

a restaurant near a company dormitory in Yokohama City, which he and his wife have managed since his retirement from Nissan Motors.

His face contorts with pain; at times he breaks into uncontrollable sobs, or a wail of anguish escapes him.

I was at the front almost six years, in China, and then in the South Pacific. The final year was the most horrible. It was just a hell. I was a medic in a field hospital on New Britain Island. My unit was stationed at Tsurubu, in the western part of the island, when the U.S. forces attacked. I remember—it was December 26, 1944. Just after Christmas. Only the night before we'd been talking about what "they" did on Christmas night. From the time they landed, we were on the run through the jungle, heading for Rabaul. Our movement, though, was called "changing direction," not a "rout." Words are convenient, aren't they? Our wild flight for five hundred kilometers was for the army "changing direction."

Until that moment, I'd managed the war fairly well. I was young and simpleminded. I really believed it my duty to serve as a Japanese soldier—one of His Majesty's Children. As a child, when you were asked what you would like to be, your answer would always be "a cabinet minister," or "a general," or "an admiral." I dropped out of school as a teenager, thinking that since I'd have to enter the army at the age of twenty anyway, I might as well go help my father, who was a mine administrator in Akita. Soon I had my own subordinates, maybe fifty or sixty of them, and spent a lot of time whoring and doing all the other things a young man does. I didn't think much about war. It certainly never crossed my mind that I could die in war. All I wanted was to leave a child behind when it was my time to go off to fight. My eldest son was in fact born soon after I entered the army.

I was tough and found it easy enough to get around the officers, so I wasn't beaten up much by the old-timers. Even better, when I got sent to the China front, my company commander turned out to be a relative. He *really* took care of me. I was even ordered to remain behind when the unit went on "punitive-force expeditions," so I was a pretty damn lucky guy. I've got to say that. But I was never promoted. Maybe it was because of my attitude. I was kind of arrogant for a private second class. So those two stars on my collar remained unchanged for a long, long time, long after some others got their third star. Eventually, I was chucked out of my unit—"reassigned" they called it, to a newly organized combat unit being sent to the South Pacific.

The unit concentrated first at Shanghai. Japan was still doing all right, or so we thought anyway. Immediately prior to boarding a transport bound for the South Seas, I was asked to serve as an orderly to a medical

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

officer. I had only two stars, but I'd been around for a long time, so at first I said no. I couldn't see myself as anybody's lackey. In the end, though, I agreed. To be frank, I was thinking of that good food the officers got, so I was assigned to another ship. That transport—the one I would have been on—was sunk just outside Shanghai harbor. Most aboard were killed, so you can say I was lucky.

I was on New Britain for three years, and here's what I learned: Men killed in real combat are a very small part of those who die in war. Men died of starvation, all kinds of disease. They just fell out, one after another while on the run in the jungle. Amoebic dysentery, malaria, malnutrition. The ones without arms or with only one leg had to walk on their own. Worms and maggots dropped from their tattered, blood-soaked uniforms. Men suffering from dysentery walked naked, with leaves, not toilet paper, hanging from their buttocks. Malaria patients staggered along with temperatures as high as 103. It was a hell march, and the whole time we were attacked by the natives. They were the enemy's sharp stingers.

We set up our field hospital again and again at different locations. The mark of a field hospital, a red cross superimposed on a green mountain shape, was supposed to represent succor and respite for those who came to it. Our relief section consisted of a medical doctor and five or six medics like me. We would simply cut down trees to use as poles and roof the place with nipa palms. We medics truly tried to save men's lives. Gangrene set in unless an amputation was performed quickly, so the doctors operated on men using only partial anesthesia, because lumbar anesthesia took time. We were true medical men, but we didn't consider the consequences, not there. After all, how could we take the legless with us? We left an enormous number of them behind. There weren't any stretchers, so the more or less mobile ones were given a few days' rations and just told to take off, get away from the hospital, get lost. The immobile ones, they were left behind.

We had only a few hand grenades and a little medicine. Soon this was used not to cure but kill our own men. I killed, too. We were five or six medics with one to two hundred patients to care for. What could we do with those without arms or legs? Carry them on our backs? Left behind, they'd have been massacred by the natives. It happened. Instead, we'd give them a shot of opium and then inject a 20-cc solution of corrosive sublimate into a vein. It took only a few seconds to die. I could tell from their eyes they knew what we were doing. "Please," one soldier begged. I guess he was asking me to take him along, but what could I do? I was sure I'd die soon, myself. I was sure it was only a matter of time.

In the beginning it was hard to do it, then I got used to it and didn't

cry anymore. I became a murderer. I killed men who didn't resist, couldn't resist. I killed men who only sought medicine, comrades I was supposed to help. Naturally the fucking officers didn't do it themselves. They left it to the orderlies. We did it under orders from the company commander, then covered the bodies with coconut palm leaves and left them there.

Lack of food left men on the run with not even the strength to boil water. From unboiled water came dysentery. More vigor lost. Walking caused thigh sores. Some men fell behind their units and some were swept away crossing rivers. Some starved. Dead bodies were everywhere. Somehow, the dead called out to the dying. They often lay together in the raised huts of the natives, so airy and cool. Three kinds of bodies: skeletons concentrated in the center of the hut; then two- or three-day-old bodies, huddled together, all swollen with gas and beginning to decompose; finally, at the edges, the ones about to die. White worms covered the bodies. Millions of worms in human shapes, rustling just like reeds. You'd see a dead man's glasses moving because of worms, moving as if he were alive.

We staggered through the jungle at night, because if the American planes caught sight of even one soldier in daylight, they chased us mercilessly. When we heard worms rustling in the dark, we told each other there were dead men nearby.

If we knew the division commander was going to pass through our area, a field hospital would quickly be set up, complete with signpost, and we'd be told to find patients. It was easy enough to gather up a hundred patients. As soon as the commander disappeared, so did the hospital. It was then that we killed the immobile ones. And I killed a sixteen-year-old child there. This I clearly remember. He'd been drafted into the army locally after swimming ashore from a bombed merchant ship that sank off Bougainville. The only survivor. His whole family had been on the ship. He was suffering from malaria, though he looked fine when the fever was down. He had real cigarettes hidden in the fuses of an anti-aircraft shell and gave some to me at a time when I was already mainly rolling and smoking ginger leaves. When I went out to give him the injection, he was asleep. It was the commander's order. The medical officer was watching me. I accepted his cigarettes and, in return, I killed him. We were under severe attack from the Americans at the time. We were made to believe the enemy were demons. It was a kind of brain-washing.

I got amoebic dysentery myself and had to walk naked, without trousers. Barefoot, too. I took some cotton from a life vest, tied it in a roll with a vine, and hung it down my back. I suffered terribly from diarrhea.

Only mucus came because I wasn't eating anything. I was unable to keep up with the unit. All I wanted to do was sleep, just be left behind to die. Once I remember sitting down by the shore, feeling strangely well. It was like I was in heaven. The coral reef stretched way off till it disappeared. The waves washed over my body. I was able to see islands silhouetted in the distance. One must have been Bougainville. I can still see those shapes clearly. I wondered, must war always end like this? It was then that the commander's orderly stumbled upon me. I didn't even know him. In order to drag me back to the unit he had to hide his commander's belongings in the tall grass.

At the sight of me, two or three soldiers cried, "Ogawa's come back!" I wept, too. I was back from the dead. However, someone stole the commander's stuff, including his private stash of rice, and he beat that orderly until blood gushed from his nose. This, I thought, is a commander who values his goods more than one of his men, and I hated him for more years than I'd like to say. I thought I'd never forgive him, but time changes human beings. That commander and I get along today like relatives.

Our flight lasted a whole year. The natives acted like a shield for the Americans. They drove American trucks, wearing Japanese swords. There were two kinds of natives, the Kanaka and Nyugya tribes. When things were still going good for us, our army used the Kanaka tribe. Somehow their women were attracted to us Japanese because we looked so young and fresh to them. They attacked us! Sex with them was somehow strange. But when you were away from Japan for so long, even black jungle women were women.

The natives were the enemy. Americans were the enemy. Even our own soldiers became the enemy under such extreme conditions. Sometimes, at night, a smell of coffee drifted through the jungle. That was a scent my nose will never forget. The enemy sentries having coffee from some kind of portable coffee pot. At night, men often disappeared. They went right over to the enemy camp to swipe some food. Mainly what they got was canned goods, but they couldn't tell what they were taking because the labels were in English. They brought back all kinds of stuff. Facing starvation, one could do anything.

We were shocked when the Americans built an airstrip overnight. We had never seen bulldozers before. Then we saw all their warships. A fleet of transports and cruisers lined up so thick they blotted out the horizon. "Japan's lost," I thought for the first time. The only one who wept at the actual news of Japan's defeat was the commander. I listened to the news, laughing. I was going to be able to return to Japan! I could hardly contain myself. I'd live!

Now, here I am drinking beer and saké. That one year, it was only one of sixty-seven for me. Sometimes, when I look back, I even get a sense of fulfillment that I survived. Sometimes, though, it's all nothingness. I think to myself: I deserve a death sentence. I didn't kill just one or two. Only war allows this—these torments I have to bear until I die. My war will continue until that moment. I'm alive. What a pity I can't do anything but weep. I know tears don't erase my sin. It's karma. I'm an atheist, but if there's a God . . . No! I don't believe in God. I did it myself!

I don't hate Americans now. I don't bear a grudge against anyone with the exception of one person. I cannot speak his name aloud. That person is still alive. He had an excellent education and was able to judge for himself. He was in a position to stop the war at the Imperial Conferences. I don't care what other people say. He cannot avoid the responsibilities of the war.

[Emperor Hirohito died January 7, 1989, about four months after this conversation.]