

Oral History Interview

with

TOM YAMADA (TY)

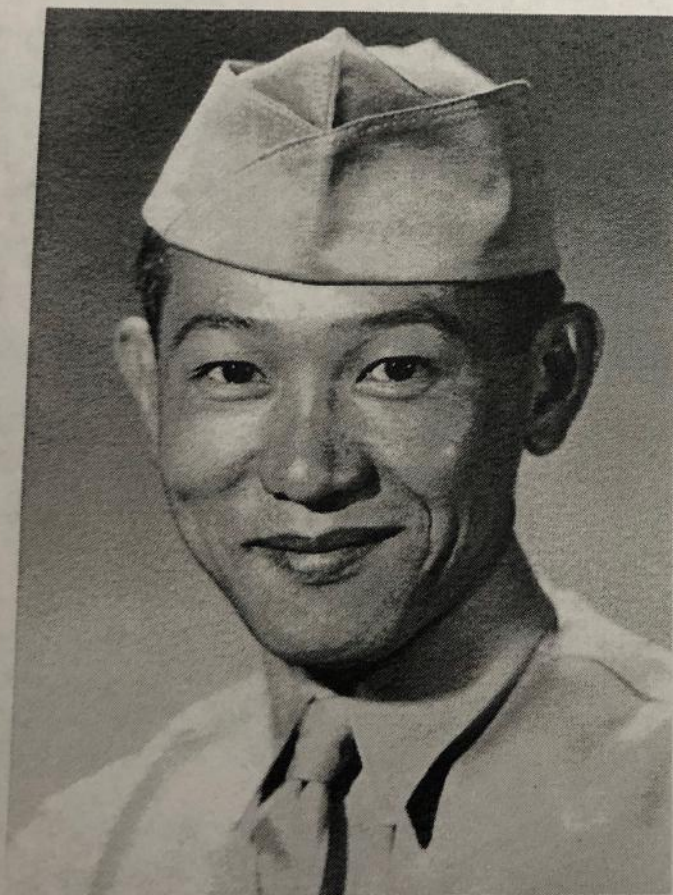
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Wailuku, Maui, Hawai'i

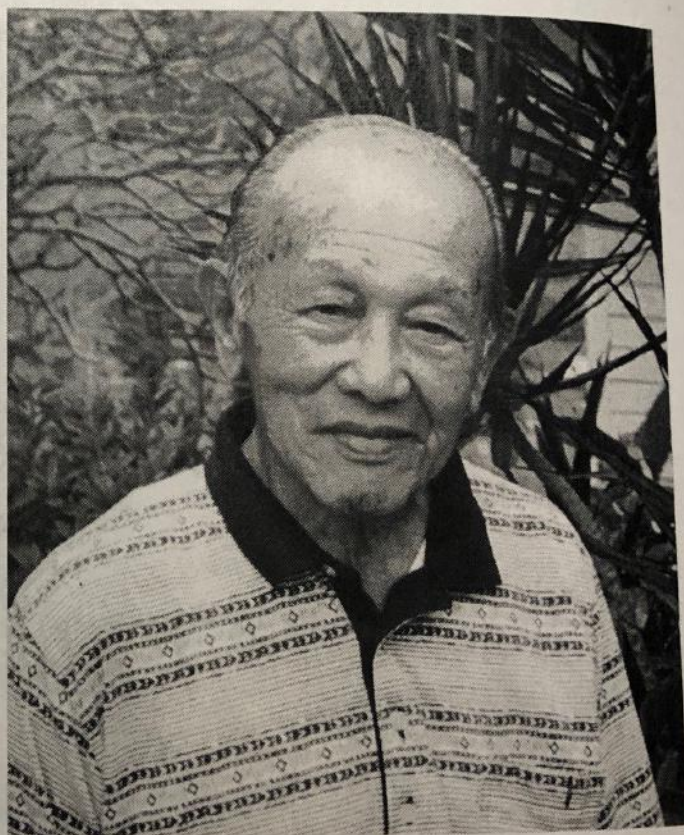
By: Dawn Duensing (DD)



Tom Yamada, Philippines, 1945
(Courtesy Tom Yamada)



Tom Yamada
(Courtesy Tom Yamada)



Tom Yamada

TY: I believe we were together. In fact, I still remember one person in Honolulu. He's of course, retired, too, but he still living in Honolulu. As for the others, I don't know where they are now.

DD: You didn't really keep up correspondence after the war?

TY: No, it's just one of them that I remember.

DD: Where were you when you heard that the war was finally over, V-J Day [Victory over Japan Day] finally came in August of 1945?

TY: Being separated from my wife for that long, I was given a furlough and I flew home from Manila.

DD: That's where you were when you heard the war ended?

TY: (I flew from Manila and was home for a two-week furlough when the war ended. The war ended before my furlough was over. Being with a interpreters' group, I received orders to return immediately to Manila. I went to Pu'unēnē Airport to thumb my way to Honolulu. They put me on a B-24 fighter plane to fly there.)

DD: For you, the news that the war ended was kind of bad news because they cut your furlough short?

TY: Yeah, it cut my furlough about four or five days short.

DD: How was your furlough going until then?

TY: It was all right.

DD: What kind of things were you doing?

TY: (Being in the tropics like New Guinea and other similar area where it is extremely hot, I returned quite skinny. My body was yellow as we were constantly taking malaria preventative pills. This furlough, being home for the first time in about three years, I was real happy. Along with another couple, the Fujikawas, we spent a few days together in a cottage in Kula.

DD: Were you able to regain most of your health before it was time to go back?

TY: Not in (the) short space of time. Gradually (reducing my intake of the strong malaria medicine, my color returned. Anyway, arriving in Honolulu, I boarded a C-54, an army transport plane, and got into Manila. On arrival there, I learned that members of the Eleventh Corps Headquarters were on a ship heading for Japan. As interpreters, we were on the priority list. Leaving Manila, we flew into Atsugi, Japan, with a number of high-ranking generals and others. Atsugi was a military airport near Yokohama.) We got on a priority plane. So we got into Japan on September 2, 1945, on the day MacArthur and the Japanese representative Shigemitsu was signing on the battleship *Missouri*.

DD: To end the war?

TY: To end the war. So we got there September 2, 1945, which was not too far since the termination of war. The war ended, I think, August 15 or something like that.

DD: Where were you when MacArthur and the Japanese were signing the document on the *Missouri*?

TY: (Arriving at Atsugi, we were transported) to the Keio University building in Yokohama, (which became the headquarters for our Eleventh Corps).

DD: What were your duties now that the war was ended? Why was it so imperative that the interpreters get to Japan so quickly?

TY: We had to assist the coordination between the natives there and then the military forces. We had several assignments.

DD: Can you describe any of them?

TY: (Considering that we were there only couple of weeks after the war's end, it was a sight I'll long remember. Practically all wooden structures had been destroyed because of incendiary bombs. Buildings remaining were all made of concrete. The conditions there at that time was terrible.)

As I told you previously, (and this was about two weeks after our arrival in Yokohama, as an interpreter), I was assigned to (the hospital room occupied by) General Tojo. I spent (a whole day and) night in the same room with (the general. There were also two nurses assisting with the general, suffering from self-inflicted wound. He could hardly talk.)

DD: He was out of it, so you couldn't really interpret much, could you?

TY: I couldn't.

DD: What kind of injuries did he have? How did he try to commit suicide?

TY: (Attempting suicide, he shot) himself with a pistol. At that time, (you can say he was fortunate that he survived, but unfortunately he went through a military trial later and was executed. He suffered a lot.)

DD: What was the extent of his injuries?

TY: Well, evidently the bullet didn't penetrate through the most vital areas.

DD: He tried to shoot himself through the chest area?

TY: The chest, somewhere in there.

DD: He missed the . . .

TY: Missed the vital. . . .

DD: . . . vital organs, but injured himself enough to be in agony?

TY: That's right.

DD: This encounter with Tojo, now I'm sure at the time you must have realized who he was?

TY: Well, I was quite surprised to be assigned to (such an important person. I had a pistol at that time and I was ordered to disarm myself before entering the hospital room. Guarding the room were MPs from our corps, so I knew all of them. Anyway, it was) quite an experience.

- DD: How so?
- TY: To think that a small potato like myself being assigned to some bigwig like Tojo, to his room.
- DD: Did you ever think at that time about what Tojo was responsible for? This was a man that was going to be tried as a major war criminal.
- TY: He was, but. . . .
- DD: Did you think about that much while you were there?
- TY: More so after the whole incident, then you start thinking about. At that time, no. In fact, I felt lucky to be assigned to him. I felt fortunate.
- DD: Why?
- TY: Well, it was an opportunity. It was something that, the time was there, I was there. Somebody else could have been there.
- DD: But you were given the responsibility?
- TY: Yeah.
- DD: Looking back at it after fifty years or so, what do you think about it now?
- TY: I'm glad I went through that experience. I'm glad I went through the experience. Not that I prayed for it, but it so happens that I am glad I went through that experience.
- DD: Did you actually talk to the man or not?
- TY: I did, (but mostly to see whether he was) comfortable or not. Somebody had sent (him) a box of fruits. I think it was persimmons. I asked (him) whether I could have some, and he said, "Oh, help yourself." (As he was suffering, he hardly talked.)
- DD: I wondered what he might have been thinking seeing an American of Japanese ancestry in there. You think he even realized it or not?
- TY: I imagine he must have had some thoughts about that, too. He's seeing somebody in the American uniform rather than his own. I imagine he must have had some feelings.
- DD: It must have been just as weird an experience for him maybe as it was for you?
- TY: Oh, likewise, same way.
- DD: Any other unusual experiences you had in those early postwar days in Japan? Beside your experience with Tojo?
- TY: Well, I had another assignment one time, but I don't know whether I should talk about it.
- DD: Why not?
- (Taping stops, then resumes.)
- DD: Your major thing in Japan would have been that encounter with Tojo?
- TY: Yes.

- DD: How long did you stay in Japan?
- TY: I must have been there for about three, four months.
- DD: And the rest of the time, were you interrogating former Japanese soldiers or did you have run-ins with civilians?
- TY: Local people.
- DD: What kind of information were they looking for at this time?
- TY: Well, I think the primary purpose of the army was to ease the citizens into getting back to their life, their former life. When we got into Yokohama area, there was hardly any natives there. They were all evacuated to the countryside. And about two weeks after we got there, they gradually came into the metropolitan area, the Yokohama area.
- DD: It must have been difficult when they came back though?
- TY: Oh, there's nothing in that city.
- DD: Then what do you have? The Japanese people and families were living in the streets?
- TY: Well, the army and the natives have to coordinate and it is a real difficult time.
- DD: Did the army bring in tents and what not, food?
- TY: I imagine they were doing a lot of things like that. That area was really bombed. Tokyo, Yokohama and Kawasaki, all that area.
- DD: Now when we talked in our pre-interview, you told me that at one point you had interviewed a POW from Kumamoto. When was that?
- TY: I believe this is in Manila, I think. I came across a prisoner who I was interviewing and then I nailed down where he came from. And it was quite interesting that he was from the immediate area where my parents came from. Being in that area as a kid, I still remember the villages, so I suppose he was quite amazed that I knew all this surrounding areas, the structures around there and some people around there. But I didn't give my name to him, so I guess he must have thought gee, how did I know so much about that area? It was quite interesting that he came from the almost immediate area where my parents came from. Things like that happen. You never can tell who you are going to bump into.
- DD: Do you know if any of your relatives, maybe cousins or uncles or whatever, might have been fighting in the Japanese forces?
- TY: No, I don't know.
- DD: Did you ever wonder about that?
- TY: Well, no. I haven't given any thought, but I'm sure there must have been some relatives.
- DD: Apparently your family was far enough removed from the old country that it wasn't something that you thought about?
- TY: That's right.

- DD: Getting back to the postwar days in Japan. What was it like talking to the Japanese civilians? What was their reaction to you?
- TY: Well, I just wondered myself, being of the same racial background and here we are in the opposite end there. They must have had some feelings about us. Ill feelings maybe. Not thinking too highly of our way, but I suppose that we take it in stride.
- DD: Nobody actually said anything to you?
- TY: No, I wasn't put in any kind of situation where I was questioned or told differently.
- DD: You must have met and talked to quite a few civilians?
- TY: I did. In fact, some of them were quite nice. They took us into their homes although what few things they had. In fact, I remember being invited to one of their homes for lunch or something.
- DD: Probably didn't have much to give you?
- TY: No, they didn't have much to give. I suppose we had more to give them. We could offer them cigarettes or something. Which we got complimentary cigarettes then.

End Tape 2, Side B.
Begin Tape 3, Side A.

- DD: We talked about your being in Japan and interrogating or talking to mostly civilians. You were invited into their homes and you said that they didn't really have much to give, maybe you felt a little uncomfortable about what they felt about you. But, what was their general mood after this devastating war and. . . .
- TY: Well, it's a time of survival after bombings, this and that. It's a time of struggle. We see how they were trying to recoup themselves. It's a time of hardship and I don't think they had good feelings about us. But contrary to what they first thought that how the Americans going to treat them, I think they were quite surprised that it was just the opposite. That the Americans really helped them rather than try to harm them more. In that way, I think they were quite happy.
- DD: Do you think they were ready to just get on with their lives and rebuild and start over?
- TY: It's a time for struggle, so I don't think---it's a matter of what they can do from day to day.
- DD: So as a day-to-day thing, they couldn't look very far into the future?
- TY: That's right, yeah. I don't think they could plan, see the future. It was a matter of how they gonna survive from day to day, whatever comfortable place they could stay. It was a difficult time.
- DD: I have interviewed *nisei* soldiers that have served on the European front, for instance Mr. [Earl] Tanaka. He [told me] about they shared their food with the starving Italian kids, Germans, stuff like that. Did you find yourself helping out the Japanese like this?