

Dad's Yosegaki Hinomaru



Armand Charest in 2000

My dad, Armand Gabriel Charest, was a US Army veteran of World War II. I knew this growing up as he would talk a lot about his Army adventures. We even attended a reunion of his 41st Division in 1971. He always expressed pride in being a soldier and pride in his role during WWII. But there were things about his army service I didn't know until he wrote his memoirs in 2002.

Then there were some things about his Army service I didn't know until after he passed, which left questions for which I'll probably never have answers.

From my [Dad's memoirs](#), I know he was drafted in late 1943 after fully expecting to not be. He had poor vision (a family trait all us children inherited) that he thought would disqualify him from military service. He was working as a trained Tool and Gage maker in one of the many factories that powered the New England economy of that era, deemed critical national defense work that also should have exempted him from active duty. Despite his poor eyesight and his critical trade, he was thoroughly surprised to be drafted into the Army.



Armand's Army Photo

His Army training was supercharged by being selected as a company machine gunner, meaning he got to carry the rather heavy machine gun in addition to his regular kit. Being a machine gunner also meant he was at the front of actions later in his Army tour of duty, when his company faced Japanese Banzai charges on Pacific Islands. He ended his Army career as part of the US occupation forces in Japan after they surrendered, and his Division was assigned to pacify the cities of Kure and Hiroshima.

Although Dad would talk about being in Hiroshima, he never spoke about what he saw there. He owned a copy of John Hershey's book "[Hiroshima](#)," which I read as a young teen. As a member of the baby-boomer generation, I grew up under the threat of nuclear annihilation which tended to peak my curiosity about Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) all the more. During my teen years, I tried many times to engage Dad in what he saw in Hiroshima, but the most I ever got out of him was once telling me that as he rode into the city, buildings on the outskirts were leaning away from the blast area. As they got closer, buildings were leaning more, and then closer still they were all knocked down.

Dad retired from his career in tool and die making in 1984, went back to school and earned a BA in English literature. He spent his remaining years tutoring English as a Second Language (ESL) students and writing. He had dreams of becoming

a published fiction writer, but the closest he ever came was selling his two-part story of [visiting Albania](#) to a travel magazine. The magazine did publish part-one but went belly up before they published part two.

Dad starting writing his memoirs about 1999 and asked me to edit them. Given the way Dad had critiqued my writings back in my school days, I approached my duties as his editor with great enthusiasm. The first draft of his memoirs was pretty sparse, and I remember kicking them back to him with a comment to the effect *"You're over 70 years old. You grew up in the Great Depression, survived WWII, raised four children, and this is all you can say?"* Dad grumbled some, but the next draft greatly expanded his life's story.

Dad's second draft did include a brief description of interactions with the Japanese civilians during the occupation winter of 1945-1946. But he still didn't include anything about his time in Hiroshima. This lack of narrative was in direct contrast to his [description of the battle of Biak Island](#) and his time spent in the Philippines.

This time, my editing was a bit more gentle, but I had a long talk with Dad about including details of his time in Hiroshima. I pointed out that he had a unique perspective on nuclear war, one that the current generation of war theorists and strategists lacked. I explained how people needed to read a first-hand account of what a nuclear blast really did to a city and it's people. Finally, Dad agreed with me and promised to write more.

His next and final draft added two short paragraphs, a total of nine sentences, about being in Hiroshima.

One of the things I also knew about dad's Army service was that he had brought home a "war trophy," a Japanese army-issue rifle (minus the firing pin). Over the years he would periodically display it in the house for a while, then put it

away, but he never explained how he acquired it. When we moved from Long Island, New York, to a rural Hudson Valley, New York town in the summer of 1972, his rifle came with us. He left it behind when he and Mom divorced in March 1974, and my younger brother Howard took custody of it. Howard proudly displayed it in his bedroom until he left for college. Mom kept this rifle for several more years until Dad reclaimed it and gave it to a friend who collected antique firearms, much to our (Howard and mine) dismay. Dad never spoke of it again.

After my parent's divorce, Dad remarried and moved to Los Angeles, California with his new family. He divorced again and – briefly – remarried and divorced a third time. After his third try, he remained single and moved to a senior citizen center in 1992. It was from this place Dad tutored and wrote his stories. Dad suffered a stroke in August of 2002 which left him partially paralyzed. He passed on the evening of February 3, 2004, at the age of 79, and was buried with full military honors in Riverside National Cemetery, California, as befitting his veteran status. Dad had made me the executor of his estate and so I inherited a large collection of his unpublished stories.

When he passed, I thought Dad's stories passed with him. But there was one more still to come.

The Discovery

After my parent's divorce, Mom stayed in the Hudson Valley, New York region, in the house her uncle built in the early 1950s. Mom had inherited this house from her aunt, and by 2014 it had been in the family for over 60 years. Mom loved her home and didn't ever want to leave, but she wasn't getting any younger and none of us children lived near her anymore. In July 2014, she had a bad fall which landed her in the Hospital.

The doctors gave Mom an ultimatum; move in with her family or move into a nursing home. My sister Melinda, living in eastern Tennessee, urged Mom to move in with her and Mom reluctantly agreed, on the condition that we also moved all her belongings to Tennessee. We knew we'd have to clear the house anyway so we could sell it, as no one in the family was going to move back to New York. So our family started the process of clearing out a house that had been continuously lived in for over 60 years.

Over the next several months Melinda, her extended family, and I alternated trips up to Mom's house to clear it out and make it ready to sell.

One of the several heavy pieces of furniture Mom owned was a "cedar chest," a large wooden chest Mom had owned since before she had married Dad. She used her cedar chest to store her special mementos. None of us children were allowed to open it while growing up, and I doubt Mom opened it even once every several years. In early August, while in the process of helping move Mom's belongings down to Tennessee, I opened her cedar chest for maybe the second time in my life and discovered something new about Dad's military service.

While rummaging through treasures such as Mom's high school yearbook (yes, really), dolls, and treasured keepsakes of her four children (including a few childhood trinkets of mine), I found what appeared to be an old WWII-era Japanese flag covered with Japanese writing. I immediately knew it had to have belonged to Dad, and knew it had important significance, but I had no idea how he acquired it or what the significance was.



Dad's Yosegaki Hinomaru

I asked Mom, and she didn't remember anything about it, other than to say "your dad must have left it there." Before I left the house that weekend I took photos of the flag with the intent to research what it might represent.

I asked my cousin, and an Aunt and Uncle, if Dad had ever said anything about it. My cousin thought he had seen it once but knew nothing other than Dad had brought it home with him from the war. Knowing about dad's time served in Japan, I guessed that this flag was related to his Japanese tour.

I found an e-mail address for the [Hiroshima Peace Museum](http://www.hiroshima-peace-museum.jp/), located in Hiroshima, Japan, of "gakugei@pcf.city.hiroshima.jp." On August 31, 2014, I sent an e-mail which included a photo of the flag. A representative of the museum promptly responded:

Dear Ron Charest,

Thank you for your email dated August 31, 2014, concerning the Japanese flag that belonged to your father.

Probably the original owner received this flag with handwritten messages when he was drafted into the military during World War II. We are not quite sure, but we guess this flag was given to Mr. [redacted] by the people of Uzuto Village, Mitsugi County, Hiroshima Prefecture.

For your information, I will share the URL of an organization that helps these flags returned to their families in Japan.

OBON 2015

<http://obon2015.com/english/>

I hope this information helps, and if you need further assistance, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Kahori Wada

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Kahori Wada

Curatorial Division

Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

1-2 Nakajima-cho, Naka-ku, Hiroshima 730-0811 Japan

Tel: +81-82-241-4004, Fax: +81-82-542-7941

Email: wada.k@pcf.city.hiroshima.jp

So, armed with this information, I checked out the [OBON 2015](#) website and promptly discovered that Dad's flag was called a "*Yosegaki Hinomaru*;" a flag carried by many Japanese soldiers during the war, signed by their family and loved ones for good luck and a speedy return. At some point during the war, American soldiers started collecting these flags from dead Japanese soldiers as war trophies.

This information helped explain the flag's significance but didn't explain how the apparent Japanese soldier appeared to

have come from Hiroshima Prefecture. There still seemed to be a Hiroshima link to Dad. I next contacted OBON 2015, again including a photo of the flag, and again promptly received a reply.

Dear Ron Charest,

Thank you for contacting **OBON 2015**.

OBON 2015 is an independent, non-profit, humanitarian movement intent on returning personal items back to their families. There is no charge for our service.

Since we are sure you have many questions about OBON 2015 and about our search process, please let us know whether you prefer to communicate by email or telephone. We prefer a conversation so we can fully answer all your questions and explain our process. If you give us a phone number and convenient time, we will gladly give you a call.

Otherwise, we can explain as much as possible by email.

As soon as you let us know we can begin to move forward.

Thank you for your compassion; these items are extremely meaningful to their families in Japan.

Sincerely,

Rex & Keiko Ziak

OBON 2015

Now, more intrigued than before, I arranged a phone call with Rex and Keiko Ziak. We had our phone call on September 2, 2014, just a mere two days after my first contact with the Hiroshima Peace Museum.

The Return

On the evening of September 2, I had a most interesting phone call with Rex & Keiko, founders of OBON 2015. The call started out with Rex and Keiko introducing themselves and their OBON 2015 project. Rex is former military and his wife Keiko is native Japanese, now living in Astoria, Oregon.

Some years earlier, they had started a project of repatriating Japanese Yosegaki Hinomaru's back to the families of the owners. Rex explained that his group had never worked with the Hiroshima Peace Museum, and was pleasantly flattered they knew of OBON 2015. The date of "2015" signified when they hoped all Yosegaki Hinomarus would be returned to families of the owners.

Rex explained that Yosegaki Hinomarus were flags given to Japanese soldiers before they went off to war. The flags were signed by family members, friends, and neighbors for good luck. The soldiers would carry these flags tucked in their clothing during their entire tours of duty. At some point during the war, American soldiers (and soldiers from allied nations) discovered these flags and began collecting them from the bodies of slain Japanese soldiers as war trophies. These collected flags were now scattered all across America and former allied countries, held by aging war veterans or the veteran's families.

Rex explained the significance of returning these flags; most Japanese soldiers who died in combat were buried (or not) in mass graves on the battlefield where they fell. Their graves were unmarked and families back home only knew their loved one was dead (as opposed to American soldiers, where the US Government made great efforts to return the bodies home). Japan had been culturally isolated for several hundred years, and for most families, losing a loved one in foreign combat may have been the first time in generations the family had no

way to properly honor their dead. The Yosegaki Hinomaru, if returned, was all that these families would ever have as a remembrance.

Rex acknowledged that Japanese actions during the war were savage and many allied soldiers who fought the Japanese held bitter memories. But, the war had long ended, Japan was now an ally, and Rex felt it was important to honor the individuals who fought in the war.

Rex then explained the process they used to repatriate Yosegaki Hinomarus. Once OBON 2015 received a Yosegaki Hinomaru they would study the writing on it. Japanese writing styles varied among prefectures (particularly back in the 1930s and 1940s), so Japanese scholars were often able to identify a region by the writing style. Once they had identified the location, they would work through contacts local to that Prefecture to identify surviving family using the names on the Yosegaki Hinomaru. Rex explained they had a fairly high success rate in repatriating the Yosegaki Hinomarus. Occasionally, a Yosegaki Hinomaru was too badly damaged to read, or the prefecture/names just could not be identified, but those were rare exceptions.

Rex and Keiko explained that, based on the photo I had sent, my Dad's Yosegaki Hinomaru was in exceptionally good condition and even had addresses written on it. Rex explained that if I chose to return it, finding the family of the owner should be relatively simple. At this point, I explained what I knew of the Yosegaki Hinomaru, which was a pretty short explanation.

Rex explained that returning the flag was entirely my decision and he would not try to push me. However, should I decide to return the Yosegaki Hinomaru, OBON 2015 would not/could not return it. Upon receipt, OBON 2015 would research the Yosegaki Hinomaru to locate surviving families of the owner. At my request, they would keep me informed of their search results. Once a surviving Japanese family member was located, they

would be contacted via a Japanese priest and asked about their preferences for return. The Yosegaki Hinomaru would then be sent to the family in accordance with their wishes. If the family wished to share information on the original owner of Yosegaki Hinomaru, OBON 2015 would relay that information back to the person who provided the Yosegaki Hinomaru.

Our conversation lasted about one hour. I was deeply impressed with Rex and his project. I was also feeling a bit awed at the small piece of history I had just fallen into. We ended our conversation with my promise to discuss this with the rest of my family, and come to a decision on whether we would return the Yosegaki Hinomaru.

Over the next several days I contacted my sister Melinda, and brothers Howard and Jeff, letting them know what I had found. As executor of Dad's estate, I knew I had the legal authority to dispose of Dad's belongings, but I wanted this to be a family decision. In truth, I had already made my personal decision. As a Navy veteran, I knew that if the Yosegaki Hinomaru had been mine, I would have wanted it returned to my family. It was that simple; I was one veteran wanting to honor another veteran of a past war who believed he was fighting for an honorable cause by defending his country. A belief based on being fed lies by his Government, not all that different than the lies pushed to other soldiers of other Governments over past hundreds of years including our own.

But I was also feeling disappointed in Dad. I thought about what this discovery meant; that Dad would have rummaged through the body of a dead soldier looking for war trophies. While I could accept soldiers becoming desensitized to death on a battlefield, the thought of Dad doing that disturbed me.

Melinda and Jeff were completely supportive of returning the Yosegaki Hinomaru. Howard was not. His feelings revolved around the history of how the Japanese treated allied POWs, and how they treated the citizens of conquered nations. Howard

was also upset because Dad had given away his Japanese rifle to someone outside the family, and Howard felt we should keep this item as a memento of Dad's WWII service. But in the end, I felt Howard acquiesced in returning it.

Returning the Yosegaki Hinomaru was complicated by the fact that, after finding it and taking photos, I replaced it back in Mom's cedar chest where I found it. By the time we had all agreed to send the Yosegaki Hinomaru to OBON 2015, Mom's cedar chest was packed away and in transit somewhere between New York and Tennessee. I wasn't able to reclaim the Yosegaki Hinomaru, package it, and send on to OBON 2015 until the end of October 2014.

As part of mailing the Yosegaki Hinomaru to OBON 2015, I filled out their legal release form. In this form I indicated, in the event the family of the owner was located, I wanted as much information as possible on who the individual was and how/where/when the owner died.

A New Mystery

As promised, Rex Ziak stayed in touch with me over the next several months. On January 6, 2015, I received an e-mail explaining their success at locating a family member of the owner. The e-mail read

Hello Mr. Charest,

We have news about the flag you sent to us.

Our scholars in Japan have worked extremely hard and were fortunate to have been able to connect the dots very quickly. They have found the family that belongs to your flag.

One of our associates in Japan has had a phone conversation with a neighbor living in that neighborhood who led them to

the correct family, which happens to be an elder brother of the deceased soldier. Our associate had a direct conversation with that elder brother's wife, who is in very good health and strength.

They very much want this item returned to them!

The information we received from the neighbor and wife has filled in more details. Apparently, this man (the younger brother) did, in fact, survive the war and returned home. However, apparently soon after returning he died in the streets. The elder brother was in Siberia during the war...and was probably held there as part of the Russian forced labor policy.

This neighbor, looking at pictures of the flag, identified many names of people he knew, and in addition to that, he noticed the signature of the Father of this soldier.

We will give you more information as this unfolds but wanted you to know what has happened in the past couple hours.

Sincerely,

Rex & Keiko Ziak
OBON 2015
P.O. Box 282
Astoria, Oregon 97103
(360) 484-3491

I acknowledged their e-mail, and several days later received a follow-up:

Dear Ron Charest,

Your father's flag is on its way to the soldier's older brother's house.

They requested to receive the flag directly to their home.

Older brother came back from Siberia and couldn't remember

anything about the detail of his younger brother. As we mentioned earlier, the younger brother (owner of the flag) had survived the war...returned home...and died in the streets.

When the flag is returned they will question elderly neighbors to see if anyone recalls more details about the young man or the circumstances of his death.

Anyway, finally, your father's flag found the home where it belongs.

Thank you so much for you and your family's generous heart.

Sincerely,

Rex & Keiko Ziak

So that was it. A few weeks later Rex again contacted me and offered me the opportunity to write a brief narrative of Dad's Yosegaki Hinomaru for OBON 2015's monthly newsletter, which I happily accepted. I never received any follow-up about what neighbors of the Yosegaki Hinomaru owner might have remembered, which disappointed me but didn't overly surprise me.

I still receive monthly newsletters from OBON 2015, and occasionally view their website. I've made a mental note that if I ever find myself in the vicinity of Astoria, Oregon, I need to try and meet Rex and Keiko Ziak. They are doing some extraordinary work for no personal financial gain, and I respect their efforts.

But I'm left simultaneously with mixed feelings of disappointment, relief, loss, and awe. I've also learned something about a small bit of post-WWII history which reinforced my personal insight into war.

I learned that Russia held Japanese POWs long after Japan surrendered. Russia stayed out of the war with Japan until the atomic bombs were dropped, then grabbed as much as they could

immediately afterward. This included capturing Japanese soldiers surrendering in China, who were then used as forced laborers within Russia for many years. This, apparently, was how the older brother of the Yosegaki Hinomaru's owner came to spend years of quality time in Siberia.

When a war ends people don't go back to living happily ever after while the film credits roll and the audience streams out of the theater. After the war, the lives of survivors are forever changed and things never go back to "the way they were before." The people who suffer the most are the people with the least ability to control the direction of their nation.

Knowing that the owner of this Yosegaki Hinomaru survived and returned home from combat just deepens the mystery of how Dad acquired it. I feel a sense of disappointment that I didn't learn the full answer, but I also feel relief knowing that Dad didn't take it from a dead Japanese soldier.

So I'm left with questions; How did Dad acquire this man's Yosegaki Hinomaru? Why didn't Dad ever tell us about it or tell us how he acquired it? Was acquiring this Yosegaki Hinomaru related to acquiring his Japanese rifle? More importantly; what did Dad experience in Japan, and specifically in Hiroshima, that he would never talk about?

I want to think Dad befriended this man, the owner of the Yosegaki Hinomaru, during Dad's time in Japan. I want to think Dad provided some personal assistance to this man and his family, and the man gave Dad his Yosegaki Hinomaru, and perhaps the rifle, as a token of thanks from one soldier to another. Or, Dad may have simply traded some rations in exchange for the Yosegaki Hinomaru and rifle. I'll never know for sure.

My sense of loss came from giving up a tangible piece of our family history, of letting go a tangible memento of Dad's army service. While I felt a sense of loss in giving back

the Yosegaki Hinomaru, I'm not sorry I did. It was not something we should have kept. I have to wonder if Dad's spirit rests a bit easier knowing this item was returned.

But I am left with a feeling of awe that I had a chance to be a small part of WWII history.

Epilogue

My sister Melinda continued sorting through Mom's lifetime accumulation of belongings long after Mom moved in with her. In November 2017 Melinda sent me something else found in Mom's cedar chest. Melinda discovered a souvenir pillow case printed with "US Army Camp Fannin, Texas". This pillowcase also has several printed images of cool Army stuff and a saccharin-sweet poem to "Mother."



Souvenir Army Pillowcase

I've validated that [Camp Fannin](#) was a US Army Infantry

Replacement Training Center near the present-day town of [Tyler, Texas](#). It opened in 1943 and operated for only four years. I know that Dad went to basic training in Texas in 1943, so I'm very certain this was a small gift Dad gave to his Mom after basic training before he was shipped overseas. Dad's Mom, our Meme, died in 1957 and the family (Dad's six sisters and two brothers) most likely would have returned it to Dad when his family sorted out her possessions.

So, in the end, our family ended up with a small memento of Dad's army service. This kitschy souvenir is something we can keep.