

Straggler

ŌTA MASAHIDE [1]

A student at the Okinawa Normal School in Shuri, he was mobilized just prior to the landing of the U.S. forces on Okinawa as a member of the Tekketsu Kinnōtai, the "Blood and Iron Student Corps."

*American military histories consider the Battle of Okinawa to have lasted from April 1 to June 22, 1945. Estimates of Japanese losses vary widely, but one source sets Japanese deaths at 65,908 troops from the main islands, 28,228 Okinawans, either from the local defense corps or serving in the Japanese army, and 94,000 noncombatants killed in bombardments, caught in the cross-fire of the armies, slain directly by soldiers of both sides, or dead from group or individual suicide. More than twenty-five percent of the prefecture's entire population, as many as 150,000 Okinawan civilians, may have died in the course of the battle, if those who died of hunger or malaria are included.**

Although Okinawa was declared "secure" on June 22 by the American military occupation (which was to become the Government of the Ryukyus), the battle did not end after the eighty-two-day bloodbath. In the weeks and months that followed, thousands of soldiers and sailors, members of the local population in local defense units, and boys like Ōta Masahide continued to try to survive without surrendering. They considered themselves under orders to carry on the fight. The official capitulation of Japanese military forces on the island did not take place until September 7, five days after Japan had formally signed the instruments of surrender on the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

The headquarters of the Okinawa Defense Forces were located beneath Shuri Castle. All the leaders were there, Commander Ushijima Mitsuru, Chief-of-Staff Chō Isamu, Operations Staff Officer Ihara, staff officers Jin and Kimura. The Chihaya Unit, to which I belonged, was under the direct command of the intelligence section of the headquarters of the Defense Forces, and we were stationed with them underground. Whenever information came in, our job was to carry the latest on the battle situation to the civilians and soldiers in the caves.

* Eguchi Kei'ichi, *Jūgonen sensō shōshi* [Brief History of the Fifteen-Year War] (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1988), p. 223. There are numerous casualty figures for the battle. Discrepancies result primarily from calculations of the precise number of men who were officially enrolled in the Japanese military forces.

On June 19, the dissolution order was issued to the Blood and Iron Student Corps, the Lily Student Corps, and other such units, but my small group was not to be dissolved. We were designated a "special unit." We were to gather in the north, at Nago, to fight an "intelligence war." A guerilla war, we'd call it now. We were ordered to allow ourselves to be captured by the Americans. Our mission, then, was to move around behind their lines gathering intelligence. A final saké party was held at headquarters that June 19. All the generals dressed in formal uniforms, all their medals on their chests. Staff officers wore their gold braid. I saw that. When it was over, they took off their military uniforms and donned the black kimonos worn by elderly Okinawan women, to make them as inconspicuous as possible. Some classmates of mine in the Chihaya Unit were assigned to accompany them as guides, one for every two staff officers. With one exception, all those who left the caves as guides were killed.

With three other comrades, I left for Kunigami in the north. We tried to pass through the enemy lines. I was soon injured. Although we set out swearing to remain together, whether in life or in death, I lost all track of them. I couldn't walk any longer. I crawled on my belly to the place where today they put up the Memorial to the Vigorous Youth. There was a well there, the only one in the area. So many people were piled up in it that they were floating on the surface. I collapsed on my back trying to reach it. Machine-gun and automatic-rifle fire was pounding us.

That evening—I don't remember the exact date, maybe the twenty-second or twenty-third—a man passed by me, then returned and looked at my face. It was my classmate. Shinjō. I'd visited his home once. In that brutal, savage time, when hardly anyone could play the violin, he was a violinist. His elder brother composed beautiful and famous pieces of music. Shinjō told me he was about to charge into the enemy. "I don't need this anymore," he said and handed me rice, packed in a sock, and dried bonito. At that time, we put rice in our socks and tied them up. I still had a rifle and two hand-grenades with me, and one hundred twenty bullets. I was wearing a half-sleeve uniform with short pants, but no belt, only a string to hold them up. I couldn't wear shoes because my feet were injured. Besides, my shoes had been stolen. If you took your eyes off something for a minute—food, shoes, anything—they'd all be stolen. I'd lost all my food that way, too.

I didn't have any dressings or medicine, so if I'd put on leather military shoes, walking would have been next to impossible. I needed workman's shoes with rubber soles. There were many natural caves in the Mabuni areas where people from the surrounding farming area were

hiding. They were starving. I suggested to one that we exchange some of my rice for such a pair of shoes. He was really pleased, since, not being wounded himself, he could easily take military shoes from a corpse. Thanks to Shinjō's rice I was at last again able to move a little.

Searching for food, I climbed to the top of Mabuni Hill. Below was located the cave where we had previously hidden ourselves. There I found small graves of Commander Ushijima and Chief-of-Staff Chō. They had committed suicide. I suppose you could call them tombs, but they were very plain. Ushijima's was just the length of a man, thinly plastered over with concrete, and above it a slab of wood, probably prepared beforehand, reading "Commander Ushijima's Grave." As I approached it, at first I thought I saw a cross there. I was very moved by it, sensitive teenager that I was, thinking one had been put up by the American soldiers. But soon I realized that rather than a cross, what I was seeing was a short American dagger stuck into the grave marker. Then I noticed scratches on it, too. I didn't understand the meanings of the words written there, then, but I remembered the shapes of the letters. Later I learned they said, "God damn! Go to hell!"

For a long time we lived in a cave as defeated stragglers. My own survival then seemed inconceivable to me. I thought only of how I might break out of enemy territory. I could hardly walk with my injured leg. I took off my short-sleeved shirt and put it inside my helmet. I buried my rifle. Simply to throw away a rifle with the chrysanthemum emblem on it would have been a serious offense! Finally I made it to the ocean, but I didn't have the strength to swim far. Human beings instinctively run into the sea when they are chased into a corner. Everybody was swimming. Before my eyes they sank and drowned. I passed out. I was washed ashore and lay unconscious for two or three days on that beach. I regained consciousness next to a woman lying face down on the sand, holding tightly to a package wrapped in cloth. She was already dead. Maybe she's got food in her carrying cloth, I thought, but when I tried to pry open her fingers one by one, she was holding it so firmly I couldn't do it. While I was struggling with her fingers, the waves came in and carried her body off. I just lay there at the waterline, unable to move, waiting for her to return. When I finally opened the package it contained candles and a comb. No food. Yet candles were very valuable.

Every day American soldiers came to hunt the remnants of the defeated army. Among my companions at this time was a graduate of Bunri University in Tokyo named Shiraiishi. He was very gentle, and had the complexion of a girl. He'd brought a Webster's dictionary into the military. He never got promoted. He looked after me and I stuck to him. I told him at one point I was prepared to meet my end right where we

were. "No," he said, "let's go as far as we can," and he insisted on taking me with him.

One day from the American warships and from the land, too, yellow and red balls exploded in the air, just like fireworks. At first, we thought it was the Special Attack forces counterattacking and we were glad. But finally Shiraishi pointed out that that was impossible. Japan was no longer in a position to do anything like that. About that time, there were only the two of us, and we had nothing to eat. All around us were the tents of American soldiers. If you threw a grenade, the Americans would run for cover, and you could sneak in and steal some food.

Once, because Shiraishi loved reading, I brought back an American magazine from one of my missions. "Ôta, look at this," he exclaimed. Of course, I didn't understand English. "Japan lost," he told me. "The explosions we saw the other day were American salvos of celebration." Later I learned it was exactly as he said, a salute to Japan's surrender, but at that time, people like us were watching from what we still thought of as battlefields. Shiraishi warned me, "Don't leak a word of this outside, or they'll kill the two of us." The stragglers of a defeated army were on a hair trigger and killed each other over the smallest of things.

Shiraishi read sentences incomprehensible to me. I was moved more by the force of his scholarship and the splendidness of learning language than by the danger around me. Once he said to me, "If you survive, come to Tokyo and study English." Those words altered my life completely. From then on we told each other, "Let's not die in vain. Let's survive."

The hunting for us stragglers was severe. Every day Americans came to the heights of Mabuni with automatic rifles, stripped to their bare chests, and ate lunch. When we went looking for food along the beaches, they would shoot at us from the heights, as if it were sport. We'd watch the Americans leave about seven o'clock at night, then we'd pick through their leftovers. They couldn't eat all they brought. So as not to let them fall into our hands, they'd intentionally pierce any extra cans with their bayonets to cause them to spoil, but even spoiled food was a matter of life and death to us, so we'd try to heat whatever we found, to kill germs. But there was no real kindling. Not a splinter of wood, not one chip. If you gathered up a few soldier's belts, the raw rubber in them would burn enough to cook everything a little. This was how for many months I roamed and scrounged around there.

One day, a "placation squad" of former Japanese soldiers came with American MPs. "We've lost. We were defeated. Why are you taking so long to come out?" they called out to us. In our cave there were then maybe one hundred forty or fifty people, in all kinds of different groups.

They'd all lived separately, but now they came together to consult on what we should do. "This must be fake! We shouldn't go out unless we get real, solid proof of defeat. It's a trap." Some said that. Shiraishi and I kept silent. Gradually, the conclusion was reached that we would demand proof of Japan's defeat. The placation squad consisted of three people. One was a former officer. Another was an Okinawan soldier. I knew him because he'd been a guard at headquarters. When he saw me he asked what I was doing there. "Your friends and teachers are all in a POW camp," he said. When I asked him who was there, to my surprise he cited names I knew.

The next day the officer brought proof. It was the Imperial Rescript. "Read it!" we demanded. Everyone surrounded him, clutching our hand grenades. The officer looked scared. He requested that we leave a route open so that he could withdraw. He read the Imperial Rescript and some asked him to leave for the day. He did. Again they argued about what should be done. Some thought it was fake. For the first time, a medical lieutenant whom Shiraishi and I knew opened his mouth, "Those sentences couldn't have been written by an ordinary person. They're in a unique style. I think it's real." That was a strong statement. Quite a few people resisted the idea. I remember a probationary officer, a Waseda University graduate, fiercely opposing accepting the truth of the document. Finally, though, the first lieutenant's argument was accepted and our surrender was decided upon. We raised one final condition. We wanted to be allowed to wash ourselves, to make ourselves decent, before we became prisoners of war.

We did so in the open air the next day. Suddenly, everybody looked like someone else because until then we'd seen each others' faces only at night or under layers of filth. We felt like we had all emerged from a different world.

I thought the day I finally left the cave was September 23. Actually it was October 23. Nearly four months had passed since Ushijima committed suicide. In the prisoner-of-war camp, those who came from Okinawa were in one tent, those from outside of Okinawa were in another, and the Korean military workers were in a tent alone. Practically every night, there were challenges—those who had been harassed before called out their oppressors, beat them up, made them kneel down, and forced them to apologize. Until then, we'd received "education to make us the Emperor's People." We thought we were just the same as the Japanese, that we'd fought together as one. Now, though, Okinawan soldiers and members of the Okinawa local defense forces talked about how terrible it was, how they'd been bullied. I myself had seen Okinawan

mothers thrown out of caves and food snatched away from them countless times. "Why is such a thing happening?"—the thought still stuck somewhere in my brain. Yet I wondered, "What's the difference between Okinawans and people from outside the prefecture?" For the first time I began to be awakened to differences in our cultures. I began to see that I was an Okinawan.