

# Japanese Atrocities on Nauru during the Pacific War: The murder of Australians, the massacre of lepers and the ethnocide of Nauruans

## 太平洋戦争中のナウル島における日本軍の残虐行為—オーストラリア人殺害、癩病患者大量殺戮、ナウル人文化根絶

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Et in Terra Pax  
Hominibus Bonae Voluntatis

#### Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been extensive research on various atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Forces in China and various parts of Southeast Asia during the Asia-Pacific War: massacres, torture, rape, sexual slavery, and ill-treatment of prisoners of war (POWs) and medical experiments on prisoners. As a result, we now have considerable knowledge about war crimes committed in many parts of Asia. This is primarily thanks to continuous and comprehensive investigation by a small group of Japanese historians who specialize in Japanese war crimes, as well as contributions by international researchers.

Japanese troops committed equally brutal war crimes throughout the Pacific islands, against Allied soldiers and civilians as well as local inhabitants. Yet very little research has been carried out so far on these cases, in particular on small islands in the Southwest Pacific. One of the reasons for the lack of research is that

researchers see little value in analyzing them because of the relatively small number of victims. It may also be due to the fact that these small island nations hold limited political influence on the world stage, whatever the reasons, their claims as victims of Japanese war crimes have been long neglected.



This paper examines three forgotten examples of war crimes committed by Japanese forces on the Micronesian island of Nauru, against Nauruans and Australians. It demonstrates how war brings not only devastating physical breakdown, but also serious moral and cultural destruction even to a small nation like Nauru.

## The Capture and Occupation of Nauru by the Japanese

The central Pacific island of Nauru was annexed by Germany in 1888 and incorporated into Germany's Marshall Islands Protectorate. In 1900, phosphate was discovered on Nauru, and in 1906 the Pacific Phosphate Company started mining the reserves under an agreement with Germany. In 1914, following the outbreak of World War I, Nauru was captured by Australian troops. In 1919, Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand signed the Nauru Island Agreement, establishing the British Phosphate Commission (BPC). BPC took over the rights to phosphate mining and started exporting phosphates to Australia and New Zealand to be used for producing munitions and as fertilizer. In 1923, the League of Nations placed Nauru under Australian trusteeship, with the United Kingdom and New Zealand as co-trustees.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the outbreak of the Pacific War with the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces invaded and occupied the US territory of Guam on 10 December 1941. The same day, they also landed on Makin and Tarawa (today, the main atoll of the Republic of Kiribati). In January the following year, New Britain and New Ireland fell to Japanese forces.

In contrast, it seems that the Japanese did not initially consider Nauru strategically vital. Located between New Britain and Tarawa, the small island (just 21 square kilometers with a coastline of 30 kilometers) was thus left untouched until August 1942.

On 22 August 1942, eighteen Japanese planes bombed Nauru, and that night the cruiser *Ariake* bombarded the island from 3,000 meters offshore. Four days later, 100 Japanese soldiers led by Lieutenant Nakayama Hiromi landed on Nauru and occupied the island.<sup>2</sup>



**Nauru from the air**



**Japanese forces on Nauru**

Most employees of the BPC and staff of the Australian administration had left Nauru in February 1942, six months before the Japanese attack. Therefore the Japanese forces found only seven Caucasians - five Australian officials and two European missionaries - and no

Australian troops when they landed. The five Australians were Lieutenant-Colonel F.R. Chalmers (Nauru's administrator), Dr. B.H. Quinn (Government medical officer), Mr. W.H. Shugg (medical assistant), Mr. F. Harmer (BPC engineer) and Mr. W.H. Doyle (BPC overseer), who had all volunteered to stay on when others left. The two missionaries were Father A. Kayser (Swiss) and Father P. Clivaz (French). There were about 1,800 Nauruans, 190 Gilbertese, and 200 Chinese on the island (Gilbertese from the British colony of Gilbert Islands and Chinese from Hong Kong were brought to Nauru and employed as laborers by BPC before the war).<sup>3</sup>

After the Japanese intervention, phosphate mining on the island was taken over by a Japanese company, *Nanyo Takushoku Kaisha* (the South Sea Development Company, hereafter NTK). However the NTK mining operation lasted less than a year, until June 1943. From November 1942, more than 1,000 laborers (half Japanese and the other half Chinese) were sent to Nauru to build an airfield with two runways - one 1,500 meters long, and another 1,200 meters long. Some Nauruans were also mobilized for this airfield construction work.<sup>4</sup>

In early 1943, as the Allied forces' counteroffensive against the Japanese in the Pacific took shape, Japan strengthened its forces in the region by re-organizing the Fourth Fleet in charge of defending the South Pacific. In February 1943, under the command of the Fourth Fleet, the 3rd Special Naval Base Force commanded by Rear-Admiral Tomonari Saichiro was established, with its headquarters in Tarawa. In line with this, the land defense party led by Lt. Nakayama stationed on Nauru was dissolved and was replaced by the newly formed 67 Naval Guard Force. An element of the 67 Naval Guard Force was placed on Banaba (Ocean Island) as well.<sup>5</sup>

Captain Takenouchi Takenao, who was named

Commander of the 67 Naval Guard Force, arrived in Nauru on 7 March 1943, and Lt. Nakayama became Deputy Commander of the new unit. In addition to the 67 Naval Guard Force on Nauru, the Nauru Expeditionary Force of the 3rd Special Naval Base Force and the Nauru Special Construction Unit of the Fourth Fleet were also sent to the island, with both additional units placed under the command of Captain Takenouchi. In March 1943, Japanese forces on Nauru were made up of about 700 soldiers: 405 from the 67 Naval Guard and 307 from the Nauru Expeditionary Force of the 3rd Special Naval Base Force. However soon after this, the Japanese forces on Nauru were reinforced, and at the end of the war there were 2,681 Japanese soldiers and 1,054 construction workers - in total more than 3,700 people - on this small island.<sup>6</sup>

Although Captain Takenouchi officially assumed responsibility as the head of the 67 Naval Guard Force, he was ill and confined to his bed most of the time. Therefore, in reality, Lt. Nakayama effectively served as Commander from the very establishment of the 67 Naval Guard Force until July 1943. Due to Captain Takenouchi's illness, Captain Soeda Hisayuki was appointed to replace the commander on 7 July, only four months after Takenouchi's arrival at the post. Soeda arrived in Nauru on 13 July. Two days later, Takenouchi left Nauru and Soeda remained as Commander of the 67 Naval Guard Force until the end of the war.<sup>7</sup>

On 13 September 1945, the Australian Army's 31/51 Battalion arrived on Nauru. On the quarterdeck of the Australian frigate HMAS *Diamantina*, Captain Soeda surrendered Nauru to the Royal Australian Navy and Australian Army. When Australian troops landed, they found no Australian staff on the island and they learned that the two missionaries were also missing. Furthermore, they realized that there were only 591 Nauruans, 837 Banabans (Ocean Islanders) and Gilbertese, and 166 Chinese - the majority of Nauruans (including a small

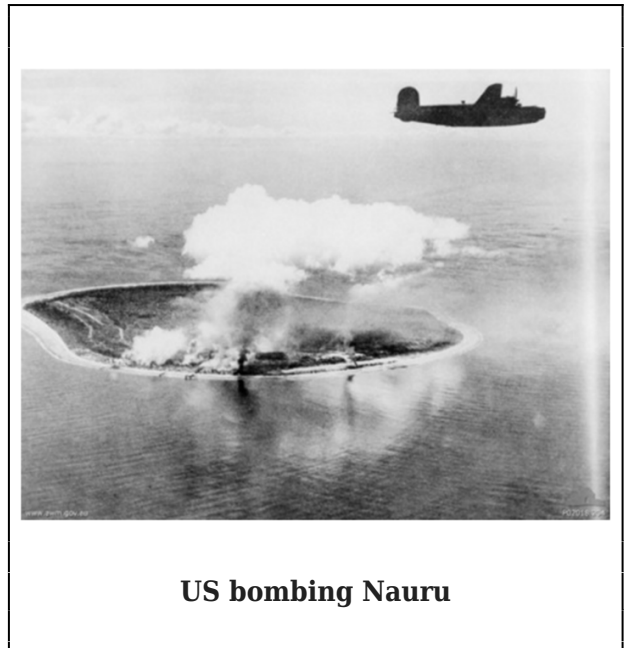
group of lepers) were not there. The Australians immediately started interrogating the Japanese officers regarding the whereabouts of the missing population. The Japanese told the Australian authorities the following stories<sup>8</sup>:

- All five Australians were killed by US bombing of Nauru on 25 March 1943. When the Japanese were transporting them by truck from the house where they were detained to an air-raid shelter in another part of the island, the truck was directly hit by a bomb. As a result, all the Australians and escorting Japanese soldiers were killed. Their bodies were buried, but the burial site was completely destroyed by subsequent US bombing and thus there were no remains of their bodies.
- Concerning the lepers' whereabouts, Lt. Nakayama testified that in July 1943 they were sent by boat to a hospital on Jaluit in the Marshall Islands. He said that he later received a report that they arrived there safely.
- Together with 1,200 Nauruans, the two missionaries were moved to Truk Atoll (today Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia), because of the shortage of food on Nauru. The first group of 598 Nauruans was sent to Truk on 30 June 1943, and the second group of 602 Nauruans together with the two missionaries was sent there on

16 August the same year.

### The Murder of the Australians

On the night of 25 March 1943, less than three weeks after Takenouchi arrived on Nauru, 15 bombers from the US Army Air Force (USAAF) bombed the airstrip for the first time and destroyed eight bombers and seven fighter planes of the Japanese Navy.



When the Australians interviewed the Nauruans, Gilbertese, and Chinese who remained on Nauru, forced to work for the Japanese until the end of the war, several of them claimed that the five Australians had been killed by the Japanese shortly after this first US bombing raid in March 1943.

From US Navy authorities on Truk, the Australian authorities also obtained the following testimony from a Gilbertese man called Tauna, who was sent to Truk together with Nauruans after the bombing. Shortly after the air-raid, Tauna happened to be at the native hospital opposite the house where the Australians were detained and witnessed the killing:

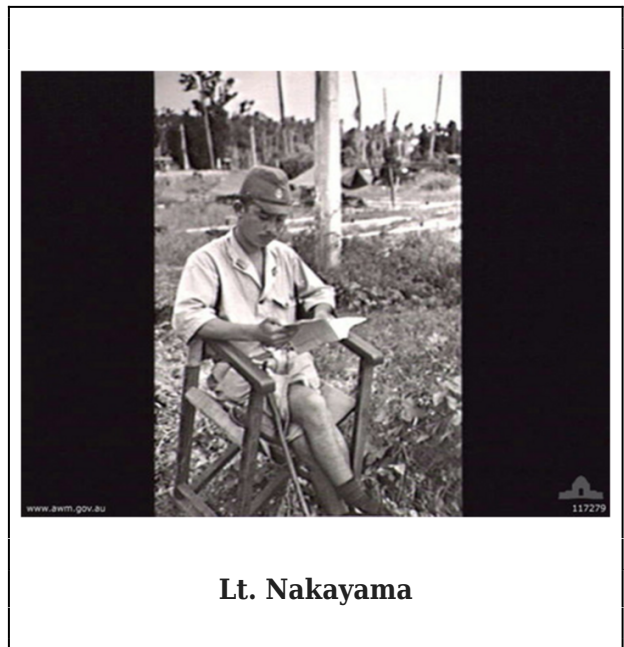
“At daybreak, a motor truck came alongside the hospital and I saw four Japanese soldiers, one carrying a sword and three with rifles, enter a house close to the hospital. I was standing in the doorway of the hospital facing the house where the Japanese had stopped. One Japanese soldier opened the door of the house and called for them to come to the door and line up before him inside the house. Three Japanese with rifles stood outside the doorway of the house and the one with the sword was standing in front of them.

“The Japanese with the sword called for one of them to step close to him. Colonel F.R. Chalmers stepped forward and I saw him stoop over and the Japanese raised his sword with one hand and brought it down on the Colonel’s neck. His head was severed from the rest of his body. Then Doctor Quinn, Mr. Doyle, Mr. Harmer and Mr. Shugg stepped forward one at a time and the Japanese with the sword went through the same motion until all the men mentioned had all been decapitated. After the execution I saw each body being carried to the motor truck and placed in a large box therein.”<sup>9</sup>

Some Chinese and Nauruans who were patients or workers at this native hospital in Chinatown also testified that they saw Japanese soldiers dragging dead bodies out of the house, putting them in a truck and driving away. A few Nauruans testified that they later visited the house and found bloodstains on the walls and floor. Some of them were later threatened by Japanese soldiers that they would be beheaded if they told anyone about the execution of the

Australians.<sup>10</sup>

Confronted with these testimonies, Nakayama on 4 May 1946, while detained in Rabaul, confessed to the killing of the five Australians. A former subordinate of Nakayama who returned to Japan in April 1943, Acting Sub-Lieutenant Sasaki Saburo, was arrested and detained in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo shortly after the war. He also revealed the deaths of the five Australians, while denying that he personally participated in the actual killing.<sup>11</sup>



**Lt. Nakayama**

Their testimony, however, differs from that given by Tauna and other Nauruans who claimed that, from the hospital, they had observed the beheading of the Australians by a Japanese officer.



**Surrendered Japanese soldiers**

The following account provided by Nakayama and Sasaki concerns the killing of Australians.

Prior to the first US air-raid on Nauru on 25 March 1943, the 67 Naval Guard Force received information from the Fourth Fleet Headquarters on Truk that some Allied warships were assembling to the south of Nauru. Because of the air raid, Nakayama thought that the Allied forces were planning to attack Nauru, to try to capture the island the following morning. He thought that the Australians might escape from the house in which they were detained and instigate islanders to engage in sabotage. Therefore he decided to kill all five Australians that night.

Immediately after the air raid, Nakayama ordered Acting Sub-Lieutenant Sasaki Saburo and ten other soldiers to dig five holes in the beach, while Nakayama with five soldiers went to the house where the Australians were detained and brought them to the beach by truck. The truck stopped outside the huts near the beach where Sasaki and some 250 members of the guard force were quartered. Sasaki, because he had a high fever at that time, sat on the grass and watched the execution party proceed to the site of execution near the shore, and did not participate in the

actual execution.

According to this version, Nakayama first beheaded one of the five Australians - probably Lieutenant-Colonel F.R. Chalmers - and then ordered soldiers to bayonet the four other Australians. The bodies were buried in the holes that had been dug on the beach. However, Sasaki testified that, due to the dim light and his fever, he was not able to see exactly what happened. Nakayama testified that all five Australians were shot, not bayoneted.<sup>12</sup>

How should we interpret this discrepancy between the testimony given by the islanders and that of the Japanese perpetrators? Somehow, the Australian prosecutors at Nakayama and Sasaki's war crimes trials did not regard this discrepancy as a vital issue.

It is possible that when Nakayama and his soldiers arrived at the house where the Australians were detained, he may have beheaded Dr. Quinn before taking the other four in a truck to the beach. According to testimony by Wong Lupchung, a Chinese houseboy to the Australians, Dr. Quinn was sick and could not move about prior to this incident.<sup>13</sup> Nakayama may have killed him in the house as he could not force him to leave the building. Alternatively all five Australians may have been executed on the beach. If so, Nakayama may have wanted to give the impression to the judges that his deed was not an emotional and irrational criminal act but the legitimate summary execution of enemy personnel.

It is clear that Nakayama made the decision by himself to execute the Australians without requesting permission from Commander Takenouchi. After the execution, Nakayama made a false report to Takenouchi that all five Australians were killed by the US bombing while they were being transported to an air-raid shelter. Takenouchi made no queries about this report apart from his short response that

that was a pity.<sup>14</sup>

At his Australian Military Court trial in Rabaul in May 1946, Nakayama was sentenced to death for the crime of killing the five Australians on Nauru and was hanged on 10 August that year. Sasaki was also tried at Rabaul for his involvement in the murder and for another case as well and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment.<sup>15</sup>

### The Massacre of the Lepers

On 27 September 1945, two weeks after the arrival of the Australian forces on Nauru, they conducted an interview with Sato Jin, a Japanese construction engineer. Sato told the Australians that Acting Sub-Lieutenant Sasaki Saburo once told Sato that Lt. Nakayama ordered his subordinates to dispose of lepers living on Nauru.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, during an interrogation on 11 October, the Australians asked Nakayama about the lepers' whereabouts. Nakayama testified that the patients were put on a cutter, which was towed out to sea by a fishing boat. He said:

“There were more than 30 lepers, about 35. The fishing boat returned to Nauru. I received a message that they arrive at their destination. I was told this by the C.O. of the ship, I do not know who the C.O. was but he was a civilian. *Shinshu Maru* was the name of the vessel. It was about 60-70 tons. I have seen the vessel. The lepers were sent on the order of Capt. Takenouchi.”<sup>17</sup>

Through interviews with Nauruans, the Australians gained information that Inaba Tokujiro, 1st Class Seaman of the 67 Naval Guard Force, was also on board the *Shinshu Maru* when the patients were taken from the island. However Inaba told the Australians that

he was not on board the *Shinshu Maru*, as he went off duty shortly before the ship left Nauru. In fact, Inaba had been instructed by Nakayama to make this false statement if he were asked about the lepers, but of course the Australian officials were unaware of this instruction. Inaba was repatriated to Japan in November 1946.<sup>18</sup>

The Australian authorities did not pursue the issue further at this stage. In interviews with a number of Japanese, Nauruans and others living on Nauru, which were conducted shortly after the arrival of the Australian forces, questions regarding the lepers' whereabouts were only asked as incidental inquiries. Clearly, the urgent matter for the Australian forces was the fate of the five Australian personnel. The Australian authorities could easily have checked whether or not a group of Nauruan lepers were presently at the hospital on Jaluit in the Marshall Islands as Nakayama claimed. However, staff of the Australian Army 31/51 Battalion failed to undertake even this simple procedure, indicative of the common Australian discriminatory attitude towards Pacific islanders. An incomplete report on the Nauruan lepers' whereabouts was sent to Army Headquarters in Melbourne, which was then forwarded to the 2nd Australian War Crimes Section (hereafter the 2nd AWCS) in Tokyo. It was only after April 1946 when investigating officers of the 2nd AWCS finally started looking at this question seriously.

During the investigation, which continued over several months, many former Japanese Navy personnel and civilian employees stationed on Nauru during the war were interrogated. Among these, Ishikawa Yoshio offered the most crucial information about the fate of the Nauruan lepers. Ishikawa, an NTK employee, was sent to Nauru in early February 1943 and was in charge of controlling the native labor force for phosphate mining. He remained on Nauru until October 1943 even after his NTK colleagues left Nauru that June when the

company stopped operating the mine. His duty was to attend to administrative matters concerning the native population. In this capacity, he was also in charge of looking after leprosy patients who were under the medical care of a Nauruan doctor named Berncke.<sup>19</sup>

In the course of the interrogation of Ishikawa, which was conducted on 1 October 1946, he gave the following statement:

“Air raids by the Allied Forces on TARAWA and MAKIN islands became increasingly heavy. Air raids on NAURU Island also increased. At this time, the unit commander made the following statement to the civilian specialists, executives of the Public Peace Maintenance Committee, patients and their relatives concerning the evacuation of the lepers: ‘All lepers in the occupied areas of the Japanese Forces will be assembled on one of the islands off PONAPE Island in the SOUTH SEAS. Their fight against the disease and their future livelihood will be guaranteed with an Imperial gift granted by the Empress-dowager. Furthermore, from an operational standpoint, the natives will have to be evacuated to PONAPE Island in the near future. In this event, you will be able to contact the patients with canoes.’

“On the day the patients departed the island, their relatives gave them a send-off from a distance. The patients danced to a verse composed by one of the patients, who was formerly an educator. The verse expressed their happiness in being able to live the remainder of their lives due to kindness of the

Imperial household of Japan and their gratitude for the kindness shown while living on the island. ISHIKAWA also prayed for their good fortune.

“The patients boarded Boat No.8, which was of enemy make and which had been dispatched from the patrol boat that had approached the colony. As the boat pulled out under the command of W.O. Sakata, I together with the natives saw them off. I was greatly surprised when I learned later that the statements made by the military authorities were false. I think that even if it was done from an operational standpoint, it was an inhuman act against non-combatants, moreover, against patients.”<sup>20</sup>

Ishikawa submitted a copy of a report listing the names of 39 Nauruan leprosy patients who were sent away that day. It seems that he had this list as he was in charge of looking after Nauruans including the patients. He also submitted a written statement about a story that he personally heard from the captain of the ship which towed away the boat carrying the patients. The following is an English translation of his original statement in Japanese, produced by the 2nd AWCS:

“At a point, a little past the equator, the boat with the lepers which was being towed about 200 meters behind the ship was shelled by the guns of the patrol boat. The first shell fell about 100 meters behind the boat, and the patients all stood up probably thinking that it was an attack by an enemy submarine. At this moment, the second shell made a hit on the



boat. The leper patients stood up, and carrying the wounded, sang a song, presumably a prayer to God. It was a strange sensation; a pitiful scene. Nevertheless, the patrol ship continued the shelling until the patients all were dead in each other's arms. The boat finally capsized. According to the earnest story of the captain, the most aged member of the patients, EIBEYONG, was the last to remain in the boat, but she was finally shot by a member of the guard unit by orders of the commander. The above story is a true story by the captain. Granting that it was war, still it is an unforgivable act to kill non-combatants and patients, moreover, to kill those who, for the moment, believe in the Japanese Army and the Imperial Family. It would have been better to have cut loose the boat out in the open sea and let them die a natural death."<sup>21</sup>

In fact, after the war, Ishikawa was expecting to be called upon by the Occupation Authorities to provide the above information. However, as no such summons was received by mid-July 1946, he voluntarily called at General Headquarters (GHQ) in Tokyo. His wish to provide information about the massacre of the Nauruan lepers was ignored by GHQ staff, and it was not until the end of September before the 2nd AWCS contacted him for an interview.<sup>22</sup>

Thus it was only in October 1946 that the 2nd AWCS could finally confirm that the ship which took away the group of Nauruan lepers was indeed the *Shinshu Maru*, and most likely the lepers were massacred by members of the 67 Naval Guard Force. However, until May 1947, it was not possible to identify the sailors and members of the 67 Naval Guard Force on board *Shinshu Maru* at the time of the massacre,

since Ishikawa had no information about the crew.

*Shinshu Maru*, a tuna fishing boat from Wakayama and its crew, were requisitioned by the Japanese Imperial Navy in January 1942. Captain Nishimura Katsuhiko and all seven other crew members of this ship were civilian employees of the Navy. The ship was converted to a guard ship, equipped with one 5cm gun, one 7.7mm heavy machine gun and several rifles. After initially being placed under the command of the Sasebo Naval Station in Kyushu, it was sent to Nauru in April 1943 and joined the 67 Naval Guard Force.<sup>23</sup>

Investigating officers of the 2nd AWCS confirmed that the *Shinshu Maru* was attacked and sunk by US forces near Kwajalein in January 1944, and as a result the captain and all the crew were killed. They also found that four members of the Sea Defense Branch of the 67 Naval Guard Force were on board when the lepers were taken away from Nauru, but two of them, Higashi Kenji and Kasuya Heizo, died in action later in the war. The two other military personnel were 1st Class Petty Officer Nakamura Tamotsu and 1st Class Seaman Inaba Tokujiro. In early June 1947, both Nakamura and Inaba were arrested and imprisoned in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. Sakata Tadae, a former Sub-Lieutenant of the Sea Defense Branch of the 67 Naval Guard Force, was also arrested because he was named by Ishikawa as the person who instructed the crew of the *Shinshu Maru* to tow the boat carrying the lepers.<sup>24</sup>

From testimony given by these three men, it became clear that the order to "dispose" of the 39 lepers in the middle of the ocean was actually given by Nakayama on 9 July 1943, without consultation with the Commander of the 67 Naval Guard Force. As mentioned before, on 7 July 1943, Soeda officially took over the position of the Commander from Takenouchi, but Soeda did not arrive in Nauru

until 13 July. It seems that Nakayama, as Deputy Commander, took advantage of this transitional period in the administration of 67 Naval Guard Force, deliberately choosing the date for “disposing” of the patients several days before Soeda’s arrival. Indeed, neither Takenouchi nor Soeda knew anything about the plan of “moving” the patients on 7 July.

On 19 September 1947, the 2nd AWCS interrogated Soeda in Tokyo and obtained the following testimony.

“Lieutenant Nakayama (informed) that the lepers had embarked on a small lighter (sic) belonging to the *Nanyo Takushoku Kaisha*, which had thereupon been taken in tow by the picket boat SHINSHU MARU en route to JALUIT Island where the lepers were to be accommodated. The SHINSHU MARU had later returned alone, and the master had then reported that the lighter (sic) had been lost in a typhoon while en route to JALUIT and all the lepers had perished. The foregoing was not submitted to me in an official report but in the course of general conversation.

“When the verbal report was conveyed to me unofficially I concluded that something was being hidden from me, but as the incident had apparently occurred during the term of the previous command I took no further action and made no further enquiries.

“I later concluded that as Captain TAKENOUCHI had been ill and generally was confined to his bed in the latter period of his command, and left the control largely in the hands of

NAKAYAMA, the latter had probably acted on his own responsibility.”<sup>25</sup>

The 2nd AWCS could not contradict this testimony of Soeda as Nakayama was dead by then - executed in August 1946 as a war criminal responsible for killing the five Australians. However, judging from other testimony, it seems almost certain that Nakayama acted alone to make the decision of killing all the patients, as with the decision to kill the Australians.

According to Sakata’s testimony, Nakayama told Sakata:

“Allied air-raids on the island have become quite frequent recently and some bombs might fall in the leper camp; perhaps some of the lepers might escape and pass on the dreadful disease to the other islanders.”

Nakayama thus gave orders to Sakata that:

“Leper patients were to be put in a boat, towed by the SHINSHU MARU and disposed of when NAURU Island was out of sight. The method of disposal was that the cannon mounted on the SHINSHU MARU was to be used to sink the boat in which the lepers were confined, and that all men other than those on duty were to use rifles to shoot any survivors.”<sup>26</sup>

Sakata conveyed this order to Nishimura, the captain of the *Shinshu Maru*, and arranged the boat for carrying the patients.

The ship left Nauru early in the morning of 11

July 1943, towing the boat with 39 patients aboard – 24 men and 15 women (the youngest was an 11 year old boy, the oldest a 69 year old woman). When Nauru Island could not be seen at around noon the same day, Nishimura gave the order to prepare for the “disposal.” After the tow-rope was severed, the ship went around the other side of the boat containing the patients and directly astern of it. Then the ship stopped and the cannon was fired at the boat several times to sink it. Immediately after that, all the crew, except Inaba who was on look-out duty, took up rifles and shot any patient still alive and attempting to swim.

Sakata, Nakamura and Inaba were tried at the Australian Military Court in Hong Kong in November 1948. Both Sakata and Nakamura were sentenced to life imprisonment; Nakamura for passing Nakayama’s order to Nishimura and assisting Nishimura to prepare the massacre of the leprosy patients, and Nakamura for killing the patients by firing the cannon and rifle. Inaba, who did not participate in killing the patients, was sentenced to four years imprisonment. In accordance with army law, the court’s decisions were forwarded to Australia for confirmation, but the Judge Advocate found the verdict against Inaba unjustifiable and overturned it.<sup>27</sup> If Nakayama had still been alive at that time, he would undoubtedly have received the death sentence.

This massacre of leprosy patients should not be understood simply as Nakayama’s personal crime. Nakayama’s action was a reflection of contemporary Japanese attitudes towards leprosy patients, regardless of their nationality. From the early 20th Century, the Japanese government adopted extremely discriminatory policies towards their own leprosy patients. The government adopted not only a policy of extreme segregation but also a eugenic policy (i.e. castration of patients despite the fact that the disease is not hereditary). Many of these programs were funded with an Imperial gift granted by the Taisho Empress-dowager, which

conveyed an impression of a “benevolent Imperial Family.” Because of Japan’s official approach to leprosy, prejudice against patients and even their family members were deep rooted and wide spread. Such prejudice and abuse of the human rights of leprosy patients has only recently been recognized as one of the major social discrimination issues in Japan. It was not until 2001 that the Japanese government finally admitted its wrongdoing towards former leprosy patients, offered official apologies to them and paid compensation.<sup>28</sup>

In his final address to the Court, a Japanese defense attorney in this war crime trial stated:

“One of the main reasons why this incident occurred was because at the time enemy air raids on Nauru Island had become frequent and there was great danger that bombs would fall on the Camp where the leprosy patients were confined. Therefore, the Naval authorities were planning to move the Camp to a more suitable place. However, because of frequent air raids, transportation and other matters directly concerned with the transfer of the Camp could not be carried out. Taking into consideration the possibility that bomb might have fallen on the leper camp and lepers might have escaped and spread over the Island, in such case, this dreaded disease would have spread to not only the children, woman and natives of the Island, but *this miserable plight would have been passed on from generation to generation. I think the step which was taken at that time was to sacrifice a few for the benefit of the majority.*”<sup>29</sup> (emphasis added).

It is astonishing that a lawyer would claim that the massacre of 39 patients was a “sacrifice for the benefit of the majority” - the same justification that Nakayama used - but his statement clearly reflected contemporary Japanese attitudes towards leprosy. The problem of leprosy on Nauru arose in the early 1920s and became serious in the late 1920s, when around 30 per cent of the entire community had been diagnosed as showing signs of the disease. However, with great persistence by both Australian and Nauruan doctors, in 1940 (i.e. shortly before the outbreak of the Pacific War), the number of cases under treatment represented less than 8 per cent of the Nauruan population of 1,761.<sup>30</sup> After the Japanese invaded and occupied the island, Japanese military doctors refused to treat patients, and left treatment to a Nauruan local doctor without sufficient medical supplies and equipment. Therefore, it can be said that the massacre of 39 Nauruan lepers was not simply the result of a single Japanese military officer’s actions, but a crime that was embedded in deep-rooted Japanese attitudes toward lepers and leprosy.

### **The Ethnocide of Nauruans**

As has stated above, when the war ended, the Australian military authorities found a total of 5,329 people on Nauru: 2,681 Japanese soldiers, 1,054 Japanese and Korean construction workers, 591 Nauruans, 837 Gilbertese and Banabans (Ocean Islanders), (500 Banabans were brought to Nauru as laborers after Japan’s occupation) and 166 Chinese. The food supply available was extremely meager. Approximately 750 kilos of rice, 170 cases of canned goods and 28 boxes of biscuits were held by the Force Headquarters, but these were solely for consumption by the Japanese military and hospital patients. All others had to live mainly on pumpkins and a small quantity of sweet potatoes that they grew in gardens, together with coconuts and toddy.<sup>31</sup>

Each unit of the Japanese military force and each of the other ethnic groups were allocated gardens. However, as approximately three-quarters of the 21 square kilometer island was useless for cultivation (due to the phosphate content), the land suitable for vegetable gardens was quite limited. Local people sometimes caught fish, but not many fish were available around the island. To supplement their food, people often ate grass and tree bark. Medicines for hospital patients were also scarce. In fact, many people died from starvation and illness between late 1944 and the end of the war in August 1945.

This devastating situation was caused by the cut off of supplies from Truk, where the Headquarters of the Fourth Fleet was located. The last Japanese warship to visit Nauru arrived on 10 January 1944. Due to continuous bombing of Nauru by US forces, in particular between May and November 1944, air delivery of essential goods was not possible either. Indeed, supplies from Japan to Truk became scarce in July 1944, and a few months later they were completely cut off due to the Allied blockade.<sup>32</sup>

It was difficult to support more than 5,000 people on the small island, even with regular supplies of essential goods from outside. Therefore it is not surprising that the Japanese forces on Nauru decided to remove the majority of Nauruans not long after occupying the island. The Australian military authorities confirmed that the Japanese indeed moved 1,200 Nauruans (i.e. 67 per cent of the population) to Truk in 1943, and two missionaries were sent to Truk with them.

The first group of 598 Nauruans was sent to Tarik Island on Truk Atoll on 30 June 1943. The day after their arrival at Tarik on 7 July, about fifty young men were detailed to do construction work on Parem Island, half a mile to the north. Although a temporary village was established on Tarik, 75 Nauruans were

transferred to Moen Island on 5 August, and the following day the Japanese removed the remainder to Tol Island. Thus, this first group of Nauruans were separated into three groups and forced to live on different islands with the majority were settled on Tol Island.

Initially life on Tol was not too difficult, as there were coconuts trees, bananas and breadfruit and the workers received a small daily rice ration from the Japanese. In September 1943, the Japanese started a farm near the village, where potatoes and other vegetables were eventually produced for their own consumption. NTK (the South Sea Development Company) was in charge of the farming operation and employed the Nauruans to work there in return for a small share of the produce.

A few months after their arrival on Tol, a detachment of Japanese naval troops was stationed near the Nauruan village. The presence of the Japanese soldiers quickly damaged the discipline and morale of the Nauruans, as contact with the Japanese troops increased. Drinking and promiscuity was encouraged and the people became degraded. Promiscuity between the young Nauruan women and the Japanese troops became a serious problem, and many succumbed to the easy way out by scavenging the leftovers from Japanese canteens. Many islanders also suffered from ill treatment by the Japanese, and a few died as a result of violence inflicted on them, not only by Japanese soldiers but also by Japanese employees of NTK.

In August 1944, young men sent to Parem Island for construction work rejoined the group on Tol. Shortly after the return of these men, the rice ration as well as the islanders' small share of the farm produce was withdrawn. This was because the Allied blockade had effectively stopped incoming supplies, and as a result the Japanese stopped supplying food rations to the locals - for this reason the first to suffer were

the Nauruans (i.e. forced migrants from another island). Therefore the Nauruans subsisted on coconuts, toddy, bananas and breadfruit. The lack of medical facilities and supplies was the biggest factor in the death toll of the first group. Forty eight died from dysentery, 38 from Yaws, 21 from tuberculosis, while 16 died because of starvation and malnutrition in three years of forced migration. With other causes of deaths, the total death toll of the first group was 160.<sup>33</sup>

The second group of 602 Nauruans together with two missionaries left Nauru for Truk on 16 August 1943, 47 days after the departure of the first group. They were brought to Tarik Island, the island where the first group stayed only for one month. Tarik is only one and a quarter miles long and no more than three hundred yards wide. The vegetation consists of mangroves skirting the coastline while the inland is covered by light jungle, affording easy movement by foot in most places. Coconut trees grew along the coastal belt and breadfruit and bananas were found inland. Immediate impressions of the new domicile were not distasteful and the island as a whole did not appear unfavorable.

The day after their arrival at Tarik, as happened to the first group, the Japanese selected about 50 men for construction work on an airstrip on Parem Island. Unlike the first group, they did not receive a daily rice ratio. The first rations were issued about a fortnight after the landing, and thereafter either once or twice a month. The only commodity issued was rice, so that it was necessary to supplement their diet with island products. Thus they suffered from lack of food supplies from the very beginning of the forced migration.

In mid-1944, the Japanese working for NTK suggested the establishment of a farm, promising most of its produce to the Nauruans who would work it. However, when the Nauruans cleared an extensive area in

preparation for planting, the Japanese took over the farm and thereafter controlled it. Around the same time, Japanese troops began to settle on the island and started the construction of trenches and other earth works. The Japanese soldiers removed the Nauruans from the farm and put them to the heavy tasks of digging and excavating. In addition, as with the first group, soldiers sexually exploited Nauruan women and encouraged them to drink, which broke down discipline amongst the Nauruans.

The year 1945 was a tragic one for the Nauruans on Tarik Island. In less than six months, 204 of them died, with starvation accounting for 161 deaths. In April alone, 44 islanders died. In many cases, whole families were wiped out and children were burying their parents. The Nauruans were the first to feel the effects of the blockade by Allied forces. The only ones to receive a ration were those who worked on the farm, and the only workers there were young girls who were sexually exploited. All men were dismissed from the farm, so that they were left to gather any available food. The only source left to them was fishing and a limited number of coconut trees on the island set aside for them. In order to survive, even lizards and rats were eaten.

Naturally, there was theft of food on a grand scale. Nauruans stole from the Japanese, from their friends and neighbors and from their relatives. The Japanese exacted heavy penalties and some Nauruans died from the beatings they received.<sup>34</sup>

When the war ended, of the original 602 that comprised this second group, only 295 or 49 per cent survived. Out of 307 deaths, 174 or 57 per cent died from starvation and malnutrition. At the end of the war these survivors were scattered amongst four or five islands - towards the end of the war the Japanese had transferred half of the population of Tarik to the islands of Fefan, Moen and Dublon. It took

until November 1945 before all the Nauruan survivors were sent to Tol Island. They were finally sent back to Nauru by the BPC ship *Trienza* in January 1946. Father Clivaz survived the three year ordeal and repatriated to Nauru with the Nauruans, but Father Kayser died on Truk because of ill treatment by the Japanese.<sup>35</sup>



**Nauruans attend flag-raising ceremony soon after Australian troops took over the island on 13 September, 1945**

On 1 October 1945, the total number of Nauruans on Truk was 762 (including 23 children who were born after arrival at Truk). Therefore, of 1,200 Nauruans who were forced to migrate to Truk from Nauru, a total of 461 died (a death rate of 38.4 per cent). Of the 461 who died, 190 or 41 per cent suffered from starvation and malnutrition.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that the forced migration and ill treatment by the Japanese brought not only a devastating physical breakdown but also a serious moral and cultural destruction to the Nauruans. This is a typical case of the way that war inflicts damage on society, in particular on people living under foreign military occupation. After the war, Australian military authorities conducted war crimes trials of several Japanese perpetrators for ill treatment and murder of

Nauruans. However the forced migration of the Nauruans and the subsequent deaths and cultural destruction that this caused were never examined as war crimes. For this reason, this story should be recorded and remembered as a case of *ethnocide* committed by the Japanese.\*

- End -

**\*Appendix:**

The following “Appeal of Nauruan Natives” to the Japanese Government was written by two young native doctors, Calis and Dainirob (son of the Native Medical Superintendent Simon Quanijo), who were living in Fiji during the Pacific War. The two completed their degrees at the Central Medical School, Suva after the outbreak of war, which prevented their return to their home island of Nauru to work with the Medical Department of Nauru.<sup>37</sup> This moving and dignified “Appeal” clearly frames questions of “ethnocide” of the Nauruans by the Japanese Imperial Forces. Although the exact date that this text was written is unknown, it is presumed that it was sometime between mid-1944 and early 1945. It is also unknown whether this document was actually delivered to Japanese government authorities.

**APPEAL OF NAURUAN NATIVES**

We, Nauruan Natives, cut off by the Military operations of this war from our Native Island, are deeply concerned for the fate of our people.

We believe deeply that in the special circumstances of our small country, the continuance for a prolonged period of war conditions means starvation, disease and death to our people.

We believe deeply that there is now no advantage to be gained or held by any of the great Nations at war with one another, in the occupation of our Island by their Armies, and that our people are meeting death for no

purpose. We ask a great nation to spare a moment from its great affairs to cast a brief glance at our small island, now a thousand miles and more from any war front. There is of course nothing we can tell you that your great country can accept, unless you can put it to the test by enquiry.

When you have made enquiry and considered the evidence, we deeply believe you will agree that there is no consideration of honour or the interests of your nation that requires your garrison to remain in our island, with them and our poor people cut off from supplies of food and medicine.

If your great country was sure of these things, surely your garrisons might withdraw to other larger and better provided Islands or Countries.

We ask you to look and see what use NOW our Island may be for attacking your country’s enemies. We believe deeply it is of no use for that purpose.

We ask you to look and see of what use NOW the occupation of our Island may be for denying your country’s enemies the use of the Natural Resources, namely Phosphate Rock. We believe deeply that no country, neither your Country nor any other Country could now or indeed for several years to come, get Phosphate Rock in any useful quantity, such has been the destruction of the plant by the war. This plant took many years to build up, when the seas were undisturbed by war.

We want our Island restored to its people now, so that our Organisation, KALAVA OMOTANIAN\* can minister to their needs. So that we can procure for our people food and medicine and give them medical treatment.

The finding of Phosphate Rock on our Island brought us many good things which can be bought with money - better living, education and knowledge of the outside world. But it has

also brought us much sorrow.

As one instance a man who came to work from the Caroline Islands brought in Leprosy, which we have been since fighting with success. As another instance, after the last Great War the ships coming for Phosphate Rock brought the Pneumonic Influenza which killed 500 of our men, women, and children.

On the other side of the picture, of Venereal Diseases we were happily free, so that in 12 years after the Pneumonic Influenza, we had recovered from the ravages of this epidemic, with an increase in population of over 500. By this time there were 400 to 500 children in our schools where they were taught the new learning, but also preserved their native arts and crafts, all paid for by money produced in our Island.

Indeed this War has brought us great sorrow. The necessities of Armies have destroyed large areas of our small food resources for military works. For many years a large military garrison cut off from their homeland and their womenfolk, have been quartered on our Island.

All this, when it was done, had a reason, perhaps several reasons.

We beg of you to consider and quickly, before our people perish from the earth, whether there is now any reason for your garrison to remain.

We would bring with us succour for our people. We would bring with us no one to make war. We would bring with us no one to mine the Phosphate Rock.

It is not the first time that the sufferings of our people have struck a chord in the hearts of your great country. In the last Great War, your Dr. Matsuoka laboured among our people and he gave his life. His monument stands in Nauru.

It was not long before this last Great War, that our Nauruan people were able to succour the Japanese people cast away on our Island in a ship from your Marshall Islands. We gave them of our best and nursed the sick and people dying of thirst back to life.

Your great country would not intentionally repay our people with starvation, disease and death.

We, natives of Nauru, long to return to succour our poor people. To help restore their native life. To rejoin our families and our Clan Relations. To perform for our people all the duties required of us by our Nauruan customs passed down to us from ages past.

We entreat your great country to give heed to our cry.

(Signed) Dainirob.

Editor's note: \* "Kalava Omotanitan" is a concocted phrase to indicate a purely Nauruan Native Instrumentality with nothing European about it. Actually "Kalava" is the Welsh for Calvary, and "Omotanitan" the Nauruan for "Holy".

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*Recommended citation: Yuki Tanaka, "Japanese Atrocities on Nauru during the Pacific War: The murder of Australians, the massacre of lepers"*



and the ethnocide of Nauruans," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 45-2-10, November 8, 2010.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For details of the history of Nauru, see *Paradise for Sale: A Parable of Nature* by John M. Gowdy and Carl N. McDaniel (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> *Chubu Taiheiyo Homen Kaigun Sakusen 2* (The Japanese Imperial Navy Strategy in the Central Pacific Vol.2) ed. by the Defense Research Center of Japan Defense Agency (Asagumo Simbun-sha, Tokyo, 1973) pp.127 - 131, 134 - 136.

<sup>3</sup> Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM) Collection 54-567/4/2.

<sup>4</sup> *Chubu Taiheiyo Homen Kaigun Sakusen 2*, pp.138 - 139.

<sup>5</sup> Collection of Defense Research Library of the Japanese Ministry of Defense, *Dai-san Tokubetsu Konkyochitai Senji Nisshi* (The War Diary of the 3rd Special Naval Base Force).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Archives (hereafter AA) Collection MP1174/1/106 S; 'Statement of Lt-Comd Nakayama, Hiromi, taken at Torokina, 11 Oct. 1945' in AWM Collection 54-1010/6/90.

<sup>9</sup> 'Statement made by Tauna on 2nd December 1945' in AA Collection A518/2/R16/2/2.

<sup>10</sup> AWM Collection 54-1010/09/118.

<sup>11</sup> 'Report on Interrogation of SASAKI Saburo' in AA Collection MP742/1/336/1/292.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., and 'Military Court - Trial of Japanese War Criminal AWC.2029 Lt Command NAKAYAM Hirrumi (sic)' AA Collection A471/1/81073.

<sup>13</sup> 'Statement made by Wong Lupchung on 14 Sept. 1945' in AWM Collection 54-1010/6/90.

<sup>14</sup> 'Statement of Lt-Comd Nakayama, Hiromi, taken at Torokina, 11 Oct. 1945' in AWM Collection 54-1010/6/90.

<sup>15</sup> 'Military Court - Trial of Japanese War Criminal AWC.2029 Lt Command NAKAYAM Hirrumi (sic)' AA Collection A471/1/81073; 'Military Court - Trial of Japanese War Criminal SASAKI Saburo' in AA Collection MP742/1-336/1/1623.

<sup>16</sup> AA Collection MP742/1-336/1/1292.

<sup>17</sup> 'Statement of Lt-Comd Nakayama, Hiromi, taken at Torokina, 11 Oct. 1945' in AWM Collection 54-1010/6/90.

<sup>18</sup> 'Military Court - Trial of Japanese War Criminals SATAKA Tadae, NAKAMURA Tsmotsu, INABA Tokujiro' in AA Collection MP742/1/336/1/1292.

<sup>19</sup> 'Report on Interrogation of ISHIKAWA Yoshio on 23 Sept. 1 and 3 Oct. 1946' in AA Collection MP742/1/1292.

<sup>20</sup> 'Statement made by ISHIKAWA Yoshio' in AA Collection MP742/1/0/336/1/1292.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> 'Report on Interrogation of ISHIKAWA Yoshio on 23 Sept. 1 and 3 Oct. 1946' in AA Collection MP742/1/1292.

<sup>23</sup> 'Statement made by NAKAMURA Tamotsu on 7 Jun. 1947' in AA Collection MP742/1/0/336/1/1292.

<sup>24</sup> 'Report on Investigation of the Killing of Lepers from Nauru Is. 19 Nov. 1947' in AA Collection MP742/1/0/336/1/1292.

<sup>25</sup> 'Sworn Statement of SOEDA Hisayuki on 19 Sept. 1947' in AA Collection

MP742/1/0/336/1/1292.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Military Court - Trial of Japanese War Criminals SATAKA Tadae, NAKAMURA Tsmotsu, INABA Tokujiro’ in AA Collection MP742/1/336/1/1292.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> For details of the history of Japan’s official approach to leprosy and Japanese general attitude towards lepers, see, for example, *Inochi no Kindaishi:Minzoku joka no na no moto ni hakugai sareta hansenbyo kanjya (A Modern History of Life: Lepers Oppressed in the Name of Ethnic Cleansing)* by Fujino Yutaka (Kamogawa Shuppan, Kyoto, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Military Court - Trial of Japanese War Criminals SATAKA Tadae, NAKAMURA Tamotsu, INABA Tokujiro’ in AA Collection MP742/1/336/1/1292.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Leprosy Epidemic at Nauru: A Review’ by H.W. Wade M.D. and Dr. Vladmir Ledowsky in *International Journal of Leprosy*, Vol.20, No.1, January - March 1952, pp.1 - 29; ‘South

Pacific Commission Project H.7 Leprosy: General Survey of the Local Leprosy Conditions on the Island of Nauru’ by Dr. J.C. Austin (Medical Superintendent, Central Leprosy Hospital, Makogai, Fiji, April 1952).

<sup>31</sup> ‘Narrative of Japanese Occupation Nauru Island by Gustav Rasch’ in AWM Collection 54-567/1/1 P+3.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Report Upon the Experiences of the Nauruans in the Caroline Islands’ AWM Collection PR00868/6/12/99.

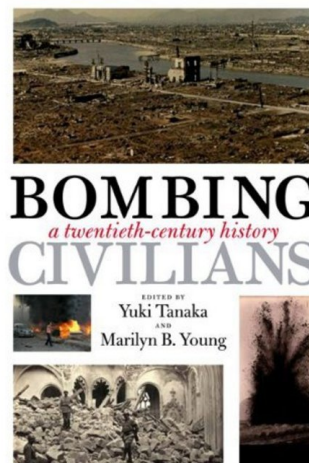
<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> AA Collection MP742/1/336/1/735.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Report Upon the Experiences of the Nauruans in the Caroline Islands’ AWM Collection PR00868/6/12/99.

<sup>37</sup> A copy of this “Appeal” is available at the Australian Archives. The document reference number is A518/1/AJ118/6.



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