

Lest We Forget

The Contributions of Japanese-Canadian Veterans in the First World War

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April 7, 2015

Report Prepared at the request of the Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre in partial fulfilment of UBC Geography 429: Research in Historical Geography, for Dr. David Brownstein

Abstract

In 2016 The Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre will publish a book commemorating the lives of the Japanese-Canadian men who selflessly risked their lives fighting for Canada during the First World War. At a time when Japanese immigrants faced discrimination and racism the question as to why they volunteered has gone largely unanswered. When the government of British Columbia denied their requests to enlist for no other reason than their ethnicity, these brave men made the arduous journey to Alberta where they would find acceptance. Facing countless injustices, Japanese-Canadians were anxious to prove to their fellow Canadians that they were worthy of equal treatment and the right to vote. Having conducted research, reading first and second hand accounts of these veterans and their family, I have come to the conclusion that fighting for Canada was seen as a way of achieving the status of being a citizen. And while this effort was unsuccessful in the short run, their heroism and selfless contributions to the war effort marked a social shift in terms of recognising Japanese-Canadians as citizens even if the government would drag its heels for decades to come. Despite providing a context for which to analyse the lives of Japanese immigrants to Canada, the main purpose of this research is to shed light on the personal and individual lives of these veterans in an attempt to keep their stories alive for future generations and to commemorate the brave men who in the face of great injustice fought for the rights we take for granted today. These are their stories.

The Early Years

Manzo Nagano, the first known Japanese immigrant to Canada, arrived in 1877.¹ In the years to come, fishermen from across Japan made their way to the coast of British Columbia and worked the waters hauling in quantity of fish unheard of in Japan at that time. The sheer number of fish is what enticed many to leave Japan and settle in British Columbia despite the obvious challenges that would ensue. Japanese fishermen were known as the masters of the sea, able to out-catch any other and with speed and integrity. As more and more immigrants arrived from Japan, communities began to evolve around the fishing ports and by the late 1890s Japanese businesses and services were popping up in the two major communities of the day: Steveston, now part of the City of Richmond, and Japantown, east of Main Street and North of Hastings Street in Vancouver.²

Japanese men did not work exclusively as fishermen with many working in lumber yards and canneries. However despite being hard-working and loyal employees, those of European ancestry, white Canadians, began to resent the Japanese who they claimed took their jobs and made them look bad. Immigrants of any origin would have been paid less than their European counterparts and thus made up a significant percentage of the workforce. By 1907 tempers had reached a boiling point and anger overflowed onto the streets. White supremacists, on the ninth of September rioted in the streets of Chinatown and Japantown causing significant damage to homes and businesses and angered residents.³ This event

¹ Takata, Toyo. Japanese Canadian Timeline. Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre. Toronto. 1977. Revised 2012. <http://centre.nikkeiplace.org/japanese-canadian-timeline/>

² Ito, Roy. Stories of My People. Hamilton, 1994.

³ Ward, W. Peter. White Canada forever: Popular attitudes and public policy toward Orientals in British Columbia. Vol. 8. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2002.

highlighted the resentment felt by many residents and community leaders and the coming years would see more hostility. However despite less than favorable conditions, immigrants from Japan, and elsewhere, continued to make their way to BC and not only men. Japanese women and families too were integral in the building of communities, the running of Japanese schools and even a hospital in Steveston.

Leading up to the War

By 1914, Japanese men, women, and children had come to think of BC as home. The first child to be born to Japanese parents, Katsuji Oya, was now twenty-five years old and knew only what his parents had told him of Japan.⁴ He and countless others now called Canada home yet they were not considered citizens by the government and society alike. Despite their hard work, those of Japanese origin were not Canadians and did not enjoy the same rights as white Canadians even if born here. This was more than an annoyance for those of Japanese origin as they felt they had earned the right to be considered citizens. When war broke out in Europe the call went out for brave men who were willing and able to serve their country. For Japanese men this was an opportunity to prove their loyalty to Canada and hopefully a chance to gain equal treatment and rights for their family and community members.⁵ But despite their selfless requests to fight for all Canadians, the government of

⁴ Soldiers of the First World War database. Libraries and Archives Canada. Available online at: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>

⁵ Ito, Roy. We went to war: the story of the Japanese Canadians who served during the First and Second World Wars. Stittsville, Ont.: Canada's Wings, 1984.

the day rejected them for no other reason than the fact that they were Japanese.⁶ But this did not stop them. After the Vancouver trained regiment which was sponsored by the Canadian Japanese Association was refused in British Columbia, they made the trek to Alberta. Most of the refused regiment enlisted in Alberta regiments where quotas were low. They had succeeded and made the journey to Europe to fight alongside their fellow Canadians.

The First World War

Many of the 196 who made it to Alberta enlisted with the 192nd Battalion out of Calgary. Little is known about the treatment they faced from their comrades while overseas but the success the Battalion had, especially at Vimy Ridge, would earn them not only medals, but the reputation for being honorable men and soldiers. With the digitization of World War One military records, made available to the public at Libraries and Archives Canada, one can see in great detail what experiences these men would have had. From detailed accounts of gruesome injuries to the names or family members, to descriptions of what they looked like, such files have proven to be a treasure trove of information.

The Individuals: Seijiro Chiba

Seijiro Chiba was one of the members of the 192nd Battalion. He was born April 15th, 1887, in Mayagi Prefecture Japan.⁷ He came to the coast of BC hoping to make money as a fisherman and settled first in New Westminster and later at 556 Powell Street living in a small apartment

⁶ Kishibe, Kaye. *Battlefield at Last: The Japanese Canadian Volunteers of the First World War, 1914-1918*. Kaye Kishibe. Toronto. 2007.

⁷ LAC First World War record, Chiba, Seijiro, Regimental number: 898537, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1676 - 36, Item 99042.

above a shop in Japantown.⁸ Seijiro had no family to speak of except for his sister Shine back in Japan. On December 21st, 1915 the Japanese Canadian Association published an advertisement in a local paper asking for volunteers. Seijiro would answer the call along with many other community members. They began training and were more than willing to put their lives on the line however such training would abruptly halt on May 11th, 1916 when the BC government announced that Japanese men would not be allowed to enlist.⁹

Seijiro would however enlist in Calgary on August 20th, 1916 and within a few months was en route to France. He would spend the next three years on the battlefield making significant contributions which lead to many successful battles. Such successes came at a great cost however. Seijiro would suffer a number of injuries over the course of the three years he served. Records show that his right leg was injured by shrapnel and then became infected.¹⁰ He would be sent to Boulogne France in April of 1917 to recover before being released in June of the same year. He later was hospitalized with a fractured left arm twice the following year. Doctors also made note of some mental instability and he was determined not to be fit for service by December of 1918. Sadly he was not the only soldier to experience such injuries and many did not survive. Seijiro did make it back to Canada, being discharged on April 5th, 1919 after which he returned to Vancouver where he lived at 114 Main Street.¹¹ He would earn two military service badges during his service and returned having served his country proud. He would continue to live in Vancouver for the remainder of his life, making trips back

⁸ City of Vancouver Archives. City of Vancouver Directory, 1916. Vancouver, BC.

⁹ Adachi, Ken. The enemy that never was: A history of the Japanese Canadians. McClelland & Stewart, 1976.

¹⁰ LAC First World War record, Chiba, Seijiro, Regimental number: 898537, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1676 - 36, Item 99042

¹¹ City of Vancouver Archives. (Multiple collections/sources) Vancouver, BC.

to Japan a couple of times. Seijiro Chiba passed away on January 13th, 1940 at the age of 52 leaving behind no family in Canada.¹² His grave can be found at Mountainview Cemetery in Vancouver. Seijiro passed away just a few years before all Japanese-Canadians would have been rounded up and sent to internment camps during the Second World War.

Toranosuke Danjo

A fellow Battalion member of Seijiro Chiba was Toranosuke Danjo. Born in Hiroshima Japan on May 5th, 1883, Toranosuke had prior military experience having served 21 months in the Japanese military. He was able to enlist in the 192nd Battalion on August 4th, 1916 in Calgary¹³. Danjo, unlike many of the other soldiers who were fishermen, was a soap-maker. He came to BC alone and settled in Vancouver where he practiced his trade. Unlike Seijiro, Toranosuke was fortunate not to have had any injuries, at least none that were documented. He did however contract tuberculosis while serving overseas; the disease later contributing to his death on December 1st, 1930. Despite this indirect cause of death, he was considered a war casualty. In the few years Danjo had post World War One he married his wife, Ms. Suma Nakamura. They would not wed until September 14th, 1929, just a few months before his death. At the time of their marriage Toranosuke was age 46 and his wife 51. He was working as a secretary and living at 1874 Marine Drive in Vancouver¹⁴. Perhaps due to their age or perhaps due to Toranosuke's deteriorating health, the couple did not have any children.

¹² British Columbia Vital Statistics Agency. British Columbia, Canada. British Columbia Vital Statistics Agency: Chiba, Seijiro

¹³ LAC First World War Record, Danjo, Toranosuke, Regimental number: 898530, Military File #2289-52

¹⁴ City of Vancouver Archives. City of Vancouver Directory, 1930. Vancouver, BC.

Chutarō Chujo

Also fighting with the 192nd Battalion was Chutarō Chujo. Chujo enlisted on September 20th, 1916 and served until demobilization on April 23rd, 1919.¹⁵ Unlike Seijiro, Toranosuke and many other comrades, Chujo did not settle in Vancouver or Steveston, but moved far north to the remote Nishka village of Nass River. He was from a small fishing town in Okinawa Japan where he had lived with his parents. It is hard to imagine leaving the comforts of home only to relocate to an isolated canning community in northern BC where the work would have been very strenuous. Eight canneries were running at the time when Chujo would have moved there in the years preceding the First World War.¹⁶ Japanese men would have been assigned dangerous jobs and it was not uncommon to lose fingers in the canning process. Compensation would have been minimal but likely more than they could have made working in Vancouver or Steveston. Perhaps it is not so surprising that when the call went out for soldiers during the First World War that Chujo, like many others, volunteered to enlist. On October 31st, 1916 he sailed from Halifax to Liverpool aboard the S. S. Empress of Britain arriving 18 days later.

While fighting at Vimy Ridge France he would receive a gunshot wound to his left leg. Military records show that he was taken to hospital in Boulangé France the day after he was shot on April 10th, 1917 before being transferred to Cardiff on the 15th of April. He would end up in Bear Wood, Berkshire, England a week later and remain there until he was able to return to battle. After demobilization he settled in Vancouver, living first at 236 Powell Street and later

¹⁵ Soldiers of the First World War database. Libraries and Archives Canada. Available online at: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>

¹⁶ Yesaki, Mitsuo. Sutebusuton: A Japanese Village on the British Columbia Coast. Vancouver, BC.

307 Powell Street. Chutarō Chujo never married and never had children. After a short time in Vancouver following the war he returned to Nass River and lived the remainder of his life there working in the canneries. He is buried in the Kincolith cemetery near Nass River where the only memorial to Japanese soldiers in BC, outside of the Stanley Park memorial, exists today.

Manzo Araki

Then there were those Japanese-Canadian men who were drafted later on. Originally British Columbia's Premier had pressured the Canadian Prime Minister not to allow Japanese-Canadians to fight as he feared the franchise issue would arise again after having completed service. But as more and more men were dying on the battlefield the call went out for men of any background to fight. Manzo Araki was one of those men. At this time Manzo had been living in Cumberland BC in the coal mines as a "timer-cutter". Cumberland had seen a large influx of Japanese immigrants from as early as the 1880s. Until 1900, single men would have made up the majority of the population working in the mines for around \$1.25 per day.¹⁷ By the beginning of the war Cumberland had an established Japantown with schools, churches, and businesses. Women and children were also more numerous although Manzo would not marry until after the war. He was drafted into the 2nd Depot Battalion BC Regiment, Canadian Infantry and had the rank of Private. He would not be drafted until January 24th, 1918 at the age of 33. He would spend but a few months serving and was granted conditional leave

¹⁷ Cumberland Japanese Resident List 1941, Rev. Ono Collection. Box 11.

without pay on May 28th, 1918 due to “his being of Japanese nationality”.¹⁸ Also noted on military documents was that “leave in this case to terminate when men of his nationality are called up” clearly discriminating against him due to his ethnicity. After the war Manzo would return to his home prefecture of Kumamoto to marry his wife Natsuka. In 1921 they returned to PO Box 528 in Cumberland where Manzo resumed his former occupation of miner.¹⁹ Work in the mines was extremely dangerous and hundreds would lose their lives before Asian mine workers were shut-out in 1932. Hostility towards Asians was growing as a dwindling number of jobs during the depression were often given to the cheaper labor. Manzo and his wife had five children during the years after the First World War. Sadly they all would be interned during the Second World War and their property and assets seized and sold off. It is not known which camp the Araki family was placed in but before leaving the Japanese residents wrote a kind letter to their non-Japanese community members, many of whom rallied the government not to forcibly remove the Japanese residents of Cumberland.

Following the war the Araki family settled in Westbank BC where they farmed tomatoes before dispersing in the coming years. Manzo and his wife would move to Vancouver in 1951 passing away three years later on September 17th, 1954 at the age of 70. His wife, Natsuka, then moved in with her daughter, Tamiko, and her husband, Nasashi Nakano, where they lived together at 3828 Beatrice Street until her death on February 9th, 1967.²⁰ Manzo’s other children and their children continue to call BC home with some living in Ashcroft, Vancouver,

¹⁸ Soldiers of the First World War database. Libraries and Archives Canada. Available online at: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>

¹⁹ Soldiers of the First World War database. Libraries and Archives Canada. Available online at: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>

²⁰ City of Vancouver Archives. City of Vancouver and Provincial Directory, Multiple years. Vancouver, BC.

Westbank, and Yale today. It is very unfortunate that veterans such as Manzo would live to experience their internment however he did live to see Japanese-Canadians given the right to vote in 1949.

Following the First World War

While these soldiers would see victory on the battlefield, they would not experience the same back at home. The BC government failed to recognise Japanese-Canadians as citizens despite their service. And while veterans were given the right to vote in 1931, no other rights would be granted²¹. Despite the government's lack of progress, Japanese-Canadian service in the First World War marked a social shift in attitudes. The Stanley Park Japanese-Canadian World War One Memorial was erected in 1920 paid for in large part by Japanese residents and the Canadian Japanese Association. And while this was a monument for Japanese-Canadians funded primarily by Japanese-Canadians, the city and residents were very much in favor of it. Life for most of these veterans would return to normal after the war but due to their selfless sacrifices a significant step was taken towards shifting opinions of Japanese-Canadians and their service marked a step towards equality.

Internment

The internment of all Japanese-Canadians (including those of Japanese ancestry that were born in Canada) marks a dark period in Canadian history. Following Japan's invasion of Hong Kong and the attack on Pearl Harbour Canada declared war on Japan during the Second

²¹ Dick, Lyle (2010). "Sergeant Masumi Mitsui and the Japanese Canadian War Memorial". *Canadian Historical Review*. 3 91: 442-43.

World War.²² Despite evidence that Japanese-Canadians posed no threat to national security, internment was deemed necessary by the Federal Government. All Japanese-Canadian residents were subsequently forced to leave their homes, businesses, and livelihoods behind and were forcibly relocated to camps inland. Vancouver Member of Parliament at the time Ian Mackenzie stated that it was the government's plan to get the Japanese people out of B.C. as fast as possible. He also stated that it was his personal intention to see they never come back to BC. The BC Government had obviously not changed their views of allowing Japanese-Canadians the rights of their fellow Canadians. The government later backed away from their decision after pressure from the federal government but not before deporting nearly four thousand people to Japan. By 1949 however Japanese living in Canada gained the right to vote and were allowed to live where they liked in Canada.

Redress

Following internment Japanese Canadians could not feel pride in discussing their heritage due to the Federal and Provincial Government's decision to treat them as enemies of the state. Having had their homes and businesses taken they had little to return to and thus often resettled elsewhere. The former bustling communities in Vancouver, Steveston, and elsewhere around the province had little evidence of having once been uniquely Japanese. But Canada was the only home many of them knew and they persevered and made the best they could out of lives shattered by the government. By 1977, the centenary of the first Japanese immigrant to BC, the National Association of Japanese Canadians together with support from the Japanese community were beginning to voice their distaste with the

²² Adachi, Ken. *The enemy that never was: A history of the Japanese Canadians*. McClelland & Stewart, 1976

treatment they had received.²³ In 1988 Prime Minister Mulroney officially apologized on behalf of the federal government and compensation was offered to those, living, who experienced internment.

Conclusions

Since the 1870s Japanese residents of Canada have helped build the Province we know today. The men who served in the First World War, regardless of their ethnicity, did so to ensure the rights and freedoms of the people of BC, Canada, and beyond. Japanese-Canadian men fought additionally for their own rights and freedoms in a country where they faced racism and discrimination. Many lost their lives and many suffered injuries only to have the government deny their requests for equal treatment. Although laws would not change immediately, social changes began to occur as a result of their service. By sharing the individual stories of these men I hope not only to keep their memories and contributions alive but also to revisit a dark period in Canadian history to prevent such injustices from ever occurring again.

Future Study

The Japanese were not the only minority group to suffer discrimination throughout this period of British Columbia history. Chinese and First Nations were just some of the groups so serve in World War One and they too would face great injustices. It would be interesting to look into the reasons why they too volunteered to fight alongside their fellow Canadians and the outcome of such an endeavor.

²³ Sunahara, Ann Gomer. *The politics of racism: The uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War*. James Lorimer & Co, 1981.

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