

The Interpreter

Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries

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Our Mission

In the Spring of 2000, the Archives continued the original efforts of Captain Roger Pineau and William Hudson, and the Archives first attempts in 1992, to gather the papers, letters, photographs, and records of graduates of the US Navy Japanese/Oriental Language School, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1942-1946. We assemble these papers in recognition of the contributions made by JLS/OLS instructors and graduates to the War effort in the Pacific and the Cold War, to the creation of East Asian language programs across the country, and to the development of Japanese-American cultural reconciliation programs after World War II.

Answering the Call

Former UGA professor, WWII veteran tells his story of being a JLO after Pearl Harbor

By Lee Shearer
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Verner Chaffin flew to Colorado recently for a school reunion he never thought he'd be attending - one that took the retired University of Georgia law professor half a century and half a globe away.

It was there at the University of Colorado that Chaffin joined a select group in 1943, volunteers who signed up to immerse themselves in Japanese language and culture for a year.

This was in the days just after Pearl Harbor, when the U.S. Navy looked around and found just a few dozen officers fluent in the language of the enemy to the east -- a few dozen in the whole U.S. Navy.

The Navy and other branches of the military sent out

invitations to join the program to people who had been named to the college academic honorary society Phi Beta Kappa -- people like Chaffin. Another retired UGA professor was also among those who answered the call -- John Dowling, former dean of UGA's graduate school.

Chaffin, already in U.S. Navy training up at the University of Notre Dame, was intrigued. "I didn't really know what I was getting into. I said, 'I've been to law school, I ought to be able to learn Japanese,'" he recalled.

He signed up, and became one of the group that came to be called "Boulderites," to distinguish themselves from Harvard, Berkeley and Tokyo trained JLOs. Nearly 100 of the 1,100 who attended the U.S. Navy Japanese Language School between 1942 and 1946 were women.

For most of his waking hours over the next year, Chaffin was immersed in the language and culture of the Japanese nation, his teacher -- his sensei -- a small man who had been a kindergarten teacher. Like many other Japanese Americans, Suzuki Sensei had been placed in a camp behind barbed wire after war broke out, but like the other teachers, he was glad to help in the war effort -- he was an American.

At Chaffin's first class in March 1943, professor Suzuki came with pockets packed with pens, crayons and strings, circles and other shapes cut from poster board.

Suzuki told Chaffin, a Toccoa native, not to worry that he spoke Japanese with a Southern accent -- the people in Okinawa had Southern accents, too, he said. That was no joke, Chaffin was to discover when he did go to Okinawa later in the war. The difference between the language in Okinawa and Tokyo was similar to the difference between the speech of Georgia and that of New York, Chaffin said.

By the end of the year, Chaffin was dreaming in

Japanese. He once unthinkingly answered a military police officer's question in Japanese before he caught himself.

After more training in a U.S. Navy intelligence school, Chaffin began the work he had been training to do. Mainly at Naval Intelligence headquarters in Pearl Harbor, he translated captured documents, including diaries kept by Japanese soldiers, translated intercepted broadcasts. Most of it was not very exciting work, and they never knew what difference if any their work made.

"We never really knew to what use the information would be put, and there was never any follow-up, except by indirection. You don't have the complete picture, and no one does at any one time," said Chaffin, now 83. "You were just getting fragments, and then you make some deductions."

Later, he helped when American troops occupied the vanquished nation of Japan, and learned how good his training had been -- or maybe it was how good a student he had been.

As part of his studies Chaffin had prepared a monograph on Osaka, and when peace came Chaffin visited the city. He knew the place better than his taxi driver.

"I felt like I had been there. I felt like it was my hometown. It was an unusual feeling," he said.

And he saw another side of the war. One of his most treasured mementos, a small beaded calculator called a soroban -- the Japanese abacus -- brings back the vivid memory of a day he spent in Japan right after the war ended. A Japanese man, a seventh-grade school teacher, invited Chaffin to his home. Chaffin was suspicious at first, but went. They shared sake and talked for hours. The man's wife and children had been killed in a bombing raid. He was one of several people Chaffin met in Japan who had lost their entire families in the war. The soroban was the man's gift to Chaffin.

Chaffin also has another remarkable souvenir, a lovely sake bottle, one side marred by some sort of molten mass. He picked it out of rubble in Hiroshima, he said.

Later, Chaffin's country asked for his help again. A Navy reservist after World War II ended, Chaffin was called up when the Korean Conflict began. In Japan, he found he could no longer speak or comprehend fluently -- but it came back after a couple of weeks, he said.

Many of the people who graduated from the school in Colorado turned their training in Japanese into careers, said David Hays, an archivist with the University of Colorado, which has begun a collection of letters, memoirs and other material related to the language school. Hays helped organize the school's 60-year reunion earlier this month.

Some became diplomats, some stayed in the CIA or other intelligence agencies, others entered academia, and in all those fields some of the graduates became leading authorities on Japanese and Asian culture, politics and language.

Dowling, the other retired UGA professor who attended the school, specialized academically not in Japanese but Romance languages.

Chaffin went back to the law, though, retiring in 1989 after teaching more than 30 years in the University of Georgia's School of Law.

But evidence of Chaffin's regard for Japanese art and culture abounds in the Athens home he shares with Ethel Chaffin, his wife of nearly 60 years. Japanese prints adorn the walls, for example, and, a low round table, finely carved in some light wood, has a place of honor in the living room.

"I've profited (from the Japanese language studies), but indirectly," said Chaffin. "It opened my eyes up to another culture."

Ethel and Verner Chaffin met on a train going from Georgia to Louisiana. Ethel, a Louisiana girl who studied modern dance with Martha Graham, had come to Milledgeville to teach at Georgia College for Women, and was headed home to Nacogdoches to visit her family, and Verner was headed for Baton Rouge for a convention of his college leadership organization -- but that's another story.

Athens Banner-Herald
Thursday, June 20, 2002.

Komesu #3

Ahoy, David and Crew!

I just received your Special Reunion Issue #3 - a superb rundown on a masterfully choreographed event. Enjoyed the bash vicariously, still regretting my inability to be there. The plaque also was handsomely and appropriately done.

I was delighted to see Maxine Pineau's "Reprise on Tony Komesu". Glen Slaughter and I

are both in touch with Maxine and with Komesu. Glen and I dubbed him "Tony" since he was dark and swarthy, and could well pass for a South Italian. We put him in a little Marine dungaree uniform with an armband, but always kept him close to us. His English was non-existent and we were afraid some Marine might have taken him for a Nip infiltrator. I just sent Tony a birthday card. Uehara tells me Tony is not positive, but thinks he is going on 100. His hearing

is poor, so it is difficult to talk to him by phone. He is living in an comfortable Okinawan version of an assisted care facility. Uehara visits Tony, and says he is always the center of an attentive coterie of female companions....whatta guy!

Sincerely,
Glenn Nelson
JLS 1943

[Ed. Note: Sorry to be so late with letters, this one is from middle of July '02. Still, I find it interesting to get three takes on the same event.]