

Oral History Interview

with

YOICHI KAWANO (YK)

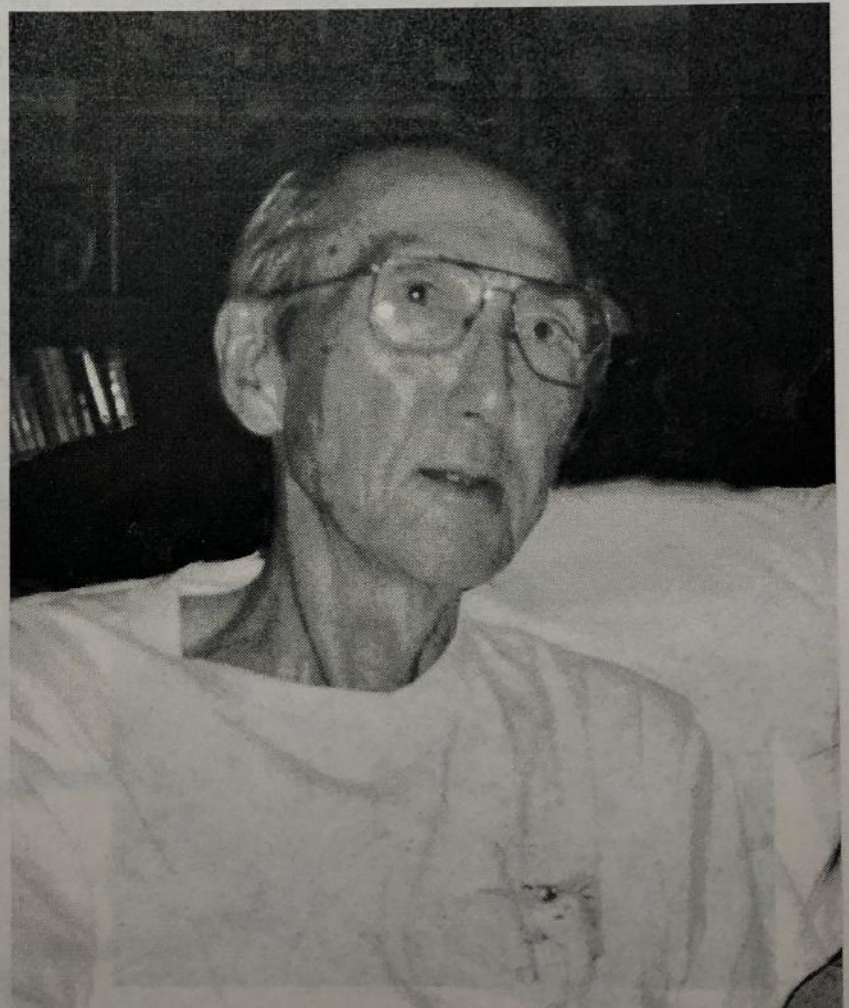
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Kihei, Maui, Hawai'i

BY: Dawn Duensing (DD)



Yoichi Kawano  
in Minnesota  
(Courtesy Yoichi Kawano)



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- DD: Did you feel that the training that you got at Camp Savage adequately prepared you for what you were doing once you got in there?
- YK: Oh yes, definitely. What we also learned, not only in Camp Savage, but while out in the field, we were taught international Morse code. You know the ddd-dot-ddd, SOS. How to operate that (Morse code transmitter). We had to learn that. We had to learn the flag signals. International Morse code (by flags).
- DD: Your training continued even as you were working in the field?
- YK: All our boys in our outfit were experts in that, sending out the ddd and dot-dot-dot. They could do it real fast.
- DD: Did you find most of your duties once you got to New Guinea very challenging?
- YK: In a way, yes. Basically you had to know Japanese. Like when we were in the Philippines, just before the atom bomb was dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, night after night for several days, for several weeks in fact, we would intercept the Japanese radio station saying the United States is warning Japan that they would drop the super bomb if we don't surrender right away. Even to us, we couldn't realize what a super bomb is. (None of us) knew what the atomic, you know, nuclear warfare [was]. So all we did was we called that, send it back to headquarters saying, "This radio station in Japan announced that unless we surrender right away, the United States will drop the super bomb." Headquarters probably knew what it referred to. But the Japanese didn't know what a super bomb is. So, same thing with us. No inkling, no idea that they were referring to the atomic bomb that was dropped in Hiroshima.
- DD: Once you did hear about what happened in Hiroshima with the atomic bomb being dropped, what did you think, do you remember what your reaction to news of that bomb was?
- YK: No.
- DD: Imagine many people must have been quite shocked?
- YK: It wasn't until several days later that we learned the full impact of it. I was fortunate because when I went to Japan---we volunteered to go to Japan for the strategic bombing survey from the Philippines. There were about twelve, fifteen of us from our unit. We went to Japan; I was fortunate in being assigned to military arsenal. Out of the boys in our outfit, I was the only Japanese American to be able to---we went into Hiroshima---to see with my own eyes what happened there.

Our job for going into Hiroshima was to find out where the atom bomb fell, where it exploded. Of course, nobody knew. We couldn't tell either, we went traveling all over the city. We couldn't tell where the bomb fell. Of course, it exploded in the air. But when we got to the center of the city, everything is gone. Everything is leveled and hardly any debris there. Just cleaned out everything. By yourself on the radio, night after night, you hear about the bombing in Tokyo, for example. And when we went into Tokyo, we saw the damage that our bombs did. Buildings leveled, burned, but in Tokyo and Nagoya, we could see the debris there, burned-out buildings, bricks lying all over the place. But in Hiroshima, nothing like that. Clean. It was as if ten thousand people had taken their brooms and rakes and cleaned out the city after the bombing. That's the difference between how Hiroshima looked compared to the other big cities.

- YK: We went into Hiroshima. All of the roads leading into the city were guarded by American MPs and American military [and] Allied troops couldn't go into Hiroshima. [At] every road that entered the city, we had to show our pass that we were the strategic military survey and we were able to go into the city. Other than that, no other military personnel were allowed to go into the city.
- DD: Do you have any idea why other military personnel were kept out? What was their reasoning?
- YK: No idea. Couldn't be the hazard because we were allowed to go in there.
- DD: When you went into Hiroshima, I believe at that time, they weren't really aware of the effects of radiation. Did they take any special precautions with you going in there?
- YK: No.
- DD: I think you also told me the last time I was here that you tried to search for some relatives in that area?
- YK: Yes. When I found out that we were going into Hiroshima, that I was going into Hiroshima, I wrote a letter back home asking my parents . . . Yamaguchi Prefecture is next to Hiroshima, so I thought maybe I could visit any relatives I had in Japan. But there being none, I didn't receive anything from home. But I did receive a letter from my neighbor back home in Pu'unēnē that the grandparents lived in Hiroshima and I got their address.

So after the military duties were over for the day, the jeep driver and the navy lieutenant, they both went back to Tokyo. I stayed back in Hiroshima and I visited this home in Hiroshima, which is located right next to the train station. I learned that my neighbor's grandparents, the grandmother had died a year before that, and the grandfather, grandpa was staying with relatives in another part of the city. And occupying the family residence was a family from Honolulu, a widow with a daughter and two sons, residing in that house and the older son was (still) in military service. He wasn't home yet. But the mother and the son and daughter were living in the home. And the son took me to another city, another part of the city, where I met with (my neighbor's) grandfather. He was senile by then; he couldn't even recognize me. I went back to the home and I spent the night there with the family. Fortunately, I was loaded down with K rations, so I was able to give that whole family my K rations.

(What) I found out from the family was that the son was looking out the window wearing an undershirt when the atomic bomb blast came. He was all burned through the undershirt, his face and arms, stomach area were all burned. He showed me the scars. But fortunately, he was still living. The next morning, early in the morning, while still dark, I boarded a train in Hiroshima, next to their home. At the time, there were only two or three of us in the train, somewhere between Hiroshima and Tokyo. When I woke up, the train was packed, even the aisle was standing room only. Standing right next to me was a young girl carrying a heavy sack, standing right next to me. So when I woke up, I couldn't see myself sitting there with all the others jam-packed standing up in the aisle, so I got up and I gave my seat to the little girl and

the heavy sack. I went back to the baggage train and I sat in the bench with the baggage boys, talking story all the way back to Tokyo.

DD: Did you talk to many of the people that you came across when you were in Japan? People you didn't know?

YK: No. Other than that, when I was making my rounds in military arsenal, (an) assigned driver of the jeep and usually a navy lieutenant went with me. The three of us would go to the military arsenal and the navy officer would have information showing on this day so many bombers dropped so many tons of bombs on your building, on your arsenal. Can you tell us the damages we did? Our job was to find out what happened after the bombing. Afterwards we would write it all down. Most of the time we found out that when the first bombs started to fall on the military arsenals, the Japanese began to go underground. Although some buildings were completely leveled and destroyed, hundred percent, maybe fifty percent of the production of (the) military arsenal, guns and ammunition were going underground. Those are the things we found out. When I went to one of these military arsenals, way outside the outskirts of Tokyo and usually I have to discuss the situation with the Japanese personnel, Japanese-speaking person only. Well, at this military arsenal there was a girl from Honolulu working in the military arsenal, so we were able to converse in English. She was able to tell me in English what happened in that part of the arsenal. I can't remember her name. I didn't even take her name down.

DD: How long were you in Japan after the war on this bombing survey?

YK: About a full month.

DD: And the areas that you were primarily in were Tokyo and Hiroshima? Any other areas?

YK: No. We were stationed (in) Tokyo.

DD: You said you took the train back from Hiroshima to Tokyo. The rail line was undamaged and you could actually ride the train?

YK: Right. Even in Tokyo, most of the trains were running. See the train in those days, maybe they carry four or five or six cars. One or two of the cars would be reserved for military (occupational) personnel only. So many times, about four or five of us would be on a whole train car, where the other remaining train cars would be filled, jam-packed by Japanese people. So occasionally we would tell, especially the Japanese people carrying a heavy load, "Come, come with me, I let you ride in our car." And we would offer these people with heavy loads, especially young children, to come and ride with us in the military personnel car. So the trains were running daily.

DD: I was just rather surprised because when you were talking about the damage I would have thought the bombs would have also damaged the railway lines.

YK: Well, in Tokyo, (the main Tokyo) Station was bombed out. The building was bombed. No roof over the station. Dead bodies. People probably starved to death and died of illness laying all over the corners of the station. People just disregarding who died, walking back and forth, and dead bodies lying there.

DD: How soon after the war ended did you arrive in Tokyo?

- YK: Few days after the peace treaty was signed.
- DD: And they still hadn't cleaned up the station?
- YK: Mmm.
- DD: Did you ever witness any hostilities between the local Japanese and the Allied forces that came to Japan after the war?
- YK: The Japanese people were very humble. They were extremely nice to us. Inside of them, we don't know what they thought about [us], to be traitors to the country or something like that. But outwardly they never showed that. We were treated like kings.
- DD: Were the *nisei* treated the same way that the other American soldiers were treated, the *haole* boys? Was there any difference in the treatment?
- YK: None that I recall.
- DD: Any other things about that time in Japan?
- YK: Well, for example, at night we would go and take a bath in the *furo*, you know, the Japanese *furo*. It was back in our dorm. We stayed in the old Kaijo Building, a big ten-story building. But most of the time the hot water would be all used up and we had to take shower in the cold water. It was late in the year so it was very cold, extremely cold. In fact, to cool our beer, all we had to do was put it in the sack, hang it out the window, and in a few hours we would have cold beer. We don't need a refrigerator. So at night we go for the hot *furo*, go to the train station, travel about ten minutes. And this *furo*, most of them were reserved for military personnel, Allied troops only. I still can't forget when we go to these *furo*, the outside as you entered the building, you'd hear Japanese voices, perfect Japanese. We would tell the owner or the caretaker, "How come there's Japanese here tonight? I thought this area is reserved for Allied troops only." We would be told, "That's right, we don't have any Japanese in here tonight. They are *haoles*, white soldiers." And we would go into the *furo* and sure enough, conversing among themselves were *haoles*, speaking perfect Japanese. Much better than us in Hawai'i.
- DD: I think you were also telling me about the charcoal-powered cars they were driving around after the war?
- YK: Yes, while making the rounds around the military arsenal(s), we would come upon these Japanese cars running on charcoal. Big charcoal burners attached to the rear end of the cars and the thing would make just like your power lawn mower running, awfully loud noise. And most of our military jeeps, the horn (wouldn't work) and you don't have any horn. So when you come, when you want to pass that car, you had to yell at the top of our voices, "Eh! Make way! Eh, stop!" Or sometimes the charcoal burner would be making such a big noise, the driver couldn't hear us. So we would carry rocks with us and when we want to overtake a car, we would throw the rock at the car and that would alert the driver. He would look behind and we would wave him aside and then pass by.
- DD: Did these charcoal cars have any power? Could they only go slow or could they operate like a regular car?

YK: I'm sure they lacked the power of gasoline engines. Even in the city, even in Tokyo, [the] majority of the cars running were not on gasoline but on charcoal burners when Japan ran short of fuel and the air force deteriorated because of the lack of gasoline for the planes. During my interviews with (the) Japanese negotiating team, I found out or we found out that when Okinawa fell to the Allied troops, the navy, the air force wanted to surrender. But the Japanese army, stuck in their stubbornness, they said, "No, we'll take them on." And they were fortifying all of the shoreline of Japan's ocean, waiting for the Allied troops to come storming out to the island. But instead of (using our ground forces, we kept bombing the Japanese mainland, day and night). Hiroshima's atomic bomb ended the war.

I also flew over Nagasaki with the navy plane to ascertain the damage to Nagasaki. We didn't actually go down and visit the city, Nagasaki, like we did Hiroshima. But one side of the city, Nagasaki is set on a mountain range, and one side of the mountain range where the atom bomb fell was totally wiped out like in Hiroshima.

DD: Could you see that the damage was any worse [in] Nagasaki or about the same?

YK: Well, there (were) more debris in Nagasaki than Hiroshima. The sad part about Hiroshima is that when the day the bomb fell, they had a . . . Japanese call it *undōkai*, athletic sports contest among all the schoolchildren in Hiroshima. So thousands of schoolchildren (were gathered) in Hiroshima for this sports event (when the bomb fell). That's the sad part of it. Young children, school age, were killed or injured.

DD: And did you learn about that at the time you were doing the survey?

YK: No.

DD: You learned about it years after?

YK: After, when we were trying to find where the bomb fell in Hiroshima, we'd find people walking around the area, I would stop and ask them if they can help us, tell us where the bomb fell. And none of them knew where. The people that knew were already gone, dead. It was impossible to see where the bomb (actually) fell.

(Silence)

DD: Did you ever go back to Japan again?

YK: I went back twice after that. Once in 1983, again in 1985. Amazing the way the cities were rebuilt. Like in Tokyo, you could see the accuracy of the United States bombing because the Emperor's Palace was untouched and one ring of buildings around the Emperor's Palace were left standing. But the next layer of buildings behind the first layer were completely wiped out and so was Tokyo city. The rest of the city was just leveled. So I was amazed at the accuracy of our bombing. They left the Imperial Palace untouched from damages.

DD: Did you visit Hiroshima when you went back?

YK: Hiroshima? No.

DD: You didn't go back?