

IMAGES OF JAPAN, 1992

by

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Twenty-three years (the half-life of Nelson) and a galaxy of dreams ago, four years of army life ended with me taking my honorable discharge in Japan on February 15, 1969. For over two years I had lived in Japan at Chitose in the Northern Island of Hokkaido and at Atsugi Naval Air Station near Yokohoma. During the next several weeks, I traveled extensively throughout the four main islands of Japan as a civilian on a sixty-day tourist visa. I visited the monkeys at Beppu, located on the southern Island of Kyushu, rode the Shinkansen bullet train to Osaka, and flew to Sapporo to see the Yuki Matsuri, the famous snow and ice festival.

My original intention was to stay in Japan until I could find a merchant ship willing to let me work my passage to Australia, but I found that the ships were heavily unionized, and the prospect unlikely. A passenger ship came into Yokohoma heading for Darwin, but I didn't want to pay two hundred and seventy-five dollars for a ticket.

Down to my last sixty-five dollars in my pocket, and my visa near expiration, I had to do something, because the Japanese Government would not renew the visa unless I left the country. Sixty-five dollars was not enough money to go to Okinawa and back, so I decided to go home. Instead of accepting a free ticket from the Army to fly, I decided to see if I could find a ship that would allow me to work my way back to the States. Somewhere along the way, I had picked up a waiver from the U. S. Coast Guard, which was good enough for me to hire on as a deck hand on the USS Fred Morris, a cargo ship owned by the Waterman Steamship Company of San Francisco.

I exchanged eighteen days of my life to chip paint on the rusty decks of the Fred Morris for the adventure of sailing from Yokohoma to San Francisco. While sitting on the bow of the ship at night, listening to a radio, watching for other ships, counting falling stars, and wondering if the full red moon rising over the calm sea was an atomic test, I fantasized of living life as a vagabond, and knew that someday I would return to the Land of the Rising Sun, colorful kimonos, and Sapporo Beer. Finally, reaching San Francisco, we sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge at midnight, a sight still vivid in my memory today.

Dreams lost themselves in the realities of conforming to honored traditions and living under the self-imposed cloud called responsibility. Marriage, raising two daughters, furthering my education, and enhancing my career as a space cadet all contributed to the delay of completing my boomerang journey to Japan until my youth metamorphosed into a prodigal old goat.

In January of this year, while making travel arrangements to go back to the South Pole, it dawned on me that my return trip from the Ice would put me in Hawaii about February 5th, the same day as the Yuki Matsuri starts in Sapporo. From Hawaii, I could easily buzz on over to Tokyo, using 30,000 frequent flyer miles, as opposed to the 55,000 miles it would take to fly from the mainland. The Sapporo Snow and Ice Festival is spectacular; it was time for me to capture memories of my youth.

By the time I arrived in Honolulu, I had flown over seventeen hours from McMurdo, Antarctica, and had been awake for about twenty-six hours. I was exhausted, and came close to canceling the flight to Tokyo, and hopping another flight to Los Angeles. But my luggage had been checked to Tokyo, so I decided to chase it. While waiting for all of the passengers to board the 747, I fell asleep. One of the flight attendants woke me and suggested that I go to the back of the plane and stretch out in the empty middle row of seats. I think I was sound asleep by the time the landing gear was retracted. About an hour out of Tokyo the flight crew woke me, and I felt refreshed.

Although it was dark outside, and very cold, the ride on a bus to Shinjuku train station was tantalizing. Neon signs written in Japanese and English advertised Asahi beer, Mitsubishi, Honda, Toyota, Sony, Fuji, and Coca-Cola. Long forgotten and fragmented phrases of Japanese began to stir in my conscientious. The incredible politeness of 27 million people living within close proximity to each other made me realized that the Japanese can still teach Westerners a thing or two.

Walking out of Shinjuku Station was like being shrunk and inserted into the backboard of a pinball machine. Indeed, the sounds of pachinko (vertical Japanese-type of pinball machines) enhanced this image. Horns were honking; signs of every size and description and color blinked on and off, overloading the senses. Buy Me! Buy Me! If you Buy Me, I will be a bigger and brighter sign next year, and I will make you happy.

The Japanese people didn't look at the signs, but they did pull their coats a little tighter as they patiently waited for a taxi. Some smoked, and some read a newspaper, folded tightly, so not to disturb others. A group of girls still wearing their school uniforms window shopped, and held animated discussions with each other, their eyes bright and shining. One of the girls, young enough to be my daughter, shyly smiled at me. No graffiti marred the walls. No tense feeling of robbers lurking in the darkness bothered me. I was a *gijeen* (foreigner – the spelling may be off). I felt no fear. It was good to be back. I felt guilty as an older lady standing in front of me insisted that I take the next taxi. She beamed when I said, "Domo Arigatio Gozimusu" – Thank you very much.

My good friends, John and Carol Brandenburg, live in Tokyo, near Shinjuku Station. They had invited me to stay with them. Don't ever tell me that if

you don't mean it, for I am liable to take you up on it, no matter where in the world you may be.

John and I had served in the army together, in Turkey and in Japan. It had been since 1970 that we had last seen each other in Carbondale, Ill. In his current job as the Asian manager of a Dallas-based company, John travels extensively throughout the Far East. Carol operates an oriental *kohtohin* (antique) business. They have lived in Japan for sixteen years, and their children, Dawn and John, never attended a school in the United States until after they graduated from high school.

At the time that John was facing the Draft in the Mid-Sixties, he wanted to be a German linguist. The army, in their infinite wisdom, told him that he didn't have the ability to be a linguist; therefore, he ended up in communications. Now, he speaks fluid Japanese and Cantonese (Chinese).

The next morning, John utilized his Japanese while renewing his driver's license. Again, the Japanese people could teach American driver' license office personnel lessons in efficiency. Later in the morning, John phoned the parents of a Japanese man whom I had met at the South Pole a week earlier and acted as a translator. It had been several months since they had talk to their son, so they seemed pleased.

Carol speaks Japanese quite well herself. After John left for his office, she took me to a small restaurant and ordered some curry rice for me. My method of ordering is to point at the plastic meals displayed in the front window of a restaurant. Sometimes I think I was served the plastic molded whatever. After eating the delicious curry, Carol drove me to a train station so I could go to the airport for a flight to Sapporo.

Sitting next to me on the flight was a man whose suit didn't quite match the years of toil his hands had endured. I don't know what stories those knarled hands could have told if they could talk – certainly, the relative comfort of an hour's flight couldn't compare with his day-to-day living. As two of my friends say about me, putting a tie on that man is like putting silver tack on a mule.

Planes going to Sapporo actually land at Chitose, the location of my old army base. In 1969, the Chitose airport terminal was the size of a large barn; now it is like a shopping mall. International flights now connect in Chitose. Probably the 1972 Sapporo Winter Olympics contributed to its expansion. Just as the airport has expanded, so has the city. As I rode the Chitose – Sapporo bus, I felt disappointed that I couldn't find the Bar Cherry and other illustrious night spots that sold Sapporo beer in liter bottles, even though I am sure we drove down the road past where they should have been.

For me, part of the adventure in traveling is never knowing where I will stay on any given night. By the time the bus arrived in Sapporo, it was late, and most of the shops were closed. At the bus station, the man in the information booth told me of a cheap hotel. I didn't have any idea what kind of a place it would be, but for the equivalent of about \$10 -\$15, I didn't expect much. I was pleasantly surprised to find a *Ryokan* (Japanese-style hotel room) with a futon and tatami mats, an adjoining Japanese bath that one washes him or herself before entering, and a robe and sandals. I always take showers instead of baths, but when in Rome... I did balk at wearing the robe, though – when I finished the bath I put my jeans and cowboy boots back on. While there was only limited heat in the room, I stayed warm sleeping under the futon that night.

Before I turned in for the night I walked to Madori Park, where the Yuki Matsuri stretched for approximately one kilometer. The lights were turned off before I finished walking the length of the park. Of course, I had to stop and photograph many of the magnificent carvings made from ice and snow. Most of the crowds had disappeared, so I had good view unobstructed by people. There are many people who are much better photographers than I am, but still, I think some of my night shots came out well.



Yuki Matsuri night shots. The bottom two photos were taken around 1968.

Words and photographs cannot adequately express the beauty of the ice sculptures. These are masterpieces of art. Back in the Sixties, one Yuki Matsuri displayed a swan about three feet tall that looked like crystal, and a snow replica of Noah's Ark about fifty feet long. This year, a replica of the White House was

built with the front about one hundred feet long. A ten-foot high statue of Abraham Lincoln resembled the statue at Lincoln's Memorial very closely. I could easily write several paragraphs describing the Yuki Matsuri.



Able Lincoln Memorial Ice Sculpture

A light snow fell that night. The wet streets acted as mirrors to the beautiful neon lights of Sapporo, damping the negative impact of the “Buy Me” messages at Shinjuku Station in Tokyo.

During the time I served in the army, I rented many bottles of Sapporo beer. Now, I don't drink much at all. After I left the park, it was time to hunt for some of that beer and *yakitori* (chicken on a stick). Steering away from restaurants that had English signs, I found a little place with a red lantern and Japanese writing outside its sliding bamboo door. They didn't have the *yakitori*, but two men inside the place were cooking strips of beef on a hibachi at their table. Asking the owner in my broken Japanese what they were eating (one never knows), he replied in his fragmented English, “Genghis Khan”. This had been one of my favorite meals in the old days, but I thought the term was invented by GI's, and would mean nothing to him. My chopstick skills had diminished somewhat, but not so badly that I couldn't enjoy this wonderful meal. After two bottles of the much sought-after beer, and a meal that I thought I would never have again, I wandered back to my hotel.

By the time I awoke the next morning, several inches of fresh snow greeted me. I guess it is only natural to have snow at a snow festival. That didn't deter any of the thousands who attended the Yuki Matsuri. As mentioned earlier, the park is about a kilometer long, and a city block wide. The crowds walked around the ice sculptures in a counter-clock wise direction. Taking photographs proved somewhat more difficult than the previous night, but the Japanese stood

politely back when they saw me trying to photograph the sculptures without the back of a bunch of heads. On one of the sculptures, a group of men played drums while others sang and danced. These performers wore shirts and shorts in the cold weather. My impression is these men were Ainu, the indigenous people of Hokkaido.



Ainu Drummers

Near the center of the park there was a large tent where people could buy hot chocolate, and some type of fermented drink that was served to me by mistake. One swig of that stuff convinced me to buy the hot chocolate. As I walked out of the tent, I slipped on ice, spilling the hot chocolate all over myself. Immediately, several Japanese people surrounded me, asking if I was OK, and then they walked me into a first aid tent where a mama-san washed my coat with a warm washcloth. I wasn't hurt, but had no doubt that I would have had very good care had I broken my ankle.

Street vendors sold film and post cards. Exquisite stamps of women in kimonos were sold at a post office set up in a booth. They think of everything. Sapporo clock tower rose majestically at one end of the park. Once again, I was impressed by the friendliness of the personnel working in the souvenir shop at the top. In 1967, while visiting this same tower, three Japanese girls shyly asked me if they could practice speaking English to me. We all went to a nearby coffee shop and enjoyed the afternoon as we laughed and they spoke English to me and I tried speaking Japanese to them.

The train back to Chitose was clean, on time, and cheaper than the bus. Two little girls, about three years old, entertained the other passengers with their antics and laughter, but they weren't loud, screaming, nor disturbing. We passed an isolated Shinto Shrine standing high above the snow-covered rice fields with its curled up roof corners and mean looking dog statues to ward off evil spirits.

In Sapporo I had used almost all my cash to buy a phone card with a photo of the ice sculptures for a souvenir. I mistakenly thought I could cash traveler's checks at Chitose airport to buy food. I was hungry, but didn't have enough Yen to buy anything. Once again in my life, airline food came to my

rescue. I had 375 Yen, and knew that it cost 490 Yen to ride the train from the Tokyo airport to Shinjuku Station. Somehow, I knew things would work out, so I didn't worry.



Temple dog to ward off evil spirits

At the Tokyo airport, prior to boarding the flight to Chitose, the Japanese security people made me give up my trusty Buck pocketknife I have had since 1971. They said I could pick it up in Chitose. But I forgot to do so. When I checked in at Chitose for the return flight, I inquired about the knife, and was told that it would be waiting for me in Tokyo. I figured that I would never see it again. Tokyo's Haneda Airport is fairly good size. An Information Booth was located close to the gate and it had signs in English. I asked the man there about the knife, and to my surprise, he gave it to me. At the time, the exchange rate was 120 Yen to the dollar, so on a whim, I asked the man if I could exchange one dollar for 120 Yen. He thought about it for a minute, and then agreed to do it. Now I had 495 Yen, and once I bought the ticket to Shinjuku Station, I had a 5 Yen coin with a hole in its center left over. No problem!

My phone card enabled me to call John and Carol to pick me up at the Shinjuku Station. We had agreed that dinner was my treat, but they wanted pizza. I told them to order a pizza for themselves, but I didn't go all the way to Tokyo to eat at Pizza Hut. I wanted *yakitori*! We drove back to their house, and then walked down a winding path to a little restaurant. They decided to skip the pizza. I think I would have rather seen John eat pizza!

He ordered for all of us. At last, I had my *yakitori*. I don't remember what John Jr. or Carol ate, but the six-inch fish on John's plate had a stick through its head and tail, and still wiggled. It was fresh out of the aquarium! Even though John Jr. had grown up in Japan, he was awed about as much as I was.

While walking back to the house, we passed a shop that had a stained glass of Mt. Fuji. On my very flight with the Navy back in 1968, while I was standing in the cockpit of the EA-3B aircraft, the pilot performed a barrel roll over Mt. Fuji. He timed it so that I stood upside down without falling as we flew over

the crater. It seemed as if everything I saw this year triggered memories a quarter of a century old.

The next morning, John, Carol, and I took another walk around their neighborhood. As I recall, we passed a large black floral wreath in front of somebody's house, indicating a death in the family. Later in the morning John drove me to a Nissan dealership, where he asked for a brochure on the 300ZX sports car. A friend from work owned one of these cars and had asked me to bring him one home. Of course, the brochure showed the driver's seat on the right side, and all the writing was in Japanese, but the people at the dealership cheerfully gave me the brochure.

We had lunch at a Chinese restaurant – the food tasted good and none of it wiggled! Soon it was time for me to go to the airport for my return flight home. John and Carol drove me to the main Tokyo train station. On the way, we passed the Diet (pronounced dee-it) building, home of the Japanese Parliament, and the Imperial Palace. I have no idea how many times I walked around that beautiful palace in days of old, fascinated by the number of huge goldfish and carp swimming in the moat. In May, you can tell the number of sons in a family by the number of carp-designed balloons flying over houses. Carp is a good luck symbol. The best time of the year to visit the Palace is in the Spring, when the cherry trees are in blossom.

Futons airing on balconies waved to the train. On the rails of a parallel track, two gleaming reflections of the sun raced the train, always just a few feet ahead, never letting the train win. Neon dragons, bucking broncos, and three-story peacocks waved goodbye to me as the train sped past dozens of little towns. Instead of screaming, "Buy Me!" they now were telling me to come back.

A Japanese man, sitting on his suitcase next to me, pointed at my cowboy boots and asked, "Texas?". When I said, "Hai" (yes), he laughed, and said something to his wife in Japanese. I don't know what else he said, but the word "Texas" was clear, and she smiled warmly at me. What impressed me most about the train ride was that a Nikon camera perched on top of luggage in the middle of the train car remained untouched all the way to the airport.

Reflecting on these last four days as I flew back to Hawaii, I felt ashamed that I had thought about going home just because I was tired. This little jaunt burned into my memory as one of my best trips ever.

Older memories of Japan surfaced. I thought about the time I was invited to a *Chanoyu*, a formal tea ceremony that is actually "a religion of the art of life". Many artists exhibited their crafts. All the women wore kimonos. As we passed from room to room, we were offered tea and rice cakes. It would have been very impolite to decline the rice cakes, but I hope I never see any more again. They tasted like very sweet rubber, and it took all my will power not to become sick.

Joe Hodder, another army friend, and I once went snorkeling. We came across a man who cultivated pearls. Before we parted company, he gave Joe and me some pearls from which he made his living. Joe married Koko, a pretty Japanese lady, and I was the best man at their wedding. Afterwards, we ate sukiyaki in the Ginza, Tokyo's answer to Time's Square.



Ginza Shopping District in Tokyo



Kamakura Buddha

Counter-balancing the pleasant memories of Japan, I remembered stark images of the Hiroshima Memorial, and hope that nobody will ever use nuclear weapons again. I am an optimist, and didn't linger long on the negative. As I rode the train away from Hiroshima, lush green rice fields and laughing children painted another picture, one of life. Itukushima Torri, near Miyazima, Hiroshima Prefecture, attracts many Japanese and Western tourists annually.



Itukushima Torri

Shinto shrines, the statue of the Kamakura Buddha, stone carvings called Ichidaruma, and seven carved wooden figures mounted in a walnut shell representing seven gods of happiness conflict with my Christian religious principles, but I must admit that two years in Japan helped me somewhat understand that people in different cultures have different religious beliefs. Had I been born and raised in Japan, I may have grown up as a Buddhist.

Vincent Van Gogh studied Hanga, the art of wood block prints, in Japan. He wrote afterwards that Western artists would paint a field of grass; the Japanese artists painted a single blade of grass. I think this statement summarizes some of the culture difference between the Japanese and the West.

One interesting thing that I remember quite clearly is the Flying Saucer Monument in Hokkaido. People all over the world have reported contact with aliens and UFO's. In the United States, though, one runs the risk of the nut house by making a claim of seeing flying saucers. In 1947, a UFO was reported in Hokkaido, and now a monument exists. According to Japanese legend, three thousand years ago people in flying saucers came to Hokkaido and taught the Ainu people agriculture. The Sumerians, who lived around Babylonia several thousand years ago, had the same legend.

As I flew home, I realized that my Japanese experiences were interwoven with American experiences. More specifically, I am talking about the lifelong friends I made while serving in the army. John Brandenburg and Joe Hodder have already been mentioned. Dennis Mirabella, Carl Jarvis, Jerry Capps, Buck Buchanan, Jim Pierce, and I were stationed together in Turkey and also in Japan. Dennis was my roommate in Turkey; Buck was my roommate in Chitose. My friendship with Carl and Jim goes back even further, to Ft. Devens, Mass., in 1965. These two guys knocked on my door in Chitose one day, and from there I went to fly with them in Naval Squadron VQ-1, out of Atsugi. There are a zillion memories. Dennis and I visited the Yuki Matsuri in 1969. Buck taught me how to ride my first motorcycle. We had other crazy adventures that someday I may write about.

The night the Martin Luther King, Jr. died is the night he came alive to me. Jim Pierce and I were on duty together. His anguish became my grief, but I know that I cannot fathom the depths of agony Jim suffered and the impact of Dr. King's death. Perhaps I can do something to help make Dr. King's Dream become reality.

Each of these friendships is on par with the other. I cannot distinguish good, better, and best, because they are all Sterling. Jerry and I have had more contact over the years, though. Through him, I came to better know Mike Nice, Mike Kelley, Wally Wallberg, and Larry Bartley.

Sapporo beer isn't dominant in my mind for its taste, even though I have referred to it a few times. These friends whom I shared this beer are what dominates. Somehow, we made it through the army together. Their names probably mean nothing to you. Their friendship means everything to me. This story is dedicated to the memory of Carl Jarvis and Larry Bartley.



I think the lady's name is Yuki. Here I am renting a Sapporo beer. Both photos were taken about 1967.

What started out as a four-day visit to Japan to see the Yuki Matsuri and ladies wearing kimonos and to drink a bottle of Sapporo beer to rekindle the fires of lost youth opened the floodgates of my mind. It has been my good fortune to spend two years, plus four fantastic days, in this charming and enchanting country. Sayonara.