

SENSŌ

The Japanese Remember the Pacific War

Letters to the Editor of
ASAHI SHIMBUN

Edited and with an Introduction by
FRANK GIBNEY

Translated by
BETH CARY

Don't Be Ashamed, You Are Heroes

The warship I served on was sunk in the Battle of Leyte Gulf and I became a prisoner of war of the American forces. I was interned in the Leyte POW camp for one year. There were about twelve hundred Japanese POWs in this camp. All of us were ashamed that we were clinging greedily to life and forced to be idle in the midst of the enemy. Occasionally we felt that we wanted to die.

As the days wore on, we realized that the attitude of the American troops toward us was different from what we were accustomed to. The MPs who guarded us, the military doctors, and the medics were all kind without exception. And we were supplied with clothing, food, and even PX items like candy and cigarettes on the same basis as the American soldiers. On the bulletin board was a sign saying POWs were allowed to write letters to their families and have necessary items sent to them. This was the way we first found out about the existence of the Geneva Convention article on the treatment of prisoners of war.

One day, the camp commander, a first lieutenant, gathered us dejected POWs and told us, "You men fought bravely until the end without fleeing, so you have no reason to think that you are lacking in courage. You men are heroes." Having been indoctrinated for years that we must die with honor rather than surrender, these words were shocking to us. We had thought ourselves to be dishonored prisoners of war. But the Americans not only dealt with us humanely, they also treated us as warriors who had fought courageously until the end and fallen into enemy hands.

Sekiyama Eiji, sixty-four (m),
company employee, Abiko

Order to "Kill All Those Under Thirteen"

The War ended when we were on Cebu. We were taken prisoner by the American forces. We were moved to Palo POW Camp near Tacloban on Leyte. I had been raised in America until I was seventeen, so I could speak

English well and was able to act as interpreter. In general, the treatment of the POWs was good. The consideration given Japanese women and children was particularly warm. The children sang songs and danced under the direction of a female American officer. It looked like they were in kindergarten.

We found out that before the War's end, when the Japanese forces were under attack by American troops, an order had been issued by the Japanese military that resident Japanese children under the age of thirteen would be an encumbrance and should be killed. It was thought that this order had been implemented. The American forces ordered two young officers to make a thorough investigation. I took part as their interpreter. The high-ranking officer who had given the order had died in battle, so the facts could not be confirmed. A first lieutenant named Aoki and a sergeant were questioned. Under tough interrogation, the two men acknowledged that they had received the order but strongly denied that they had carried it out. In the end, this matter was considered to be an internal Japanese military matter, and the investigation was terminated with no firm results.

Ironically, this incident contrasted the actual nature of the American forces, who had been called "fiendish," and that of the Japanese forces, who had been entrusted with protecting Japan's citizens and its territories. I remember the desolate expression on the faces of a middle-aged couple whose child had been taken from them.

George Fukui, sixty-five (m),
retired, Yokohama

POW Sergeant Major Johnson's Thanks

The summer before the surrender, as a soldier in the reconnaissance regiment, I was assigned to guard a temporary POW camp in the highlands in central Taiwan. The prisoners were American troops from Corregidor.

Sunday was a day of rest. The prisoners gathered under the trees and sang hymns and prayed. I had occasion to chat with Sergeant Major Johnson. He was a short man with a fearless face. His expression earnest, he said to me with tears in his eyes, "I have nothing to offer in exchange, but I'd like to let my men smoke. Won't you give me some cigarettes?"

Escaping prisoners were shot. But there was also the danger of being killed by the prisoners, and it was risky to be easily swayed. I promptly