



the brunswickan

canada's oldest official student publication

What are the facts? Again and again and again—what are the facts? Shun wishful thinking, ignore divine revelation, forget what "the stars fortell," avoid opinion, care not what the neighbours think, never mind the unguessable "verdict of history"—what are the facts, and to how many decimal places? You pilot always into an unknown future; facts are your single clue. Get the facts!

—R.A. Heinlein

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March 15, 1985

THE BRUNSWICKAN-3

Hero interned despite medals

HAMILTON—Masumi Mitsui fought for Canada in the First World War but learned the medals he won were meaningless when a fellow military man told him his Japanese-Canadian family had to be interned.

The year was 1942, said Mitsui's daughter, as she recalled the painful and humiliating story of a family evacuated from their Port Coquitlam, B.C., home and sent to an internment camp during the Second World War.

Lucy Ishii remembers clinging to her mother, sobbing with terror as she and her brother watched their father's rage some time after he learned of the internment.

"We knew he had a gun at home and we thought he was holding it in his pocket," said Ishii of Ancaster, Ontario.

The children followed their father into the office of Cap. Harnett of the British Columbia Security Commission, she said. The captain got up and came around his plate-glass-topped desk, smiling.

"What can I do for you, Sarge?" Ishii remembers him saying.

"My father said: 'There's nothing you can do for me now. What are you doing to me? I served my country. You've taken everything away from me. Told us we have to leave with only 150 pounds of luggage. What are the good of my medals?'"

Mitsui's hand came out of his pocket. It was not a gun he was grasping but the medals, including the Military Medal he had won leading his men up Vimy Ridge, Canada's most famous victory of the First World War.

After Mitsui hurled the medals down on the desk, Harnett crawled around picking them up.

"I don't know the exact words but he said: 'Sarge, it is not my doing. I got orders from Ottawa. There is nothing I can do for you.'"

Mitsui and his family were taken from their chicken farm and interned at a stockyard in British Columbia, where pinned-up blankets made makeshift rooms out of cattle and sheep pens.

Now in his 98th year, Mitsui, whose name is on a war monument in Vancouver's Stanley Park, still lays a wreath on Remembrance Day. Mitsui, who lives with another daughter, Amy Kuwabara in Hamilton, is alert but unable to speak clearly, with a memory that fades in and out. He is content to let Ishii tell the story of the family's part in the internment.

Three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1942, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came for Mitsui. They were

taking veterans first.

"All my mother told us was that Dad wouldn't be home," Ishii said. "Naturally we cried. Then when we went to school we were spat at, kids wouldn't talk to us, threw things at us... We didn't know what was going on. We thought of ourselves as Canadian citizens."

For a time, Mitsui worked at the stockyard as an interpreter, but soon the camp emptied and her father was no longer useful.

"They gave us a choice," she said. "Go back to Japan or go east."

The Mitsuis sent their eldest son, George, to Toronto to scout for jobs.

In Eastern Canada, the Canadian Army was recruiting Japanese-Canadians for the Intelligence Corps. George sent a telegram back to Greenwood that he was enlisting.

"My father sent a telegram right back saying: 'If you enlist after what they have done to me, you are disowned,'" said Ishii.

George got a job instead as a chauffeur-gardener and the family moved east, first staying



CP Laserphoto

Mitsui holds decorations, photo from First World War.

Instead, they were sent to the near-ghost town of Greenwood, a former mining community in the interior of British Columbia. Ishii recalls arriving by train and seeing an incredulous group of local people.

"The people that lived there had never seen Japanese before," she said. "They had axes, they had hatchets, baseball bats, you name it. They were so scared."

"After we got to know them and became friends and worked with them, they said: 'how come they told us you had fangs and horns?'"

But the threat of deportation to Japan for all those who refused to move east of the British Columbia border still existed as the end of the war loomed.

in a Toronto hostel with nine other families and then moving to a peach farm in St. Catharines, Ontario, "because we had no money."

The loss of property — a seven-hectare farm, a laying flock of 500 chickens and a newly built house — is still an outrage to Ishii.

"Before we were evacuated, we were told to make a room in the basement to keep all our valuables. We bought the lumber, made the room and locked everything in it. It lasted one week...our place was ransacked."

Ishii said she wants compensation for her father.

"I would like someone to do something so he can go in peace."