

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs
Oral History Project

LIVING WITH A JAPANESE FAMILY
My Way to a Career in the U.S. Department of State Focused on Japan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. One year of college as a Voice Major | 3 |
| 2. Studying Korean in the US Army | 3 |
| 3. My Best Friend in the Army – Dick Bolger | 6 |
| 4. On my way to Japan | 6 |
| 5. Tokyo – February to July 1956 | 7 |
| 6. Kyoto – July 1956 to August 1957 | 9 |
| 7. Living with a Japanese family | 11 |
| 8. On Location for the filming of the movie Sayonara | 21 |
| 9. Acceptance into Georgetown University | 29 |
| 10. Success – Hired as Assistant Director at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Japanese Language Center in Tokyo | 30 |
| 11. A renewed friendship with my Japanese host family in Kyoto | 30 |
| 12. A career in foreign language training with FSI | 32 |
| 13. Closing Remarks | 34 |

Introduction

Living with a Japanese family in Kyoto, Japan changed my life and that of my family. I am writing this recollection with the hope that others might be attracted to the idea of living with a Japanese family as a valuable step in learning the Japanese language and culture.

Acknowledgments

I will always be grateful to Dr. Eleanor Harz Jorden, founder of the FSI Japanese Language School in Japan, who was my mentor and friend at the Foreign Service Institute beginning in 1962 and until she passed away in 2009 at the age of 88.

My best wishes to the family of my best friend Richard J. (Dick) Bolger, who passed away in 2015 at age 81.

Thanks to my wife Diane and cousin Ed Ratliff for proofreading.

1. One year in college as a Voice Major

By the end of my first year of college in Louisiana as a voice major, I realized that there might not be an attractive career for me as a singer. Some voice majors end up with a wonderful career. My mother was a voice teacher and a high school chorus director who was much loved. My father played trumpet in the college band and as a hobby for the rest of his life. My sister majored in voice, sang in the opera in Germany for many years, and retired many years later as a Ph. D voice professor at a university in our hometown of Hammond, Louisiana. My brother earned MA's in harpsichord and library science and was head of the Music Library at the University of Maryland. But for me after one year in college, I saw my best career possibility as a chorus or band director in high school, a life I did not find appealing.

2. Studying Korean in the US Army

The GI Bill had been established for those who were in military service, beginning in World War II, and through the Korean War. It paid college tuition and a monthly stipend. But in the summer of 1954, I learned that the GI Bill was about to expire. If I entered the armed services before the expiration of the GI Bill, I would be eligible and could go to any college that would accept me, no matter how high the tuition. At a point at which I did not know where my life and career were headed, joining the US Army seemed the right thing to do.

I joined the army in late 1954 and after basic training, I was assigned to Ft. Devens, Massachusetts. I took a language aptitude test and my score indicated I had potential for learning a “hard” foreign language. I was accepted into the 10-month Korean full-time language training program at the Army Language School (now the Defense Language Institute) in Monterey, California beginning in February 1955.



John Ratliff - Basic Training Photo

My foreign language study background was only high school Spanish, taught by an American instructor whose experience was just two weeks in Mexico. The course consisted of reading

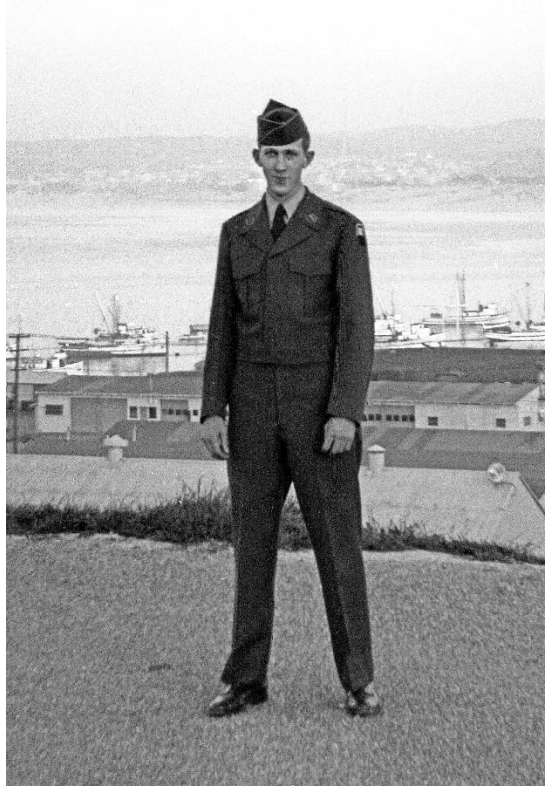
Spanish. If speaking came up, the teacher would defer to our classmate who had recently immigrated from Cuba.

I had never MET an Asian person before arriving at Army Language School. I had requested other languages, but Korean was the major requirement at the time so most of us were enrolled in Korean, with only a few in Czech and Serbo-Croatian.



**Sign for Army Language School
On the hill above Monterey Bay**

When the military aircraft full of soldiers bound for Monterey, CA landed, we were taken by bus to the Presidio of Monterey. When I went into the barracks to find a bunk, I saw that the barracks had been divided into cubicles, with two beds in each cubicle, on the left wall and on the right. Another soldier and I arrived at a vacant cubicle at the same time. He grabbed the left bunk, and I took the right. We introduced ourselves. His name was Richard (Dick) Bolger. We would share the cubicle for the full training period, both of us in Korean training. Little did we know that we would be together for most of the three years of our army service.



**Private Dick Bolger, on the Presidio,
overlooking Monterey Bay**



**Private First-Class John Ratliff,
halfway through training**

The 10 months of Korea training in Monterey were challenging but I finally caught on and was able to keep up with my classmates. As time went on, I felt more comfortable with the training and graduated with a fair knowledge of Korean, both speaking and reading.

3. My Best Friend in the Army – Dick Bolger

Although Dick and I were not in the same classroom, all the men (there were no women) in what was designated as K-35 Korean class lived in the same barracks, near the foot of the Presidio, which overlooks Monterey Bay. So, we spent time together regularly, though we each had our individual activities when we weren't in class. Dick bought a car, presumably saving his pay while I was frequenting a couple of favorite bars, one just off campus, and one in downtown Monterey. The one downtown was called "The Old Stein Grill" and has been gone for decades. The other bar was right off campus up on the hill and was frequented largely by Army Language School students. The female bartender prided herself in learning to greet customers in the language they were studying. The bar served 3.2 beer, a low alcohol drink permitted to people under 21. The Old Stein Grill served only regular beer and mixed drinks and customers who were under 21 (as I was) had to keep an eye out for the military police. I don't remember Dick Bolger ever going to either of my favorite places.

Even though I had given up my voice major to enlist in the army, I was not ready to give up on singing. I read an ad in the newspaper by a somewhat elderly British lady in Carmel named Dorothy Goudge offering voice lessons. I called her, then asked Dick if I could borrow his car to drive to Carmel for my first voice lesson. He kindly agreed and from time to time on a Saturday, I would drive to Carmel in Dick's car for a voice lesson. I found it stimulating. That was in 1955. More than twenty years later, when I visited what had become the Defense Language Institute on official business for the US Department of State, I tried to find Ms. Goudge in Carmel. Well, she no longer lived in her apartment, but someone pointed me to an assisted living facility. I found her there and she remembered me! By that time, she was 100 years old. On one visit, she asked me if I thought her mother was still living. I said, no, I didn't think so. I still have fond memories of her, and of Dick Bolger for regularly loaning me his car.

Approaching Graduation

Army students enrolled in 10-month language training were promoted to Private First Class (PFC) about halfway through the course. At the end of the 10-months training program, we were promoted to Specialist 2nd Class (SP2), equivalent to Corporal but a new category for linguists and other specialists who did not have supervisory duties.

4. On my way to Japan

After graduation in December, I went on leave over Christmas to my home in Louisiana. After leave, I went to Fort Lewis, Washington in preparation for boarding a troop ship to the Port of

Yokohama, Japan. From there, we would be sent to a US army base in Tokyo, from which we expected to receive our assignments to Korea.

One day at Ft. Lewis, I went into a fast-food place and was surprised to find some Korean soldiers there. It was my first chance to speak Korean with anyone other than my instructors at Army Language School.

I then found myself on a troop ship to Yokohama, Japan. On the ship, I was assigned to cleaning the enlisted men theater along with some shipmates, not a stressful job. On the way to the Port of Yokohama, the ship stopped for a few hours at Adak in the Aleutian Islands, and then Okinawa. I don't remember getting off the ship in Adak, although I remember it being quite cold. But in Okinawa, we were permitted to walk around the immediate area, which included caves where Japanese soldiers had tried to defend the Island during World War II. We found pieces of destroyed military equipment and other debris in the caves, indicating that many lost their lives there.

Arrival in the Port of Yokohama

The troop ship arrived in Yokohama and, of course, we were all on deck for our first glimpses of this new country. For many of us, it was our very first time to visit another country. And Japan of course had a special reputation because of its role in World War II, just eleven years earlier. Little did I realize that my family and I would find ourselves LIVING in Yokohama eight years later!

5. Tokyo – February to July 1956

All of us who had graduated from Army Language School were put on a bus for Oji, north of Tokyo, a drive of about one hour. There was at that time a US army base there, referred to as "Oji Camp".



Headquarters US Army Security Agency Far East

We were shown to the barracks and each of us selected a bed. The next morning, all of us who had graduated in Korean from Monterey, were given Korean tests. Those that scored highest were assigned to Japan. The remainder, except for a few who scored the lowest, were assigned to Korea. Dick Bolger and I both scored high and were assigned to Oji Camp.

Former classmates and others we met would go to the entertainment areas of Tokyo for restaurants and bars. Some bars had Japanese women who spoke English, with whom you could talk and dance. Some also had bands that played American music. Friends of mine who knew I had majored in voice would sometimes suggest to a hostess that perhaps I could sing a number with the band. I was always excited to do so.

I begin studying Japanese

There was an evening class for the Japanese language, perhaps on the base. It did not last more than a few weeks, but I was very interested and continued studying on my own after the class ended. At that time, I was not thinking beyond my time in the army in Japan but as time went on, my interest in Japan and Japanese grew stronger and stronger.

A restaurant/bar called Tatsumi was within walking distance of Oji Camp and was very popular with soldiers stationed there. The owner (whom we referred to as Madame Tatsumi) would permit soldiers to run a tab, payable on the next payday.



Dick Bolger entering Tatsumi

6. Kyoto – July 1956 to August 1957

A few months after we arrived, Dick Bolger was called into the Commandant's office and told that there was a vacancy for which he was qualified at the 326th Army Security Agency outside Kyoto, Japan, a place called Momoyama Camp, which had been a Japanese army base. Dick accepted the assignment, and we did not see each other again for a few months. At one point, I decided I wanted to take a few days of leave to visit him. He and I had a nice reunion and he showed me around the beautiful city of Kyoto. I fell in love with the place. When I returned to my base in Tokyo, the Commandant asked me how I had liked Kyoto and Momoyama Camp. I said I loved it. He said there was another vacancy and that I had been selected to fill it! So off I went to Kyoto. Before long, Dick and I were roommates again.



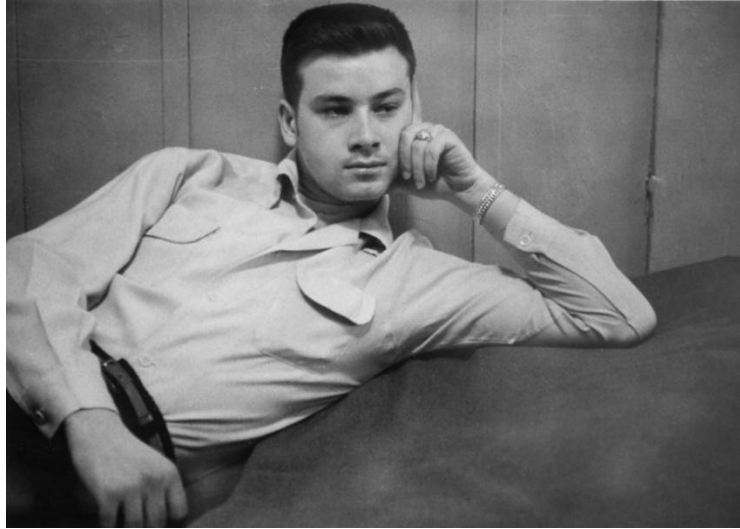
**Dick Bolger at the entrance to
Momoyama Camp**



Our Barracks



Dick Bolger in his room



John Ratliff in the same room

I had continued to study Japanese on my own and tried to speak Japanese whenever the opportunity arose. One day, a fellow soldier came to me. He had been driving an army truck just outside the base and had hit an elderly Japanese man.

The man's injuries were serious enough to require hospitalization. The fellow soldier said he had been advised to go to the hospital to apologize and express his condolences. Because of my reputation for speaking Japanese, he asked me to go with him to talk to the injured man in Japanese. I agreed to do so. Since interpreting for him on the spot spontaneously would be out of the question, I began to research and prepare a few sentences of apologies and condolence. When the two of us arrived at the injured man's hospital room, two or three family members were also there. I conveyed my friend's condolences in Japanese, and it seemed to have a positive effect on both the injured man and his relatives. I was flattered to be asked but also relieved that I had been able to accomplish it.

7. Living with a Japanese Family

I was aware that a couple of soldiers had rooms in a Japanese home, in addition to their beds in the barracks. One day, they invited me to pay a visit to the Japanese home where they were staying. It was very nice. I met the hostess and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Yoshikawa. I may very well have expressed my envy of how the two soldiers were benefiting from this wonderful living situation.

A couple of weeks later, one of the soldiers contacted me again. He said that he and his house mate and the host family had invited a few soldiers to the house because the other soldier was being transferred to the US. He said that, with the support of the landlady, I have been selected as the replacement of the friend who had left. And would I like to move in now that the other soldier had left? I said I certainly would! And I moved in.

Many of the soldiers on the base worked on shifts: days, swings, and nights. So, unless we were working days, we were at the house to have breakfast with the hostess, and sometimes the host as well. In most cases, only one of the two military guests would be there for breakfast because we often worked different shifts. I don't remember the cost of the rent, but it was quite modest, and included breakfast.

Rooms for both guests were on the ground floor and with traditional "tatami" mat floors. In hot weather, fans kept the guests cool and huge mosquito nets were strung from the ceiling in each corner of the room, protecting the entire room from mosquitos.

One of the first things that happened after I moved in was that the landlady gave me a kimono! Actually, It was a yukata, which is a summer kimono. I was delighted. Here I am with Mrs. Yoshikawa, with perhaps my tatami room behind us, and looking out at the beautiful garden.



John Ratliff with Mrs. Yoshikawa



Inside the Yoshikawa house



John Ratliff in the Yoshikawa house

I learned that Mr. Yoshikawa was the retired President of Keihan (Kyoto – Osaka) Railways. He was as social as his wife. Mrs. Yoshikawa’s objective was to practice her English with her house guests. We were happy to oblige, and I had lots of chances to practice and learn more Japanese.

Well, I learned that there was a third foreign tenant in the house! He was living upstairs, and we rarely saw him. I think he wrote for a NYC publication like “The Village Voice”, although I am not certain. I did see him coming downstairs a few times, but I don’t know if we even spoke. If his name came up with Mrs. Yoshikawa, she would refer to the fact that he rarely, if ever, bathed. If she mentioned him, it was with only one word in Japanese – with emotion: “KITANAI!!!!” (Dirty, or filthy).

An early breakfast with Mr. Yoshikawa

I had many enjoyable breakfasts with Mrs. Yoshikawa. She would practice speaking English and I in turn would practice speaking Japanese. One time I was having snacks with Mr. Yoshikawa,

speaking only in Japanese. He offered me a portion of something, and I said I liked it, but a little spicy. He asked me, “Do you like spicy foods?” I said I did. He then handed me a small serving on a plate of an unknown food, which I tasted. I asked him what it was, and he told me its Japanese name. I looked it up in my handy Japanese-English dictionary and learned that this “delicacy” was Salted Fish Guts!

Mrs. Yoshikawa took me all around Kyoto. We went to festivals, parades, and traditional Japanese performances. We would ride on a Keihan (Kyoto – Osaka) railway car. Since her husband was the retired President of Keihan railways, she had a train pass, which she would just show as needed. Once, on the train, she showed it to me. I could not read it all, but I could read her date of birth. She pointed to it with a smile and said in Japanese “uso” (a lie). I couldn’t help laughing!



A traditional Japanese performance in a theater



Visiting a shrine on a festival day



A festival parade on the streets of Kyoto



A shrine in Kyoto

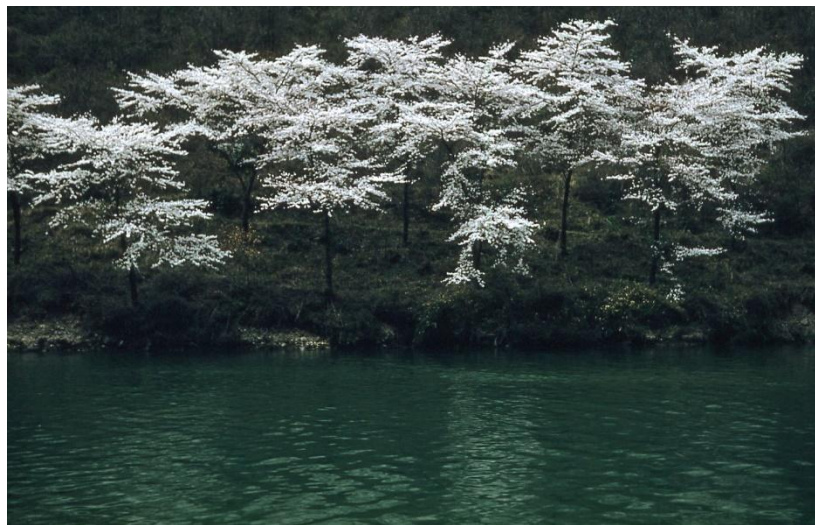


Maiko (Apprentice Geisha) pose with John Ratliff



The famous Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion) in Kyoto

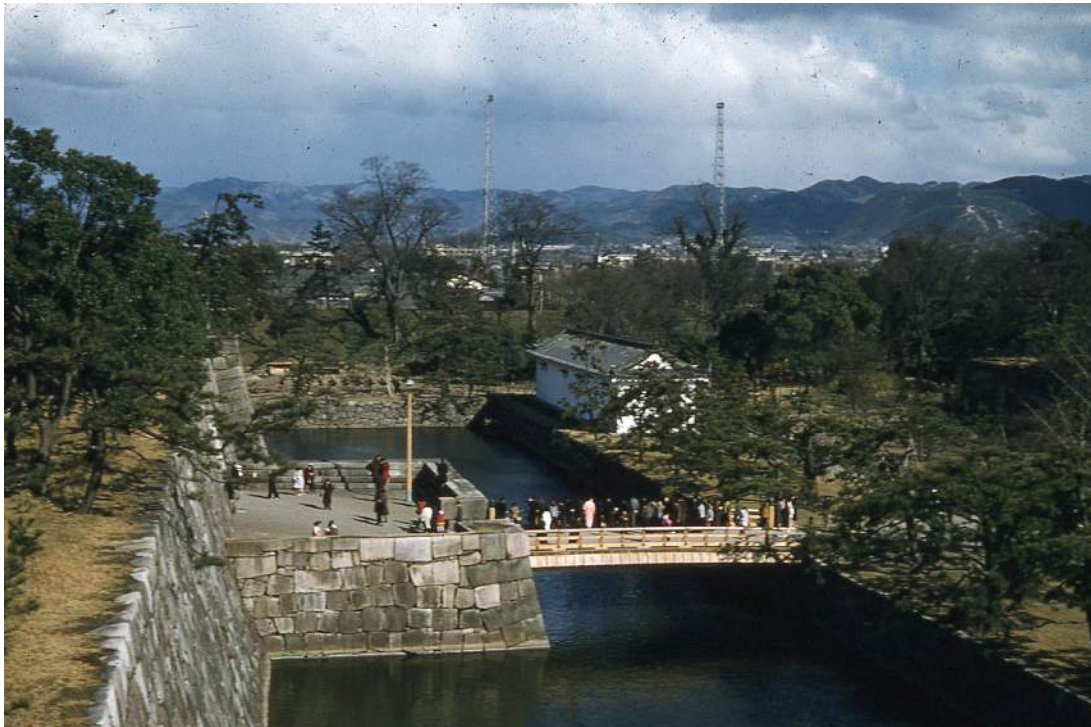
One morning, Mrs. Yoshikawa asked me if I would be interested in visiting a Sake brewery. It turns out there was one within walking distance of her house. She arranged it, probably knowing the manager. I arrived at the brewery and was treated like a VIP, with a personal tour, followed by an invitation to sample the product. Thanks to Mrs. Yoshikawa, I had an experience that I never expected.



**Japanese cherry trees in bloom
on the Kamogawa (Kamo River)**



Torii (Gates) near a Japanese shrine in Momoyama



Moat of Nijo Castle in Kyoto



Dick Bolger and Chuck Cobb at Heian Shrine in Kyoto



Dick Bolger sailing on Lake Biwa

8. On Location for the filming of the movie “Sayonara”

Somehow, I learned that an American movie called “Sayonara” was being filmed on location in Kyoto. The movie’s director was Joshua Logan. Principal actors were Marlon Brando, James Garner, Red Buttons, Miiko Taka, and Miyoshi Umeki. A major theme of the movie was the prohibition of US military personnel marrying Japanese women.

At one point, I learned that they would be filming along a canal in Kyoto, the name of which I cannot recall. I believe it was in a part of town called “Gojo”. With “Go” meaning five, I recall there was also a Shijo (four) and Sanjo (three). I arrived at the location to find the director, actors, and filming crew there, along with many Japanese spectators.



The Canal at Gojo



Director Joshua Logan



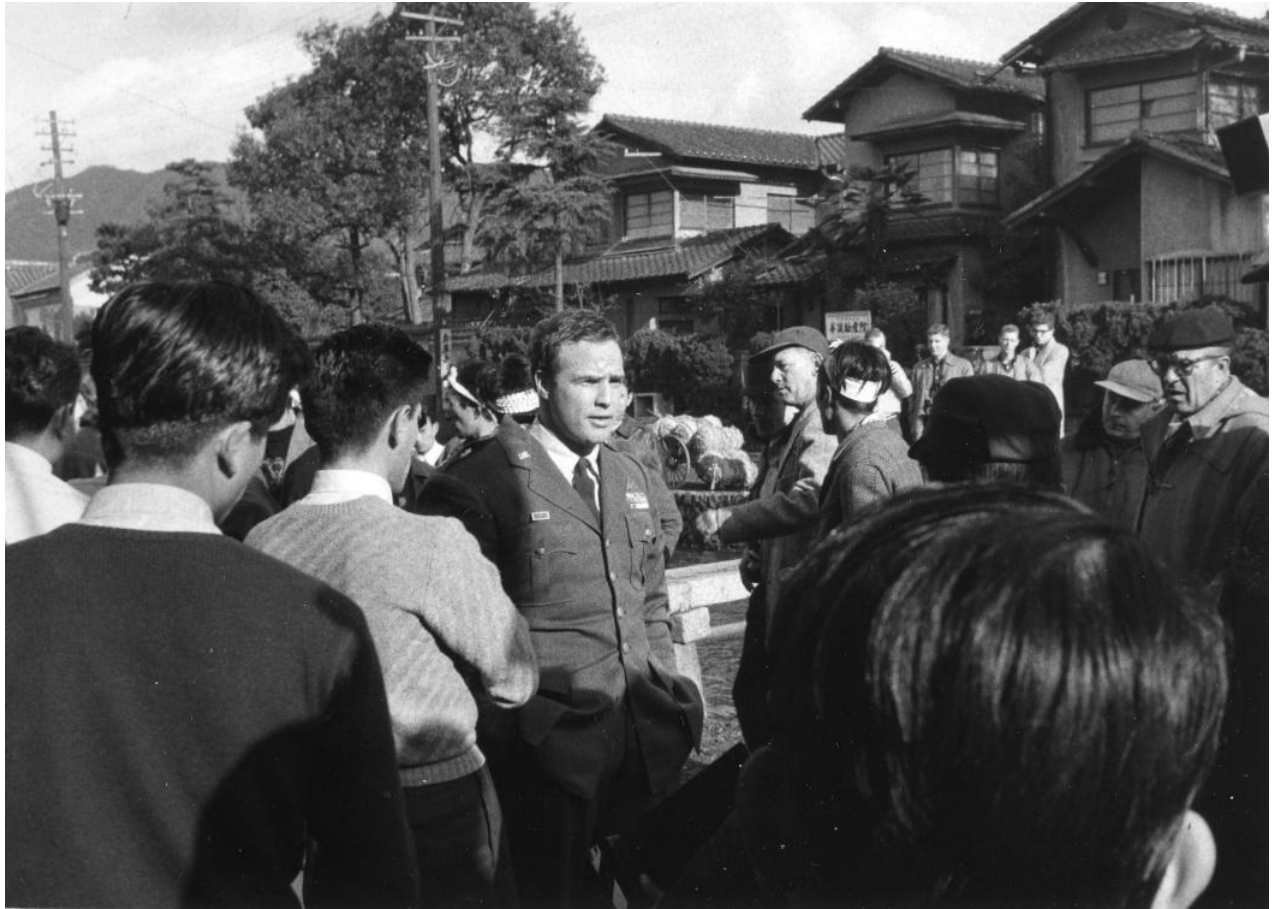
**Marlon Brando and Miiko Taka and James Garner
James Garner**



Marlon Brando in action



Marlon Brando in action



Brando between scenes, with admirers



**Photo of Marlon Brando in front of house
Of Red Buttons and Miyoshi Umeki
(Taken on location by John Ratliff)**



**Clip from movie, with Brando and Garner
In front of the house of Red Buttons and Miyoshi Umeki**

The movie came out in 1957 and I especially enjoyed it, having watched the filming of one scene in person.

A Special Dinner with guests at the Yoshikawa residence

I don't remember the circumstances but at one point, possibly toward the end of my tour in Kyoto, Mrs. Yoshikawa said she would like to host a special Japanese sukiyaki dinner for me and some friends. I was delighted. I invited Dick Bolger, Bill Self, and Dick Horvath. Mrs. Yoshikawa was assisted by her daughter and granddaughter. It was a wonderful time, and I could not adequately express my heartfelt gratitude.



**(From left)
Dinner Guests Dick Horvath, Bill Self, and Dick Bolger**



**(From left) Guests Dick Horvath, Bill Self, Dick Bolger
And hostesses (from right) Mrs. Yoshikawa, her daughter, and granddaughter**



(From left) Mrs. Yoshikawa's daughter, John Ratliff, Bill Self, and Mrs. Yoshikawa



(From left) Dick Bolger, Mrs. Yoshikawa's daughter, and John Ratliff

This was the highlight of my stay with the Yoshikawa family. However, there are so many memories over those wonderful months. Mrs. Yoshikawa took the initiative, but the entire family was so welcoming and demonstrative in introducing us to so many aspects of Japanese culture and the unique attractions of historical Kyoto. I will remember this wonderful family fondly for the rest of my life.

9. Acceptance into Georgetown University

Knowing by then that I wanted a career involving Japan and the Japanese language, I applied to Georgetown University in Washington, DC. A second lieutenant in my Korean class in Monterey had graduated from Georgetown and mentioned their foreign language major courses as particularly noteworthy. I was able to get a few credits for my freshman year as a voice major but much more credit for 10 months of Intensive Korean in Monterey. Although some of my army friends were skeptical that they would accept someone like me, I was accepted! In addition, the army permitted early discharge to report to classes at a school that had accepted a soldier. So, I left Japan about a month earlier than my original discharge date, so that I would arrive in the US and Washington, DC on time.



**Specialist 2nd class Ratliff
On the ship going home**

And so, I boarded a ship in Yokohama again. Now I was a Specialist Second Class, whereas I had been only a Specialist Third Class on the ship TO Yokohama. Ironically, instead of a cushy job like sweeping the movie theater daily, I was put in charge of the kitchen's garbage grinder! Being in charge did not spare me from soiling my uniform on a regular basis.

Life at Georgetown University

My two uncles on the Ratliff side who lived in Washington, DC invited me to stay with them for a while. Thanks to their kind hospitality, “for a while” became two semesters! I then went to my hometown of Hammond, Louisiana for the summer, saw the love of my life, Mary Diane Moffat almost every day and eventually proposed to her. She accepted and before long, we were driving back to Washington as newlyweds, in the car my parents promised us when we got married.

10. Success – Hired as Assistant Director at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Japanese Language Center in Tokyo

Life as a married student was not simple. I ended up getting a day job and many of my courses were at night. Despite the hardship, I was able to earn a BA in Japanese in 1961. My department head, Prof. John Young, had recommended me for a National Defense Act Fellowship for graduate school, which meant I no longer had to work! While I was in graduate school, Dr. Young introduced me to Dr. Eleanor Harz Jorden, the head of the Asian Language Department at the US State Department's Foreign Service Institute School of Languages, in Rosslyn, VA, just across the Potomac River from Georgetown. I learned from Dr. Jorden that there was a vacancy for Assistant Director at the Foreign Service Institute Japanese Language and Area Center in Tokyo, a school Dr. Jorden founded! (For more on the story, see The History of the FSI Japanese Language and Area Training Center at ADST.ORG)

[FSIYOKOHAMALANGUAGESCHOOLHISTORYPt1.pdf \(adst.org\)](#)

[FSIYOKOHAMALANGUAGESCHOOLHISTORYPt2.pdf \(adst.org\)](#)

I was hired by the Foreign Service Institute by the fall of 1962 and my wife Diane, our three sons and I were on our way to Tokyo in May of 1963 by ship from Los Angeles. Sailing first class on an American President liner bore no resemblance to a troop ship.

We settled in well in Tokyo but found within a few months that a fourth son was to be born in Tokyo in 1964. That same year, the school moved from its location in Tokyo to the American Consulate General building in Yokohama.

11. A renewed friendship with my Japanese host family in Kyoto

In time, Diane and I made a trip to Kyoto, leaving our four sons in Yokohama with our faithful maid and child protector Tsuneko Sato. We went to visit the Yoshikawa family and they were delighted to see us, as we were them. We stayed at their house a couple of times. Also, Mrs. Yoshikawa came to Tokyo with a sister and friend. We took them for lunch at the US military-owned Sanno Hotel and had a wonderful lunch together.

In 1966, Diane's mother Myrtle Moffat flew to Japan to visit us. Of course, we wanted her to see Kyoto and meet the Yoshikawa family.



**From left: Diane Moffat Ratliff, Myrtle Moffat,
Mrs. Yoshikawa, Mr. Yoshikawa**

We were in Japan from 1963 until 1967, when we were transferred to the US Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand. My job was Regional Language Supervisor for SE Asia, with particular emphasis on language training and testing in Vietnam. In the summer of 1969, we were transferred back to Yokohama, where I assumed the position of Director of the FSI Japanese language school. My parents, Barton and Vera Ratliff, came to Japan to visit us in 1972. Of course, we took them to Kyoto to see that wonderful city and to visit the Yoshikawa family.



From Left: Mr. Yoshikawa, Diane Ratliff, Vera Ratliff, Mrs. Yoshikawa, Barton Ratliff

12. A career in foreign language training with FSI

As I noted earlier, living with a Japanese family got me started on a career with the US Department of State Foreign Service Institute School of Language Studies that lasted from 1962 to 1985. Below are the highlights of my career:

1963 to 1966 – Assistant Director of the Foreign Service Institute Japanese Language Center, Tokyo – 1963-1964, and Yokohama, 1964-1966.

1967 to 1969 - Regional Language Supervisor for SE Asia, stationed in Bangkok, Thailand

1969 to 1974 - Director of the Foreign Service Institute Japanese Language Center in Yokohama

1974 to 1976 - Foreign Service Institute, Arlington, Virginia

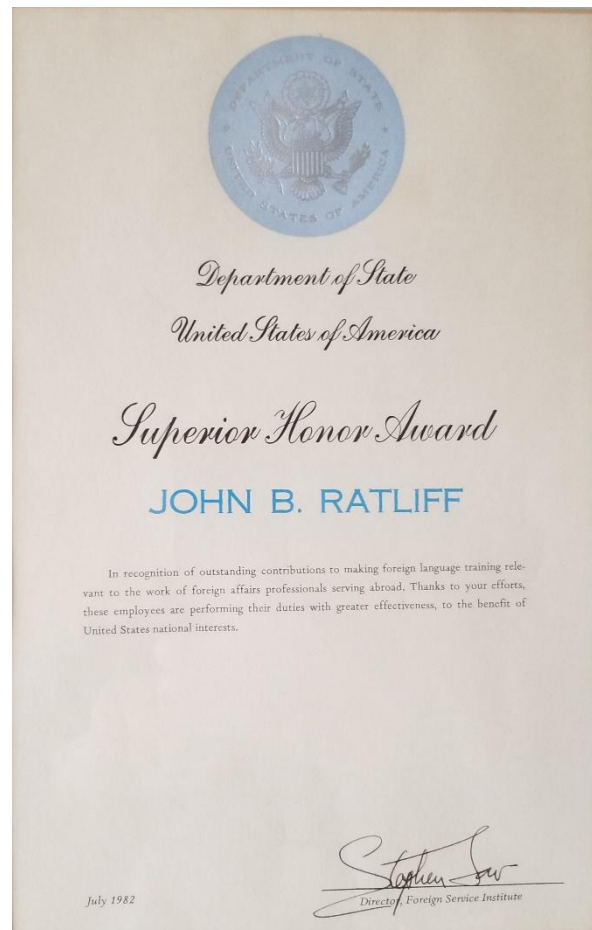
Supervising Linguist successively for Vietnamese, Cambodian, and German

1974 to 1976 - FSI Special Assistant for Interagency Language Roundtable

1976 to 1980 - Assistant Dean for Overseas Language Programs, including the FSI Field Schools for Japanese in Yokohama, Japan; for Chinese in Taipei, Taiwan, and for Arabic in Tunis, Tunisia

1980 to 1984 - Associate Dean

July 1982 Superior Honor Award



“In recognition of outstanding contributions to making foreign language training relevant to the work of foreign affairs personnel serving abroad. Thanks to your efforts, those employees are performing their duties with greater effectiveness, to the benefit of United States national interests.”

February to July 1985 Acting Dean

August 1985 Retirement from the Foreign Service

In retirement, in 1986 my family and I founded a commercial foreign language training center in Rosslyn, Virginia, quickly expanding it to translation and interpreting services. We had many US government and military clients. We sold the company in 2001.

In 1997, I was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, in which I talked about my career with the US Department of State. See [Ratliff, John B.doc \(adst.org\)](#)

Over the past few years, I have written:

A history of the seventy years of the FSI Japanese language training center in Yokohama (ADST)

[FSIYOKOHAMALANGUAGESCHOOLHISTORYPt1.pdf \(adst.org\)](#)

[FSIYOKOHAMALANGUAGESCHOOLHISTORYPt2.pdf \(adst.org\)](#)

A recollection of recruiting Vietnamese language instructors in Vietnam during the Vietnam War (ADST)

[Ratliff.John.B.VietnameseLanguageTeachers.docx \(adst.org\)](#)

Living with a Japanese Family

13. Closing Remarks

This concludes the story of Living with a Japanese Family, an experience I will always remember. I traveled to Japan in 2005, many years after I had retired from the US Department of State. I went to Kyoto and to Momoyama. Of course, the army camp was no longer there and had been replaced by a housing complex. The Yoshikawa house also was no longer there. But nothing can take away those wonderful memories of living with the Yoshikawa family.