

An American Name

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It was a demonstration of pride seen rarely in my family. And even then, it was a gesture meant to be shared. I stood in the basement of the house, surrounded by the collections of years that so many of us keep. I stand a mere five foot six, but I am head and shoulders above my Aunt Nobu, now 84, and my Uncle Goro, 88. I was feeling a bit awkward and large next to my frail relatives and it was midnight, time for me to be going. It was in this humble and friendly place that Goro opened a small blue box and showed me the Congressional Gold Medal. I hadn't come to see it, but it was the answer to my question.

My quest began when my first son was born. I wanted to be sure that he understood something of the legacy which every father gives to his children. I wanted him to know his family, but what I had to give wasn't enough. I needed more. And so, one Sunday evening, 3000 miles from home, I sat for hours with Goro and Nobu at their kitchen table. And we talked.

The story begins a long time ago. It is a story pieced together, laced with uncertainty and regrettably incomplete. It is a story of courage and of honor. It is a story of family. This is how I see it.

Masuji Asaki was born in Ehime-ken Japan on September 12, 1882. He first came to America sometime before 1911, maybe many years earlier. Stories differ on why he came. One story has it that he was seeking a place more tolerant of Christianity. Another story has it that he was choosing to leave rather than face compulsory military service at the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904), he being a man of peace opposed to wars of conquest. Possibly both are true. Though, in the United States he enlisted in the Navy and was given the assignment of cook on a vessel. How he felt about this job is not known – culturally, this would be a strange position as Japanese men are not allowed in the kitchen. (Goro remembers that as a boy he was allowed in the kitchen to bring in wood and start the fire, otherwise he was not welcome and expected to be elsewhere.) After Masuji's military service, he started a sawmill operation with a partner. About 1915 he returned to Japan to marry.

Mineko Sagara was born December 21, 1894 in Kagoshima-ken Japan. Her lineage can be traced to the Japanese royal family where her line and the ruling line diverged

about 1000 years ago. The document recording this lineage has been missing for several years, though many of my father's family have seen it. One story has it that Masuji was originally to marry (arranged, of course) one of Mineko's sisters. Our relatives in Japan, of the Sagara and Senta families, have occasionally been visited by my uncles and aunts, and by my dad.

After Masuji and Mineko married (about 1916), they returned to California. At some point the sawmill business was plundered by thieves. The Asaki family turned to farming. They worked in Lindsay and Visalia, and likely other places, before settling near Hanford, California in 1922. They were not allowed – by law – to own land. They farmed for others. During these years between the two world wars, the Japanese Americans in this country faced strong prejudice supported by culture and law. Mineko and Masuji began to raise many children:

Shichiro (Tom) [1917–2000]
Teruko (May) [1919–2009]
Teiko [1921–1947]
Nobuko [1922–1923]
Goro (George) [1923–]
Fumiko [1925–2011]
Aiko [1927–]
Kiyoko [1929–]
Yoshiko [1931–]
Hiroshi [1932–1932]
Isamu (Sam) [1934–]
Yutaka (Jack) [1936–]
Sei (Steve) [1938–]

The youngest is my father. He was almost four years old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

When the news came out several things happened quickly. Goro remembers his dad burying the rifle under the house. May remembers her dad burning family possessions that tied them to Japan. The next day, Tom volunteered with the United States Army. It was his hope that this would favorably represent our family's loyalty to the United States. On May 8, 1942, the remaining 12 family members were evacuated by train to the interment camp at Jerome, Arkansas. They were allowed one suitcase apiece. Mineko traveled while ill with the condition that eventually killed her – hypertension – in December of 1942. Goro's thoughts are that she suffered and died also of loneliness – that she had come to feel useless. Considering the dramatic change in circumstances – from daughter of the extended royal family to detained alien – I cannot disagree.

Masuji, like many internees, had time. Gradually, austerity was transformed into a semblance of comfort through hard work, initiative and creativity. Internees began to make furniture, clothing and artwork. One time Masuji baked a birthday cake. He had no means of decorating it in the modern sense, but Goro remembers a very elaborate, beautiful and creative job using the only material at hand – waxed paper. At the conclusion of the war, they would leave most things behind again for their travel “home,” each given \$25 to start a new life. Nobu has noticed the photographic, literary, and museum bias toward representing the camps in a much more comfortable and domestic light than was usually the case.

Tom apparently never spoke to anyone (his wife Ruth perhaps?) about his war experience. As Goro said, “It was not a topic we ever discussed. That story is gone with him.” Some things I can piece together, though it remains very sterile. He served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, 3rd Battalion. Initially, he was with Headquarters Company. Later, after the 442nd rescued the “Lost Battalion,” he joined I Company. He participated in the North Apennines, Po Valley and Rhineland Campaigns in Italy. He was decorated with the Combat Infantryman Badge, Purple Heart, Bronze Star and Unit Citation.

Goro served in the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) having volunteered shortly after arriving in the relocation camp. He underwent military and language training at Camp Savage and later at Fort Snelling, both in Minnesota. He graduated December 1944. He served in the Philippines and in Japan translating communications and acting as an interpreter. During part of this time his unit helped find and debrief Japanese soldiers in the islands who were unaware of the war’s end.

I asked Goro how he felt about the use of atomic weapons on Japan in 1945. He remembers the policy/belief at the time that this action saved many more lives than would have been lost by a lengthier war. While he did not say that he believes this today, he did add that he does not regret this action by the United States. I exchanged with him the story of the blackened canteen and of my meeting with Larry Johnston (late of Moscow, ID).

Both Tom and Goro were discharged shortly after the war. Masuji and Tom returned to Hanford and Tom purchased the family land which they had been forced to leave four years earlier. A new house was built (What happened to the old rifle?). Masuji died in April of 1946. Teiko died in August of 1947 from complications with the birth of her first child.

Now there remained ten siblings. I believe that May and Goro did not return to Hanford. May had married while interned and Goro was studying in the Chicago area. The younger children were now being raised by their older siblings. This

circumstance may be the reason that the family was strong for so many years – this and the continued prejudice. The family also had the support of an old family friend, Mr. Noda, who encouraged them to remember the principles they had been taught by their mother and father and never to dishonor the family name.

They made it through. It could not have been very easy. My dad, my uncle Sam and my uncle Goro have all given me the same answer to the question “What was it like growing up in Hanford?” That answer, given after a slight pause: “Well, we went to school.” I’m not sure how to understand this. I know so little about this time in my family’s experience, yet no one says much about it.

At Goro’s and Nobu’s kitchen table, we talked for hours. I told them about my quest for my sons. I want my sons to know at least a little about their family, my family. I want “Goro” to be more than a picture in an album. I want “Tom” to be more than my namesake. I want something to hand to my sons that says “This is part of you.” I want my sons to know of the struggles, the triumphs and the lives that are Asaki. I almost left that day with an unfulfilled quest. Truly, such a quest is never fully realized, but this day I wanted more, I needed more ... and so Goro brought out the small blue box.

The Congressional Gold Medal is an award bestowed by the United States Congress and is, along with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest *civilian* award in the United States. The decoration is awarded to an individual who performs an outstanding deed or act of service to the security, prosperity, and national interest of the United States. In October of 2010 this medal was awarded collectively to the approximately 6,000 Nisei soldiers that served in the 100th Infantry Battalion & 442nd Regimental Combat Team (the most highly decorated regiment in the history of the United States Armed Forces), and the Military Intelligence Service. However, as a *civilian* honor it means much more. It was forged with the names of *all* Americans of Japanese ancestry who, with honor and courage and faith, earned – often at great cost – a name in America. One of those American names is Asaki.