Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation

A. Porter, Edgar, Porter, Ran Ying, Porter, Edgar

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1  “Something Big Was Going to Happen”

Saiki Goes to War Footing

Kou Takeda remembers seeing aircraft carriers and navy planes coming and going from his hometown of Saiki as a child. “I was born in 1929. The naval air force base construction was completed when I was five years old. My father took me to the opening ceremony. The naval headquarters was the first building the local residents had ever seen made of concrete and steel. When the war started with China in the 1930s, Saiki was the home base of most of the navy planes that attacked China.” To young Kou, war seemed an exciting and romantic prospect, with young pilots dashing around town during training breaks visiting the restaurants and entertainment district in town. At the time, China seemed a faraway land occupied by Japan, while Pearl Harbor had never been heard of. But that would soon change.

The decision to build a new naval base in Saiki was made after the 1931 Manchurian Incident. This event, the bombing of a section of the Japanese-controlled South Manchuria Railway line in northeast China, was staged by Japanese Army officers under the leadership of Colonial Kanji Ishiwara of the Kwantung Army, who then publically accused Chinese troops of detonating the bombs. Thus began a new era of warfare. “Once started, the Manchurian Incident set off a chain reaction of international and domestic crises that interacted and fundamentally altered the whole trajectory of Japanese state development. China immediately sought redress before the League of Nations; the Kwantung Army sought reinforcements.” There was confusion in Tokyo’s Imperial Palace, as the emperor knew the event was staged, but he soon yielded to the army and allowed the story of Chinese sabotage to serve as the official story. By October, just two weeks after the incident, most Japanese rallied behind the military leaders and the impending slaughter moved closer.2

This rush to war found enthusiastic support in the national press, as described by historian Eri Hotta:

At the beginning of the Manchurian campaign, Prime Minister Wakatsuki Reijiro and Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijuro, among others, wanted

2  Ibid., p. 240.
to contain hostilities. Japanese public opinion, however, fueled by the jingoistic media, keenly supported Ishiwara’s adventures. The public was fed reports commending the courage of the field army, swelling national pride. Major newspapers competed with one another, issuing extras with exclusive photos of Japan’s every strategic move, profiting greatly from their suddenly booming circulation. Correspondents were sent to war zones to report under such dramatic headlines as “Our Army Heroically Marches from Changchun to Jilin” and “Our Imperial Army Charges into Qiqihar, Its Great Spirit Piercing through the Sky!”

The papers at this time made a conscious political choice that would haunt them in the coming decade: self-censorship. Despite their knowledge, passed on to them in private by some army officers, that the supposedly Chinese-orchestrated bombing was a sham, all the major newspapers chose to withhold this information. Cornered by what seemed like unequivocal public endorsement, forced in no small part by such newspaper coverage, Wakatsuki’s government, on September 24, grudgingly approved the military operations.3

Such self-censorship, coupled with an increasingly direct military censorship, controlled public opinion for the next fourteen years, and, as we shall see, the newspapers of Oita played their part with enthusiasm.

Saiki, which had served as a military training area since the mid-1920s, was chosen as a site to upgrade naval and air military readiness because it already had some degree of military infrastructure. Just as crucial, Saiki’s proximity to the eastern coastline of the country and its deep water port provided opportunities for training Japan’s growing naval and air forces while strengthening defense fortifications. The base formally opened on February 15, 1934, the day young Kou joined his father at the ceremony. Citizens of Saiki and surrounding towns were proud of the newly enhanced reputation this brought to their community and of the economic benefits it would bring. The local Oita newspaper heralded the event with these words, “The newest addition to the air corps will bring added protection to the nation. The local residents of Saiki City raise their hands in praise.”4

3 Eri Hotta, Japan, 1941 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), p. 45. These headlines show lack of knowledge in Chinese geography, as Changchun is the capital city of Jilin and not a different place.

4 Itsuo Hoashi, Asia and the Pacific War and Air Raids on Oita (アジア・太平洋戦争と大分の空襲) (self-published, 2008), pp. 62-63. Author’s address: 1-Chome 3-11, Soda Kita-Machi, Oita City, Oita Prefecture, Japan; the book can be found in Oita Prefecture Library.
Soon another Oita coastal town, Usa, was also transformed into a military training center, as Japanese militarism moved into high gear. Naval officers visited the town in 1937 to scout out a site for a new air field. They met with the mayors of three small villages – Yanogaura, Ekkan, and Hachiban – and directed them to inform their residents that parts of each village would be transformed into a naval air base. They were to ready themselves to help construct the base and feed the naval personnel, who would fill seven barracks. This news was not altogether welcome to the mayors or their citizens, but they had no choice, and life in this quiet community by the sea began to change dramatically. Women and children joined the men in building the air base, and the villagers who had their land stripped from them began building water lines to the base, moving their agricultural fields to new sites and relocating their families to new dwellings. On October 1, 1939, the Usa Naval Air Base opened as a new home to fighter planes and bombers that began training for air battles, dipping and diving above the heads of the villagers.5 The base would eventually play an important role in the coming war with the United States, in part as a training and departure site for the Special Attack Force (kamikaze unit) that would be stationed there.

Oita was moving onto a war footing, with Saiki leading the charge. By early fall of 1941, military activity had increased in Saiki as war with Western countries grew nearer. Kou Takeda remembers, “When I was in the 4th or 5th year of elementary school, more and more ships and planes came into Saiki Bay. They came gradually, though. I also noticed that the airplanes had changed. These were not the planes that attacked China and that we had gotten used to seeing. These new planes were small but speedy, quite different from the old ones. They were Japan’s ‘new aircraft,’ the Zeros.”

As ships and planes anchored in Saiki, training commenced in Usa, just over 100 kilometers north, for the larger bombers that would join the Zeros in the coming attack on Pearl Harbor.6 But Oita’s preparation for war did not stop with air power, as another new type of weapon was introduced in the summer of 1941. In an early omen of what would evolve into a culture of strategic suicide missions during the war, midget submarines began training in the waters off Saiki. Speaking to American military intelligence officers just after the war in Tokyo on October 15, 1945, navy captain Yasuji Watanabe, former aide to Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, stated that leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack “we

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6 Interview with Morimasa Yonakawa, Tokyo, June 11, 2012.
had studied and trained to attack in shallow water with torpedoes. They were special torpedoes to run shallow. We had trained for four months, since August 1941, at Saiki." He informed his American interrogators that the use of these midget submarines was intended solely for the Pearl Harbor attack and was implemented in part as a moral boost for young naval officers who wanted to show their bravery for Japan. From fighter pilots to midget submarine crews to bomber pilots, the people of Oita witnessed historic activity as Japan prepared for an expanded war. They just did not know the full force of what awaited them at the time.

Despite the thrill of seeing the pilots and officers around the town of Saiki, relations between local citizens and the military were distant. Kou Takeda recalls that even though villagers paddled their small boats out in the bay to sell vegetables to the sailors living on their ship,

there was little interaction between the sailors and local citizens. Bars and restaurants welcomed them; however, they couldn't spend a lot of time and money there, because they had curfews and must return to their ships at a certain time. Only commissioned officers were allowed to stay on shore overnight in Japanese-style inns. When the sailors came in town, though, citizens wanted to pay tribute and encourage them to do a good job for the country. But most of them just went straight to the brothels, where they'd queue up. So residents had mixed feelings toward those soldiers. But they were protecting our country and that was honorable, so no one would criticize them.

Just up the coast from Saiki lies Beppu Bay, which fronts Oita City, Beppu City, Hiji Town, and other small fishing villages and ports. Seiichi Kogo was an elementary school student in Oita City in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He was thrilled to see large ships enter the bay. He recalls:

I remember thinking something big was going to happen. About a month before the attack on Pearl Harbor, there were sailors everywhere in Oita. We didn't know it at the time, but it hit me later that they were the ones that trained in Saiki; then went to Hawaii. Near my house was a restaurant and the navy men would often have their dinner there. On educational tours with school classes, students would board and visit the ships.

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I found out later that the ship that I was on sank in a battle off China. After the war in the Pacific began, educational tours to those ships stopped.

**Admiral Yamamoto Comes to Saiki**

What young Kou and Seiichi and their fellow citizens did not know at the time was the fierce behind-the-scenes discussions going into the plans to bomb Pearl Harbor, and the role this small, rural coastal town was to play in the attack. By the fall of 1941 plans were underway to start the war, even while negotiations continued in Washington, D.C., and despite the fact that no final order had been given to attack the Pacific Fleet in Hawaii. On October 20, Saiki hosted a strategic gathering of the chiefs of staff of the Sixth Fleet, the First Air Fleet, and the skipper of the newly built super aircraft carrier *Yamato*. The outcome of this meeting set Japan on a heightened war footing and presaged a new phase in preparation for the coming battle. The next morning, October 21, Saiki woke up to assault training involving submarines and planes. However, the early training was chaotic. The local commander, Admiral Matome Ugaki, found the pilots largely untrained with accidents occurring at an alarming rate during practice runs. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, appointed to command the coming attack, made periodic visits to Saiki to gauge the progress of the training, while overseeing an alternate training site in Kagoshima, at the southern tip of Kyushu. Despite the problems, Admirals Yamamoto and Ugaki knew that war was coming, and they worked feverishly to prepare their troops. On October 29, Admiral Ugaki wrote in his war diary that he had arranged a dinner for new southern area army staff visiting with him and Admiral Yamamoto in Saiki. Communication between the two branches of the military was surprisingly limited and each was suspicious of the other. This was an attempt to open better communication and share plans as war approached. It is not likely many people in the town knew who was attending the dinner. When asked if he ever saw Admiral Yamamoto in Saiki, Kou Takeda recalled, “No, it was all a secret, but the cars carrying high-ranking officers, such as Admiral Yamamoto, had flags and security guards to accompany them, so we could guess.”

By early November 1941, Admiral Yamamoto showed his impatience with both the national leadership and his own training conditions. He had

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already clashed with his superiors, having advised against war with the United States in the first place, and voicing his opposition to the recently signed Tripartite Treaty with Nazi Germany and Italy. But he was ignored. War was inevitable, and he was the man chosen to lead the initial strike. Ever the professional commander, Yamamoto threw himself into finding a way to protect Japan. He proposed his plan to attack Pearl Harbor and disable the U.S. Pacific Fleet headquartered there. Anticipating approval, he sped up the training exercises in Kagoshima while conferring with Admiral Ugaki in Saiki. But as the days went by, he grew anxious on multiple fronts: Not only had his plan to attack Pearl Harbor yet to be approved, but he worried about the effectiveness of the training in Kagoshima as he waited restlessly for the final order to proceed. He realized that the training exercises in Kagoshima had to be moved, because the topography was not close enough to that of Pearl Harbor to provide effective strategies for attacking the U.S. fleet, and he despaired over his pilots being unprepared in the coming attack. Mock air attacks, for example, were made from too far out at sea in Kagoshima and the harbor was poorly situated for replicating the placement of American ships in port.

Yamamoto’s bold plan to attack Pearl Harbor aimed to cripple the U.S. fleet and air power, fearing that without such a knockout blow the United States could gather enough strength to defeat Japan within two years. Even by the end of October there was much opposition to his plan. On November 1, he was called to Tokyo, where he argued his position once again, threatening to resign his commission as commander in chief of the navy if his Pearl Harbor strategy was not formally approved. At this emergency meeting, the highest military and governmental authorities finally gave in and ordered him to make final preparations for the attack. Upon gaining this confidence, he ordered that the training for the attack be moved immediately from Kagoshima and centered on Saiki.

If one visits Saiki Bay even today it is easy to see one of the reasons for the change. Like Pearl Harbor there are hills close by for pilots to be wary of, and just off the coastline stands a small island, mimicking Pearl Harbor’s Ford Island, the docking site of many U.S. battleships, including the Arizona. Despite the short time between the current training period and the projected attack date of December 8 (Japan time), Yamamoto received final clearance to relocate the air attack training exercises to Saiki. Almost immediately, preparations for the attack hit their stride.

Just after midnight on November 3, orders went out for horizontal bombers, dive-bombers, and torpedo bombers to take off from the six aircraft carriers in Kagoshima, fly several hundred kilometers north, and attack
targets designated in Saiki Bay. Their early morning mission was aligned with the expected attack timetable set for Pearl Harbor only weeks later. These exercises were repeated over the next two days. When asked if he was satisfied now, Yamamoto replied, “Yes, I'm sure we can do it now.” Concurring with that optimism, Admiral Ugaki reported from Saiki that “masses of planes attacked the ships in anchor. Much progress was noted in their skill.” Observing from the coastline, a young and wide-eyed Kou Takeda witnessed the practice runs, recounting, “I remember when the airplanes started practicing in full force. Those airplanes, both bombers and fighters, flew very close to the sea, coming over Saiki Bay and Naval Air Force headquarters, which served as a target for their attack.”

On November 5, while berthed in Saiki aboard his flagship Nagato, Admiral Yamamoto drafted a long and detailed outline of the coming battle, titled, “Combined Fleet Secret Operational Order No. 1.” It began, “The Combined Fleet’s operations in the war against the United States, Britain, and Holland will be put into effect as detailed in the accompanying booklet.” On November 17, after weeks of training exercises by pilots and naval crews and hectic last-minute planning by Yamamoto and his officers, he boarded the ship Akagi in Saiki, which was to lead the attack on Pearl Harbor. The admiral addressed the crew on board this ship, speaking especially to the flying officers who would constitute the first wave of pilots to bomb Pearl Harbor. He praised them, but warned that Japan was facing a strong enemy, the strongest in the history of Japanese history. They expected to surprise the enemy, but they should be prepared for strong resistance.

The day to launch the attack was fast approaching. Training intensified, and while now more organized and effective, it was fraught with danger. One officer from a ship in the bay described the dangerous conditions they faced as they pushed the limit of their planes and pilots. “An old submarine was docked, and pilots practiced flying over a hill, then swooping down low and within 800 yards of the target before swerving off sharply. They even trained at night, so there were a lot of accidents.” Sailors and pilots aboard the ships in Saiki could sense the tension as frantic and last minute preparations were put in place. Former navy captain Eiichi Choh recalls, “a new torpedo just developed by Mitsubishi for use in the shallow waters of

10 Ugaki, pp. 20–21.
11 Agawa, p. 237.
Pearl Harbor had to be rushed onto the carriers direct from the factories shortly before the fleet departed.”

Then they vanished, like ghost ships that come and go without warning. Early on the morning of November 19, the fleet sailed out of Saiki Bay heading to the northern Japanese islands in the Kuriles, where the attack forces would rendezvous. Mr. Takeda remembers getting up that morning, expecting to see the aircraft carriers and accompanying ships still sitting in Saiki Bay, as they had off and on for the past many days. But “they had all disappeared and when I heard later about the Pearl Harbor attack, then I thought the ships must be the ones that went on that attack.”

After arriving in the Kuriles, the pilots and seamen on the ships from Saiki and the rest of the combined attack force awaited orders. On November 25, Yamamoto ordered the strike force to advance on Hawaii and prepare to destroy the American fleet; confirmation of the exact date of the attack would follow. At 6 p.m. on the night of November 26 the fleet departed for Hawaii. But Saiki was not yet finished contributing to the attack, as explained by Misayo Hamasaki, curator of the Saiki Peace Museum. “Some submarines left for Hawaii directly from Saiki, not the Kuriles. They arrived early to reconnoiter Pearl Harbor secretly and assist any pilots shot down during the attack. These were newly constructed, two-man submarines attached to larger submarines for most of the journey.” All of these midget submarines were lost, as were their crews.

Conflicted Pride

For decades after the war the people of Saiki expressed frustration that their small port town never received the attention or credit for the role it played in the attack on Pearl Harbor. While this may seem odd to those who find little to admire about Japan’s attack, which began a new phase of world war, pride in the attack still lingers. This was highlighted during the 50th anniversary celebration of Saiki’s contribution to the success of the attack. On December 6, 1991, a Saiki youth group staged a symposium, exhibit, dinner, and tour of the harbor to commemorate Saiki’s role in world history. Addressing hundreds of participants were former Zero pilots, submarine

13 Ibid.
captains, and the son of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto. The young people listened intently to these heroes of Japanese military daring.

The keynote speaker was Kennosuke Torisu. Torisu had led the Japanese Navy’s “human torpedo” initiative, a late war effort that placed one suicide volunteer inside a one-person submarine with explosives in its prow. The most popular speaker of the day was Kyozo Makino, a Zero pilot turned postwar businessman. His remarks roused the crowd of over 400 with his defense of Japan’s attack as a necessary act of self-defense. “Before the war, only four countries in Asia had independence; after the war they were all independent,” Makino said. “That’s because Japan pushed the whites out of Asia.” Taking his argument to postwar consequences, he further argued that America assisted Japan in rebuilding solely because “it recognized that the true enemy was communism, and it felt bad about having gone to war with Japan…. We must teach our youngsters that we were not the aggressors in the war.”

At the time of his presentation in 1991, Makino held the position of chairman of the Japan America Society in the neighboring town of Beppu, starkly illustrating the incongruity of such postwar sentiment exhibited by many Japanese.

Toward the end of the day’s celebrations, the romanticism of the attack and of Japan’s naval prowess was enhanced by the memories of those who had participated. The reputation and image of Admiral Yamamoto is a case in point. Participants in the celebration toured a local historic home, where former navy captain Choh guided them to a tatami room where Yamamoto used to rest during his visits to Saiki. “Was he as dashing a man as he is pictured in the movies?” asked one visitor. “He was like a god,” said Choh. “He was Japan’s hope.” The admiral’s son, closer to the man than any others eager to idealize him, tried to bring the discussion back down to earth. “He was really pretty short,” he responded.

The isolated port town of Saiki had not finished commemorating its historic role. In the mid-1990s, townspeople established a museum there to highlight the Pearl Harbor attack, and at the same time to show the daily life of the people who lived there during the war. When visiting this museum, one is struck by the seemingly contradictory messages it conveys. On the one hand, the museum sits just across the road from Saiki Bay, and directly across from the small replica of Ford Island that Zero pilots used for training exercises. Video and still pictures of the Japanese naval force in port during those years and of the actual attack on Pearl Harbor are at

15 Quoted in Helm.
16 Ibid. In fact, Admiral Yamamoto was 5’3,” short even by Japanese standards at the time.
the center of the exhibition. However, it does not stop there, as the lives of common people during the war years are starkly exhibited. The lack of material for clothing, the lack of food, the lack of metal for anything other than military use, and the records of American bombing campaigns on Saiki are stark reminders of those years. The museum is in fact called the “Peace Memorial Museum,” suggesting that the war was not glorious, but brutal and not to be repeated. When visiting the museum for the first time, upon learning that the authors’ home was in Hawaii, the now elderly but active museum advisor Kou Takeda apologized for the “unfair attack” on Pearl Harbor. When discovering that Ran Ying was originally from China, he also offered apologies to her for the cruelty of the Japanese military in China. This is not a man to romanticize the attack on Pearl Harbor or the goal of Japan to save all of East Asia from the North Americans and Europeans. At the same time, he remained proud to have shared the role Saiki played in the war effort and to recall those childhood days when he was enthralled with the sailors and ships he saw every day. Saiki is a perfect representation of the contradictions Japanese exhibit toward the war.