

War, Trauma, and Humanity in a Japanese Veteran's New Guinea War Memoir: Ogawa Masatsugu's "Island of Death" (1969)

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Abstract: Upon its publication in 1969, a war memoir by a Japanese veteran, Ogawa Masatsugu (1917–2009), "The Island of Death," New Guinea: Humans in Extremis (Shi-no-shima Nyūginia: Kyokugen no naka no ningen), rose to prominence for its portrayal of the raw realities of the author's combat experience in New Guinea. Although it secured its place in Japan's war memory of the Asia-Pacific War, what remains overlooked, and merits further exploration is Ogawa's efforts in grappling with his war trauma and psychological damage. This article argues that Ogawa's memoir marks the initial step in his long healing process through employing two narrative threads. First, he identified the initial traumatic episode as an incident in China, where he had fought before New Guinea. Second, Ogawa created a binary between the compassionate New Guineans and the callous Japanese officers. The two threads led him to frame himself as a victim and bystander but let him leave questions of violence, humanity, savagery, and civilization unaddressed. His capture as a prisoner of war and his repatriation to Japan dealt further blows to his already fragile self. It was this awareness of psychological damage that led Ogawa to write his memoir and to start his long road to recovery. Thus, Ogawa's memoir is not a mere personal story, but rather it reflects the inner struggle of many war veterans in Japan and elsewhere attempting to come to terms with and give meaning to their traumatic war

experiences.

Keywords: the Asia-Pacific War, New Guinea, Japan, military memoir, war trauma, Ogawa Masatsugu (1917–2009)

Introduction

In the complicated politics of memory of the Asia-Pacific War in Japan, Japanese soldiers occupy an ethically compromised territory of being complicit in the war of aggression that resulted in a devastating loss. How can we make sense of the fraught positions the soldier-veterans occupied before, during and after the war? Travelling to sites of mourning such as erstwhile battlegrounds and cemeteries can facilitate the visitors' vicarious appreciation of the war and veterans' remembering of their experience.¹ Another form of travel veterans take in search of answers to ethical quandaries of war may be writing. Many wrote private diaries, memoirs, and novels. Included in the plethora of memoirs by Japanese veterans of the Asia-Pacific War is a war memoir by Ogawa Masatsugu titled "The Island of Death," New Guinea: Humans in Extremis ("Shi-no-shima" Nyūginia: kyokugen no naka no ningen; hereafter "Island of Death"). Ogawa's memoir offers a detailed account of the hardships he endured as a private in New Guinea. Ogawa

wrote the draft shortly after being repatriated to Japan in 1946 and decided to publish it unmodified in 1969, a period when the escalation of the Vietnam War revived pacifist rallying calls in Japan. Upon publication, *Island of Death* won the inaugural Ōya Sōichi non-fiction prize in 1970. The judges found that *Island of Death* depicted the minutiae of the cruelty of the war and the inner struggles of a rank-and-file soldier. Recalling the details was in itself an achievement because the Allied captors had ordered Ogawa and other Japanese soldiers to have all of their private diaries incinerated (Bungei Shunjū 1970, 220–223).

Though it never rose to the stature of a best-seller, *Island of Death* is a long-selling book. Following changes of the title and the publishers it remains in print and readily obtainable as a paperback (Figure 1).² Sociologist Takahashi Saburō validates the significance of *Island of Death* as a representative memoir of the Shōwa 40s (1965–1974), 20 to 30 years after Japan's defeat, in two respects. First, *Island of Death* renders the harrowing realities of the war from the perspective of a low-ranking soldier. Second, instead of a chronological account of battles, *Island of Death* offers an introspective probing of the essence of humanity in the midst of war (Takahashi 1998, 13, 76–77).³ This article reinterprets *Island of Death* as a site of working-through traumatic experience and situates Ogawa as the subject engaged in this arduous task. This re-reading can then facilitate the crossing of the rigid categories of victim and perpetrator.

The article argues that, despite unresolved and unaddressed issues, *Island of Death* marks the beginning of Ogawa's eventual healing from trauma. Dominant across *Island of Death* are two themes. First, the author travelled back in time to trace the origins of his trauma. Second, he observed the New Guineans and the Japanese officers. The comparison led him to conjecture the corrosive

effects of extreme conditions on the officers' morality. His juxtaposition informed his understanding of human civilization. He linked these two narratives in an implicit attempt at self-portrayal as a psychologically damaged veteran who was striving to recover his morality and values. Yet in the process, Ogawa overlooked vital questions about his role as a soldier and bystander in violent acts. This oversight, it is concluded, delayed his direct engagement with the loss he mourns.

Japan's Imagining of the Asia-Pacific War and the New Guinea Campaign

Amidst the thorny politics of collective and individual memory of the Asia-Pacific War, the New Guinea campaign is all but forgotten in today's mainstream Japanese media. The attrition rate was among the highest for that of Japanese soldiers, making it one of the harshest of all the campaigns the Japanese fought in during the Asia-Pacific War. Of some 150,000 soldiers deployed to New Guinea, 127,000 died. Of these, over 90% (114,840) died of illness and starvation (Fujiwara 2001, 135).⁴ Ogawa was one of 91 of the 6,151-member 79th Regiment who returned home (1.47%), and the sole survivor of his 260-man company (Ogawa 2000b, 220). This overwhelming rate of attrition inspired many memoirs and several high-profile accounts. Of the well-known works are the documentary film *Yukiyukite shingun* (1987) and autobiographical manga and essays by another veteran-author, Mizuki Shigeru.⁵ Their expressions of sorrow at their comrades and of anger at the war, their superiors and even the Emperor fed into a narrative of victimhood that gained acceptance in postwar Japanese society. At the collective level, self-identification as a victim of the war gained considerable ideological influence in postwar Japan, where alternative narratives vied for public recognition and acceptance (Hashimoto 2015; Hosaka 2014). For instance, nationalists

positioned the Japanese soldiers as tragic heroes; progressives consider them as perpetrators of violent acts or implicated in the machinery of violence (for example Seaton 2007, 19–23).

As the discussion below shows, Ogawa portrayed himself as a victim of war and a bystander of injustice and violence. While these tropes are common in many memoirs, what sets *“Island of Death”* apart is the elaborate effort the author took to articulate his traumatic experience before the language of trauma had become widely known in Japan. The concept of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) only entered professional and popular parlance in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake of January 1995 along with the publications of Japanese translations of seminal works on trauma. This stands in contrast to the West, where conflicts such as the two World Wars and the Vietnam War provided impetus for the convergence and refinement of psychiatry and neurology (Nakamura 2018, 7). During the wartime and much of the postwar era, under-reporting war-related psychological disturbances were the norm. For example, during the wartime psychiatrists routinely attributed combatants’ psychological disturbances to individual responses such as the lack of manliness and courage and registered far fewer cases than observed (ibid., NHK 2018). In the postwar era, Japanese psychiatrists applied the same logic of individual capacity when they overlooked the diagnoses of atom bomb victims in Japan (Zwigenberg 2018). A closer look at *“Island of Death,”* therefore, offers an insight into deep-seated trauma of a defeated nation in which veterans and citizens lived without due recognition or diagnosis and passed the inchoate trauma to next generations.

Veterans’ writings have gathered attention from multiple disciplines such as history, literature, and psychology. An emerging consensus suggests that the act of writing

enables the writer to work through the trauma. Recent essays by David Stahl, Kyle Ikeda, and Justin Aukema (2016) have also set the stage for further exploration of fictional and semi-fictional writing about the trauma of the Japanese Asia-Pacific War. Psychologists have demonstrated that story-telling, including writing memoirs and novels, can facilitate the processing of psychological damage. Psychologists generally agree that “three Rs” — re-experience, release and reintegration of memory — are necessary steps on the path towards autobiographical repair (Shimokōbe 2000, 136–137). Through the process, the victim takes ownership of traumatic memories as part of the life course, not as separate incidents.⁶ The process can put the veteran into something of a false consciousness where the veteran feels satisfied with the narrative written but ends up postponing the painful, but ultimately meaningful, confrontation with the source of trauma. Historian Eric Santner perceives a vital connection between traumatic memories and the Freudian notion of the pleasure principle. Santner argues that working through traumatic memories is so painful that societies develop “fetishized narratives.” These narratives engender scripts for acting out traumatic memories but paradoxically impede the opportunities to work through the kernel of traumatic memories. Correspondingly, such “fetishized” narratives delay the integration of self from the period before a traumatic event and the person who emerges after such events. The postponed integration of the fragmented selves and post-traumatic development invites the return of repressed emotions (Santner 1992, 144, 147). Words and silences in Ogawa’s memoir reveal the extent to which he has, and at times has not, worked through traumatic memories.

The Structure of *“Island of Death”*

“Island of Death” follows a loosely

chronological order, beginning with Ogawa's arrival in New Guinea and ending with his return to Japan. However, this chronology is disrupted in places. As is the case with many war memoirs, Ogawa wrote from the vantage point of a veteran who disavowed war and violence but did not reveal his attitude towards the before conscription. What Ogawa said was that he had served in northern China before arriving in Wewak, in central north New Guinea, in January 1943 at the age of twenty-six (See Figure 1). The memoir's middle section has a stream-of-consciousness feel; he uses frequent flashbacks and crisscrosses in time and space, often without mentioning dates or places. The meandering structure indicates how Ogawa's thoughts lurch from one topic to another. His sophisticated vocabulary and prose can be overly long-winded for the average reader. Such complexities reflect his background. Rare for a private, Ogawa had obtained a degree in Japanese literature before conscription. In the postwar era, he became a professor of literature at a number of Japanese universities. His intellectual predisposition gave him unique perspectives on war and its representation and places him in the ranks of the conscript-turned-writer Ōoka Shōhei who held a degree in French literature.



Figure 1. Map showing New Guinea Island and adjacent islands.
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Nightmares and Psychological Affliction

Throughout *Island of Death*, Ogawa made numerous comments about his psychological damage as oblique references to Japanese, Chinese and Western literary canons. The most direct comment appears in the epilogue Ogawa wrote in 1969. Reflecting on the writing of the memoir over twenty years previously, he recalled feeling “scars etched deep in [his] consciousness” (*ishiki no shinsō ni kizumi tsukerareta kizu*) (Ogawa 1998, 351) and bearing “stupendous aftereffects” of the war (*tohōmo nai kōishō*) (ibid., 264). These are a few clear instances of Ogawa's linguistic and cognitive resources to name his trauma without using the term. His grasp of the conditions did not, however, make him confident about the possibility of the nightmare ever ending (ibid., 353).⁷ In his final book published in 2000 (reissued in 2013), he admitted that he felt liberated from nightmares and proved himself wrong (Ogawa 2013, 218). The absence of specificities makes it unclear to the reader what he did to achieve this state. What emerges from the memoir, the epilogue, and the essay, all written at different junctures, is recovery from nightmares is possible.

Psychiatrists understand that recurrent nightmares are a vital manifestation of traumatic memories. Analysis of nightmares is essential to identifying the traumatizing events, overcoming the debilitating effects, and achieving autobiographical repair (for example, Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; Hunt 2010, 51–52). Ogawa noted the onset of his nightmares as early as December 1943 — nearly a year after he had arrived in New Guinea. Following the defeat of the Battle of Finschhafen in December 1943, Ogawa's unit began a three-month march due west with the Allies in pursuit (Ogawa 1998, 227). The Japanese walked through the precipitous and arduous Finisterre range whose altitude

exceeded 10,000 feet. They exhausted their supplies during the retreat. Ogawa recalls hearing other soldiers groaning at night — ostensibly troubled with hunger, illness, pain, and nightmares:

When we slept in the open, I saw eerie illusions. Feet, feet, feet – countless feet began on big marches. Bare feet, feet with shoes, feet with socks, feet with blood, feet-in-chains dragging along. Each foot splashed yellow mud and followed one another. From somewhere I saw rays of light as if shining onto the mud. The feet without the bodies dance about. Is it a dream? Is it real? I put my head up and peer through the darkness. I see soldiers lying around. They are actually alive (ibid., 237).

The feet represent the futility of the marches and the powerlessness of the soldiers. They had no option but to obey the order; they walked with no knowledge of the route, destination, or the purpose. Another kind of nightmare Ogawa had during the march repeated the themes of confusion between the illusion and the reality. He saw a ray of light on several occasions in his sleep. He woke up and wondered if the light gave him hope for deliverance, or if it was death beckoning him. Awake or asleep, Ogawa could not escape from drudgery and fear of the war.

The hardship Ogawa experienced had much to do with the conditions in New Guinea. Food and supplies were depleted shortly after arrival. Diseases were rampant. He sensed that the war assailed the soldiers before they fought the enemy. Daily sights and sounds consisted of his comrades dying along the way or pleading with him and others to end their lives (ibid., 333–334). For Ogawa, the Allies were the distant enemy. The more direct threat came

from the very surrounding of New Guinea:

Nature in New Guinea was nothing but violence that gripped us in perpetual fear. We could not afford to enjoy the scenery. The most violent was rain. I recall it rained about half the year, and the humidity was high. Our weapons rusted quickly. Metal rotted. Wounds took a long time to heal. ... Marching in the rain was the worst of all. Mud came up to our knees. ... We were muddy dolls on marches, as if walking was the only will we had (ibid., 236).

The raw and bleak picture subverts the image of the tropical islands of sunshine, leisure, and happiness. It makes the soldiers seem like toys deployed to ‘the island of death’ at the whim of the strategists thousands of miles away. The climate and the environment exacted a toll on the body and mind of the soldiers and made their goods useless. Ogawa’s impression concurs with that of many other soldiers. In historian Fujii Tadatashi’s analysis of Japanese soldiers’ memoirs, letters and diaries, many Japanese soldiers stationed on the Pacific islands feared that the jungle would “swallow” them, for they lacked the know-how to sustain themselves in the bush. Furthermore, the officers’ demands of unquestioning obedience to unrealistic orders and unpredictable and sporadic enemy attacks dampened the morale of the rank-and-file soldiers. They felt vulnerable and powerless in what became the long-drawn-out war of attrition (Fujii 2000, 182).

The nightmares Ogawa experienced in New Guinea did not end at Japan’s defeat or his repatriation but lasted for decades. Subsequently he recognized the nightmares fell into three categories. First, a flat oblong-shaped airplane pursued Ogawa from above. He ran away until he reached a corner only to

find he could not run any further. The aircraft cackled as it flew off. Then he found himself surrounded by countless graves. Second, Ogawa felt gripped with a sense of foreboding he could not name. To fight off his anxiety he tried to shoot his rifle into the air. As he tried to put bullets into his rifle, he found the inside was full of maggots. Ogawa then looked for ways of killing himself. The third category had him scrambling up a slippery slope while an object pursued him from behind. Ogawa knew it was not the enemy but could not tell what it was. He slipped and fell so many times and came very close to getting caught by the shadow of the object. In the end his limbs grew numb and tired, and he stopped moving. Then the shadow began towering over him (Ogawa 1998, 352; Ogawa 2013, 218). Ogawa's descriptions of these nightmares can be seen as instances of re-experience and release. However, the memoir and subsequent writing fall short of probing the meanings of the nightmares and reintegrating the traumatic memory they represent into his life story.

What Ogawa did in *"Island of Death"* instead, however, was to trace the origins of his nightmares. As the memoir progresses, Ogawa wonders why his nightmares began in New Guinea but not in China where he had fought earlier. He then attempts to integrate the two separate campaigns into his life story. This reflective quality distinguishes *"Island of Death"* from many Japanese veterans' New Guinea memoirs that discussed just that campaign. Ogawa conjectured the differences in New Guinea and China might explain. In China, the Japanese traversed on plains in daylight. The similarity of the culture and the relative availability of food presumably made him feel less alienated. The Japanese had sufficient weapons and ammunition to fight the Chinese. However, Japanese soldiers in New Guinea faced a very different situation. Ogawa found New Guinea gave "none of the foundation to build [his] identity as a soldier" (Ogawa 1998, 333). This recollection reinforces

another recollection of the effects the New Guinea jungle had on the soldiers. By contrast, in the early phase of the war in China, the Japanese were in the ascendancy and were able to maintain their soldiering selves. It is this loss of soldiering identity that Ogawa re-experienced and released in the memoir in the milieu of Japan's emasculating defeat. His continuing nightmares demonstrate that he lacked sufficient wherewithal to mourn this loss of identity and accommodate it in an understanding of his personal history, as well as into Japan's turbulent transwar history.

Following this brief comparison of two war zones, a middle section of *"Island of Death"* relates two incidents in China and describes his psychological harm. In the first, a platoon leader he refers to as "Captain U" demanded that some soldiers, including Ogawa, stab to death a captured Chinese civilian in his 50s. The order froze Ogawa's body; he recalls witnessing the man getting stabbed multiple times and dying on the ground. Ogawa interprets that his reaction came not from "resistance by reason, but [came from] a physiological shock" (ibid., 201). Ogawa recalls that the incident prompted recurring nightmares and led him to conclude that the true purpose of war was to kill people. In the second incident, "Captain U" got all the Japanese troops under his command to volunteer to kill a young Chinese soldier the Japanese had caught. Hesitation amongst the Japanese soldiers irritated "U"'s aides. One of them shouted: "You cowards! Why are you here? Men like this one killed your superiors! Take revenge!" Two or three came forward. However, one of U's aides handpicked a soldier who had not volunteered. This soldier ran away screaming, pointing his finger at five or six men to carry out the order together. Ogawa was spared from the order, but watched the killing, "stupefied as if it had occurred in a faraway world" (ibid., 202). Ogawa ends the descriptions of the killing by saying that it "sank deep into his mind like a piece of lead"

(ibid.). These responses mark Ogawa's psychological numbing and distancing from the events. Ogawa's defense mechanism shaped his personal identity as a victim of circumstances which aligned with the broader collective identity of the Japanese as the victim of the war. The security Ogawa's identity gave him helped him avoid the arduous work of deconstructing and reconstructing his life story. What subsequently changed Ogawa was the real combat situation that left him with "sticky emotions" (ibid., 201).

Immediately after narrating the first incident, Ogawa goes on to relate a second incident. While he was on the frontline, he was consumed in a kill-or-be-killed mania and only came to his senses after seeing death and wreckage. He then felt a certain "dryness [in] a world of abstraction through the works of physics and geometry" (ibid., 201–202). Exactly what he meant here is unclear, but he implies that his "dryness" and "abstraction" were buffers that cushioned him from the raw and corporeal sensations of the acts of aggression he had committed. These sensations formed a sediment of memory in Ogawa's subconscious and followed him through New Guinea and back to Japan. Indeed, military psychology has established that soldiers on frontline duties suppress their fear and anxiety about fighting. When they withdraw from the frontline, suppressed emotions tend to come to the surface and overwhelm them (Nakamura 2018, 38). Albeit brief, Ogawa's descriptions in China offer clues to human qualities that he lost and the soldering identity that replaced them. The absence of frontline combat and the associated excitement in New Guinea prompted him to recall and question what happened to him in China. Still, Ogawa fell short of fully exploring connections between the two campaigns to forge tangible psychological links to identify and manage the sources of his trauma.

"Noble" and "Ignoble Savages"

The second prominent narrative thread that Ogawa developed in *Island of Death* relates to the idea of "civilization." He refers to this concept many times throughout the text and loosely equates it with so-called modernity; but he does not go to the same extent as criticizing Japan's feudal mindset, as some other veteran-authors at the time did.⁸ Rather, Ogawa remained conflicted about the meanings of civilization. Earlier, he observed his Imperial Japanese Army-issued weapons rusting in New Guinea. While this point can make subtle criticism of the limit of materiality of civilization, what preoccupied Ogawa was the question of what made humans civilized. Ogawa regarded New Guineans as uncivilized albeit humane and compassionate and the Japanese officers as civilized but morally degenerate. The contrast enabled him to highlight the individual and collective guilt of the Japanese troops in New Guinea. In turn, the comparison accentuated Ogawa's unresolved issues of creeping doubts about civilization and silence over his role in the war. It is these unresolved issues that made him an implicated subject and impeded his three Rs — re-experience, release and reintegration of traumatic memory towards recovery.

Ogawa's perception of the New Guineans came with ambivalence. On the one hand, Ogawa showered the New Guineans with gratitude for their generous offers of food and shelter. On the other hand, Ogawa judged them through the lens of a hierarchical notion of "civilization." In an early phase of the New Guinea campaign, he found it strange to receive food and shelter from the New Guineans, who apparently expected nothing in return. He even admitted to feeling embarrassed for suspecting possible ulterior motives: "As I spent time with them, it became clear that this was a virtue only known to those who have not gone through the baptism of civilization" (Ogawa 1998, 38). His encounters

with the kindness of strangers continued well into the later phase of the war. In February 1945, Ogawa returned to one village after a few months on a march. The village chief saw Ogawa and said: “*Boon nottin, me sori*” (“You are nothing but bones. I’m sorry”) (ibid., 121). Indeed, Ogawa was so emaciated that a Japanese medic had to resuscitate him. Meanwhile, his comrades had already dug a grave for him in anticipation of his imminent death (ibid., 122). The chief’s compassion struck a chord in Ogawa. Appreciation for New Guineans is a common theme in Japanese war memoirs (Iwamoto 2006, 53). “*Island of Death*” follows suit. Ogawa regarded the New Guineans’ generosity and compassion as extremely beautiful and untainted by the corrupting influences of so-called civilization (Ogawa 1998, 144, 285).

Such episodes and Ogawa’s gratitude sat uncomfortably with his preoccupation with his understanding of civilization and his conclusion that the New Guineans were inherently lacking in it. Ogawa could not fathom why the New Guineans helped the Japanese even when the Japanese were losing and risked potential retribution from the Allies for assisting the Japanese. It was this apparent selflessness that compelled Ogawa to name the New Guineans “gullible children of nature” (*oroka na shizenji*) (ibid., 144) to the point of making a caricature that reinforces the “noble savage” trope. However, historian Eric Bergerud (1996, 118), for instance, finds that the New Guineans helped soldiers out of compassion, rather than as an expression of loyalty to a particular nation. Still, Ogawa’s compliment reduced the New Guineans into child-like “noble savages.” While his impression infused the personal and humane to an otherwise impersonal and cruel warzone, this story should not discount the crucial point that the war dictated the nature of interaction between the New Guineans, on the one hand, and the Japanese and the Allies, on the other.

One incident Ogawa recalled in the Sepik River, in the island’s interior, brought his paternalistic assumptions into sharper relief. The village chief requested the Japanese to intervene in a dispute with a neighboring village. Men in the neighboring village had abducted a woman working on a plantation and were demanding a ransom. The Japanese mediation helped to resolve the matter in the chief’s favor. The dispute gave Ogawa and his accompanying army doctor the following impression:

We found the people in the Sepik region are very frank about sex. This means that they may not have sensibility for love. In no way can romantic love take place if one sees the opposite sex as a sexual object. ... [L]ove demands a high level of mental sophistication. We concluded that we did not find anything that resembled love in their lifestyle. There is no such thing as love between New Guinean men and women — this was our conclusion (Ogawa 1998, 151–152).

The ambivalent conclusion underlines the reach of the Japanese imperial imaginary of the South Seas Islands, such as Taiwan and Micronesia under formal Japanese control, to New Guinea.⁹ Naoto Sudo (2010) and Robert Tierney (2010) have argued that Japanese intelligentsia invented cultural tropes of Japan’s tropical empire. In what Sudo and Tierney name “Nanyō-Orientalism” and “interstitial imperialism,” the Japanese positioned themselves as non-Western imperialists catching up with the West and superior to indigenous peoples of the South Seas. Creating “the savage” out of the indigenous Taiwanese and Micronesians elevated the Japanese above them in the racial hierarchy. Inherent here were ambiguous sentiments of admiration and nostalgia for the indigenous people. Their

putative “savagery” reminded the Japanese of primitiveness they had supposedly lost.

It was within this cultural paradigm that Ogawa and the doctor perceived the New Guineans as “the gullible children of nature.” Ogawa’s view of the New Guineans was constantly in the background to compare Japanese officers. He judged them as “ignoble savages” who failed to maintain their standards of civilization. In one example, Ogawa accompanied a party of ten soldiers on a potato raid. The group arrived in a village. Near a hut a lone villager was guarding a pile of potatoes. The Japanese captain told his men: “Go for it. We don’t need to care about finishing off a native or two” (Ogawa 1998, 282). The villager sensed danger and ran away into the bush. As the soldiers helped themselves to the potatoes, they heard the villager’s drum beats to warn other villagers. The Japanese fled. The captain fired at the ground once or twice to intimidate the villagers and initiated a discussion with the village chief. The captain conceded that stealing was unethical and admitted that he should have asked the chief first. In his defense, however, the captain explained that he could not help stealing because the food shortage had become so acute. He then added: “If you cannot pardon the theft, then I have no option but to fight. Many soldiers are so hungry” (ibid.).

What did the chief do? He replied: “All right, what’s the point in a pointless fight? Why didn’t you tell one of the boys? It’s no good to be hungry. Now that I understand, I’ll give away all the potatoes” (ibid.). While Ogawa gave the officer’s logic short shrift, he saw the villagers had “a greater spirit of tolerance and compassion than the Japanese” (ibid., 283). Through this episode Ogawa judged the officer’s actions as unbecoming of the supposedly “civilized” standards as Japanese soldiers. Pitting the civilized but callous Japanese officers against the uncivilized but benign New Guineans disturbs the victim narrative and puts the Japanese squarely into

the perpetrator camp.

Ogawa’s description of the raid finds him adopting a fly-on-the-wall attitude, as a witness watching what the Japanese officer did. What remains conspicuously absent is his involvement in the raid. His silence stands in contrast to his recollection of the execution of a Chinese man earlier in the narrative. Ogawa wrote he was spared from stabbing the man to death. His exemption afforded him to become a witness to the event. His account of the potato raid says little about the roles he played in it either on his volition, under pressure from his superiors or fellow combatants, or in self-defense against the villagers. Although arguing for silence can be futile, historian Jay Winter contends, what the veteran chooses to write or omit in a memoir, are political decisions that control, regulate, and project a veteran’s self-identity. Winter also notes that silence and omissions highlight disturbing memories the veteran evades (Winter 2018, 38, 43). The distance Ogawa created between himself and the others afforded him to become an innocent bystander. This identity became part of a “fetishized narrative” that put himself on the vantage point of criticizing the officers’ degradation of civilization.

Ogawa’s silence over the issues he did not and could not examine has significant bearings on his persistent trauma. He accumulated painful memories in China and New Guinea and brought them back to Japan. In Japan, Ogawa’s war continued ‘in the head’ despite his transition from a soldier to a civilian. His struggle fits with what Michael Rothberg (2019) names the implicated subject. Rothberg argues that we, present-day citizens, are not complicit in violent and unjust events of the past, but we are implicated in trans-local and intergenerational legacy of the past. The implicated subject complicates the position of the bystander to look into their involvement or complicity in past events, and the contemporary imbalance of power and privilege

the past events created. Ogawa's silence helped him carve out the figure of the bystander but hindered direct engagement with the awkward issues of his complicity during the raid and what the raid means to him in his whole life story.

Following the potato raid, Ogawa continues to observe of Japanese officers' ethical degradation and exploitation of the New Guineans. In one village Ogawa watches a Japanese soldier bartering his razor blades for the villagers' bananas. Also witnessing is a Japanese officer. He finds the razor blades had become rusty and tells the soldier to cancel the trade. The officer then takes the bananas from the villagers, claiming that the bananas are a reward for intervening in the unfair trade. The officer turns to the soldier and berates him, saying "Shame on you! You are not Japanese!" and "This is no good for the dignity of the Emperor's army." The villagers look on looking bemused. That same evening, a village elder offers the soldier several bananas. Ogawa understands this gesture as the elder commiserating with the soldier for bearing the officer's excessive anger and compensating for the shame that the elder might have contributed to the soldier's humiliation (Ogawa 1998, 284-285). On this occasion, the officer ostensibly protected the innocent inhabitants and thus upheld his dignity as a member of a supposedly more "civilized" culture. However, Ogawa adopts the stance of a bystander and points to the officer's perverse post-hoc rationalization in order to take the bananas. Ogawa's morality tale casts the New Guineans as 'friendly natives' falling prey to uncivil and devious Japanese officers. His positioning as a bystander enables him to create the division between the victim and the perpetrator. The potato raid and the razor blade incident allow Ogawa to position himself as an innocent bystander absolved of personal responsibility; but he comes short of interrogating his own position as an implicated subject. This kind of mental abstraction spares him from the difficult

work of the three Rs — re-experiencing, releasing and reintegrating the traumatic memories — towards his healing. Yet at the same time his failure to fully confront the meaning of such episodes can be seen as one potential source of his persistent nightmares.

Traumatizing Encounter with the Allied Captors and Return Home

If his wartime experience caused Ogawa profound trauma that lasted for years, the final pages of *Island of Death* relate the emotional impact of Japan's defeat. At the end of the narrative, Ogawa writes of his subsequent capture and experience as a prisoner of war (POW) and ends the memoir with his return to his hometown, Hiroshima. All of these impressions added to his grave realization that he and his fellow Japanese troops had been completely stripped of their once privileged position in Japanese society. After the Japanese surrendered, Ogawa and his comrades walk from inland to an Australian-run POW camp by the sea. There, the Australians were to disarm the Japanese before sending them to another POW camp. At the seaside camp, Ogawa sees half-naked Australian troops chewing gum and toting machine guns, ready to shoot any Japanese who resisted. Ogawa senses that the Australians' appearance was a staged performance intended to humiliate the Japanese. He describes the Australians as "greasy giants," with glistening muscular bodies and radiant blond hair; they smirked contemptuously at 'the shriveled and dirty lines of soldiers' (ibid., 309). What Ogawa saw was the triumphant bodies of the victors in sharp contrast to the emasculated Japanese bodies. An Australian soldier's questioning of Japanese "Lance Corporal O" seemed to inflict yet more humiliation on the Japanese. Ogawa writes: "Lance Corporal O was short. He had a baby face. A long arm took away O's cap, and the hand patted his head. [The Australian] then

asked ‘How old are you? Eighteen?’. It was bizarre to see a thirty-year-old man assumed to be eighteen.” (ibid.) For Ogawa, Lance Corporal O was superior to Ogawa, both by rank and age. However, in the eye of the Australians, Lance Corporal O was just another member of a vanquished nation. These episodes are uncomfortable reminders that what followed the defeat added to the emotional burden Ogawa carried with him.

The final incident that seared trauma onto Ogawa’s mind came upon his return to his hometown of Hiroshima. Ogawa and his comrades had learned of the news of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki within days, even in New Guinea. Ogawa disembarks a train at Hiroshima and walks out of the station. As the sight of the devastated city comes into view and left him wonder:

Is this what that bomb could do? Did I live to see this devastation? The bomb killed several tens of thousands of people, and it helped me to live. ... Here [Hiroshima] was no place for human habitation. I went from the jungle to a ruin. I went from the violence of nature the war meted out to the violence of civilization. I have gone between two realms that excluded humans. I could find no means of putting together my shattered self. An empty breeze passed through an empty heart (ibid., 350).

His journey from one death zone in a New Guinean jungle to another in Hiroshima offers no consolation of homecoming. It was the war of conflicting civilization between the Allies and the Japanese that brought him to New Guinea. There Ogawa fought a war against nature and the corrosive effects of the jungle on a type of civilization he valued. Upon returning to Japan,

the altered landscape of Hiroshima presents him with an even more profound paradox about “civilization”. The atom bomb represented the epitome of human civilization and scientific endeavor. When the news of the atom bomb over Hiroshima reached Ogawa and his comrades, they believed the bomb brought the war to its end sooner. They even drew a sigh of relief for its getting him out of the jungle (ibid., 302). Yet, his survival came at the cost of unprecedented destruction and the deaths of many civilians. New Guinea and Hiroshima are very different places, but the damage to humanity brought together different war experiences Ogawa and others had. In spite of the debilitating vulnerability and emptiness Ogawa felt, he still managed to take to writing to reclaim his humanity.

Conclusion

Of a plethora of writing and cultural artefacts of war, the veteran’s memoir is no less significant to studies of war, autobiographical writing, and trauma. Japanese memoirs of the Asia-Pacific War inform us how individual veterans tried to come to terms with the defeat from the vantage point of their return to the defeated homeland. Ogawa’s *“Island of Death”* is an informative text that reveals the severity of trauma when concepts of it had barely taken root in Japan. In other words, Ogawa’s memoir is not only a personal record of his inner war but speaks to many war veterans in Japan and elsewhere who lacked the wherewithal or means to articulate how they felt.

This article has explored two narrative threads in *“Island of Death”* when we read it as Ogawa’s attempt at psychological recovery. In the first, he unearthed his traumatic memories in China and New Guinea and recognized they were indeed on the same continuum. The second thread involved him contrasting the New Guineans and the Japanese officers in an

attempt to repair his broken faith in humanity. Ogawa did not elaborate how he finally unshackled himself from his decades-long nightmares in subsequent publications. Given that he wrote the draft of *“Island of Death”* shortly after his return home, he was most likely immersed in narrating his wartime life as a victim and a bystander. “Civilization” was a convenient rhetorical device to sustain the binary of noble and ignoble “savages.” Ogawa’s experiences of the prisoner of war camp and a devastated Hiroshima dealt further psychological blows to him. In this context of his psychological state, Ogawa portrayed himself as a victim of the war and a bystander but fell short of assisting him to terms with traumatic experiences. If one considers Ogawa’s declaration of eventual freedom from his nightmares, it becomes possible to re-read *“Island of Death”* less as the endpoint but more as the beginning of the author’s autobiographical repair. Actions that remained unspoken and pent-up emotions could manifest in many dreams. None is too inconsequential to the long war Ogawa experienced and the trauma that his memoir passed down to subsequent generations.

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Notes

¹ See articles by Alison Starr, Beatrice Trefalt and Collin Rusneac in this special issue.

² The original title was *Kyokugen no naka no ningen* (“Human Beings in Extremis”). In 1983 Chikuma Shobō republished it under the new title. Since 1998 Kōjinsha has published it. Ogawa is not completely unknown in the English-speaking world. An anthology of oral history of Japanese experience of the Asia-Pacific War, by Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore Cook, features Ogawa’s oral testimony (Ogawa 2000a, 267–276). Yuki Tanaka introduces Ogawa’s witnessing of suspected cases of cannibalism by Japanese soldiers (2018, 125–126).

³ Along with Ogawa’s *Island of Death*, Takahashi lists Kamiko Kiyoshi’s *Ware Reite ni shisezu* as the other representative memoir of the Shōwa 40s. See Justin Aukema’s article in this special issue for an analysis of Kamiko’s memoir.

⁴ This figure excludes Rabaul, New Britain Island, which became the site of a large base and naval and army headquarters for Japan’s South Pacific operations. At the end of the war there were 100,000 Japanese troops stationed at Rabaul.

⁵ *Yukiyukite shingun* followed veteran Okuzaki Kenzō as he interrogated former officers whom he suspected of murdering his compatriots and of cannibalism in New Guinea. See Tanaka 2019.

⁶ Shimokōbe credits Nishizawa (1998) for the 3Rs. Nishizawa adopted the formulation of recovery from childhood trauma by the US psychiatrist Kendall Johnson (1989).

⁷ I refer to the pages in the 1998 edition.

⁸ See Justin Aukema’s article in this special issue.

⁹ The Western imagination of the Pacific Islands has engendered a copious amount of study. Mahon Murphy’s article in this special issue draws our attention to a lesser-known colonial fantasy of the German empire.