SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Returning of *Yosegaki Hinomaru* to Where They Belong

A Discussion with Mr. Rex Ziak

Abstract

On Thursday, August 31, 2023, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted the virtual policy briefing, "Returning of 'Yosegaki Hinomaru' to Where They Belong." In this event, Mr. Rex Ziak, co-founder of the OBON SOCIETY, shared his insight on the return of the "Yosegaki Hinomaru" flag to bereaved families in Japan and the significance of the return for both the U.S. and Japan. The Honorable Haruko Arimura, member of the House of Councillors Japan, then provided her commentary on the Japanese government's efforts to repatriating more flags to the motherland. Then, Professor Hidemi Mutsuda, representing the bereaved Mutsuda family who participated in a recent flag return ceremony in Japan, shared his reflection of the return. Their presentations were followed by a Q&A session with the audience.

Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series presented this discussion and held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community along with members of academia, think tanks, and media, as well as current and retired members of the U.S. military, Japanese media, and members and supporters of the U.S.-Japan communities in the

United States. Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President of Sasakawa USA, provided introductory remarks, facilitated this event, and moderated the Q&A discussion.

Mr. Rex Ziak's Presentation

Mr. Ziak opened his remark by quoting Dr. Richard N. Haass, a prominent U.S. diplomat, "government officials rarely, if ever, have time to ponder history…" [1] Mr. Ziak finds this unfortunate as he enjoys looking back at history to examine and reflect on the past. A recent example of such was the U.S.-Japan leaders 'summit on August 23, 2023. Mr. Ziak patiently waited for someone to point out the significant anniversary of this meeting between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. However, no one recognized that this meeting occurred on nearly the 170th anniversary since the very first encounter between Americans and Japanese. Commodore Matthew Perry landed in Japan in July of 1853. Before that date, no American had ever seen or spoken to anyone from Japan.

In these past 170 years the U.S.-Japan relationship, there is a period of four years of brutal war, which has cast a "dark cloud" that continues to linger over the two nations. Thousands of men from both sides had lost their lives, so when the war finally ended the two nations faced the task of recovering the remains of their fallen soldiers. In the case of the U.S., their Congress bolstered the U.S. Army Graves Registration Service with funding of USD190 million (roughly USD3 billion today). They employed 13,000 workers to exhume, identify and repatriate the remains of the fallen U.S. soldiers, from both in the European and Pacific theaters, back to their families. The Japanese faced a different situation. The Japanese political and military leaders, along with major manufacturing, academia, and media representatives were indicted for their involvement in WWII and imprisoned. With all their leadership confined in jail there existed no leadership to conduct a massive recovery program like the U.S. Furthermore, General Douglas McArthur, who oversaw the General Headquarters in Japan, did not appropriate resources to support repatriating the enemy combatants 'remains. As a result, the remains of Japanese soldiers were not recovered and quickly disintegrated into the sands and jungle of the Pacific Islands. These forgotten remains of missing soldiers are extremely difficult to find today and nearly impossible to return to their family. In

[1] Richard N. Haass, "Defining U.S. Foreign Policy in a Post-Post-Cold War World, US Department of State," April 22, 2002, https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/p/rem/9632.htm.

2015, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Iwo Jima and learned that the remains of many Japanese soldiers are mixed in with the sands. A photo, taken during the visit to Iwo Jima, shows Prime Minister Abe expression of despair and helplessness towards the forgotten Japanese soldiers. In 2023, the Americans estimated that 39,636 U.S. servicemen are missing from the war in the Pacific whereas Japan lists more than 1.12 million missing servicemen. Of the forty thousand Americans, the U.S. Department of Defense estimates about 80 percent of these were from aircrafts that crashed into the waters or were on the ships that sunk. Meanwhile a majority of the 1.12 million missing Japanese are a direct result of Japan's inability to freely recover their servicemen in a timely manner after the war.

Though repatriating all remains of Japanese soldiers may be difficult, Mr. Ziak argues there does exist another option. Every Japanese serviceman carried a unique, small Japanese flag (*Yosegaki Hinomaru*) that was made specifically for them by family and friends. Since these flags were unique to each Japanese soldier, they made sought after souvenirs for the Allied soldier to bring home from the battlefield. Today, across America, it is estimated that more than 50,000 such personalized flags exist and as such, they are the only surviving remains of many missing servicemen in existence. Because each flag was created in Japan by one group of people for one single individual they are as specific and unique as a fingerprint and can be traced back to their original family. Because of this unique quality which makes tracing them to family 100% accurate, these "Non-Biological Human Remains" (a term coined by the OBON SOCIETY) have taken the place of human remains for hundreds of families whose father or brother or grandfather went missing in the war. Additionally, not only does the returned flag bring peace to the family, but it also makes a cross-cultural connection between the Japanese families and American veteran families who are returning their souvenir Y*osegaki Hinomaru*. Many Americans feel those flags that their fathers and grandfathers brought home should return to the families in Japan. They want to heal the lingering grief among Japanese families and display the enduring friendship between our nations.

Mr. Ziak recently played a pivotal role in the return of one particular *Yosegaki Hinomaru* flag that was on display aboard the USS Lexington Museum ship in Corpus Christi, Texas. The OBON SOCIETY received a request from a family member in Hiroshima, Japan, stating the flag belonged

to his grandfather. This individual provided photographic proof of his grandfather, Shigeyoshi Mutsuda, holding the flag and explained the flag shown on display had signatures of his relatives and neighbors who were still alive. When the OBON SOCIETY presented this proof to the USS Lexington Museum, the staff soon responded that they felt the flag should return to the original family. This *Yosegaki Hinomaru* had been on display for 29 years during which time more than nine million visitors had viewed the misidentified flag. But for the Mutsuda family, receiving the *Yosegaki Hinomaru* gave the same relief and closure they would have felt had the grandfather's biological remains been returned. The return of the missing grandfather's flag reunited the family. They all felt his presence and declared this moment to be an essential moment in their family's history. This specific example shows how, with the cooperation and support of the U.S. and Japanese governments, tens of thousands of these "non-biological human remains" could return to bereaved families so they can experience the sort of closure every family deserves, correct the oversights from the past, and demonstrate true friendship between our nations.

Hon. Haruko Arimura's Comments

Following Mr. Ziak's remarks, Hon. Arimura provided brief commentary on Japan's efforts to repatriate the *Yosegaki Hinomaru* flags. Seven years ago, Hon. Arimura raised the concern at a Diet meeting about *Yosegaki Hinomaru* flags that were sold online not just on U.S. websites, but also on Japanese websites. At that meeting, Prime Minister Abe along with his Cabinet ministers from Health, Economy, and Foreign Affairs expressed their distaste that the flags were being sold online to make profit and that the flags should be respected with dignity. Once this discussion was broadcasted nationwide, online services such as eBay established an internal policy to discourage any users from selling *Yosegaki Hinomaru* flags and sought to find and return such flags to appropriate families in Japan. In two years, the U.S. and Japan will mark the 80th anniversary since the end of WWII, making it difficult for younger generations to sustain this repatriation program as nearly 90 percent of Japan's population are born after WWII. Nonetheless, Hon. Arimura is confident that the two countries can continue to heal from their past with true friendship such as when Prime Minister Abe visited Pearl Harbor and hugged American survivors. Current Japanese Members of Parliament will continue Prime Minister Abe's efforts.

Prof. Hidemi Mutsuda's Reflection

Prof. Mutsuda, the grandson of Mr. Shigeyoshi Mutsuda and representative for the Mutsuda family, expressed his sincere appreciation for everyone who participated in the return. He then shared a story about Shigeyoshi's wife who recently passed away. Upon hearing the news that her husband's flag will be returned, the family postponed her funeral. After 80 years of being apart, the *Yosegaki Hinomaru* return ceremony reunited the couple once again and the family was filled with joy. The return ceremony was a scene of reconciliation and strong friendship between the U.S. and Japan. Prof. Mutsuda added that after the *Yosegaki Hinomaru* return ceremony, his father has become highly active in sharing this story with younger generations through local school visits and community meetings.

Q&A Session

A Q&A with the audience followed the presentation covering a wide range of topics. A summary of their responses is below:

- *Senninbari*, or "thousand stitches," is another unique long fabric that Japanese soldiers carried during WWII. A thousand knots were stitched on a long fabric by one thousand women which was thought to deflect the bullets and protect soldiers. This fabric also made good souvenirs for Allied soldiers, but they usually do not have names written on the fabric, making it extremely difficult to return to the Japanese families.
- The OBON SOCIETY has neither a marketing nor outreach team in advertising their activities and will not purchase any non-biological remains. All the items they receive are brought to them voluntarily. The organization receives multiple inquiry emails asking how an American person could return a non-biological remain to a Japanese family.
- Mr. Ziak's goal for OBON SOCIETY is to return one flag per day, which will make 365 flags returned annually.
- The organization does not have one method of identifying and returning the remains. The process is on a case-by-case basis.
- If a belonging cannot be identified, the OBON SOCIETY keeps an archive and stores every item. The organization will continue to search for the Japanese families who are long waiting for the *Yosegaki Hinomaru* return.

- OBON SOCIETY has received items from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Scotland, Wales, Spain, Chile, Mexico, Singapore, Marshall Islands, Italy, the Netherlands and England. The U.S. should lead the return process and encourage all allied nations to follow suit.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Mr. Ziak, Hon. Arimura, and Prof. Mutsuda for proving their insights and reflection on the return of the "Yosegaki Hinomaru" flag. Sasakawa USA also thanks the Q&A participants and attendees for joining us in this engaging discussion.

The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

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