

Nine Japanese Nationals were serving on the USS Maine when it was destroyed.

Two survived, seven perished.

From JAVA Research Team (JRT) / JAVA June 2020 newsletter

At 9:40 PM on February 15, 1898, five tons of powder charges exploded in the forward section of the battleship USS Maine as she lay at anchor in the harbor of Havana, Cuba. The explosion obliterated that part of the ship where the enlisted crew had their quarters and were retiring for the night. Of the 355-member crew (26 officers, 290 enlisted seamen and 39 Marines), 261 men died or were declared missing and presumed dead. Ninety-four men survived and, of this number, 16 were not injured. Though largely American, the crew also included citizens of Canada, Great Britain, Russia, Japan, China, and the Philippines.

Of the USS Maine's 261 known or missing/presumed dead, 231 have gravesites at Arlington National Cemetery and 27 at the USS Maine Plot in the Key West, Florida, City Cemetery. The remains of three men were returned to their families. The identities of 63 men interred in Arlington National Cemetery are known and 168 gravesites are dedicated to those whose bodies were never found and who were declared missing/presumed dead. The USS Maine Plot, dedicated on December 11, 1898, and administered by the City of Key West and the U.S. Navy, contains nine gravesites of identified crewmen and 18 dedicated to those missing/presumed dead.

Nine Japanese nationals were serving as U.S. Navy seamen aboard the USS Maine when it was destroyed. One had completed 14 years of sea duty; three had completed their first three-year enlistments and were on their second three-year enlistments; and five were in their first three-year enlistment. Two of the nine men survived; one was wounded, the other uninjured. Kashitara Suzuki's body was recovered from the Maine on March 24, 1898, one week before recovery activity stopped with 75 bodies still in the vessel. His tombstone (Figure 1) is at Spot 47 in the USS Maine Plot of the Key West City Cemetery. It is likely that the unidentified remains of the six Japanese seamen declared missing/presumed dead are also interred in the City Cemetery. In Key West their graves are marked by individual tombstones bearing the inscription, "One Unknown. U.S. Battleship Maine. Killed in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898," (Figure 2). It is not known how many of the Asian nationals risked their lives to gain U.S. citizenship that was not otherwise possible as the U.S. Naturalization Act of 1790 prohibited Asians from becoming U.S. citizens.



Figure 1. Inscription on tombstone: "Kashitara Suzuki, Mess Attendant. USS Battleship 'Maine.'" Killed in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898." City Cemetery, Key West. Photo by Russell Brittain.



Figure 2. The inscription reads: "One Unknown. USS Battleship Maine. Killed in Havana Harbor. February 15, 1898." Photo by Russell Brittain.

Key West residents honored the USS Maine casualties by erecting a statue in the Maine section of City Cemetery of an American sailor dressed in Spanish American War period uniform, (Figure 3). The well-groomed cemetery is a testimony to the dignity and respect accorded to deceased seaman, U.S. and foreign, irrespective of race, nationality and rank, and whether the burial occurred one year ago or over a hundred years ago.



Figure 3. USS Maine Cemetery, Key West, FL. Photo from Russell Brittain

The seven Japanese seamen who lost their lives on the USS Maine are also honored at various other locations. Their names are inscribed at the base of the USS Maine Mast Memorial (Figure 4) and the six missing are also listed at the Tomb of the Unknown, both located at Arlington National Cemetery. Their names are also inscribed on the Heroes Wall of the Japanese American National War Memorial Court (JANWMC) located in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. The JANWMC, constructed by southern California Nisei veterans, is the only location in the United States where ethnic Japanese killed in all wars, from the Spanish American War to the current Gulf Wars, are memorialized. During a ceremony at the JANWMC on June 15, 2009, after paying his respects to the Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals killed in wars and whose names are etched on the granite wall, Japan Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki said he was deeply touched by the powerful cultural message conveyed by the inclusion of Japanese nationals in the Memorial Court.



Figure 4. USS Maine Mast Memorial. Arlington National Cemetery, VA.

Two Japanese nationals survived the Maine explosion: Katsusaburo Kushida, one of only 16 USS Maine crew who were uninjured, and Fusanoin Awo, who was wounded. According to U.S. Navy records at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), St. Louis, Missouri, Kushida was born in Hiroshima City on March 3, 1873. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy on April 4, 1894, and gave his father, Josko Kushida, as his next of kin. He completed his three-year enlistment on April 5, 1897 and reenlisted on May 4, 1897 for another three years. He was in the ninth month of his second three-year enlistment when the USS Maine was destroyed. He was then reassigned to the USS Vermont as a warrant officers' cook and subsequently promoted to wardroom steward on the USS Mayflower. Foreign nationals serving as U.S. seamen were bound by the same administrative, medical, and security requirements as the U.S. seamen. During his four years in the U.S. Navy, Kushida's job performance and conduct were evaluated as "Very Good" and his health was evaluated consistently as "excellent." His pay was \$37 per month.

A letter from the Secretary of the U.S. Navy to the U.S. Secretary of State, dated May 12, 1898, lists personal items found in the USS Maine for Katsusaburo Kushida and Isa Sugisaki, one of the men who was killed. The letter asked if the U.S. State Department "would ascertain if the Japanese Legation will receive these articles for distribution to the proper heirs." The personal items included banking information, gold coins, cash, silver items, letters in Japanese. Kushida was still serving in the Navy when the letter was sent but he left on October 10, 1898. He may have resided for a time in Boston, Massachusetts, where on June 9, 1904, someone with a similar name signed a petition before the clerk of the Boston District Court to become a U.S. citizen. The match is not perfect. For example, the handwritten name on the affidavit could be read as "Katsusa Kashida" or "Katsusa Kushida." Also, the date of birth Kushida gave the court is May 1, 1877, however, the U.S. Navy records said his date of birth is March 3, 1873. Additionally, Kushida's date of arrival in Seattle, Washington, is recorded as November 21, 1899, while the U.S. Navy documents state he enlisted on April 4, 1894, perhaps while a U.S. vessel was calling at a foreign port. Nonetheless, the similarity of the names, the place of birth as Hiroshima City, and his occupation as "Officers Steward" together with the known vagaries of spellings and dates in such documents suggest that the applicant may have been Katsusaburo Kushida from the USS Maine. Unfortunately, except for this legal petition for U.S. citizenship, no other U.S. public record has been found for Kushida. Additional research is underway to determine his activities following his service in the U.S. Navy.

Based on information collected from NPRC and other sources, Fusanoin Awo was born December 15, 1873, in Aichi Prefecture and immigrated to America in 1896. On July 22, 1897, he enlisted in the US Navy at Fishers Island, New York, and was assigned to the USS Maine as steerage cook. He gave his mother, Ei Awo, as his next of kin residing at Haguri, Yamanaka Mura, Kikata Gori, Mikawa, Aichi Prefecture. An indication of Awo's interest in America was a list of items he claimed to have lost when the USS Maine sank: a Japanese-English dictionary, books on grammar and geography, and a book on Commodore Perry. After surviving the sinking of the USS Maine, Awo served on the USS Vermont, USS Saturn, USS Franklin, USS Vulcan, USS Yosemite, USS Brutus, and USS Colombia. He consistently received a rating of "Very Good" in the categories of job performance and conduct, and his pay was \$37 per month. He was promoted to cabin steward in 1898 and left the Navy October 25, 1901.

Following his naval service, Awo apparently settled at 110 Bower Street in Boston, Massachusetts. On November 26, 1903 he married Mary Goodrich in that city. His occupation at the time was club house keeper. Nine years later, on November 3, 1912, listing himself as a widower and an auctioneer and merchant, Awo married Mary A. Bowen, also of Boston. In 1914 he and his wife moved to Jacksonville, Florida where they resided at 529 West Church, listing his occupation as a chef. Subsequently, Awo visited Japan and returned to Seattle, Washington, aboard the Manila Maru on October 17, 1916. The vessel's manifest listed his nationality as Japanese, and his destination as Tacoma, Washington

The seven Japanese nationals who perished when the USS Maine was destroyed are:

Kashitara Suzuki of Hachioji, Tokyo, a mess attendant whose body was recovered, enlisted in New York on January 8, 1895 for three years. In early 1898 he reenlisted for a second three-year stint, but was killed shortly after. Suzuki's tombstone is shown in Figure 1.

Suke Chingi of Kagoshima Prefecture, a mess attendant, enlisted on September 26, 1895 in New York for three years. He had six months of naval duty prior to his assignment on the USS Maine shortly after it was commissioned. Missing/presumed dead.

Otogiro Ishida of Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture, a steerage cook, enlisted on September 25, 1895 in New York for three years. He had one year of naval experience prior to his assignment on the USS Maine. Missing/presumed dead.

Yukichi Kitagata of Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, a warrant officers cook, enlisted on August 12, 1896 at Norfolk, Virginia, for three years. Missing/presumed dead.

Tomekichi Nagamine, a mess attendant, enlisted in New York for three years on December 10, 1896. Missing/presumed dead.

Isa Sugisaki of Odawara, Kanagawa Prefecture, a wardroom steward, enlisted in New York for three years on September 16, 1895. Declared Missing/presumed dead. On July 11, 1898, Wakichi Nishimiya of 227 W 25th, New York City, reported that Sugisaki had died in the US without relatives and filed a petition at Kings County Surrogate's Court to settle his estate.

Sugisaki had served in the U.S. Navy since 1885, making him the first ethnic Japanese to serve in the U.S. military. He was recognized in New York's Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 28, 1898. The article said "he was only a [U.S. Navy] steward, but Isa Sugisaki, who died on the ill-fated Maine, will long be remembered by his grateful countrymen. Some years ago out of his hard-earned savings he established a home and clubhouse at 164 Sands Street, Brooklyn, for Japanese who were out of employment. It was named the Sugisaki Club in his honor, and is now in a very flourishing and prosperous condition. At least a dozen Japanese societies have their headquarters at the "Sugisaki." The most prominent organization which meets there is the "Dai Nippon Jin," or the Great Japanese Society. It is primarily a mutual-benefit society, and was founded for the purpose of helping young men. It meets twice a year. Another society which meets at the "Sugisaki" is the "Shio bu Kai," which means literary and social club. At its meetings Japanese literature, history and current events are debated and discussed. A fencing gymnasium which was recently established in the backyard is open to the members of the various clubs. It consists of an open pavilion profusely decorated with Japanese lanterns." A photo of Sugisaki appeared with the article, (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Isa Sugisaki, Photo from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 28, 1899

Referring to the Issei on the USS Maine in 1898, retired Army historian Dr. James McNaughton, author of *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service During WW II*, commented: "When thousands of Nisei joined the U.S. Army in World War II, few of them knew that they followed in the footsteps of some ancestors that history nearly forgot. In the nineteenth century, many Japanese men signed up to serve on U.S. Navy warships, often as cooks or mess attendants. When the USS Maine exploded, seven men tragically became the first known persons of Japanese origin to die under the flag of the United States. These men may be silent in the historical record, but are not forgotten. Over time their footsteps were but the first of many on the long path of proud service in the armed forces of the United States that continues to this day."

JRT Comment. As Dr. McNaughton noted, Japanese nationals also served on other U.S. war ships. One such person is a Nisei, Nobuteru Harry Sumida, born in New York City in 1872 of a Japanese father and Caucasian mother. He enlisted in 1891 and served as a gunner on the USS Indiana in the Battle of Santiago, Cuba, where he received a shrapnel wound in his right leg. During WW II he was forcibly interned at the Manzanar interment camp. During the early phase of our research we could not find any published data on the nine Japanese nationals. The JAVA Research Team hopes this article sparks an interest in a researcher, probably collaborating with a Japanese scholar, to write a more comprehensive paper. While the content and presentation is ours, our appreciation for collecting and assisting in the various phases of our research is gratefully extended to Dean DeRosa, Arlington National Cemetery; Russell Brittain, City Cemetery, Key West; Ambassador (Admiral, USN Retired) Harry Harris, JAVA Member; RADM Samuel Cox, USN Retired, and Mark Mollan, Naval History and Heritage Command; Ellen Nakashima, JAVA member; Theresa Fitzgerald and David Hardin, National Personnel Records Center; Adebo Adetono, NARA; William Elsbury, Library of Congress; Erika Moritsugu, Esq, JAVA member; US Senator Tammy Duckworth and Benjamin Rhodeside; Douglas Haynes, US Census Bureau; John Tobe, JAVA Member; Edson Mori; Dr. Thomas and Catherine Yoshikawa (financial); Jeffrey and Yoko Morita, JRT researchers; and Dr. James McIlwain, Professor Emeritus, Neuroscience, Brown University, JRT editor.