

December 2021



OBON SOCIETY

Newsletter

Every item sent to **OBON SOCIETY** arrives with a story. From time to time OBON SOCIETY enjoys sharing extraordinary stories about amazing people we have the honor to meet.

Talking with Dr. Mark Shelton is like talking to a gentleman from the last century. He grew up in a rural part of northern Louisiana, left home to attend medical school, returned back to his hometown as a primary-care physician and immediately went to work caring for his former high school classmates. And also his classmate's parents and grandparents. Now, thirty-four years later he continues to care for his classmatesand their children and grandchildren. With no interest in chasing lucrative opportunities or prestigious employment he is perfectly content caring for the many generations of neighbors in his Louisiana hometown.

"I feel fine," he told us in his polite. Louisiana drawl, *"I would like to continue working until I'm ninety-five."*



Dr. Mark Shelton with wife Jennifer and grandchildren



Dr. Shelton's father, James Leo and his hunting dogs.

In addition to caring for his community he also provided care for his father in his final years. It was during one of these medical check-ups when Dr. Shelton blind-sided his father with a deeply emotional question. He asked, *"Dad, how long has it been since you saw Uncle Ralph?"* Without any pause to calculate his father replied, *"Seventy-five years."*

"Uncle Ralph" was his father's only brother. They were a couple years apart in age, but inseparable. Whether they were pond fishing, hunting squirrels or shooting baskets, these two brothers were together. It must have given their parents great pride when the local high school team won the championship thanks to the combined efforts on the court of both brothers.



Ralph Shelton (center) James Shelton (bottom right) and other relatives from their extended family

Dr. Shelton's father (photo left, lower right) and Ralph (center) along with their relatives answered the call of duty after graduating from high school.

Ralph enlisted in the Army and became part of the Air Corp. He quickly transitioned from "shooting hoops" on the basketball court to shooting enemy fighters as a tail-gunner in a B-29 bomber. Teenagers grew up fast in the 1940's.



Joseph Ralph Shelton



Dr. Shelton's father (far left) was not quite as tall as his younger brother Ralph (third from right) in this April 16th, 1942. news story.





Some crewmen from a B-29 Flying Fortress. Ralph Shelton is second from the right.

The B-29 was the fastest, highest-flying bomber in the world. By the time Ralph joined the crew their mission and strategy had changed. The government had replaced the type of bombs that explode with “fire bombs.” These “incendiary bombs” contained highly flammable, gasoline jelly that ignited upon impact.

It was war.

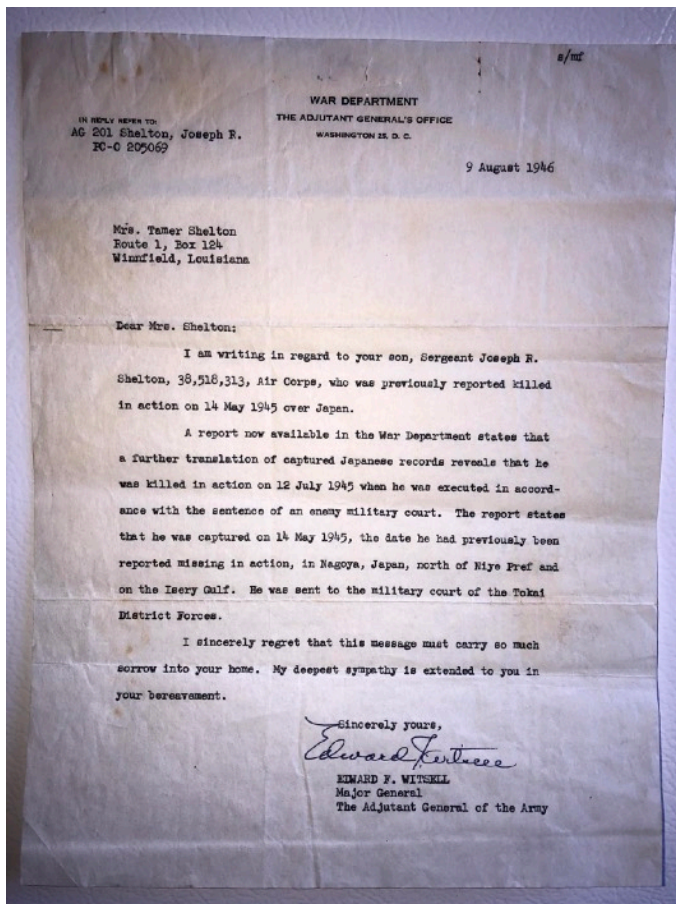


B-29's dropping incendiary bombs.

Most B-29 attacks involved hundreds bombers, each carrying between 10,000 and 20,000 pounds of incendiary bombs. Setting cities on fire was the surest way to halt Japan's production of weapons and supplies.

More than 60 Japanese cities were targeted. These cities, approximately the same size as America's Detroit, Seattle, Dallas and Atlanta, were constructed of wooden structures instead of steel, brick and cement. The ancient, wooden cities exploded into flames. With thousands of incendiary devices falling to the north, south, east and west, there was absolutely no way for the anyone to escape.

It was war.



Letter provided by Dr. Shelton from their family archives

Japanese anti-aircraft gunners tried to defend their cities from these attacks but their guns rarely reached the high-flying B-29's. Unfortunately, on May 14th 1945 Ralph's plane was hit and crashed. The military notified his family that he had been “killed in action.”

However, unknown to the military at that time, Ralph, along with several other crewmen, had parachuted to safety, but were later captured and imprisoned.

The crew was tried, sentenced and ultimately punished for crimes against the Japan. This level of jurisprudence and legal proceedings was not imagined to have existed in war-time Japan. Their tragic fate was revealed in this letter the family received a year after the war ended. (left)

It was war.



James Leo Shelton never recovered from the loss of his younger brother. The lingering grief plagued his mind until his final day.

At some point in time James Shelton had obtained a Japanese flag. Perhaps this *Yosegaki Hinomaru* was given to help remind him of the war that was fought, the victory that was won and the tragic sacrifice his brother had made.

Several years after his death this flag came into the possession of Dr. Shelton who kept it safe, exactly as his father had done.



Yosegaki Hinomaru sent to OBON SOCIETY by Dr. Shelton



One day Dr. Shelton was watching the popular PBS program called "Antiques Roadshow" when he happened to see a *Yosegaki Hinomaru* displayed. He immediately went to his closet and found his father's old Japanese flag.

After a little research on the computer Dr. Shelton found OBON SOCIETY and agreed with our mission. He contacted us, we explained the procedures and he sent the flag to our archivists in June of 2019.

From there the search began.

OBON SOCIETY scholars and researchers deciphered the writing, which contained little besides names. With their uncanny skills they determined the owner of this flag to be Mr. Shigenori Arae, who resided in the far north of Japan.



The island of Hokkaido is forested, mountainous but contains excellent agriculture land and is surrounded by great fishing waters. The scattered communities and towns are isolated from one another by great distance and by deep snow drifts during the long winters.



OBON SOCIETY researchers traced the flag to the northern prefecture of Japan called Hokkaido.

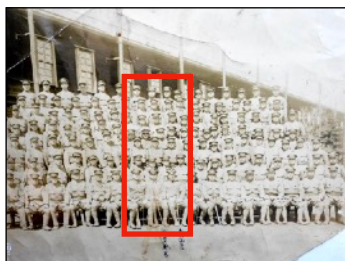


An OBON SOCIETY staff member, who happens to reside in Hokkaido, led the search effort. This is slow and tedious work but eventually a sister was found who not only identified her older brother but also vividly remembered seeing him off at the train station when he left home for the last time. She recalled he shouted out the window for her to take care of the parents, then waved his hands as the train pulled away. She watched the white gloves he wore until the train was out of sight.

OBON SOCIETY assisted in arranging the Returning Ceremony on November 6th, 2021 in the Kitami City mayor's office.

Accompanying the 93 year old eldest sister, were two younger sisters. A fourth sister, suffering from medical issues, could not attend the ceremony.

Her brother, along with hundreds of other local Hokkaido boys, had been sent to Guadalcanal. Less than 20% returned home after the war.

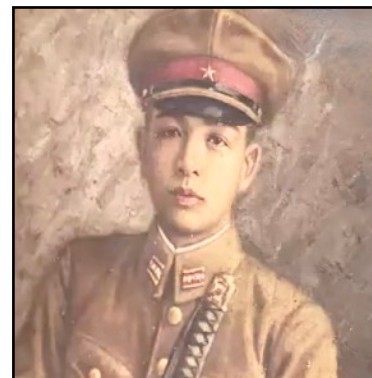


Mr. Shigenori Arae is seated in the front row, middle.



Kazuko Nakamata receives her brother's remains

The elder sister brought along a large, framed portrait of her brother that her parents had commissioned to be painted after his death in Guadalcanal. This portrait kept his memory alive within the family for more than seven decades until his *Yosegaki Hinomaru* finally returned.



To remember the devastating loss of more than 80% of their local young men the community constructed a simple monument in their memory.



The eldest sister explained, "No trace of my brother ever returned home....no bones — nothing ever returned. Now it is as if I am meeting my older brother again."

When she touched his flag she was surprised by the enormous weight she felt in her hands. This was, she explained, his spirit letting her know he was home once again.



(Left to Right) Sisters Sanae Kudo, Noriko Watanabe and Kazuko Nakamata

She went on to explain, "I will keep this flag together with other precious memories of my ancestors and think about my brother.....I truly appreciate all the people who helped my brother return home."

After suffering a life-long grief the eldest sister stated, "I wish there were no more war in the world."

Dr. Mark Shelton explained, "This is one of the most rewarding things I have done in quite a while... you know I think closure is just so important. Clearly, for the sisters..... getting some living piece of their brother who they haven't seen in 75 years... It's all about them...I'm just glad we could do something for that family."



Dr. Mark and Jennifer Shelton surrounded by children and grandchildren

Dr. Shelton has been diligently healing the people of his Louisiana hometown for more than three decades and now, with his generous humanitarian sense, he is healing families both here in America *and* on the other side of the world.

You can recognize the care and attention we give to every bereaved family. This special effort is made possible by generous support from people like you.

Can't you help continue our work with a donation?

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