Japanese Reflections on World War II and the American Occupation

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17  A Bitter Homecoming

Demobilized

Japanese soldiers found themselves scattered around the Pacific, as well as in military installations throughout Japan. Those in Japan, such as Imperial Guard Isematsu Matsumoto, kamikaze support mechanic Mamoru Hirano, and former teacher and air defense soldier Nobuo Kawamura, were quickly demobilized and sent home. Others, like infantry trainee Tomiichi Murayama, who had just picked up and left on their own when the war was over, were required to return and formally process out of the military and into society. In their planning documents governing the Occupation, the Americans specifically dealt with this eventuality.

In order to effect the collection and documentation of personnel who have discharged themselves or been discharged without authority [occupying forces require] all such personnel to report by a certain date to selected centers to be specified by Army Area Headquarters or by Depot Area Headquarters.... It is provided that those reporting will not be subject to disciplinary action for desertion or other stated irregularities, but failure to comply with the order will entail severe penalties.¹

Following the emperor's declaration ending the war, the homecoming for some of Japan's fighting men was delayed for months, even years. This proved the case for Oita 47th Regiment captain Shunichi Make, 47th infantry soldier Naomasa Kodama, and young naval telegraph operator Jiro Nakano. When finally reaching Japanese soil aboard transport ships, they were met by Occupation forces to complete the demobilization process. As spelled out in the “Administrative Provisions for Discharge” found in American plans to secure the Occupation, the returning soldiers were placed into skill categories to determine how quickly they would be returned to their homes. The report stipulated:

Certain priority categories of personnel are first discharged. These categories may include:

a  Personnel for work in certain public utility services.

b  Personnel for work in transportation services.

¹ “The Occupation of Japan,” Section 4C-22, Appendix 6a, p. 9.
c Agricultural workers.

d Personnel for work in certain classes of building trades.

e Such other specialist personnel as may be required by army area commanders.²

Demobilization began after skills were assessed, with the Occupation forces spelling out in detail what each person was entitled to as they headed home. This included payment due each soldier or civilian employee of the military up to the date of discharge, plus a half month thereafter. It also included “haversack rations for the journey from the place of discharge to the place of residence, as well as food and clothing rations cards.” Additionally, “each man, on discharge, is issued a travel warrant to his place of residence.” Finally, each man could keep select military-issued goods, though there were exceptions. Under the category of clothing, the following order appeared:

a Each individual is allotted to retain, without payment, after discharge, the following items of clothing:
   1 Field Cap
   1 Field Jacket
   1 Pair Long Cloth Trousers
   1 Belt and Buckle
   1 Pair Boots or Shoes
   1 Pair Braces (if desired)
   1 Greatcoat
   2 Shirts
   2 Pair Underpants
   2 Pair Socks
   2 Handkerchiefs

b In additional to the above, one blanket per man may be issued.

c Deficiencies of clothing in relation to the scale in a and b above may be made up from local stores, if any are available.

d All insignia and badges of rank are removed from clothing retained, prior to departure of the individual.³

² Ibid., p. 11.
³ Ibid., Appendix 6b, pp. 1-2.
Upon departure for home, each former soldier received the following instructions in writing:

1. You have received the last payment which will be made by JAPANESE armed forces authorities for service with JAPANESE armed forces organizations. Pay has been calculated up to and including the day of discharge and for half a month thereafter.

2. On arrival at your destination, you will report, with your Discharge Certificate, to the local police station. There you will receive:
   I. A civil Identity Card.
   II. Instructions on registration at the local employment office.
   III. Failure to report at your local police station will result in investigation and punishment.

3. You will not be registered for employment nor will you receive food and clothing rations cards except on production of your discharge certificate.  

Awkward Reunions

Families in villages and towns around the prefecture waited for their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers to come home. In many cases, the wait was long, and in some cases forever. “When the war ended, people in our village wondered when the men would come back, or if they would not be coming back. There were quite a few people from our village who had gone to fight, so we were waiting for them. Some died, and some were missing,” recalls Hidekatsu Nakano. In some cases families were in for a lifelong wait, as no record of death was forthcoming and the expected loved one never came home. In other cases, the wait was long, but eventually rewarded. Akira Tani, a student in middle school when the war ended, remembers his brother’s return.

My third brother had been working in a factory in Manchuria, and then was conscripted into the army. After the war, but unknown to us at the time, he ran away from the army to avoid being captured. He moved from one place to another in China but eventually boarded a ship back to Japan. We didn’t know anything about this. One day he just appeared at our door step. He walked in and said, “I’m home.” My father was the

4. Ibid., Appendix 6b, p. 3.
first to see him and called to everyone to come. He said to my brother, “Fumioka, we thought you’d died in the war!”

One day, Sadayoshi Yutani’s mother told him and his sister that his father was coming home from Thailand. Seven-year-old Sadayoshi went with his mother and sister and grandparents to Oita station to meet his father. “It was the first time in my life that I saw my father in person. My sister said to him ‘welcome home.’ I was shy, stayed with my mother and said nothing to him. He came home with malaria.”

Children who had been expecting only months before that they would become soldiers and die for their country saw the former soldiers walking the streets still wearing their ragged, once proud uniforms. They also watched them beg, sometimes from their former enemy. “The Japanese soldiers hated the American soldiers, but didn’t express their feelings directly. In fact, many of them wanted cigarettes from the Americans, and took them when they could. This was a very sad scene to watch.”

The general sentiment was mixed and muted, but most people still admired these defeated men for the sacrifices they had endured. Ichiro Hashimoto, fifteen years old when the war ended, remembers seeing the men come home. He felt a sense of appreciation and, at the same time, sadness.

When I saw the soldiers return, my first thought was, “Gokurou sama deshita,” a common Japanese phrase depicting a pat on the back to show respect and gratitude for having worked so hard. My family lived right by the station in Oita City, so some of the returning men would stay at our house for a night because ours was the only house around. They hadn’t eaten well for a long time, so we fed them. They came from Manchuria and had fought in China.

Not everyone was welcomed so warmly, for the war’s loss was still raw and there was little energy or inclination to give a grand welcome home. “They came home quietly,” remembers Toru Takaya, a high school student at the time. “Some of the soldiers told me that when they left to join the war, everyone cheered and sent them off, but when they came back there was nothing. People looked at them coldly.” Tetsuo Tsukuda saw the men return to a hard life.

When they came home, there was no organized welcoming event; they just came home one by one to their families. Many had psychological

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Interview with Tetsuo Tsukuda.
problems and stayed away from people for long periods of time. Their friends had been killed, but they came home alive. This was shameful for them, so they stayed silently at home. Those who got out of the house had a difficult time finding a job, though many kept looking. Some became carpenters, and a few became teachers. But even these men did not talk about the war, and kept silent for 10, 20, even 30 years.

Psychological breakdown was common among returning soldiers. As seen earlier, Nobuo Kawamura, even though he had never fought overseas, refused to return to his job as teacher for over a year while he secluded himself at home. Naomasa Kodama experienced the same mental anguish; after returning from Indonesia he refused to leave his house for six months. It was a time of hunger in Usuki, his hometown, but he could not face leaving the house to find work. Even at 95 years of age, the shame of defeat and loss runs deep inside him. When asked to sit for a photo with his military medals and the battle flag carried by his brother during the war, he refused, saying “I cannot have such a photo taken holding those wartime keepsakes, because Japan lost the war.”

Even the women who had served in the army, in most cases nurses, also initially withdrew from society and refused to leave their homes. Yukie Matsumoto, the army nurse who walked back to Oita from Kagoshima at the end of the war, remembers:

When I got home I didn't want to do much of anything other than be a good daughter and help my family with household chores. This lasted about a year. Then one day, I had to take my older sister to Beppu where she was hospitalized in Kokuritsu Memorial Hospital. When I got to the hospital, I saw that one of her nurses was my former army nurse instructor. She asked what I was doing with my life and I told her. She said it was such a waste that I wasn't making good use of my skills as a nurse, so I started working with her and stayed there for some time. When the American doctors came to inspect our work, they criticized our standards as being too low. Even though I'd graduated during the war from nursing school, I had to take training courses and then retake the licensing exam. I took it and passed, and in 1951 I became fully certified and worked as a nurse for many years.

A few of the men had climbed to high rank in the military, and for them the return had its own problems. Takeyoshi Kajiwara tells of his uncle, who led troops in Papua New Guinea, only to be one of the few to survive
the fighting and hunger there. He returned home two years after the war ended. “When he finally came home, he was all bones, no fat. And even though he was very smart and a graduate of a military school with many managerial skills, he couldn’t find a job. At that time, former high-ranking officers like him couldn’t get employment in the government or jobs that needed security clearances. So he went into farming. Only years later did he become a school teacher, teaching Japanese.”

But some men were able to take up where they left off. Tomiichi Murayama went home to visit his family and then quickly returned to Tokyo to continue his studies at Meiji University. He returned to Oita City after graduation, where he entered politics as a young activist in the Socialist Party, eventually holding the position of prime minister of Japan.

Former imperial guard Isematsu Matsumoto returned to the small hamlet of Ooga near Hiji, where he worked on the family farm all his life. And Mamoru Hirano, after demobilization, returned to Usa where he opened a factory making shochu, a locally produced spirit.

Some stories took uneven twists and turns. Jiro Nakano, the young boy who joined the navy as a sixteen year old, returned from Indonesia to Beppu, where he became, in his own words, “a juvenile delinquent. I walked around the streets, getting in trouble, sometimes cursing the American soldiers. I was a very angry young man.” Later, he worked in the American camp in Beppu as a handy man, but he never grew close to any of the Americans during that time. After the camp closed and the economy eventually started to recover, he worked with his family in real estate acquisition.

Finally, there is Captain Yunokawa, the former naval kamikaze officer who, at the instruction of his commanding officers, ignored the surrender command, went underground and quietly disappeared into a small town with a new identity, waiting for new orders to protect the emperor’s family.

From the recluse to the rabble rouser, the university student to the family businessman, and the farmer to the underground nationalist, these soldiers of a defeated military discovered a country unsure how to welcome them home and uncertain how to integrate them back into a now changed society. What they all had to deal with, no matter their mental or financial state, was the presence of their former enemy in their streets, their shops, their hospitals, their schools, their homes, and their brothels. After the first few hundred occupying soldiers arrived in Oita Prefecture in the weeks after the surrender, the trickle turned into a flood, and the cities of Oita, Usa, and especially Beppu, were full of Americans for several years, changing the prefecture, like much of Japan, forever. This American presence would last from the formal Occupation period through the end of the Korean War.