

Prologue



"Nothing so beautiful as snow-covered Mount Fuji," Yoshiro said. Later in life, he taught himself to paint and create this scene. While not of Fuji, the image and mood is reminiscent of his native Japan.

The three 19-year-olds reached Mount Fuji at dawn. It towered overhead, as if daring them to test their mettle on its steep slopes. They paused a moment to gaze at the highest of Japan's Three Holy Mountains. Then, excitement overcame awe and they burst into ascent.

It was 1942. They were college students taking a ski holiday. The young men joked, laughed and "horsed around" as they scrambled up the icy incline. They were carefree and confident in the way of young people. Even though they'd grown up in a country continually at war, they were largely unaffected by faraway conflicts.

Theirs were affluent families. They had always lived in nicely appointed homes, worn high-quality clothing, attended better schools and enjoyed nutritious food prepared with the help of servants. But their advantages hadn't spoiled them. From earliest memory, each learned to embrace Japanese values of respect, discipline and a strict code of honor.

The merry trio were among Japan's best and brightest. They were also doomed.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

In a few years, their generation would come to know its mortality through the devastation of World War II. There would be grand-scale losses; millions of deaths, leveled homes, decimated

cities and radioactive poison in the air. After the war, survivors would experience agonizing starvation, widespread disease and the near-total breakdown of their country's infrastructure.

On this particular day, however, the sun shone and Japan was still a powerful nation. And the boys – for they really were still boys – were on a lark. Bundled in cold-weather garb to battle Japan's February elements and having strapped long, wooden skis with leather bindings to their backs, they skillfully negotiated the terrain toward the mountain's weather station.

In the midst of winter, only the heartiest climbers and skiers visited this range. Resorts were locked and cottages were boarded up for the season. The workers tending the weather station were cut off from civilization for long periods of time and the appearance of the three students was a welcome diversion.

One of the climbers was a good-natured, intelligent, athletic fellow who naturally took to sports like soccer, fencing, rock-climbing and downhill skiing. He could be very serious, but when amused, his laughter was ready and infectious. His name was Yoshiro Tanji. Following Japanese custom for the eldest son to be addressed by his last name, his pals simply called him "Tanji."

"Those days, the weather station guys were happy to see us," Tanji said. "Not too many people come [that time of year]. We give them candies. They are happy to get something from college kids. Next morning, snow comes. Nothing so beautiful as snow-covered Mount Fuji. Fresh snow – that's the best. Only trouble is, you ski, ski, ski one hour, two hours and you get tired," he remembered with a chuckle.

Young Tanji stood on the mountain in the winter of 1942. How he got there is a comfortable progression of growing up the eldest of three children in a traditional well-to-do Japanese household.