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The "Green Desert" of New Guinea

OGAWA MASATSUGU

He was in China when his unit, the Seventy-Ninth Regiment of the Twentieth Division, was transferred to New Guinea in January 1943.

"When the families of the dead come to see me, they always confront me with the question, 'Are you really the Mr. Ogawa who came back from New Guinea?' They have in mind a powerful image of a strong, sturdy man who returned alive. A man who could kill without hesitation. When they see my true physique, people can't even believe I played baseball in college. My position was shortstop." His large eyes dart back and forth behind his glasses as he speaks. An extremely thin and small-framed man, he walks very slowly around his house because of a painful back condition brought on by carrying his pack in the war. He is now a professor of medieval Japanese literature.

South of the equator and north of Australia, New Guinea is a huge island, more than three times the size of either Great Britain or Honshu, Japan's biggest island. Japanese forces landed at many points on its north shore early in the war, but efforts to seize the city of Port Moresby on the southeastern coast by seaborne assault were turned back in the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 5-6, 1942). This initiated a bitter struggle, pitting Japanese against Australian and American troops in battles that ranged across the ridges and valleys of the towering Owen Stanley Mountains and along the island's sweltering coasts. At least 148,000 Japanese troops were to die on New Guinea in the course of the war.

Ogawa Masatsugu's regiment finally was in the eastern area of the island when it was caught up in an offensive—Operation Cartwheel—launched in June 1943 by General MacArthur's forces. At the coastal town of Finschhafen on September 22, Australian troops defeated a numerically superior force of Japanese and drove them away from the coast. The Japanese army was then forced to conduct a "fighting retreat" through the mountains, harried by the Australians and Americans. Ogawa Masatsugu's book based on his experiences,

Human Beings in Extremis: The Island of Death, New Guinea, *won a major literary prize.*^o

After the main force had passed over the gorge, they blew up the suspension bridge. The thousands who trailed behind were left to die. We were at the end of the line. Soldiers who had struggled along before us littered the sides of the trail. It was a dreadful sight. Some were already skeletons—it was so hot that they soon rotted—or their bodies were swollen and purple. What little they wore was removed by those who had less. Wearable boots were instantly taken, so most of the dead lay bare-foot. The worms crawling over the more recently dead gave them a silver sheen. The whole mountain range was wreathed in the stench of death. That was what it was like.

Our own forces blew up the bridge before we could cross it! We marched for another month because we were one day late. We'd already been marching for nearly two months by then, ever since the many battles at Finschhafen, and we'd almost gotten through the mountains to the coast. It was about the tenth day of February 1944. Behind me there were more thousands, completely dispersed, scattered. Many had gone mad. I couldn't get over the fact that, delirious as they were, they still continued to march in the same direction. Nobody, no matter how insane, walked the wrong way. The dead bodies became road markers. They beckoned to us: "This is the way. Just follow us corpses and you'll get there." That was true until we came to the gorge where the bridge had been. Now, we had to find the way for ourselves.

New Guinea was green, full of greenness, all year long. If it had been any other color, you couldn't have stood it. The green provided some relief, but it was a desert of green. The advance units had quickly eaten all available food. The rest of the column had to survive on what little was left after they'd passed. The soldiers who fell by the side of the mountain trail increased rapidly, so mixed together that you ceased to be able to distinguish their units. When we left Finschhafen, we had already passed the limits of our energy, and yet we had to crawl along the very tops of ridges and cross mountain ranges. It was a death march for us.

It had rained for more than half a year straight. Our guns rusted. Iron just rotted away. Wounds wouldn't heal. Marching in the rain was horrible. Drops fell from my cap into my mouth mixing with my sweat. You slipped and fell, got up, went sprawling, stood up, like an army of

marching mud dolls. It went on without end, just trudging through the muddy water, following the legs of somebody in front of you.

As you marched, you lost comrades from your unit. Usually, you just flopped down by the road, rested together, then moved on. But sometimes the one you were with would say, "I'll just rest a little longer." You'd lose the will to stand up if you sat too long. "Let's get going. Come on!" I said to one. He was sitting at the edge of a cliff. He only lifted his glasses and wiped his face. He looked utterly exhausted. I never saw him again.

The worst was the jungle at night. Even if you attached a white cloth to your pack, it couldn't be seen. You'd have to follow the person in front of you by pushing lightly up against his pack. You had to keep your mind focused only on that. Sometimes you'd move swiftly. At other times you slowed to nothing at all. Then you'd shout, "Get going!" and find yourself pushing against a tree. If you tried to rush, you'd stumble, as if your feet were grabbed or clutched at by something. You weren't supposed to call out. The enemy might hear. Each step, you had no way of knowing if there was going to be ground under your foot when it next came down.

At times the rain was heavy in the mountains, not like in Japan. It was more like a waterfall. You'd have to cover your nose or it would choke you. A valley stream could turn into a big river instantly. If you got caught there washing your face, away you went. People could die of drowning while crossing the mountains. I climbed mountains four thousand meters high. Dark black clouds swirled around us. I had the feeling the heavens were glowering down at me. Beyond the clouds, you could see stars even in daylight. It was like being in the eye of a typhoon, suddenly seeing those stars shining behind the dark clouds. It was a weird experience.

For a time after the bridge was blown up, military police, the Kempei, were stationed here and there on the trail, ostensibly to protect the security of villages along the way, and to direct stragglers. Soldiers often grumbled about them. One day I encountered a Kempei. He demanded that I salute him, even though he was a noncom. "I'm a sergeant too," I insisted, "even though I don't have any stripes." "You must salute the Kempei forces!" was his only response. We didn't even salute officers in those conditions. "You're alone?" he asked. I replied that I had a companion, but he was a little behind. "Why didn't you kill him, then?" he demanded. "You can't get out of these mountains if you wait for stragglers. It's all right to kill them. One or two of you doesn't mean anything." He looked two or three years younger than me. The dark shadow of the Kempei disappeared from the mountains about half a month after the bridge went down.

^o Ogawa Masatsugu, *Kyokugen no naka no ningen: "Shi no shima," Nyūginia* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1983).

In the army, anyone over thirty was an old man. Twenty-six or twenty-seven, that was your peak. The young soldiers, serving for the first time, didn't know how to pace themselves and died quickly, though there were many strong men, fishermen and farmers, among them. If you were older, you knew what you could do and what you couldn't. I was in what was called the regimental "labor company," but it was really a special unit organized for all kinds of difficult missions. We blew up enemy tanks with saucer-shaped mines. We'd approach moving tanks from their blind side and attach the charge directly to their hull. We'd trap them in tank pits. We were sometimes called the Special Attack Raiders. The heaviest casualties were in our labor unit. We were like a small engineering unit, building bridges and destroying enemy strongpoints, but we took pride in being like tiger cubs, the most valuable unit in the division. Our primary weapon was a flame-thrower.

One thing that surprised me when I went into the military was that the majority of the long-service soldiers had only gotten through elementary school. Many of the conscripts were well educated, many beyond middle school. You could recognize conscripts by their glasses. Regular soldiers often said, "draftees have glib tongues, but are useless in action." When I was a corporal, I once got into a fistfight with a sergeant for saying that there wasn't any difference between a regular soldier and a conscript when both are on the same battlefield risking their lives.

I turned down the chance to become an officer candidate. When they told me I had permission to apply, I said "I don't like the army. If I liked the military I'd have gone to the military academy in the first place." They beat me mercilessly for my impudence that time, I can tell you. You see, I didn't want to kill subordinates with my orders. I could watch out for myself, but I didn't want to determine what others should do. Eventually I reached the rank of sergeant, but it didn't mean much in New Guinea. Nobody ever seemed to rank below me, since reinforcements never reached us. I was always near the bottom.

I heard later that our high command considered the battle at Finschhafen a turning point of the Pacific War. It seems they had an expectation that a victory there could have reversed the tide of war. In fact, we did rout the enemy easily—at first. I was amazed how weak the Australian soldiers seemed. Their infantrymen ran before us when we attacked. The next day, though, their artillery and airplanes bombarded us from all sides. Only when we were totally exhausted did their infantry return to mop up at their leisure. Our side had no fighting capability left.

The bigger the scale of the battle, the less we riflemen had to do with it. Cannons and machine guns dominated then. As you can imagine, in infantry battles, machine guns were the stars. Five machine guns blaze

away, spewing out six hundred rounds a minute. The bullets just come "Ba-ba-ba-ba, dah-dah-dah-dah!" You want to dig into the earth even just five or ten centimeters more. You can't raise your head. You know how well they know your position by the height of their fire. When the bullets come low you can't move. Your back is heated by the bullets. You can't fire your single-shot, bolt-action Type-38 infantry rifle. You'd feel too absurd. It's like a kind of symphony coming from both sides. You'd get intoxicated by it. An hour of firing like that and my whole way of looking at the world around me was different. I was transformed, along with Nature itself.

I came to feel the Australian military was very strong indeed. They didn't want to have infantry battles. They wanted to leave the fighting to mechanized power. The Japanese military only had infantry. Our artillery had almost no ammunition. If we fired even one shell, hundreds came back at us. "Please don't fire at them," we'd pray to our guns from our trenches. I had a sense then that one day war would be fought without humans. Just airplanes and artillery. War in which human beings actually shot at each other, where we could see each other's faces, that was over. What were we infantrymen there for? Only, it often seemed to me, to increase the number of victims.

The "enemy"? I often wondered what that meant. We didn't hate the enemy. We seemed to fight them only because they showed up. I sometimes wondered why either side was there. It was like a plot by both sides to fight in this place. In China, at least, when our soldiers were killed I sensed they had been killed by a real enemy. There, two sides, similarly armed, grappled fiercely with each other, man-to-man.

In New Guinea, we didn't know what was killing us. Who killed that one? Was it death from insanity? A suicide? A mercy killing? Maybe he just couldn't endure the pain of living. I remember that war as mainly one of suicides and mercy killings. Once, as I was trudging along, a soldier by the road caught my eye. He'd lost his voice. He just pointed at my rifle and with a bent finger signaled that he wanted me to pull the trigger. I couldn't. My mind was still mired in some kind of lukewarm sentimentalism. I knew he had no hope, but I couldn't shoot him. Another time, I saw a man kill his younger brother. Love is such a cruel thing. That's what I felt then. The younger brother had gone insane, although he was the physically stronger of the two. They were in different units, and met by chance in a shack in the mountains. The younger brother was cackling madly when we came upon him. The elder one slapped him across the face and shook him, calling out his name. He just kept laughing. Finally, the elder brother shot him dead. I didn't even raise my voice. The brother and I dug a grave for him.

I knew an army doctor, about thirty-five years old, who volunteered to shoot all those who knew they couldn't survive. This I consider "sacred murder." Often subordinates asked their superiors to kill them when the main force was about to depart. If you were left behind, that was the end. A man who had the strength left to pull the pin could always blow himself up, so everyone tried to keep one hand grenade until the last moment. Even those who tossed away their rifles never threw away their last grenade.

My three years in New Guinea were a succession of such horrors. Everything was beyond my control. Planes roared directly overhead. We could smell their thirst for blood. No matter how many flew over, you knew the one that was after you. Once, I was just aiming my rifle when an enemy bullet actually got stuck in my barrel. If it had been a touch off line, the umpire's call would have been "You're out!" A bullet went through a man's helmet, spun around inside and exited through the same hole. Around his head was inscribed a bald line where the bullet had gone. How can you explain something like that? You move your body just a little and immediately the place where you've been lying is hit directly. Luck? Accident? That just won't do it. I was forced to learn the limits of human intelligence. Things you'd think would logically be best for you often proved to be the worst. "If you're going to die anyway, die gloriously," I'd think. I often volunteered for special missions. Yet again and again I'd come back and find it was the main unit that had been wiped out while I was off on a dangerous assignment. I felt something was controlling us.

I never really killed anyone directly. I shot my rifle, so I might have hit somebody, but I never ran anyone through with my bayonet. In China, soldiers were forced to practice on prisoners, slashing and stabbing, as soon as they arrived for training. "Stab him!" they'd order, indicating an unresisting prisoner. I didn't move. I just stood there. The platoon leader became enraged, but I just looked away, ignoring the order. I was beaten. I was the only one who didn't do it. The platoon leader showed them how, with vigor. "This is how you stab a person!" he said. He hit the man's skull and knocked him into a pit. "Now stab him!" They all rushed over and did it. I'm not saying I determined it good or bad through reason. I just couldn't take the thought of how it would feel, running a man through with my bayonet.

The New Guineans seemed immaculate. To get help from the natives in the mountains was the only means left to us. I was so happy to see that they accepted words without twisting them all around. We could communicate directly. When I first caught a glimpse of black people, I thought we'd never be able to communicate, but one of them spoke

Pidgin English. That saved me. Because of Pidgin, I was not afraid. I understood German, French, and English, but I was amazed how useful a few simple words could be. I was impressed by how beautiful human beings could be, too. An old native once left a mixture of roots and water and a little salt by my head when I'd collapsed flat on my back in the trail. And a village headman went himself to tell other Japanese two kilometers away that I had fallen ill, even though his people thought I was already dead.

I think the natives and the Japanese got along well. They'd dance in a circle when the moon was full. Those of us who were from farming or fishing villages would casually join in and dance, too, as if they were dancing in the Japanese countryside. They'd borrow drums and do it pretty well. The natives seemed really pleased by this. The whites never approached them; they merely frightened them with their guns. With the Japanese, they shared living. Sometimes I wonder why they cooperated with an army that was disintegrating. The Australians would win them over with goods, things like canned corned beef. We never had anything to return to them. All we could say was, "Thank you." Yet their kindness lasted to the very end of the war. Some village chiefs were executed after the war because they provided us with food. They were accused of "hostile action" by the Allies. The enemy organized them to work as irregular guerrillas against us. Indeed, the thing I most regret about New Guinea is the incidents I learned of later where New Guineans were killed by Japanese. It makes me despondent to think that we could have killed people like that chief who saved me.

In the world we lived in on New Guinea, you had no use for the language or knowledge you had accumulated before you went there. Literature, which I'd studied at Keijō Imperial University, meant nothing. I sensed that the extremes of existence could be reduced to the human stomach. Lack of protein, in particular, fostered a kind of madness in us. We ate anything. Flying insects, worms in rotten palm trees. We fought over the distribution of those worms. If you managed to knock down a lizard with a stick, you'd pop it into your mouth while its tail was still wriggling. Yet, under these conditions, a soldier offered me his final rice and a soldier I met for the first time gave me half of a taro root he'd dug up.

We had other fears on New Guinea. Near the end we were told not to go out alone to get water, even in daytime. We could trust the men we knew, but there were rumors that you could never be sure what would happen if another of our own soldiers came upon you. We took precautions against attack. I once saw a soldier's body with the thigh flesh gouged out, lying by the path. The stories I heard made me shiver and

left me chilled to the bone. Not all the men in New Guinea were cannibals, but it wasn't just once or twice. I saw this kind of thing. One time, when we were rushing along a mountain trail, we were stopped by four or five soldiers from another unit. They told us they had meat from a big snake that they were willing to share with us. Their almost sneering faces unnerved me. Maybe we were thinking too much, but my companion and I didn't stop. "Thank you, maybe next time," we said, and left. I knew that if it were really snake, they'd never have shared it. They were trying to pull us in to share their guilt. We never talked about it afterwards, but when we reached the coast other soldiers warned us that there were demons in the jungle. Maybe this was just wild fear, but I can still visualize it clearly.

I didn't really have a future while I was trudging along in those mountains. There was no tomorrow, no next day. All I could think about was falling asleep, or following pleasant memories back into the past. Still, when a staff officer showed up, gathered maybe fifteen of us together, and told us to prepare for our final battle and issued us our final rations, I felt that the future had been foreclosed. I was now completely uncoupled from anything to come, in a closed universe. I thought if I could just drag myself a few steps further, I might actually grasp the situation a little better, know where I was, but I couldn't even climb the slightest incline without crawling on my hands and knees. Near the end, everything was called *gyokusai*. In the end, I never did it, but whole regiments were used up in those attacks, protecting us as we trudged through the mountains on our fighting withdrawal. This can be interpreted as a comradeship of which we were unaware.

Human beings can be divided into two extremes. I collapsed from fever many times. Sometimes a soldier who happened to pass by carried me on his back to the next village. One time a soldier I didn't know told me he had two *gō*, just a handful, of rice in his pack. "It's no good to me now," he said. "You take it." Some people are like that. They become extraordinarily lucid in the face of death. I was deeply moved, in a sense, but I couldn't say, "All right, I'll take it." After all, each of us kept that two *gō* of rice for the time of our own death, so we could say, "Now I'll eat my last meal."

Another time, when we were climbing from Kali into the mountains, I was hailed by a soldier unable to move. He asked me to cook some rice porridge for him with the rice in his mess kit. I got water but asked one of our men to make it for him, since I was such a bad cook. By the time the rice was ready, darkness had descended in the jungle. At last somebody guided me back to where he was. "Your porridge is ready!" I said as I shook him by the shoulder. He simply fell over. Already dead. I wonder

what on earth he must have been thinking while that rice porridge was cooking. Maybe "That guy ran away with my last rice!" I did my best and it was no good. I felt wretched. The soldier who'd guided me there opened the dead man's mouth and put some of the porridge in. All he kept muttering was "What a pity, what a pity." I saw the two extremes of humanity. I don't know what divides men that way. There's something murky and filthy in human beings. If you've seen this, you might find yourself at one or the other of the poles.

One day natives brought in a soldier on a stretcher. I couldn't tell who he was at first, but he was from our special unit. He told us his name. We'd last seen him when we were going over the ridge line more than a year earlier. On the very day they carried him in, he was shot as a deserter. The man who shot him still regrets doing it. But if you were ordered to do it, you had to. If they had gone strictly by rank, it would have been my job. I was officer of the day, so in one way, I'm the one most responsible, but the warrant officer didn't pick me. I'm grateful for that and I feel guilt and responsibility toward Yoshimura, my friend, who had to shoot him. "Forgive me, Nagayama," Yoshimura said twice in Osaka dialect, and then shot him. This took place after the end of the war, but just before we became prisoners.

I understand there were many such deaths by execution. For example, you'd get an order to "take the message and report back in three days no matter how difficult." You might have to travel a distance as far as from Osaka to Kobe in that time. But malaria was like a time bomb. If it went off you just collapsed and couldn't move. That happened to me. So a week later, you return and you're charged as a deserter. Even many officers were ordered to kill themselves for the crime of desertion. They'd go out on scouting missions, find themselves unable to get back in time, and so leave death poems behind. What a bitter feeling they must have had before being shot. The military was a place where only results were weighed, not reasons.

We didn't know anything about the war situation outside our bit of jungle. One day at the enemy camp we saw two flags go up, the Union Jack and the Japanese flag. We heard "*Banzai! Banzai!*" in Japanese. We'd never seen anything like this before. We then had three days of silence. Planes flew over and dropped leaflets proclaiming, "Peace has come to the Orient." Even the regimental commander didn't know about the end of the war. This must have been about August 15, but even that I don't know exactly. It would be a lie if I said I felt sad, or happy. I can't analyze my feelings at that time. I just felt, "Well, so it's over."

Our Seventy-Ninth Regiment had sailed from Pusan, Korea, on New Year's Day 1943 with 4,320 men. Including reinforcements, 7,000 men

in all were assigned to our unit. Only 67 survived. My own company broke camp in Pusan with 261 men. I was the only one who boarded a transport ship bound for Japan and home after the war. I was told that of about 170,000 officers and soldiers in eastern New Guinea, 160,000 died. When we were imprisoned as POWs on Mushu Island, after the war had officially ended, a dozen or so men died every day. The island was all coral, so we couldn't dig graves for them. We didn't have the strength, anyway. They had to hasten our repatriation because they couldn't keep us there any longer. We were shells of men, completely burned out. Even on the way back to Japan, the transport had to stop several times to commit the latest dead to the sea. They were only one step away from home.

It's such a long time ago, so it's probably all right to put all this down about individuals, but I often wonder what the family members of the deceased will feel. You can't call how their relation died "glorious," and of course they'd like to believe that if they had to die, at least they died accomplishing a soldier's duty, not in a ditch by the trail, through madness, by their own hand, or eaten by their fellow soldiers. Relatives of those whose deaths I can confirm with the evidence of my own eyes still ask me, "Isn't there any chance he could have survived?" When I was being held as a POW, even I thought that one day soldiers might begin to pour out of the jungle. But it didn't happen.

All battlefields are wretched places. New Guinea was ghastly. There was a saying during the war: "Burma is hell; from New Guinea no one returns alive." Former company commander Captain Katada told me after the war that when his ship stopped in Korea, he went as far as my parents' home, intending to tell them about me. He paced up and down in front of it, but couldn't bring himself to let them know where I was, so he never went in. I guess people at home already realized that there would be no return from New Guinea.

Soldiers' Deaths

OGAWA TAMOTSU

"I refused to apply for a military pension for a long time, although I was eligible. It was a way of expressing my feelings about the experiences I had had. I haven't spoken to anyone about these things for forty-five years." He apologizes for his local dialect—rich in the accents of northern Japan's Akita region—and for drinking saké the whole time we talk at