

Magnificent Obsession: Japan's Bone Man and the World War II Dead in the Pacific

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The lone survivor of a Japanese infantry unit in World War 2, Nishimura Kokichi promised his comrades he would bring their bodies back to Japan. Sixty years later, he is still trying to fulfill his pledge in a story of indomitable will and determination.

Nishimura Yukiko listened to her husband, Kokichi, in shock. After thirty-five years of marriage and four children, the 59-year-old was leaving. He would hand the keys to the family business, one of Tokyo's most successful engineering works, to his eldest son then board a plane for Papua New Guinea where he would start a new life. The object of his attentions was not another woman but the bones of men killed over three decades before. "I'll be gone for a long time, probably years," he said.

It was 1979 and the Nishimura family was about to be split asunder. Only daughter Sachiko sided with her father as he reminded his wife of a pledge made before they married: to find the bodies of his dead friends. Nishimura Kokichi would spend 26 years fulfilling that promise, at the cost of his business, his life in Japan, and his relationship with his sons and wife, whom he never saw again. "I heard she died a few years back," he says, adding that he can't even recall her name. As for his sons: "They are nothing to do with me."

Today, Nishimura lives with Sachiko in an

otherwise bland landscape of densely packed suburbia north of Tokyo, in a house with an unusual driveway. Stuck into a pillar beside its garden of well-trimmed shrubs is the propeller of a World War Two B-24 airplane. The symbolism is rich: a war trophy from Papua, but it could have been one of the fleet of American bombers that reduced dozens of Japanese cities, including Tokyo, to rubble and incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing perhaps half a million people.



Nishimura outside his home in Kazo, Saitama

After a quarter of a century fighting the weather, bureaucrats in two countries, fading war memories and now his own declining health, the propeller signifies a last thumbing of Nishimura's nose at the world, says a new biography; "one heroic, if futile, final gesture."

Nishimura has been thumbing his nose at the world for most of his life. As a private during Japan's campaign to conquer Papua New Guinea, he was the sole survivor of a platoon of 56 infantrymen from his native Kochi Prefecture in southern Japan. Starvation, cannibalism, disease and death on an epic scale studded his tortuous path home. Had he lived till 25, his story would have been extraordinary but he is still alive and fighting a battle that has defined his life since the war -- bringing back the bodies of the men he fought with.

According to Japan's Minister of Health and Welfare, the remains of 1.2 million of its soldiers and civilians are scattered across Asia, nearly half of the 2.4 million Japanese killed overseas during World War II. Victims of Japan's timorous postwar diplomacy, and the shame and amnesia that descended on the nation after the war ended, most lie where they fell in the battlefields of China, The Philippines and Papua New Guinea. Defeated and occupied Japan also lacked the resources and the diplomatic clout required to recover its dead when they were most likely to be found: in the immediate years following surrender.

But the abandonment of the war dead is also seen by some veterans as an extension of Japan's entire wartime military strategy in Asia, which dispatched millions of soldiers as far to the southeast as Papua and deep into Manchuria in the north, then abandoned them without supply lines to fend for themselves. By war's end, about 6.5 million Japanese, including 3.5 million military personnel, were stranded across the region; 1.1 million in Manchuria and hundreds of thousands in Papua and the Pacific

islands. Many would never make it home.

Those figures are considered shamefully high by men like Nishimura. In contrast, America spares little effort to recover its war dead: Just 17 percent of the half a million U.S. soldiers who fell in the combined Pacific, Korean and Vietnam conflicts remain listed as missing. "Everybody today is against war in Japan, but nobody wants to talk about what happened," laments the old infantryman. "It's pitiful. Why did all those people die?"

In 1942, the 22-year-old was ordered in sweltering heat to cross Papua from Kokoda over the Owen Stanley Mountain Range and take the capital, Port Moresby, in what became one of the most infamous battles of World War II. In two weeks of fighting, he was shot by a young Australian and watched his entire unit being wiped out. But the barbarity was just beginning.

Over the following months, he and comrades engaged in a savage war of attrition that left him a skeletal 28 kilos. The survivors resorted to eating horses, rats, tree bark and eventually the flesh of dead Australian and American soldiers, which they called "white pork."

"It was eat or die," Nishimura told Australian journalist Charles Happell, author of the new book *The Bone Man of Kokoda*. Happell describes how the battle for Papua scarred him deeply and left him with a lifetime of guilt. "He said if I survive the war I will come back and try to find your bones," says Happell. "He grew up at a time when those old-fashioned ideals of duty, honor and sacrifice had some traction in Japanese society. He was a man who thought his word was his bond."

Nishimura did survive New Guinea, the sinking of his ship off Taiwan and near-death in Burma, where he was abandoned, delirious with malaria in the jungle, then a decade wandering Japan after the war ended. A gifted engineer,

he built up a successful business, married and had children, before that fateful night three decades ago when he reminded his family of his promise. To his mind, they rejected him: “I married my wife on condition that I would go back to New Guinea but neither she nor my sons understood this. It made me sad.”



Nishimura in Taiwan after release from hospital following his Papua ordeal

At an age when most men are considering retiring, the 60-year-old former company president set up base in one of the world’s poorest and most dangerous places, living in tents and makeshift huts as he searched for bones. In a quarter of a century of digging, armed with a metal detector and hand tools, he estimates he found the remains of about 300-350 men, including some former members of his 144th Infantry Regiment. “It is hard to tell because they have become so damaged over time.”

The dig, and the quest to find the families of the dead, became an obsession, consuming his life and about 400 million yen of his own money. The collection of skulls, femurs, gold teeth and rusting knives, swords, buckles and spoons steadily built up in his rickety hut. His fame reached Japan, where TV crews were dispatched to the island. In the mid-1990s, the Japanese ambassador in Papua offered to take care of his treasures and return them to Tokyo. Reluctantly, Nishimura agreed, a decision he came to bitterly regret.

Instead of being reunited with their families, the remains were incinerated in the charnel house of Chidorigafuchi Cemetery, Japan’s equivalent of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; unidentified bodies cannot be interred in family plots or enshrined at Yasukuni, the official memorial for military dead. Says Happell, Nishimura was furious. “These young conscripts died for Japan, but they were treated no better than criminals.” The decision reinforced his distrust of the authorities; they wanted to leave his colleagues buried, forgotten along with the rest of the war’s ugliness. Aged 75, he would continue to go it alone.

The welfare ministry rejects Nishimura’s criticism, but the once steady stream of remains from abroad has turned into a trickle: just 604 came home in 2005, down from a high of 35,000 in the early 1970s. “We send teams out every year to many countries,” said a spokesman. In Papua, where the bodies of about 78,000 of the 127,600 Japanese troops who died there remain, the search becomes more difficult by the year, said Susumu Kiyosawa of the Japanese Embassy. “You have to remember that it is 60 years since the end of the war. There is not much left.”

Nishimura refuses to accept these claims. “They’re just words,” he says. They don’t care. It has always been the same.” He continued to dig until last year when, at 87, his crumbling

body forced him to return to Tokyo. Before he left, he fought hard against one more indignity: Skeletal remains dug up by locals, displayed on stalls to tourists and even, he recalls with disgust, offered for sale. “I asked the people there: ‘What if it was a member of your family. Would you treat them like this?’

“I know of one Japanese man who went to Papua and was so upset he paid to buy some remains,” he recalls. “So now the locals know they can get money for them.”

It is, explains Happell, the worst possible way for Nishimura to leave the country. “The only time he cried was when he talked about the bones of his comrades becoming part of these tourist attractions. He hates the fact that the bones that have been recovered are sitting on trestle tables, and that the government knows that they’re there and doesn’t go get them.”

Back in Saitama Prefecture, his backbone weakened by repeated bouts of malaria, Nishimura rifles through his belongings to return with a dusty picture of wartime Emperor Hirohito, taken during a visit to Kochi Prefecture. For most Japanese, the war was a disaster and for many the emperor a reviled figure who reigned over a military cult that demanded death rather than surrender. But Nishimura believes the country had no choice but to fight. “We were starved of oil and supplies, but I knew we would lose. America

was so powerful.” He believes “reds” have helped make Japan ashamed of its past. Ultimately though, says Happell, discussion of the war all comes back to one thing: “the forgotten dead.”

Before he dies, the indomitable former infantryman has two typically ambitious final missions to fulfill. He wants to help build a new city at the mouth of New Guinea’s longest river, the Sepik. As an engineer with half a century of experience, he says he has poured over maps of the area and badgered Papua officials for years on the prospects for the city, which would, he believes, help lift the country out of poverty. And he would like to see all the graves of the 365 troops in the 144th Infantry Regiment from his native Kochi Prefecture. So far, he thinks he has visited over 330. “I’m not sure how many. At my age, things begin to fade.”

This is an extended version of an article that recently appeared in The Irish Times and The Japan Times. David McNeill writes regularly for a number of publications, including The Chronicle of Higher Education, The Irish Times and the London Independent newspaper. He is a Japan Focus coordinator. Charles Happell’s book is [The Bone Man of Kokoda: The Extraordinary Story of Kokichi Nishimura and the Kokoda Track](#).

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