

# Friendship Blooms from Relic of War

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The death of two soldiers fighting on opposite sides in World War II has given birth, decades later, to a warm friendship between their families on opposite sides of the globe.

The story began in 2003, when Jim Taddonio of Del Cerro discovered a Japanese dog tag among the personal effects of his deceased father-in-law. The dog tag belonged to the father-in-law's cousin, a Marine lieutenant killed in the battle of Peleliu in the Pacific Palau Islands in 1944.

This oval brass tag, about 1 inch wide, etched with a series of Japanese characters, launched Taddonio on a search for relatives of the Japanese soldier who once had worn it.

After numerous inquiries, Taddonio was put in touch with a Navy captain married to a Japanese woman, who translated the soldier's name: Teruhiko Hirabayashi.

Eventually Taddonio, who retired two years ago as a Toyota sales manager in National City, made contact with a Japanese homeland defense officer based in San Diego. When the officer returned to Japan, he discovered Hirabayashi's name on a memorial shrine in Tokyo. The officer eventually identified the soldier's hometown near Nagano and located his sister, 76, who was living with her son and daughter-in-law.

Almost a year after Taddonio had begun his search, he and his wife, Jean, received an e-mail followed by a phone call from the daughter-in-law, Fumiko, who teaches English. She told them that Hirabayashi, 24, was killed during fighting in Papua New Guinea in 1943. His family had received no personal belongings, just an empty box with a letter stating that he was dead.

"This name tag is very important to us," she told the American couple. "It's the only reminder of him from the time he died. We'd like to buy it from you."

Taddonio quickly informed them that the dog tag wasn't for sale, but he would happily give it to them. Rather than trust it to mail delivery, he said he and his wife were coming to Japan for a convention the

following summer and would personally deliver it. An e-mail relationship quickly blossomed.

A short time later, Fumiko informed them that her son and mother-in-law had booked a flight to San Diego and would pick up the ID tag. The Taddonios opened their home to their new Japanese friends and planned a whirlwind tour of San Diego. It included traditional tourist sites but also the Yokohama Friendship Bell on Shelter Island and the Japanese Friendship Garden in Balboa Park. There, in a brief ceremony, the Taddonios presented the dead soldier's name tag, or kitami, to his sister, 61 years after he died. Words were few, but the quiet celebration filled their souls, Jean said.

"We all became one for those moments," she said. "Death had found new life for all of us and scars of universal grieving had faded, at least for a time."

During the three-day visit, "We never got into how my wife's cousin came to possess the name tag, or who killed whom," Jim said. "We all accept the fact that that little piece of metal brought two families together, something that neither family would have ever dreamed of happening. ... Since then, we've established a very strong and loving family friendship and have visited each other."

The Taddonios refer to the ID tag as a gift from the dead.

"A lot has happened because of me finding that name tag in my in-law's belongings," Jim said. "Not because of me, but because, after all these years, Americans and Japanese are ready to forgive and move on."