
1 / BATTLE LINES IN CHINA

A Village Boy Goes to War

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Seventy-four years old, he sits in front of an open hearth in the center of the tatami room of an old farmhouse in Toga, a remote mountain village in Toyama prefecture in central Japan. The mountains and ridges visible through the open windows are midsummer bright green, their rounded tops wreathed in clouds.

He brings out an ink stick and an inkstone. "I 'requisitioned' this from a Chinese house," he says. Then he spreads out a large Sun Disk Japanese flag, which has a small bluish purple stamp in the corner stating: "In Commemoration of the Fall of Nanking. Field Post Office." It is dated December 13, 1937, the day after the Japanese army entered the Chinese capital of Nanking.

My father made charcoal. We didn't have enough wood on our mountainsides for our ovens, so we had to buy other people's trees, and then haul the charcoal to town using our horse and cart. The mountains here are so steep that terracing fields for rice took too much labor. We ate millet and buckwheat instead. I remember Grandmother, exhausted from her day's labor, dozing off while turning the millstones to grind those grains. White rice was something I ate only three times a year—at the O-Bon festival for the dead in August, at the village festival, and at New Year's.

Every winter, my father had to go far away to work in a copper mine in Tochigi prefecture, because we get such heavy snowfall here. It comes right up over the first floor. My mother was taken away from me when I was only two. My grandparents brought me up. Grandmother opposed my going to agricultural school, because, as she said, "No one who's gone to school from this village ever came back." So I only had six years of elementary education.

In 1934, I walked the twenty kilometers down to Inami, then took the train to Jōhana for my military physical. All my classmates from Toga Village were there. Well, actually, one was missing. We heard he'd killed

himself in Kyoto, but since they'd never found the body, he was still on the army register.

Of the forty from our village, ten were passed as Class A, fully fit for military service. I was one of them. After the exam, the administrators told us that two of those examined had achieved scores at the level equivalent to middle-school graduates, Kasahara Akira and Nohara Teishin. They said that about me right in front of everybody! I swaggered a lot, I guess, though the whole town was praised for ten A's.

In the evening we returned to Inami and stayed in an inn where the village mayor and village assemblymen held a party for us. The night of the physical was a time for celebration. The A's were seated on a dais at the front of the room, and we could drink as much saké as we pleased. But I've never been much of a drinker. I like tea. We returned to the village the next day.

I entered the Thirty-Fifth Infantry Regiment in Toyama in January 1935. All recruits got ordinary combat training. In addition, we had to learn one of the special skills for which we alone would be responsible, jobs like using and detecting poison gas, firing a machine-gun, or launching grenades. My speciality was communications. I had to learn to send signals by flag, hand, telephone, or telegraph. The least popular speciality was bugler, because you couldn't really get to private first class from there, and you didn't want to be assigned to look after the horses, since then you hung around waiting for some officer who needed a horse. Medics and stretcher-bearers didn't make private first class in peacetime either. Now, the gas soldiers, they really needed a brain to identify the types of gas, so they were promoted first. In communications and signals, if you were sharp, you could get ahead, too, but you had to get that Morse code into your head. Dah-dah-dit, dah-dah. You sent telegrams by numbers, and at first I didn't think those numbers would ever sink in, but somehow I learned.

It was still peacetime when I first went to Manchuria at the end of 1935. We worked to maintain the security of Manchukuo by suppressing bands of bandits who each day picked a new place to plunder. They were just thieves. They used small Chinese ponies to carry off the things they stole. Women, especially young girls, were prime targets. The Japanese pioneers built walls around their villages to keep the bandits out. Their fields were beyond the wall. Though some places had their own independent garrisons, we in the army were supposed to provide security so that the people could live in peace. But China is a vast country, wider than you can imagine.

We marched and marched from valley to mountain. Marching was our job. We'd go out for about a month at a time, rest for a month

or two, then go out again. Normally, we'd go out in company-size expeditions of about two hundred men, leaving the rest of the unit behind to garrison the base.

On bandit-suppression operations there were times we got into fire-fights and actually saw them face-to-face, but we were always in the mountains. I was fed up with mountains. Bushes and underbrush reached your chest and you had to push them out of the way. You quickly became exhausted. After a month, you could hardly move. Those of us from mountainous areas had the stamina to endure that, but quite a few soldiers from the cities, who had made their living with paper and brush, weren't able to keep up with us.

I returned home at the completion of my term of service in December 1936. Back in the village, all we talked about was when our next call-up would come. We followed the newspapers and listened to the radio about the war in China, which began in July 1937. I was drafted the tenth of September 1937 and was sent straight to Central China. I was in the Fujii Unit of my old Thirty-Fifth Regiment. My speciality was still signals. There were nine or ten men under my command. We went into action the night of October 3. We crossed a granite bridge spanning a creek to string wires from the brigade all the way to regimental headquarters. I was at one end of the bridge directing things and some of my soldiers were connecting wire on the bridge when a trench-mortar round exploded. Shrapnel hit one soldier, blowing a big hole in his chest. He died instantly. Another was hit in the arm. It was dangling limply. I tied it up with a towel and bound his hand so it wouldn't flop around. A third man was hit in the leg. I was the leader of the first squad to suffer casualties in Toyama's Thirty-Fifth Regiment in the China Incident.

You had a heavy responsibility when you laid wire. You had to figure out the distance between the positions you were going to link. That determined how much wire each soldier would have to carry on his back besides his rifle and other equipment. Often it was more than humanly possible. We stretched wire as much as we could. Bullets would sometimes hit the wire and cut it. A dead telephone line meant I had to have soldiers run back without equipment to find the break, and then detach men to go back and repair it. After all, we were the link between brigade and regimental headquarters.

At the beginning of the war, the enemy was quite strong, and Japanese soldiers simply formed a line and, when officers gave the order, advanced. Our Thirty-Fifth Regiment was almost annihilated that way in the early battles. At a terrible place we called Susaku Seitaku, we had our toughest fight. The enemy was under cover, shooting at us through loopholes in walls, so our dead just piled up. We were in the open fields.

"Charge! Forward! Forward!" came the orders, so you'd run a bit, then fall flat, calm your breathing, then charge again. Out of two hundred men, only ten or so weren't killed, wounded, or just worn out. Soldiers were expended like this. All my friends died there. You can't begin to really describe the wretchedness and misery of war.

The regimental commander called to find out why Colonel Shinkai, Third Battalion commander, hadn't taken the position yet. Shinkai told him these methods wouldn't work, that the Imperial Army wasn't marching across China in a flag-taking competition. "If you expend your soldiers here, you cannot continue afterwards." Thanks to Shinkai, from then on, even if it took two or three days to outflank a position, we adopted new tactics. He made us dig trenches all around. It was a kind of mole strategy, attacking only after approaching in trenches. First and Second Battalions also copied our tactics.

But the battles were always severe. There are many creeks in Central China. The dead Japanese and Chinese would just fall into them and get tangled up on the surface. Many hundreds at once. It was a gruesome thing. The corpses would block your way. If you pushed at them with a stick, they moved easily, the whole mass floating away. We drew water from those creeks to drink and cook our rice.

Cholera soon spread. The men with cholera we'd put in a bamboo grove. The grove was surrounded by a rope and the patients promised not to leave. Nobody really prepared food for them. So I'd take my friend's rice and cook it for him. It was said that if you got too close, you'd be infected. But I passed things to him on the end of a bamboo pole. He'd beg, "Give me water, give me water." I had to do something. I boiled water in my mess kit for him. When we were at rest I could do something, but when we went into battle, I had to leave him. I don't know how often the medics came to take care of them. I just felt pity for my own friend. Many died. My friend did, too.

We fought our way to Nanking and joined in the attack on the enemy capital in December. It was our unit which stormed the Chunghua Gate. We attacked continuously for about a week, battering the brick and earth walls with artillery, but they never collapsed. The night of December 11, men in my unit breached the wall. The morning came with most of our unit still behind us, but we were beyond the wall. Behind the gate great heaps of sandbags were piled up. We cleared them away, removed the lock, and opened the gates, with a great creaking noise. We'd done it! We'd opened the fortress! All the enemy ran away, so we didn't take any fire. The residents too were gone. When we passed beyond the fortress wall we thought *we* had occupied this city.

The Thirty-Fifth Regiment received a citation from the general staff,

but the citation stated that the Twentieth Regiment had occupied the gate and the Thirty-Fifth had only then passed through. That same night, a scouting party of two or three officers from the Twentieth Regiment—they were from Fukuyama and Kyoto, and were next to us on the front line—had made it to the gate and written on it that it had been seized by their unit. So we were robbed of the flowers of glory, because we hadn't scribbled anything on the gate!

The next day, a Japanese pacification unit arrived and memorial stamp pads were made. I used the stamp on my Japanese flag, as a souvenir. There were hardly any Chinese people about, only the ones who could barely move. We gathered them later into a single area where they weren't in our way. We didn't kill them. I'd say we made them live a "communal life."

Nanking was a grand city. Chiang Kai-shek had kept it as his capital. I saw the tomb of Sun Yat-sen, where the father of modern China was buried. It was really regrettable that most of the town was practically destroyed, from the shelling and air raids. This was the capital of China—like Tokyo in Japan—so we had to do it, but it was still a shame. All the buildings in ruins. Bombed areas were uninhabitable, not even a store anymore. Wherever you went there were Japanese. All military. Hundreds of thousands of troops converged on Nanking. This many people couldn't really remain in there, so the Thirty-Fifth Regiment was ordered to return to Soochow.

The Japanese army was now strung out all over both North and Central China. We in the Thirty-Fifth Regiment were supposed to be mountain men, so we got orders to march on Hsüchow directly through the mountains in early July 1938. We faced tough situations regularly. On one occasion I was in the regimental office when a final call from a sergeant-major came in. "We're under attack. We regret that we're running out of ammunition. Our soldiers have kept a last bullet for themselves in order to make our final decision." Then the phone went dead. Even now my heart aches and I choke up like this when I remember that there were moments like that.

I took part in a "ceremony for the cremation of the dead." Among the dead men was one from this village, from this very hamlet. All you did was pull down any house nearby, pile up the wood, then lay on bodies. It was like baking sardines. You just set fire to it and let the flames consume the wood. Then you took up bones from the parts that burned, put them in a bag, and filled out a tag with the dead man's name. You said a silent prayer, sure, but there wasn't any "ceremony." It was war, so you couldn't help it. When it rained you couldn't even really burn them, so say the battalion commander had died, you'd burn just his body and

distribute bits of his bones to the rest. You can't tell this kind of truth to the families of the deceased! So you burn what you can quickly. You just do it, keep going. Ten. Twenty. You have to move fast. The further behind you fall, the faster you must march to catch up. Every soldier wants to get back to his unit before it's too far away. That's how soldiers think.

Once we crossed two mountains in pursuit of the enemy. There wasn't one tree, not one blade of grass, and we had horses loaded with radio equipment and wire. We went to farmers' houses and requisitioned—pillaged, actually—clothing to wrap the horses' legs in, to protect them from the rocks. Those horses were strong climbers, but the descent, that gave them real trouble. They'd slip, going down, even though I had my men carry the equipment.

Stealing of horses began there, I think. They'd break their legs, or become unfit for service. You'd need a replacement. Horse-handlers were each assigned their own horse, but when the soldier was asleep the rope restraining the horse could be cut and the horse led away.

This happened to us. We had only a single horse left to carry all our gear. I ordered the groom to tie himself to it overnight, but the rope was cut anyway. When he came to tell me, it was already after dawn. My squad couldn't move out. I told them to wait and I went hunting. Soon enough, I came across a horse tied to a tree. It belonged to a cavalryman. He was a slight distance away. He looked like he was taking a shit. I ran up, untethered it, jumped on, and rode away. I had become a horsethief in broad daylight! I cut the horse's mane here and there to change the look of the horse. That was how it was in China. We stole horses, even within our own regiment, but we were responsible for moving our own equipment, so how else could we fight the war?

When we came across wounded Chinese soldiers or those on the verge of death, we'd kick them out of the way. I didn't harbor any ill feeling toward them. Wounded Japanese soldiers were lying all over the place. That's war. I had no way to take care of them. I had the feeling that before long I would be one of them anyway. Sometimes I spoke to them. Other times I didn't. If I recognized a face, I couldn't help but say something. Even if a soldier was from your own hamlet, all you could say was "Do your best. A medic will get here soon. Hold on." Then you'd keep going.

There are songs about war comrades who never desert each other. But China was no song. The fallen don't say, "Please go on ahead." They're hurting and ask for help. But you have to advance to carry out your duty. The ones left behind, maybe they're collected later by a medic and get treatment at a temporary dressing station, or maybe they're even

taken to a hospital, maybe not. I feel lucky that I was never on a stretcher. My unit "returned home in triumph" after two and a half years.

When I got home, how could I tell my friend's parents that he'd died of cholera? I told them he'd been killed by a stray bullet. I came back without a scar. I worried they might think I'd been hiding myself. There was no place to hide. China was really flat. I was assigned to the responsible position of squad leader. I never acted in a way that others could accuse me. In the field, we often talked about "luck with bullets." There were two or three like me in that unit of two hundred, who didn't get even a scratch. I didn't even take a day off for a cold.

I went back and forth two more times after that. Each time I was discharged I came home thinking I'd be sent back again soon. They simply let us rest a little, that's all. Four times I went in, if you include my active duty. Nobody fights a war because they like it. "Nation's orders," "Emperor's orders"—that's what they said. What could you do but go? If an order was issued and you didn't go, you were a traitor. There's not one soldier who ever died saying "*Tennō Heika banzai!*" [Long Live the Emperor!] I was with hundreds of men when they died. The dead lay with grimaces on their faces.

My prime time, my youth, was all spent in the army. I reached the highest enlisted rank, but I always thought it was a lot better sitting at home here in Toga than being a sergeant-major.