Preface

Oita Prefecture sits tucked away on the eastern shore of Japan’s southern island of Kyushu. Historically, quiet fishing villages dotted this coastline while farmers cultivated rice and sweet potato in the farmlands edging up to the surrounding mountains. Starting on the southern coastal tip of the prefecture lies Saiki, and moving north one finds at intervals of a few miles Oita City, Beppu, Hiji, Kitsuki and, eventually, Usa and Nakatsu. All were destined to play intriguing, important and, at times, historic roles in Japan’s war effort. In all cases the lives of people in these small towns, and dozens of hamlets in between, have rarely been shared outside the home and occasional local archives.

Even to this day, most Japanese outside Oita think little of the place, as though it is an afterthought in any conversation about Japanese culture and history. But between the years 1934 and 1945, these villages and towns were awash in Japanese military activities that transformed the lives of common fisherman and farmers into both observers and participants in what began as a glorious adventure and ended in earth-shattering destruction, disillusionment, hunger, and death. This is their story, told through the words of those who survived and eventually overcame the misery of defeat. It is, surprisingly, the story of a place that played a crucial role in the beginning of the war and was a place from which the last attack on the United States forces in the Pacific originated. Immediately following the war it continued to play an important role, as the small resort town of Beppu, which had been spared from any direct bombing, served as a regional headquarters of the American Occupation.
Map 1  Map of Japan highlighting location of Oita Prefecture (大分県)

Map 2  Map of Oita Prefecture highlighting key locations during the war