

In Love and War: Memories of the Battle of Okinawa

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By Hirano Chizu

TAKARAZUKA, Hyogo Prefecture--It was a strange time to fall in love. The Americans were about to land on Okinawa Prefecture for what would later be one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.

But Ohama Tatsuko says some of her most cherished moments came amid the horrors of the war, namely her walks on a beach in the prefecture with a student conscript, their hopes and promises for the future, and even the awkward moments trying to express their true feelings toward each other.

However, it was an ephemeral relationship. The student left the island when Japan lost the war, never to return.

Tatsuko knew the fate of the student. Yet for decades, she constantly wondered about the final thoughts of her first love, a quiet young man with a passion for marine life who later became a war criminal executed for lopping off the head of an unarmed prisoner.

About 60 years after the war ended, she got some answers. Tatsuko, now 75, who lives in Takarazuka, Hyogo Prefecture, received a diary that the student conscript, Taguchi Yasumasa, kept while on death row in prison.

The diary, provided by Taguchi's family in Hokkaido, shows how the man calmly awaited death while reflecting on the miseries of war.

It also carried his last tanka poem, written after he was told he would be executed the next day:

"Just earnestly/ praying for a peaceful world/ I am leaving now/ for the land yonder/ of tranquil liberty."

Taguchi was drafted in late 1943 while studying at the Imperial Fisheries Institute in Tokyo, now the Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology.

Originally from Otaru in Hokkaido, Taguchi was assigned as a navy ensign to Ishigakijima island in Okinawa Prefecture, just south of the main island, in February 1945, just before the fierce Battle of Okinawa, the only battle fought on Japanese soil during the war, was about to begin.

He met 14-year-old Tatsuko on the island. He was 22.

Tatsuko, who attended a school on Okinawa's main island, was back home recuperating from an illness.



Tatsuko's father, a doctor, often invited young troops to his home.

Tatsuko remembers Taguchi as a quiet student who talked only about marine life "even though my heart was pounding" when they were together.

He would often take her for walks along the beach and enthusiastically talked about his interest in noctilucae and plankton.

Looking over the Okinawan seas, Taguchi told her: "I will let you see the seas of Otaru some day." She believed his words.



I must face this without escaping.

They never mentioned how they felt about each other.

And Taguchi never talked about what later became known as the Ishigakijima Incident.

On April 15, 1945, three U.S. airmen on a downed fighter were captured by Japanese troops on Ishigakijima.

The Japanese commander decided to execute them. Taguchi was one of the three officers ordered to carry out the deed. He beheaded one of the Americans.

Tatsuko said Taguchi became gloomy around that time, but she knew nothing of the Ishigakijima Incident until he left the island.

Taguchi returned to the fisheries institute in Tokyo to continue his research. In February 1947, he was taken and sent to Sugamo Prison. In March 1948, he was sentenced to death as a B/C-Class war criminal.

About 1,000 people were given death sentences for war crimes, such as abuse of prisoners of war and mass murder. Many eventually escaped capital punishment, but Taguchi was not one of them.

Tatsuko, who lost many classmates in the Battle of Okinawa, got married after the war. She told her husband and two daughters about her memories of Taguchi, but she never visited his grave.

Nearly 60 years after their separation, a widowed Tatsuko, encouraged by her daughters, finally contacted Taguchi's relatives and visited them in September 2004.

Taguchi's younger brother told her, "My brother once told me the woman of his first love lives in Ishigakijima."

He handed her an old diary, the one Taguchi

kept in prison.

The entries started on Nov. 22, 1948, describing his daily life in prison.

Tatsuko learned that the prisoner taught English to his cellmates and played the board game of go with them. Sometimes he wrote, "I must face this without escaping."

He chanted Buddhist sutras every day.

One entry said: "Dec. 6. The steam heater in the corridor is rumbling, creating a subtle harmony with voices chanting sutras."

"It sounds as if Amitabha (Buddhist deity) were telling me 'Don't worry, I will save you.' It gives me great relief."

In early 1949, a telegram reached Taguchi from Tatsuko's father on Ishigakijima in response to a letter he wrote from prison.

"I am glad you are alive," the telegram said.

"Jan. 11. My life in Ishigakijima lasted only less than a year," Taguchi wrote.

"Knowing they were nevertheless worried about me, I sensed a sweet scent of human kindness coming from thousands of kilometers away to this resident in Sugamo. It moves me to tears."

Taguchi never wrote about what he thought of the Ishigakijima Incident; nor did he complain about his superiors who ordered him to execute the American airman.

But he did mention the misery of war.

"Jan. 19. Even if Japan had won the war, the human and material losses would have been so huge and could never be recovered."

"Not only in Japan, the loser, but in victor nations as well, how many tragedies did the war bring about, even though publicly unknown?"

His entries stopped temporarily in February 1949 when he fell ill. A year later, on April 6, 1950, he was told he would be executed the next day.

After writing the tanka poem, Taguchi was hanged. It was almost five years after the war ended. He was 27.

Taguchi's diary did not mention Tatsuko. But she says she was glad to learn he lived his final days in a sincere manner, caring about his relatives and friends and without trying to refute his charges.

Tatsuko, who has given speeches to young students about the miseries of war, says she often wonders "what if" Taguchi were born in a different age.

Tatsuko still keeps a crinkled photo of Taguchi.

She says that when she dies, she hopes his diary will be put into her coffin.

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