

## Our Man of Peace in a Time of War — SAC Honolulu Robert Shivers during World War II

*by R. Jean Gray (1955-1984)*

December 7, 1941, the “day that will live in infamy,” exploded on the United States igniting hysterical passions. General John L. DeWitt, Western Defense Commander, U.S. Army, filed a report accusing Japanese Americans of engaging in espionage and disloyal conduct. Japanese Americans were said to be signaling with lights and by radio to Japanese submarines lying off the West Coast.

Less than three months after General DeWitt’s warning, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which empowered the Secretary of War to single out Japanese Americans, expel them from their homes and businesses, and incarcerate them in internment camps.

Approximately 120,000 Japanese American men, women and children in the states of California, Oregon and Washington were rounded up. Without specific charges or hearings, the government herded them out to the remotest parts of Utah, California, Arizona, Wyoming and Arkansas, where they lived in barracks and tents (with little privacy), surrounded by barbed wire and watched over by armed sentry guards.

General DeWitt’s reports of Japanese Americans’ disloyalty were, however, being disputed. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sent a secret six-page memo to Attorney General Francis Biddle in which he ridiculed General DeWitt’s conclusions. Hoover said, “Every complaint in this regard has been investigated, but in no case has any information been obtained which would substantiate the allegation.” AG Biddle and Colorado Governor Ralph L. Carr agreed with the Director.

Nevertheless, the government convinced the U.S. Supreme Court that the Japanese Americans were security risks, and so it was a military necessity to

round them up and incarcerate them. The Justice Department attorneys were aware that General DeWitt’s allegations were “in conflict with information in possession of the Department of Justice.” (Source: Asian American Studies Institute)

Mr. Hoover was instructed to comply. Fortunately, the Director had already selected an exceptional gentleman to reopen the Honolulu FBI Office as the clouds of war gathered — SAC Robert L. Shivers.

Born in 1895 in Tennessee, the fifth of ten children, his father was postmaster of Cheatham County in Ashland City, TN. He was raised in the segregated south in a family with roots in the Confederacy. He heard boyhood tales from Civil War veterans of “the cause” and “the disgraceful and shameful catalogue of disasters” heaped on the Old South. Robert joined the U.S. Army in 1918 and served in France during World War I. Returning home, he worked for the U.S. Post Office and as an investigator. Despite having no education past high school, he was accepted into the Bureau of Investigation on November 3, 1921. Early in his career in the Nashville Division, Shivers was suspended for ten months based on accusations that he distributed political literature and lacked judgement. After an investigation, he was reinstated and his accusers were admonished. But, in view of the poisonous atmosphere, Hoover transferred him out of Tennessee to nine different field divisions in eight years, three of them as SAC. Shivers investigated multiple types of crimes and produced well-written comprehensive reports. While some persons described him as taciturn, which weighed against promotion, others praised his skills as an investigator and his diplomatic ability when engaging others, which created a favorable impression. At the Bureau, Edward Tamm, a close advisor



*Photo courtesy of FBI.gov*



*Photo by R.H. Lodge. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i AR19 Archival Collection.*

to the Director, praised Shiver's telephone tapping ability, despite his lack of technical training. Shivers had tapped Tamm's telephone within three hours and reported back his conversations. At one point in this odyssey, Shivers was demoted from SAC, Pittsburgh, and sent to Miami because of hypertension and other heart problems. It was believed a lighter work load might help. The Director took an interest in his welfare. He wrote Shivers, praising him for loyalty given and received and averred that he would always have a place in the FBI notwithstanding his health conditions. When Shivers' symptoms abated, he was made an SAC again in Little Rock. In 1939, when he was sent to Hawai'i, Shivers was outwardly an unlikely choice as SAC, Honolulu — not your typical Old South assignment.

Shivers arrived in Honolulu on August 23, 1939, with his wife, Corinne, to reestablish an FBI presence in the Territory of Hawai'i. The first Field Office there opened in April 1931, but was closed in 1934. Reopened in 1937, it was closed again after four months to save money. To begin, Shivers rented office space to house his staff of two Agents and one stenographer in the Dillingham Building, walking distance from the "Iolani Palace" — seat of government. A Big Five executive rented him a home at 4047 Black Point Road, east of the Diamond Head crater.

Described later as the single most pivotal individual on the domestic security side of Hawai'i's history, a military intelligence officer described Shivers as "a small, soft-spoken man with an expression of utter guilelessness, the last person one would expect, at first sight, to be an Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation." Shivers reported to Hoover the Caucasians of Hawai'i were "utterly cold" to the FBI presence and "felt we were not needed here and were completely disinterested."

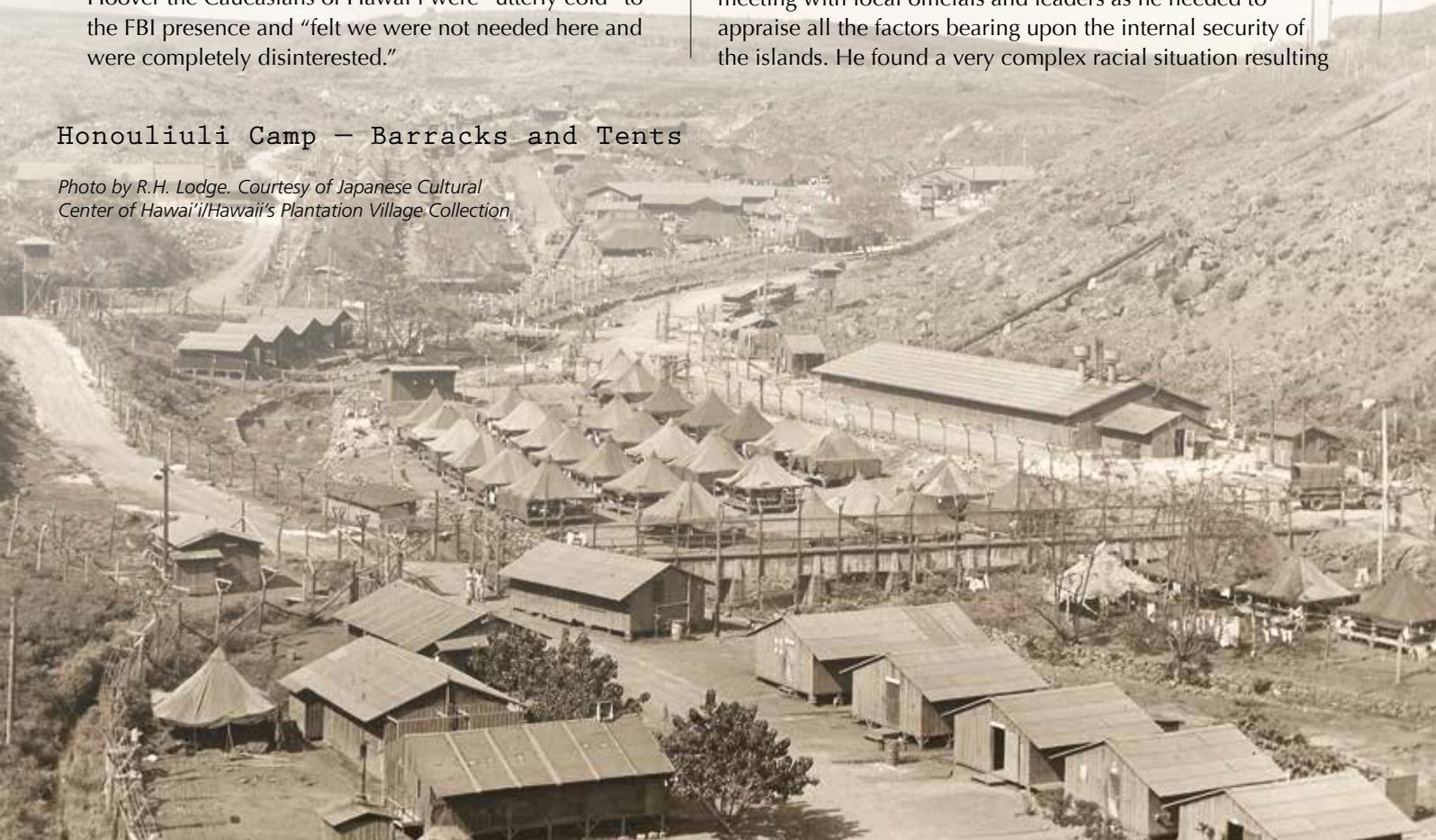
Shivers had never dealt with Asians before his arrival in a territory where 37% of the population was of Japanese origin (a quarter of those aliens), 26% Caucasian, 15% Hawaiian or part Hawaiian, 13% Filipino, 7% Chinese, 1.5% Korean and less than 1% "others." Shivers advised Hoover that the various Asian communities "were most reticent and said nothing to indicate how they felt other than to avoid all contact with this office."

The cultural shock must have been profound. At the suggestion of a university professor, Robert and Corinne took a Japanese American student from Maui into their home where she was given room and board in return for helping with housework. Corinne balked at the idea of taking in an Asian at first, but they accepted Shizue Kobotake. Shizue welcomed the chance to join their household as she started her sophomore year at the University of Hawai'i. Shizue soon became close to Corinne who asked her questions about life in the Japanese American community, their views of Christianity and Buddhism, the role of Shintoism, and how the Emperor was regarded. Corinne learned Shizue believed that being an American was central to her identity. Robert had trouble with pronouncing Shizue so he renamed her Sue. He gave her driving lessons. She scraped his car — no matter. Soon Sue was so much a part of the family they introduced her as their adopted daughter. It turned into a lifelong friendship. When Sue married years later, Shivers walked "his daughter" down the aisle as Corinne sat in the front row. She became Sue Isonaga whose children called Corinne "mom." From this beginning, Asians were welcomed early on into the Shivers' home, including men who became key to the networks he was building.

To learn about Hawai'i, Shivers travelled about the islands, meeting with local officials and leaders as he needed to appraise all the factors bearing upon the internal security of the islands. He found a very complex racial situation resulting

## Honouliuli Camp — Barracks and Tents

*Photo by R.H. Lodge. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i/Hawaii's Plantation Village Collection*



## Prisoners of War in Garden at Honouliuli



Photo by R.H. Lodge. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i/Hawaii's Plantation Village Collection

from the large ethnic groups like the Chinese, Koreans and Filipinos whose homelands had long been or surely would come under the heel of the Japanese Army in the impending event of war. They harbored an undercurrent of suspicion and growing fear of the behavior of the Japanese population in Hawai'i. Shivers later testified "it was readily apparent that unless all the racial groups were held together and worked together as a united community in a common effort, not only would Hawai'i's contribution in the event of war be seriously hampered, but it would be most difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the internal security of these islands and free the Army and Navy for their main task of prosecuting the war against the enemy, without the necessity of using part of their forces in maintaining order behind the lines among the civilian population."

An independent nation until its annexation by the United States in 1898, the Kingdom of Hawai'i sought workers from Japan. In 1885 the Emperor approved Queen Kamehameha's request. The first arrivals, those born in Japan were called Issei. The Emperor expected them to remain loyal to Japan. The first generation born in Hawai'i was called Nisei. Yet when Hawai'i was annexed, none became U.S. citizens because of the Japanese Exclusion Act. In 1924, the law was changed to grant citizenship to Nisei born in Hawai'i.

To form a united front within the population, a complete survey would be conducted by the FBI, together with intelligence officers from the Army and Navy to determine if the long-held suspicions of the loyalty of the Japanese population were valid. One of the findings of the FBI study was that the remaining Issei (a sizeable percentage) had become loyal to the U.S. as their new homeland. They were not the "fifth column" as some feared.

Into the existing polyglot Asian mix of citizenry, with the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Japanese spreading war in China, the President ordered an aircraft carrier battle group to Pearl Harbor. The arrival of military units and construction workers swelled the population of O'ahu.

Shivers' work to establish an FBI presence in Hawai'i in the face of many daunting challenges leaped in importance when two weeks after his arrival President Roosevelt designated the FBI as the coordinator of intelligence agencies. The *Honolulu Star Bulletin* quoted Hoover as saying that Shivers and the FBI were in charge. This was news to the U.S. Army and Navy but, despite the tiny size of Shiver's staff, the Army sent him the files of 125 individuals they believed should be investigated. Bureaucratic struggles ensued. At the Washington, DC level, the view of the situation in Hawai'i held by the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) was that the Japanese American community was their main concern. They complained to the Bureau that the few FBI Agents in Hawai'i lacked Japanese speaking ability (true), understanding of the background and had difficulty assimilating ONI information. They based their apprehensions on reporting by a claimed network of hundreds of informants. The Director reversed his position over Shivers' objections and ONI resumed a lead position in domestic security. On the ground in Hawai'i, ONI made plans to oversee not only naval personnel but "to cover Japanese activities pertaining to espionage, sabotage, subversive activities and general intelligence." They informed Shivers they would open branch offices on Maui, Hawaii and Kauai, but apparently never did so. A central figure to ONI's conceptions was a medical

## Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp POW Processing Center



Photo by R.H. Lodge. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i/AR19 Archival Collection

doctor named Cecil Coggins who fancied himself an expert on Japanese subversive activities. He wrote a report about his suspicions of the activities of Japanese fishing boats off California and sent it to the chief of obstetrics at a naval hospital. The report reached ONI, which asked Coggins to write a manual on how to pursue intelligence investigations. Coggins also sent monthly letters to officers of the Pacific Fleet. Describing him as a health, recreation and morale officer, the U.S. Navy appointed him in 1937 a member of the Venereal Disease Control Committee of the Territory of Hawai'i. Working with the ONI office on Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Coggins did assemble a network of more than 100 Nisei, but finally concluded the "Nisei were just itching to prove they were good Americans." Coggins later turned his network over to Ford Island and went on to other things.

Shivers continued working with military intelligence. He presided over weekly meetings with ONI and Army Intelligence. As ONI receded from the scene, Shivers strengthened his relationship with the Army. Lt. Gen.

Walter Short, Commanding General, Hawai'i Department, designated Col. M.W. Marston, Chief of Army Intelligence (G-2), to work with the FBI. Shivers worked closely with G-2 throughout the coming years.

FBI Honolulu was receiving a stream of grim news from the Bureau of the increasing likelihood of war with Japan. With FBI staff limited, ONI and the Honolulu Police Department were closely monitoring the Japanese Consulate. Parallel to his official relations with the Army and Navy, ever since his arrival in the islands, Shivers continually sought out civilians who could aid him in assessing the population's reaction in the event of war.

Following his tours of the islands and his talking to plantation owners and businessmen, Shivers was frustrated and complained "I got just as many different answers as the number of people I talked to." He added "The haole (Caucasian) population in Hawai'i was not in a position to give any accurate information about the Japanese populace because there was very little intercourse between

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the two." He decided "to start from scratch."

Charles Hemenway arrived in Hawai'i to teach in the early 1900s from Vermont. He rose quickly in The Five companies (a group of what started as sugarcane processing corporations), becoming a member of several boards of directors. As an educator, he wrote the articles of incorporation of the University of Hawai'i and served for decades as a regent. From his vantage point in society, he came to know many outstanding individuals from disparate ethnic backgrounds. "The University of Hawai'i together with McKinley High School, the YMCA and church groups had become melting pots for different racial groups." McKinley High School had ROTC where Nisei students trained and would later join the U.S. Army. Shivers met Charles Hemenway during a meeting with six white businessmen. Shivers asked if he could recommend a few persons of Japanese ancestry he could vouch for without reservations. Hemenway replied "How many do you want, 500?" Shivers asked for six. Hemenway said he would introduce Shivers to "six Americans as loyal as any of us here." Shivers soon met Clifton Yamamoto, an insurance executive and past president of the Hawaiian Japanese Civic Association (HJCA); Masatochi Katagiri of similar background president-elect of HJCA; Jack Wakayama, HJCA president; Shunzo Sakamaki, a well-known professor of Okinawan History at the University of Hawai'i and Thomas Kurihara, an employee of the City and County of Honolulu.

Sand Island, 1942

Barracks Flooded by rain

Barracks were used for Detainees



Photo by U.S. Army Signal Corps. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i/U.S. Army Collection

At this group's first meeting, Shivers told them he did not want a counterespionage organization. He needed the considered, frank opinions of absolutely loyal Americans who would talk to him freely about every aspect of life among the Japanese population of Hawai'i. He specifically said he did not want the names of suspected individuals. It was a matter of becoming acquainted and developing a level of trust. With their help, Shivers learned "something of the Japanese mind" which helped him break out of the haole mindset and better understand not only the Japanese point of view but that of other races. Through this group, he became attached to their friends and acquaintances of Chinese and Hawaiian ancestry and entertained them in his home. From weekly meetings with these contacts, Shivers later testified "the information which we were able to secure from these men through their keen insight into the psychology of the Japanese people in Hawai'i and their accurate and wide knowledge of what went on among them helped immeasurably in our appraisal of the situation and in taking the necessary preparatory steps prior to Pearl Harbor." This advisory group spawned other working groups: The Oah'u Citizens Committee for Home Defense and the Committee for Inter-Racial

Unity in Hawai'i. The latter group was formed at a meeting called by a man of Chinese origin at the time the Japanese Army was pillaging China.

The support from these groups was critical to the FBI's mission in Hawai'i. The office was inundated with work. The Police Contact Group was formed by the Honolulu PD under the command of Captain John A. Burns a rather rebellious, Army-brat rough and tumble Irishman, veteran of the U.S. Army, who worked his way up in the HPD, overcoming his known disdain for the haole "attitude." Burns prided himself on his understanding of the Japanese and others gained from growing up in a mixed neighborhood of Honolulu. Three of his group spoke Japanese — one was Japanese American. Their job was to help the FBI through liaison with the local populace designed to prepare them for what would be expected from them in case of war. As time progressed, more of the FBI workload was passed along to Burns who personally led the five-member Police Espionage Unit working with Shivers daily. Burns, Shivers and Director Hoover understood something that the officialdom in Washington — both civilian and military — did not. That the Japanese populace of Hawaii was loyal to the United States. After the war, Burns wanted Shivers to be elected Governor of Hawai'i; he was the potential Republican nominee when he died in 1950. Shivers was never to be elected, but Burns was. He later served three consecutive terms as Governor. Burns is another example of Shiver's ability to seek out and surround himself with outstanding individuals.

Burns recalled being ushered into Shiver's office in

December 1941. "With tears in his eyes," Shivers told Burns in confidence that the United States and Japan would soon be at war — an attack could occur somewhere possible within a week. He was not to mention these details, but he was instructed to begin watching the mood in the Japanese community for any hint of an impending attack — "if they were expecting something."

At this point the Honolulu Office was staffed by SAC Shivers, ASAC Wayne Murphy, 14 Special Agents, one radio operator, eight clerical and stenographic personnel and one Japanese translator.

At 7:55 AM on Sunday, December 7, 1941, 22-year-old radio operator Dwayne Logan Eskridge was alone in the Honolulu FBI office gun vault adjusting his radio transmitter. The Arizona native had a life-long fascination with short wave radio. The FBI used short wave stations in many locations. Hawaii was a key spot. During the night, Eskridge passed the time exchanging messages with Jim Corbett in the San Diego Office. Alerted by the sound of explosions, Eskridge and clerk Sullivan raced up to the roof transfixed by the sight of fighter aircraft passing overhead towards Pearl Harbor so

low the features of the pilots could be seen through the canopies. Eskridge ran below and radioed Corbett to stand by for an "urgent and important message." Corbett replied and Eskridge tapped out the attack message for immediate relay to Washington. He remained at his post for 62 hours.

At his home east of the city, Shivers was called to the phone by Sue Isonaga at 8:25 am. He was preparing to host a meeting of his Emergency Services

Committee, community leaders who met regularly to discuss issues from the growing threat of war. Capt. Bernard Van Kuren, Chief of Detectives, briefed him on the damage inflicted by the attack. Shivers told his wife, Corrine, to telephone his staff to report to the office, then seek safe shelter for herself and Sue. He careened his car through Honolulu streets to the Dillingham Building. He was joined by Col. George Bicknell, the G-2 Commander, who had relocated his staff to the Dillingham Building from Schofield Barracks to cooperate more closely with the FBI. There was also a telephone link to ONI at the Navy Yard.

About 9:00 am, Shivers reached Quinn Tamm at the Bureau to inform him the attack was continuing and that he had ordered disconnection of the telephones at the Japanese Consulate and the isolation of its staff by the Honolulu PD. As the day went on, the casually-dressed Nago Kita, the Japanese Consul General, emerged from the consulate carrying his golf clubs as if nothing had happened. A police officer escorted him back inside. When it became apparent files were being burned within the consulate, the building was seized and files were recovered by FBI Agents and police passed to ONI for cryptographic analyses.

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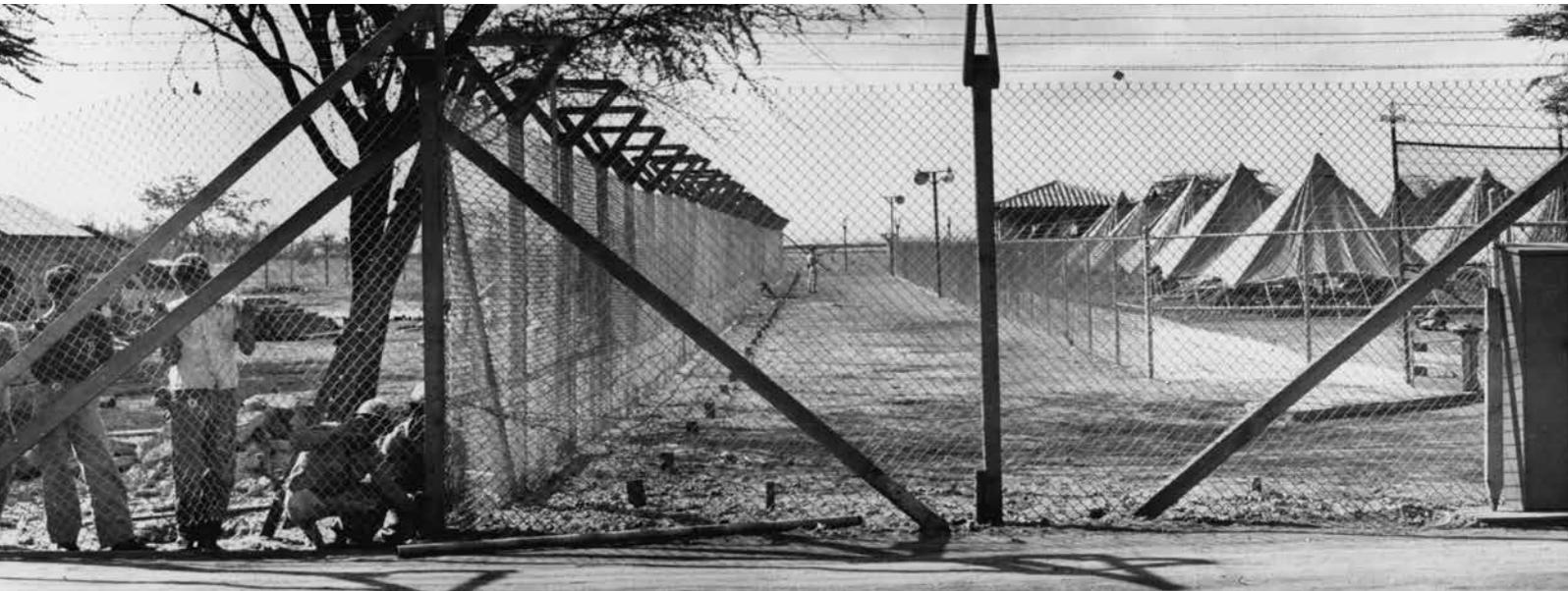
**“There was not one single act of sabotage committed against the war effort in Hawai'i during the course of the entire war. Nor was there any fifth column activity in existence or in evidence here.”**

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## Sand Island Internment Camp, 1942

Tents behind fence. Tents were used for Prisoners of War.



*Photo by U.S. Army Signal Corps. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i/U.S. Army Collection*

Territorial Governor Joseph Poindexter called Shivers in shock. An unexploded anti-aircraft shell had landed in his driveway. John Burns was listening in on an extension. The Governor said his Attorney General was asking him to sign the Territorial Government over to the military. However the Legislature had just given him extraordinary powers in the event of an emergency. He asked Shivers' advice on which action to take. Shivers referred him to the U.S. Attorney. Thirty minutes later, Poindexter signed over his powers to the military. President Roosevelt ratified the order. There is also a story of Lt. General Short and his Adjutant General personally demanding he relinquish his power to the U.S. Army.

Shivers telephoned members of his advisory group of leading citizens and requested them to get out into the city and report to him about the reaction of the citizenry to the attack. They did so. Others called the office offering to help. No verified reports of subversive activities materialized.

Over the years, since his arrival in Honolulu, under legislation passed by Congress, the FBI together with G-2 had been identifying locals who fit criteria for detention as enemy aliens plus certain Hawaiian-born citizens of Japanese ancestry. There had been numerous disagreements between ONI, G-2 and the FBI during the process at the national and local levels. The main struggle for Shivers was between the people in Hawai'i and those in Washington,

who envisioned large segments of the Japanese population as prepared to support the enemy and who needed to be interned. Shivers stood firmly for limited internment of only key persons, who definitely fit the criteria ordered. Shivers' staff had prepared three plans based on where the initial attack occurred. A flash message arrived from Hoover about 4:00 pm. It contained an order signed by President Roosevelt requiring the arrest of all Japanese aliens listed for custodial detention. A letter also arrived from Lt. General Short ordering the arrests. So ill-prepared were Shivers, Bicknell and Burns that they began to manually review the index cards of candidates for detention. As each name was read, the three men would decide. If two voted for apprehension the decision stood. Within 48 hours, 391 Japanese aliens had been arrested by the U.S. Army or FBI Agents.

Lt. General Short was swiftly relieved as commander in Hawai'i. His replacement, General Delos C. Emmons arrived in Hawai'i on December 16, 1941, effectively in full command of the islands. An experienced senior officer, who commanded the Army Air Corps in Hawai'i from 1934 to 1936, Emmons believed the Japanese posed an imminent danger and wanted aggressive action. Robert Shivers and Charles Hemenway convinced him he was wrong. Most people in Hawai'i later gave Emmons high praise contrasting him favorably versus General John L.

DeWitt, Army commander on the West Coast massive roundup mentioned in the opening paragraphs. Some called the very different final internment results in Hawai'i "A Tale of Two Generals."

Robert L. Shivers retired from the FBI in 1943 for reasons of health. One of the Chinese members of Shivers' Inter-Racial Committee told Eleanor Roosevelt about Shivers' contributions to racial peace in Hawai'i. She penned a note to FDR, who immediately appointed him Collector of Customs for Hawai'i. It was in that capacity Shivers testified on cooperation between various racial groups and constituted authorities before and after December 7, 1941, before the Sub-Committee on Statehood of the U.S. House of Representatives at the Iolani Palace January 15, 1946. He reviewed his work at SAC gathering committees to study the racial situation and work for maintaining order in case of war. As concrete evidence of the actual size of the disloyal group, he pointed out that from December 7, 1941, until the end of hostilities only 1,441 persons of Japanese ancestry in Hawai'i were picked up for internment, "or less than 0.9% which is less than one percent of the total alien and citizen population of Japanese ancestry. This group may be broken down to show that of the total interned, 879 were Japanese aliens. Of those 879 aliens 301 were subsequently released or paroled after being brought before hearing boards." Of 534 American citizens of Japanese ancestry interned, 160 were released or paroled. In the citizen group, there were 468 Kibeis (Niseis born in the U.S. who went to Japan for their education) plus 28 persons who renounced their U.S. citizenship. This means there were 980 citizen and alien Japanese who were actually interned and sent to war relocation camps on the mainland; this from a population of 120,000 citizens and 40,000 aliens of Japanese ancestry in the islands. Shivers argued that this record of loyalty augured well for the future of the territory or state. He also testified "There was not one single act of sabotage committed against the war effort in Hawai'i during the course of the entire war. Nor was there any fifth column activity in existence or in evidence here."

## Barracks at Honouliuli Internment Camp



Photo by R.H. Lodge. Courtesy of Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i/AR19 Archival Collection

SAC Robert L. Shivers' accomplishments in a community where he arrived as a complete stranger were remarkable. Starting with little more than gumption, persistence, intelligence and compassion, he created an FBI presence with enormous positive influence on society in Hawai'i far beyond its size and in a time of tension and peril. Robert L. Shivers was a peace maker.

### Sources:

A very special thanks to Society Historian Ray Batvinis who made available an article he had written on the subject.

How Hawai'i Changed America – The Campaign for Equal Treatment of Japanese Americans in the War Against Japan by Tom Coffman.

The Asian American Studies Institute of the University of Connecticut

We would like to thank Marcia Kemble, Tokioka Heritage Resource Center Manager for the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii for her assistance in providing photos of the Japanese internment camps on Oahu. In this photo, she is holding the book, "These Americans: The Japanese in the Hawaiian Islands in World War II" by John Rademaker, opened to a page with a photo of Shivers.

The blue pamphlet is entitled as follows: Robert Shiver Statement Before Sub-Committee on statehood, U.S. House of Representatives at Iolani Palace, Honolulu January 15, 1946. The further title is Cooperation of Various Racial Groups with Each Other and with the Constituted Authorities Before and After December 7, 1941.

