

A ‘very special’ Japanese soldier [or A saviour in the Japanese army]

I want to know more - Daughter of British former POW

Her dead father kept a precious photo for 60 years

A photo of a Japanese soldier has been found carefully hidden amongst the belongings of a former British soldier who was captured by the Japanese army during the Second World War.

The photograph caught his daughter's eye as she was sorting through her father's things, and she has managed to locate the descendants of the man in the photo living in Gunma, Japan, thanks to an NGO dedicated to friendship and understanding between Japan and the UK.

To Gunma to locate the descendants

Her plans to visit Japan on the trail of her father's memories have been put on hold due to coronavirus restrictions.

Helen, who lives in Derbyshire, England, found the faded photograph of a Japanese soldier while sorting through the belongings of her father Ernie, who passed away in 2004 at the age of 84.

When Japan invaded Singapore in 1942, Ernie, who had been deployed there, was captured. He and the other captured soldiers were taken to a prisoner of war camp where the Japanese soldier in the photo was stationed.

Ernest was repatriated in 1946. He hardly spoke to Helen and her two brothers of his wartime experiences. Nor did he express bitterness towards Japan, but Helen recalls that he never bought a Japanese car, and that he stopped going to a certain bank when he learnt that there was a Japanese teller behind the counter.

Helen learnt from her mother, who passed away in 2018, that the person in the photograph was ‘a Japanese man who helped your father’. But even her mother didn't know any more than that. Helen doesn't know what went on between these two soldiers of enemy countries, but she thinks that her father wouldn't have kept the photograph for over 60 years if the man in the photograph hadn't been a ‘very special person’.

A name and an address in Gunma prefecture were written in Roman letters on the back of the photograph.

UK-based Keiko Holmes represents Agape, an organisation that promotes peace and reconciliation between Japan and the UK through activities such as bringing British ex-POWs to Japan. In 2018, Helen went to her for help, and using the address as a clue, Holmes contacted the Gunma prefectural office via a friend. The man in the photograph had already passed away, but she was able to connect with his elder son.

When he learnt that Ernie had treasured the photograph of his father all this time,

his son was 'incredibly happy,' according to Holmes.

Coronavirus throws up a wall

When Helen heard that contact had been made with the family, it strengthened her desire to go to Japan. With the support of Holmes and others, she made plans to meet them in Japan in the autumn of 2020. However, the Japanese government's coronavirus policy has essentially made it impossible for foreigners to enter Japan at present, and she has had to put her plans on hold. Now, she's aiming to go to Japan next autumn.

'I want to ask his family what kind of person this Japanese man, who was so precious to my father, was,' says Helen. 'Many English soldiers who became prisoners of war died. I believe he helped keep my father alive. I want to express my thanks.'