

Remarkable friendship not lost in translation

A Japanese woman is reunited with a U.S. soldier nearly 60 years after they first exchanged smiles in war-torn Japan

By **TOM HALLMAN JR.**
THE OREGONIAN

In the hour before the ghost from his past floated into Portland, Robert Mitchell sat in a living-room chair while his oldest daughter pattered outside, hanging a welcome sign on the front of the house and sticking a small Japanese flag

next to the American counterpart on the front stoop.

Inside, the 79-year-old waited alone with his memories, dressed in a burgundy cardigan despite Thursday's heat. In his hand, he grasped the dozen red roses he planned to give to his guest, a woman he last saw nearly 60 years earlier.

The tale of Robert Mitchell and Sumiko Irie began in 1945 when Mitchell was stationed with the U.S. Army in Fukuoka City, Japan. He'd been sent there to help form Japanese labor groups that would work at rebuilding the country. He lived in a hotel, and the official Army rules were to not fraternize with the locals.



Robert Mitchell hands Sumiko Irie a dozen red roses to welcome her to his home. She flew from Japan to see Mitchell again.

STEPHANIE YAO
THE OREGONIAN

But he was young.

He met a woman, just three years younger than he was, who was part of the hotel staff. He'd use his Japanese dictionary, point to the word in English and she'd read the Japanese word aloud. They didn't talk. But they communicated

with tender smiles and meaningful looks, two things that will never need translation.

But that was as far as things went. They were just two people caught up in a crazy time, living in a scary world that

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had drastically changed. He kissed the woman he called "Dimples" just once, on the cheek.

When his tour ended, Mitchell left Japan without saying goodbye. He sent four letters from the States, but his friend was shy and never responded.

Then Thursday, just after 3:30 p.m., in the dog days of summer, she walked up the steps with her cane and re-entered his life.

Two years ago, Dai Ichi International Travel in downtown Portland opened a Tokyo branch, where it advertised trips to Oregon. Two months after the opening, Sumiko Irie called the office. She wanted to visit Portland so that she could look for a Mitchell. The Tokyo office forwarded her letter to Portland where an agent read it

The story of Mr. Robert Mitchell is very old, and I apologize. In 1945, the end of September, where I met is Yamamoto Hotel in Fukuoka City. I think he was in the Army. My house was about five minutes away from the hotel, and I was working there as a waitress. I was about 17 years old, and I think Mr. Mitchell was two or three years older. Whenever he walks by me, he was singing Dimples song.

In the letter, she explained that her parents had died, and so, too, her husband. She was getting older, but her children and sister, who had heard the story about Mitchell, encouraged her to come to Portland to look for him.

"I think this may be the last opportunity," the letter read, "so I gathered my energy and courage and decided to go to Portland. . . . I just want to express my appreciation for his kindness. . . . I am also wishing not to bother his family members at all in any way. I told my husband about Mr. Mitchell once when he was alive. He was giggling and smile. It would be fortunate and delightful if I can meet him once again! I know it is not an easy work, and I am a little embarrassed, but



STEPHANIE YAO/THE OREGONIAN
Robert Mitchell waits while his wife, Jean, helps Sumiko Irie into the room to meet Mitchell for the first time in 60 years. They met when Mitchell was stationed in Japan while in the U.S. Army. They lost touch until Sumiko hired a private investigator who found him.

please consider helping me for this trip."

The agent hired Chris Peterson, a private investigator, who looked for a year before he found the right man.

Mitchell has been married for 53 years. He has eight children, who learned about Dimples decades ago when they found a box of his Army memorabilia with pictures of her. After Peterson contacted him, Mitchell sent a letter to Sumiko Irie.

She wrote back, and the two of them exchanged Christmas gifts.

Then, Sumiko Irie decided that she had to come to Portland to see her old friend.

Robert Mitchell set the roses on the side table and reflected on life.

"She was so timid then," he recalled. "I don't think she had much of a childhood. It was a tough time for her. Buddy, that was a long time ago."

A car door slammed shut.

In his younger days, Mitchell, always a gentleman, would have stood. But he can't feel anything in his left foot, and he worries about falling.

Outside, Sumiko Irie, a hunched-over woman with gray-streaked hair, waited for help. Her oldest daughter, who'd traveled with her from Japan, offered her arm and Sumiko Irie used her collapsible cane to slowly make her way up the driveway.

Minutes later, she carefully stepped into the house. A travel-agency translator who volunteered

to come with her told Mitchell's wife, Jean, that Sumiko Irie appreciated being allowed to see her husband.

Mitchell handed her the roses, and Sumiko Irie sat down in a chair right next to his.

Two people — two old friends — who connected, however briefly, back then.

She reached out with a shaky hand and gently took Mitchell's hand in hers.

There was nothing to say. There really never was.

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