

Unit 731

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Unit 731, also known as "the Ishii Unit" after its founder-director, Army Medical Lieutenant General Ishii Shirō, was the Japanese army's principal bacteriological-warfare research and experimentation organization. Built at the village of P'ingfang outside the Manchurian city of Harbin in 1935, both the facility—officially designated a "water purification unit"—and its work were classified top secret by the military. Until its buildings were demolished at the approach of Soviet troops in August 1945, Unit 731 was the site of experiments aimed at developing and testing bacteriological agents and means of delivering them as weapons of war. What this entailed was the deliberate use of live human beings, suffering from no illness, as experimental animals and exposing them to diseases like bubonic and pneumonic plague, epidemic haemorrhagic fever, typhoid, and syphilis in order to obtain data useful to developing the most deadly and effective strains and means of causing infection.

The very existence of such a unit and research program has never been fully acknowledged officially—neither during the American Occupation of Japan, nor now—though an official of the Health and Welfare Ministry admitted before the Japanese Diet in 1982 that Ishii had received a retirement pension.[°] No firm figures exist for the total number of victims, but they likely numbered in the many hundreds, perhaps thousands. Most were Chinese, but the research allegedly extended to Allied prisoners

[°] The existence of such units was once the center of debate, though it is now supported by overwhelming documentary and personal testimony since the immediate postwar years. Ienaga Saburō's *Taiheiyō sensō* [*The Pacific War*], which was translated into English in 1968 and published by Pantheon, cites many early references. In "Japan's Biological Weapons: 1930–1945," appearing in the October 1981 issue of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Robert Gomer, John W. Powell, and Bert V. A. Röling presented a chilling exposé of the nature of Japanese biological-warfare research and the complicity of Allied, specifically American, authorities during the years of the American Occupation in keeping the extent and very nature of the research secret for reasons of American "national security." See John W. Powell's "A Hidden Chapter in History," pp. 44–52, and Bert V. A. Röling's, "A Judge's View," pp. 52–53. Peter Williams and David Wallace, *Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1989) is the most comprehensive study in English.

of war—Americans, British, Australians, and New Zealanders held at Mukden. Weapons developed at Unit 731 were reported by some attached to the unit actually to have been employed in Japan's war with China, and at least one claims they were planned for use against U.S. forces on Saipan.[°]

Determining the full extent and nature of Unit 731's work is further complicated by postwar American policies, which had the effect of allowing the leading Japanese doctors and officials involved—including Ishii Shirō himself—to escape back to Japan and to avoid prosecution as war criminals, in exchange for their cooperation. Their knowledge of bacteriological-warfare techniques and defenses against it, together with the records of their human experiments, allegedly contributed directly to American biological-warfare research after the war. Not only have some of those involved themselves continued to work actively in related fields, but some rose up the ladder in medical-academic circles to become professors at major national universities and research institutes. An expert in freezing has served, for example, as a leading consultant on the Japanese Antarctic expeditions and research.

After declining to talk many times, repeatedly suggesting "Speak with more senior people. Talk to my superiors," Tamura Yoshio finally agreed to meet at a train station near his home on the Bōsō peninsula in Chiba. The rice plants in the nearby fields bend low under the weight of their yellow grain nearing harvest. Our discussion takes place at a roadside restaurant for tourists, nearly deserted in the off-season and eerily quiet. When the conversation turns to his experiences, his words seem to come almost one by one, as if forced out through his lips. Only repeated focused questions, referring to a short article he had written about his experience, break his silence and compel him to take his story to the next step. †

To be honest with you, I don't want to recall what I did a long time ago. But I feel I have to say war is a dirty thing—something one should not do twice. I am a war criminal because of the things I actually did. Not in theory.

I dropped out in the midst of my second year of middle school to go to China. I was the eldest of six brothers. My father, a former policeman, was a small-scale farmer and part-time laborer. My parents didn't

[°] Takidani Jirō, *Satsuriku kōshō, 731 butai* [*Carnage Arsenal: Unit 731*] (Tokyo: Shinmori Shobō, 1989), pp. 17–18 gives a figure of three thousand "Chinese, Koreans, Americans, and Russians" being experimented on at Unit 731.

† His article, "Saikinsen. 731 butai no bankō" ["Bacterial Warfare. Atrocities by Unit 731"], was published in Chūgoku Kikansha Renrakukai [Association of Returnees from China], eds., *Sankō* [*The Three Lightnings*] (Tokyo: Banseisha, 1985), pp. 23–40.

approve of my going, but somehow I managed to get them to affix the family seal to my application. And so I became a uniformed civilian employee of the Japanese military, spending a little more than a month in training at the Army Medical College's epidemic-prevention research laboratory in Tokyo before leaving for China in May 1939. I didn't even think about what I was going to do over there. For that month we created cultures for bacteriological research and learned Chinese in the evening. About thirty of us in all. We were together with our friends and things seemed bright and boisterous. We were to be the junior employees for the Ishii Unit. Because we were from Chiba prefecture, the same area as Commandant Ishii, I simply was drawn along by my seniors. At sixteen, I was one of the youngest.

We took the Shimonoseki-Pusan steamer. From Pusan it took roughly four days before we arrived in Harbin on May 12, 1939. As soon as I got off at the station, the first thing I noticed was the smell of horse manure. Horsecarts were racing everywhere. Harbin was an international city. There were many Russian-style buildings dating from the time of the czars. By bus, it took about an hour on the military road to get to Ishii Unit 731. Along the road we passed a memorial to the fallen Japanese dead of the Russo-Japanese War and saw red sorghum fields stretching off into the distance.

In those days, Unit 731 seemed simply a huge concrete structure, several hundred meters long, out in the middle of a field. Just naked concrete. There was only one entrance. That main building, in the shape of a hollow square, was three stories tall and had no windows below the top floor on the inside of the square. There were two two-story buildings within the walls. Experiments on human beings were conducted inside them. Those people who were involved in those experiments were called the Special Group. Production plants for bacilli and the like were located there too.

Lodgings and barracks were built outside the wall after our arrival, and we moved there. Noncoms, and those of us in the youth troop, lived there, while all the other workers came by bus from Harbin every day. There were about ten buses for the commuters. Those who ranked major or above had chauffeured cars, several coming together in a car. If your rank was high enough, you came by yourself. There were many vehicles assigned to Unit 731, and they became more and more numerous. There was even an airport.

We got up at six o'clock, did military drill, and then spent most of our mornings in lectures on bacteriology. In the afternoon we had labs. We really were kept very busy. No time to think about anything. The first

thing we were taught was the Military Secrets Protection Law. It was really simple: "Don't look, don't talk, don't listen." The Kempeitai warned us that we would be punished under some article of that law if we even so much as mentioned anything we saw there. This unit, they said, was of primary importance and its work had the highest-level classification. The next thing we were taught was the Military Penal Code, and that said that if we ran away, it would be no different than deserting in combat and we would not escape death by firing squad. We had military police assigned directly to our unit. Under a law calling for the protection of military secrets, when this unit was created, all the Chinese who resided in the area were evicted and confined to a "protected hamlet." They were really practically imprisoned there and used for labor.

At that time all of Japan was very spy-conscious, so I wasn't really shocked by these things. They also gave us an anti-Communist education. I guess the Japanese army was most fearful of the Communist Party. Also, most of those who were kept at the Ishii Unit were Chinese Communist Party members or sympathizers. We were told everything about them was bad. They were "Reds! Reds!" At night, I became aware of the sound of chains, military boots, and military swords jangling when I had been there at the unit for about two weeks.

The thing that first shocked me though—what I remember even now—were the rabbits. They were given injections and they had seizures. Shots of cyanide, nitric acid, and strychnine nitrate. We were told not to look away from those rabbits. I don't think the kids of today could do it. Observing and killing animals was the first step. Gradually we came not to think anything of it, even when conducting experiments on human beings.

I went on to specialize in animals like mice and rats. We did everything at the direction of our superior, like culturing bacteria, carrying out experiments on animals, studying the results, determining exactly what level of each bacterial strain was necessary to kill them. Each experiment stated what animal of what weight died in how many days after an injection of what strength. When an animal died, it was immediately dissected. The heart, liver, kidneys, everything was taken out and cultures made, and bacteriological levels tested and tabulated. That means we were calculating "levels of morbidity." It takes two years to train someone to be able to do this.

Directing us were bacteriological scholars. Most of them had been senior professors at such prestigious universities as Kyoto Imperial University [Ishii's school]. All the army doctors there had studied bacteriology. We, ourselves, without even knowing it, were being raised

to be noncommissioned officers, or perhaps even officers, for the unit. When high-ranking officers from the Kwantung Army came for inspections, we lined up and responded as if we were already soldiers. It was almost like being hypnotized. We just drifted down that course, without really being conscious of it. Within two years, many of us, although under the age of conscription, had volunteered to enlist. Later, I also took that step. We sensed that we were becoming an elite, even though we didn't have any real academic pedigrees. They even told us they would send us to college, though only two of thirty ever made it there.

In a word, we were really caught up in it. When we were assigned to the bacterial unit, after the completion of our education, we were designated "chemical-weapon handlers" and began receiving our "chemical allowance," which was bonus pay, so I was getting paid what a university graduate made in those days. We now became official members of the bacteriology unit, though we were still technically civilians. We exerted ourselves to try to make ever-more-lethal bacteria. Of course, if you cut corners in your work, you yourself might be infected. One scratch and you could die. During the first year, two of us died. The dangerous work of handling the animals infected by disease, of course, was carried out by the boys in the youth troop. Our superiors only compiled the data and judged. Given the way rank works in the military, there was no way to escape this except by climbing the promotional ladder yourself.

You had to have special passes in order to enter or leave those two buildings inside the unit's inner court. It took a long time before I qualified, but even then, those of our level didn't go there often. When you did go, you really were appalled. Even for people who had already lost their humanity it was ghastly to see. [*He pauses for a long time, sitting in silence.*]

Where did you go?

Those two buildings inside the square. To get there you went through an iron gate. There was a time clock to record when each person went in. Photographs of those with passes were posted too. I hardly ever entered there alone. I always went with my superior, to assist him.

That was the first time I heard the expression *maruta*. It was a term used by army doctors. At first, I thought of it only as a "log," which is what the term means in Japanese. But in German it has the meaning of a medical experiment. "How many logs fell?" Other people would have no idea what was being said, but among ourselves, we often spoke about how many fell or were dropped. This was only after I started going into those buildings. This use was limited only to us insiders. [*Again he falls silent.*]

In your article you mentioned injecting bacteria. Did you do that yourself?

I didn't do it myself, directly. We tried to have the infection progress naturally. In the case of plague, it was necessary to have the medium of the flea. We used fleas.

If you give as hot, it isn't possible to get the benefit of an experiment. We cultured the fleas, that was what we did when we were engaged in "practice" during our training. We raised them in clean oilcans. Rusty ones were no good. We put wheat, unhusked wheat, about fifteen centimeters deep in the can and then put a rat in a tiny basket, about the size of my fist. The rat couldn't move. You then increased the humidity and temperature above the rat's body temperature and left it for about a month. Whenever the rat died, we'd replace it with a new one. To exchange rats was our job. Sometimes when some fleas were still on the fur of the dead rat we removed them with a dryer. We did it in darkness. We were totally naked except for a white gown. We had nothing on our hands or arms. When the number of fleas reached a certain level, we would dump out the wheat and gather the fleas into a cylinder by putting a red electric light bulb on in the darkness. The fleas ran to the dark side. That was their habit. They disliked red light. To use this in bacteriological warfare, you had to put a live rat injected with plague bacilli in with the fleas. They would then attach themselves to the rat, and then the rat would be dropped from the sky. The rat would die and the fleas would scatter, because fleas won't stay on a dead body. We were told we had to replace the dead rats both quickly and carefully because infected fleas might be present, but we had no way to be cautious. So we were involved in bacteriological warfare, although it was called our "practice."

Before plague can infect people, it first infects rats, so we also had an "animal group," which bred rats and other animals for experiments. They were rats, not mice—not special laboratory rats, but common blacks rats. The ones you used to breed fleas had to be the wild variety. The white mice of the laboratory would be too conspicuous for bacteriological warfare.

We were handling bacteria, so we took a bath in disinfectants when we returned. We took off our uniforms and submerged ourselves in the bath. We reeked of that disinfectant. We got orders, for security reasons, not to allow any smell of disinfectant to cling to us if we left the unit, so we'd take another bath when we got back to our barracks to try to get rid of the smell, but it clung to our bodies. Even going out of the unit gradually became more difficult. We were totally wrapped up in our work. During the Pacific War I don't think we even had Sundays off. There was

no place to spend money so it was all saved up. All my friends had about a thousand yen saved up. It was enough money to buy a house, more than a house.

Did the Chinese man you said you worked on in your article have the plague?

Yes, he did. It was done in a way resembling natural infection. The fleas were probably put in some kind of container and tied to his body. I'm not sure. There are many ways it could be done.

How many days did it take for him to develop the Black Death?

It is said the incubation period is generally a week.

Was that man young?

Yes, all of them were. Most were men. There were very few women.

Were you involved with many of these people?

Well, let me see. I wasn't involved with that many, although I saw them. I actually did that to only one. Just that one person.

How did you view those people? Didn't you have any feelings of pity?

Well. None at all. We were like that already. I had already gotten to where I lacked pity. After all, we were already implanted with a narrow racism, in the form of a belief in the superiority of the so-called "Yamato Race." We disparaged all other races. That kind of racism. If we didn't have a feeling of racial superiority, we couldn't have done it. People with today's sensibilities don't grasp this. That's why I'm afraid of the power of education. We, ourselves, had to struggle with our humanity afterwards. It was an agonizing process. There were some who killed themselves, unable to endure. After the defeat.

Did you exchange words with these people? I know you were able to speak Chinese.

Yes, I did. Although they only swore at us, "Jih-pen kuei-tzu! Japanese devil!" When you entered there, and had that said to you, there was nothing you could do but ignore it. If you ask, "Did I feel hatred

toward them?" I'd say, yes, hatred was there, but I simply had to ignore it. In other words, they were valuable experimental animals. We treated them with civility. Thus, we gave them very good food. It was a lot better than the food we had. If you talk about a "menu," there was a Chinese menu for Chinese people. There was a special cook. They were always taking them food. Unless you provide a certain level of nourishment, they were of no use as experimental materials. When you went into their kitchen, it really smelled good. Nothing but good smells. Yes, that was the way it was. That's why if you call it a crime, it was. Therefore, quite a few of them refused to eat.

Did the ones who were there know what was going to happen to them?

Yes, they did.

Did you let the person live to the very last moment and try to extract plague bacteria?

Yes, that was the objective. Unless you dissected them quickly, extraneous bacteria would intrude.

Did you do it while they were alive?

[He pauses for a very long time.] Yeah. Yes, at the moment when he may or may not still have a breath of life remaining. If time passed, the effect of the experiment would be reduced.

Where did you extract the bacteria? From what part of the body?

From all the internal organs. In order to determine which part is most infected by the disease. You see, from the perspective of bacteriological warfare, it is best if pneumonic plague develops in the lungs, because death comes quickest in that form. Normally, when you are bitten by fleas, the disease develops in the lymph system, which produces boils and sores there. That's bubonic plague. That's what you mean when you speak of the progress of the infection.

So, you removed the lung and used it to culture bacilli to be used to spread the disease outside?

Yes. We used it to make the bacterial culture I spoke of earlier. I was actually there, on the site, doing that.

Did any of your friends catch the plague?

Unit 731 didn't have a hospital, only an infirmary. Those of us who got infected would have had to go to Harbin for a hospital, but if a plague patient appeared in the Japanese military medical system, it would be a severe breach of hygiene. Dysentery or typhus might not cause too much of a stir, but still, action had to be taken to prevent epidemics. That's why they didn't put the patients into an ordinary army hospital. Anybody who got sick was put into the special buildings. I guess they treated them, because they were members of the unit, but I'm not absolutely sure about that either. If they got infected and they were about to die, it was the same, whether they were unit members or not.

Were they too used to make bacterial culture when they passed away?

Yes, yes, they were just the same. We were all experimental material. If you died, you got a two-rank promotion. The unit held a unitwide funeral, and their ashes were taken to Japan. The unit commander himself read a memorial eulogy, shedding tears for the dear departed member—"Your heroic spirit will avenge . . ." and so forth.

Mr. Tamura, you yourself were on the site when your friend's life ended. How did you feel?

I knew the whole truth only much later. I left the unit for active duty as a soldier soon thereafter. Volunteered. Maybe it was because they made me be present there and be involved in that. I don't know. Even at that time I thought, "I can't take any more of this. It's impossible! I can't believe it!" It was inconceivable that he would be used that way. Even I didn't think we would be used that way. I was shocked, but I didn't dare discuss it with the others. If I'd talked I would probably have been accused under the Military Secrets Law.

I left there in 1943 at age twenty. But even in the army, after I completed my new-recruit training on the Manchurian-Soviet border, I was assigned to brigade headquarters and then the medical service. The man in charge of their medical department was from Unit 731 and knew of me. I worked in Chinese hospitals and research institutes in Manchuria. I feel I was allowed to study Chinese for that purpose.

I was never involved in actual bacteriological warfare as a soldier. I never fought with a gun. I was never subjected to an air raid. That kind of war I didn't fight. I was at headquarters and there was no real danger. I was always trying to get out, but never could.

The overwhelming majority who were able to flee back to Japan right at the end of the war were men like that. The men who were caught and charged as war criminals in the Soviet Union from Unit 731 were my superior, Karasawa, and Kawashima Kiyoshi. Five more were charged in China, including me. I don't know much about this, but those in Japan evidently traded their research to America. In return for their research documents, detailing their experiments, they were absolved of any crimes. That's what I heard.

Commander Ishii was managing a Japanese inn and living a quiet life when I returned to Japan in 1955. One of my old acquaintances suggested that it would be better for me if I paid a courtesy call on him one time, but I had no intention of going. I later heard he died of cancer of the larynx.

Most of the people at Ishii Unit 731 simply pretended not to know anything about what they had done. Many had been from top schools and they simply went back to similar places and gained positions quite high up in Japanese medical circles. The Institute for Infectious Diseases, the predecessor to the National Institute of Health, was closely associated with the unit. The leaders of the Ishii Unit even have a close-knit, old-boy network, called the *Seikonkai* [Refined Spirit Association].

Efforts to get other members of the Ishii Unit to talk of their experiences were unsuccessful. When contacted by telephone, the wife of a major, also convicted as a war criminal, said, "My husband is really ill. We've suffered enough. We don't have much time left. Don't torture us anymore. If he talks, memories come back and it's really painful. Other people, more responsible, escaped." She cried and sobbed over the phone. She refused to convey a request for an interview.

Independent reports confirm that he was still an active jogger two years after that call. ■