

SHOT DEAD:

Killed by Sentries in America's Concentration Camps

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"The guards have been instructed to shoot anyone who attempts to leave the Center without a permit, and who refuses to halt when ordered to do so.... The guards were finding guard service very monotonous, and... nothing would suit them better than to have a little excitement, such as shooting a Jap."

When these observations were made in a WRA report on Manzanar in the fall of 1942, less than a year had passed since Pearl Harbor. At most of the camps where Japanese Americans were detained, camp officials, military police, and local residents did not perceive the prisoners as U.S. citizens, or legal U.S. residents, unlawfully deprived of their civil liberties. Most people saw the internees as "enemy aliens," or "Japs." For "patriotic" young men itching to get to the shooting war, doing guard duty in the desert was undoubtedly boring and frustrating. A handful took their frustrations out on their prisoners. The seven cases of homicide discussed in this article have been verified through government



documents, oral histories and other sources.

1 Kanesaburo Oshima **May 12, 1942 • Ft. Sill, OK**

Kanesaburo Oshima was an *Issei* from Kona in the Hawaiian Islands. He was incarcerated at Ft. Sill, OK, a Department of Justice detention camp for "dangerous enemy aliens." A barber by trade, he was not popular with the other prisoners because he charged money for his haircuts, while most inmates offered their services free to fellow *Issei*. Oshima was a quiet man, who confided in few, except for Rev. Hozui Nakayama, the Buddhist minister who had been Oshima's priest in Kona, and was now his tentmate. According to Nakayama, Oshima had recently been acting strangely, as if in deep thought.

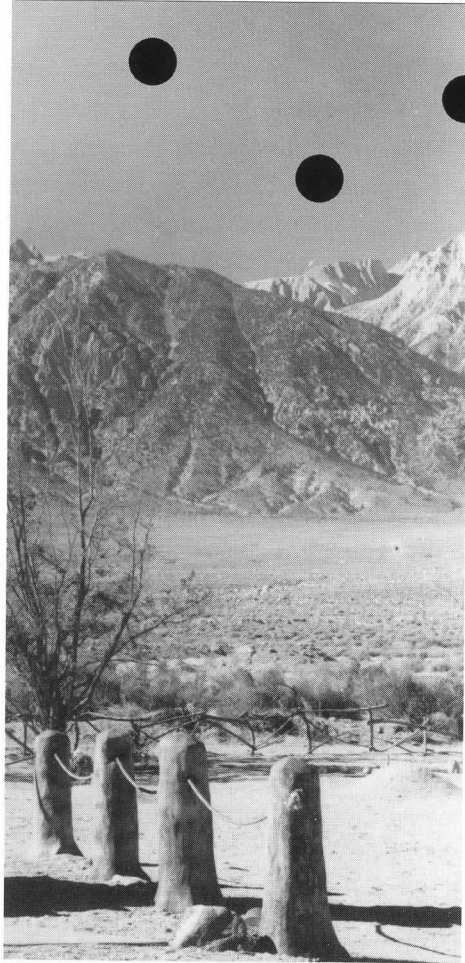
On May 12, 1942, Oshima made a request to a group of *Issei* from another

block. When he was refused, he left quietly. Watching him leave, the men saw Oshima begin walking in a circle. As he quickened his pace, still walking in a tight circle, the *Issei* onlookers became alarmed. Suddenly Oshima ran to the barbed wire fence and began climbing it, sobbing, "I want to go home! I want to go home!"

A nearby guard pointed his gun at the frantic man, while another guard yelled, "For Pete's sake, don't shoot!"

"Help him down; don't shoot," the *Issei* cried out. But a shot rang out and Oshima fell dead with a bullet through his skull. Not until after Oshima's death did the other internees learn the extent of his troubles. They felt ashamed that they had treated him harshly.

Relatively few *Nikkei* in Hawaii had been arrested. Oshima had not been a teacher of martial arts or the



The monument in the cemetery at the Manzanar concentration camp was built by internees to memorialize the many who died in camp. Photo by Ansel Adams, Library of Congress collection. NJAHS Archives.

ing. Oshima was buried in an Oklahoma cemetery, thousands of miles away from home. Many years later, his eldest son came to take his remains home to the Kona countryside.

2-3 Hirota Isomura & Toshio Obata

July 27, 1942 • Lordsburg, NM

Hirota Isomura and Toshio Obata, both 58, and both invalids, were among 147 internees transferred by train from a Department of Justice detention camp in Bismark, ND, to another camp at Lordsburg, NM. Fearing hostility against the prisoners from local townspeople, authorities did not unload the detainees at the train station in town. Instead, the train was stopped in a field outside the town, at 1:30 am – in the dead of night. The prisoners were ordered to detrain and walk to the camp, over an hour away. Carrying their luggage, they walked in the same shoes they had been wearing since their arrests (on Dec. 7, 1941 or soon afterwards).

Isomura had difficulty walking because he had injured his back years before in a ship accident while working out of the port of San Pedro, CA. Obata was a long-time victim of tuberculosis who had been taken from his sickbed in Bismark. Both men had been promised transportation from the train.

As the other *Issei* trudged toward the camp, a closed car passed them. It was too dark to identify the passengers. The walkers straggled into the camp around 3 am. When they asked about Isomura and Obata, they were told, “They must be with friends somewhere in camp.”

A few hours later, a pair of *Issei* janitors saw two piles of blood-soaked clothing on the floor of the administration office. Word spread like wildfire

throughout the camp. Internees confronted administration officials, and demanded an immediate explanation. They were told that Isomura and Obata were shot to death while attempting to escape.

Knowing that both men were invalids who walked with difficulty, the *Issei* refused to accept this explanation. They asked that an autopsy be performed by the two *Issei* physicians in camp, Drs. Oguchi and Akimoto. The administration refused, and declared that the funeral would be held at 4 pm that day. They called for volunteers to serve as pallbearers. The internees boycotted the funeral, meeting instead within their barracks for silent prayer.

The guard who shot Isomura and Obata was 18-year-old Pvt. Poston. Years later, on Sept 2, 1976, the *Lordsburg Liberal*, a local newspaper, reported that “the soldier who fired was wined and dined by the people of Lordsburg, who even took up a collection for him.” The article also quoted a colonel from 8th Army Corps Headquarters (in Dallas) who had been in Lordsburg during the incident.

“...the soldier who [shot and killed the two invalids] was wined and dined by the people of Lordsburg, who even took up a collection for him.”

– *Lordsburg Liberal*, Sept. 2, 1976

He reportedly said that the soldier should be given a medal for his “heroics.” The *Issei* at Lordsburg never learned what disciplinary action, if any, was taken against Pvt. Poston for

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shooting and killing the two physically disabled men.

4-5 James Ito & James Kanagawa Dec. 6, 1942 • Manzanar, CA

James Ito, a youth of 17, was born in Pasadena, CA; James Kanagawa, 21, was from Tacoma, WA. Both were killed during the so-called "Manzanar Riot" or "Manzanar Protest."

Conditions at Manzanar were tense because of mutual distrust between the camp administrators and the inmates. Among the *Nikkei*, there was a struggle for leadership between the immigrant *Issei* and the U.S.-born *Nisei*. The *Issei* viewed the incarceration as the latest in a long history of government discrimination against people of Japanese ancestry. The *Nisei*-led Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), on the other hand, strongly urged the *Nikkei* to redeem their standing by zealously "proving" their loyalty as American citizens. Many camp inmates believed that the JACL's positions sacrificed the community's welfare for its own agenda. Distrust, therefore, infected interpersonal relations in the camp.

On Dec. 5, 1942 *Nisei* Fred Tayama, who had just returned from a WRA-sanctioned JACL convention in Salt Lake City, was beaten by six masked men. Although Tayama could not be positive, he thought that Harry Ueno had been among his attackers. Ueno, a *Kibei*, had organized the Kitchen Workers' Union in Sept. 1942. More recently, he had accused two camp administrators of stealing meat and sugar from camp supplies to sell for profit. Ueno was arrested for questioning about the beating and jailed in the nearby town of Independence.

Many internees believed that Ueno had been detained for exposing graft. A series of angry mass meetings resulted in Ueno's return to the Manzanar camp jail the following day. Tensions remained high, however, and an hostile crowd of 2,000-4,000 gathered. Some invaded the hospital and barracks in search of Tayama and other JACL leaders considered to be *inu* (informers). About 500 massed outside the camp jail to demand Ueno's release. Camp director Ralph Merritt ordered in the military police. Efforts to disperse the crowd were met by stones. Tear gas was released. In the ensuing confusion, which included a driverless car aimed at the police station, 3 soldiers fired into the crowd.

James Ito died instantly, shot through the heart at 25 feet. Ten others were injured, among them James Kanagawa, who died several days later from stomach and chest wounds. All but Ito were shot "from the side or behind." Ueno and 25 other "troublemakers" were arrested. Sixteen were sent to an isolation center and later to Tule Lake. Tayama, and others who had been beaten or threatened, sought protection from camp administrators. Within a week, 65 of these "refugees" were sent to Cow Creek Conservation Camp, where they remained until resettled inland in Feb. 1943. Col. Francis E. Howard, director of the Prisoner of War Division, wrote a letter saying that the troops were "absolved from all blame whatsoever."

6 James Hatsuaki Wakasa April 44, 1943 • Topaz, UT

James Wakasa, a 63-year-old *Issei* bachelor from Ichikawa-ken, Japan, was shot and killed by military police sentry Gerald B. Philpott from a watchtower near the southwest corner of the Topaz concentration camp.

In October 1942, the Western Defense Command had decreed that no non-citizen Japanese be allowed within a mile of the outside perimeter of any camp. There are conflicting reports as to how Wakasa met his death.

The military police claimed that Wakasa attempted to cross the inner boundary fence and failed to obey a challenge to halt. The sentry fired a single shot in the victim's back. Wakasa's body fell 40 inches (3-1/2 feet) inside the fence.

The Spanish Embassy, which represented *Issei* internees during the war, filed a report which claimed that Wakasa fell six feet, four inches inside the boundary fence. The position of the body indicated that Wakasa was walking *parallel* to the fence, facing the guard tower, and was shot from the front. There was no warning shot. Wakasa was 240 yards from the nearest watchtower, and experiments verified that a shouted challenge made at that distance was barely audible.

Although county authorities visited the camp to investigate, the inquiry was hampered by military police Lt. Miller's refusal to give or allow testimony for the inquest. Upset with the camp administration's response to the incident, internees protested with work stoppages for two weeks. As a result, the guards were removed from the inner perimeter to the outer rim of the compound.

In an official report on the incident, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson informed the Secretary of State that: "Prisoners may be killed in order to prevent his escape, and therefore constitutes plain legal justification for the position taken by this government."

Some years ago, I met a San Francisco Bay Area woman who was 13 at the time of the incident. She recalls hearing two shots in rapid succession. Hiding behind the barracks nearest the scene, she saw clearly that the ambulance arrived at very slow speed.

7 James Shoichi Okamoto May 24, 1944 • Tule Lake, CA

On May 24, 1944, James Okamoto drove a truck, at the order of his construction supervisor, to get lumber from across the highway from the old main gate. He carried the necessary identification papers, and a badge which allowed to him to pass out of the gate and return by the same route.

He was waved through the gate by the first sentry, but the second sentry, Bernard Goe, ordered him out of the truck and told him to walk to the back of the vehicle, saying, "You Japs and your WRA friends are trying to run the whole camp." Recognizing that obeying the order would place him just outside the gate, Okamoto hesitated. It was possible that the guard wanted him positioned behind the truck in order to justify shooting him. As Okamoto paused, Goe struck him in the shoulder with his rifle butt, then stepped back one pace and shot him without warning.

A physician described Okamoto's injuries at the Modoc County coroner's inquest in July 1944. "A small hole on the right-hand side of the body [appeared] to be the point of entrance, and the large hole on the left-hand side of the body to be the point of exit.... Abdominal contents were protruding and draped outside his body, a portion of which we recognized as spaghetti." Eighteen witnesses were called to testify before the all-Caucasian jury. The inquest declined to identify the sentry

who shot Okamoto "due to Army regulations."

Despite cold and drizzly weather, some 6,000 people attended Okamoto's funeral. A camp bulletin reported that "an investigation is being made by the military, and proper disciplinary action will follow." Six weeks after the shooting, a court martial composed of five colonels, a lieutenant colonel and two captains deliberated for only an hour before acquitting Goe.

The internees called it "a shameful verdict" and "a whitewash." In a press release, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes called the shooting "completely unwarranted and without provocation on the part of the victim."

James Okamoto was just two weeks shy of his 30th birthday when he died. Born in Garden Grove, CA, he was working for S. I. Market in Los Angeles at the outbreak of war. He was sent to Pomona "Assembly Center" and Heart Mountain, WY, before going to Tule Lake. His father died at Heart Mountain. A devout Buddhist who was described by pre-war Caucasian friends as "quiet, gentle and very considerate," he never challenged the administration during his internment. He was an athletic 5 ft., 9 in. and 180 lbs., did not touch intoxicants and only began smoking after confinement in camp.



The seven cases above are incidents that I have been able to verify through clearly documented primary sources. Other incidents cited in various books have not stood up to closer examination. For instance in *Prejudice, War and the Constitution*, a passage reads "At Camp Gila in the summer of 1943, they shot and killed a *Nisei* who strayed outside the barbed wire."

The passage refers to the shooting of Elmer Satoshi Kira on Dec. 1, 1943. Kira, a *Sansei*, had been a 20-year-old commercial art student at a junior college before the war. In camp, he was employed as an artist for the *Gila News-Courier* (camp newspaper).

Not long before the shooting, a camp physician, Dr. Hata, examined Kira and diagnosed "schizophrenia and incipient dementia praecox." According to a report by Community Analyst G. Gordon Brown, Kira was shot in the left side by a sentry when he did not heed the sentry's command to stop. He was taken to the camp hospital where the bullet was extracted by Dr. Hata, who did not consider the injury to be serious. The internees learned that Kira had been shot only through a statement which the camp director made to the *Arizona Republic*, a local newspaper. Brown noted in his report that the inmates were critical of the shooting of an unarmed man, but "resentment would have been greater if the victim had died."

Kira was apparently making a satisfactory recovery from his bullet wound when he was transferred on Dec. 10 to Arizona State Hospital, presumably for treatment of his mental condition. I was not able to find further information on his fate.

Other Camp Casualties

Sentries shot and wounded a number of other inmates who survived. A full record of names, circumstances, extent of injury, and other details has not been compiled.

I was able to find 28 recorded suicides in concentration camp documents. Complete information on the circumstances of these deaths was not available. ■

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