

Eyewitness Accounts of The Battle of Okinawa — OCJC Students Interview Their Grandparents —

沖縄戦体験者の証言 — 本学学生による祖父母へのインタビュー —

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Abstract

This paper deals with almost one hundred eyewitness accounts from the Battle of Okinawa. The respondents are mostly the grandparents of students who have studied at Okinawa Christian Junior College over the past five years. The students interviewed the respondents and presented the findings to their classmates. Here, I present an edited record of the testimonies, divided thematically into paragraphs. The aim of the research is to provide an accurate snapshot of life (and death,) between April and June 1945 in Okinawa, Japan. It is felt necessary to preserve these memories depicting war in all its horror, at a time when calls are being made for the revision of Japan's pacifistic constitution.

Introduction

The Battle of Okinawa which claimed the lives of, “approximately 150 000 lives - a quarter of the prefectural population,” (Inoue, 2017 p. 4) is widely considered to have taken place between April 1st and June 23 1945. Although renowned historian and journalist Masahide Ota disputes these dates as they don't take account of massacres carried out earlier on Tokashiki, and later on Kume jima. (2014 p. XV) Nor do these dates include casualties inflicted by bombing raids in late 1944 and early 1945 which “destroyed the cities of Naha and Shuri with their national treasures.” (Warner, 1995 p.7) However it is defined, “the horrifying extent of civilian casualties is a key feature of the battle...needless to say, most families in the prefecture will have the name of at least one deceased relative engraved on the Cornerstone of Peace, the marble tablets in Mabuni that bear the names of the more than 240 000 combatants and non combatants of all nationalities who died in the battle.”

(Ota, 2014 p. XVII) Even though Okinawans cannot but be aware of this tragic chapter in their island's recent history, I nonetheless decided this was a topic I wanted to devote time to in my higher level classes.

Data collection

Every year since beginning teaching fulltime at Okinawa Christian Junior College (OCJC) in 2014, I have asked my students to interview their elderly relations, or neighbours, about their war memories. Of course I expected most students would already know their grandparents' histories but I wanted to ensure that *absolutely every student* knew these stories. I also wanted all the students to understand not just the objective facts of the

Battle, (when it started, ended and how many people perished etc.) but I wanted them to consider its human cost, from the perspective of a close relative or neighbour. In addition, I hoped that students who had become overly familiar with their own grandparents' stories, to the point where they were no longer shocked by them, would listen to accounts told by other students with a fresh ear.

About OCJC

OCJC is an educational institution explicitly committed to promoting peace. One of the college's founders, Chosho Nakazato, had himself been an educator, a high school teacher. Prior to the Battle of Okinawa, he urged "his students to go to war and die for the Emperor. Many...complied and, of course, lost their lives in the war. When the war came to an end, he was profoundly grieved and lamented deeply. He resolved to completely rethink concepts of education and sought to restart education not for war making, but for peace making." (Arakaki, 2013 p. 44) One of the best ways to promote peacemaking is to debunk the myths of war, and lay bare all of its horrors. It was primarily for this reason that I asked my students to interview their grandparents.

Revisionist history

Another reason was to ensure that a record is kept of what actually happened during the Battle of Okinawa. In recent years there has been growing pressure from some quarters to airbrush from history the worst excesses perpetrated by Japanese forces during the war. One notable example occurred in 2007 when the Ministry of Education announced that "all references to military coercion in the compulsory mass suicides (*shudan jiketsu*) of Okinawan residents during the Battle of Okinawa were to be eliminated" from school text books. (Masaaki, 2008 p. 1) Such revisionism can only be effectively countered by the testimony of those who were actually there. Of course there already exists a large bank of source materials from the Battle of Okinawa, among them *Descent into Hell* (Ealey and McLauchlan, 2014) but the more testimony there is, the more difficult it is for revisionist historians to score a victory in what they "refer to as the rekishi-sen (history wars.)" (Ealey and Norimatsu, 2018 p. 1)

Pedagogic reasons for the research

My final reason for getting students to collect these stories was pedagogic - I wanted them to improve their writing and presentational skills. I thought that students would be more interested in writing about the deeply personal memories of their grandparents, than about other less emotionally charged issues. When "students are thoroughly engaged, those students frequently strive harder than usual to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language...while they are trying to construct a narrative or tell stories about their childhood, for example, they are tapping into their own experiences. This provides powerful motivation to find the right words to express such experience."

(Harmer, 2001 pp. 259-260)

A note about the respondents

As the vast majority of OCJC students come from within the Prefecture, only a very few did not have at least one grandparent (or great grandparent) who lived in Okinawa during the war. However, understandably, some of these elderly people found it too difficult to talk about their traumatic experiences as children. The mother of one student said her mother would not talk because, “She had a more painful experience than you can imagine.”

In other cases the students’ grandparents had already died. In some such cases students were still able to write about their deceased grandparents’ stories, thanks to help from their parents. In other cases, students recounted the experiences of a neighbour. However, where students wrote about someone whom they did not know personally, or were not related to, (for example a war survivor who had visited their elementary school, or someone they had read about on the internet,) I excluded the account from this research. For the purposes of this paper I have used 95 reports where the interviewee was known to the student, (in the vast majority of cases a grandparent,) and had experienced the war firsthand (or at least part of it) in Okinawa.

Students’ English mistakes

As one would expect with pre-intermediate/intermediate level students, the reports contained many grammatical and lexical errors. In an effort to make the paper more readable, I have corrected the students’ English where I felt it was clear what they were trying to say. Below are examples of three such mistakes which I corrected.

Her father died away by war. → Her father died in the War.

The Tushima maru was a sunken ship. → The Tsushima maru was sunk (by U.S torpedoes.)

There was not safety. → It was not safe there.

In cases where a student’s writing was not ungrammatical but would still seem quite odd to a native speaker, I tried to change it into something more natural sounding. Where the writing seemed just slightly unnatural but didn’t significantly interfere with understanding, I tended to leave it as it was.

Collating the data

I collected around 130 reports from students over five years but as previously noted, only 95 were deemed suitable for this research. The next thing I did was to alphabetize

the names of the 95 authors, using an Excel spreadsheet. This allowed me to see if any students had the same family name, which meant I could check if there were any siblings among the participants who may have written about the same grandparent. While there were 14 instances of students sharing the same family name, in only one case did the students seem to be writing about the same person, their grandmother. If other students were siblings, (or cousins) then they apparently wrote about a different grandparent. I mention this only to highlight the fact that these testimonies apparently relate to 94 different people - which seems to be a significant sample.

In the interests of data protection, I do not want to identify any of the participants or their interviewees. Thus instead of using a student's name I use his/her alphabetical ranking (i.e. after they were sorted in alphabetical order.) Thus Student 3 will likely have a family name beginning with the letter A, while Student 90 will likely have a family name beginning with the letter Y.

Some people may think that students at OCJC would tend to be anti-American or anti-Japanese Government because of the pacifistic founding principles of the college. However, my experience (in the debating classes I have taught here) is that when the issue of American bases is discussed, most students are actually in favor of them. OCJC attracts students primarily because of its reputation as a good place to learn English, rather than because of its underlying philosophy. This is something borne out by Makoto Arakaki's research when he recalls how, "one male student asserted 'We want to work on base and that is why we come to this school.'" (2013 p. 46)

TESTIMONIES.

Looking for shelter

The overwhelming picture which emerges from the collective testimonies of grandparents and great parents is one of families fleeing for their lives, crisscrossing the main island on foot, in search of some kind of sanctuary. The refugees headed in many different directions but for many, the less populated mountains of the North seemed to offer the best chance of survival. Certainly the battle may have been less intense there than in the South but the reality was that there too, "nothing but sufferings and troubles were awaiting for them." (Ota, 1984 p. 190)

Whilst on the move, families sought shelter where they could. Student 31's great grandmother's family tried in vain to find shelter in a *gama* (cave) but "the *gama* was already full of soldiers and other people. So she was hiding instead in a grave. Inside, the grave smelled of dead bodies because bodies were not burned during the war." Similarly, the grandmothers of Students 21, 95, and 51 also took refuge in tombs. The

great grandfather of the last of these, “painted a cross on the front of the tomb because he thought, ‘The U.S. soldiers believe in Christianity and the cross is a Christian symbol so they won’t open the tomb.’” Student 24’s grandmother contracted “a serious disease” after she hid in a tomb “but miraculously she recovered and survived.”

Many people also hid in dugouts. Student 82’s grandmother “has the strongest memory - there was a woman who had a baby in the same dugout. The woman was desperate to keep her baby from crying” presumably lest it alert American soldiers to their location, (or provoke Japanese soldiers who feared such an outcome to silence it.) Student 69’s grandmother witnessed the birth of a baby in the crowded “pitch dark trench” in which she was hiding.

Student 89’s grandmother, who at the time was working as a (very young) nurse, became separated from her family. “As the fighting became fiercer Japanese soldiers, some of them injured, came to the bunker where my grandmother was sheltering. She and the other medical staff were ordered to leave.” They tried to get into many other bunkers without success as they were all so crowded. Eventually she managed to enter a bunker in Ihara where she was eventually captured by the Americans.

Some bunkers were more sophisticated than others. Student 10’s grandmother, then a 2nd grade junior high school student, described her hiding place as “a hole in the mountains.” Student 75’s grandmother may have had even less shelter. She told her granddaughter she was simply “hiding in the forest.”

Awful sights

“Now we can see a beautiful view from my house but in those days, as far as the eye could see there was nothing but burnt out ruins.” So said the grandmother of Student 25. The landscape of Okinawa in the Spring of 1945 must indeed have been horrendous. Student 87’s then nine year old grandfather remembers hiding in an air raid shelter. He was looking forward to the end of the raid so he could return home and eat. “At that time his district had 250 houses. But when he went out of the shelter, there were no houses left and there were dead bodies everywhere.” This chimed with Student 52’s grandmother’s recollection. She and her mother (the student’s great grandmother) had left their home in Itoman in the hope of finding safety in Uruma. On the journey, she had to repeatedly tell her mother to “‘Step over it’ because there were a lot of dead people killed by soldiers and her mother was blind.” Student 40’s grandfather who was 10 years old at the time, painted an equally graphic picture. He was moving from area to area, “trying to escape from the shelling...and there were many dead bodies. The bodies were crawling with maggots.”

Student 32's grandmother's mother and brother were killed while she was still an elementary school student and she ended up wandering around the southern part of the island on her own. With swollen feet and feeling "faint from malnutrition, she fell down." Eventually she arrived at a river. "A lot of dead bodies were floating in the river. They were rotting. She drank the water that was contaminated with blood."

Student 42's then 15 year old grandmother remembered the "ground was dyed deep red...human flesh was scattered along the paths...and even in the daytime everything was pitch black with the smoke of the bombs." The grandmothers of Students 22 and 78 also recalled a land strewn with corpses, however not all of these people it seems died at the hands of others. Student 20's grandmother, who for safety's sake only moved around at night, observed people so distraught that "they killed themselves."

Another distressing scene was remembered by Student 95's grandmother who was seven at the time, "My friend saw a baby drinking milk from its mother who was already dead. But no-one could help the baby" since everyone was consumed with their own struggle for survival.

Tsushima maru

The name Tsushima Maru is a familiar one to most Okinawans. Student 59 explained why. His grandfather was 6 years old in 1945 and was due to be evacuated to Miyazaki. "He was planning to go by the ship, Tsushima Maru but his teacher's child got a fever, so he couldn't go. But he was lucky because the Tsushima Maru was sunk by an American torpedo." The majority of the 1,458 people who died were schoolchildren (The Japan Times, 2014.) Student 54's grandfather had also secured passage on the same ship but "he overslept that day so he couldn't board but he was able to get on the escort ship travelling behind..." Perhaps Student 23's grandmother was on the same vessel, "She was on the ship behind the Tsushima Maru. Her friends died in front of her eyes."

Other lucky escapes

Other grandparents had equally lucky escapes. For instance, Student 9's grandfather had been reluctant to obey his mother's insistent pleas to leave the family home in Naha. He was in charge of feeding their goat and feared it would die if left behind. In the end, "A couple of relatives said, 'We will remain here so you can escape to Nago.'" Had the boy stayed in Naha he would almost certainly, like his relatives, have been killed.

The grandmother of a friend of Student 18 was injured by a bomb. Her family was hiding in Toguchi, Kitanakagusuku, when a rumour spread that soldiers were coming. "Everyone ran away to the North" but her family stayed put, perhaps because their mobility was curtailed by an injured daughter. In the event no soldiers came and the family survived.

“But almost all the people who fled to the North were killed.”

In a similar vein, Student 95’s grandmother fled from Ie Island. “Her father decided to rent a *sabani* (a small canoe type boat) to get to the mainland. The next day the island was bombarded and most people died.” (According to Masahide Ota, 1,500 civilians, close to half of Ie Island’s population, were killed in the American assault of the island in four days in the middle of April 1945. (1984 p 88)

Heading north from Ie the next inhabited island is Izena. Student 85’s old grandmother lived there and as a nine year old was caught outside in the open during an air raid. “The US army dropped a bomb but the bomb misfired so they were saved.”

The following two stories can hardly be termed “lucky” escapes, even though the people concerned did escape death. Student 14’s great grandmother was hiding in some kind of bomb shelter when “a soldier (she doesn’t specify from which side) said, ‘Go outside.’ My great grandmother was so afraid that she ran away. The soldier shot her. The bullet hit my great grandmother’s leg. It was bleeding and she was crying.” However, she survived, albeit with leg injuries. Student 77’s grandfather was also shot, in his case it was a shoulder wound which he received while searching for firewood in the mountains. He too somehow managed to survive.

Lost family members

Most of the testimonies here come from people who survived the war but given the huge number of deaths during the Battle, it is inevitable that many respondents lost siblings and parents, and indeed some, like Student 26’s grandmother, were the only surviving members of their family. She was just an infant when her family went in search of safety. “At that time a bomb fell nearby and her grandmother, her mother and her brother were all blown up. As she was protected in her mother’s arms, she was the only one to survive. My grandmother was brought up by relatives.”

Student 27’s then 7 year old grandmother was similarly bereaved. She told how she fled Naha with her family. One evening on the road, “five or six students sat in a shelter singing a song. I was sitting listening to them when my mother called me over. I went to my mother and fell asleep beside her and my younger brother. A shell fell near me. I fainted with the blast. When I came to, there was no trace of my mother and my brother.”

Student 55’s grandmother was also caught up in a bombing attack as she was moving with her family towards the south of the island. After the air raid ended her grandmother discovered, “her older brother wasn’t there. A relative went to look and found him alive but bleeding heavily from his whole body.” The student’s great grandmother who was already carrying a baby, tried to also carry her injured son but he died shortly after. “She left his body on the mountain.”

Other victims include Student 36’s great grandfather and Student 8’s great grandmother. The former was bringing his family to Yanbaru in the hope of finding sanctuary when he

was shot dead while out collecting water. The latter “was wearing a military uniform so the enemy shot her.”

Tragedy befell Student 11’s pregnant great grandmother as “she kept on moving (even though her child was about to be born) because she wanted to protect her family. The child died inside its mother, who also died.”

Student 63’s grandmother, who was two years old at the time, lost her younger brother in an instant, “Something hit him and as a result he died.” Student 13’s great grandmother was killed when the cave she was sheltering in was attacked. Student 50’s grandmother, then five years old, lost two younger sisters, while her grandfather had “one brother killed by the army and one sister died because of a bomb.”

Some of the informants were separated from their families during the Battle of Okinawa and didn’t discover their fate until much later. Student 89’s grandmother was a nurse who was captured by the Americans. They sent her to the Philippines to work at a clinic in Manila. It was only when she returned in 1946 that she learned her mother, sister and younger brother had died “in a bunker in Maehira.” Likewise Student 93’s grandmother was evacuated to Osaka with her sister. On her return she discovered that her parents and grandparents had died in an air raid. Student 47’s grandmother was evacuated to Nagano. “When the battle in Okinawa ended my grandmother returned. The landscape gave her a great shock. Moreover, her sister had lost two children and her husband.”

It is difficult to imagine how the survivors came to terms with the trauma they experienced. An elderly neighbour of Student 68’s explained how he has been trying to cope after his entire family (seven people) were killed. “I have never forgotten them. They come out in my dreams.”

Teenage soldiers

As many junior high and high school students over the age of 14 were conscripted into the Japanese army across Okinawa (Ealey and MacLauchlan, p. 46,) it is perhaps surprising that only a handful of students wrote about their relatives becoming soldiers. Among them was Student 88 whose grandfather became “the family’s father figure” at the age of 13 after his father and older brothers were conscripted. “His father was in the Air Force. Nobody knew exactly where he died so his body couldn’t be found.” Meanwhile Student 88’s grand uncle who became a soldier at the age of 16, “died in Itoman.” Student 46’s grandmother’s two older brothers were also killed in action with the Japanese army. Student 2’s grandfather described himself as a child soldier. He was 14 years old when he began delivering messages to “Japanese soldiers in the dug outs.” Student 17’s grandfather was even younger when an attempt was made to recruit him. He was just 6 years old, hiding in some kind of air raid shelter when a Japanese soldier called him to come out. The soldier showed him how to “sharpen a bamboo rod” in order to kill American soldiers.

American soldiers

Tens of thousands of Okinawan civilians were undoubtedly killed by American bombs and bullets. Student 45's grandmother did not witness any such deaths herself but, "Her mother saw people that were killed by American soldiers. People that were not able to climb the mountain were killed by American soldiers." However, other respondents recalled the unexpected kindness of individual US servicemen. Student 53's great grandfather, a Japanese soldier, had been shot in the right leg but, "when the war ended he was protected by an American soldier." Student 35's then 11 year old grandmother was also surprised. She was found wandering alone by a US soldier and "thought she would be shot by him but instead he gave her a small rice ball. She wanted to thank him but she didn't know how to say *arigato* in English." Student 81's grandfather witnessed a similar incident. "He was hiding from the soldiers. He saw a little girl and she was walking alone. The American soldier found her and he took her hand. My grandpa thought the soldier would kill or kidnap her but he gave her water." Student 21's grandmother, then 14 or 15 years old, was suspicious of such generosity. "An American gave her gum. But she thought the gum contained poison so she couldn't eat it." Student 49's great grandmother "was caught by American soldiers while walking to an air raid shelter with her family. But they were kind and gave her snacks. She told me American soldiers were kinder than Japanese ones."

Japanese soldiers

Student 75 had a story about the kindness of one Japanese soldier. Her great grandmother "thought she couldn't bring up her baby so she tied her, my grandma, to a tree. But later she felt a terrible sense of remorse and returned to the tree. She saw a (Japanese) soldier holding the baby. The soldier had been trying to help the baby. My grandma said, 'At that time, if he hadn't helped me, I might have died.' Then the soldier gave a name to my grandma. Her name is Keiko." Sadly, not all Japanese soldiers were so benign. Student 30's grandmother was "hiding in a cave with many people when Japanese soldiers came and said, 'We will stay here, so you guys get out right now.' They tried to resist the soldiers but were forcibly kicked out of the cave." The story told by Student 29 was even more shocking. Her great grandmother was hiding in some kind of hole with her children when one of them, "wanted to drink water, so my (Student 29's) grandmother went to the river. When she came back her family was dead. They had been killed by a Japanese soldier. Her sister had been crying which had made the soldier angry." Tragically, such behavior was not unique. Student 34's grandmother lived on Kume Island where, "Some people were killed by the Japanese army as spies because they had a Surrender Recommendation Bill (sic) or because they tried to surrender. So my grandmother was more afraid of the Japanese Army than the American Army."

Captivity

Student 76 and Student 8's respective grandmothers don't think they would have survived if they hadn't been taken prisoner. While Student 10's grandmother said her life improved enormously after being captured. "She took a bath and ate food every day. She said it was good to be a captive." Student 78's grandmother agreed. "Her family were given a lot of food and they had their injuries treated by the American army." POWs were protected not just from the violence of the battlefield but also from the ravages of "dysentery and infectious diseases" (Student 8) which claimed many lives.

Death From Malnutrition

Not all the victims of the Battle of Okinawa died violent deaths, some were simply unable to find enough food or water. Student 58's grandmother was hiding in a crowded cave. "One evening she left the cave with her cousin. They were so hungry. They hadn't eaten anything for days. They were holding hands as they ran away but her energy gradually disappeared and then her cousin died. My grandmother cried loudly." Student 70's grandmother lost her one year old baby brother in similar circumstances, "He died of malnutrition" as the family took shelter in a dug out. Student 41's grandfather became an orphan after his mother died of malnutrition. Although still very young he took it upon himself to look after his little brother. "My grandfather learned how to cook because he wanted to protect his brother."

Shortage of food

Food, or the lack of it, was something that featured a lot in survivors' accounts. Student 70 writes that her grandmother's family "were hiding in a dugout. There was nothing to eat so she often ate cicadas. But after she ate them her hair fell out and she got a rash on her skin. This period in Okinawa was known as Cicada Hell." Student 90's grandmother lived on Ishigaki Island and she too, "ate some insects like grasshoppers, cicadas, and crickets. Of course sometimes they gave her a stomach ache." Meanwhile, Student 63's grandmother "had frog tea. They put frogs in boiling water and they drank it." Most respondents however apparently existed on a more simple vegetarian diet. Student 57's grandmother "ate *sotetsu* (Sago Palm.) It had some poison...and the Adan." (The latter resembles a pineapple in shape, if not in taste. It is scarcely edible.) Student 49's grandmother ate nothing but "Japanese *yomogi* (mugwort.)" Student 72's grandmother, then 10 years old, spent much of the Battle in a cave. "The food while hiding was sugarcane and a little rice. In the morning my grandma went out to look for food but it was so dangerous." More typically, people, (including the grandmothers of Students 1, 21 and 65) seemed to survive entirely on sweet potatoes which grew wild. Student 74's grandfather who escaped to the mountains of northern Okinawa "doesn't like sweet potatoes now because he was eating only sweet potatoes during the war."

Clearly people had to get sustenance where they could find it. Student 40's grandfather

“stole vegetables from a stranger’s field,” while Student 88’s grandfather took “a lot of food from near the US base.” Student 6 says her grandfather’s “only food was water.” Given the precariousness of their situation clothing was almost certainly a secondary consideration for those fleeing the fighting. However Student 79’s grandmother recalled that she had no shoes, “But the ground was hot and so to prevent infection she wore (a kind of) sandals made from leaves.”

The futility of war

Many respondents spoke passionately about the futility of war. For example, Student 19’s grandmother said “War should never happen again.” A sentiment echoed by Student 59’s grandfather who intoned that, “War doesn’t make anyone happy.”

Those who were not in Okinawa

Some grandparents were able to escape Okinawa. For example, grandparents belonging to Students 2, 28, 61 evacuated to Taiwan, while those of Students 3 and 71 fled to the Philippines.

Conclusion

Taken collectively, the testimonies of my students’ great grandparents, grandparents and elderly neighbours, almost a hundred people in all, provide incontrovertible evidence of happened in Okinawa during the Spring of 1945. They tell of innocent people being cut down by American bombs and bullets as they tried to flee for their lives; of Japanese soldiers in an effort to save themselves, expelling frightened women and children from the relative shelter of caves; and of people being reduced to eating weeds and insects in order to survive. Whilst many of my students already knew about their own family’s war experiences, some did not. Every year a handful would thank me for the opportunity to learn about what their grandparents went through. And it is important that they did learn, that these accounts are preserved so that, (along with the many published memoirs of the War,) the truth of what happened will not be lost or altered. It is these memories and others like them which offer the best hope for preserving peace in a troubled world. If allowed to fade or become distorted, such testimonies will be replaced by another, entirely erroneous version of war, one imbued with stories of heroism and liberation, or of one-sided atrocities that need to be avenged. At a time when the Japanese government is actively seeking to amend the pacifistic Article 9 of the constitution, and “to legitimate Japan’s participation in military operations abroad,” (Repeta, 2017) it has never been more important to remember and reflect upon what happened in Okinawa 75 years ago. What the survivors tell us is that civilians are always the main casualties of war, and for them war brings nothing but misery.

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