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## 9 / WIELDING PEN AND CAMERA

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### *Filming the News*

ASAI TATSUZŌ

*“Whenever I go to the memorial hall at Yasukuni, I see so many statues and displays of people I filmed. I find myself saying, ‘I got him. Him too! A lot of them.’ It’s pretty hard on me. I went to every battlefield over nine years of war. My camera and film were rifle and bullets for me. But all the film I took was seized by MacArthur. Eventually, the United States returned them to us, and now the films are stored at the National Film Center, or someplace. But they won’t let us see them. The Japanese officials say they don’t have enough money to show them, but that’s just bureaucratic bullshit. Those are the people’s films. They have no right to keep them from the public.”*

His long white hair falls onto his shoulders. Tall and thin, he exudes the aura of an artist. He often illustrates a story by holding up a phantom camera and panning or changing angles with his hands.

When the China Incident broke out I covered Japan for MGM, but Hearst’s Metro-Tone News show *News of the Day* was our main customer. We were damn busy, sending in one or two stories a week, covering everything from the fall of governments to train wrecks—anything just to introduce Japan—but since we worked for a foreign news service, we weren’t allowed to follow the army to China. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937, Dōmei News, Asahi News, Yomiuri News, and all others began offering nationwide coverage of the events in North China. We had to ask for dupes from the other services and then sent those on to our office in America.

In August 1937, when the story jumped to Shanghai, news people went crazy trying to cover the war. Dōmei News Agency was so new that they didn’t have any veterans, just regular still photographers trying to carry around movie cameras in Shanghai. When they asked me if I’d join them, I jumped at the chance. I spent the next six years based in Shanghai.

I went everywhere. It was incredible, I can tell you. I flew with

bombers about ten times as they attacked Chungking. I got Wang Ching-wei when he fled from there, before he became president of Japanese-occupied China. I even covered the battles of the unit I'd have been called up to serve in if I'd stayed in Tokyo. That was the Kanō Unit from Tokyo. It was the first to land at Shanghai and had a terrible time. Two days after I went to their headquarters to cover them, Commander Kanō himself was killed. It was a real shock to me.

A large number of special correspondents soon arrived—reporters, photographers, movie-news people. I had to send home at least two or three reels a week, and Shanghai was a stalemate. The lines didn't move for four months. For days, weeks, men couldn't move. Often, when soldiers were waiting to go forward to relieve those in the trenches, they'd tell you something like, "God, I love sushi." Or they'd speak about home. That's all they cared about. Sometimes they'd ask, "Are we winning this war?" They often asked me to come over and sit with them awhile. Under conditions like those, they had no idea what was going on.

Shanghai itself was a jungle of concrete. Long, low tenement houses were everywhere. If you went into the alleys between them you'd be shot, so the soldiers broke through the inner walls, room by room, in order to move forward. My camera and I went with them. Once, I went into an alley, crossed the street in order to shoot them coming from the vantage point of the other side. The enemy was shooting at me from ten feet away. I got a good shot of bullets hitting the brick wall right next to me. Then the naval landing force I was covering came out through the wall, carrying a heavy machine gun, and opened up. "Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!" The bullets were slamming into the wall over my head. I realized then that the enemy soldiers were just above me, shooting back at the marines. My camera was pointing at our troops. I got wonderful shots, taken from the enemy side. They were real. I was actually over there *on* the enemy side. Later I turned cold just thinking about it. I didn't know anything. That's the only reason I could do it.

I followed that famous Nishizumi Armored Unit, of movie fame. Tank Commander Nishizumi was named a war god for his bravery. I went right to the front with them. You dug a foxhole under the tracks of your tank and slept there. Then, even if a mortar were fired at you, you wouldn't be hit. You gradually learned how to deal with such situations if you were at the front long enough. Cameramen fresh at the front, covering troops for the first time, often got killed. They didn't know how to stay alive.

I was once on my way back to Shanghai after a battle, when I came to a field hospital at the mouth of a tributary of the Yangtze. As we passed

in our car, I saw a wounded soldier squatting down on his heels looking like "The Thinker." He was dressed in hospital white. It was evening. I was just returning from horrific combat. The tranquillity struck me. I wanted to capture it on film. As I got closer, I saw that a destroyer was leaving the port. The soldier was watching it go. Waves from the ship's wake lapped the shore by his feet. I took a shot showing that soldier looking out across the river, the destroyer in the distance. Then I shot the wave and panned to the soldier's face. I sent nearly a hundred feet back to Japan. You could have put an antiwar caption on that! Just as it was. I didn't have to ask the soldier how he was feeling. I just took the shot and left. The head of the moving picture division raved, "Asai, you sent the greatest footage I've ever seen! Everybody else just turns in war scenes. It's not that I don't want to use your film, I just don't know how." I heard they finally showed just a brief cut on the news, but I still remember it.

Back home, people were desperate for news from the front. They formed long lines to get into the news movie theaters that showed only newsreels, just war, but it was all "*Banzai, banzai!*"—just emotion. I didn't take that kind of film myself, though I'm not denying its value. For example, in *The Soochow Operation*, the soldiers in the most advanced unit go in and occupy the city. Then those who come in later go to the city gate and raise cheers. For a still photo, that might be OK, but I wouldn't have staged anything for my pictures. I wanted to show only what the camera saw objectively. That's what I call "news." It's my bad habit!

I marched from Shanghai to Nanking with the troops, carrying my camera. It weighed roughly thirty kilograms. Not too bad for those days. It was an Aimo, a hand-held job made by Bell and Howell. Real good. Nothing like that in Japan then. I repaired it myself when the mainspring broke. We used Fuji Film. I shot only the film I wanted to shoot. I even wrote my own captions. I was often able to decide the cuts and their order.

But you know, when the fighting was really heavy, you couldn't even look out of the trenches. Once I crossed a creek, crawled through the trenches, and peeked over the edge of a parapet. All I could see was a swath of ground covered with the corpses of Japanese soldiers. They'd risen from the trench at the command "Charge!" and been mowed down by enemy fire in a moment. You couldn't even recover their bodies. If soldiers received the order "Advance!" they had to go. No choice. I was a cameraman. I could say no, stay behind. I just couldn't let my camera roll on that scene. All those Japanese bodies! I took shots of the soldiers

crossing the bridge over the creek later, but you can't really direct your camera at the corpses of your own kind. Even if you did, you couldn't show that. Don't you agree?

I didn't really shoot pictures of Chinese corpses either, though there were hundreds of them. I was there at Nanking. At the time of the Nanking Massacre. I didn't go out to take pictures. I never saw them killing, but I saw the corpses. More than several hundred. A lot more. But I didn't film them. You couldn't have shown them, either.

Just before the Pacific War broke out, I was called back to Tokyo to be a member of the Navy's press corps. As early as October I knew war was coming. By November, the cameramen from Shanghai were already being transferred to the South. They showed me the funny paper money they'd been given, bills from the places the army was going to land. All over Southeast Asia.

Everybody got so excited at the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor! The senior cameraman, Ueda Isamu, who'd returned from Hollywood, didn't think it was so good. "Listen, Asai," he told me, "America won't take it this way for long. They'll really do something." The soldiers didn't know America, but I'd worked for MGM, so I had some idea. I thought I might not come back alive this time. I was twenty-seven. I didn't get married then because I didn't want to make anyone a widow. I went everywhere with my camera. Singapore, Sumatra, New Guinea. I even met Prince Takamatsu twice.

We knew a lot about the war situation. We learned we were gradually losing. It was after Midway that things got bad. Before that operation, I was in Sumatra. Someone told me, "Planes are being transferred," so I wangled my way onto one. Something must be up. We flew back to the Homeland, but then we kept on going north, to Paramushiro Island, near Soviet Kamchatka, then with a scouting mission flew over Attu and Kiska in the Aleutians. When I went out, the plan for the invasion of Midway was being implemented in the Central Pacific. When I got back, everyone looked so deflated. So glum. The staff officers at headquarters kept saying, "This is terrible. A disaster."

Staff officers hardly ever went out to the front themselves. It was a real event when they did. Usually they just sat with their legs apart, looking tough, engaging in desktop strategizing in Tokyo. The army especially was like that. They'd land thousands of men somewhere, but there'd be no supplies coming from the rear. "Use local requisitioning," they'd order them. The local people would be growing barely enough to feed themselves, and here would come thousands of Japanese to take away what the natives had. It was that kind of armchair strategy! Those staff officers didn't do a single thing good.

I was in Rabaul for about a year and a half, assigned to the 705th Air Unit. I went on bombing missions. I flew to New Guinea. I saw planes hit around me. I didn't really film our planes going down, though. Only once, a plane in our formation catching fire and going down wreathed in flames. I sent that film in separately, about a hundred feet of it, wrapped in red tape, indicating it was secret. I was told it was forwarded to the air office of the Munitions Ministry, where it was used for research into where our planes caught fire.

The film I most remember taking was the last footage of Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku. He came out to Rabaul. It was his first trip there and it became his last trip, too. Even our headquarters didn't know his plane had been shot down until the announcement was made in Tokyo. I couldn't send back the film I'd taken by an ordinary flight. The last film of the navy commander-in-chief? What if it got lost? I thought I'd better take it myself, but we weren't allowed to leave the airfield or say anything. I sat tight, holding onto my film. After two weeks or so I was told by the base commander, "Go ahead, Asai. We'll give you a plane." I flew straight to Tokyo. We put out a newsreel, *The State Funeral of Yamamoto Isoroku*. My footage of the living admiral was played just before the footage of his funeral. I took about four hundred feet, maybe four minutes of thirty-five millimeter. Isoroku arrives at the airfield by car. Base commander is waiting for him. He gets out of his car. He goes to the site of the ceremony. The attacking unit waits for him. The unit takes off, Yamamoto cheers them off, waving his hat. I actually had a meal with him. Sat just a few meters away. But he never came back, like so many of the other fliers there at Rabaul.

Dōmei News Agency was disbanded and dissolved by the Occupation soon after the end of the war, and I went to work under the U.S. Signal Corps. I was assigned to film the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, the International Military Tribunal Far East. I was there for three years, from the time they started to build the courtroom in Ichigaya. I thought the Tokyo trial was just victor's justice, a monkey play, a kangaroo court. They didn't even mention they'd dropped the atomic bombs. But the news reports shouldn't reflect your feelings. People who watch the news should reach their own conclusions about what's going on. That's the way it should be, isn't it? I tried.