Conclusion

Completing this book 70 years after the end of the war, and the 75th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the authors sense the timeliness and importance of the stories shared here. It also allows for reflection on the aftermath of the war and how Japan today has come to grips with this legacy.

The people of Oita Prefecture, both as citizens on the home front and soldiers on many fronts, had given unquestioned loyalty to their emperor and military leaders for most of the first half of the 20th century. Many died and those who survived lost relatives and friends on faraway battlefields and at home as a result of bombing and strafing from the feared American airplanes. Children quit school to produce munitions and repair fighter planes. Teenagers flew off on kamikaze missions, leaving behind grieving parents. And young women served as nurses and midwives, tending patients as hospitals burned and babies delivered in earthen shelters.

The people believed what the media told them, followed their leaders, no matter how confused the orders might be, and worshiped their emperor with an unwavering blind faith. Today, however, many express dismay at how completely they were misled during the war. They believed they were winning until the end and swallowed whole government propaganda about helping raise up their Asian neighbors. How does a government trick a whole nation? To understand this, we draw on parallels from China, for this reality bears striking similarity with Ran Ying’s experience as a student during China’s Cultural Revolution. It is easy to criticize this unreserved “group think” if one comes from a society where individual rights and freedom of expression is taken for granted. That, however, does not define life in a totalitarian society where not only are critical comments never uttered, they are in fact hardly thought of in the first place. In both instances, the few lines of communication were controlled completely by the government. Like Ran Ying reading only government-approved newspapers, revolutionary novels, and short stories, the people of Japan read only government-approved articles describing military “victories” and stories of heroic martyrs and inferior enemies. It was only after the war that any clarity and truth telling appeared.

And what of today?

At all levels of government, there exists an almost total absence of any penetrating analysis or acknowledgment of those years. In fact, most
political leaders, even most educators, prefer to avoid the discussion altogether. Unlike Germany, which accepted and acknowledged responsibility for its role in taking Europe to war, Japan finds it just too embarrassing, too difficult, and too painful to acknowledge the atrocities it inflicted around the Asia Pacific region.

To underscore this erasure of history, Oita City recently published the prefecture’s official historical timeline, beginning with the Stone Age and updated into the 21st century. Curiously, it omits any mention of events between 1934 and 1945. An uninformed reader would assume it was a time of no historical importance and consequences, but of course the silence screams out an insecurity and self-deceit masking a painful, irreconcilable past. In today’s Japan the CEOs of major corporations and politicians caught in a web of corruption or prideful blunders will go on television, bow deeply and apologize to the people of Japan hurt by their actions. However, a Japanese prime minister appears incapable of visiting those countries colonized and brutalized, acknowledge his country’s history and carry out the same traditional protocol to ask forgiveness of non-Japanese. It seems Japan cannot learn from Germany that this is the way to move forward.

This lack of critical leadership articulating a truthful and painstaking account of its role in the war has created a vacuum in time and consciousness. But vacuums never go unfilled, and enhanced nationalist initiatives strive to fill that vacuum by glossing over the horrors of the war and reinterpreting Japan’s pacifist constitution to allow greater military might, thus isolating Japan further from its Asian neighbors and marginalizing the voices crying for an honest appraisal.

At a personal level, the war remains a conflicted story for those who lived through it. This tension plays out with those who abhor the actions of their country, yet continue to wax nostalgic for the romance of the era. For example, at the beginning of one interview, upon hearing that the authors were from Hawaii, the interviewee apologized for the “unfair” attack on our home state. Then, when learning Ran Ying had grown up in China, he apologized for the horror her countrymen endured during the invasion of her homeland; however, it is the same gentleman who insists that his hometown of Saiki get full credit for its role in preparing for the Pearl Harbor attack. Another interviewee who had worked in the military factory during the war as a student and saw his friends incinerated by American bombs swears the war was a terrible mistake; but a model of the Mitsubishi Zero,

just like the one he used to repair as a child laborer, stands proudly in his office.

The romance of the war is also marketed to children today in local stores, as witnessed by the authors when visiting a hobby store displaying a row of Japan’s Mitsubishi Zero and the battleships Musashi and Yamato model kits. Pride in the iconic symbols of that period of course never fully faded, and, indeed, appears to be growing stronger with the encouragement of a government pushing away from an official pacifist stance to a more aggressive military posture.

The authors have witnessed the rising tide of nationalism from our home in Beppu when these right-wing organizations drive their black flag-decorated buses and vans through the streets blaring hateful comments aimed at Chinese and Koreans. Although dismissed by most Japanese as fringe elements of society no better than yakuza, or organized crime, their presence nonetheless intimidates as they shout down opponents, shut down movie theaters, and attack journalists they consider too openly critical of the dark side of Japanese history.

One can only hope that the people of Japan continue to listen to the voices of those like 86-year-old atomic bomb victim Sumiteru Taniguchi, who spoke at the August 9, 2015 commemoration of the Nagasaki bombing. After describing the horror and suffering he and others experienced, Taniguchi closed his comments in dramatic fashion with a warning to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that the government’s “meddling” with Japan’s pacifist constitution went against the wishes of all the survivors and would tragically lead once again to war.

Finally, we close with a return to America’s Occupation headquarters in Beppu. The land that held Camp Chickamauga is now known as Beppu Park, a beautiful testament to turning swords into plowshares. Each spring cherry blossoms cover the park and in the fall Japanese maple trees turn the grounds into glowing red and yellow. Children play ball and chase each other, while their parents and grandparents picnic and read under the trees beside small streams. Camp Chickamauga now exists only in the foggy memory of a few, with a simple rock placed at the top of the park marking its military past.

This is the place, both literally and figuratively, where the story of this book begins and ends. Initially we planned to tell the story of the American Occupation, only to be drawn to those ageing men and women from Oita Prefecture willing to share with us their memories of the war and Japan’s defeat. No doubt, and perhaps ironically, some of them still spend hours each year under the trees of Beppu Park sharing food, drink
and memories with their friends and families. We end with Mr. Yutani, the first person interviewed for this book who as a child visited the park to “attack” the likenesses of Roosevelt and Churchill. “I only feel relief that we lost the war,” he laments. “Otherwise, Japan would be just like North Korea today.”