

Fresh Sardines

08-22-2015 by Harry Zirkelbach

The winter month of February 1946 began cold, remained so without storms and more snow. Days, when you left your dwelling with a chill, that remained and worsened. The waters of the Sea of Japan provided saturated air. The residents of the city of Nanao, western Japan, had little to do but await Spring, planting time.

Except, a remnant of the recent war had created work for a few dozen local laborers. Their task, remove bombs and munitions from the Japanese ship, Takakurasanmaru. In returning munitions from Korea for homeland defense, twelve months earlier, the Takakurasanmaru struck an American dropped mine in that harbor; Sinking, that Captain headed ashore, ran aground. The ship remained there, the same water-level inside, flooding the cargo.

With peace, to help the Japanese economy, non-military material was ceded to the Japanese.

The Takakurasanmaru fell in that category, once the munitions were removed. Eighth Army in Tokyo gave permission, should the munitions be removed without threat to anyone, then the task to our Navy detachment in Kyoto.

Two military officers were sent to Nanao. They reviewed the Ship manifest content, visited the Takakurasanmaru, made assessment. The munitions could be removed to barges, that towed into the Sea of Japan, carefully dropped overboard into the water beyond the one hundred fathom line. Danger to none.

Japanese Drivers would place temporary cement patches along seams that had been rent by the mine blast. Once the munitions were unloaded, the ship would be towed to Tsuruga, the hull repaired, the ship refitted, joining their new merchant marine.

I became the Disposal Officer for the task which was completed without incident. But not adventure.

Indispensable for this and all munitions disposal, an interpreter. Our small office had no interpreters. Army Military Government assigned Japanese Nationals conversant in English. A few were young, had studied in the United States before the war. Others, all age, their English understandable, limited by contact with their English speaking world.

The interpreter I would live with for five weeks was Tommy Yamada. Maybe twenty years my Senior, Tommy was short, even amidst the Japanese, had a ready smile and laugh.

Tommy was a tailor. He had lived before the War by buying an Ocean-liner ticket, selling clothing to passengers. By day, contacting fellow travelers, make a sales pitch. Evening/night sewing suits, dresses, shirts in his small stateroom. Delivered before reaching the next port.

Tommy, tireless, working alcoholic, liked by all immediately. His friendship and understanding was indispensable, with authorities, laborers.

Outside our task, Tommy teaches me to all things Japanese.
Cloisonné, Wood Block Prints, Western Japanese foods,
Geisha dancing, Pearl fishing.

And after one long day at sea, dumping munitions, we had returned to the single dock of the Port of Nanao. On tie-up, we climb to the pier's floor. Since departure a Sardine fisherman had arrived, was allowed to spread his catch over much of the pier, for drying in the sun; then salted.

Tommy explains, suggests I eat one. They seem tiny silver knives with head and tail, curling and shining in the afternoon sun; not a treat. I eat one.

It was a delicacy.

I eat several more.

Smiles, laughter, from the Nanao population assembled.

I bow.

Tommy is pleased.

My education continues.

