

# Flags: 'This is making peace at a family level'

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Ziak and his wife, Keiko, are organizing the efforts through their Astoria-based nonprofit group, OBON, a humanitarian movement that receives the flags from American veterans and their families, searches for the flags' origins and returns them back to Japanese families at no cost.

The nonprofit movement, affiliated with Astoria Visual Arts, is the first of its kind.

"This is very unique. These items were taken, and now 70 years later, they are being sent back to Japan as a symbol of reconciliation and love," Rex Ziak said.

On Monday, OBON and members of the 41st Infantry Division — National Guard units from the Northwest that served in World War II — will host a returning ceremony at the Barbey Center at the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria.

The ceremony will be the first official public transfer of the flags. Five flags will be ceremoniously passed to OBON, which will attempt to connect them with families in Japan.

"This is making peace at a family level," Ziak said.

## 'It's a miracle'

Rex Ziak founded OBON — named after the Japanese season when ancestors' spirits are honored — in 2009, the same year he married.

Keiko Ziak, a native of Japan, experienced first-hand the joy of a flag returning home. Her grandfather died in Burma during World War II and disappeared without a trace. Her family never had closure until the son of a Canadian military memorabilia collector returned her grandfather's flag to the family.

For the Japanese, and for most other cultures, an item such as a flag means more than its material value. The flag symbolized Keiko Ziak's grandfather coming home. It is hanging in a family shrine at her uncle's house in Japan.

"It's a miracle that happened," Keiko Ziak said. "I passed that story on to Rex. He researched it and we found out that so many miracles could happen."

More than 2 million Japanese soldiers died in World War II, including over 1 million missing in action. The staggering numbers mean there are just as many unclaimed flags.

So far, Rex and Keiko Ziak have collected about 100 flags, of which 30 have been claimed by Japanese families.

Connecting the American and Japanese cultures to return the flags has proven difficult for the Ziaks. One obstacle is the fact that Japan did away with



**JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian**  
Photos of 1st Lt. Paul Nichols and his family sit in a box near a Yosegaki Hinomaru that Nichols obtained when serving in World War II. Nichols' granddaughter, Christine Wheat, sent the flag to the Ziaks asking them to send it back to the Japanese soldier's family.



**JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian**  
Rex Ziak holds the pieces of a Yosegaki Hinomaru that had fallen apart over time.

phone books about 15 years ago, making it harder to track people down.

Since 2009, Rex Ziak has been busy gathering a group of scholars who can read the names and slang messages on the flags. In addition, he has worked with Japan's version of veteran affairs, health departments and religious leaders.

With help in place, Rex and Keiko are just recently starting to collect and return flags.

Had they not married, the Ziaks say they would not have been able to start the OBON effort. Keiko needed Rex's understanding of American government and vice versa for it all to work.

"She was able to work the other side of the ocean and I on this side," Rex Ziak said. "It was truly a combination."

## Peaceful gesture

One of the flags that will be returned at the ceremony Monday is from a Portland physician, whose late father grabbed the flag during the war. If the Ziaks can find the Japanese

family connected to the flag, the physician's 86-year-old mother said she may want to travel to Japan and return the flag in person.

"It's a very peaceful gesture," Rex Ziak said.

David Pearson, deputy director at the Columbia River Maritime Museum, said the museum is planning to display collected flags in an exhibit in August. The exhibit is scheduled to be open for at least a year, possibly two. Pearson said it will be interesting to watch the exhibit fluctuate as more flags come in and others are returned overseas to Japan.

"The museum has always had an exhibit on the Pacific War, so it seemed like a very interesting part of the story 70 years later," Pearson said.

As more flags are returned, Rex and Keiko see their project as something larger than when it started, something they say could foster more peace in the future.

"To me, it's very spiritual," Keiko Ziak said. "We believe this is the right thing to do on both sides of the ocean."



**JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian**  
Submitted photo  
Leslie "Buck" Weatherill, a World War II veteran, stands with a Yosegaki Hinomaru that he sent to the Ziaks to be returned to the Japanese family. Weatherill will be one of the guests of honor at the returning ceremony Monday.



**JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian**  
Keiko Ziak folds a Yosegaki Hinomaru.



**JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian**  
Writing covers a Yosegaki Hinomaru. One problem with identifying the owner of the flags is the changes to Japanese writing that have happened over the past 70 years. The changes can make it difficult to read the writing.

# Spring into whale-watching

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department will host its spring Whale Watch Week Saturday to March 28 at 24 designated whale-watching sites along the coast. Trained volunteers from the Whale Watching Spoken Here program will be stationed at the sites from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on those days to help visitors spot gray whales heading north. Visitors will also

learn about whale migration and feeding habits. A map of the watch sites is available online at whalespoken.org

Local watching sites include Cape Disappointment State Park in Ilwaco, Wash., at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center at 244 Robert Gray Drive; Ecola Point inside Ecola State Park; and the Neahkahnie Mountain Historic Marker along U.S.

Highway 101.

Camping, including yurts and cabins, is available at state parks along the coast. Go to oregonstateparks.org to check availability and make a reservation.

OPRD reminds visitors to be aware of storms and high waves: respect closures; stay off the sand; and watch storms from an elevated location.

# Dock: Project was caught in a wider debate about a proposal to export coal to Asia

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But the project remained caught in a wider debate about a proposal by Ambre Energy, the Australian company that seeks to export coal to Asia.

The coal would be mined in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana, then shipped by rail to Boardman, where it would be loaded onto barges on the Columbia River bound for the Port of St. Helens. Ocean-going ships there would take the coal to Asia.

Commodity member David Lohman said it was appropriate for the commission to consider the long-term environmental effects of the project, based on a state policy that commits Oregon to prepare for climate change.

"The nature of the projected commodity (coal) can be as relevant as the nature of the projected jobs," said Lohman, who's a lawyer in Medford.

Voting for the funding were Lohman, Alando Simpson of Portland and Chairwoman Tammy Baney of Bend, who switched her vote from last summer, when she voted for funding the dock project.

The projects that received funding on Thursday, in order:

- City of Eugene, \$909,066 requested, matched by \$227,267, for a 24-station, 170-bicycle Bike-Share site that will link to a University of Oregon.

- Teevin Bros. Land & Timber Co., \$2.34 million requested, matched with \$1 million from the company, to enable it to expand its site for rail-to-barge transfers in Rainier.

- Sause Bros., \$965,148 requested, matched with \$519,695 from the company, to acquire a reach stacker and forklift truck to enable it to move heavier cargo from trucks and trains onto barges in Rainier.

- Sisters Airport, \$733,259 requested, matched by \$916,574 from the airport, for various improvements.

- Columbia County Ride Transportation, \$542,646 requested, matched with \$135,661, for a transit center in Rainier.

- Salem-Keizer Transit District, \$1 million requested, matched with \$4 million from other sources, for a transit center in south Salem.

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## MARCH MANIA

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