The Lightning Bolt

Digging In

The Battle for Okinawa was obviously lost, despite the brave face put on by the commanders in the field and in Tokyo. Generals simply do not commit suicide, even in Japan, when they have won a major battle, and the suicides were mounting. The country now waited for the invasion of the southern island of Kyushu. Resistance in the air proved negligible at best, as few airplanes were in flying condition despite desperate attempts to patch them up and return them to the air, if only with young untrained pilots. Fortifications appeared along the coast, including newly dug trenches and shelters, and the construction of single-plane protective concrete bunkers dotted the few remaining operational air bases.

In Tokyo, Hiji’s Isematsu Matsumoto continued his service as a member of the Imperial Guard. Bombs dropped around the palace with increasing frequency, and the emperor hid in his underground quarters while Isematsu and others did what they could to shore up the defense of the palace grounds. But the bombs were getting closer.

At one post, a bomb fell and killed five of our guards. You couldn’t tell who they were, their bodies were blown to bits, and the ones left were bleeding internally. Because I was in charge of the area, I had to go to the shrine and pray for the dead men. The emperor hid in his shelter during the raids, and, when we had funerals for those men, he never came, only sent flowers to bless them. I remember thinking how lucky these dead men were for receiving the blessing of the emperor. The bombs kept falling and our commanders trained us to prepare for war to be fought on our land. I remember feeling very sad about what this meant, but I had to protect my country. So I got ready to face the enemy.

We were told that the enemy would probably land on our shores soon. And the speculation was that American tanks would come first, we began learning how to stop the tanks. My commanding officer was a young man, and he showed us these little bombs that looked like rice cakes. We were to dig holes in the ground, hide, and wait for the tanks to come close to the palace. When the tank was near enough, we were supposed to run to them, stick the bombs on the tank and blow ourselves up with it. It would be one man and one tank destroyed together. We were really hoping the Americans would be prevented from coming up ashore because none of
us wanted to blow ourselves up, like the kamikaze, but I guess we were going to do the same. We expected to become human “meat bombs.” We waited, not knowing when we would have to blow ourselves up with American tanks. We talked about who’d die first.

On August 2, Admiral Matome Ugaki, recently charged by Tokyo to prepare Kyushu for the coming invasion, moved his headquarters from Kagoshima on the southern tip of Kyushu to the naval base in Oita City. For Ugaki this was a return to Oita Prefecture, as he had begun the war with Admiral Yamamoto in Saiki while he supervised dive-bomber training exercises to prepare the Pearl Harbor attack. He had begun the war in Oita and now he would finish it there. On August 3, Ugaki’s command flag was raised at a flea-and-mosquito-infested underground bunker belonging to a local farmer. He spent the next few days inspecting military installations around Oita City and Saiki, all the time preparing for the final battle. American planes strafed the city, with some bullets hitting Ugaki’s headquarters residence. He heard of the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the unexpected entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan, and then a rumor of surrender. But like his Oita comrades advising the emperor in Tokyo, Ugaki remained unbending in his determination to keep fighting. From his war diary just after the atomic blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

While we were completely absorbed in preparing for the last stand after being pressed to the homeland, the atomic bomb attacks and the Soviets joining the war, thus deteriorating our position, shocked us. But we can take countermeasures against them. We still have enough fighting strength remaining. It might be the view of some clever fellows to surrender with some strength left, instead of being completely destroyed, if and when we can’t avoid defeat anyway. But those fellows advocating that idea are nothing but selfish weaklings who don’t think seriously about the future of the nation and only seek immediate benefits.... Moreover, it’s clear, too, that the whole nation wouldn’t be pressed to taste the bitterness of war, and some cunning fellows would take advantage of a defeat so that the traditional Japanese spirit would be basically destroyed and even the noble spirit of revenge be lost, making the prospect of the empire extremely dark. In the end, the future of this empire will be completely ruined. Even though it becomes impossible for us to continue organized resistance after expanding our strength, we must continue guerrilla warfare under the emperor and never give up the war. When this
resolution is brought home, we can’t be defeated. Instead, we can make the enemy finally give up the war after making it taste the bitterness of a prolonged conflict.¹

While Admiral Ugaki readied his remaining military forces for the invasion, and Isematsu Matsumoto trained in the art of suicide attacks on tanks rolling into Tokyo, combat training for school boys and girls continued unabated, with girls trained especially in the defensive use of long bamboo poles. As bamboo is found throughout the prefecture of Oita, this made a little sense, but not much. People had been told they should sacrifice themselves for the emperor and their country, and stories abounded of young people ready to die when the enemy stormed ashore. This sentiment is summed up clearly by Yonosuke Yanase, at the time a thirteen-year-old boy in Beppu whom Admiral Ugaki would have been proud of.

I was ready to die for Japan. I wanted to join the kamikaze, but I was too young. You had to be fourteen to join the military and if the war had continued I would have definitely gone. I wanted to join the kamikaze because I didn’t want Japan to lose. Japan was God’s country. As a kamikaze, I could help God’s wind blow and it would change the direction of the war. In addition, it would be an honor to die for my family and my country. Families with men in the military received an honorary plaque to display in their homes. But mine was one of the few families that didn’t have that so I wanted to make a name for us. At the end of the day, men were supposed to be warriors, not doctors or pharmacists. To be in the military was the highest honor, so much so that if you were not, you weren’t really a man. We idolized the kamikaze and had the war gone on for another year, I would’ve died proudly.

Nursing the Wounded

Whether through national pride or a controlled and twisted press, the people kept vigilant. One example was 20-year-old Yukie Matsumoto of Hiji, who on April 20, 1945, entered the war as a nurse. She and 20 other young women from throughout Oita were sent to Kagoshima, the most active kamikaze center in Japan and home to a major army air base.

¹ Ugaki, pp. 656-659.
I had a lot of fun going to Kagoshima. All of us felt proud and excited about the adventure. We wore the sharp and fashionable nurse uniform designed by the empress, and everyone admired us. We took the train to Kagoshima. From there, we rode a horse-drawn carriage to the military hospital. However, even before we reached the hospital we found out that it had been moved to a makeshift facility in the mountains. American planes bombed the area almost every day. We treated those injured from the bombing, mostly soldiers, but also some civilians. The conditions were horrific; those who were severely injured didn’t survive. There would be dozens of those wounded lining up in front of the operating room waiting for surgery. Those with leg wounds that didn’t need amputation were just turned away immediately. The wounded were treated according to their severity. It was terrible. We listened to many stories from the soldiers, and then had to make the awful decision of who’d get treatment and who would be just left to die. We felt this tremendous sadness when we had to make these life-or-death decisions. But my spirit never broke. I had to be a nurse, and so I was. I was there only a few months, then the war ended. But the experience was life changing. There’s not a nurse who lived through this trauma who wasn’t changed.

No Taste for Invasion

On the American side, there was no enthusiasm for an invasion. Soldiers knew from the brutality of many battles, especially Okinawa, where defense of the homeland took on a particularly gruesome character, that the Japanese people would fight to the death. There was little taste for that, from the common soldier to the president of the United States. But the Japanese had not surrendered despite their troops being defeated, even decimated, and their air power all but finished. And major cities throughout the country were flattened by B-29s to the point that military historian F. J. Bradley argues that by August 1945 “there were no strategic targets left.”2 So how would this war end? American casualties for the invasion of Kyushu were projected to be 22,576 killed, wounded, and missing during the first 30 days. For every ten additional days another 11,000 would fall. The attack was scheduled to begin on November 1. President Truman made the call. The invasion would be put on hold and Japan would feel the heat of the atomic bomb, first dropped on August 6.

2 Bradley, Title page.
Japanese newspapers did not carry any details of the atomic bombings, thus most people had little knowledge of or response to them. While rumors spread that some new type of weapon had been used against Japan, to those outside the two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, little was known. “No one used the words atomic bomb,” remembers Masaaki Yano. “We just heard there was some new type of high powered bomb. It was after the war I heard it was an atomic bomb.” Yoshio Ninomiya heard something about a special bomb exploding in Hiroshima, but, like Masaaki Yano, he had never heard of an atomic bomb. “Even our teachers probably didn’t really know anything about it; at least, they did not talk as if they did.” In Usa, located in the northern part of Oita and closer to Hiroshima, some recognition of the danger posed by an atomic bomb emerged. Takafumi Yoshimura remembers, “We heard that a powerful bomb had dropped on Hiroshima and, all of a sudden, students were told to stop wearing dark clothes and change to white. Someone said white clothes don’t absorb radiation as much as black clothes, so we changed into white.”

Former prime minister Murayama had left his Oita home late in the war when he was conscripted. He was stationed in nearby Kumamoto at the time of the first atomic bomb.

I was in Kumamoto when the news about the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima came. At the time, no one knew anything about atomic bombs, so it was only called “a very bright light.” If you were in the light, you’d get seriously injured. That was how the troops were informed. During the Kumamoto bombing, the troops hid in the mountains that surrounded the city, so we had little information on the Hiroshima bombing. But, privately, we did wonder, “How can we fight a war under these circumstances?”

Nobuo Kawamura, the Oita school teacher pressed into service near the end of the war, served in Kokura, just north of the Oita Prefecture border with Fukuoka Prefecture and about 100 kilometers from Hiroshima. He remembers:

On the 6th when Hiroshima was hit, I was in Kokura. It was too far away for us to hear or see it, however. The officers informed the soldiers that a new type of bomb exploded in Hiroshima. The soldiers were ordered to put on our long-sleeve shirts. In addition, when sirens went off, we were to wear our full suit. On August 9, at around 11:00, a call came that the same bomb was dropped in Nagasaki. We found out later that Kokura, where I was stationed at the time, was the initial target. It just so happened the
city was shrouded in clouds and the target not visible that day, so the Americans went with their back-up plan and hit Nagasaki.

One young man from Oita did witness the bombing of Hiroshima at close range. He tells what he saw while training as a youth naval cadet.

I graduated from middle school in March 1945. Rather than going on to high school, I volunteered to enroll in the naval school on Etajima at age sixteen. The island of Etajima was just off the coast of Hiroshima, and I saw B-29s flying over on a regular basis. We studied English, math, physics, and Japanese in the morning and learned how to steer a boat, how to shoot, and other military skills in the afternoon. Furthermore, we swam in the sea every day as part of the training. One morning, as we were walking to the ocean from school, we saw what looked like a lightning bolt coming from Hiroshima. The explosion sounded like thunder, and raised a mushroom cloud. When we got back to the school and inquired what the bomb was in Hiroshima, no one knew it was an atomic bomb; just that it was a new type of bomb. We were ordered to cover our arms with stitched socks to protect ourselves from getting burns. For days after that, we’d pull them on at the sound of the air raid siren. Nevertheless, we kept on training, even going back to the sea in the boats. But we did not go swimming again.

After the war ended, we were let out of the school to go home. I boarded a ferry to Kure. From there, I’d take a train along the coast toward Oita. It was after nightfall when we left Etajima. When the train passed through Hiroshima city, I could see very little of the destruction. But I definitely noticed that there were no longer buildings against the skyline. It was a horrible hollow feeling. Luckily, even though I was close to the explosion, I never experienced any radiation sickness, nor did my classmates. We saw the explosion but escaped injury.3

When the bombing of Hiroshima elicited no Japanese response to American calls for surrender, the Americans decided to bomb Nagasaki on August 9. Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall explained a few years after the war that Truman hoped Japan’s leaders would be “shocked into action” following these bombings. The devastation from the Hiroshima bomb was quickly grasped in Tokyo by those few with access to the truth, but it took two days before the emperor even ordered the cabinet’s chief bureaucrat to

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3 Interview with Yasuo Tanaka.
draft the Imperial Rescript Ending the War. Despite the follow-up bombing of Nagasaki, it took three additional days before the draft was sent to the prime minister’s cabinet, which modified it before finally approving it for transfer to the emperor. On the night of August 14 he signed it. All the while, the three military leaders from Oita advising the emperor resisted the obvious.

In his Oita headquarters, Admiral Ugaki never stopped planning for massive resistance, despite the expected toll this would take on the people. The citizens in Oita were mobilizing and knew little or nothing of the heated discussions taking place in Tokyo nor the most recent catastrophic events befalling their country. They just waited and watched the skies for more American planes and scanned the coastline for invading American soldiers.

Bix, pp. 524-526.