

My Japanese Canadian hero:

A response to our viewpoint question

In the February issue of *Nikkei Voice* we printed an English translation of a response to our readers' VIEWPOINT question of April, 1989: Who is your Japanese Canadian hero and why?

Mr. K.O. of Toronto told us of the "heroism" demonstrated by Tokikazu Tanaka during a "shooting incident" at the Petawawa internment camp in 1942.

In response, we received a letter and excerpts from a personal diary from Mr. Hideo Takahashi of Toronto recounting his experiences during the shooting incident.

It is interesting to note Mr. Takahashi's reference to the fact that JC men were interned at a camp which also imprisoned Italian and German POW's.

By MR. HIDEO TAKAHASHI
July 1, 1942

I was awakened in the wee hours of the morning by the loud noise of gunfire. The bullets were crashing through the walls of the hut. All of us jumped off the cots, some falling off the cots with a dull thud. Pandemonium broke loose and we were bumping into each other in the dark.

I must have felt the bullets whistling over my head because I remember ducking my head a few times. We did not know what the shooting was all about, and I got a further shock when I opened the back door to see an officer standing just outside the barbed wire with a pistol pointing towards my face. I instinctively slammed the door shut and hit the floor. The guards on the tower were still shooting.



Tokikazu Tanaka

Through the window, I could see some searchlights sweeping the camp from one end to the other. The shooting finally stopped. Miraculously, none of us were hit.

By now, we were excited as well as angry. Some of the boys were openly walking out of the hut shouting defiance at the guards and daring them to shoot.

The Germans and Italians were all awake and they kept encouraging us through the windows of the huts. "Tojo! Tojo!" they kept yelling. I guess they thought we were very brave or something. The tension kept us awake and we were constantly on the alert for more shooting.

We didn't have any breakfast that morning. How could we? All the pots and pans were riddled with bullets.

An officer accompanied by heavily armed guards arrived for roll call, but we refused to line up until the military authorities provided us with an explanation about the shooting. The officer retreated after threatening us that it would

be to our advantage to adopt such an attitude. It was then that we spontaneously decided to go on a hunger strike. In protest.

The ration wagon arrived at the gate on schedule but none of us went to the gate for it. It was a very hot day. The thermometer read 102 degrees in the shade, and most of us were lying naked on the beds just thinking, "The meat must be rotting on the wagon."

July 4, 1942

Some brass hats from the Petawawa Military Camp arrived and warned us to the effect that unless we at least observe the roll call we would all be given life imprisonment or stand us against the wall. We knew that that was a hollow threat. The guards were holding their automatic rifles menacingly and had us surrounded. The Germans and Italians were again yelling encouraging words to us.

The officer yelled that he was giving us exactly five minutes to obey him. He was looking at his watch and started the countdown. All of us started talking at once, and I am sure that, although they kept shouting defiantly that they would not obey the officer, deep down in their hearts they were afraid of the possible consequences. We knew for sure they would never shoot us down in cold blood, but none of us could anticipate what a nervous guard might do under the tension. We had seen how jumpy some of the guards were. They were more afraid of us than we were of them. They probably never saw a Japanese before.

The officer shouted that there were two minutes remaining. I was standing beside our spokesman and camp leader, Tokikazu Tanaka, on a slightly elevated step leading to a hut.

Out of the corner of my eyes, one particular guard caught my attention. He was literally shaking in his boots out of fear. The automatic rifle he was aiming towards us was far from steady. I turned to Mr. Tanaka. He was also staring at this guard and probably sensed a potential danger coming from the source. He turned to me and quietly said:

"Takahashi-kun, what do you think?"

I looked straight into his eyes and read his thoughts. Slowly I nodded my head in agreement.

Looking down at the mob-like scene, Mr. Tanaka raised both his arms and demanded their attention. He, thereupon, in a very calm and unhurried manner, talked the boys into observing the roll call.

From the moment I saw our spokesman calming the shouting crowd and then walking erect in front of the men, hands swinging smartly in military fashion, leading the men into the parade grounds, I said to myself, "There goes a great man!"

That afternoon, we had our first good meal.

Correction: Translation of the English section viewpoint, "My hero among JCs," (February 1990) was by Hiromi Yamazaki.

Historical record of Petawawa shooting incident

Without warning, the sentries fired three volleys at the internees as they moved between huts 10 and 11, aiming above their heads. The bullets penetrated the thin wall of hut 10, grazing the blankets of one bed and the pillows of another. Fortunately, both of the men who should have been in those bunks were among the men outside the hut. Shocked and furious, the inmates complained about the excessive zeal of the sentries to the camp commandant and the Spanish consul, and reinforced their complaint by refusing to participate in roll call for three days.

No explanation was ever officially given for the incident, although an inquiry was held three months later. It seems most likely that the incident resulted from the abnormal status of the Japanese internees. Ignorant of the fact that the Japanese in the camp were Canadians, not Axis troops, the guards reacted as they had been trained to do. Perhaps because of this incident, the Japanese were transferred soon after to Internment Camp 101 at Angler, Ontario, where their status as Canadians "detained at the pleasure of the Minister of Justice" was made clear to their guards.

Excerpt from Ann Gomer Sunahara's Politics of Racism (James Lorimer & Company, Publisher; Toronto, 1981) which portrays the events at Petawawa, July 1, 1942.

inactive on the issue. Like the Government of South Africa, the Government of Canada needs pressure from other communities, both in and outside of Canada, before it will move to correct the situation.

This decade looks to be one of promise. Around the world changes are being seen, the same changes that had come to be seen as unlikely or even impossible. It's time for Canada to make its own changes. Canadians (and Japanese Canadians) must raise their voices of protest enough to attract world attention on this issue; only then will the Government of Canada correct the injustices.

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Japanese Canadians, it is an understandable one. Yet I can't help but lament that he presented only the opinion of younger JC's without even considering others and so has over-simplified the matter.

Aside from the younger Japanese Canadians, there are older issei who speak Japanese, nisei, and also shin ijusha. There may be a need for a community for these other people. And perhaps, the NAJC is necessary as the representative group, to bring together Japanese Canadians and their newer counterparts (shin ijusha)... even if JC's are an entity that may disappear.

However, what Mr. Kayahara expressed is also the natural direction Japanese Canadian society will take, and those who can enter the *hakujin* society should do so without hesitation. No one has the right to stop them.

Sanmiya Gunji
Guelph, Ontario

"Geechan" brings criticism

I noticed the advertisement in the December/January issue of *Nikkei Voice* for the book *Baachan, Geechan, Arigato*. While the book and ideas behind it are certainly commendable, the spelling of the title has me puzzled. It seems that the author was trying to ensure that the word for "grandfather" would be pronounced correctly by non-Nikkei readers, but would it not have been just as easy to spell it "Jiichan?" While there is the likelihood that the "J" could be mispronounced as a "Y," and the "i's" pronounced as long vowels (like "eye"), this is the perfect opportunity to educate others (as well as

ese English Dictionary, which is written in heibon-shiki, *gee* is onomatopoeic for "retch." Certainly, this was not the intention of the author.

If non-Nikkei people mispronounce our name or any other Japanese words, it is incumbent on us to correct them, rather than to allow their (mis)pronunciations to continue. In doing so, we retain pride in our own heritage and do not give in to the cultural imperialism of the majority.

Emi Ohtani
Toronto

Nisei calls for radical action

During the thirties, Canadian and American volunteers went to Spain to fight the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. These individuals saw the danger to freedom and democracy posed by the German and Italian fascists who supported Franco. They formed the legendary Lincoln Brigade, which wrote a chapter of bravery and selflessness. (c.f. Orwell — "Homage to Catalonia")

We challenge retired JC's to form a similar volunteer group, to stand in the front lines at impending confrontations between the First Nations and government, at all levels. Today we see more and more First Nations losing patience with the delays, the prevarications, the slow pace of "negotiations" and seemingly never-ending litigation. We have had calls for help, for volunteers of goodwill, to stand with the First Nations, in a show of

jail if necessary. Yes, this has happened, and will continue to happen, as some authorities flex their muscles. We know that JC's are law-abiding citizens who have an almost inbred, instinctive aversion to be "on the wrong side" of the law. But as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others have shown, to challenge wrong laws openly, and to suffer the consequences (i.e., being jailed, "acquiring a criminal record") is often the best, the only way to get these laws changed.

Why retired JC's? Many of you have lived a full life, and have enjoyed a satisfying career. You live surrounded by a loving family. But is that all you want out of life? Here is a chance to do something daring, to help bring about a better Canada, a Canada where the First Nations, all Canadians can raise their heads high and be proud to be Canadian. Then you can boast proudly to your grandchildren, "When the chance came, I was there to do my bit to build a better Canada."

Why retired JC's? Working with, and for the First Nations, with no thought of benefit for yourself, will bring out inner resources and love that you never knew you had. We challenge you to try it and see.

To add your name to the roster of the "JC Lincoln Brigade" volunteers write or call:

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