Educator Ensures A Better Tomorrow for An Entire Country after World War II

Our Salute To An Older American

BY JANICE DOYLE

The U.S. government began planning early in the war (WW II) to win. There was a committee planning for the end of the war and how Japan would be dealt with,” said Dr. Mark Orr of his part in “making a better tomorrow” for the people of Japan after WWII.

His work in that country during the Occupation helped create a democratic nation and shaped his life by creating a passion and pride still evident as he talks about his Army Air Corps service time. Dr. Orr is 95, and lives in his spacious apartment at University Village in Tampa. Orr talked with me in his living room where artwork and furnishings convey his love of all things Japanese. “Many of these were gifts from friends,” he said of the numerous framed woodblocks. Orr was working toward his Ph.D. in political science at the University of North Carolina when called to military service. His orders sent him to a School of Military Government where men of various ranks and backgrounds were being trained to set up the new government in Japan after the war.

“We had lectures and seminars about various kinds of administration arrangements for dealing with occupied territories. Our focus was strictly Japan. We studied the language, history, religion, education system – a full course about the country’s history and traditions including foreign policy, and events leading up to war.”

Language instruction was from young Japanese who had been in internment camps. “They were our first friendships with the Japanese people.” In August 1945, just before Orr finished the course, Douglas MacArthur signed the treaty with Japan and by October, Orr was in Tokyo, joining the staff at the headquarters for SCAP, Supreme Commander for Allied Powers. His wife joined him over a year later.

“Tokyo was a shambles when I arrived,” said Orr who served as Chief of Education Division for three years. MacArthur created 18 staff sections with each section responsible for a part of the Japanese government. “Mostly generals were leading the sections, and the sections set goals as to what kind of Japan we wanted to produce.” Orr was in the Civil Information and Education Section. Before the Occupation, Japanese education under the Ministry of Education had been tightly controlled and monitored as part of the war effort for propaganda and thought control. All students participated in military drills with bamboo swords, preparing to die when the country was invaded. That education system “created a faith in the emperor which translated to faith in the government without question in order to dominate most of Asia.”

While the Political Division was drafting the constitution that would create a new democratic government, Orr’s staff began their work by putting out directives for the 50 prefectures to follow in their schools. “The first year was really rather comical,” he said. “We had no time to change text books. We had authorities just red line in text books what was objectionable. We eliminated the venom for the enemy and worship of the emperor that required allegiance to him.”

For the next three years, Orr brought in teachers, administrators and other specialists who worked with the Japanese to write curriculum and textbooks. The Americans served as advisors and provided seminars. He is extremely proud to have been a part in girls finally getting general education which, prior to the war, had just been for boys, even at the university level. “Girls were trained only to be homemakers and mothers,” he said. “I did have difficulty maintaining my staff,” said Orr, “because most of the men were reserve officers and they wanted to go home to regular careers.” Others were badly needed back at their regular colleges, but some found the work a unique challenge and took a leave of absence to participate in the reform process.

Why did reforms work?

When I asked Dr. Orr why the American reforms worked, he said, “The Japanese people were so defeated. They were hungry, many had no home, 40 major cities had been destroyed. The people were tired, sick, yearning for change. They would cooperate because of their desire for a normal life and a weariness of war.” Orr said they rarely had resistance. “People wanted and welcomed change. Our relationships were more on level of discussions where they wanted to learn what made America so successful. And we were really nice people. There was no animosity.”

On MacArthur’s first day in Japan, he was driven through the streets of Tokyo. On the way they passed thousands of soldiers, all armed, and yet never a shot was fired. “It was a complete surrender. MacArthur came with no arms himself and he went straight to work.”

The reforms worked and by the end of the Occupation the objectives of the United States had been met: to defeat an evil dictatorship and replace it with a democratic system of government, to have a loyal ally and a good trading partner. “They are our friends,” said Orr, “and a major economic world power, to an extent MacArthur himself never anticipated.”

Lifelong feelings for Japan

Orr returned to the States in 1949 just after the birth of his daughter Karen. The Japanese Occupation ended in 1952, but his interaction with Japan has still not ended. When speaking of Japan, his thoughts are clear and focused and full of the details that make for easy listening. Orr completed his Ph.D. and became Director of International Affairs at the University of South Florida. With his background on Japan, he became the focal point for USF, Tampa Bay and Florida educational, cultural and economic ties with Japan.

He served as President of the Japan-America Society of Florida and was active working with the Japanese consulates in both Atlanta and Miami on cultural and business interaction with Japan.

Bob Payne, former Executive Director of the Japan-America Society in Tampa, said, “Dr. Orr has been interviewed by NHK and Japanese scholars on development of the post war Japanese educational system. For his efforts to promote Florida/Japanese relations, he was awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure by the Emperor of Japan.”

The internment camp language instructors may have been his first Japanese friends, but others have been an integral part in the life of this articulate gentleman scholar. He helped them create a new government and then stayed their friend for life. Dr. Mark Orr resides at University Village, Tampa. (813) 975-5009.

The Orr’s household staff says goodbye as the family leaves Japan