

## A Soul in Sad Exile — Never-ending War of a Japanese Army Surgeon Hitoshi Nagai

### 1. Desperate Battlefield

On February 14, 1947, 34 remnants of a defeated Japanese troop unit surrendered to the Philippine Army after having been on the run in the jungles of Mindanao Island, the Philippines, for almost a year and a half after the end of World War II. In May 1945, U.S. forces had landed in the Cagayan area and driven the remnants to retreat into the mountainous area, including jungles and valleys. The retreat was so severe that it deprived the remnants of many lives. Although they had opportunities to surrender, the unit commander regarded the surrender-recommendation fliers distributed by the U.S. forces as an enemy trap to lure them out. Moreover, the unit commander believed that surrender was a shame to soldiers, saying: "We must never surrender." He gave the troops serving under him no choice but to continue their retreat.

Some soldiers who tried to desert were shot. Others who could not continue retreating due to illness or injury chose to commit suicide with hand grenades. Moving from one bivouac to another, hiding from their "enemies," their stockpile of rations running out, many soldiers died miserably of starvation. The Japanese military took food supply lightly and prohibited their soldiers from surrendering, which affected soldiers on the front line terribly, resulting in a wide variety of tragedies.

To survive, the starving remnants ate whatever they could, including weeds and mice. It was truly a "Desperate Battlefield." Living on the verge of starvation, the holdouts lost their humanity to such an extent that they did what was described in *Fires on the Plain*, a novel written by Shohei Ooka. One who survived the death jungle was Army Surgeon A, a first lieutenant, who had been drafted right after completing a private university medical course in September 1943 (the word "surgeon" in Japan refers to a military doctor).

### 2. Death Sentence

The remnants, including Surgeon A, were on the run for a year and a half. During this time, some of them engaged in repeated assaults on local residents in the Province of Bukidnon, Mindanao Island, causing more than 70 deaths. If they had accepted the end of the war a year and a half earlier, as many other Japanese soldiers had, the residents of Bukidnon and the holdouts themselves would have been spared tremendous suffering. In this sense, their surrender was "too late" and a truly deplorable tragedy for both sides.

Bukidnon residents who narrowly escaped the assaults reported torture, murder and sexual assault. Moreover, the Philippine Army discovered human bones and obtained other evidence that the remnants had practiced cannibalism. The connection between the 34 soldiers who surrendered and the terrible incidents reported attracted attention from the investigating authorities, resulting in the decision to subject the remnants to a war crimes trial.

The trial began on July 6, 1949, at the Philippine military commission located near Manila City Hall. At the trial, 18 remnants were prosecuted on charges of atrocities toward local residents on Mindanao Island following the end of the war. According to the indictment, Surgeon A and four other soldiers were charged with involvement in an atrocity suspected to have occurred in Bukidnon in September 1946. On September 20, 1949, of the 18 accused, 10, including Surgeon A, were sentenced to death by hanging and four to life imprisonment at hard labor. Three were acquitted. The prosecution of the remaining one was later rejected. Surgeon A was then 31 years old. His mother, upon hearing that her son had received a death sentence, fainted and later became ill.

### 3. Surviving in Muntinlupa

Japanese war crimes trials conducted by the Philippine Army continued from August 1947 to December 1949. The defendants were tried by Filipino judges mainly for murders and atrocities against Filipino civilians during the war. During the trial period of about two and a half years, approximately 150 persons were prosecuted (a total of 73 war crimes cases were tried), and 90% were declared guilty, including 79 sentenced to death and 31 to life imprisonment. Thus, the trials resulted in very severe outcomes for the Japanese defendants. After sentencing, they served their terms in the New Bilibid Prison in Muntinlupa, a suburb of Manila.

Although Surgeon A was at first devastated by the death sentence, he believed that "I will absolutely be saved from death." In his prison cell, he studied English, German and Spanish as well as medicine. He tried to "take life one day at a time." He comforted himself by painting with water-colors and playing baseball under the Southern Cross. He was emotionally supported by his Christian faith, which he developed when he was devastated soon after surrendering to the Philippine Army (he was baptized at a church in Iligan City at the end of August 1948). His encounter with Christianity offered him opportunities to reflect on the people of the Philippines, who had experienced enormous losses and suffering at the hands of the Japanese forces. When he took off the "spiritual armor" of the Japanese forces and regained the human emotions he had lost during the war, he realized that "it was not my will to join the war, but I am a member of the system called Japan and I can never be relieved of my guilt."

From late at night on January 19, 1951 to early the next morning, 14 Japanese war criminals, including 13 of the so-called Nakamura Case (the criminals in the case were sentenced to death for atrocities in Medellin, Cebu Island) were suddenly executed. The mass executions had a great impact on the remaining 60 or so war criminals on death row, since there had been no executions for more than a year and it was assumed in both the Philippines and Japan that a peace treaty would soon be concluded. A diary entry dated January 24, 1951, by a former second lieutenant sentenced to death fully conveys the despair of the condemned. "The sentences in the Nakamura Case were highly likely to be commuted. Now that they have been executed, I'm sure that the rest of us on death row have almost no hope."

Right after the executions, the remaining criminals began to write their wills. Every time darkness set in, they showered and changed into newly washed underwear in preparation for their executions. They struggled to accept their destiny, believing that "the death penalty may be executed tomorrow." Surgeon A was quite depressed, thinking: "We, the war criminals here, have been abandoned by the Emperor and our country. Why did they send us here? Japan is regaining its prosperity, forgetting about us and paying no attention to our suffering." On the other hand, every time the morning sunlight streamed in through the iron-barred window of his cell, he secretly felt joy that "I can live another day." The convicts sometimes received letters from family and friends in Japan, and received some Japanese visitors, such as Hamako Watanabe, a singer. The war criminals, continually living in the shadow of death and engulfed by loneliness, were truly encouraged and relieved by such letters and visitors. In Japan, Surgeon A's father and friends were working desperately to request that his life be spared.

## CONTENTS

A Soul in Sad Exile—Never-ending War of a Japanese Army Surgeon by Hitoshi Nagai .....	1~2
Series: Reflections from Hiroshima	
The Spirit of Hiroshima: Practicing What One Preaches by Takashi Hiraoka .....	2~3
Concealed Atomic Bomb Material in the U.S. by Hiroko Takahashi .....	4~5
"Real Dangers" of Nuclear Weapons Unseen by Kazumi Mizumoto .....	5
Research Projects	
An Exploration of the Atomic Bomb and Nuclear War in Art and Popular Culture in Japan and the United States .....	6
Politics of Regret: Collective Memory in Northeast Asia .....	6
Bombing and the Civilian: A Twentieth Century History .....	7
Forthcoming HPI Research Forums:	
How to Memorialize War for Peace .....	7
What Do Americans Think about the Bombing of Hiroshima and Why? .....	7
Forthcoming International Symposium:	
Life Out of Death: Bringing Hibakushas' Lessons into the 21st Century .....	8
Diary .....	8

Continued on Page 2

Negotiations on compensation to be paid by Japan to the Philippines reached a deadlock, and a peace treaty between the two nations was delayed. In July 1953, however, President Elpidio Quirino of the Philippines pardoned all the Japanese war criminals, including those sentenced to death, and permitted their return to Japan (death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment, while many criminals were released with special pardons, including some sentenced to life imprisonment). On July 22, the 108 war criminals arrived at the Port of Yokohama on the Hakusan-maru. The criminals to be released, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment or less, upon their arrival at Yokohama went straight to a welcome-back party co-hosted by Kanagawa Prefecture and Yokohama City. In contrast, 56 condemned criminals, including Surgeon A, whose sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment, were placed in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. Thanks in part to tough diplomatic negotiations behind the scene, on December 28, 1953, President Quirino signed special pardons for the formerly condemned criminals imprisoned at Sugamo. On December 30, those criminals, including Surgeon A, were finally set free.

#### 4. With the Past Fading Away

In the spring of 1955, former President Quirino came to Japan to receive medical treatment. When Surgeon A and his wife visited him at the Imperial Hotel, Quirino said "I would like to thank God, who offered me the opportunity to give you the rest of your life." Moved by that statement, Surgeon A devoted his life to the study of medicine and to regaining the 10 years he lost in the Philippines. To further cultivate his medical knowledge, he worked at his university's hospital and at his father's hospital. He later pursued his studies at a local college, where he received a Doctorate in Medical Science. As seen in the title "Japan is no longer in the post-war period" (*The Economic White Paper*, July 1956), much of the Japanese public believed by 1956 that the nation's postwar recovery had been completed, with war memories gradually fading away. However, this did not apply to Surgeon A, whose anguish remained with him always.

His wife said that his everyday life was a mixture of "light and shadow." He spent busy days taking care of his patients, which made him temporarily forget the horrible scenes of the last battlefield agonies. At night, however, his mind kept flashing back to those horrible scenes, depriving him of sleep for many days. The horrendous scenes were imprinted on his mind: the sounds he heard when his friends hesitantly committed suicide with hand grenades, the imploring eyes of a Filipino

child asking his help before being killed by Japanese soldiers. He continuously suffered pangs of conscience for having become involved in such horrible scenes and for not stopping the tragedies. Moreover, he was full of remorse over the fact that some of the Japanese war criminals had been executed, yet he was still alive. Haunted by insomnia and nightmares, he would suddenly jump out of bed at night, crying out. At such moments, his wife sang the hymn "I'd Rather Have Jesus" to calm him.

In the latter half of the 1970s, Surgeon A visited the Philippines for the first time since his return to Japan. Following that visit, he often returned to the Philippines, especially to Mindanao and Negros islands, bringing medical supplies and conducting medical examinations for local residents, free of charge. He served as a foster parent for Filipino children living in orphanages. He did so to expiate his sins, thinking, "I don't think enough has been done to make amends for what we did to our neighbors." Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1993, it was announced that families of the victims of cannibalism in the Province of Bukidnon, Mindanao Island, were asking for apologies and compensation for the atrocity. Although Surgeon A had begun to gain comfort by committing himself to medical volunteer activities, he was now faced again with the fact that the war victims and their families still suffered from the trauma they had experienced during the war. Again he felt the heavy weight of his guilt, which would never be erased.

The new demands from the Philippines had a great impact on his family. Feeling anguished and hesitant, in April 1999 he finally decided to visit Bukidnon, prepared to be killed by the victims' families. He chose to seek the bereaved families' forgiveness by directly apologizing to them. The victims, recognizing his courage in directly visiting them, accepted and forgave him by performing their traditional reconciliation ceremony. Thus Surgeon A, directly facing Japan's responsibility for the war, tried to make up for it in his own way.

"My war will not end until I die." Surgeon A used to say to his wife. On February 27, 2005, his 87-year life came to an end. It is painful to confront a dark past. Surgeon A's anguished life shows us how devastating and unreasonable wars are, and warns us against the current trend in Japan and other countries to divert attention from the dark histories of their own wartime past, viewing them only from a self-serving perspective.

*Nagai is assistant professor at HPI*