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Scouting in a Japanese War Camp

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The Spirit Lived On Scouting in a Japanese War Camp

by Linda Florence

My introduction to the story was set in motion when Bill (Seichi) Tahara's wife began her 1985 spring housecleaning and insisted that Bill "clean out all (his) junk". During the rather painful exercise, Bill came across some group shots from his Boy Scout days during WWII. Wondering if records of those days existed, he brought his memorabilia to national headquarters – not far from where he works in Ottawa. We talked only briefly, but long enough to convince me his experiences were worth sharing.

It was most definitely a long shot that, in a matter of weeks, Bill had located the former Scoutmaster of his troop – a successful businessman, now retired and living in Toronto, only an hour's drive from the site of the VI Canadian Jamboree. And, on July 10, I met Edward Shige Yoshida, 77, and his former Scout Bill around a picnic table outside the Media trailer at the Guelph Conservation Area campsite.

It was a delightful and fascinating meeting. Mr. Yoshida brought with him a treasure – his carefully kept record of the history of troubled times and the unique Scout Troop he formed "because the boys had nothing to do" in the war camp at Tashme, B.C., home to 2,200 Japanese Canadians evacuated from coastal towns and cities after Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbour in 1942.

Born in Victoria in 1908, the year Scouting came to Canada, and reared in Chemainus, B.C., Mr. Yoshida told a Scouting story that goes back to 1924 when his interest in the movement led him to become a Lone Scout with Boy Scouts of America. The Lone program was brand new in the U.S.A. and not yet established in Canadian Scouting.

Although transferred back to Canadian Scouting in 1925, he remained a Lone for five years, until he'd accomplished Scouting's highest tests (the seventh degree) and was able to fulfill a dream. In 1929, he started the 2nd Chemainus – an all-Japanese troop – the

first in the Dominion of Canada and, according to B.-P., who sent them a congratulatory cablegram on their third anniversary, "unique throughout the Empire".

It was a highly active, highly trained troop that boasted the first Japanese-Canadian Scout to be awarded a Certificate of Merit (he rescued a friend from drowning), the first Japanese-Canadian King's Scout, numerous wins in Scouting competitions and many good community works.

"In those days, I was with the young people all the time," Mr. Yoshida said. "Every activity pertaining to youth, I used to take part."

And then it was 1942. "They took my house away – my two guns," he said. "They sold it for \$800 and took a 10% commission!"

The authorities first sent Mr. Yoshida to the Hastings Park Clearing Station where, because of his work with Scouts, he was asked to supervise the boys' dorm. Bill Tahara, 13, also spent time at Hastings, but the two didn't meet until both were sent to Tashme in the interior of the province.

THE 1ST TASHME

On February 13, 1943, Mr. Yoshida organized a Scout Troop in Tashme where the B.C. Security Commission employed him as a clerk in the Welfare Department. It was sponsored by the Tashme Youth Organization and warranted and uniformed by Dominion Headquarters. There, 14 year old Bill, like most of the other boys who joined, became a Scout for the first time.

"Scouting was one of the most positive things that happened during the war," Bill said.

"He became a good Scout," Mr. Yoshida smiled. In fact, he became the first of the troop to earn the Silver Medal as an "individual all-round Scout" – presented on the troop's first anniversary.

Only two months after its formation,



Scoutmaster Yoshida.



the troop showed its mettle and training when a fire broke out in the single men's quarters. Fifty men were successfully evacuated and a news clipping of the day reads: "...the young Boy Scouts formed a guard to keep the crowd back and later prepared emergency accommodation for those driven from the damaged building."

The 1st Tashme built its skills and camaraderie in the outdoors with camping, tracking and woodsman training. "We studied nature a lot," Bill recalled. "It was really foreign to us because we'd all lived in the city."

In a photo taken on Nov. 28, 1943, the troop was 125 boys strong. The photo



Former Scout Bill Tahara (left) and Scoutmaster Yoshida shake hands the Scouting way at CJ85.

appeared in the Jan. 1944 issue of *The Scout Leader* with the simple caption: "Canadian-born Japanese Scouts of various troops (sic) carry on in one of the wartime communities." Possibly the editor found it difficult to believe that one troop could be so large.

Mr. Yoshida brought Wolf Cubs into the group and provided guidelines and help to a fledgling Tashme Girl Guide group as well. During Scout Week, Feb. 1944, the 1st Tashme proudly celebrated its first anniversary with a torchlight parade. "It was something," both men remembered, describing how the glow of 110 Scout-borne torches bounced from the snow to light up the whole town.

"At its peak, (the troop) was about 200 boys, all in uniform," Mr. Yoshida said proudly. They raised uniform money by putting on shows and with the willing help of parents. "I think parents sacrificed a lot of food for us to be in uniform," Bill added ruefully.

Shortly after the 1st Tashme celebrated its second anniversary, the end of the war seemed near and the government began dispersing people in preparation for closing down the camp. Bill and his family were allowed to go to an uncle's farm in Vernon, B.C., because it was outside the 100 miles from the coast that were off-limits to Japanese. Soon, Mr. Yoshida also had to leave the camp. "We were given only two alternatives - go to eastern Canada or go back to Japan," he said. For a Canadian-born citizen, going back to Japan simply wasn't an alternative.

And so, he moved east to start anew. He left with many, many letters of re-

commendation praising his work with young people and outlining his fine qualities as a good Scout and a good citizen - his honesty, skill, dependability, trustworthiness, loyalty, conscientiousness, fairness and common sense. But he left without his wife and three children.

"I didn't get back into Scouting, although I was invited," he said. "I had no time. My family was still in camp. I had to get a job. It was hard to rent a place for them because people thought we were barbarians. To be in Scouting, you need at least three or four days a week."

And, eventually, he did bring his family together. But it took many, many years of hard long hours of work to become re-established. Scouting remained only a memory. A very good memory.

"One thing I never felt was bitter," Mr. Yoshida said. "In fact, I'm happy the way it turned out. My children are doing well - I'm very happy. Now that I'm retired, we travel a lot. We've visited Japan twice."

"Some of my fondest memories were right at that war camp," Bill agreed. "I met many friends."

And what of the many other members of the 1st Tashme? "We're scattered all over now," Mr. Yoshida said. Bill, a successful businessman, pointed out that at least one former member is television celebrity Robert Ito who plays Quincy's assistant, Sam.

"I think my favourite memories come after leaving the camp," Mr. Yoshida said, "looking at the accomplishments of the Scouts as they grew up to become



The 1st Tashme Scout Group on its second anniversary, February 25, 1945.

doctors, lawyers, businessmen. It's my greatest satisfaction. I did something worthwhile."

"I enjoyed the competitive nature of Scouting," Bill added, "and one thing I've never forgotten all my life is 'Be Prepared'. That's what life's all about — being prepared."

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

Mr. Yoshida's book of memories includes several letters, cards and photos from Scouting's founder. "I met B.-P. two or three times," he told me. "He was a great Scout. When you saw him, you'd just like to hug him!"



It was most fitting, then, that as we toured the jamboree site after our interview, the first person we shook hands and chatted with was Lord Baden-Powell III, the founder's grandson. Later, watching B.-P. in action, Mr. Yoshida said, "He's just like his grandfather — his walk, his talk, his manner with the kids!"

The former Scoutmaster and Scout expressed amazement and delight at everything they saw. "Let's turn back the clock so we can be kids again," said Bill. "Isn't this something!"

"It's like a dream," Mr. Yoshida agreed. "I feel 20 years younger. July 10, 1985, in the city of Guelph at your National Jamboree will be remembered as long as I live."

I, too, will remember it. And Bill best explained why: "Mr. Yoshida is a very special individual," he said. "Many of us owe a lot to him." X

Reproductions of original photos from Mr. Yoshida's book of war-time Scouting memories and CJ'85 photo by Richard West.

Monument Marks Scout War Story



An American Scoutmaster told this true story to a gathering of Scouters shortly after the end of the Pacific campaign during World War II.

One of the Scouts in his pre-war troop was a Japanese boy. His parents, Japanese citizens, returned to their home country before war began and, in the course of time, the boy became a soldier in the Japanese army.

During the fighting, an American patrol met and was pushed back by a Japanese force. A wounded American fell behind and, just before losing consciousness, saw a Japanese soldier rush towards him with fixed bayonet. Before he passed out, the American made the Scout sign.

According to the Scoutmaster's account, published in the April 1958 issue of *Scouting* magazine, Boy Scouts of America, "The Japanese soldier stopped, laid down his gun, administered first aid and stopped the flow of blood." It turned out that the Japanese soldier was the boy who, before returning to Japan with his parents, had been a Scout in the Scoutmaster's troop.

When the American soldier came to, the Japanese soldier was gone. But he'd left a hastily scrawled note.

"When I saw the Scout sign," the note said, "I remember that I was a Scout and recalled the Scout Law stating that 'A Scout is a brother to every other Scout.' I couldn't kill a brother Scout in distress and I hope I have saved your life. If so, I ask you to use that life in the cause of peace."

The American was rescued by members of his patrol and returned safely to his country when war ended. But the story didn't end. When Japan began to rebuild Scouting several years after the war, an American Scout advisor happened to repeat the tale at a meeting. "To

Scouter Eggleton and the Japanese monument to the power of the Scouting brotherhood.

his surprise, his Japanese audience arose and cheered," the magazine account says. Later, the chairman of the national board of directors and international commissioner of Boy Scouts of Japan arranged for an artist to make a life-size bronze plaque in memory of "this astonishing evidence of Scouting's power".

Leslie Eggleton, honorary vice president, Fraser Valley Region, said he first heard the story in 1952 when "it was suggested that a donation be sent to the Japanese Scout Organization towards the expense of casting the plaque". His North Surrey-Delta District Boy Scouts Association was one Canadian group that made a donation.

"I always remembered this story, telling it at times to gatherings of Scouts or Cubs," Scouter Eggleton wrote. "I never thought that I would get an opportunity to see this plaque."

The opportunity came in May 1984 when the Eggletons visited their son, recently transferred from Montreal to the Canadian embassy in Tokyo. The monument, however, was not easy to find. "Information was very scarce... even to where it was located," he said, "but a chance meeting with an American Scouter gave me the information I needed." The result was a visit to Kodomi-no-kuni Park, Nagatsuda District, Tokyo. There he found the huge solid bronze plaque at the entrance to a bomb shelter.

"The description on the wall was so badly weathered, it was impossible to read," he reports. But the plaque of the Japanese soldier aiding a fallen American tells the story. As Scouter Eggleton says, "Even in war, the Spirit of Scouting lives on."