

How a Long-Lost Soldier's Survival Story Riveted—and Confounded—'70s Japan
Stephen R. Kelly - Slate



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Fifty years ago this month, one of the last Japanese soldiers from World War II finally came in from the cold.

Two local hunters on the Pacific island of Guam stumbled across a hunched-over man in filthy clothing late one January afternoon as he was setting handmade shrimp traps in a remote jungle stream.

The two men had lived through the brutal Japanese occupation of Guam during the war and knew exactly what they had found. Before the wild-eyed man could escape, they grabbed him, tied his hands behind his back, and marched him at gunpoint to the island authorities, who could scarcely believe the story he had to tell.

The hunters had bagged Lance Cpl. Shoichi Yokoi of the Imperial Japanese Army. He was the last survivor of a 20,000-man Japanese garrison that U.S. forces had obliterated when retaking the American territory in 1944.



He had been on the run in Guam's rugged interior for nearly 28 years, first as part of a small band of stragglers and later completely on his own. He hid by day in a dank, smoky tunnel he had dug himself with a fragment of an artillery shell. By night he foraged for coconuts, cane toads, and the occasional stray cow. He was 56 years old and weighed less than 90 pounds.

Yokoi's discovery in 1972 stunned the Japanese public, who had long assumed the last of the emperor's imperial troops were dead or accounted for. More than 5,000 flag-waving men, women, and schoolchildren turned out on an overcast winter afternoon to cheer him when he finally returned to Tokyo.

Seventy million more, the equivalent in percentage terms to 200 million Americans today, watched on live television as he shuffled to a microphone set up on the airport tarmac and delivered another shocker.

He told his countrymen he was ashamed to have come home alive.

I first came across Yokoi's story while working as a reporter on Guam in the mid-1970s. At first, it was the details of his survival that floored me: His escape from the massive Allied invasion that killed 90 percent of the Japanese defenders.

The deadly game of cat-and-mouse he led for literally half his life as U.S. troops and vengeful islanders hunted down survivors. His sheer will to carry on, even after the last of his companions had died. But in recent years I have grown more interested in the broader questions his ordeal raises.

What was he so ashamed about? What did the Japanese of 1972, whose new constitution forbade the use of force in resolving international disputes, whose emperor was no longer considered a god, and whose economy had become the world's third largest, think about this time traveler from a very different past?

And perhaps most important, at a moment when we Americans are consumed by questions about character, purpose, and resurgent nationalism, what kind of country produces a man who would choose to spend decades in a hot, stinking hole rather than simply give himself up?

Even 50 years later, the answers are complicated.

Shoichi Yokoi was born poor in the rural outskirts of the gritty industrial city of Nagoya in 1915, and grew up during one of the country's deepest recessions.

His mother walked out on her alcoholic husband when he was just 3 months old, and struggled to support her only child. Yokoi was passed from one reluctant relative to another until he was 15, when he apprenticed himself to a master tailor in Toyohashi, 40 miles southeast of Nagoya.

The work was so long and the food rations so short that when Yokoi was called to his first draft physical in 1935, he flunked. For a man who would set a record of sorts for human endurance, he was off to a weak start.

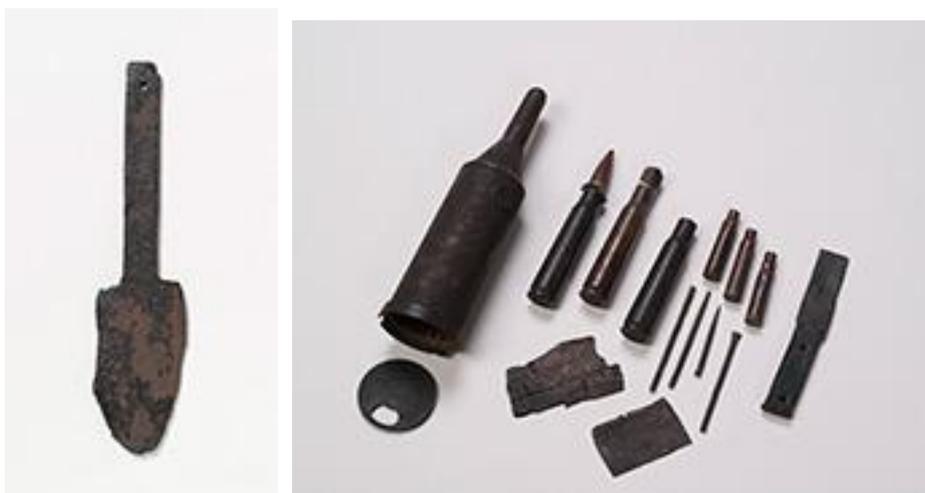
Learning how to cuff pants or handle a tape measure might not seem like the best training for a life on the run. But Yokoi used what he knew. After his army uniform rotted away in Guam's tropical heat and humidity, he figured out how to tease fibers from tree bark, spin it into thread, and weave that thread into a burlap-type cloth.



This he tailored into surprisingly well-fitting shirts and pants, complete with pockets, belt loops, and properly sewn buttonholes. The garments protected him from the tropical sun and clouds of mosquitoes.

The process of making them, which took several months for each set, protected his sanity. "It might actually have been good for my mental condition to keep myself thoroughly occupied with day-to-day business," he later wrote. "I derived simple delight and satisfaction from every moment of these activities."

His survival innovations did not stop there. Not only did he learn how to dig tunnels with primitive tools and keep them from flooding or caving in, he devised a coconut-husk filter to reduce the telltale smoke from his underground cooking fires.



He also learned how to excise the poison glands of the cane toads that provided him badly needed protein, and later began to raise the giant amphibians in his tunnel, for cockroach control and companionship.

He built traps for river shrimp, eels, and field mice and disguised the entrance to his tunnel with a bamboo mat that was strong enough to support a man, yet invisible to the untrained eye.



He also discovered the hard way that trying to start a fire by rubbing two pieces of bamboo together could be exhausting, unless he added a small dose of gunpowder from one of his remaining bullets at just the right moment.

For a less-than-robust soldier from an unpromising background, he proved a survival genius.

When Yokoi first returned to Japan in 1972, his survival toolkit sparked such intense interest that tens of thousands of Tokyo residents lined up for hours to see it exhibited in a downtown department store. (The website of the Nagoya City Museum has a page where you can [see the toolkit online.](#))



But as the immensity of his ordeal sank in, the public's focus gradually shifted from the contents of his toolkit to the forces that had made it necessary.

Yokoi grew up in a Japan that had a chip on its shoulder. Despite its victory over Russia in 1905 (the first time an Asian nation had defeated a Western power) and its

alliance with the victors in World War I (it was the only Asian power invited to the Versailles peace talks), the country's leaders felt disrespected.

They chafed under limits the U.S. and U.K. imposed on their naval fleet and resented the racism Japanese emigrants faced in the United States, where hysteria over the "yellow peril" led to a 1924 ban on Japanese immigration. As Americans today well know, a sense of grievance can be a powerful motivator.

Beginning in 1930, a shocking series of assassinations and attempted coups linked to ultra-nationalist elements in the Japanese military undermined the democratic institutions that had bloomed in the 1920s.

An increasingly authoritarian regime promoted unquestioning devotion to an allegedly divine emperor and a Japan-first mentality that justified naked imperialism.

In 1931, a group of right-wing Japanese army officers staged an attack on a Japanese-owned rail line in Manchuria that they then blamed on the Chinese. The incident served as a pretext to annex the entire province.

By 1938, mounting casualties in Japan's continuing war in China forced the Imperial Army to lower its physical standards far enough to snare Yokoi.

Given his less-than-robust physique, he was assigned to a behind-the-lines logistical unit and sent first to China and later to Guam, where he joined in a last-ditch defense of Japan's crumbling Pacific empire.

When the Marines crushed his ill-trained unit on Guam's beaches in 1944, he retreated with a small number of other survivors into the hilly, forested southern half of the island.

The Japanese had overrun Guam within days of Pearl Harbor, making it the first U.S. soil to fall under enemy control since the War of 1812. They ran it like a concentration camp. When the surviving islanders like the two hunters discovered stragglers like Yokoi in the postwar period, they often killed them.

Finding life on the surface increasingly risky, Yokoi and his steadily dwindling band moved underground beginning in the 1950s. In 1964, Yokoi's last two companions, with whom he had had a falling-out, died under mysterious circumstances.

The Guam medical examiner would later rule they had been poisoned, probably through the ingestion of ill-prepared cycad nuts, which contain a toxin Yokoi and his companions all knew was deadly.

Yokoi carried on alone for the next eight years, working his shrimp traps, herding his cane toads, and watching strange planes he would later learn were called jets rumble above his tunnel entrance.

He couldn't help but notice none of them had Japanese markings. In his early years in the jungle, he had heard loudspeakers that claimed the war with Japan was over. But

in the militaristic and ultra-nationalistic country that had shaped him, members of the Imperial Japanese Army were expected to fight to the death.

Surrender, he was told in no uncertain terms during his early years in the army, dishonored not just the soldiers, but their families back home. In battle, this draconian edict had led to appalling casualties.

Of the roughly 20,000 Japanese defenders estimated to be on Guam when the Marines boarded their landing craft the morning of July 21, 1944, U.S. forces would later count 18,382 dead. Many had died in suicidal “banzai” attacks that served no practical purpose.

Fewer than 1,600 were taken alive. Another 150 or so fled into the bush, caught between their desire to live and their refusal to surrender. Yokoi was the last to come out alive. He hadn’t surrendered, but he hadn’t saved his last bullet for himself either.

From the moment of his discovery, the American and Japanese press reveled in the Rip Van Winkle elements of Yokoi’s story. He had never watched television, didn’t know men had walked on the moon, and had never heard of the atomic bomb.

He didn’t know what to do with the small paper packets he found on his breakfast tray in Guam Memorial Hospital—they were salt and pepper.

He delighted reporters at his first press conference after his capture by asking if Franklin Roosevelt was still the U.S. president. Roosevelt had been dead more than 26 years.

Yokoi was also in remarkably good shape. True, he was abnormally thin, and his underground existence had left him with a pronounced stoop it would take months to straighten out.

He was also missing seven teeth, suffered from mild beriberi, and showed signs of a crushed vertebra in his lower back from a tunnel cave-in that had nearly killed him.

His low caloric intake had also erased any interest in sex—it would be months before he experienced an erection. He hadn’t tasted salt in more than a quarter-century and rarely ate red meat. While his blood protein levels were low, he was not malnourished.

By necessity, he engaged in regular exercise to gather food and firewood. And he had fastidiously boiled his drinking water and bathed nightly in his go-to fishing stream.

All of which meant his heart was healthy and his body parasite-free. He was also surprisingly articulate for someone who had only talked to cane toads for the previous eight years.

If the Japanese people were fascinated by his survival story, they were divided over what it meant. Many of his countrymen saw him as a victim of the fearsome prewar educational system that had made war seem acceptable and free thinking subversive.

Neo-nationalists branded him a simple deserter. One detractor sent him a letter containing a razor blade and the suggestion he apply it to his wrists. Younger Japanese—by 1972, half the country's population had been born since the end of the war—admired his grit, but found his sacrifice incomprehensible.

Yokoi himself provided no easy answers. Despite all that he had been through, he remained stubbornly loyal to Emperor Hirohito, the man who had sent him to die on Guam, then surrendered to the Allies, and was still on his throne when he returned.

Yokoi remained vague on when he had finally realized the war was over, and what exactly had happened to his last two jungle companions.

Although he rejected any suggestions he was a hero, and had grown weary of the attention he attracted—tour bus companies had added stops at his home in Nagoya to satisfy the demand—he launched a low-budget parliamentary campaign in 1974 on a platform that rejected the consumerism, short skirts, and pollution of modern Japan.

He lost. Badly.

Yet this conflicted and wrinkled survivor again surprised everyone, including himself, by finding love at age 57. His family had decided he needed a wife, and hired a professional matchmaker to find one.

A 44-year-old woman from Kyoto, Mihoko Hatashin, was the third candidate. Sparks flew. They married in November 1972 and honeymooned, as unlikely as it seems, on Guam. They spent the next 25 years together until Yokoi's death in 1997.

Officially, he died of a heart attack. But he had been in a long period of decline, due to a form of Parkinson's disease that doctors linked to his long jungle ordeal, and had stopped eating. Some believe he starved himself to death to avoid becoming a greater burden on Mihoko. He was 82.

Yokoi was not the last of the emperor's soldiers to come in from the cold.

Two more would eventually emerge, one a swashbuckling Japanese officer who surrendered his sword in a melodramatic ceremony in the Philippines two years after Yokoi's discovery, and the other an ethnic Taiwanese who had been drafted into the Japanese army and was found farming in Indonesia in late 1974.

But Yokoi was the first straggler to emerge after a 12-year lull, a period when Japan had largely succeeded in putting World War II behind it, becoming a vibrant democracy.

He brought the war, with all its violence and mindless devotion to extreme ideologies, back with surprising and often painful force.

Fifty years later, the shock waves of what came to be known as the Yokoi boom still echo around Japan. The Japanese public broadcasting network NHK aired a 30-minute documentary about him in November 2021, based on a recently discovered trove of tape recordings he made shortly after his return.

The reporters also tracked down Mihoko, who is now 93, and played the tapes for her.

I met with Mihoko in 2019 in Nagoya, sitting in the house she and Shoichi built in 1973 with unsolicited donations that had poured in from all over Japan.

Mihoko told me her husband avoided talking about the war or his experience on Guam, although he did volunteer to cook up a panful of field mice shortly after they married. She told him she would do all the cooking from then on.

Mihoko is shown in the documentary listening as Yokoi revealed his bitterness toward the officers he felt had abandoned him and his companions on Guam, his horror at the atrocities they committed there, and his frustration in trying to explain to his countrymen what had happened to their sons, brothers, and husbands on the distant island, and why they should still care.

“Japan isn’t the place he thought it was,” Mihoko says after a pause.

“I think it’s a place that no longer needs to hear his story.”