

# 1945 June 4-10

## The Fugitives

It is not well-remembered today, but during World War II this area was populated by as many as 3,500 Japanese and 5,000 German military personnel. Were these Axis forces on secret missions in the heartland of the United States? No, they were prisoners of war at Camp (now Fort) McCoy between Sparta and Tomah. Camp McCoy was one of 130 sites in the United States to house Axis prisoners of war.<sup>1</sup>

The site of the prisoner of war camp at McCoy had formerly been a [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) camp before the war. Its first occupants after the United States entered World War II were civilians from Axis countries who were to be interned for the duration of the war. This first group, arriving in early 1942, consisted of 106 Germans, 5 Italians, and 181 Japanese. An unexpected member of the Japanese contingent was Ensign Kazua Sakamaki of the Japanese Navy. The commander of a midget submarine that attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, he had the distinction of being the first prisoner of war the American military captured in World War II. The civilians were soon moved elsewhere so the camp could accommodate German prisoners who had been captured in North Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Camp McCoy was the only permanent camp for Japanese prisoners of war in the United States until late January 1945. Increasing numbers of Japanese prisoners taken in the Pacific campaign forced the creation of more camps for them in this country.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Camp McCoy was a training base for thousands of American troops before they headed overseas. Among the trainees was the 100th Battalion from Hawaii that was made up of Japanese-Americans.

Hazel Huber of Bangor was one of about 500 women who worked in the Camp McCoy laundry during World War II. Right across from the laundry was the prisoner-of-war compound that held German and Japanese prisoners in separate areas. They were guarded by military policemen who "always had a great big dog with them." Japanese prisoners cleaned the laundry area. Huber recalled that the Japanese were skilled artists, and she remembered seeing "weird pictures" drawn by the Japanese prisoners on the laundry presses when she came to work in the morning. The POWs ate their meals out of canteen cups. One of the military policemen once told Huber, "Today the Japs have fish heads and rice. Tomorrow they are going to have rice and fish heads."<sup>4</sup>

There were a few escapes by POWs from Camp McCoy. Three Japanese prisoners once escaped only to be recaptured in Winona. Another Japanese escapee stole a rowboat and tried to row down the Mississippi River. He was recaptured eight days later in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin.<sup>5</sup>

The latter was one of a trio of Japanese prisoners who escaped from the camp in late May 1945. The other two were recaptured this week near West Salem, as related in the following newspaper article.

## **TWO ESCAPED JAPANESE PRISONERS OF WAR TAKEN**

The remaining two of three Japanese prisoners of war who escaped from Camp McCoy May 23 were captured Friday afternoon at 4 p. m. near West Salem. The capture was made by Chief Ivan Wright and Patrolman Jerome Breske of the county highway police after receiving a call from Melvin Schomberg, R. 1, West Salem, who reported seeing the two walking along county trunk B near the Clinton Griswold farm.

The prisoners were wearing raincoats turned inside out to hide the prisoner of war lettering and carried home-made daggers and a hatchet. They offered no resistance to the police officers who stopped them near the Maple Grove golf course.

The two were turned over to FBI officials who questioned them. Since their escape the two Japs had wandered in what they called the "mountains" back of the small towns in this vicinity. They had caught what they termed an opossum and cooked it, concealing the smoke by placing a tent made of their raincoats over the fire. Their aim was to find the Mississippi river and follow it.

The two were Kokei Tanaka and Hajime Hasimoto. The other, Takeo Hakamura, had been taken into custody previously on the Mississippi river near Prairie du Chien in a boat.

*(Bangor Independent, 1945 June 7, page 1)*

Despite trying to hide their identities, they were "immediately recognized as Japs" by Chief Ivan Wright and La Crosse County highway patrolman Jerome Breske, according to an article in the *La Crosse Tribune*. An FBI agent from Milwaukee and an interpreter questioned the POWs in the La Crosse County Jail. Like their comrade Hakamura, who was recaptured on May 28, they intended to find and follow the Mississippi River because that was the only geographic feature they knew in the United States. The hills of the Coulee Region, which they called "mountains," confused them, so they had decided to travel on level land.<sup>6</sup>

This is when they were seen walking along the road by Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Schomberg and Florian Stremcha as they were driving to the Clinton Griswold farm 2 1/2 miles from West Salem. They told Mrs. Griswold about the suspicious-looking men and she called the authorities.<sup>7</sup>

Wright and Breske received a reward of \$15 from the Army for each prisoner.<sup>8</sup>

The reward, and the accompanying newspaper coverage, did not sit well with someone in the community, as is evidenced by the following rebuttal in *The Nonpareil Journal* of West Salem.

## Our Apologies!

"We hope to see this printed:" is the introduction to a note we found in the Nonpareil-Journal letter box this week, which we are printing below exactly as it was received by us.

"In regards to the 2 captured Jap prisoners of war we are all happy to know they have been captured. But why not give our alert home town folks just a little credit, the one especially who was wide enough awake to recognize the p. w; s. Melvin Schomberg the person really responsible never recognizes mention in your paper—and may we ask did he receive any regard for their recapture??"

Had the writer signed her name, (we say "her" because the writing appears more like a woman's than a man's) the editor could have answered her in person, but since her identity is unknown we can answer only through the medium of the paper.

### Had We Known

The answer is that the Nonpareil-Journal would have been happy to give Mr. Schomberg all credit due him for recognizing the escaped Japs as the missing prisoners of war—had we known about it. As it happens, the story about the Japs appeared during the week when the Journal's part-time printer was still decidedly under the weather as the result of the strep throat that had kept him in bed all the previous week. It also appeared just a month after the passing of Mrs. Meta Baer, whose death was the most staggering loss the Badger Publishing company has sustained in all the six difficult years since Col. Garlock was killed. It was a week when, to be quite honest, the editor felt she did fairly well to get out any paper—let alone a perfect one.

### Not Clairvoyant

Throughout newspaper history, an editor's chief grievance has been the belief seemingly held by many of his readers that he is clairvoyant, that he sees all and hears all—even when the shortage of help in his shop is so great that many days he can barely get out of the place long enough to eat! It would be pretty wonderful if we really did know everything. But unfortunately, editors are not clairvoyant, they do not possess a crystal ball in which they can see all the events in their community, past, present and future. For a very large part of the news they print, they must rely upon information passed on to them by the public. Omission of news is never a slight—it is merely proof that editors, like their readers, are ordinary human beings and not supermen and women.

### Deserved Credit

For the omission of news in question, we can only offer our apologies. Mr. Schomberg certainly deserved credit for recognizing the prisoners, and we are sorry we did not hear of his part in their capture so that it could have been mentioned in the story. If by his "receiving any regard" the writer refers to the reward received by the two La Crosse police officials who turned the prisoners in, that is a matter for the Camp McCoy military authorities and not the Nonpareil Journal.

Once the war ended, the Axis prisoners were sent back to their countries. All the remaining Japanese prisoners of war left Camp McCoy in October 1945. The last German prisoners did not leave until June 1946.<sup>9</sup>

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#### Sources & Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Cowley, *Stalag Wisconsin: Inside WW II Prisoner of War Camps* (Oregon, Wisconsin: Badger Books, 2002), 14-15. There were also about 500 Koreans and some other nationalities that had been impressed into the Japanese and German armies.

<sup>2</sup> Cowley, 14. In the first few months he was a prisoner, Sakamaki attempted suicide several times. For a Japanese military man, capture was a personal failure and humiliation.

<sup>3</sup> Cowley, 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Hazel (Clair) Huber, interview by the author, 1977 January 5. Huber was the author's grandmother.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Lampert Smith, "Stalag Wisconsin," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2002 January 27, page C-8.

<sup>6</sup> "County Police Apprehend 2 Escaped Japs," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 2, page 1. This article refers to the man captured earlier as Takeo "Nakamura," while the *Bangor Independent* shows it as "Hakamura."

<sup>7</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 2.

<sup>8</sup> "Commend Officials For Arresting Japs," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 4, page 2.

<sup>9</sup> Cowley, 19.