

TWO OLD SOLDIERS – 50 YEARS LATER

(by Ed Pippenger)

Could it happen? Two young soldiers living only yards apart in 1950 in a foreign land, and never meeting, find each other more than 50 years later via the Internet and the telephone? IT HAPPENED!!

I was a twenty year old “buck sergeant” serving with the 2nd Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, in Camp Ainura outside of Sasebo in the southern prefecture of Kyushu Japan, in the early months of 1947. A part of my battalion was called upon to serve as a security force in the city of Kobe that summer, so I and my buddies after a long and miserable train ride arrived in Kobe to take up our duties. Headquarters Company was “beefed up’ with troops from a couple of the line companies for this mission. Arriving in Kobe we were quartered in a group of Quonset huts in East Camp, just inside the front gate on the left side of the road, and directly across the road from the command stockade.

I had an 870 MOS (Chemical Warfare NCO) and was assigned to Headquarters Company. In Camp Ainura I was the NCO in charge of the regimental ammo dump. After arriving in Kobe I was assigned to the S-2 office and was not part of the security guard that pulled guard duty around the city of Kobe and the piers. But I didn’t get out of guard duty all together. Every other day I was the “Sergeant of the Guard” for the camps interior guard force. Corporals of the guard and privates of the guard were made up of troops from the quartermaster and ordnance companies, and other service companies quartered in East Camp.

Let me digress here to point out a feature of the Army that people reading this in the 21st Century may be ignorant of. Up until 1948 when President Truman changed the order of things, the army was segregated by color. The Negro soldiers (that’s what we called African Americans at the time) assigned to duties in and around Kobe were quartered in West Camp, on the “other side of town.”

In the summer of 1948 our battalion was relieved of duty by a battalion from the 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. The 25th was headquartered in Osaka and the 24th battalion was pulling duty in and around the town of Gifu. This battalion was an all black (Negro) Unit and was quartered in West Camp. Our battalion returned to Camp Ainura, but I and a number of other troops from the battalion were assigned to the 24th Division Artillery at Camp Hakata, outside of Fukuoka in Kyushu Prefecture. I had fallen in love with the city and people of Kobe and wanted to return if possible. The opportunity presented itself a few months later when my request for assignment to the Hyogo Military Government Team in Kobe was approved on the condition that I reenlist for an additional three years. I grabbed at it.

So, in December 1948 I was assigned to a quartermaster company in East Camp to await my discharge date and subsequent reenlistment. When all of the paper work was completed I moved out of the tin shack in East Camp and into the Fuji Hotel, just off Tor Road about a mile away. Pretty luxurious living for an infantry soldier but I adapted to the new life quickly. I even had my own jeep 24 hours a day since I was filling the office of team sergeant major. Colonel Gilman K. Crockett was our commanding officer and one of the finest field grade officers I ever met. He took me under his wing and I often traveled with him to ceremonies and meetings with Japanese officials around Hyogo Prefecture. He was the fourth ranking colonel in the army at this time.

The military occupation of Japan was taking some new twists now. General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces (SCAP) in Japan wanted to ease the appearance of an occupying force and give back more responsibility for governing the country to the Japanese people, Thus in 1949 a new term was born and we became the Hyogo Civil Affairs Team. No more military government. That didn't last long. A short time later we were to receive a lovely worded letter from SCAP stating that we "had worked our way out of a job", and the Japanese were ready to take over the responsibilities of their own governing. All civil affairs teams were to be disbanded and the troops would, "return to the organizations from which they came." The Japanese government was now ready to take on work that was previously administered by occupation forces. I moved back into East Camp but not with the Quartermaster. When Civil Affairs was disbanded a new organization came into being. Under the Kobe Port Command the office of Customs, Immigration and Quarantine was created with the officers and men from the civil affairs team filling the positions. I lucked out and was selected to fill one of the TO&E slots.

I had a new job. I was now quartered in a Quonset hut about 150 yards from the front gate on the right hand side of the road and probably close enough to John Hanick to hit him with a stone had I known he was there. But I didn't know, and we never met. It's possible that at some time before the Korean war and my departure from Japan we may have passed each other coming and going through the front gate or in the PX. Who knows? But we did meet over fifty years later (sort of).

In June of 2004 this 76 year old veteran now sucking oxygen from and oxygen concentrator almost 24 hours day, and spending most of his waking hours at his computer when not watching television began thinking of his younger days and the time spent in the army. His thoughts went back to East Camp so he pointed his cursor at GOOGLE, the Internet search engine with all the answers, and typed in "East Camp". Google had the answer. It pointed him to a web site built by John Hanick and displaying hundreds of images. There is the front gate to East Camp, and just inside the gate on the left was our mess hall building. Here is a shot taken

from a position near the front gate showing a street car just starting to make the left turn toward Sannomiya Train Station. Another photo shows a couple of young ladies crossing the street just outside the gate. And there is the Tor Hotel and here more pictures of harbor scenes.

So after a little investigation I was able to find a telephone number for James Hanick of Warren, Ohio. I chatted with James for a few minutes and he was able to give me a telephone number for John-san. The next long-distance call was to John and a new friendship was born. This was followed by a meeting over the Internet with a Japanese gentleman, Kanji Aranishi, who had visited John's web site and wrote a couple of messages in John's guest book. Much of Mr. Aranishi's exploration and searching has brought more photos and images to John's collection, and are filed in folders on this CD.