Chapter 5
Japanese soldier’s experience of war
Tamura Keiko

第5章
ある日本兵の戦争体験
田村恵子
In this essay, a Japanese soldier’s experience of war in New Guinea will be explored, based on his diary, which was found in Australia almost sixty years after the soldier’s death. The diary was kept in a pocketbook which was issued to every Japanese soldier. The entries, which were made between April and December 1943, filled about 160 pages. The frequency of entries varied over time. During the earlier stages of his days in New Guinea, the diarist sometimes wrote up to ten pages a day. In contrast, the entries became sparse after September, and there were no entries for October and November. The last entry was made on 8 December 1943 when he recalled the start of the Pacific War.

The diary does not contain the name of the owner, but it belonged to Tamura Yoshikazu. He was 158.5 cm tall and weighed 57 kg. So he was about average in height for an adult male in that period, and relatively well built as his chest size was 84 cm. He also had good eyesight. Tamura turned 26 years old on 27 April 1943. He was unmarried, and his immediate family consisted of a father, two sisters and a brother. The anniversary of his mother’s death was on 6 February. He also recorded the registration numbers of his firearms, sword and watch, and his bank account number.

Tamura was from Tochigi Prefecture north of Tokyo. In his first period of service his unit served in northern Korea and China, and he wrote his memories of this period in the diary. Although English excerpts of his reflections on China are not included here, he vividly described the cold, dry climate and arid landscape of China, which was dotted with small villages. According to his writing, his unit does not seem to have been engaged in combat in China. After his first period of service, he went back to civilian life where he had fond memories of a climb up Mt. Fuji with his friends.

His second period of conscription became effective from January 1943 in Utsunomiya. He joined the 239th Infantry Regiment (Toto 36 Unit) of the 41st Division on 5 January and left Utsunomiya on 12 January. From Utsunomiya, the troops travelled to Shimonoseki where they boarded a ship bound for Korea. He recorded the departure scenes. The train travelled through the Japanese countryside in winter. He noticed that there was hardly anybody on the station platform to farewell the troops, whereas previously they
had been cheered off loudly by big crowds.

The New Guinea diary started with an entry for April 1943 at a camp in Wewak. Tamura had been on active service for three months but had not heard from his family or friends in Japan. The last entry of the diary was on 8 December 1943. It is most probable that Tamura was killed and his diary captured by Australian soldiers soon after 8 December.

A characteristic of the diary is that it was not just a record of a soldier’s daily activities. He used the diary as a means to reflect upon his experiences in the military, and to reflect on his purpose in life, both as an individual and as a soldier for the nation. Some of the letters he wrote to his friends and his family were copied into the book. He also recorded some memories of his past experiences both at home and in China. He missed home as he lived in a tent in the jungle without any communication from Japan for months. The diary also described how the soldiers acted and felt during the air raids by the Allies. Furthermore, the emotions of a soldier faced with death and maintaining his honour are vividly expressed.

He employs two styles of writing in the diary – prose form and the 31-syllable tanka poetry form. Tamura recorded over one hundred tanka poems in his diary. The format he favoured was to record his activities and reflections for the day and then write down four or five poems at the end. Thus, the tanka poems were summaries of his thoughts and emotions on the incidents recorded.

After the war, the diary remained in the possession of Mr Allan E. Connell, who was originally from Melbourne. He had enlisted in the 57/60th Australian Infantry Battalion in October 1941, at the age of nineteen, and was discharged in January 1946. The diary was discovered while Mr. Connell’s son, Jeff, and daughter-in-law, Mrs Kay Connell, were sorting through Allan Connell’s possessions after his death. It is not known how the diary became the property of Allan Connell, as he did not talk about it at all to his family.

However, it is possible to speculate on the fate of the diary. According to his service record, Allan Connell was in New Guinea towards the end of 1943 and working in the intelligence field. All of the captured Japanese diaries and documents were sent to the intelligence section from the battlefield and eventually forwarded to the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS) in order to be assessed for their strategic value. Allan Connell, who was handling those diaries, probably decided to keep one pocketbook for himself when he found out that the diary did not contain any military information on the Japanese.
might have anticipated that the diary would eventually be destroyed. Although such an action was not officially permitted, it appears that similar incidents were not unknown.

Upon discovery of the diary, Mr. Jeff Cripps, a friend of Jeff and Kay, contacted the Australia–Japan Research Project (AJRP) in 2001 and sent a photocopied page, in order to find out about the contents of the pocketbook. That particular page included several beautiful poems about life in the jungle in New Guinea. Those poems clearly revealed the soldier’s literary sensitivity towards the foreign flora and fauna. Later, Mr & Mrs Connell kindly agreed to provide photocopies of the whole diary for the project so that we could read it through and translate part of it. The AJRP would like to express its great appreciation to Mr & Mrs Connell and Mr. Cripps for their cooperation.

**Movements and actions of the 239th Infantry Regiment of the 41st Division**

According to the Japanese War history series, the 239th Infantry Regiment of the 41st Division was first raised in Utsunomiya, Tochigi prefecture in September 1939. For the operation in which Tamura was involved, the division consisted of about 19,000 personnel. According to official records, the regiment had moved to Qingdao on 29 January 1943. Between 20 and 24 February the troops landed in Wewak.

The unit history stated that, between March and April 1943, the regiment was engaged in airfield construction in Wewak and But. Between April and June 1943, the troops worked on an airfield in Dagua, constructing roads from Dagua on the coast, to Maprik which was inland. Between July and September 1943, the regiment came back to Wewak to engage in airfield construction again.

The Tamura diary mentions that the Wewak area was bombed during the period of airfield construction, but the bombing was restricted to a single bomber at night, while Allied reconnaissance planes flew over the area during the day. So, although the construction work was delayed, it did continue, and eventually the airfields were completed. According to the Australian Official History, by August 1943, the 6th Air Division of the Japanese army, with five fighter and three bomber groups, totalling 324 aircraft, was established at Wewak. The 7th Air Division with a total of 156 aircraft was also established at But, some kilometres west of Wewak. At this stage, Japan was aiming to regain the balance of air power and making plans to bomb Port Moresby and other areas.

However, Japan’s prospects were completely dashed on 17 August 1943. Allied forces became aware of the concentration of aircraft in the area and decided to attack them.
On 17 and 18 August Allied aircraft bombed four Japanese airfields in the Wewak area intensively and the Japanese army lost about 100 planes, including light bombers, fighters and reconnaissance planes. (See chapter 3 of this volume for details of these attacks.) From October 1943 to February 1944, the regiment was mobilised to go to Madang under Commander Nakai to participate in the Finisterre and Saidor campaigns. In March and April 1944 the regiment was under the 41st Division at Madang.

In his memoir, Nyuginia-sen tsuioku ki (Memoir of the New Guinea campaign) (Tokyo, 1982), Hoshino Kazuo, who was a staff officer of the 41st Division, wrote that by the end of the war only 600 troops of the 41st Division survived out of an original strength of 20,000 men. He also wrote that, of the 200,000 Japanese troops who were sent to east and central New Guinea, only 10,000 were alive at the end of the war. Thus, the rate of attrition was extremely high, particularly towards the end of the war, due not only to the desperate battles the Japanese fought, but also to the disease and starvation the soldiers suffered during their retreat.

Extracts from the diary

The diary starts with the following entry. The exact date is not known, but it is most likely that the entry was recorded in early March 1943, about two months after the landing in Wewak. The writing shows that the diarist’s reference point at this stage was firmly fixed in Japan, as he contrasts the unfamiliar scenery and nature with those back in Japan.

When I hear birds of paradise sing, I remember cuckoos back in Japan. They live among tropical coconut trees. I don’t know what they are saying, but they make very weird cries that sound like “keukoh, kiou, keukoh, kiou”.

A mate of mine received a letter from home and he showed me a copy of a newspaper dated the end of January. Nothing seemed to have changed at home. It also contained an article about the front line in New Guinea. Who could know that I am in New Guinea now?

The climate here is similar to that of mid-August in Japan. Yet, there are so many noxious insects, and the mosquitoes in particular are a real nuisance. Since many of us are sick and do not feel well, our fighting spirit seems to be low.

Tamura was a keen letter writer and he yearned for letters from home. At the back of his pocketbook he recorded details of letters sent and received. He also copied some of the letters into his pocketbook. In this section, copies of three letters are included. The first letter 田村兵士の日記にも書かれているように、ウエワク地域は飛行場建設の最中に爆撃を受けており、日中は偵察機の接近だけで、爆撃は夜間の単機爆撃機による攻撃のみであった。そのため、従前遅かったものの作業は継続され、ようやく飛行場が完成し、この地域で日本軍機の発着が可能になった。オーストラリア公刊戦史によると、1943年8月までに、陸軍第6飛行師団の5個の戦闘機戦隊と3個の戦闘機戦隊がウエワクに配備され、総勢は航空機324機であったという。

しかし日本の戦意は、1943年8月17日に完全に打ち消された。連合軍は日本軍航空機がこの地域に集中していることに気付き、それに対して攻撃を加えることを決定した。8月17日と18日に、連合軍爆撃機編隊がウエワク地域の日本軍飛行場の4ヶ所を集中空襲し、日本軍は一度に重爆撃機、戦闘機、偵察機など100機を失うという、大きな損害をこうむった。（この攻撃と影響に関しては、進藤為文に詳しい）1943年10月から1944年2月にかけて、連隊は中井支隊長のもと、フェニステルとサイド工作隊に参加するためにマダンへと向かい、1944年3月と4月にはマダンにおいて第41師団の指揮下に置かれた。

第41師団の参謀学校だった星野一雄の著書『ニューギニア戦時通信抄』によると、当初約2万人であった第41師団の兵力のうち、終戦時に生きていたのはただの600人だったという。さらに、ニューギニア東部と中央部に配備された20万人の兵士のうち、生き残ったのは1万人のみであったと書いている。死亡率がこのように極端に高かったのは、戦争期末期の日本軍の悲状な戦いによるものだけではなく、退却の際の兵士の病気と飢餓に原因していたのだった。

日記抜粋

日記は冬のような文から始まる。日付はないが、おそらくウエワク上陸後約2ヶ月後の1943年3月上旬に書いたのであろうか。見慣れた風景や自然を、日本と比較することで、田村は常に故郷のことを思いにいたのだろう。

極楽鳥の鳴き声をさけて内地のカッコウ鳥を想う。南洋の椰子の林の中に、ケオコーヌ、キュウ、ケオコーヌ、ケヨウオ。何と言ふのかからねども、合せに好いな鳴きごとへ。

昨日には戦友に内地から手紙を来て1月分の新聞を見る。相変わらずの故郷、南方ニューギニア戦線のニュースも出るたたかけど、我が現在の地と誰が知るだろう。

内地のお盆の頃位の暑さであるが、害虫多く中にも蚊だけは全く閉口して居る。病の為かこの頃元気なく、兵士の士気低い感ある。
was sent from Palau to his younger brother. In this letter, Tamura was in high spirits and wanted to tell his younger brother about the adventure he had embarked on in the tropics. Palau was still peaceful around that time. Hoshino, a staff officer of the 46th Division, wrote in his memoir that he enjoyed coffee and cream soda at a tea room, and a full-course dinner with ice cream dessert at a hotel on the island. Hoshino also purchased accessories made out of turtle shell as souvenirs for Japan. Of course, those souvenirs were never taken back to Japan.

A letter 12 February

How are you? Are you working hard? I wonder if you are shivering in the cold weather. If you are, why don’t you come over here? You wouldn’t want to stay long because it’s too hot. How have you been back home? I am well. I swam in the sea on Emperor’s Day.

I would like to send you lots of coconuts through my dreams. So many that you could eat as much as you wanted and still not finish. I wonder if they will arrive home safely. You will be able to keep them in a basket by your bedside.

I will write to you about interesting things later.
To my dear young brother. From your older brother.

Tamura wrote a lot about his work in the Wewak area. His unit was engaged in airfield construction – work that was hard and monotonous. The following poems describe the work and his feelings about it. The only break the troops could enjoy from their labour was during the air raids.

Under the blazing sun,
Soldiers construct airfields
With sweat and without words.
The construction work progresses day by day.
The adjutant officer comes for inspection today as well.

We sit down by the shore, wiping sweat from our face
And look across the sea, waiting for letters from home.
On branches of coconut trees,
Birds of paradise sing.
Gradually the day is getting light.
Air raids become so frequent that
We look forward to them on a quiet day
In order to have some rest from our work.

Cicadas are singing and leaves are falling.
It feels like autumn.
But when we see fresh green leaves,
We think of spring.

During his trip to the inland, Tamura and his colleagues met the local people in the area. For Tamura, the way they spoke, dressed and behaved was completely foreign. However, as we shall read in the following two pieces, he communicated with them and bought tropical fruits from them. He was impressed with the innocence of the local children. He found it amusing that the locals found the Japanese as curious as the soldiers found them. It is clear that he appreciated the differences and managed to see the local people as human beings.

Natives
They speak fast in a foreign language. The soldiers listen to the language earnestly in order to understand it.

We’ve got it. They’ve come to exchange goods.

In little string bags, they each carried about twenty bananas and papayas in order to exchange them with the goods the soldiers have.

They wear loincloths, but the rest of their bodies are naked. The way they live seems to be primitive.

I gave twenty sen for two bananas. These are the first bananas I have had in New Guinea. They tasted very, very sweet. The size of the fruit was as big as my arm or even bigger. They were astonishingly large.

I dreamed that we could eat as much fruit as we liked, but so far only two. Yet, I enjoyed my first taste of bananas in this place.

Natives 4 May

When I saw real naked natives for the first time, I felt frightened. But they did not do any harm. They were very well hung, and proudly decorated their hair.
with bird feathers. It was a surprise for me to see the way they showed off their decoration.

When we reached our destination in the late afternoon, we rested by the regimental barracks. Forty to fifty natives came, and they were all naked. Some were carrying thick ropes and bush knives. A few were wearing crosses on their chests. Furthermore, about half of them were completely naked.

The soldiers stared at them strangely. The natives were also staring at the soldiers intently. They went around the building about twice and disappeared. When I asked other soldiers who had been here previously about them, they told us that the natives came to have a look at us. To them, the soldiers looked very weird. Probably, we looked very foreign to them.

I asked for bananas in the mountains. They seemed to be saying that they did not have bananas at the moment. I felt I understood their language a little bit. Compared with Chinese people, the native children did not have any traces of gloominess and looked so innocent, as if they were blessed by God. They seemed to regard the soldiers as a peculiar group. They were not frightened and did not cry although we were still new to them.

Deaths inevitably occurred around Tamura while he was in Wewak. As the type of war he was involved in was not direct bloody combat on the ground, the sudden disappearance of his war comrades hit him hard. The following section expresses his feeling of loss.

A few days ago, my friend was killed by enemy shells in this bay. However, the bay with its white waves does not look any different. There are a few drums floating away from boats. The landscape of the headland is as lush as before. Boats are moored to the wharf as before. But I feel so devastated!

He left us after a work session, sending his regards to other members of our section. The next morning, this friend could not be found anywhere and now he is at the bottom of the sea after an attack by enemy planes. What an unfortunate fate he had.

But it is no use lamenting. We hope he is in a peaceful slumber and becomes a god protecting the nation. At his grave, I prayed for my dead friend's peaceful repose.

二、三日前友の逝辞に無からく散ら。この内海は何時もと変わりない、小波が漂っていた。かなやなれたらちを二つ背負って居る。叩けの絶やしをらず、波止場の舎すらも変わら。さしふと何と悲しき事事が också

作業の帰り道。分隊勇士にやしもと伝言頼んで分れた友が消える朝は何かへも知れず。船に就機の為に、森を呑んで海底に浮る。ああ無念なり。

とどど散らし。帰るうらかに戦場で護国の神となれ。今は無き友の哭を祈りし君の墓所に立つ。

田村は日記に彼の感情の起伏を詳しく書き残しており、それに彼の戦友の士気の高揚や低下が反映されている。最初の例は、兵士たちの複雑な感情を歌っている。歌詞はおそらく部隊の戦友が戦いの初期に作られたものであろう。そこには、さらばに遠い戦場で戦う兵士たちの士気を同時に、国を懸かしむ将軍の念が表現されている。

四月一日
若草やゆる丘の上
浪巡るかの吹むれば
太平洋の黒潮を
今日ももりこえはるばと
強く勇者かが来る
祖国の速さをせせ来る
Tamura records his feelings extensively in his diary and some of the entries reflect the ups and downs of his and his comrades’ spirits.

The first section expresses the mixed feeling soldiers had. The words probably come from a song that may have been sung by his friends in the unit during the early stages of the campaign. They show both the heightened spirit of adventure in a faraway land, and homesickness.

1 April

From the top of the hill with its fresh green grass
I gaze towards the ocean horizon.
Across the Pacific, across the Japan Current,
From far away, a boat is coming with might and courage
With letters from our homeland.

Sitting in the shade of a coconut tree
Looking across the sky above the ocean waves
Thinking about home from New Guinea.
With the heat, it hurts to realise
How far this place is from home.

The soldiers’ spirits were affected by various factors, such as illness and difficult living conditions. In addition, the unreasonable authority exercised by their superiors also influenced the level of morale. The following two sections demonstrate the problems the troops faced in maintaining high morale in the face of illness and hunger.

We are generally in bad shape. In spite of our superior’s words, our fighting spirit has been in decline.

It might be to do with working too hard or malnutrition. No, no. It was not like this at the beginning. Military life is never exciting, but the current situation is not at all rewarding.

The duty of a soldier is to carry out his tasks without complaining. Yet, somebody who does not have any worth as a person can throw his weight around just because he has the senior rank.

Diary 27 May

The fine rain was falling continuously even though the moonlight was bright. I

The soldiers’ spirits are affected by various factors, such as illness and difficult living conditions. In addition, the unreasonable authority exercised by their superiors also influenced the level of morale. The following two sections demonstrate the problems the troops faced in maintaining high morale in the face of illness and hunger.

We are generally in bad shape. In spite of our superior’s words, our fighting spirit has been in decline.

It might be to do with working too hard or malnutrition. No, no. It was not like this at the beginning. Military life is never exciting, but the current situation is not at all rewarding.

The duty of a soldier is to carry out his tasks without complaining. Yet, somebody who does not have any worth as a person can throw his weight around just because he has the senior rank.

Diary 27 May

The fine rain was falling continuously even though the moonlight was bright.
was awoken by the sound of a plane engine. The dawn had come. I felt relieved that I could sleep through the night after I had recovered my health.

Compared with malaria in central China, I have heard this illness is more difficult to treat. Yet, I might be able to recover quickly. I stayed behind in the camp after my colleagues left for work, and spent my time looking after the firearms. Soldiers cannot help looking after their arms.

Our company leader is also in hospital. The number of patients exceeds expectations.

While Japan should be enjoying the season of fresh green leaves, the weather here is getting worse. The ceiling of the tent is leaking and makes us feel very uncomfortable.

I yearn for letters from home. Everybody feels the same here. I thought of home and wrote two letters to my friends.

Epilogue

The AJRP received a request from NHK, the Japanese national broadcaster, concerning final letters and diaries belonging to former Japanese soldiers, about a year after this essay appeared on the Project’s web site. The Tamura diary was subsequently made known to NHK. Coincidentally, a request for information about the Tamura diary arrived from Jiji Press at around the same time. Articles about the diary appeared in various newspapers around Japan, and the NHK documentary, titled Last words, aired on 15 August 2003.

As a result of investigations with various institutions, Tamura’s family was located in Oyama City in Tochigi Prefecture. The head of the family in which Tamura Yoshikazu had been born and raised was now his younger brother, Sadanobu. His younger sisters were also alive and in good health. According to the notification of death received by the family, Yoshikazu had been “killed in battle in March 1944 at Bilian, New Guinea”. Bilian was near Cape Gunbi, where Allied troops had landed in January 1944, and was the site of fierce fighting between the two forces.

None of Tamura’s personal effects had returned from New Guinea. The diary is his only legacy. The Australian War Memorial decided to return the diary in accord with the deepest wishes of the family. It is at last possible for Tamura Yoshikazu, along with the diary, to finally return home to his waiting family sixty years after passing away.