

HIROSHIMA AND PEARL HARBOR

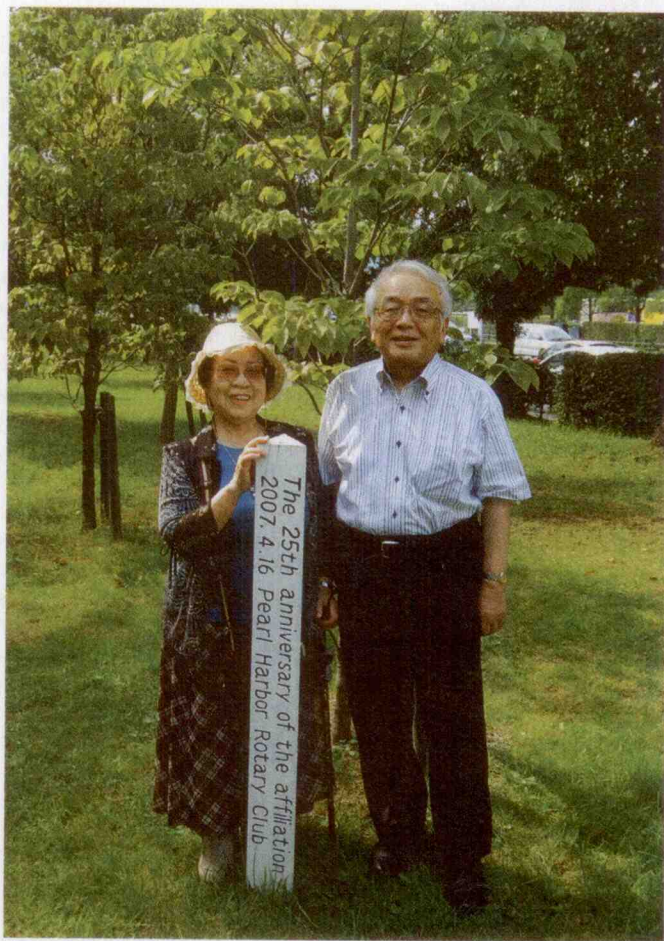
Sister clubs turn scars of war into bonds of peace

Akio Nishikiori clasps his prayer beads and bows his head as the Peace Bell tolls, marking the exact moment that Hiroshima, Japan, was devastated by an atomic bomb 64 years ago.

Nishikiori was just eight years old when the bomb shattered the city on 6 August 1945. A week passed before his parents located his eldest sister, who had volunteered to work in a downtown factory. Badly burned, she told them how she had desperately repeated their address to anyone who passed by. She died two days after being reunited with her family.

Now, as Nishikiori observes the crowd gathered in Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park, he reflects upon how Rotary helped him find friends in former foes. The story starts in 1982, when Nishikiori, a well-known architect and member of the Rotary Club of Hiroshima Southeast, learned of an unexpected request. The mayor of Hiroshima hoped to expand the city's sister relationship with Honolulu and thought that Rotary, with its emphasis on world peace, could help.

Hiroji Mukasa of Japan was president of Rotary International at the time, and the idea was a perfect fit with the RI theme: *Mankind Is*



One – Build Bridges of Friendship Throughout the World.

It wasn't a perfect fit with club members, however. "It was most difficult on our club president, Seiki Hirotoni," Nishikiori says. "He worried what his deceased family would think, especially his parents." Hirotoni had lost his parents, two sisters, a younger brother, and a grandmother in the attack, and he was so conflicted about establishing the sister

club relationship that he had nightmares in which his parents and siblings would appear.

Hawaiian Rotarians didn't immediately embrace the idea, either. "Anytime you go through an agonizing experience, it always takes tremendous willpower to forgive," says Bob Deibler, a retired U.S. Navy officer who was president of the Rotary Club of Pearl Harbor, Oahu, in 1982-83. "Seiki Hirotoni and

I sat down," he remembers. "Through interpreters, we didn't pull any punches. We talked about the bitterness that was felt on both sides."

Deibler was boarding a streetcar in Chicago on 7 December 1941 when he heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. "We considered it a sneak attack," he says. Two years later, at 17, he enlisted in the Navy; he was stationed in Japan for 10 months during the postwar occupation.

Although they saw the war from different sides, once the conversation turned to Rotary, Hirotoni and Deibler found themselves seeing eye to eye. "[We said] we're all Rotarians, and we should focus on projects and helping people, and forget about the scars of the war," Deibler remembers.

By September of that year, both clubs were in favor of forming a sister relationship, and Hirotoni and Deibler signed the affiliation agreement in Hawaii. But after returning home, Hirotoni continued to be haunted by his memories of the war. He decided to hike into the mountains and build a memorial to his parents so they would know he'd never forget them. Finally, the nightmares stopped. Hirotoni died in 1996.

Now every year, Hiroshima Rotarians visit Pearl Harbor, or Pearl Harbor Rotarians visit

Hiroshima. "From our different cultures, it was very hard to come to an understanding of how we would approach this thing at first," Deibler says. "If it were two clubs in the U.S., you'd have a drink, hang on their shoulders, and sing songs, but this was different." After several trips, however, the formal nature of the relationship gave way to true friendship. In addition to visiting one another's memorial sites, the Rotarians golf, shop, and dine together. Deibler traveled to Japan to attend the wedding of Hirotani's son.

Hirotani's widow, Semae, still marvels at the relationships that blossomed among the Rotarians. On the 10th anniversary of her husband's death, more than 50 people gathered at his tomb to honor his memory. Many were members of the Pearl Harbor club. "Going back to the start of this affiliation, we couldn't have imagined these friendships," she says. "It took years for us to forget the war."

To mark the 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, to show remorse, and to honor those who had lost their lives, Seiki Hirotani suggested planting a "peace tree." Rotarians from both countries planted a tree for each club in Blaisdell Park, overlooking the USS *Arizona* Memorial.

On the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, members of the Pearl Harbor club planted a myrtle tree in a small park adjacent to Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park. Both clubs have continued planting,



Read Akio Nishikiori's recollections of the bombing of Hiroshima at www.rotary.org/rotarian.

OPPOSITE: Semae Hirotani and Akio Nishikiori at Hiroshima's peace tree grove. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** The A-Bomb Dome stands as a memorial. Bob Deibler with Hiroshima Rotarian Kenso Hino in Hawaii in 2004. Origami cranes are a symbol of peace in Hiroshima. Commemorating the dead at the 2009 anniversary in Hiroshima.



and today dozens of peace trees flourish in the two cities.

Other joint club efforts have included a Group Study Exchange to promote better understanding between the cultures, and an art contest for Japanese and U.S. children. In 2002, after learning that the people of Nomwin, Micronesia, were in need of clean water, the clubs partnered on a Matching Grant project with the Rotary Club of Truk Lagoon.

Kazuya Nakatani, president of the Hiroshima Southeast club, hopes the bond between the clubs will serve as a powerful symbol of Rotary's work for peace, and will inspire younger generations to avoid the misunderstandings that lead to war.

"Right now is a time to look at peace," adds Donna McLaughlin, of the Pearl Harbor club. "That's the thing that Rotary leads the world in."

— VANESSA N. GLAVINSKAS AND SUZELLE TEMPERO