

From Nanjing to Okinawa - Two Massacres, Two Commanders

Satoko Oka Norimatsu

Translated and introduced by Mark Ealey

In her articles published in the Ryukyu Shimpo on 4 and 31 December, Satoko Oka Norimatsu reminds us of three important things. First, of the meaningfulness of formally remembering lessons learned from significant historical events that occurred outside the bounds of our home countries. Second, of the importance of connecting the dots when explaining how the outrages committed by Japanese soldiers towards the civilian population during the Battle of Okinawa can be traced back to atrocities that the Imperial Japanese Army committed in Nanjing and other parts of China. Third, she questions whether men who only avoided being tried for war crimes by taking their own lives can be given pride of place in a commemorative setting.

In these dangerous times, those with the authority and capability to unleash tremendous harm upon hundreds of thousands of people should take a moment to consider the lessons from the past. ME

1. Responsibility to face up to aggression (4 December, 2017)

Year-end during which we remember war

December is an important month in terms of Japan's war memory. [The 8th](#) (the 7th in Western memory, because the attack on the Malay Peninsula, Pearl Harbor and other places is remembered on both sides of the date-line) is the 76th anniversary of the commencement of

the Asia-Pacific War in which Japan launched attacks on the colonies of the Western powers in the Pacific and Southeast Asia in an attempt to secure the natural resources required to continue to pursue its war of aggression on the China continent. The 13th is the day on which we remember that 80 years have passed since the Nanjing Massacre, one of the most heinous atrocities known to humankind. In addition, this year, as though bookended by these two anniversaries, on the 10th the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) will be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. At the acceptance ceremony Setsuko Thurlow, who contributed to the adoption in July of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons by the United Nations, will give [a speech](#) on behalf of the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.



On 24 July, 2017, Ontario Legislature member Soo Wong (3rd from left) and members of Chinese- and Japanese-Canadian communities together held a press conference to support Bill 79.

From the end of 2016, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Canada, where Thurlow lives, has deliberated over Bill 79, which seeks to proclaim 13 December, the date in 1937 on which Nanjing fell to Japanese forces, as Nanjing Massacre Commemorative Day. In the multicultural society that Canada is, precedents exist for anniversaries of dates of historical significance, such as “Holocaust Memorial Day” being proclaimed as commemorative days. Obstruction from Japan and local deniers of history has meant that Bill 79 has not yet become law, but a motion of considerable weight was passed unanimously on [26 October](#).

Out of deference to the Japanese government, some Japanese Canadians have opposed this bill, but there is a move within the younger generation to support it. Based upon the perception that Japanese Canadians experienced the injustice of being interned in camps during the war, and feeling a responsibility to show solidarity with the struggle for justice of others, [an open letter of approval](#) was sent to Premier of Ontario Kathleen Wynne in the name of “Japanese Canadians for Bill 79.”

Several Canadians of Okinawan heritage were among those who put their names to the letter. One of those, Ms. M, explained why she came forward to put her name to the letter. Her grandfather had been recruited into the Imperial Japanese Army and while his experience did not overlap with the Nanjing Massacre, he took part in four campaigns in China. When Ms. M found this out, she said that she couldn’t hold back the tears at the thought that her grandfather had probably killed many people. According to her grandmother, her grandfather was a changed man after he returned to Okinawa after the war - he was violent and drank to excess. In the e-mail I received from Ms. M, she wrote, “I signed the letter because I sensed that I had to on behalf of my grandfather.”

An irrepressible surge of emotion came over me when I read these words. With the Okinawan people having been forcefully Japanized (kominka), Ms. M’s grandfather was conscripted, and had taken part in Japan’s war of aggression as a member of the Imperial Army. The psychological scars that he bore from that experience destroyed the remaining years of his life. The weight of Ms. M’s decision to sign the open letter supporting the establishment of the Nanjing Massacre Commemorative Day cannot be adequately expressed in words. If I can say anything, it is that it has made me sense the magnitude of my responsibility as a Japanese who writes about this aspect of history even more strongly. The fact that the men at the top in the Japanese 32nd Army, Commander-in-Chief Ushijima Mitsuru and Chief-of-Staff Cho Isamu, played leading roles during the Nanjing Massacre also means that what occurred in Nanjing is strongly connected with Okinawa. This year, I plan to spend 13 December, the 80th anniversary of the massacre, in Nanjing.

2. Reimei Memorial Tower an insult to Asia (31 December, 2017)

Massacres that link Okinawa and Nanjing

“Nanjing Massacre” refers to a series of atrocities including massacre, mass rape, pillage and arson committed by the Japanese Army against Chinese civilians, wounded and surrendering soldiers, prisoners-of-war and stragglers who had given up arms. These violations of the international law of war occurred over a period of more than three months from early December 1937, during the Nanjing Campaign, which followed the three-month long Battle of Shanghai and prior to that, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July, from which time Japan’s war of aggression in China moved into full swing.

Numerous historical studies, materials and witness testimonies have established beyond any doubt that several hundred thousand

people were either killed, or lost family members, and if they survived, bore physical and psychological wounds for the rest of their lives. It is shameful that Japan, which was the aggressor in Nanjing, is now the only country in the world where people who deny this historical fact exist among the ranks of government officials and intellectuals and so are in a position to influence society.

Given that well over one hundred thousand residents were brutally killed in the three months during which the Imperial Japanese Army fought in Okinawa, the battle there has points in common with Nanjing. Despite former prime minister Konoe Fumimaro's February, 1945 advice that defeat would be inevitable, Emperor Hirohito opted to continue hostilities, thereby dragging the people of Okinawa into a war with the United States in which there could be only one outcome. The Battle of Okinawa, the realities of which surely allow it to be referred to as the "Okinawa Massacre," has close connections with the atrocities committed not only in Nanjing but also throughout China.

Of the main units deployed to defend the main island of Okinawa, the 24th Division had previously been deployed in the puppet state of Manchukuo and the 62nd Division had been in Shanxi Province in North China. Many of the troops in these divisions had been involved in atrocities such as bayoneting POWs to death or the rape of local women. As a result, behavior towards Okinawan civilians such as forbidding them to surrender, forcing death upon them or even killing them, reflected the manner in which the commanders down to the lowest ranking troops in the Imperial Army had operated on the Chinese mainland.



Ushijima Mitsuru



Cho Isamu

From 13-15 December I went to Nanjing, where experts guided me around the various sites where the atrocities occurred. I attended the National Memorial Day commemorative event held on 13 December and was able to meet two survivors who lived through the horror that occurred in Nanjing 80 years ago. Given that in Japan discussion of this terrible incident tends to be focused on the number of victims, it was a truly precious experience to be in a position to sense the pain of people who had actually been involved. Of particular significance is the fact that Commander-in-Chief of the 32nd Army Ushijima Mitsuru and Chief-of-Staff Cho Isamu were both involved in the Nanjing Massacre. After spending time in North China and in the Battle of Shanghai, Ushijima was the commander of the 36th Infantry Brigade, thereby controlling the 23rd and 45th Infantry Regiments within the 6th Division, which

entered Nanjing from the South. These two regiments carried out the mass killings at Jiangdongmen where the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall is located and at the various gates on the western side of the Nanjing Wall. The 45th Infantry Regiment proceeded north from the Jiangdongmen area, attacking Chinese attempting to flee upstream along the southern bank of the Yangtze River. The commanding officer of the 6th Division, Lieutenant General Tani Hisao, who ranked above Ushijima, and company commander Captain Tanaka Gunkichi of the 45th Infantry Regiment, who ranked below him, were both sentenced to death in the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal. Cho Isamu served jointly as an intelligence officer in the Central China Area Army commanded by Matsui Iwane, who was sentenced to death for command responsibility in the Nanjing Massacre in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, and as aide-de-camp for Prince Asaka Yasuhiko who led the Shanghai Expeditionary Army. Within the Shanghai Expeditionary Army was the 16th Division, which can be described as the key culprit in the Nanjing Massacre. Known for his firebrand character, numerous witness accounts document the fact that Cho issued orders for mass executions of captured Chinese soldiers. Among them is testimony that he used the expression “Yatchimae!” meaning “Deal to them!” There are statements recorded that when faced with troops who hesitated to kill civilians, Cho said, “This is how you kill someone,” and stepped forward to cut a person down with his sword. Cho related how the soldiers, jolted into action, moved as one to begin the slaughter.

Three days before going to Nanjing I had stood at Mabuni Hill in Okinawa in front of the Reimei Memorial Tower, which commemorates Ushijima and Cho. Unquestionably the first-class seat on Mabuni Hill, you will not see a higher spot in whatever direction you look. In this manner, men who can be called war criminals responsible not only for the “Okinawa Massacre,” but also for the Nanjing Massacre,

are honored. Is this not an insult not only to Okinawa and the Okinawan people, but to China and indeed all Asian countries that carry memories of Japanese aggression?



Reimei Memorial Tower on the highest point of Mabuni Hill



Reimei Memorial Tower bears calligraphy of former Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru

On this occasion, travelling as I did from Okinawa to Nanjing, I could not help but think that the true nature of the Battle of Okinawa became clear to me when I considered it in the context of the bigger picture of Japanese aggression in Asia. In keeping with the spirit of the concluding statement at the [Okinawa Peace Memorial Museum](#) totally rejecting the “affirmation or glorification of war”, I feel responsible as a Japanese to take issue with the Reimei Memorial Tower.

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Translator's supplementary notes:

Mabuni-no-oka (Mabuni Hill) stands at the southwest corner of the Peace Memorial Park in Itoman, in the southern area of the main island of Okinawa. This is where Ushijima and Cho set up their Headquarters cave before committing suicide during the night of 22 June 1945, so it is effectively the scene of the death throes of the shattered 32nd Army. These days, Mabuni is the venue for the main commemorative ceremonies held on 23 June (Okinawa Memorial Day) and as such it has a special significance for the people of Okinawa.

Immediately east of the hill is the Cornerstone of Peace, a monument unveiled on 23 June 1995 in memory of the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa and the end of World War II. The names of over two hundred and forty thousand people who lost their lives during the battle are inscribed on the concentric arcs of the monument's black granite walls. They include not only Okinawans but Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese, Koreans and Americans among others. The Cornerstone of Peace was erected with three philosophies in mind: to remember those who were lost and pray for peace, pass on the lessons of war, and to provide a place for meditation and learning.

Up a slight slope on the eastern side of the Cornerstone of Peace is the Memorial Museum that Satoko refers to. The Memorial Museum is clear in its position rejecting the "affirmation or glorification of war." The inscriptions on the monuments erected by local Okinawan authorities in the Itoman area in the years immediately after the war are similarly

unambiguous. The words inscribed on the likes of the Himeyuri Memorial Tower, the Kenji Memorial Tower and the Konpaku Memorial Tower are simple statements of fact overlaid with expressions of grief.

On Mabuni-no-oka, where the Reimei Memorial Tower is located, there are several dozen monuments that were mostly erected by the various prefectures of Japan during the mid-1960s to pay homage to the soldiers from their respective regions. The inscriptions on these monuments are notable for having three features: reference to soldiers fighting bravely, no mention of the suffering of Okinawans caught up in the battle, and no heartfelt statement expressing a desire for peace. As the monument dedicated to the souls of the commanders of the 32nd Army, the Reimei Memorial Tower has attracted criticism for adulating men who played central roles in the tragedy that unfolded in Okinawa in 1945.

In keeping with the desire of Imperial Headquarters to prolong the struggle and therefore buy time to prepare for what was expected to be the decisive struggle for the main islands of Japan, the commanders of the 32nd Army decided in late May to withdraw southwards from Shuri towards the Kyan Peninsula directly impacted upon the tragic scale of the "Okinawa Massacre."

Almost three weeks later, on 17 June, from his Headquarters cave in Mabuni near where the Reimei Memorial Tower now stands, with only the shattered remnants of the 32nd Army left, Ushijima ignored US General Buckner's proposal for surrender. The choice was to allow the carnage to continue to the bitter end.

The withdrawal from Shuri towards Kyan meant that the closing stages of the battle would be fought with thousands of fleeing civilians caught in the crossfire. It resulted in three more weeks of civilians having their food supplies stolen by or even being murdered by Japanese soldiers, being forced out of caves

and shelters into the US bombardment or dying from starvation or malaria.

According to historian Hayashi Hirofumi,

between half and two thirds of the civilian casualties in the Battle of Okinawa occurred during the weeks after the order was given to withdraw from Shuri.

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