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Rainbow Over Hell

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By Mohri Tsuneyuki

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[The single most morally and politically difficult issue related to World War II for Japanese is the wartime attitudes of the general population. When the Pacific War began in December 1941, most Japanese approved and expected to prevail, although some well-informed people immediately suspected that the government had initiated a fight that it could not win. By the last year of the war, however, soldiers in the field could no longer expect reinforcements or even basic supplies. Scores of thousands of soldiers nevertheless unquestioningly followed orders to sacrifice their lives even after they knew it was for a doomed cause. The most famous such individuals were the kamikaze pilots, but many less glamorous foot-soldiers also chose death, often in an obviously ineffectual military action, over surrender. On Saipan, many local Japanese and native civilians also took their own lives when they realized that the Allies would soon win control of the island. Arakaki Saburo, a technical school student from Okinawa who was studying on Saipan and is the subject of this memoir, shared this attitude.

Since 1945, many older Japanese have found it difficult to convey to themselves and others why they had accepted the need for such sacrifices during the war. Articulating that seismic shift in their own attitudes has proved very difficult, in part because doing so makes painfully obvious the sheer waste of so many Japanese lives. Younger Japanese find it even more difficult to comprehend the degree to which so many of their elders had accepted the obligation to kill and die imposed on them by their leaders. In a recent book on soldiers who hid out in Southeast Asian jungles long after the war ended, Beatrice Trefalt shows that their reappearance in the 1960s and 1970s was deeply disruptive precisely because the Army stragglers still believed that to surrender was to disobey orders and dishonor oneself. Their anachronistic sense of duty to a by-then meaningless cause disturbed other Japanese because it was simultaneously so alien to their postwar lives and so profoundly reminiscent of their wartime ones.[1]

How then did individual Japanese negotiate the mental terrain that led from glorious self-sacrifice to participating in the future? Mohri Tsuneyuki describes the pivotal moment in Arakaki's psychological transformation below. The radical disjuncture that he experienced helps explain why so many Japanese think of 1945 as a fundamental turning point for their society yet find it hard to express the precise nature of that change of heart.

The attitude of wartime Japanese was a source of horror for Americans fighting in the Pacific. As intended by Japanese military leaders, the Americans were deeply disturbed by kamikaze attacks, far more than was warranted by the actual capacity of the poorly trained pilots to inflict harm. Their discomfort came from their conviction that Japanese identified with their state and its head, the emperor, far more fully than did Americans, who, according to Robert Westbrook, fought for private goals and universal values (such as freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and

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freedom from fear) rather than for the nation as such.[2] As Willard Price, writing in National Geographic put it in 1942, "We believe in living for our country. The Japanese believe in dying for their country."[3] This distinction was at the heart of the American wartime conviction that the Japanese were fundamentally different from themselves and all other modern human beings. In their view, while Americans chose as individuals to fight for their families and universal ethical values, Japanese participated in a collective exercise of national identity.

Yet, although Americans in the 1940s saw their own attitudes toward war as completely different from those of the Japanese because of their greater independence from their own leaders, I wonder how Americans today will look back on the current war in Iraq. Mohri's narrative reminds us that governments everywhere demand extraordinary sacrifice from their subjects in wartime and mete out harsh punishments for those deemed insubordinate. Japanese soldiers marched toward certain—and often strategically pointless—death because their government demanded this action of them. After the surrender, many of the survivors realized that they had never genuinely thought about why they had supported leaders who had been willing to sacrifice so much for "death with honor." Nor had they questioned the ways that military policies had embittered local populations and made a travesty of official ideals. Decades from now, will "staying the course" seem as alien to Americans as "glorious self-sacrifice" does to Japanese today?

Laura Hein

1. Beatrice Trefalt, Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950-1975, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

2. Robert B. Westbrook, Why We Fought: Forging American Obligations in World War II, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004.

3. Willard Price, "Unknown Japan," National Geographic, August 1942, p. 244, cited in Westbrook, p. 30.]

Excerpt from Chapter 7: "Banzai Attack"

July 6. Morning dawned after a ghastly night that could only have been a nightmare. After a long interval of rainless weather, a sudden squall broke loose. The merciless bombing by the American forces continued. Worn to the breaking point, civilians in ever greater numbers had given up hope and flung themselves, one after another, from the cliff into the ocean. The bodies that fell on the rocks below floated about in the shallow water. Here and there on the beach, clothing and canteens had been discarded. From time to time, shredded photographs and bits of paper money were swept up in a bomb blast. In their last moments of life, people had discarded their last and most precious possessions.

Along with Sergeant Aoki, Saburo descended Mount Marpi and hid in Banadero's jungle. Soldiers and civilians mingled together enveloped in an air of tension and despair. Saburo looked around to see if he could spot any students from the Saipan Vocational School, but he didn't see anyone he recognized.



Aerial view of Saipan, July 1944.

Now everything was futile. Saburo unwound

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the small amount of paper money he had kept wrapped in the handkerchief tied around his waist and threw it away. It was inevitable that the U.S. troops would launch an all-out attack from land and sea—perhaps even tomorrow. Anxiety and despair began to overwhelm Saburo.

When the sun set that evening, the shelling subsided. Soldiers began moving about even more frantically. The moon rose in the eastern sky. A military messenger came running. "There's to be a massive counterattack! Fall in!"

Voices began calling out. "It's a division command order! Fall in!"

In the moonlight, a commissioned officer began shouting at the several hundred soldiers who had gathered in the area surrounding Banadero Airport: "Today, both Navy Vice Admiral Nagumo and Army Lieutenant General Saito, at the combined headquarters at Hell Valley, made the decision to die an honorable death!"

A moan of bewilderment rose from the crowd. The atmosphere became even more oppressive.

The commanding officer was dead! What are we to do?

Instinctively, Saburo looked at Sergeant Aoki's face. The sergeant had sat down, his shoulders drooping and eyes closed.

"I convey to all of you the final order of the commander in chief!"

In the dim moonlight, another commissioned officer unfolded a piece of paper and read in a loud voice: "Message to the Imperial Forces, Saipan. For over two weeks since the attack by the U.S. forces. . . ."

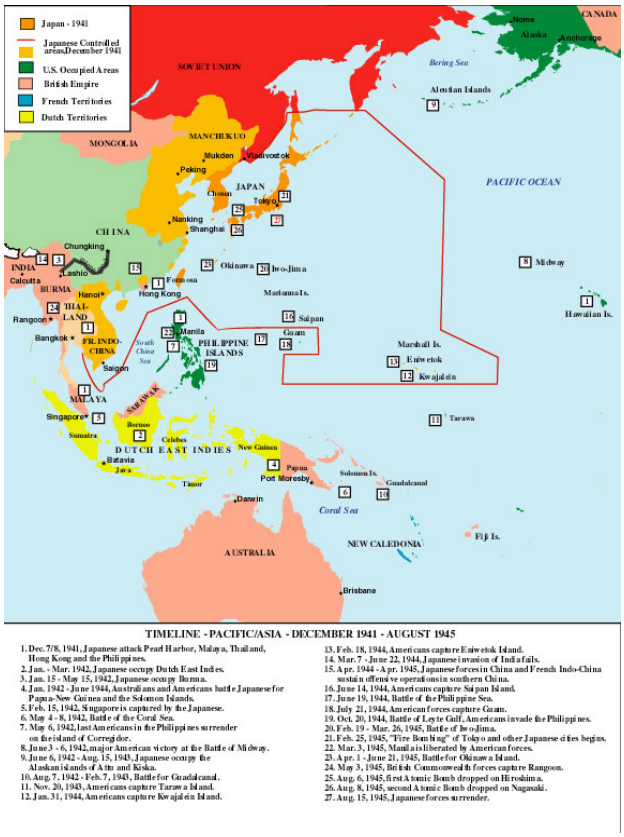
The soldiers fell into a dead silence and a flock of eyes—some ferocious, some evasive, others dark with despair, and still others glinting with rage— took in the words of the commanding officer with a frozen, death-like gaze.

". . . We have no battle supplies left, our munitions have been destroyed, our comrades are perishing one after another. . . . The U.S. forces have taken only a small corner of Saipan, but the shelling and bombardment is severe. . . . Death is near."

There were some words Saburo didn't understand, but he recognized that the Japanese forces had lost, and that they faced certain death.

". . .Whether we attack or hold out, we will die. When that time comes, we have the opportunity to show that we are true men of the Japanese Empire. One more attack on the U.S. forces will be achieved, and a Pacific Ocean bulwark will be erected on Saipan with the bones that we bury and leave. According to our battlefield ethics, 'I vow never to suffer the disgrace of being taken alive but will rise up with my entire being in courage and dignity, rejoicing in living according to the eternal principle of justice until the end.' "

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Those words pierced Saburo's ears: "I vow never to suffer the disgrace of being taken alive." During military training at school, he had memorized and recited them every day, over and over again. Men and boys of Japan must never be taken as prisoners of war—it had been pounded into his brain. Now he faced the reality of this supreme order.

"I command you!" The commissioned officer raised his voice even further. "The Saipan garrison shall mount an attack on the American devils tomorrow, July 7, with each man killing ten Americans and fighting to an honorable death." The order was for a "banzai charge" against the American camp, with the desperate purpose of killing until no Japanese was left to fight.

"Death for honor! Death for honor!" a great stir rose from among the soldiers.

"You are ordered to seek out the threatening enemy forces tomorrow, July 7, anytime after 15:30, and attack, advancing toward Chalan Kanoa to pulverize the American forces," the officer continued.

"Oh. . . . Oh, no. . . ." Deep moans that could not be made into words shook the crowd.

Any hope of being saved had collapsed. Soldiers began to move about.

It has come—the final moment! Anxiety ran up his spine, and Saburo shuddered. *For the motherland, for the Divine Emperor! I'm going to give my life! Die a noble death! As a Japanese, I'll have a dignified end! I will never be taken prisoner!* Spurring himself on, Saburo strengthened his resolve.

"Sergeant Aoki, I'm going with you!" Saburo put his determination into words.

The sergeant nodded. "You've really taken care of me." With a weak smile, he thumped Saburo on the back.

Two surprise attack units were organized, made up not only of soldiers, but also of civilians. Saburo was placed in the second unit. Those who did not have other weapons bound daggers to the end of sticks. Those who didn't even have daggers made spears out of green branches.

It was July 7, *Tanabata*, the Festival of the Weaver Star, just past midnight, and the festival moon hung in mid-heaven. "Gather at Matansa and advance toward the enemy at Tanapag. Let's go!" the commissioned officer barked out the order, and the first attack unit of 400 or so persons quietly began to advance toward Matansa on the western shore. The sense of impending death moved about like a breeze through the night. Everyone—those on the road along the shore and those on the path by the mountainside—walked silently forward, exposed to the enemy, not even crouching low to the ground or hiding in the shadows.

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Saburo strained his eyes to gaze after the soldiers whose backs faded away in the distance. In the dim moonlight, the flock of ghostly shadows, like a thing not of this world, vanished into the darkness where something dreadful was developing.

With a carved wooden spear in his hand, Saburo stood for some time. The moon disappeared in the western sky, and the area was shrouded in complete darkness. Suddenly, in the distance, the roar of a machine gun tore through the silence. At the same moment, the scream of the "banzai charge" burst and swelled in the air. The wild, crazed death voices made Saburo's intestines churn and raised goose bumps on his skin. At the same time, blood charged through his veins. He was confused, and felt paralyzed. Flashes of light pierced the darkness. Flare bombs burst in the sky, one after another. The sound of fierce shelling and bombardment, like the roar of the ocean, drowned out the screaming. Like the ebbing of the tides, the voices were swept away.

Saburo gritted his teeth and almost took off running. Sergeant Aoki took his hand and held him in position.

The second attack unit was launched, and both Saburo and Sergeant Aoki joined in at the tail end. Each of the 300 or so members of the group was given a single rice ball cooked in salt water. Without savoring it, without feeling thankful, without feeling anything at all, Saburo devoured his portion.

Suddenly a flustered commissioned officer appeared on the scene, shouting loudly. "Everybody, listen up! A warship left Tokyo Bay today to save Saipan! Let's survive until that ship arrives! Live and fight! That's it!"

A sea of voices rose from the crowd. Some clasped each other's hands. No one questioned the officer's words.

"Aoki-san, let's go back to the jungle," Saburo urged.

Whatever it takes, we've got to go on living, he thought. Those who had resolved, just moments before, to die with honor for the motherland and the Divine Emperor now had to make a complete turnabout; now they had to determine to survive and continue fighting.

Synopsis

Rainbow Over Hell is the dramatic true story of Saburo Arakaki's transformation from World War II assassin to preacher for God. Only eighteen years old in 1944 when U.S. forces invaded the island of Saipan, Arakaki was among the thousands of Japanese who fled to "Suicide Cliff" at the northern point of the island. Against all odds he survived the Battle of Saipan and became one of the men in "Captain Oba's Company," the historic final group of Japanese to surrender on Saipan. Following his surrender, Arakaki was sentenced to death for two murders he had committed. However, when his sentence was reduced to life imprisonment, he unexpectedly encountered the Bible and was so changed that his own warden began petitioning for his release. Arakaki received full Presidential pardon from President Eisenhower, went to Japan and became a Christian minister.

Web site: http://rainbowoverhell.com

Mohri Tsuneyuki is an award-winning Japanese author and playwright, whose work encompasses fiction and nonfiction books, TV, film, radio, and stage. His work often explores issues in war.

Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson has published fiction and essays in several magazines. Rainbow Over Hell is one of two books by Mohri Tsuneyuki that she has translated.

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