

# **Shoichi Yokoi**

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### Introduction

Deep in the jungles of Guam, two local hunters walked along the dense vegetation near a river in search of game. Suddenly, behind the tall foxtail reeds along the riverbank, they came upon a frail, undernourished, wild looking man, wearing tattered clothing, setting fish traps in the river. Not knowing who he was, one of the hunters pointed his gun at the man. Frightened by the encounter, the man charged at the hunter and tried to grab his gun; but, because he was so weak, he was easily overpowered. The hunters, realizing he was Japanese, took him captive. The men took the terrified man to their village and fed him. The year was 1972. This is the tale of Shoichi Yokoi, a sergeant in the Imperial Japanese Army, who hid in the Guam jungles for 28 years, becoming one of WWII's last Japanese holdouts.

### Early Life

Shoichi Yokoi was Born in 1915 and raised in a farming village near the city of Nagoya in central Japan. On leaving primary school Yokoi became a self-employed tailor and was drafted into the army in 1942. He was deployed to Guam in February 1944 as part of a newly formed battalion designed to take part in the defense of the mid-Pacific area.

### Guam

By 1944, the tides of World War II were turning against Japan. Guam, located approximately 1,500 miles south of Japan, was the key to controlling the Pacific region, serving as a crucial airfield and naval base. The Japanese were acutely aware that losing Guam would provide the Allies with a staging area for bombing operations against the Japanese mainland.

Japan sent 20,000 soldiers to defend the island. The Japanese commanders on Guam realized that they were vastly outnumbered and outgunned. They knew they could not repel the invasion outright, so instead they planned to delay the Americans as long as possible, inflicting heavy casualties, and disrupting their momentum.

After months preparing for the invasion, the soldiers on Guam were exhausted. They dug caves, prepared defensive positions, set booby traps, and constructed concrete pill boxes. One day, the soldiers saw distant ships appearing on the horizon. Thinking that they were Japanese ships with much needed supplies and reinforcements, they were encouraged. Soon, however, their encouragement turned to dread as they realized that the ships were not Japanese but American. The Japanese soldiers defending Guam could only watch helplessly as the Americans began to carry out reconnaissance flights in preparation for the invasion.

The US began a naval and aerial bombardment to soften up the Japanese defenses that lasted several days. The continuous bombardment and the sheer scale of American firepower made the Japanese soldiers feel as if their entire island would be obliterated.

## Battle

As the American bombardment intensified, signaling an imminent invasion, the Japanese troops prepared for battle despite exhaustion. Yokoi's Regiment Commander sent a message instructing his men to fight hard and uphold their honor, emphasizing that they should die in battle rather than be taken prisoner.

On the morning of July 21st, the main landing began, and the US forces made significant inroads, pushing the Japanese back. The Americans maintained pressure throughout the night, illuminating the sky to hit Japanese positions with heavy fire. The Japanese were on the defensive, retreating, and finding shelter in the jungle as they faced the overwhelming might of the American military. Sgt Yokoi's unit was pushed back and established a temporary base at a banana farm. There was a Japanese supply depot located at the farm that provided food, ammunition, and medical supplies for Yokoi's unit.

As the fighting moved north over the next few weeks, Yokoi's unit was bypassed at the farm and eventually became isolated. They no longer received any commands or communication from the Division Headquarters. The company commander sent two soldiers to find the division headquarters, but they never returned.

On August 10, 1944, the Japanese Commanding General ordered a last ditch, all-out attack on the enemy - a suicidal Bonsai charge. Because of the confusion of war, Yokoi's unit did not receive the order to attack. Eventually, the US repulsed the bloody attack, and the Japanese Commander took his own life. The next day the US declared victory in Guam and took full control of the island.

## Decision to Hide

Not receiving the orders to conduct a final suicidal Bonsai charge left many Japanese soldiers, including Shoichi Yokoi, in a precarious situation. Yokoi, along with his comrades, entered an uncertain path, wandering without a clear destination. They faced a difficult dilemma: to surrender to the Americans or go into hiding. Yokoi and his soldiers opted to go into hiding. The decision to hide was profoundly agonizing for the men.

For many reasons, surrender was not an option for the Japanese soldier. Whereas in Western armies there is little stigma attached to being, or having been, a prisoner of war, the Japanese soldier was expected to win or fight to the death. If he failed to do so, suicide was his only permitted course of action. The shame of failure was great, and that of being captured even greater. Soldiers on the battlefield were told that they should always keep one hand grenade for their suicide in case they should be unable to continue fighting and in danger of being captured by the enemy.

Japanese culture also considered surrender a deep shame. This distain for surrender was shared through the entire Japanese society. Soldiers believed that their families would be ostracized if they were known to have surrendered. One Japanese soldier recalled that on the

day he was shipping off to war, his mother said, "Here is the family dagger. Should you be captured, use this to kill yourself."

There were also prevailing fears and rumors among Japanese soldiers about potential mistreatment, torture, or execution by American forces. Whether grounded in reality or fueled by propaganda, this played a significant role in the decision to evade capture.

The decision to hide was not taken lightly. It involved an intense internal struggle. Yokoi had to weigh his ingrained beliefs and values against the grim realities of their situation. One reason he decided to hide was there was a lot of uncertainty of war's outcome. Many soldiers were not aware of how the war was going or the true extent of Japan's perilous situation. Holding onto hope and the myth of Japanese invincibility, some believed that Japan might still turn the tide, making their hiding a temporary phase before the Japanese Army would return and rescue them.

#### First Years of Hiding

After the battle was over, Yokoi and other Japanese soldiers formed a small group of about 20 soldiers to hide. They retreated into the dense jungles of Guam. The men supported each other in terms of safety, resources, and morale. The initial days were marked by confusion, anxiety, and the urgent need to find shelter.

Knowing that there were Japanese holdouts, the Americans formed patrols to hunt down the stragglers. The patrols used Japanese soldiers who had surrendered to broadcast messages encouraging the holdouts to give up. When stragglers were located and refused to surrender, they were often met with horrible fates, sometimes being burned out of caves with flame throwers. Being burned alive was the Japanese soldier's greatest fear. Yokoi's group moved frequently, mostly at nighttime, to avoid detection.

With no supplies, Yokoi had to rely on the Guam jungle for food. They foraged for edible plants and fruit and caught frogs, toads, and small wildlife. Freshwater sources were critical with rivers and rain being primary sources. Determining which plants were safe to eat in the jungle often involved experimenting and learning through mistakes.

Hiding with a group posed both advantages and challenges. While there was mutual support and shared tasks, decisions such as whether to risk moving locations and how to distribute food became points of contention. Over time, being in close quarters and under constant stress led to arguments among the men. Trust became a significant issue, especially with sharing food. With passing time, concerns arose about potential defections or individuals giving away their hiding spots.

As their survival ordeal turned into months and then years, the physical challenges of living in hiding started taking a toll. Malnutrition, injuries, and diseases became common. Emotional struggles intensified. The fear of capture, thoughts of families left behind, and the uncertainty

of Japan's fate in the war weighed heavily and broke many of the men. As time passed, many in the group either decided to surrender, were captured, or killed by the patrols.

Around 1955, Yokoi's group had diminished down to only two other soldiers, Shichi and Nakahata. The three relied heavily on each other for survival. They developed a deep bond. They shared stories of home, memories from before the war, and hopes for the future, helping to keep despair at bay.

Like before, however, disagreements eventually arose among Yokoi and the two men, and Yokoi decided to go his own way. The three remained friends, stayed relatively close to each other in the jungle, and agreed to meet periodically.

In 1962, nearly two decades after they first went into hiding, both of Yokoi's companions died. While the exact circumstances of their deaths are not known, it is thought that they died in a large typhoon that hit the island that year. Yokoi found their bodies in their cave several weeks later. The deaths of his two friends traumatized Yokoi. Not only did he face deep grief losing his friends, his only human contact, but he now faced the increased challenges of surviving alone. Their deaths marked the beginning of his eight years in total isolation.

### Eight Years of Isolation

Loneliness and isolation were, by far, the most difficult situations for Yokoi to bear. Human beings are inherently social creatures. The sheer weight of solitude took a toll on Yokoi's mental wellbeing. Over time, this isolation affected his perception of time, events, and reality.

To combat despair and maintain his sanity, Yokoi clung to his purpose – his loyalty to the Emperor, the belief in Japan's eventual resurgence, and his role as a soldier. Daily routines, from foraging to maintaining his hideout, provided some semblance of structure and purpose.

The loneliness was often overwhelming. Constant fear of discovery meant Yokoi was always on high alert. He never slept well. Every sound or disturbance could signify a threat. Paranoia about being captured or facing unknown threats became a daily challenge. Often, in the middle of the night, when he could no longer bear his solitude, he would cry and shout, banging his head against the walls of his hideout.

Yokoi created a series of hideouts over the years. The most notable was a cave he dug in the ground by hand. Without proper tools, it took him months to dig the cave.

Through the years his uniform disintegrated. To pass the time he painstakingly made clothes out of tree fibers. Being a tailor before the war, he crafted proper shirts and pants with buttons and pockets. The needles he used were formed from spent bullet casings. He made sandals out of bamboo fibers as well.

As years passed and he entered his late fifties, survival became more and more of a struggle, and he was getting noticeably weaker. Nearing the end of his physical and mental endurance, he began to doubt his ability to last much longer.

## Capture

On January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Yokoi ventured out to set shrimp traps in a stream near his underground cave. As he was setting his traps in the river, he looked up and was alarmed to find a local man aiming a rifle at him, motioning him to put his arms up. Several other locals were nearby. In a desperate attempt, he lunged forward and tried to overpower the armed man but was easily subdued due to his weakness. The hunters eventually realized he was Japanese and took him captive. Confused and scared, Yokoi wondered where he was being taken and what would become of him.

Despite their attempts to communicate in broken Japanese and reassure him of his safety, Yokoi feared for his life. The men offered him food and drink which he reluctantly accepted, given his distressed state. Although he began to recognize their gestures of kindness, he was still afraid, especially since some of them wore surplus US military shirts and were armed.

The hunters took him to their village. Yokoi was placed in a house where he was served rice, the first he had eaten in over two decades, as well as juice, coffee and stewed fish.

Later, Yokoi was taken to the nearby police headquarters. They found a second-generation Japanese woman who spoke to him in fluent Japanese, offering comfort, though he remained anxious. He was moved to the Guam Memorial Hospital late at night.

News of Yokoi's discovery spread rapidly on Guam and back to Japan. At the hospital, he was enthusiastically greeted by around twenty Japanese citizens. The doctors found him to be in remarkably good health, considering his ordeal. After an immediate physical examination, he was only found to be slightly anemic.

Yokoi remained in constant fear while at the hospital. He was terrified when he was taken to an old x-ray machine which he mistakenly believed was a beheading device. Yokoi underwent several x-ray procedures, sparking his fear of being experimented upon.

There were other examples of his mental fragility. During his stay in the hospital, he begged the nurses to not leave him by himself in his room, because when he was alone, he was haunted by the spirits of his fallen comrades surrounding his bed. The voices of these spirits asked Yokoi why he was going home alone and implored him to bring them home with him. These voices and hallucinations persisted until he asked for a pen and paper, wrote two notes to acknowledge the fallen soldiers, and posted them to the headboard of his bed. After this, the voices ceased.

During his hospital stay he was given newspapers and magazines. He was very upset how the Japanese Emperor Hirohito, who he worshipped as a god, was depicted in the magazines. After World War II, Emperor Hirohito of Japan was not prosecuted for war crimes. He remained a symbolic figurehead in a ceremonial role in the post-war years. Yokoi felt the way the Emperor was portrayed in the news was humiliating.

During an interview, Yokoi was asked if he knew the war had ended. He said he knew Japan lost the war in 1952, after reading a discarded newspaper article, but decided to remain in hiding due to shame and fear of punishment.

#### Return

Yokoi returned to Japan on April 2, 1972 with the remains of two comrades, Shichi and Nakahata. A welcoming party of over 4000 people gathered at the Tokyo Airport to greet him. At his arrival ceremony, an emotional Yokoi told the crowd "I am ashamed that I have returned alive." After he saw the enthusiastic welcome, he finally felt free from the fear of being tried and executed for desertion for the first time.

#### Public and Media Reaction

While Yokoi was hiding in the jungle all those years, Japan was steadily distancing itself from its wartime past. In 1964 Japan had proudly displayed its reconstruction by hosting the Tokyo Olympics. By the 1970's, Japan's economy was growing and was becoming the second largest auto maker in the world. Japan had largely moved on from the war.

However, Yokoi's return to Japan brought many unresolved wartime issues to the forefront and forced a 1970's Japanese society to reflect on its past and the lasting impacts of war.

The public and media reactions were complicated. The reaction to Yokoi's return was divided primarily along generational lines. The younger, post-war, generation primarily saw Yokoi as a pitiful man and a victim. He was perceived to have been trapped in his wartime roles due to the intense indoctrination he underwent and wartime propaganda.

The older generation, those in their 60's, 70's and 80's, who experienced firsthand the same indoctrination and war time experience as Yokoi, fully understood Yokoi's worship of the Emperor, his dedication to duty and fear of punishment. They viewed Yokoi's ordeal and survival with a strong sense of national pride and considered him a hero.

#### Later in Life

Yokoi's return took the media by storm. Yokoi became an instant national celebrity. Eventually, however, the media frenzy surrounding Yokoi's return faded. Yokoi was given a government pension and received many gifts from benefactors, including five years' supply of Ramen noodles from a food company, and many offers of marriage. Yokoi adapted to the hustle of modern Japan remarkably quickly. Nine months after returning he was married. He became a pacifist, wrote two books and became a television commentator on survival tactics. He even stood for election to Japan's upper house of parliament in 1974.

Yet, Yokoi was unhappy with many aspects of the Japan he returned to. The country was experiencing heavy economic growth. He wondered what had happened to its old qualities of elegance, harmony and simplicity? Yokoi wrote: "Golf courses should be turned into bean fields. The Japanese people should live simply, frugally and without waste. " In his later years,

Yokoi faded from public life. He took up pottery and calligraphy, grew organic vegetables, and traveled with his wife.

On September 22, 1997, twenty-five years after his dramatic exodus from the Guam jungle, Shoichi Yokoi died in a Nagoya hospital of a heart attack. He was 82 years old. In his final days, still carrying deep-seated guilt, he continued to apologize to his war buddies for coming home. Yokoi was buried at a Nagoya cemetery, under the same gravestone that had originally been commissioned by his mother in 1955, 42 years earlier, after Sgt. Yokoi had been officially declared dead in the battle of Guam.