Japanese education during the war years was founded on a philosophy of the divine nature of the emperor and the superiority and invincibility of the Japanese people and their military. The grounds for this heightened sense of patriotism and emperor worship by schoolchildren had been sown a decade before under the direction of the Ministry of Education and other agencies. Playing up the glory still celebrated from victory in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, the Department of the Imperial Household Ministry presented each school with a portrait of the emperor, the most important symbol of Japan’s rising nationalism. In 1928 the government had produced a *Statement Concerning the Guidance of Thought*, which encouraged the “promotion of education” and the “cultivation of the concept of the kokutai.” As the title states, it was a plan to guide the thoughts of young people in the direction of unquestioned loyalty to the emperor at all times. The Ministry of Education directed that all schools and universities throughout the country implement this new campaign to guide young people in a unified direction. By the 1930s a cult of worship for the emperor was in full force, giving the military leaders in Japan an unquestioned mechanism to transform Japan into a militaristic nation with expansive dreams.²

By the mid-1930s, just prior to the 1937 surge in attacks across China, the Ministry of Education infused public school instruction with ancient mythology mixing Shinto and emperor worship with warnings to stay clear of Western ideas. At the same time, Emperor Hirohito was promoted as the broad protector of Asia writ large, thus setting the stage for young people to dismiss “Asian little brothers” and “Anglo-Saxon enemies” as inferior.³

Schoolchildren were taught these values through various means, including the use of a large pictorial book describing the mythical history of Japan’s royal family, lessons in moral education and the glorification of national heroes. The exhortations and historical accounts promoted in the book are accompanied by pictures drawn in graphic detail. Titled *Pictorial*

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1. Bix, p. 201. The concept of *kokutai* stipulated the unquestioned spiritual and exclusive loyalty to the Royal Family over all Japan.
3. Ibid.
Imperial Rescript on Education, this book was published in 1930 just as Japan was set to invade Manchuria. The book is replete with paintings of the emperors’ ancestors transforming themselves from deities in heaven to deities on earth. Glorious fighting men are shown protecting the nation in previous wars, and famous cultural heroes of Japan exhort the young people to protect and die for Japan.

One who remembers the importance of this book is Nobuo Kawamura. Kawamura was born in 1921 and served as a teacher in Oita City at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor. He remembers, “This was a kind of moral education, a foundation for how children were supposed to think. Students between the ages of 6 and 20 were to hear words from this book every day, and to learn them by heart. All students had to study hard to recite the text, and if I as a teacher did not force the daily reciting, then I would be punished. I memorized the complete text, and every morning I would recite it first, and then have the students repeat after me. Even today I can recite this book. The Pictorial Imperial Rescript on Education was distributed throughout the country, but only 2,000 copies were printed with color pictures. I was one of the 2,000 teachers honored to receive the color edition and have it still today.”

In 1937 the Ministry of Education further promoted this view, producing a pamphlet titled The Fundamentals of the National Polity. Distributed in schools throughout the country, and eventually selling over two million copies, this document informed students of the ideological and spiritual position of the emperor and his appointees in creating a moral and benevolent society. Students should understand the “bright, pure, and selfless heart” of the Japanese and appreciate that Japanese people were superior to all others in the world. The family was to be honored and ancestors worshiped. Finally, Japanese should remember that their country had twice been saved from foreign invasion by the “divine winds” (kamikaze), proving once and for all that Japan was protected and indestructible so long as it followed its “living god,” the emperor.4

Listening to those who were of school age during the war, it is striking to hear the optimism they shared, and the amazement they felt when later, like Yoshio, they discovered much of what they had been told was a lie. This optimism arose from two main factors, both of which controlled people’s access to information. First, the media played its part through presenting carefully scripted newspaper stories and radio reports. Second, schools throughout the country never wavered in building enthusiastic support

4 Bix, pp. 313-314.
for the war. In the initial six months of the Pacific War, newspapers were full of victories around Asia, and rightly so. Only days after Pearl Harbor the British warships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk in Malayan waters. People were thrilled with conquests in Malaya, the Philippines, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies. When British-controlled Singapore fell on February 15, 1942, celebrations around the country went on for three days. Hidekatsu Nakano, though only a child living in a village outside the city of Oita, remembers these celebrations well. “I was in the second grade when the Pacific War started and my grandfather was mayor of our village, which had about 3,000 people. I remember that the fall of Singapore was a great victory for us. The villagers gathered together with the students and teachers to celebrate this victory at the school, which served as our community center.”

The Oita newspapers heralded the victory, with headlines declaring, “Singapore Finally Falls,” and “Brilliant! Imperial Japanese Army’s Achievement among the Century’s Greatest.” Pictures of the British officers handing over Singapore to the Japanese Army were captioned, “British Army Surrenders, Admitting Defeat.” The stories that followed under the headlines reported that “the enemy in Singapore agreed to unconditional surrender at 7:50 p.m. on February 15th. The commander of the British-Malay Army met Lt. General Yamashita at the Ford Factory in Bukit Timah at 7:00 p.m. and they signed the unconditional surrender and cease-fire to begin at 10:00 p.m. on the 15th.”

The claim that Japan was invincible was proving true, and the enthusiasm was contagious. The day of victory in Singapore saw Oita residents gather in the streets to watch an impressive celebratory display of naval air power as military planes flew over much of Japan, including their city. As reported on February 17 by the local press under the headline, “Naval Air Force Congratulated on Excellent Achievement,” Kure Naval District will conduct a special flyover with 156 aircraft from the Kure Naval District Air Force to congratulate the Naval Air Force for its excellent achievement in this sacred ceremony in Singapore. Commanding is Major General Kira Shunichi. Each unit leaves its base and marshals above the Seto Inland Sea. After that, the units will pass over Hiroshima at 2 p.m. They will conduct special maneuvers under the supervision of Admiral Toyoda, Chief of the Kure Naval District. The overflight covers Kyushu, Shikoku, Chugoku, and Kansai for a distance

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*Oita Godo Press (大分合同新聞) (Oita City, Japan), February 16, 1942, p. 1.*
is more than 1,000 kilometers. They will finish the flyover at 4 p.m. and each unit will return to base. Our Oita unit will take part in this flyover. Journalists in the navy division of each newspaper will attend to cover the story of this event to uplift the morale of the Japanese nation.⁶

The local newspapers encouraged the entire populace to mark this victory in a manner that could only occur in Japan, when they announced that the city would distribute 360 cc of sake to each household, asking the citizens to gather in their neighborhood associations to ceremonially toast the Japanese military with a kampai.⁷

Hiding the Truth

As the war dragged on, victories proved harder to come by, while defeats and stalemates began to wear down the military. The censors prohibited candid reporting, and the media efforts to stimulate support for the war veered ever further from the truth. Censorship intensified and people rarely discovered any outright admission of defeat for the duration of the war. While early stories reported genuine victories, later stories hid the truth to keep up public morale. Victories were exalted and defeats turned into victories. These stories, coupled with the “moral” education taught in the schools, kept young people’s focus on victory and sacrifice unchanged, therefore ensured unquestioned support for the war.

Only a few dared to question the war propaganda, with Admiral Yamamoto the most important among them. Yamamoto was “too shrewd and too experienced” to believe all the claims made by the High Command and Imperial Headquarters. Even in the flush days following Pearl Harbor, he criticized the overzealous statements made by his own naval spokesmen in Tokyo about the ease with which Japan was winning the war.⁸ But his words were drowned out by the thunderous propaganda. The Battle of Midway on June 5-7, 1942, is but one example.

Coming early in the war, this ambitious naval operation was designed to eliminate much of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and to capture the U.S. base headquartered on the small atoll of Midway, located at the very northern tip of the Hawaiian island chain. The plan was then to move once again

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⁶ Ibid., February 17, 1942, p. 1.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Hoyt, pp. 28 and 33.
on Hawaii, further demoralizing the Americans and forcing a negotiated peace on Japan’s terms. But the Japanese were the ones to be surprised, for, unknown to them, their military codes had been broken and American ships rushed to intercept the Imperial Navy as it approached Midway. The attack proved costly to Japan in losses of both ships and personnel. The outcome emboldened the American military and citizenry, raising morale to its highest point since Pearl Harbor. Admiral Matome Ugaki, watching the battle from his flagship and recognizing the seriousness of the defeat, records in his dairy on the evening of June 5, 1942, “Thus the distressing day of 5 June came to an end. Don’t let another day like this come to us during the course of this war! Let this day be the only one of the greatest failure of my life!” On June 7 he continues, “During the two months of April and May, planning and preparations were made with great effort with this day as a goal. Before this target day came, however, the tables had turned entirely and we are now forced to do our utmost to cope with the worst case. This should be kept in mind as a lesson showing that war is not predictable.”

Most naval commanders knew of the serious losses and possible consequences, but the people heard not a word about it. In fact, Japan had lost four aircraft carriers, a heavy cruiser, and 3,000 men in the Battle of Midway. This included 121 top pilots, who would be almost impossible to replace in a short time. Midway Island was damaged by bombing, but never taken, and it continued to play a crucial role as a forward American base for the remainder of the war. Even in Tokyo the significance of the loss was kept closely guarded, as navy officials refused to entrust the government with an accurate accounting, worried that such honesty would damage morale and endanger military intelligence in the future. Only the emperor was informed of the total picture, and he decided not to share this even with his army officials, who proceeded to make plans based on inaccurate information. Across government and military lines, the censors worked diligently to promote the Battle of Midway as if it were no setback at all. Most were led to believe that “the Combined Fleet was healthy and secure.”

Needless to say, the common citizen in Oita Prefecture remained ignorant of this defeat, and looking at the newspaper accounts of those days we can see why they kept such optimism. The Oita Godo Press of June 11 summed up the Battle of Midway with, “The Imperial Japanese navy launched blistering sharp attacks against Midway, the base of the enemy in mid-ocean. At the same time, it trapped the U.S. fleet in this area and pounded it, wreaking

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9 Ugaki, p. 152 and 155.
10 Bix, pp. 449-450.
enormous damage on maritime and air forces. During the Midway battle two U.S. aircraft carriers were sunk, one Enterprise class and one Hornet class, and 120 aircraft were shot down. Damage to our forces included one aircraft carrier lost and one damaged. A cruiser was damaged and 35 aircraft are missing.” Misinformation filled this account of Midway and, after this story appeared on June 11, Midway was rarely if ever mentioned again in the local press. For the citizens of Oita, the war remained a glorious venture and the military remained invincible.

Military Education

The overwhelming imperial and nationalist education presented each day in school mirrored the newspaper accounts, took hold, and stayed current in most people’s minds throughout the war no matter how dire the circumstances, even toward the end. This education was presented through stories, lectures, physical training, and rote memorization. And in many cases it was beaten into them. Quite literally.

Toyoki Goto, only a third grader when Pearl Harbor was attacked, remembers:

It seems strange in today’s world, but at the time we didn’t really think of it as “military” education. It was just an education, nothing strange or abnormal about it. We were all in the same boat so it wasn’t like we ever wanted to speak out against our government. We simply didn’t think anything of it. Back then, there was only one perspective, and we had no idea there were other perspectives. If anything, if someone spoke out against what the country was doing, they would be ostracized, like a black sheep.

Just like children all over the world, these primary school students romanticized war and acted it out in the fields, shores, and villages near their homes. As young primary school students, they had little or no military training in the early years, but that did not mean there was no military education. Toyoki Goto remembers, “We were constantly taught about the war in school, especially about the victories of the Japanese military and faith in the emperor. We’d rush to play war games after school. The older kids would teach us about different ranks and responsibilities in the army so we

would arbitrarily decide what we wanted to be. Then we’d split up between friend and foe. We didn’t choose other nations as enemies to fight against; it was just good against evil.” However, a more specific enemy was targeted by Yonosuke Yanase and his friends. “After class we would play at sword fighting [chanbara]. We would divide up the kids; some of us were Japanese and others either Americans or Chinese. We’d always make an enemy.”

Textbooks even for the youngest children of elementary age used every opportunity to raise the level of patriotism. The texts teaching Japanese language and grammar to second-year students used simple poems and stories to accomplish this, as shown in these two poems written about experiences in occupied China:

Colors
Colors colors, his Imperial Majesty gives us the precious colors
The precious colors show the sign of our army
Colors colors we will protect our nation with the words of his Imperial Majesty
In our heart
Colors with the soul of our army
Colors colors we will go to the enemy territory prepared to die for his Imperial Majesty
Our army’s colors
Colors colors our army always wins
Our army’s honored colors

On the Asia Train
The Asia train is running in Manchuria, arriving in Shihei
One of the soldiers talks to me with a smile
I can see the flag of Manshukoku in the farm over there
Soldiers staying in Shinkyo
When I bow to them, they come to shake my hand.13

Even the fourth-grade Japanese language text conveys a clear message to students that they have a part to play in the war. This text, meant to be

12 The author, and interviewer, is American and it is highly likely that in some cases the exact truth is shaded to save embarrassment on both sides and in fact the enemy in these games was the United States or its allies.
recited by both teacher and students, focuses on the experiences of a young girl as her family hosts soldiers who are training to fight overseas:

**Maneuvers**

1. Just as I thought I heard the pitter-patter of a horse, a brave horse soldier rode right by us. Because the military was passing through our town tonight, my mother took me to the dining hall. Eventually, a deep rumbling preceded the arrival of tanks. I was surprised how the earth shook as the townspeople came out to see. Foot soldiers came marching toward us. My mother prepared to serve tea to the soldiers. Many combat vehicles arrived, but the roar of the vehicles was too loud and the townspeople got frightened and ran away. The soldiers arrived and their captain said, “Take a 20 minute rest.” War veterans, women, and young ladies helped serve the tea. The soldiers are very dirty, covered with dust and sweat, and are keeping us very busy bringing us their canteens for more tea. We worked till around 11 p.m.

2. The morning had not yet come when we heard the sound of a gunshot to the north. Teachers took us girls to watch their maneuvers and performance. The glorious airplanes arrived with a very loud roar. When we heard the sounds of cannon I wanted to go see them as fast as I could. We watched the maneuvers but could not tell where they were shooting the guns. We could only see the foot soldiers running with sticks and straw on their bodies. After a while soldiers appeared carrying the emperor’s flag and marched by. The leader of the marksmen appeared, watching the tactical operation without wearing any thick coat. When we saw that we had no words to say, but tears came to our eyes.

Not all reading lessons focused on the brave soldiers, as the young people were being prepared for more practical contributions to the war effort, as seen in the following fourth-grade lesson. The narrator sounds eerily like Mr. Rogers from the American children’s television show a half century later:

**Making the Cannons**

I wonder how they make all the cannons that shoot down airplanes, tank cannons that shoot through thick metal, and the battlefield cannons pulled by horses. Have you ever wondered the same? Visiting a manufacturer of these large cannons, you can see a big powerful machine that melts the metal into liquid under a white flame. This molten metal is then poured into molds that don’t really look like cannons. After being removed from the mold, the large metal slab is then heated bright red
again. A large hammer that shakes the whole foundry then pounds the cannons into the right shape. Like making mochi with the mortar and pestle, the big machines shape the ball of metal. This way the metal is strengthened over and over, but that is not all they do. After stretching this metal to look like a rod, they put it into a tall furnace to heat up again. The rod waits patiently in the furnace. Eventually, the furnace doors are opened and the hot rod rolls slowly out. As soon as it came out of the furnace, the rod is dropped into a pool of oil 10 meters deep. For an instant, the black surface of the oil turns red as the rod sinks deeper into the black pit of oil. Beating, heating, and chilling the metal, make it stronger. If these were not done, the cannon would be blown apart by the powerful gunpowder; it would not be strong enough to be a proper cannon. In the same way our hearts grow stronger by withstanding the cold of winter and the heat of summer. The strengthened barrel is then raised by a machine and shaved into a perfect cylinder. After shaving off the dark, rough edges of the barrel, we finally see the white shimmer of the cannon. Beside this machine stands a high school graduate, a 23-year-old young man who carefully covers the cannon with oil to smooth the process. As the exterior of the barrel becomes smooth and the cannon reaches the right length and diameter, the inside shaft that holds the cannon ball is carved out. A sharp blade is set on the tip of the cannon barrel as it starts to spin, slowly grinding its way into the barrel. The blade digs a hole; one centimeter, two centimeters deep, slowly but surely into the hardened barrel. One little mistake would make the entire cannon useless so the engineer keeps a close eye on the machine to make sure…. Once this process is completed, the antiaircraft barrels are mounted on a metal base and pointed toward the skies, getting ready to shoot down airplanes in an instant. Rubber wheels are attached to the smaller cannons that shoot enemy tanks no matter how fast the tanks run.14

As the war eventually reached Japan via American bombers, the texts were updated to stress the importance of children staying vigilant by watching the skies for enemy planes. The following poems for fourth graders reflect this,

Poem 1
On a rainy day and windy night,
On summer days when the noon sun burns,
On mornings when winter winds pierce our bones – no matter when,

14 Ibid., pp. 6-9.
I am standing here, always.
As winter passes,
The bright spring comes,
The water-colored skies
Are blanked by scattered clouds floating by.
This big sky,
Stretching for all of eternity,
Our bodies become our eyes,
Our bodies become our ears,
As we stare up at the sky suspiciously.
Even now, somewhere in the sky
We can hear the tiniest of buzzing,
We can see the swarm of planes like bugs,
We warn everyone and we run around like a tornado.

Poem 2
The time, the direction,
Friend or foe,
How many of what model?
The altitude, the direction.
I run to the phone and shout.
“Number Five, Aoyama Watch Station,
Thirty Seven Minutes, North,
Enemy, Mid-Size, Thirty,
Three Thousand, South-East.”

Learning to Kill, Preparing to Die

Tetsuo Tsukuda was a ten-year-old boy living in Beppu in 1941. Classes, he remembers, did not change much at the beginning, but soon military trainers arrived in his school and began military education. “It started with a morning bow. Upon arriving at the school each morning, we’d first bow and pray to the photo of the emperor at the front gate. Then, all the children would assemble in the school grounds, face the direction of Tokyo, and bow again to the emperor’s residence in his palace. After that we’d march and sing military songs, boys and girls together. Talking to each other during

15 Ibid., pp. 11, 12.
this time was strictly forbidden. Only after the marching exercise would we go to our classrooms to begin class.”

Yonosuke Yanase remembers the daily routine of his life during those war years.

A typical day during this time started around six or seven in the morning. For breakfast we’d have ichiryu-sai, which was some rice with a small side dish. As farmers, we had our own rice field, which produced 600 kilograms of rice a year, so my family had enough to eat. We usually had miso soup as the side dish or pickled cucumbers. But I remember they were not very good. Sometimes, we’d have an extra dish of a small piece of fish. My mother fixed my bento lunch, and I’d carry it to school. I’d walk to school with friends either wearing straw sandals or barefoot. We didn’t have shoes. Class started at eight. Each morning, we’d pass the picture of the emperor before we entered the school. We’d bow to the picture; in fact, we wouldn’t actually see the picture, because it was placed in a shrine. But we knew it was there and we knew what he looked like because his picture was all over the place. We just weren’t allowed to open the shrine. The school officials would open it four or five times a year, for example on the emperor’s birthday. The principal would walk around carrying the picture. Inside the shrine there was a kyoiku-chokugo along with his picture. This was a message from the emperor on education. The principal would take these documents out of the shrine and read the creed of education out loud. The students were not allowed to look up, and we had to keep our heads bowed. This lasted about five minutes. It was so boring that we’d whisper to each other. We had our heads bowed so long our noses would start to run. Children caught cold or got sick easily then due to lack of food. So you could hear kids sniffing all through the crowd of about 100 students. We didn’t have handkerchiefs, so we’d just sniff. While standing at attention, the teachers would get mad at us if we made noise or got out of line. They would yell or beat us. Some teachers would hit us as we stood there. We were really scared so we usually tried to behave ourselves. Once in a while, someone would fall over because they were sick or weak.

Those special days when the emperor’s picture was shown were holidays. We’d be let out of school after the ceremony. We’d even get presents from the school, like sweets or tangerines.

A common theme heard from the memories of these people is the role of teacher as disciplinarian, especially the subtle differences found among
the teachers in this role. Yonosuke Yanase describes both sides of one of his teachers in primary school:

When I was a fifth grader, there were 40 boys in my class. One day, Yabuchi Sensei [Teacher Yabuchi] asked, “When you eat rice, who do you give praise to?” Everyone’s answer was either “the emperor” or “the soldiers.” I was the only one that said, “the rice.” Everyone laughed out loud. They were all thinking of the military, the emperor, or the country, but I thought we should thank the rice for giving us nourishment. This was because my dad always told me that the rice was more important than anything, even our lives. While everyone was laughing, Yabuchi Sensei stayed silent. Then, he said, “That is another way of putting it. That’s gijin-hou” Gijin-hou is giving life to inanimate objects. I remember him standing up for me. I thought he was a great teacher for having an open mind. At the time most Japanese teachers would not have been so kind. But, of course, he was also a strict teacher and taught us that we should join the military and give our lives for the emperor, but that was expected.16

Takafumi Yoshimura remembers that after the war began with the “Anglo-Saxons,” military education became stronger and the students’ determination to join in the war grew. There were also new requirements to contribute to the war effort.

When we turned ten years old we would go to the houses of those who had children in the army and help them with their farming. At school we had military drills, but because we were elementary school students we did not have real guns, so it was like we boys “played” war. We also learned military-style marching. Soon graduates of our elementary school who had joined the army came to talk with us. They told us that we should prepare to be soldiers soon. They became our role models; we thought they led exciting lives and we all wanted to be soldiers. This was aimed at the boys. We never talked with the girls, who were in different classes, but I believe the girls did sewing. All this was led by the teachers. We were

16 One reason the teacher would have found this explanation acceptable is that Shinto, the national religion of the time identified with Japan’s militarism, is based on a belief in the spiritual nature of animals and inanimate objects. Thus while the response from Yonosuke was unexpected, an enlightened teacher disposed to humane treatment of students would have found this defensible in the context of Japanese culture.
taught how to hold a gun, how to walk, and how to act like a soldier. Our
guns were just sticks and in primary school our training was done just
by teachers, no real military men.

Ichiro Hashimoto’s education in Oita City changed dramatically after the
bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In middle school, we had military education and training. Three or four
military training officers trained a group of 50. In physical education
class we would do both regular and military exercises. We wore military
uniforms to school. We would wrap our leggings and wear hats like the
military. We had wooden guns. We’d run 10 km and then do body-building
exercises. We’d sword fight with stick swords. We’d played with stick
swords before, in primary school. But now, stick swords were no longer
Toys. We also made human-sized wooden dolls to ram with the bayonets
attached to our wooden guns. At my school, we didn’t draw faces or
anything on the figures we bayoneted, but I know that in some schools
students drew the faces of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin on them.
These were not child’s play; they were real exercises. We all hoped that by
demonstrating our dedication we’d be able to attend one of the military
schools set up for middle school students all over Japan. My goal was to
attend a naval school and become a pilot.

When Tetsuo Tsukuda became a junior high student in the mid-1940s he
went to school to prepare for a soldier’s life. “We were taught that American
and British soldiers were devils, or monsters. Even in elementary school, our
teachers talked about the war every day and encouraged us to be soldiers
when we grew up. No one ever said anything against the war, and if any
teacher was suspected of saying something negative he would be fired, then
arrested by the military police.” After school, the students would sometimes
go to Beppu Park, which was adjacent to a military base. “At the gate to the
park, there stood large posters with the figures of Roosevelt and Churchill.
When we went there, we’d be given balls to throw at their hearts. If we hit
the heart we’d get candies as rewards.”

Tadashi Ono was nine years old in 1941. He remembers how quickly things
changed in school after December of that year:

17 Interview with Sadayoshi Yutani (湯谷貞義), Beppu, Oita Prefecture, Japan, February 1,
2012.
Before the Pacific War, there were books and notebooks but after the war started, there were few books or notebooks. Teachers and the military trainer drilled the idea into our brains that it was our duty to die in the war. They told us that we must be brave and that the desire to die for the emperor and the country was an honorable thing to behold. The girls would spend their time sewing the thousand-stitch good luck belts in sessions organized by schools and families.

The Beatings

Corporal punishment was widely used in schools, and memories of teachers and older students beating the younger students are fresh and vivid over sixty years later. While common before the Pacific War, school beatings grew in ferocity as the war continued. There was no time for softness. Corporal punishment was a regular feature of military training in school, mimicking actual practice in the Japanese Army, where soldiers were regularly beaten by their officers.

Tadashi Ono remembers that despite the tender ages of students, they were strictly disciplined. “Even if we didn’t really do anything bad, maybe just a bit rowdy, we’d be hit or made to stand for long periods in front of the class. Once my teacher hit me and pushed me so hard that he broke my arm.” Displaying his crooked arm during our interview, this man of nearly 90 years old said, “To this day I can’t raise it fully.” When Tadashi went home that day, he lied about how he broke his arm. “We could never tell our parents about these beatings, because they’d surely support the teachers. In the eyes of the parents, teachers could do no wrong.”

Toru Takaya was a fifth grader when he began military training. Like most of the young boys, he hoped to impress his military trainers and his teachers so he could later be commissioned as an officer.

In middle school, we’d do things like improve our balance by going inside a large bamboo ball while trying to remain standing. During the training, teachers were very strict. If one student did something wrong, it would always be a collective mistake. We’d all be made to stand in front of the class, and the teacher would beat us with a stick. This would happen even if we were supposed to stand, and one student was sitting, or if we should be sitting when one student remained standing. Sometimes we didn’t even know why we were being punished, but the teacher was always right.
An especially rough episode stands out. One day after our morning meeting on the school grounds, we went into our classrooms. Five or six of us were playing in the room when the teacher arrived. Then the teacher took us back outside, told us to strip down to our underwear, and ordered us to sit in a tub of cold water. This was during the winter, and it was snowing, so of course we were freezing. He went back into the classroom, leaving us out there in the cold. When the teacher returned, he checked the water temperature and declared that it was not cold enough. He proceeded to add more cold water to the tub where we were sitting. If we complained of the cold, he’d get angrier. We sat in the cold water for about 30 minutes. Another time, also during the winter, all the boys were disciplined for one boy’s mistake. Again, we stripped down to our underwear. The teacher made us run several kilometers. This was better than sitting in the water, though. At least running warmed us up. I could never tell my parents about these punishments, because they would have scolded me for not following the instructions of the teacher.

For Masaaki Yano, the elementary school student from Canada who had moved with his family to Japan, the memories of harsh treatment by military advisors in his school are as vivid today as they were during the war. As the nephew of Admiral Hori and still seen as an immigrant by some, he was watched intently by students and teachers to gauge his response to this training.

Just after the Pearl Harbor attack, we experienced “extreme militarism.” I was fifteen at the time. In our school in Kitsuki, the military instructors and regular school teachers sat separately in the teachers’ room. The military instructors were arrogant and mean, regularly hitting or slapping us to instill military fighting spirit into the students. I was physically rather weak, but I put up with this, and didn’t say anything to my parents. Although, my parents must have known this was happening. Between the military instructors and regular teachers and students there was an unbridgeable gap. I was terrified of military instructors.

The reasons for punishing students differed between the military instructors and school teachers. Under the military instructors, the students had to show perfect harmony in group activities. A group of 50 in one class would be divided into four or five smaller units. We would mimic war by running outside in formation, using real guns without bullets. We made straw men to attack with bayonets; they represented the enemy. If one student made a move that was not in unison with the rest of the
group, we’d all be beaten. Our school teachers were not so brutal; they’d hit only an individual student when he didn’t understand the content of the subject we were studying.

Education and expectations for girls were noticeably different from that of the boys. When the war began, Yukie Matsumoto was a middle school student in the village of Ooga, just outside the fishing town of Hiji. As a student in the village school, her education was hardly disrupted during most of the war, except for the introduction of training in self-defense. “My school was small, so the boys and girls studied together. We didn’t have military training with weapons, but all the girls were trained to fight off the enemy with large bamboo sticks. We were trained in this not as warriors to fight as a group, but as individuals who might be attacked by enemy forces. The boys were trained by military men, but we were just trained by our own teachers.” Unlike the boys, who practiced the art of war as aggressors with rifles, bayonets, and hand grenades, the girls trained in defensive tactics to resist foreign rapists and killers. The beatings experienced by the boys were not replicated with the girls, though the education and training prepared them equally for death.

When asked what the discipline was like for her and her friends who broke rules or made the teacher angry, Nobuko Eto, from the small seaside town of Tsukumi, remembers little in the way of training in self-defense and no physical discipline of the girls in her class, only kind teachers, “There were girls who made fun of those less fortunate, like those with some type of deformity or those like me, who were very short. But the teachers just used to reason with them to correct their ways.”

From the viewpoint of teachers, strict discipline of students was inevitable. The times called for it, principals and military instructors required it, and students grew to expect it. Even if at some personal level individual teachers found this distasteful, harsh behavior went on unabated throughout the war years. One former teacher who experienced this was Nobuo Kawamura. Discussing his life as a teacher and, later, reluctant military officer, Kawamura explains that while he taught students to die for the emperor, he and his family had little eagerness to join or support the war, even if it meant breaking the law.

During the war, my father would disappear for half the year. I didn’t know where he was or what he was doing. I only knew that when he came home he would put 100 yen bills in the family cash box. Back in those days, you wouldn’t earn even 100 yen in a year. I didn’t find out until he died what he
was actually doing to earn this money. I don’t want to tarnish my father’s name, but during those months away, he was arranging for young men to run away to a small island near Okinawa to hide from military service.

In other words, his father was smuggling conscripted and active soldiers to a safe haven away from the war. From all appearances this was purely a financial scheme, with no political motivation. While this was far from a common practice, it shows that not all Japanese felt total loyalty to the emperor and the war effort, but managed to use the war for their own self-interest. In the end, though the son could not fully escape his duty. Kawamura continues:

In the 1930s, I was a middle school student in Oita City. Everything in school was focused on the emperor. I studied fine arts. In 1943, on October 21, my education was terminated and most of us joined the work force to support the war effort. The fine arts students, however, were distrusted by the military so we were allowed to go to university and get a certificate to teach. After receiving the teaching certificate, I was sent to a school in the countryside near Beppu. At that time it was safer to have a teaching certificate, as you wouldn’t be drafted by the military. My father knew the dangers of military life and guided me in this direction. So he was pleased that I became a teacher. But I wanted to help out in the war effort in some way, even as a teacher. While a university student, I prepared myself for this and took judo, kendo, and other martial arts classes. When I left university I took these skills and taught them to the children in my village school. I taught them to kill. We had to be strict with our students in order to prepare them for military life. Children were called the “emperor’s children” and the objectives of Japanese education, at the time, were that the kids should put the nation first and think of the emperor as their father. Some people were opposed to this type of education, but I could not ease up on the students. Girls and boys were split into two schools, and I was in the boys’ school, where I was especially strict with my students. Because I had avoided the army, I knew I had to go overboard to demonstrate my loyalty. My students were the emperor’s children, I told myself, and their lives belonged to the emperor. Government mandates made it clear that the children were the subjects of the nation and the emperor, and this was not to be questioned. This was why I was so strict.

The term “strict” as used in wartime Japan indicates extreme punishment meted out to children who were considered undisciplined, so Mr.
Kawamura’s admission he was “especially” strict makes it clear that he did not shirk from using harsh physical punishment to get his students’ attention. His years of avoiding the military and remaining a strict teacher came to an abrupt end later in the war.

In 1944, March 10 was National Army Day. On this day, all the students at school split into groups and practiced marching drills around the school yard. Around 9 o’clock, during the morning assembly, I was directing boys to do combat drills, when my father suddenly showed up at the school. Of course, there were no phones in our village, and I didn’t know he was coming. I was summoned to the principal’s office, where my father told me that I was drafted into the military. It came as a shock since I had been exempted from military service. I was informed that the government had just announced that all men between 19 and 45 were to report for the military, and all previous exemptions were no longer valid. My father could not save me, as he had others. I was 22 at the time, still young, but now went from teaching war to children with sticks to being a soldier with real a weapon.

The unspoken desire to avoid military service, while far from the norm, was not uncommon among even among some students approaching the conscription age of 20. “Desperate to avoid serving, many men faked physical disabilities and illnesses. Some drank a large bottle of soy sauce before a physical in hopes of inducing temporary liver or heart failure. Others lost a massive amount of weight through the use of laxatives.”\(^{18}\) Yet as the war effort became more desperate and legal means of avoiding duty more difficult to obtain, men who thought they were safe saw the maximum age limit for conscription increase and health deferments decrease. Some tried alternative service, or at least service that would keep them off the battlefields.

High school student Mamoru Hirano, for instance, avoided battle by entering a special training program to maintain aircraft that participated in kamikaze attacks over Okinawa. He recalls:

I attended an agricultural high school in Usa during the first few years of the war. I was supposed to graduate in March 1944, but my family knew that the military didn’t have enough fighters for the war, especially in China, and that I would be drafted immediately after graduating in

\(^{18}\) Hotta, p. 48.
February. About that time, the government called for volunteers for a special military training program that would take eighteen months to complete. I didn't know what the special program entailed; only that it had something to do with being trained as an engineer for airplane maintenance. It did not matter much what I was to do, as I saw it as an opportunity to avoid being drafted, assigned to a combat unit, and sent overseas to fight. I also thought it would allow me to graduate at the regular time in March. But because the war was going badly, in fact many of us were forced to graduate in December in order to speed up the supply of new soldiers. On top of that, the eighteen-month special program was in fact completed in ten months. In December 1944, I was assigned to the 101st Squadron, which was part of the air corps attached to the Tokkotai (kamikaze), so I ended up in the military, after all. However, this delaying tactic probably did save my life, as I never had to go to the front.

Creeping War Weariness

Despite government pronouncements about the success of Japan's military actions, life in Oita rapidly deteriorated. One local Oita historian recounts:

As the Asia Pacific War escalated the lack of military fighting power and lack of labor forces sufficient to keep up with the demands of the war became evident. War weariness spread. Productive men disappeared into war, leaving the elderly and women to harvest the fields, to fish, and to work in factories. The government declared that all citizens should contribute, and further strengthened the “Student Labor Contribution” by ordering young teenagers to work in factories. By mid-1944, it was already accepted that an invasion of Japan was imminent. The military, with civilian cooperation and assistance, began preparing coastal defenses throughout Oita Prefecture in anticipation of American landings. An elaborate system of pill boxes was constructed and trenches were dug along the hillsides overlooking the coast, while new caves were dug out of the mountains to house factories, evacuations, and command control centers.20

19 Japanese rarely use the word kamikaze when speaking of this special force, rather they use the term Tokkotai, which is translated as “Special Attack Force.”
20 Hoashi, pp. 55-56.
Military conscription intensified further. Students who were initially protected from the draft were now pressured to enlist. Student laborers, both male and female, entered the workforce. Because of labor shortages, appeals were even issued in Korea and China for volunteers to work in Japan. However, the term “volunteer” was used loosely in many cases, when people working in their fields were forced into ships and trucks and transported to Kyushu and other parts of Japan.  

While the men prepared for fighting, some young women volunteered to do what they could for the country. Nobuko Eto led a wartime life worthy of her own biography.

I was born in January 1928 in Tsukumi City. I was a tiny baby. At the time, the only heating device we had was fire stoves and charcoal pots. My mother would tuck me in her kimono or lay me next to a heated stove to keep me warm. That was how I survived the first winter of my life.

In March 1944, I graduated from an all-girls school and decided that the best way to help my country was to become a nurse, so I enrolled in nursing school. My class had 30 students, with 20 in nursing and 10 in midwifery. There was a clear line, by long tradition, between the older, experienced nurses and midwives and those of us just entering nursing school. For example, when we were activated to join the military medical teams, our elders would hit us if we made mistakes. Furthermore, the first-year nursing students not only had to be more diligent in carrying out our duties, but also take on additional tasks, putting in extra hours of work while others were resting or sleeping. We’d have to sneak out of our dorm rooms at 5:30 in the morning without waking anyone to clean the hospital or sterilize equipment.

In the fall of 1944, the war took a turn for the worse, and supplies began to run short. In class we would be thrifty; by using the backs of old pharmacy prescriptions to take notes on and by tying bamboo sticks to pencils that were otherwise too short to hold.

Our dormitory was situated on the same street as the 47th Regiment’s army base and we saw soldiers come and go all the time. During those days the newspapers reminded the residents every single day that all must pull together and never give up the fight until Japan won.

The turning point for me was when an air raid killed some students at Ueno Middle School in March 1945. For the next three months, air raids

only intensified. We dug a shelter under the floors of the hospital, but it was musty and full of mosquitoes. There was no food and water in the shelter, either. We all avoided going into the shelter as much as we could. During my second year, six of us took on the responsibilities as messengers. Before each air raid, we’d receive information directly from the military and we’d run around to inform everyone in the hospital and dormitory of coming attacks. “Air Raid Warning,” “Air Raid Imminent,” we’d shout over the megaphone.  

Even in far off Shanghai, where Japanese troops protected thousands of its citizens engaged in commerce, education, and government administration, an awareness of coming defeat took hold. Individual families had to make decisions about staying in a country that might be regained by the Chinese, though they dared not utter those words. Shunsaku Nanri recall, “Even though I never saw any fighting in Shanghai, and even though my parents didn’t say it, I think they knew Japan was losing and Shanghai would not be safe. So my sisters and I were evacuated back to Japan in December 1944. Many Japanese were leaving at that time, so there were no sad feelings of leaving friends. I came to Beppu to live with my mother’s family. The only thing we worried about going back to Japan was the rumor that there was little food to eat, as there was never any shortage of food in Shanghai.” Young Shunsaku returned to a prefecture soon to be heavily bombed and strafed by American airplanes. He found the educational practices of the teachers the same as in his Japanese school in Shanghai, but his time in the classroom did not last long. He was quickly mobilized as a student worker assigned to a powder mill factory south of Oita City, and worked there until the end of the war.