was somewhat of a mysterious character to us at first. We did not pry into his personal history but clearly there was a story behind this man. Occasionally a detail would appear in his emails that revealed a bit of information, however, it was not until after several months of communication that we saw his eleven page resume and then began to understand this unique and complex man.



Dr. Chopra, among other professions, is the person sent to negotiate with warlords and splinter army groups in those rare places on earth where governments do not exist, but medical care and food aid must arrive. The U.N. calls upon his unique abilities to help them in places like El Salvador, East Timor, Northern Iraq, Somalia and other places that average people would be afraid to visit. He also is a leading authority on peace maintenance, international law and conflict resolution.

His family is native to India. When we asked about his *early* family history he mentioned the name of some relative who put up opposition during Alexander the Greats eastward intrusion. In more recent times his family suffered severely when they opposed the invasions of Britain's East India Company in 1849, and were punished by having their family treasures carried off to England as booty. In recent years his great uncle, a physician for the British Army, perished during the surrender of Singapore in 1942.

Prompt, good-natured, generous with information and extremely kind-hearted, he was absolutely a pleasure to be with every minute of every day. We asked him to deconstruct some interviews and meetings he had attended with us and his analysis revealed such fascinating insights into political maneuvering, invisible to us, that our jaws dropped open. He could read a room of high officials and evaluate the shifting positions and jockeying that was occurring with the same clarity X-rays can see through skin. We felt like we were attending graduate school.

And yet, he was no prima-donna. Subway trains and casual meals on the fly were just fine with him, as were inexpensive businessmen hotels so tiny you barely could squeeze between the bed and the wall. And yet, on his first morning in Tokyo he wanted to find a post office to buy a stamp and mail off a handwritten letter to his young daughter. "Yes," he explained, "the electronic mail used these days does not produce memorable artifacts, so I write real letters with stamps to her, should one day she decide to keep them."