Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

A. Porter, Edgar, et al.
Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation.
Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
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8 Never-ending Sirens

Cancelling Classes and Evacuating Students

These incessant kamikaze attacks only heightened American resolve to flatten Japan, with Oita a prime target. From mid-March until the war ended in mid-August, American planes flew along the coast, attacking Oita City, Usa, the Saiki Naval Air Base, and smaller targets along the way. On April 26, the B-29s returned and pounded these targets once again. Twenty-eight died as they ran for their poorly constructed shelters. On May 8 the local newspaper reported inaccurately that eight B-29s had been shot down over Oita. “Oita prefecture citizens watched our shells explode on the enemy planes and they highly praised our defense forces. Airplane-producing workers were encouraged by these interceptions and gained new energy to produce airplanes as quickly as possible.” This was yet another example of attempts to raise morale with fictional stories, many of which were not acknowledged until after the war.¹

While these attacks dramatically affected the lives of people in Usa, school officials did what they could to maintain some sense of normalcy for their students. But there was now a new normal. Teachers left their positions to join the army, students scraped bark off trees to make uniforms, and bombing attacks killed families, but rice was still planted and classes were sometimes held. The cryptic daily log kept by the principal of the elementary school in Usa describes this new normal. These entries chronicle the time between the beginning of the Japanese school year in April, which coincided with the beginning of the most intense bombing over Oita, and the end of the war in August 1945.

April (two weeks after first bombing of Usa airfield)
2nd: Goodbye to conscripted soldiers. Goodbye to Tsuda Toyoshi at 6:00; goodbye to Tokumitsu Hayashi at 14:30.
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May
1st: Sirens. Air raid. Students evacuated.
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15th: Emergency staff meeting to discuss how to educate the students when they cannot come to school. For the time being, teachers will be sent out to the student’s homes when classes cannot be met at school as they can come and go more quickly than students.
......
30th: Sirens. After morning assembly, all but first graders strip trees.

June
1st: Sirens. Air raid. All but 1st and 2nd graders strip trees. National Military Service Ceremony held at 14:00.
......
29th: Sirens.
30th: Warning. Raid by small planes, send everyone home.

July
1st: Sirens. Hold regular morning classes. All students sent to work.
......
31st: Sirens. Classes end at 10:00.

August
1st: Sirens. Air raid.
......
14th: Sirens. Because of the increased air raids, we have started a new rule for classes. If there is siren by 8:00, students go to their local classroom. If there is an alarm, study at home.
15th: No sirens, classes held locally. Sirens. Send students home. Government announcement raises questions.
16th: The principal goes to Yokkaichi to confirm the reports on end of war. Due to the end of the war, classes will be held at school. Classes in morning, clean up and go home after noon.
......
24th: Ceremony held from 8:30 to discuss what happens now that war is over.²

² Fujisawa, pp. 87-91.
Dodging Bullets and Delivering Babies

The students in this and surrounding schools carried out their responsibilities, made sacrifices, and experienced the horror of air strikes almost every day during this period. They worked in the fields and forests, and occasionally studied in the relative safety of shrines and temples scattered around the mountains. Food was becoming scarce in the last year of the war. Usa elementary school student Takafumi Yoshimura recalls, “We brought our bento [lunch box] to school every day as usual, but now they were made of wood, not aluminum like before the war. Also, the bento had to be filled with barley not rice. Teachers checked the bento to make sure we only had barley, as all our rice had to be sold to the government.” One other Usa boy still in elementary school at the time describes the chaotic scene only days before the end of the war:

Close to the end of the war, I attended Choshu Elementary School. There were hardly any classes as the older kids helped us dig shelters on school grounds. During summer break, sirens would go off all the time, and we had to stay at school day and night. In case the school was bombed, we put out fires to prevent them from spreading. Once, I was walking across Komatsu Bridge with a protective cloth over my body when, all of a sudden, a Grumman flew toward me. I was right in the middle of the bridge when I heard splashing in the water, and it struck me that he was shooting! He was shooting all around me, and I was sure I was going to die. But I didn’t want to die on a bridge so I turned around and started running. I ran the fastest hundred meters ever in my life. Lucky, I found a shelter along the river and dove into it. No one else was there. It took me a while to catch my breath. I came out and continued on my way. As I reached the top of the hill, he started shooting at me again, and I found another shelter with a few tatami mats in it. Just as I thought I was safe, an explosion crumpled the shelter, piling dirt on top of me. When I finally made it home, I was bruised and totally exhausted.

Life on the ground throughout Oita Prefecture became desperate, but the people never quit doing their part to win the war. Tsuruko Tomonari was a nursing student who grew up in Oita and later became a midwife in Beppu. Those days remain clear to her over 60 years later.

3 Saiji Ikeda, quoted in Matsuki, p. 94.
The girls in our neighborhood were organized into groups by older ladies, about 20 to a group. When bombs fell on our homes, some would get stuck on the roof before they exploded (these were the smaller time bombs). To protect the houses, we’d put our aprons on and knock the bombs off the roofs with long rods. We’d also put out fires and build shelters for our neighbors. We weren’t scared, because we never thought about them exploding. It is unthinkable now, but that was normal then. We were fortunate that none exploded as we moved them.

Nurse Tomonari’s work as a midwife shows the strains on people under the bombing, even if the bombs hit too far away to inflict direct damage.

I came to Beppu to help my aunt who was a midwife. When air raid sirens sounded, we’d evacuate to a shelter we’d built next to the ladies clinic where I worked. The bombing was almost always at night. I would get up each morning, put on my nurse’s hat, prepare breakfast and feed the patients, then sterilize our equipment. The midwives lived together in the clinic and we built the shelters ourselves. Even though Beppu was never bombed, it was so close to Oita City, we didn’t know if it would be next. The shelter was very small, just big enough for a few people to stand in. Initially, there were 38 midwives in our group, but most left the area when the bombing started. Only three of us stayed until the war was over. Some of the doctors also left. During Oita bombings we used to take the women from the hospital to the shelter to give birth. Since the shelter was too small, we couldn’t fit them all in there, so those not yet ready to give birth were left in the clinic alone during the bombing. It was very difficult to assist a birth underground, because dirt was all over the place and falling from above, as well. To make it worse, we had no hot water or proper equipment in the shelter. All these things had to be left in the hospital when we rushed the women to the shelter. It was impossible to keep anything sterile, so infection was a constant problem. Even in the clinic, we had little in the way of sanitary equipment; no gauze, bandages, or clean needles. We washed and rewashed the gauze. I guess all the supplies went to the soldiers. All births had to be natural. We couldn’t perform C-sections because we didn’t have enough tools or any way to sterilize and clean what we had. There were times we just couldn’t do anything to help the mothers or the babies when complications arose. We just waited for them to die. When babies were delivered in the shelter, we cut the cord there. For everything else we waited until we got back to the clinic. After the mother and baby went home, they were mostly left on
their own because we were too shorthanded to provide them with any regular check-up. Fortunately, most babies were delivered healthy, and because the bombing was not directly on Beppu, the hospital facilities were intact, so we could usually finish the delivery and return to the hospital when the sirens stopped. Each air raid lasted about one hour.

Despite the sirens and bombings, students, like the nurses, continued their work by modifying their production plans to meet new challenges. Like the clinics, some factories relocated. Ichiro Hashimoto, assigned to a factory making airplane engines from February 1945 until the end of the war, recalls:

As the raids got worse toward the end of the war, some of the smaller factories like mine were moved outside the city to escape the bombing. Big tunnels were dug into the sides of mountains and we moved into those to do our work. Our tunnel was huge, and we would make the engines there. Plane engines at that time were not so big, so we kept up the pace. As young students we had no experience or training to perform such specialized work, but we worked feverishly under the instruction of professional engineers.