

HISTORY

ALOHA FROM HAWAI'I TO OKINAWA

The Post World War II Relief Effort that Cemented a Relationship

Dan Nakasone
Special to The Hawai'i Herald

It was noon on Sept. 27, 1948, when the USS *John Owen* made landfall at White Beach, the U.S. naval facility on the eastern coast of Okinawa island, near the tip of Katsuren peninsula. Onboard the ship was a precious cargo of 536 pigs that had survived the arduous 6,000-mile crossing from Portland, Ore. The pigs were a gift from Hawai'i to help restart Okinawa's pig farms, which had been decimated in the Battle of Okinawa in World War II.

More than five decades later, a musical — "Pigs from the Sea" ("*Umi Kara Buta ga Yatte Kita*") — about the seven Hawai'i men who made the journey to Okinawa with the pigs was staged at the Blaisdell Concert Hall.

This September marks the 70th anniversary of the voyage of the seafaring swine, so it's a fitting time to delve into the entire Okinawa relief movement and share our findings to the following questions:

- Who was in charge and how were the relief supplies distributed in Okinawa?
- Were the most needed prioritized?

• Did the relief effort serve its intended purpose?

I took on this research project with Chizu Inoue, chief editor of Okinawa's *Momoto* magazine. We were assisted by Hiroaki Hara, a librarian with the Okinawa Prefectural Library who recently arrived in Hawai'i to begin his two-year tenure as an East-West Center Obuchi fellow. We hoped to find answers to these questions and write what I felt was the missing "last chapter" to this compelling story.

ORIGINS OF THE RELIEF EFFORT

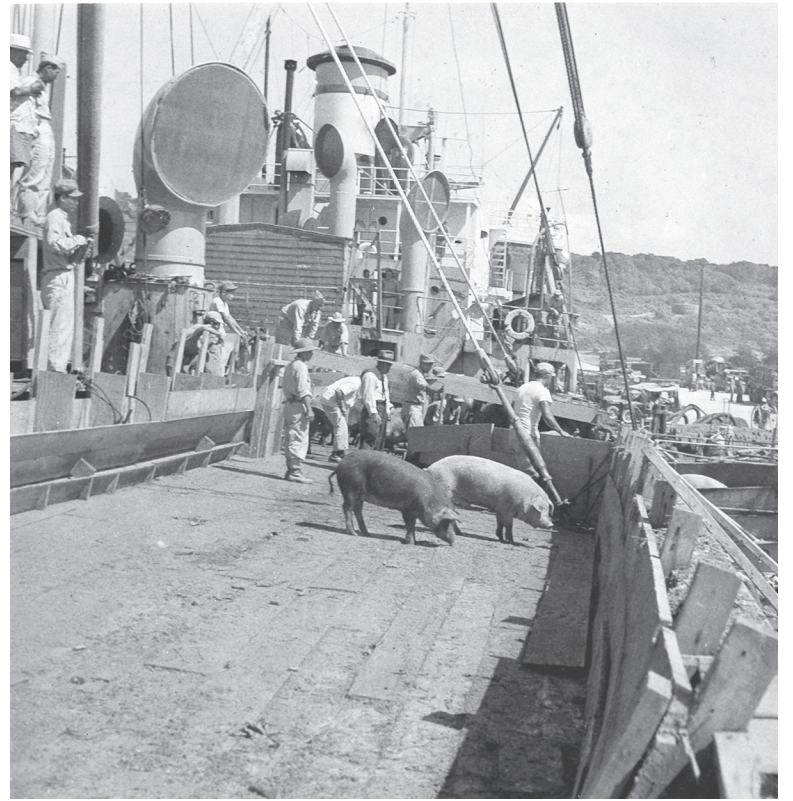
After having served in Europe with the 100th Infantry Battalion, Pfc. Thomas Taro Higa, a Kibei-Nisei of Okinawan ancestry, was sent home in 1945 after having been injured twice. Higa decided to return to military service, this time as a volunteer interpreter in the Battle of Okinawa. The ravages of war had left the civilian survivors in a dire situation. Because Higa could speak the native language, he understood the people and their urgent need for food, clothing and shelter.

After returning to Hawai'i, Higa attended a meeting of roughly forty Okinawan businessmen in Honolulu on Sept. 16, 1945. They came to hear his appeal for help. Higa told of leaflets being dropped by the thousands from U.S. planes ordering civilians to surrender. The leaflets instructed the men to surrender wearing only their loincloths or shorts and for the women to come out in whatever they were wearing. Higa's testimony made a clothing drive the priority.

The businessmen agreed unanimously to support the effort. They were faced with two challenges, however: 1) Discrimination against Japanese people would inhibit support at the scale that was needed; and 2) They would need the U.S. Navy's approval to ship relief supplies to Okinawa.

The solution was to appeal to religious organizations whose principles of humanity did not discriminate between enemies and friends. They

reached out to Dr. Gilbert Bowles, a Quaker who had lived in Japan for 40 years. Bowles agreed to help and sought the assistance of the Honolulu



The 536 pigs being off-loaded from the USS *John Owen* at White Beach, Okinawa, in September 1948. (Photo by Shinyei Shimabukuro, courtesy Jon Itomura)



This 1948 photo shows Seiko Komesu with his Chester White. Komesu, now a healthy 94, was among the 15 Ginowan farmers who entered a lottery to receive a pig. Inset: Seiko Komesu recently at age 94. (Photo courtesy Dan Nakasone)

Council of Churches. The first organizational meeting was held Oct. 29, 1945. A month later, on Nov. 29, the Okinawa Clothing Relief Drive Committee was formally organized with members Dr. Theodore Richards, the paternal grandfather of the late Hawai'i Island rancher Herbert "Monty" Richards; Dr. Gilbert Bowles; the Rev. Edward Whitmore and insurance man Sadao Asato.

Dr. Bowles, Rev. Whitmore and Taro Higa appealed to the Navy for transportation assistance. Capt. W.F. Jennings, chief of the Navy's Mid-Pacific Department of Civil Affairs, committed the Navy's cooperation in transporting and supervising the distribution of the relief supplies upon arrival in Okinawa.

On Feb. 5, 1946, roughly two months after the

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