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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The Emperor's Voice

During the 20 days between the Potsdam Declaration demanding unconditional surrender and the end of the war on August 15, 1945, the emperor and his advisors struggled with how to stop the war and maintain Japan's dignity. Throughout this time the bombing of Japanese cities continued unabated. Oita felt the blasts until August 11. During those two weeks of bureaucratic dithering, an estimated 380,000 Japanese died. One Oita historian writes, “Had they [the Japanese leaders] accepted the Potsdam Declaration to begin with, this could have been avoided. It is a 20-day tragedy.”

Then, the world changed on August 15.

All morning, the radio kept broadcasting that the emperor was to make an important announcement at noon. On this particular day, the weather was wonderful across the entire nation. Oita's skies were blue and the summer sun shone brightly. As it approached noon, citizens gathered around whatever radio they could find. Even at this point, the populace still believed that their blessed nation was invincible and that it was inconceivable that Japan could lose any war. Many people actually expected the emperor to encourage them to keep fighting, to fight harder. It was noon. After the national anthem, the emperor's voice came on. No one had ever heard his voice before. “Upon reviewing the situation between the world and our empire, it is with grave....” The radio signal was so bad; people had a difficult time understanding what the emperor was saying. Some people even thought it was a call to arms for a battle on mainland Japan. However, what little many of us could understand made it clear we'd lost the war. People started to cry and moan in pain.

As the morning of August 15 broke, student factory workers went about their business as usual. In Saiki, fifteen-year-old Kou went to work in the navy shipyard as he did every day. “We were ordered to gather in an open space to listen to a recorded announcement by the emperor. When I heard we had

1 Hoashi, p. 88.
2 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
to gather for the emperor’s speech, I expected to hear the war was over.” This youthful insight into the coming end was not shared by most other young people. Twelve-year-old Yoshio Ninomiya loaded the rocks by the river into the truck as he did every day. Heading home after work, he recalls, “someone in a small store had a radio playing and that was how I listened to the emperor’s talk. But I did not quite understand what he said. When I got home, I saw my father crying. It was a sad scene. He told me Japan had lost the war and now it was over. I couldn’t believe it because I thought Japan was still winning. But at the same time I felt relieved, although I couldn’t tell anyone how I felt at that time.”

Takafumi Yoshimura in Usa recalls:

It was during summer break, and I went to the store on an errand for my family. I remember being surprised that for the first time in a long time there were no air raid sirens going off. When I got to the store, the radio was on, and a lady was crying. She told me she’d just heard that Japan lost the war. My family didn’t have a radio, so I’d not heard the speech. I couldn’t accept the fact that Japan lost because I'd always been taught Japan would win the war. I was really confused. I'd planned to become a soldier. My parents were farmers, but I didn’t want to be a farmer. Being a soldier was my path out of farm life. What was I going to do now? I had to think what I should do next.

Ichiro Hashimoto was in a protective tunnel working on airplane engines when the announcement came.

I remember the radio announcement at noon. I don’t know if they did a bad job recording his message, but the announcement was not clear. We couldn’t tell if he was saying, “Keep it up!” or “Give up.” It took a while to find out that the war had actually finished. We went back to school after that, and the teachers told us the war was over and that was it. They didn’t say Japan had lost, only that the war was finished. They didn’t show much emotion, and, as I was still just a kid, I didn’t know how to feel. I remember I didn’t feel much, though.

Masaaki Yano was working in his bomb-making factory in Oita City when the students were told to stop and listen to a special announcement on the radio. “I heard that the war was over and knew that the United States had won. I didn’t think much about the future of Japan. I was just looking forward to going back to school and hoped the teachers would not hit me anymore.”
Tetsuo Tsukuda, hearing of the war’s end at school, recalls a similar sense of relief, “I felt happy, even though we lost. Maybe we could have enough food now, I thought.”

Poison for the Women

Women had particular concerns in the days following the surrender. Tsuruko Tomonari was working alone in her maternity clinic in Beppu when she heard the emperor’s talk. “It was about noon when I heard the speech. I could not believe that we’d lost the war. I cried alone.”

In Oita, Nobuko Eto was working in her hospital when she was told to go with the other nurses and doctors to the office to hear an important announcement. But this headstrong girl refused to leave her station. “We were so busy in the hospital treating injured people I didn't have time to listen to the emperor’s message. Later, my friend told me that the war was over and that we had lost. Those were the only words I heard, and my head went blank. It was so depressing.” Nobuko and her friends were told that the Americans would come soon. Before leaving the hospital that day, the pharmacist handed her a crumpled piece of red paper with powder inside. “If something happens,” he said to her, “take this.” It was poison.

Nurse Yukie Matsumoto, the young woman so proud of the stylish uniform fashioned by the empress, spent the last days of the war treating those injured by bomb attacks around Kagoshima in southern Kyushu. As soon as the doctors and nurses heard the war was over, everything changed. They wasted no time leaving the makeshift military hospital.

Those of us from Oita started to walk home. Before leaving, we were told that American soldiers were landing soon, and if they found us we’d almost certainly be raped. A doctor gave each of us a syringe filled with poison. We were to use that before being captured. It took us two and a half days to get home, but we didn’t run into any problems. I kept the poison for a long time, but now I don’t know where it is. It’s been sixty years, and I’m guessing it long ago lost its potency anyway.

Defeated and Sent Home

Those serving in Japan’s military heard about the end of the war at different times in locations scattered across Japan and the Asia Pacific region.
Captain Morimasa Yunokawa, the kamikaze officer who had trained his pilots in Usa and Oita, took the news hard.

I was at Komatsue training to use the new Oka 2-2s for kamikaze attacks. I had heard the day before that the emperor was to make an announcement. So I gathered my men around the radio and we listened but we could barely make out the words because the quality was so bad. We knew immediately that the war was over; we just couldn't make out the exact words.

I gave a speech to my subordinates. I said that we all heard what the emperor had to say. It seems the war is over, but I don’t know what’s really happening. A lot of men have died fighting this war, and for what? This may be the emperor’s real desire, but it may also be what some people surrounding the emperor forced him to say. Therefore, we must assess the situation closely before taking any action. We don’t want to make any mistakes. Stay calm and wait until the situation becomes clearer.

Three days later, on the 18th of August, the troops were finally instructed with clarity regarding the real situation and the plan of action. I finally accepted the defeat. On August 21, we received our final paychecks, and I sent my men home. The officers had a final dinner together. I’d already decided that I would commit suicide. I’d trained and sent so many men off on their suicide missions. All the while, I’d been told to fight harder. What a complete reversal this was.3

Captain Yunokawa, who had earlier been saved from death on March 18 in Usa when American fighter planes shot up his kamikaze command, was saved yet again, this time thanks to his own commanders. He was preparing a pistol to shoot himself when his superiors entered the room to intervene and give him one last important and secret assignment, one a loyal follower of the emperor could not refuse. As told by his biographer:

As he was preparing to put a gun to his head, a secret message came from Naval Headquarters ordering him to join in a mission to save the emperor. No one knew if the emperor was going to be executed. Japanese have long believed that the lineage of the emperor must be preserved and protected. So, the idea was that even if the emperor was executed, his family must be protected. Being a respected, trusted and capable officer,

3 Ironically, Captain Yonakawa would soon join the Japan Self-Defense Forces, working closely with Americans for decades after the war.
Captain Yunokawa was chosen to carry out this mission. He accepted the assignment. A fiction was created that Captain Yunokawa had gone on a kamikaze raid and died in action. He went underground, like a spy. Under a false identity, Captain Yunokawa moved to Shimane Prefecture and started a new life in a totally strange place. He chose that location because no one knew him there. He told people that all his family had died in Hiroshima, and he was alone. After five months he received a message that the emperor and his family were safe, and he could come out of hiding. It was in Shimane that he met his future wife, under his assumed name. He soon returned to his home close to Tokyo to live with his new bride under his real name.4

Another kamikaze pilot who survived the war was Kiichi Kawano of Oita. He was scheduled to take off on his mission on August 16. He had seen his friends fly out on the days and hours just before the emperor's speech and had every intention of joining them.

One of my good friends was Yoshiomi Nishimori. On August 13, right before departing on his mission, he called me over to his room and asked me to exchange uniforms with him. “Why should I exchange uniforms with you?” I asked him. “I'm going to die in three days, too!” He said that he was going to die before me, and that he wanted to die in a newer and cleaner uniform. Since he was my senior, I agreed and exchanged uniforms with him. When I went home after the war I was actually wearing his uniform. I think it was a blessing from god that my uniform was sacrificed in the war instead of me. For many years after the war I looked for his family to return his uniform to them, but I could not find them. He was originally from Kochi, and they built a museum there to commemorate the war, so I donated the uniform to the museum.

On the 15th another friend of mine flew out on his mission at 11:00 a.m. Then, at noon, we were ordered to listen to the emperor's speech. After I realized the war was over, I hoped my friend would turn back, but he never returned home. That day I thought to myself how unfortunate I was not to die. Those who died were the lucky ones. At that time we were so uncertain how Japan would turn out. It was a very twisted time.

4 Interview with Yuko Hada, Tokyo, July 11, 2012. The existence of a secret mission to protect the emperor is supported by comments from Imperial Guard Isematsu Matsumoto and his wife, Yukie, during an interview of February 25, 2012. See the following.
Isematsu Matsumoto, serving in the Imperial Guard at the palace in Tokyo, gathered with his fellow guards to listen to the radio message from the emperor.

We were in our barracks just outside the palace. When I realized what he was saying, my chest tightened and I was crushed. The guard unit was dismantled right then and there. Some younger guys who weren’t officially military were hired to protect the emperor. A rumor circulated that one certain commander and some of his buddies tried to organize a secret force to protect the emperor and maybe overthrow the government. They didn’t want to give up the fight. This wasn’t a formal or sanctioned organization, just a few commanders who decided to do this over drinks. I found out soon that these rumors were true, as one of these officers said that he might contact me later to continue the fight, and it could take up to five years before he’d send me my orders. I understood, I said, and finally, on September 7, we were all dismissed and sent home.

While I waited for the train to take me back to Oita, I saw my first American jeep. The American soldiers came into Tokyo, and they took pictures of us. Would I be secretly ordered to fight them again? For the next five years, I was often anxious and dreaded hearing from that officer. Thankfully, he never contacted me.

Most soldiers serving in Japan found out about the emperor’s talk after the civilians had heard it. “I didn’t hear the emperor’s speech, because I was busy with my army duties. We heard the news a few hours after the radio announcement from our superiors. At first I felt bad that we had lost, but some of us were at the same time relieved because it was a long time coming,” recalls former prime minister Tomiichi Murayama.

As soon as I found out the war was over, three friends and I headed home together. We just left. About ten days later, we received a letter from Oita City Hall, telling us to go back to our base in Kumamoto. The army had not yet been dissolved. Since we had left without authorization, we were reprimanded for having abandoned our duty. Rules are rules, the army always conducts things properly. So we went back, but as there was nothing to do, we were finally discharged. No speeches, no encouragement, we just left and were free.

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5 Matsumoto believes that it is possible, though difficult to verify, that this order was under the same secretive leadership as that which ordered Captain Yonakawa to go underground.
Mamoru Hirano worked as a noncombatant army technician in the airplane-maintenance factory preparing kamikaze support planes for their missions.

It was right before I was to transfer to another location, since we followed the airplanes to wherever they were. I packed up all of our tools and got on the train when people asked us what had happened. We had no clue but soon found out that the war was over. I knew the situation wasn’t going in our favor, despite the good job done by the kamikazes. I guess I was relieved that it was finally finished, but I couldn’t say that to anyone at the time. We couldn’t really speak those words even then.

Nobuo Kawamura was stationed in Fukuoka, about 100 kilometers from his hometown of Oita, when the war ended.

I didn’t hear the emperor’s speech. A lot of people heard the announcement, but many of us in the military didn’t. It’s not like we had radios lying around in those days. We found out by a telephone call from headquarters, ordering us not to make a move, no explanation, nothing, so we didn’t even know that Japan had lost the war. When we finally realized what happened, I was actually happy. I’d known for a while we couldn’t win, but I could never have said that. Some of the career soldiers in our unit ran away, because they thought they’d be captured and executed when the Americans came. Most of us weren’t career soldiers, and we were just happy to go home to our families.

Those soldiers fighting overseas found out the war had ended over a period of weeks, depending on their assignment. The Oita 47th Regiment was stationed in Indonesia when the war ended; many isolated on small, out of the way islands. Captain Shukichi Make was one of them.

I was in Timor, on Sumbawa Island with my men when the war ended. On the morning of August 15, we got a phone call to let us know what had happened. My first thought was this was a joke, some kind of plot. When I fully realized it was true, I cried, as I’d spent seven years with my men, and I felt sorry for them. I tried to figure out why we’d lost. We waited fifteen more days to get our orders. On August 31 members of the regiment who were nearby gathered around our headquarters and one of the captains burned our regimental flag. When the Australian Army took control over Timor, they ordered us to bring in our weapons
and gunpowder to a designated location. But, because the territory was so big, and the Australians could not manage everything, they finally instructed us to decide on our own how to dispose of our weapons and ammunition. We took the gunpowder and dumped it over a cliff. We stayed in Timor for another year, living off the land as best we could. The Australians didn’t provide us with any food. We cultivated bananas, corn, and vegetables. In that climate, things grew fast. We also planted rice. We didn’t get home until June 1946.

Jiro Nakano, the young naval wireless operator from Beppu, ended the war in the city of Makassar in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. At the end of the war he was a navy petty officer, 2nd class. He was in his company’s headquarters attending to the wireless machine on August 15 when he received the telegraph message about the end of the war.

I couldn’t believe the message I’d just received. After I told the other men in the room we all went crazy, throwing things around the room and screaming that this could not be true. But it was true, and we had to accept the fact. The communications unit was sent to a POW camp at Malimpung along with other navy and army units. I was ordered to stay there and take charge of handing over weapons, including my wireless, to British Indian Army soldiers. My gun was taken away, but I stood guard over the equipment. Before the war ended, the local Indonesians and Chinese had greeted us with “Good morning, sir.” Now that they saw us as unarmed prisoners, they’d spit on us. We stayed in Indonesia for almost one year before returning to Japan in June 1946.

Sergeant Naomasa Kodama of the 47th Regiment was almost completely isolated on another small island near Timor.

The 47th Regiment was separated into nine groups, and mine was number six, with about 200 men. There was little contact among the groups. I didn’t know the war was over until sometime in October. For two months we received no communication from anyone. When we were finally contacted, the war had been over. Before leaving, we threw our guns into the ocean. In my mind, we did not lose. Japan never surrendered – it was just that the war was now finished.
Ugaki's Pride

Three hours after the emperor told his people that Japan would put down its sword, one final, dramatic sortie on American forces took place. This unsanctioned kamikaze attack originated from the naval air base in Oita City and was led by Admiral Matome Ugaki. This was the same commander who had helped prepare Japanese forces for the first attack on the United States base in Pearl Harbor from the Oita town of Saiki four years before, and who had been entrusted to coordinate the defense of Kyushu during the anticipated invasion. The story is introduced here by Hideo Sonoda who was one of the young pupils, working in the factory that prepared the planes for kamikaze raids out of Oita City.

Some of us were resting, listening to the emperor's announcement, when, all of a sudden, someone yelled, "Get up! Get Up! Now! We're going for a final attack. The commander is going for one final attack! Go make the bomb attachments now!"

We rushed into the factory and, for the next two hours, attached bombs underneath the planes. We knew the war was over, but we had no choice but to help get the planes ready. Our job was making parts to hold bombs, so we did that. It wasn't our place to question anything. We had to obey orders. I don't know how the kamikaze members felt, but my guess was no one was against going. Their leader simply said, "I'm going!" and they said, "Then we're coming with you!"

Admiral Ugaki had heard the emperor's message, and wrote the following in his final diary entry before he led the attack.

There are various causes for today's tragedy, and I feel that my own responsibility was not light. But, more fundamentally, it was due to the great difference in national resources between both countries. I hope from the bottom of my heart that not only military men but all the Japanese people will overcome all hardships expected to come in the future, display the traditional spirit of this nation more than ever, do their best to rehabilitate this country, and finally revenge this defeat in the future. I myself have made up my mind to serve this country even after death takes me from this earth. Now at 1600 my staff officers are waiting for me to drink the farewell cup, so I'm going to end this war diary.6

6 Ugaki, pp. 665-666.
The admiral then drank his last cup of sake with his staff at 5th Air Fleet Headquarters and headed for Oita airfield by car. In his hand he held a short sword given him years before by Admiral Yamamoto. When he got to the field he saw 11 Suisei dive-bombers warming up their engines, with 22 airmen lined up in front of them, for each plane carried a crew of two. On each man’s forehead was the traditional Kamikaze head band with the red sun in the center. Surprised to see so many join this final attack, for he only ordered five planes to accompany him, Ugaki asked, “Will all of you go with me?” They all shouted, “Yes, sir!” and raised their right hands in unison. Ugaki thanked them all, bade farewell to his staff and boarded his own plane, which held him, his first officer, and one other man who insisted on squeezing in. The planes took off one by one, disappearing into the sky as they headed south to Okinawa. His last message displayed the traditional Japanese warrior spirit that ignited this war, and which could not accept defeat without the final sacrifice.

Despite brave fighting by each unit under my command for the past six months, we have failed to destroy the arrogant enemy in order to protect our divine empire, a failure which should be attributed to my lack of capabilities. And yet, believing that our empire will last forever and the special attack spirit of the Air Force will never perish, I am going to proceed to Okinawa, where our men lost their lives like cherry blossoms, and ram into the arrogant American ships, displaying the real spirit of a Japanese warrior. All units under my command shall keep my will in mind, overcome every conceivable difficulty, rebuild a strong armed force and make our empire last forever. The emperor, Banzai! Time: 1924. 15 August 1945. From on board plane.7

What happened next remains a mystery. One American military historian reports that late that night radar from an American base in Okinawa registered a group of incoming planes. Night fighters on routine duty rushed to meet them and, after verifying they were not American, proceeded to shoot them out of the sky without any damage to American planes, ships, or ground forces.8 Local Oita reports insist that Ugaki crashed on the small island of Iheyajima, on the northern tip of Okinawa, and that no American targets were ever hit by him or his fellow kamikaze.

7 Ibid., from the epilogue.
American reports say that none of the 22 airmen returned to base. They all died. However, that is clearly not the case, as several Japanese reports claim that three planes returned with five airmen. (It appears one of the men died during the flight.) Over the years some of these men granted interviews to tell their side of the story. Their planes were too weak to make the trip due to engine failure, so they turned back before reaching Okinawa.

Conflicting views on the patriotic and spiritual merit of this attack have been debated since the end of the war. Just before leaving, some of Ugaki’s own officers tried to talk him out of it, while others then and later glorified it as a noble example of honoring the emperor and upholding Japan’s warrior spirit. From another corner of Japan comes the view from kamikaze Captain Morimasa Yunokawa. He had served under Ugaki at one time and knew the admiral’s character well. While not surprised at his action, Captain Yunokawa argues that he and most others within the military looked upon Ugaki’s last action with disgust. “It was shameful what Ugaki did. Many fine officers in the navy detested his action. This was totally uncalled for; the war was OVER. Many, including Ugaki’s Commander Jisaburo Ozawa, were mostly angry with him for not just taking his own life, but that of others as well. I went to the Naval Academy with some of those men he took with him. He should have committed harakiri instead.”

Oita Men on the Missouri

The final and formal ending of the war took place in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945, aboard the battleship USS Missouri. The emperor sent two representatives to sign the surrender document. One was Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu, who had been reappointed foreign minister only on August 17. The emperor hoped Shigemitsu would prove a conciliatory choice, as at least within Japan he was known as more amenable to ending the war than some others. The other was the chief of staff of the Japanese Army, General Yoshijiro Umezu. Ironically, the emperor ordered Umezu to represent the Japanese military at the very surrender that he had resisted as a member of the War Council in the days leading up to the end. These two men grew up in Oita Prefecture only a few kilometers from each other, one from Kitsuki and the other from Nakatsu. Thus the two Japanese signatures affixed to the formal surrender document on the battleship Missouri were both Oita men.

9 Interview with Morimasa Yonakawa.
During those many years of war throughout Asia and the Pacific, the quiet but strategically located Oita Prefecture played a role no one could have imagined prior to 1941. Supreme military leaders, foot soldiers, and airmen helped lead the way in many battles in China and throughout the Pacific. The prefecture had served as a primary training center for the first attack of the war on Pearl Harbor, and four years later the staging ground for the final kamikaze attack. It held many important air and naval bases, and by war’s end Japan’s foreign minister and three of the six most important advisors to the emperor called Oita home. Finally, the capstone of the prefecture’s historical role is that it fell on two Oita born men to sign the surrender document for Imperial Japan.

One is struck by how much one small place contributed so much to such a horrific period in history.