

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: James T. Ohashi

James Tatsumi Ohashi was born March 2, 1928 in a sugar plantation camp in Kīpū-Hulē'ia, Kaua'i. The seventh of eight children of Bunjiro Ohashi and Ima Kanemori Ohashi, he attended Hulē'ia Grammar School and graduated from Kaua'i High School.

After receiving his degree from the University of Hawai'i, Ohashi enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. He rose to the rank of colonel. He is a veteran of the Vietnam War and also served in Japan before retiring in 1973.

Ohashi is an avid and prolific writer and a student of local history. He has spent many years researching and writing about his family in Kaua'i. In the following essay, he writes about the destructive tsunami of April 1, 1946 on the Garden Island. At the time, he was living with his mother and younger sister in a Nāwiliwili Bay-front cottage on the estate of Charles Atwood Rice. "Mama Hashi," as his mother was known, worked as a maid, cook, housekeeper and baby-sitter.

Ohashi acknowledges and reflects upon Kaua'i tsunami victims from Anahola, Kalihi Wai, Hanalei, and Hā'ena. His essay is reprinted in its original form with minor editing for clarity.

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE 1946 TSUNAMI

Written by: James T. Ohashi

Mililani, O'ahu

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Unbeknowing to us who were living on the Garden Island, a huge sinkhole on the Aleutian Strait ocean bottom dropped. All the Aleutian Strait seawater rushed to fill the huge sinkhole. Once the sinkhole was filled, the water took a reverse course. Water can be compressed to a certain point, then the energy released by the surge creates huge rolling waves.

Approximately 2,500 miles away, my mother, kid sister, and I were getting ready for a new day. It was April Fool's Day, 1946.

I'm an early riser and stepped out to the front veranda which overlooks a meandering stream and Kalapakī Beach.

Kalapakī Beach was a private beach owned by Charles Atwood Rice and Patricia Smith Rice. The beach estate was shaped like a saimin bowl with one section wide open toward the Kalapakī Beach side. There was only one road leading in and out of the saimin bowl beachfront estate. All around the main mansion and the two caretakers' houses were medium-sized hills with thick tropical foliage and trees growing to prevent erosion and to obscure the view looking down into the privacy of the beach mansion and secluded private property.

Standing on the veranda and leaning over the top rail to gaze at the sun's rays brightening Hā'upu Mountain, I noticed some strange sounds emanating from the stream below. The mouth of the stream was covered with buffalo grass and there were dry twigs and branches caught in the web of the buffalo grass. The breaking and cracking sounds became more audible and frequent. The ocean tide was rising and flowing up into the stream. I've never experienced anything like the phenomenon that was developing before my eyes.

I hurried into the kitchen where my mother was preparing our breakfast consisting of steamed white rice, fried egg, and Portuguese sausage. I said, "Mother, come see the ocean, it's acting funny." (*Okā-asan, henna umi o mite kudasai.*) My mother stepped out the front door and as soon as she saw the Nāwiliwili Bay from the veranda, she immediately knew there was going to be a huge wave, or in Japanese it's called "tsunami," (or "harbor wave"). The surface of the bay water was acting differently. It was calm, no tradewinds were blowing, but there were ripples on the surface of the water. I saw the *medakas* and swordtails surfacing and gasping for air like goldfish do when they need more oxygen. Fish ordinarily don't need fresh air and oxygen from above the surface of the water but there they were all huffing and puffing for air.

My mother said that we must get away from the house. No sooner had she said that, the bay water started to slowly, then rapidly, recede. I mean, the entire volume of the ocean water receded from the high-tide mark and down, way below the low-tide mark and beyond. The water now was

receding so fast, the momentum and volume were increasing.

All the centuries-old topsoil, mud and sediment from the ocean floor was being rolled up and brownish-red water was rushing out to the breakwater and hurrying towards the lighthouse near the mouth of Nāwiliwili Bay. Water receded so rapidly that it was like Moses crossing the Sea of Jordan, with the water boiling and churning; acting and behaving beyond one's imaginations.

My mother, Ima Kanemori Ohashi, my sister, Eva Yaeko, age sixteen, and myself rushed through the rear exit kitchen door which gave us an escape route up through the *haole koa* and *kiawe* brushes. We were on our hands and feet clinging on to tree trunks as we hurried up the hillside. We had no time to save or take any of our personal belongings. Our lives were at stake and our possessions: house, furniture, money, everything, had to be sacrificed.

I was a varsity letterman and co-captain of our Kaua'i High School Red Raiders football team. I was in very good physical shape and could help my mother and sister escape up the hill and reach the sugarcane fields' perimeter road. It didn't take us long to reach the safe haven because our house was built on high two-by-four wooden stilts and located on the side of the hill about twenty-five yards down from the perimeter dirt road, which was built around the sugarcane field.

I didn't see the first wave hit our house and sweep through the valley. But when I reached the perimeter dirt road, I saw the first wave receding, first very slowly and then more rapidly. The first wave was a preliminary wave. It was a prelude of how destructive a tsunami can be. The mighty forces of seawater compressed into a restricted space with nowhere to go but higher, faster, and more devastating.

The first wave only knocked down our ten steps leading to our front veranda, and the staircase and veranda just dropped down and broke off from its support. The stilts holding up the house were still standing. But, you should have seen the second wave, which was a humongous wave never seen by human eyes from a level looking down from a hill onto the bay.

The second wave got its momentum and buildup when the first wave receded, taking with it everything that was unattached. Even prized reef fish, lobsters, *ulua*, mullet, all were swept out and beyond the bay to the lighthouse. The water was so roiled up and dirty as I mentioned before, that the fish couldn't see where they were going. They just had to go with the monstrous tide. It was powerful, powerful hydro-power.

I swear, I never saw the bottom of Nāwiliwili Bay until this April Fool's Day. I'm sure I'll never see that scary phenomenon again. Not in the remaining years of my lifetime.

The second wave built up to a crest when the back waters of the Pacific Ocean could not hold back the receding surge. Then it all happened. "Look out, here it comes," roaring down the empty, nearly dry bay with tremendous sounds and speed, knocking everything in its path. That number two wave was a killer. It had no mercy.

Our wooden two-bedroom house on stilts was like a matchbox. The stilts buckled and cracked; the house faltered and leaned towards the stream below. The dirty muddy water was as high as our ten-step staircase. It was just awful. Really, no mercy. The second wave hit so fast and deadly that even the estate's owner, Charles Atwood Rice's mighty beachfront estate and mansions were dismantled into chunks and tiny pieces, pushing debris, fallen trees, cars and Mrs. Patricia Rice and

baby Robin all the way back to the hillside located on the opposite end of the bay. Miraculously, Mrs. Rice and her son did not drown and their lives would be spared. Mr. Hada, the yardman and caretaker, was not as fortunate. He drowned. His body was pinned under a tangle of *kiawe* branches.

The second wave was the terminator wave. As the wave receded from the saimin bowl-like estate, the total destruction was just unbelievable. Even today, I have to think what would have happened to our family if it wasn't for our wise and quick-thinking mother. She would say, "*Hayaku! Hayaku!*" Hurry! Hurry! Mother saved us.

As the second wave receded and took more debris, branches, parts of houses, garages, and anything that floated, I watched the demon destroy us and take everything from us like a thief without conscience.

The third wave was a mop-up wave. What the terminator did not do, the cleanup wave swept the entire bay rather cleanly. Our house was gone; gone down to Davy Jones's locker. Our refrigerator fell through the kitchen floor and got stuck in the mud below the house. That was all that was left: the refrigerator, tilted at a 65-degree angle and stuck in the mud. There was one more thing that I remember surviving: a tamarind tree which grew a few feet from the first step to our house's staircase. Today, that tamarind tree reminds me of the destructive April Fool's Day tsunami in 1946 that brought havoc to Nāwiliwili Bay and Niūmalu and Kalapakī Beaches.

I was an eyewitness to the biggest tsunami to hit the Garden Island, and all I can say is I never knew what homeless meant until that fateful day. We were homeless but we had our futures to look forward to. Thank God we survived.

Postscript: I am thankful and grateful to the Kaua'i County disaster relief and family services, friends and relatives who came to our aid when we were down and out. Within less than six months we were recovered and back to our normal activities and well on our way to a brighter future.

Note: A tsunami in deep ocean is hardly detectable and travels between 450 and 650 miles per hour. When the 1946 tsunami approached Nāwiliwili Bay, the speed was between 30 and 200 miles per hour. The Nāwiliwili Harbor seawalls may have slowed the speed and surge of our 1946 harbor wave.

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