

Japanese Canadians at the Petawawa P.O.W. Internment Camp

By Susan Yatabe, 2025 March 8 (updated February 18, 2026)

Many people who live in the Upper Ottawa Valley may be aware that the Petawawa military camp housed prisoners of war (P.O.W.s) during the Second World War, including people of German and Italian backgrounds. However, Camp 33 P.O.W. camp at Petawawa also was home to 294 Japanese Canadian citizens from April 13, 1942 to July 21, 1942.

Japanese Canadians in the Second World War

The years leading up to the Second World War were very difficult for Japanese Canadians in British Columbia, who were considered outsiders and undesirables by white Canadians and were excluded from mainstream society. They lived under race-based restrictions on their movements and labour. Fear and resentment of Japanese Canadians reached a breaking point on December 7th, 1941, when the attacks on Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong took place. Government action against Japanese Canadians was swiftly enacted, as rumors spread about a possible Japanese invasion.

Pearl Harbor Attacks and Aftermath

At the time of the Pearl Harbor attacks, three-quarters of Japanese Canadians were either naturalized or native-born Canadians (Izumi, 2024).

There were immediate repercussions on the Japanese Canadian community in British Columbia after the attacks. All three Japanese language newspapers were shut down. Japanese language schools were closed. 39 respected leaders within the Japanese Canadian community were dragged on December 7 from their homes to the Vancouver Immigration building, then moved to P.O.W. camps in Seebe, Alberta, and Petawawa, Ontario, eventually being incarcerated in July 1942 in the Angler P.O.W. camp in Ontario (Okazaki, 1996). The 39 included a Buddhist minister, manager of a logging company, Japanese language teachers and Japanese language newspaper editors. They were considered threats by the RCMP because they were powerful and influential. 1200 Japanese fishing boats were confiscated; the RCMP towed them to a dispersal centre and many boats were damaged during this move. Licenses of Canadian citizens of Japanese descent were suspended. There were mass firings of hotel, railway, mill, and factory workers throughout the west coast. Homes and businesses owned by Japanese families were vandalized.

Evacuation of Japanese Canadians

Eventually, 20,000 citizens would be uprooted and forcibly moved. 90% of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia were removed from their places of residence to locations spread across the country, including internment camps, labour camps, sugar beet farms, and prisoner-of-war camps. Wartime restrictions against Japanese Canadians were not fully removed until 1949. Most never returned to British Columbia, and many were deported to Japan during and after the war.

Facing pressure from British Columbia politicians, the war cabinet of Mackenzie King created, on January 16, 1942, a 100-mile Protected Zone extending from the BC coast. Male enemy aliens (Japanese nationals) aged 18-45 were removed from this zone beginning on February 24 and sent to work camps in the Rocky Mountains west of Jasper (Ito, 1984, p. 142, Theurer and Oue, 2021, p. 136).

On February 7, 1942, all male Japanese Canadian citizens between the ages of 18 and 45 were ordered to be removed from the Protected Zone.

On February 24, 1942, the Canadian government ordered all people of Japanese origin, regardless of citizenship, to be removed from the Protected Zone. Japanese nationals, naturalized Canadians, and Canadian-born citizens were all considered to be enemy aliens. Japanese women married to white men were allowed to stay in the Protected Zone. A curfew was established.

In March 1942, Japanese Canadians were ordered to turn over property and belongings (plus items that evacuees could not bring with them) to the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property as a “protective measure only.” Homes, farms and properties of Japanese Canadians were seized by the Custodian. These items were later sold by the Custodian without permission of the owners, who received very little after these sales. Vehicles, cameras, radios, and firearms were confiscated.

Temporary detention of Japanese Canadians at the livestock building of Vancouver’s Hastings Park began. Able-bodied men were sent to road construction camps around the country and women, children and elderly people were forced to go to internment camps, most of which were decaying ghost towns in the BC interior, outside the Protected Area. Living conditions in the camp were very crowded and many families were unprepared for the cold winters in tents and poorly insulated buildings. All mail was censored. Families who wished to stay together were sent to sugar beet farms in Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario to work and live under very harsh conditions. Some people were only given 24 hours to pack their belongings and leave. Adults were limited to 150 pounds of baggage, and children, 75 pounds.

First generation Japanese Canadian veterans from the First World War learned that winning the franchise (in 1931) and various medals for bravery did not protect them from internment. Land, including farms, that the veterans had been granted from the Soldiers Settlement Board in 1919, was confiscated and sold during their internment. Only one First World War veteran, Zenosuke Inouye, regained his land after internment.

Petawawa and Angler Camps

Those who protested about denial of their rights or about the separation from their families were sent to the Petawawa and Angler P.O.W. camps in Ontario, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. These included my uncle Jerry and his brother.

Among the internees were Hirokichi Isomura, a First World War Veteran who had fought for Canada at Vimy Ridge, and his son Kunio. Both were sent to Petawawa and Angler for protesting the internment of World War 1 veterans and their treatment as enemy aliens. Mr. Isomura's wife Mitsu died in the Greenwood internment camp in BC, leaving their two daughters at Greenwood without parents.

My Family's Links to the Petawawa P.O.W. Camp

My mother, Kazuko Shinobu, was born in Vancouver but interned with her family in the town of Kaslo, BC during the Second World War. Unlike most internees in her generation, she always discussed this awful experience with us. Most children of Japanese Canadian internees have very little knowledge of what happened to their parents. As the Canadian government made no provisions for schools for the interned children, Kazuko's family paid \$40 for her to complete grade 12 in Kaslo. Eventually churches set up schools for the Japanese Canadian children with high school graduates as teachers in the internment camps. Kazuko taught grade 3 in Kaslo to internee children during 1943-1944, after enrolling in a summer school course for internees. She was 18 and had a class of about 30 students.

One of my mother's students was Sumire Tanaka (now Shintani). Sumire Tanaka's parents owned the Queensborough Japanese language school in Queensborough, (present-day) New Westminster, BC. Both were highly educated Japanese nationals. Following the Pearl Harbor attacks, Sumire's father Tokikazu was abruptly removed from their home by RCMP officers; Sumire was 6 years old and witnessed her father being taken away. She didn't see him again for 6 years. Tokikazu Tanaka was one of the first of the 39 prominent Japanese men who were imprisoned by the RCMP. He was the official interpreter for Japanese people in BC, with degrees from universities in Japan and the United States.

After detention in the Seebee P.O.W. camp, Tokikazu Tanaka was sent to the P.O.W. camp at Petawawa, Ontario on May 20, 1942, where prisoners of Japanese descent were incarcerated with German and Italian nationals. He recalled that one of the internees at Petawawa was Camillien Houde, the former mayor of Montreal, who was imprisoned for four years for campaigning against conscription. On July 21, 1942 the 287 prisoners of Japanese descent housed at Petawawa were moved to the Angler P.O.W. camp between Neys and Marathon, Ontario. Tokikazu Tanaka stayed at Angler until the camp was closed in July 1946 because he was the spokesman for the prisoners.

My mother had attended school with Eiko Suzuki in Vancouver. Eiko's father Juzo was the owner and editor of the Canadian Daily News, a Japanese-language newspaper. Her father was another of the 39 men rounded up by the RCMP and moved to P.O.W. camps that included Petawawa and Angler. He was repatriated to Japan in August 1943 and Eiko returned to Japan with him. Eiko wrote letters regularly to my mother from Japan over the following 60 years. It was obvious that she was unhappy about leaving Canada, where she had been born, and going to live in Japan, a place where she never felt at home.

The most comprehensive first-hand account of the Japanese Canadian detentions at Petawawa and Angler was written by Robert Okazaki (Okazaki, 1996), who was interned at both camps. Opening the book for the first time, I was surprised to see a picture of my mother in it – she had been a classmate in Vancouver of the author before the internment.

Five Japanese Canadians served in the Canadian military after being interned in both the Petawawa and Angler POW camps (Okazaki, 1996 and Ito, 1984). I learned this while doing research for the Japanese Canadian Museum and could scarcely believe it. These included Kazuo Kato, George Yoshio Masuda, Greg Ohashi, Mickey Nobuto and Saichi Imai. They served with my father, and the latter three worked with him in Southeast Asia as interpreters and interrogators from 1945 to 1947. My parents eventually moved to Deep River, just 20 km from the Petawawa military camp. Our home faced Hill House, a military-era building that had been built by German P.O.W.s housed at the Petawawa camp. The view of Hill House filled our living room window, as the building was less than 150 m from our house and was located in a park. The words *“hier haben wir gearbeitet”* (we worked here) are written in the rafters of Hill House by some of these prisoners. I often wonder whether these German prisoners ever encountered Sumire’s dad, Eiko’s dad, my uncle and his brother, or my dad’s army buddies during their detention at the Petawawa POW camp.

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