Professor Kunio Kawagoe - an appreciation

I first met Kawagoe-sensei when he came to the Fire Research Station, Borehamwood, for a stay of one year. He made many friends at FRS, and in the town, where his host, Mr. Lawson, Director of Fire Research, lived. Kawagoe-san - as we called him - worked mainly on the preliminary studies for the CIB Cooperative Program on fully developed fires.

When he left to return to Japan, one of the questions asked of him at a goodbye meeting was what his aim was in fire research! His answer, omitting all the qualifications and subtleties a more fluent speaker of English might have voiced, anticipated the present wide, but then less fashionable, acceptance of fire safety engineering. He said simply "to abolish the fire resistance test".

In Japan in the years he had spent at the Building Research Institute since he joined it after WWII, he had worked on fully developed fires in order to develop performance requirements for fire resistance. He first worked under Professor Fujita and then with Dr. Sekine developing calculation methods based on an energy balance of the ventilation controlled fire.

As a result of his visit to England, my family and I spent all 1966 in Japan. One of the newer activities then of the fire group concerned smoke, its generation, its movement and the control of its hazard. This involved several large-scale fire experiments above ground, in buildings to be demolished, and below ground, in new car parks before being commissioned. Later in 1969, Dr. Kawagoe, as he then was, became Director of the Building Research Institute and a member of the Board of the International Building Research Organisation Conseil International du Bâtiment (CIB). He had been a participant in its fire commission (W14) since 1960 and attended regularly until 1990. He contributed to its work, enjoyed the international contact, encouraged his younger colleagues to follow his enthusiasm and gave his influential support unstintingly.

On a visit to Japan in the 1980's, I was asked at short notice to give a talk to a certain committee. "What should I say?", I asked Professor Kawagoe. His answer was that whilst some members of the audience were internationally-minded, some were not (as it is the whole world over) and I should emphasise for them the importance of international cooperation and participation in international work, particularly, for this audience, in international standards. By this time there were few international meetings to which he was
a Professor at the Science University of Tokyo where the Centre of Fire Science and Technology was founded. It was no surprise that he was one of those informally advocating the formation of an international organisation for fire science. He was the spokesman of the Japanese fire researchers in the building sector and in 1988, with Professor Hirano, who led combustion tradition in fire science, organised the Second Symposium of the International Association for Fire Safety Science.

At this symposium he gave the Howard Emmons lecture in which he emphasised the importance of full-scale fire experiments as part of any research project. He supervised many projects at the Centre and became its international spokesman. He became intrigued by the low ventilation room fire with its blue ghosting flame to the beauty of which he always drew his audiences' attention.

He much regretted being unable to come to the Ottawa symposium: his absence was a great shock. In particular, he had looked forward to presenting the medal which coupled his name to the Association.

In May 1994 he won the Grand Prize of the Architectural Institute of Japan and it was at the party held in his honour in July that I last met him.

Dear Kawagoe-sensei, we miss you - but you will long be remembered with affection and be an inspiration to us all.

Philip Thomas