

## ONLY IN (JAPANESE) AMERICA

With a resounding "clang" the steel gate closed behind me, mysteriously and simultaneously with a dozen other similar gates running in tandem along a common rail on level "B" of the Quarantine ward of McNeil Island Federal Prison. For a fleeting moment, visions of the ominous hooded silhouette of the Executioner and the gleaming angled blade of the dreaded guillotine flashed before me.

After assuring myself my head and body were still intact, I cautiously viewed the tiny but spotless steel <sup>and concrete</sup> cubicle I had been assigned to. It would be my temporary home for the few days it took to process me as a new prisoner to insure I carried neither parasite, vermin, nor communicable disease. One cot, one toilet and one wash basin with space for only one occupant was, none-the-less like a luxurious private penthouse after the smelly, crowded, dark, vermin-infested county jail I had previously been held in for over two months while awaiting trial.

The trial days were the most anxiety-ridden. But in spite of the close quarters, lack of sunlight and unsanitary conditions, I was buoyed by the sense of urgency of the issue at hand and was confident my mission was just. My spirits were high and my hopes, even higher.

After all, wasn't the U.S. Constitution the supreme law of the land? And wasn't it the government that was in violation of that supreme law? Were we not citizens being detained in prison camps without Due Process? Were we not therefore, wards of the government, albeit illegally? Was not the military draft, as applied in our case, a form of taxation without representation? Even the Selective Service Act, itself, states that no one detained in a prison, asylum or detention center, shall be registered for the draft, until the day of his release, (section 14, paragraph 246, Selective Service Act of 1940). The government was in violation of its' own laws in detaining us without trial nor hearings. It was compounding the violation by imposing the draft under circumstances of its' own erroneous creation. Our "crime" was only that of refusing to volunteer for military service <sup>wife</sup> ~~and~~ demanding that our citizens rights be restored!

However, in the early stages of our trial, the largest single draft case in U.S. history, Judge Blake Kennedy referred to us 63 defendants as "You Jap boys ----". It was all downhill after that. Although it may have been merely a slip of the tongue, and terms such as that and worse, had become quite commonplace in those days, such bias from a district court judge was

an insult to our entire judicial system. Later research confirmed the racist history of Judge Kennedy. None-the-less, we were deemed guilty and sentenced to three years in prison. Our prior detention and the deprivation of our civil rights weren't even acknowledged as relevant to our case. Thirty of the older members of our group were sent to Leavenworth, Kansas. The thirty-three younger fellows, including myself, were sent to McNeil Island in Washington State.

On the train trip from Cheyenne, Wyoming to Tacoma, Washington, we traversed some of the most beautiful country America has to offer. Yet, because of the circumstances, I could enjoy very little of it. Inwardly I cried for myself, my parents, my people, for my high school teachers who taught me about the U.S. Constitution and for the Constitution itself. It was all so incomprehensible, so confusing, so hopeless.

So, here I was in solitary confinement, not as punishment or to "break my spirit" as was urged by two JACL representatives who interviewed me in the Cheyenne jail as I awaited trial, but as a routine precaution against my carrying vermin from that shamefully inadequate hell-hole to this more "civilized" facility.

After our decontamination, deodorization and final degradation of an extremely intrusive physical exam, we were released to the "big house", the main prison. It was just as depicted in the movies with hardened criminals confined in five or six tiers of steel cages, row after row, within one huge concrete enclosure. Fortunately, we were there for just a few days, just enough to scare us perhaps, and were eventually sent to the minimum security work-farm a few miles away on the same island.

Here, there were no walls, no guard towers, not even a barbed-wire fence. There were guards, of course, but I don't recall seeing weapons. At least, they weren't displayed in any threatening manner. The guards seemed quite friendly, especially after they realized we were American citizens and were informed of the extraordinary circumstances under which we were brought there.

Most of the inmates at the farm were war related violators, Conscientious Objectors, Jehovah Witnesses, and black-marketeers. A few were "short-termers", convicted of more serious crimes, even second-degree murder, who had already served most of their time in the "big house" and their remaining time was so short, an attempt to escape was very unlikely. Perhaps the farm was a kind of half-way house for them before they were unceremoniously released on the unsuspecting public. I found the murderers to have the most fascinating stories.

Of course, they no doubt, had the most time to concoct these stories. They were, none-the-less, quite entertaining.

During my whole time there, I don't recall a single soul I could not get along with. I often wondered why. Was I so down on myself I could relate to the "losers" more easily than I could the so-called "law-abiding citizen"? Or was it merely the non-competitive atmosphere which encouraged each inmate to follow the unspoken code to "do his own time", and not lean on others. Whatever the case, I detected an unexpected element of self-respect and respect for others not always found in the competitive "free" society.

While in physical captivity I discovered a freedom never before experienced, nor have I since experienced. I had no worries about getting or keeping a job, or a place to sleep and dinner was always prepared for me and always on time. I had clothes on my back, free laundry, free utilities, no taxes to pay, no books to keep, free cigarettes and even a pot to pee in-----all free! Of course, I had no choice about it either. They had no control over my thoughts, my dreams, my fantasies. Mentally I could travel forward, backward, sideways, up or down and it wouldn't cost me a cent. The key, perhaps, is that I felt no guilt. I had no axe to grind, or at least I was relieved of any immediate obligation to grind an axe. We had given it our best (and only) shot and although serious mistakes were made, they were made mostly by those who would persecute us. My conscience was clear. Liberation came from within. McNeil Island is a federal penitentiary. One does not normally go there to seek liberation. Strangely enough, that's where I discovered it-----within myself.

This is not to suggest one need go to prison to find redemption. But in my case I had no other choice. I REFUSED TO KILL MY FELLOW MAN, BE HE FRIEND OR FOE, TO PROVE MY LOYALTY TO A GOVERNMENT THAT BETRAYED ME. I CHOSE INSTEAD TO STAKE MY FATE ON THE SUPREMACY OF THE VERY PRINCIPLES THE GOVERNMENT VIOLATED IN ITS' BETRAYAL.

Many years have passed since that kid, barely out of his teens, nearly peed in his pants when the prison gates slammed behind him. Not once during the intervening years, was he accused of disloyalty to his country by his fellow Americans. The accusations came only at the trumped-up trial and sadly, still persists in the fear-ridden, deeper unconscious of Japanese America.