

20 Jun 1950

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FIFTEEN TO ONE: THE DEATH STRUGGLE

IN BURMA

FOREWORD

I do not think that it is a futile effort for a defeated nation to review its battles to find a way to peace.

With sincere apology for my part in the war, it is my desire to relate the facts of the Burma campaign with thoughts of the heroes killed on the Burma battlegrounds and of their kinds. If for nothing else, I wish to leave a record of my activities for my eldest son.

This book was prepared while I traveled incognito from place to place.

Of my 21 years in military service, I spent eight years on the battlefield. The final year was the most turbulent and difficult one for me.

This book is a candid record of the last year. Since this is a personal account, it may give the reader the wrong impression that I am seeking recognition or that I am ^{trying to} vindicate my past errors. This is not purpose.

There is no denial that the war was lost because the army was demoralized and there were many errors in battle tactics; but it is wrong to condemn all soldiers as depraved creatures or that all battles were poorly planned.

This book is based on actual facts only. Only those events which I have personally seen or experienced or facts which I have heard directly are related. There may be some discrepancies in the time and date and the strength of the army, but my conscience is clear on other facts.

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NAZI WAR CRIMES DISCLOSURE ACT

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I dedicate this book to Lieutenant General Mizukami and his men who were killed in Burma. Perhaps I can offer some comfort to the relatives of the dead by relating the experiences of our battles. Therefore, I have turned over my notes to my old friend, Takamiya Taihei, for editing.

Youths who are active in this book are youths of Japan. Youths who are now wandering aimlessly and desperately without any roots in their defeated fatherland are also youths of Japan.

If this document can offer to these youth any encouragement to live and fight for peace, my wish will be more than fulfilled.

To abandon war and to establish a peaceful Japan, the people must redouble their efforts and sacrifices to preserve the peace. In this sense, it would not be useless to reflect on the turbulent past of the Burma campaign.

10 March 1950

Tsuji Masanobu

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CHAPTER I. FORCED LANDING IN ENEMY AREA

The Japanese military situation changed from offensive to defensive following the setbacks in Midway and Guadalcanal. Although the greater part of the nation's remaining shipping tonnage was assigned for military transport between Japan and the Southern Areas, this was totally inadequate to meet military requirements.

The Imperial General Headquarters planned to divert the flow of materiel through overland transportation to relieve the shipping shortage. In February 1944, the China Area Army was ordered to launch air attack against Kwei-lin. This was for the dual purpose to establish an overland route through Korea, Manchuria, China, French Indochina, Thailand, and Malaya and to destroy the advanced bases of the B-29s.

Yokoyama Isjuu, with ten divisions totalling 100,000 men, was assigned this mission. As the chief of the Third Section of the China Area Army, I was responsible for the logistical support for army of one million men.

Within two weeks, Ch'ang-sha fell to the Japanese Army. Provisions were easily obtained locally, but ammunition had to be transported 100 kilometers on backs of men and horses.

The force pushed on to Hang-yang, but there it met unexpected strong resistance. To establish the supply line to Hang-yang for the relief of our men in seige, I had to return to Hankow to make

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further arrangements. Enroute we made a forced landing near the Yangtse River between Yo-chou and Hankow and I was taken prisoner by bandits. Through clever deception I bribed the bandits and returned safely to Hankow.

Following the withdrawal of the China Area Army's control over the economy in accordance with Premier Tojo's order, the economic circle in Shanghai was thrown into chaos. The China Area Army was instructed by the Minister of War to cooperate with the embassy and the Wang Regime to restore economic order. In reply, I proposed ^{that} the Greater East Asia Ministry should be abolished and that the army should be given full control over all affairs, except those of purely diplomatic nature. This message was sent to the War Ministry over objections of the chief of the staff, and I awaited the reply, fully expecting dismissal for my rash suggestion.

The reply was both a defeat and a victory for me. On 3 July, I was transferred to North Burma as a staff officer of the Thirty-third Army.

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CHAPTER 2. CRUMBLING DEFENSE

Upon my arrival in Rangoon, I conferred with the various Burma Area Army Headquarters officers to reorganize the Japanese forces after the defeat at Imphal. The Imphal campaign was carried out despite adverse supply conditions. This factor probably was one of the major weakness of the army in that it ^{was} excessively inflexible in its thinking and unduly sensitive to its reputation. It is evident that the Imphal campaign failed because the army strove to gain fame through vain glory and divine inspiration.

Air supremacy in Burma was already in the hands of the Americans and the British. When I requested for a plane ride to Maymyo, I was told to take a reconnaissance plane to Meiktila and then to go by automobile at night to Maymyo. When I arrived at Meiktila, I obtained the consent of the two soldiers who had come for me from Maymyo to drive during the day. Thus, I was able to familiarize myself with the tropical terrain of Burma, which differed from that of Malaya. In Malaya where there is only one narrow road running north and south, mechanized units cannot be used effectively. In Central Burma, except during the rainy season, mechanized units can operate cross-country.

I reported to the Army Headquarters at Maymyo, a resort town, for my orders. I was demoted and assigned to work under Lieutenant Colonel Chirasaki.

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While the Fifteenth Army was engaged in a fierce battle at Imphal, the 18th Division (Kiku) advanced to the Hukawng Valley from Myitkyina to intercept the Chinese Expeditionary Force in India over the Ledo Road and to guard the right flank of the Fifteenth Army. The 18th Division, which was defeated by four American-equipped divisions of the Chinese Army retreated south and abandoned or destroyed its heavy weapons. To rescue the 18th Division, the 116th Division (Yasu) was thrown into the battle.

Myitkyina is a strategic point connecting the Yunnan area with the Hukawng area. The four battalions under Major General Mizukami, assigned to defend Myitkyina, were completely surrounded by the Chinese airborne troops in late June and were not expected to continue resistance beyond a month.

On the Yunnan front, the 56th Division (Tatsu), which had been guarding the Nu-chiang line for two years, was contained by 15 divisions of the Yunnan Expeditionary Army.

Since the primary objective of the Japanese advance into Burma was to cut off the overland American and British assistance to Chungking, it was a logical move to secure the Yunnan front at the sacrifice of the Hukawng area.

Before I made the final decision, I made an inspection tour of the 56th Division Front. I found that incessant enemy air activities forced the Japanese Army to move only at night.

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Chapter 3. ARMY HEADQUARTERS AT THE FRONT

When the orders for the interdiction operation were issued, the Army headquarters was moved to Hsenwi in July. This site was chosen because it was located near Lashio -- the terminal of the line of communications -- and was suitable to direct the operations in the Kunglong, Namhkam, and Mang-shih areas. The Imperial General Headquarters expressed its desire that this operation be completed by the end of September.

Bhamo was the only remaining base from which this operation to prevent the merger of the Allied forces from India with the Chinese forces in Yunnan ^{could be conducted.} The Takahashi Battalion of the 2d Division was assigned to defend Bhamo. When Myitkyina was endangered, Bhamo was hurriedly strengthened by additional artillery, engineers, and logistical support.

When the situation in Myitkyina was considered as hopeless, Regimental Commander Maruyama withdrew his 800 men to save the regimental flag. Later, Major General Mizukami committed suicide to atone for his responsibility in the loss of Myitkyina.

I do not wish to think that Maruyama was a coward. He must have felt that it would be better to retreat and reassemble his men than to lose or burn the regimental colors. On the battlefield, it is often necessary to defend until the last man. In such a case, I do not consider it shameful to permit the flag to share the fate of the soldiers.

On 28 August, the Headquarters was advanced to Mang-shih to supervise the rescue of the 56th Division. The plan was to rescue La-meng

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by drawing the enemy to LA-meng, Tang-yueh, and Lung-ling and by attacking the enemy south of Lung-ling. The rescue of Teng-yueh and P'ing-ka was to follow.

The 2d and 18th Divisions were to alternate in the defense of Namhkan and reassemble at Mang-shih in late August to prepare for an attack in early September. The 18th Division was to intercept the Indian Expeditionary Army.

Fierce battles ensued. The Headquarters was further advanced to the front line. After 12 days of fighting with a force of only 1,400 men, Mang-shih fell on September 9th, followed by the loss of Tang-yueh. Despite heavy fire from the enemy, the 800 soldiers, including 150 stretcher cases, defending P'ing-ka were safely evacuated to Mang-shih.

This was the end of the Lung-ling campaign — the first phase of the interdiction operation. The total enemy strength was about 280,000 while Japanese forces numbered 18,000 — a ratio of 15 to 1. The number of enemy killed, wounded, or missing totaled 63,000. Our losses were 7,300, or a ratio of 9 to 1.

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CHAPTER 4. THREAT ON TWO FRONTS

The second phase of the interdiction operation was to check the advance of the Indian Expeditionary Army to the Namhkam area and to prevent a second attack on the Lung-ling area by the Yunnan Expeditionary Army.

La Mong Yu, an unknown Burmese settlement located between the 56th and 18th Divisions, was the new site of the army Headquarters. Meanwhile, the 18th Division which was disposed at Namhkam, was readying itself for the second operation. The 2nd Division was transferred to the Mandalay area on 10 October.

When I inspected the Shamo positions, I found that the defense preparations were inadequate. The officers seemed unaware that the chief cause of the fall of Myitkyina was ineffective defenses.

After the P'ing-ka battle, the 56th Division, was disposed at Mang-shih for the defense of area south of Lung-ling.

I was asked to send the main force of the 18th Division to Longmit for immediate strengthening of that city; but I asked for a delay on the ground that the Indian Expeditionary Army would strike at Namhkam. Much to my regret, the transfer was made during my absence. As I had predicted, the enemy attacked. ~~with~~ ^{Since} the 2nd Division ^{was} transferred and the 18th Division ^{was} understrength, the force left for defense totaled only one division. It was to fight against the 20 divisions of the enemy.

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CHAPTER 5. RETREAT OF THE 56th DIVISION

When it became apparent that the 56th Division would not be able to defend the Mang-shih area against the expected attack by the enemy, plans were formulated for a safe retreat of the division. Time was of the essence in this move. Miscalculation meant the annihilation of the division.

The division commander was not in accord with my plans for an immediate retreat. After a personal inspection of the front, I finally convinced him of the necessity of this move. The retreat was accomplished to Che-fang on 19 November.

While the 56th Division was retreating, Bhamo was surrounded by the four divisions of the Indian Expeditionary Army. It was attacked on 15 November. It was our good fortune that we decoded the enemy's messages. By the end of November, Bhamo lost its outside support and was left to its own defenses.

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CHAPTER 6. THE NIGHT OF THE ATTACK

The defense of Bhamo was my "baby". I could not have it fail. The plan was to reinforce the Yamasaki Detachment at Namhkam with selected battalions from the 56th and 49th Divisions. Then the force was to advance on the Namhkam-Bhamo. This was to permit the Bhamo garrison to escape. To aid in this rescue, the main force of the 18th Division was to push northward from Mongmit.

This rescue campaign was successful. Although fighting against 30 to 1 odds for over a month, the 980 men of the Bhamo garrison, including 200 wounded, broke through the enemy line and returned to Namhkam on 11 December.

When I left the Mong Yu Headquarters for the rescue operation, I was instructed to deceive the enemy that our strength was large. During the fierce 8-day struggle, I had no time for such a plan, but on my way back to the Headquarters, I made an authentic operational map showing our plans for attack on Namhkam. Our force was indicated to comprise four full divisions of the 56th, 49th, 2nd, and 18th and 18th. Namhkam and Wan-ting were shown to have large concrete fortifications. I left the map by the roadside as if it had been lost knowing that it would be picked up by the enemy.

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CHAPTER 7. HOLIDAYS AT THE FRONT

The Indian Expeditionary Army was quiet after the battle of Bhamo and Namhyu, but the Yunnan Expeditionary Army began its drive to close in on the 56th Division. During the last days of the year, Che-fang fell and Wan-ting was surrounded.

Expecting the enemy to observe a truce on New Year's Day, at least, plans were made at Lashio for a celebration. However, in the midst of merriment, the Headquarters, which had moved to Lashio from Long Yu, was notified of a heavy enemy attack on the Imaoka unit. We had forgotten that the Chinese observed the old calendar and that their New Year was in February!

The commander of the 56th Division was in control of the front line extending from Wan-ting to Namhpakka. Our force comprising the 56th Division, Yoshida Regiment, Yamasaki Detachment, and others totaling 19,500 men was pitted against the Yunnan Expeditionary Army of 15 divisions in the north and the Indian Expeditionary Army of six divisions to the west with a combined strength of 290,000 men. The ratio was again 15 to 1.

We were able to hold the Ledo Road over the new year. If the enemy were able to recapture the Ledo Road and returned to China, the Kuei-lin area would be endangered. If the enemy pushed southward to Mandalay, our adjoining army would suffer. The last phase of the interdiction operation was to sustain our defense as long as possible.

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In spite of heavy enemy attacks we were able to hold the line until the end of January, when the 56th Division retreated to the Hsenwi-Lashio line. All ammunition and supplies were safely transported to the rear area before we retreated.

I proceeded to Kalaw to report on the interdiction operations to Army Headquarters. I was quite surprised to find that a ceremony had been planned to award me a citation. Honors are generally bestowed upon heroic soldiers posthumously. I, who was still very much alive, and who had always voiced opposition to individual awards, protested vigorously, but to no avail. I received the award with considerable embarrassment and with a premonition that it would bring bad luck.

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CHAPTER 6. ADJACENT ARMY IN DISTRESS

After the Chinese Army regained control of the Ledo Road, my next plan was made on the presumption that the Chinese Army would be withdrawn to China. Only the 56th Division was to be left to defend the Lashio area. The 16th Division was to be assigned to the Mandalay area to assist the Fifteenth Army now in a death struggle with a superior Anglo-Indian Army on the banks of the Irrawaddy River. The plan also included my transfer to the Fifteenth Army.

Chief of Staff Yamamoto approved my plan, but Army Commander Honda objected, and in particular my transfer. When I insisted, the plan was finally approved and I was transferred to the Fifteenth Army.

Before I reported to the division headquarters at Myotha, I inspected the front-line and found that the Fifteenth Army was fighting under more adverse conditions than the Thirty-third Army. Contrary to my expectations, I was welcomed at the headquarters.

The following day, the headquarters was thrown into confusion when a large enemy mechanized column of 100 tanks and 1,000 trucks crossed the Irrawaddy River advanced to Meiktila and captured it. This necessitated a sudden change in our plan, but this was opposed by the Area Army Headquarters at Rangoon, which was directing the operations without knowledge of front-line situation.

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Permission was finally granted for the 13th Division to recapture Meiktila. I was assigned to lead the division in this operation. When this mission was accomplished, I returned to the headquarters and found that I was transferred back to the Thirty-third Army, which was ordered to the Meiktila area.

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Chapter 9. THE DEATH STRUGGLE

When I reported to the Thirty-third Army, it was in command of the 18th, 116th, and 49th Divisions. After the Meiktila battle, the military situation of the Fifteenth Army had deteriorated rapidly. This naturally adversely affected the capabilities of the Thirty-third Army.

On 25 March, the Army Headquarters was moved to Thazi; four days later it moved again to Nyaungnyan. Finally, it shifted to Pyawtwe. When the Headquarters was attacked and liaison with the 18th Division was severed, Second Lieutenant Fujimoto had to break through the enemy line to deliver orders to the division.

Later, the Headquarters moved to Pyin^{na}mana under the cover of darkness. There the remnants of the 116th and 55th Divisions were disposed in a semicircle to guard the small town. The 18th Division was guarding the right flank. The Headquarters, with its staff of 300, established defense positions 3 kilometers south of Pyinmana. This was the beginning of the death struggle.

Early on the morning of 19 April, the Headquarters was attacked heavily by planes and tanks. Under the cover of darkness, it moved again without being detected by the enemy.

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Chapter 10. THE SEVENTH WOUND

The plan of the Burma Area Army was to assemble the Fifteenth Army at Toungoo for a new campaign while the Thirty-third Army held the northern front. Eventually, remnants of the 49th, 56th, 116th, and 55th Divisions assembled at the Tenth Sector Army Headquarters east of Toungoo.

Over the objections of staff officers, I proposed a plan to assign the Thirty-third Army to defend the Sitang River mouth to assist the rescue of the Twenty-eighth isolated in the area. This plan was approved by the Area Army Headquarters. The Fifteenth Army was ordered to secure the east flank of Toungoo and to assist the southward march of the Thirty-third Army. Then it was to proceed to Moulmein.

The 56th, 116th, and 49th Divisions began their southward trek. At the bank of the Schwegyin River, the crossing operation was hampered by the swollen river and heavy enemy fire from the opposite bank. I became impatient with this delay because it might be dawn before the crossing was completed. Therefore, I plunged into the river on horseback and led the others.

It became increasingly more difficult as we pushed through the jungle in the rain. It was obvious that the Area Army was not fully cognizant of our depleted ammunition and strength.

After crossing the river, the 56th Division reduced its rest periods and pushed forward relentlessly both day and night. It reached the Sitang River mouth on 10 May, just a day or so ahead of the enemy.

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Plans ^(H.M.V.) were formulated for the rescue of the Twenty-eighth Army. This successful operation was primarily the work of Colonel Maruyama who was relieved of his command when he withdrew his regiment to save the flag.

On 18 May, I was ordered to the General Headquarters. On the way to Saigon, I stopped at the Area Army Headquarters at Moulmein and was requested by Army Commander Kimura to report that he was responsible for the defeat of his force. Kimura had been the target of considerable criticism for abandoning Rangoon and fleeing to Moulmein, leaving several thousand civilians to defend the city with bamboo spears. His promotion to a full general immediately after the fall of Rangoon intensified the criticism.

When I arrived in Saigon, I was astonished and disgusted with the poor discipline at the Headquarters. When I was requested to draft plans in anticipation of my transfer to the GI Army in Thailand, I rejected the suggestion on the ground that my transfer was still unofficial. I expressed the hope of returning to Burma to continue my work at the front line.

When I made a full report on the interdiction operation to Lieutenant General Numada, chief of the General Staff, I called his attention to the discipline at the Saigon Headquarters. I expected a reprimand, but to my surprise he thanked ~~me~~ for the report and suggestion.

I immediately returned to Moulmein by plane. While hurrying back to front by truck at night, I was wounded by a bullet from the Japanese-trained Indian Army volunteers. After sustaining wounds in the Shin-

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Japanese conflict, the Nonanhan Incident, Malaya, New Guinea, and Guadalcanal, I was wounded for the seventh time. This time it was by a Japanese bullet fired from a Japanese weapon in the hands of a former ally.

Despite my serious injury, I continued to plan from my bedside. On 31 May, I received the official order transferring me to the Gi Army in Thailand as a staff officer.

On 4 June, with my right arm in a sling and holding a green bamboo cane, I ^{bade} bid farewell to my friends at headquarters and carried my memories of the men who helped me in my work.

It is not likely that a staff officer in cane would be welcomed in Bangkok, but I have to fulfill my duties, even with my life.

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