Reporting from Imperial General Headquarters

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"At the end of the war I was a military correspondent, accredited to Imperial General Headquarters, the Daihon'ei. *All the official war news came only from us. There are now probably fewer than ten left of all those I knew. We felt we were a chosen elite—a few each from the national dailies like my* Yomiuri Shimbun, *and the major local papers. The Dōmei News Agency wire service was represented, but the radio—NHK—only sent someone over to broadcast official announcements. Many of those who covered the army later went on to become board members at their papers. I didn't get that far, though."*

It's been a long time since the war. When time passes, memories seem to grow weathered, and even hardships can seem like happy times.

But even now, almost fifty years later, when I walk along the Ginza, suddenly I see a place and think, "I clung to this wall and hid myself here during the bombing."

I began my career as a reporter in Osaka. When the public announcements of the war dead came in, you got in a car with a list of addresses and rushed to the family's home. I spent whole days in that car visiting families. You assumed that they knew, but often they hadn't heard anything. They'd wail and cry. It was awful. There was a small placard at the entrance of each house where someone had died that said, 'House of Honor.' Some houses had three of them out front. Our going there meant that a fourth member of that household had just been killed. Before the Pacific War broke out, the casualty reports weren't piling up yet, so we'd always go out and try to get a story on each one. We'd get a photo of the dead soldier and we'd get a family member to talk about him. Usually we'd submit a story filled with fixed phrases like "They spoke without shedding a tear," no matter how much they'd cried. Every paper competed for a picture. Photographs weren't common like today. In those cases where there weren't any, we still had to get one, so we'd even take his face out of a childhood school graduation shot. Sometimes you'd borrow the family's only picture of their son and it would get lost in the paper's print shop. It was very hard to have to go back to the family to apologize. Even though it wasn't a big story, with the family picture it always made the paper. That was a job they gave to the new boys.

We told a lot of tales about laudable virtues when I was on the city desk. We called them *bidan,* beautiful stories. When a series of ten articles was planned for the paper, all the participating reporters would discuss themes and the style each would use. "I'll use the 'small mother' voice." "I'll use the 'struggling, yet gallant mother' type." Like this we'd establish a theme for the series.

I might be assigned "weak boys from the city who nonetheless fight hard at the front." It could start like this: A soldier's unit bombarded by enemy guns is surrounded and defeated. In the midst of a hail of enemy fire, our soldier, the only survivor, sabotages his rifle so the enemy can't use it. Then he dies. We'd get the outlines of these stories in from the front, then go to see the mother to find out what kind she was. Of course, a rifle wasn't much of a weapon. Even if captured, it wasn't going to reveal any great Japanese secrets, but in the atmosphere of those times this was still a *bidan.*

There were lots of styles. You could write the story any way you wanted. You'd have a mother who had been weeping, mourning for her son, crying so hard and long that her face was swollen and her voice was choked. Her dead son would appear before her and beg her, "Don't cry, Ma. When you cry, it only hurts me to see you so sad." Then she'd stop. That's what we'd write. We couldn't repeat the same thing every time, so we'd have to change it around.

I recall one about a widowed mother and her only son. The boy comes back on leave from the army. The train tracks pass near the house. Just hearing the sound of the trains makes him bawl at the thought of going back. That'd be our lead. We'd push that for all it was worth, right at the top of the story. The point was, even this kind of kid fights well when he gets into action. He never comes home again. We'd make it clear that he hadn't done anything particularly heroic, just his duty. We'd focus on the fact that he wasn't the son of a particularly courageous mother, only the boy of a humble, ordinary, lonely mother, a "small mother."

Once, when I was covering Yasukuni Shrine, I spotted a family that had come for the ceremony to enshrine a soldier recently killed. The younger brother was hugging a huge bundle of rice stalks, whole plants, ripe from the harvest. I asked him why he held them so. "They were planted by my older brother," he answered. If you just look around, something will always catch your attention. Of course, there were made-up stories too.

The assignment to cover the regional military headquarters was a great job! In those days we couldn't really go abroad freely, but I was able to hop back and forth all over the place. I saw a lot. I even had a chance to go aboard a German merchant cruiser, a Q-Ship, the *Michael.* It was 1942, the year my son Kyōtarō was born—he's a *Yomiuri* reporter himself now. This ship had brought a cargo of German weapons and other supplies to Japan to exchange for things we had. I heard after the war that it also brought rocket blueprints, including those for the V-weapons used to bombard England, information on other new weapons, and plans for radars, all as part of a regular shuttle between Japan and Germany. It was absolutely secret.

The ship looked like a tramp freighter by day, but it had tremendous speed and four large guns, a scout plane, and torpedo tubes like those on a U-boat. It displaced only 4200 tons, but had a crew of four hundred. They had flags from everywhere in the world. They'd surprise and capture Allied merchant ships, unload the cargo, take off the crew, later to put them ashore on an uninhabited island; then they'd scuttle the prize. The funniest thing about the ship was that since they'd left Kiel, they'd taken American, Canadian, and British merchantmen and confiscated their stores. They had every kind of food imaginable! Monday was "American food day," Tuesday was "British food day." I don't think they ever killed anyone. I boarded in Singapore and stayed on board for two months. By

day, they'd hide inshore by an out-of-the-way island. At night, they'd slip out to sea and hunt. It was scary. I thought we'd be caught and be sunk for sure.

I wasn't aboard as a newsman. My status was equivalent to a "PK," pronounced *"Peekaa"*—an officer in charge of military reports, not a Japanese journalist. I didn't even get an article out of the experience. I wrote some, but when the *Michael* blew up in the port of Yokohama after I'd gone ashore at Kobe, the story was killed. The cause of the explosion remains unknown.

When articles by war correspondents began to appear in the paper, the profession of correspondent became very popular. I remember it was like being a star. I was now assigned by the *Yomiuri* to the Imperial General Headquarters. The Kempeitai checked you out before you could be appointed. The army made us wear a uniform created specially for us. Maybe they just wanted to control us, I don't know, but the drab uniform they provided sure wasn't much to look at. They certainly didn't have to worry about us outshining them in those uniforms. The collars buttoned up to the top and could choke you. Yet, I've got to admit they were easier to work in since you didn't have to explain who you were all the time. But we didn't have any ranks to show off, and we didn't get any medals either.

There was a special ritual for issuing Imperial General Headquarters announcements. Today, they'd use word processors, but then, they came and read the announcement first for NHK radio. Then, they'd read it for the newspapers, explaining practically every word or phrase in the text. We'd telephone the announcement in to our head-office desks, but that wasn't really enough. We had to be safe, so we'd ask for a messenger to take the text to the paper. A mistake in a single Chinese character could mean your neck—these were "the Emperor's words" after all—so we wanted to be sure the phrases got through exactly as they announced them. Messengers on motorcycles from all the papers circled the building while we in the second floor pressroom were getting the text together. When we had our story, we'd stuff it in an envelope and throw it down to our man, so he could zoom off to the head office. There, the typesetters would compare it with the type they'd set from our telephone call and correct any mistakes. What a waste it all seems now, but it was life and death then!

General staff officers from the front often came back to report to the army minister. We'd be asked to meet them, and then we wrote up the accounts we heard, as if we'd been there ourselves. "Kawachi, Special Correspondent with Unit X at the Front" would be my byline. I went to a lot of exotic places that way! At times, things got complicated and contradictory. Yesterday I was at Attu island in the Aleutians, and today

I'd be in the Marianas. Officially, for the record, I'd actually been there, even if I'd never set foot outside the capital. When my report appeared in the *Yomiuri*, I'd be credited as *"Yomiuri* Special Correspondent." When it appeared in the *Asahi* or other papers, I was "Kawachi, Army Special Correspondent." The army press officers knew that if they talked to certain journalists like me, their stories would appear on the front page. Then they, or their units or their commanders, would get a lot of exposure, while somebody else might only get them a line or two.

I remember once when Colonel Shiroishi asked me if I would be willing to go the Southern Area. Instinctively I knew what he meant and I agreed. My wife had been evacuated to the countryside near Osaka. It was almost impossible to get a train ticket to visit her at that time. It wasn't a matter of money, since tickets were cheap for us; it was just transport control. I was given a special transport voucher, with the red Army stripe across it and a seal on it, which could be converted into a ticket practically anywhere. I then went to the "Southern Area," spending four or five days with my wife in Osaka. People who didn't know this thought I was off in the South Pacific! This was normal procedure. I wrote up a bunch of stories about conditions there—not dramatic accounts of our victories, but relations between the Japanese and the natives, that kind of thing. They were pretty good stories.

People tend to think that every report was censored and that it was impossible to write anything critical of our wartime situation. In fact, though, depending on who was doing the writing, many things got through the censor. You learned the tricks. I knew how to write reports late at night, when few people were on duty at the press-corps office. I could call up the colonel in charge, tell him the outline of the story, and sometimes he'd tell me his seal was in his desk drawer and I could use it to pass the story. Of course, he trusted me and knew I wouldn't go too far.

In hindsight, a lot of the announcements from the Imperial General Headquarters look like nothing but lies. It wasn't that they tried to lie from the start, just that there usually wasn't enough information available. In order to make an official announcement it was necessary to get the Imperial seal on it first. This was the official procedure. It's what made the headquarters "Imperial." Back then it was inconceivable that the Emperor could make a mistake. He was a god. You couldn't change what he'd said and explain that it was in error. Once something had been announced, they'd have to try to justify it, and one lie would lead to another, until the whole thing became a big lie.

It didn't always start out that way. For example, there was an uproar when it was reported that the American fleet had been wiped out in a

battle off Taiwan, just prior to their planned landings on Okinawa. The ecstasy of the moment, the relief at the thought that the special attack forces had turned the tide and crushed the Americans swept everyone along. A colonel from the Press Office burst into the press room with a large bottle of saké. "Here comes a torpedo," he cried, swinging it as if he were launching it from a plane. "The moment we've been waiting for has come!" He was shouting. For the first time, the army had joined the navy in a coordinated joint air attack at sea, and they'd been victorious. They were exultant. "It's the Divine Wind, the Kamikaze!" The colonel bounded up the stairs, calling for everyone to toast the victory. When all the saké was gone he ordered junior officers to rush out for more. His joy was real.

By the next day, we knew differently. This was the first time army planes had gone out to attack ships. They really had no idea about the sizes of their intended targets, they simply charged into the antiaircraft barrage, which was terrific and something they'd never seen before. They tried to duck in under the ack-ack, to breach that wall of fire. Every ship looked enormous up close. Everything happened so fast. They had hardly any training in this kind of attack. Whenever a plane dropped its bomb and an explosion sent up a pillar of flame, the pilot thought his plane had surely scored a direct hit. When smoke rose from a ship, even if it hadn't been hit fatally, even if was just superficial, it was reported sunk. Many pilots thought they'd obliterated their targets. The reports poured in of the annihilation of the U.S. fleet. These raw reports coming into headquarters were issued over the Imperial seal. In fact, it was soon clear that only a frigate or two had been hit, and even those ships in the outer picket circle were able to proceed under their own power—but you couldn't take back the official announcement. Officers then had to cover up the mistakes. Theirs weren't intentional lies, but rather signs of the acute anxiety, the desire everyone felt for something good to happen. They jumped at the prospect and their fragments of news were immediately seized on by the newspapers, which glorified the "story."

Even military strategy sometimes changed as a result of such stories. At the time of the American invasion of the Philippines, General Yamashita Tomoyuki had planned to fight a defensive battle until he received news of the complete Japanese victory over the U.S. fleet which encouraged him to move against Leyte. The Japanese defeat there might have begun with this. In a sense, I'd have felt better if Imperial General Headquarters had lied intentionally, had deceived the people on purpose to force a final sacrifice. But the fact—so much the worse, it seems to me—is they were really uninformed and didn't know the true situation of the war they were responsible for fighting.

I went to airbases to get stories about the Kamikaze, the special attack forces. They were just tales of courage and bravery at first. You'd describe how they took off without shedding a tear and things like that. I remember one group of young Kamikaze pilots who spent a night in Matsudo City in Chiba before departing for their attack base. They knew they were going to the front, but their families didn't know they were leaving as special-attack pilots. Reporters were told to be cautious in speaking to their family members so they wouldn't find out prior to their missions, so we made a lot of noise and had a merry time, lots of drinking and singing together. The next day they departed, dipping their wings as they flew south. At that moment I looked back and saw a mother and father praying, holding a Buddhist rosary. They knew. Nobody told them, but they knew. The *Yomiuri* photographer didn't dare take a shot of the parents with that rosary. Planes dipping their wings in parting were really a heartrending sight, even sadder than human beings waving good-bye, particularly in the case of the Kamikaze. They were bound for Taiwan or the Philippines. From there they would plunge into the enemy. I covered such events and went to get that kind of story so often that I guess I got used to it.

Once I focused my story on how they spent their last hours. They knew they were going to die, so they really didn't lose control. They didn't even get drunk or rowdy. All were young and innocent. They must have been really scared. They had to imbue themselves with their death, make themselves blind to other thoughts. When it rained and delayed their flights, they didn't know how to spend even one more day of life. They had to soar into the air instantly, without lingering. Any hesitation could make it all unravel. On rainy days they ended up writing terrible poems. I can't even talk about them, they were so bad. At that time, I remember thinking that they shouldn't be writing this awful stuff. Now I look back on it and think it was all right. They weren't writing for literary posterity or for the critics. They just wanted to leave something behind. I suggested that instead they might leave their handprints, but they told me they weren't sumo wrestlers. They were imagining an ink print of their hands on Japanese paper being hung in their school auditoriums for other students to see. They didn't think their own hands impressive enough. They wanted some kind of flashy legacy. They wanted to die a "good death."

I slept there with them. Sometimes I joined them all in the common bath and had my back scrubbed by a boy who was going to die on the morrow. I never met one of them who came back alive. They were all so young. Every one of them looked like he had a girlfriend. Each had a pure-white silk muffler. Almost all of them practically reeked of perfume.

Some even wanted to have their teeth fixed before they took off, because they wanted to die in perfect shape. They were going to die anyway. What difference could it make whether a tooth was fixed or not?

I went to many departure ceremonies. The commander would pour a cup of saké for each of them in turn. It was called the Farewell Cup. He'd drink with them. When an airplane gains altitude, each cup does the work of three or four cups on the ground. Those among them who were not able to hold their drink very well must have staggered through the skies. I don't know if they consciously planned it that way, but this was the ritual every time.

During the Tokyo air raids, I lived in the *Yomiuri* dormitory in Ochanomizu. Tokyo was a charred wasteland. You sort of got used to people dying. Hundreds of thousands were killed in the air raids. There were bodies lying all over the city. A man dying meant nothing. I didn't really contemplate my own death, didn't give the situation any serious thought, and yet felt a kind of emptiness, a kind of anxiety about the future.

You couldn't tell what was really going on. A place on a map would be declared Japan's "life-line." Then we'd be defeated and that place was no longer a "life-line." We'd use the phrase "point of decisive battle" to describe a place like Leyte. Then it would change. It was constantly changing. When you're a correspondent at Imperial General Headquarters, and you've been reporting things like that, you become embarrassed. "Special Correspondents to Decisive Battles" is how the head-office reporters started to refer to us. We'd even issue reports of air raids that said, "The damage was light," despite the evidence of our own eyes. At the last stage of the projected battle for the Homeland, the army planned to fight on from the huge underground complex they built in the mountains of Nagano. They were going to move the Emperor there. They even told us reporters about it, and asked us to come with them.