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The Remembered and the Forgotten: Slighting the firebombing victims of Japan's Pacific War

By Hanai Kiroku

This summer I saw three Japanese movies -- two documentaries and a feature -- depicting the plight of World War II victims.

"*Hito no Ishibumi* (Human Monument)" is about the battle of a woman who, having lost an eye in a U.S. air raid, demanded enactment of a law to compensate ordinary citizens for war-related injury and damage.

"*Ari no Heitai* (Soldier Ants)" concerns the tragedy of a former Japanese Army soldier who joined the Chinese Nationalist Army under orders of his commander after the war and ended up fighting Chinese Communist forces. Despite his hardships, he was denied the right to veterans' pensions.

"*Kamiya Etsuko no Seishun* (The Youth of Kamiya Etsuko)" tells the story of a navy officer who arranges a marriage between his girlfriend and an officer friend before taking off on a kamikaze suicide bombing mission. Each is a serious work of great effort.

I was especially moved by "Hito no Ishibumi", having experienced the horrors of an air raid in which my family home burned down. Sugiyama Chisako, now 90, is the central character in the movie. In the March 1945 U.S. air raid on Nagoya by B-29 Superfortress bombers, she was seriously injured while in an air-raid shelter and lost her left eye. In 1973, she established the National Liaison Council of Citizens Injured in the War to campaign for government compensation for an estimated 500,000 citizens hurt in U.S. air raids.

B-29s dropped thousands of tons of firebombs on Japanese cities in the final months of the Pacific War

Former military personnel and civilian workers for the military wounded during the war, as well as bereaved families of those killed in action, became eligible for pensions under a 1952 law. In 1953, pensions for war veterans were restored. The same year, relatives of convicted war criminals who died in prison also became eligible for pensions.

During the war, those who lost homes in air raids were entitled to compensation of 350 yen each under a special law. After the war, the compensation was abolished.

2.Tokyo in flames

In a 1952 public hearing conducted by the Lower House welfare committee on legislation to aid military personnel wounded in the war and relatives of those killed in action, Suetaka Makoto, a Waseda University professor, said war-distressed people should be given aid without discrimination on an equal basis, regardless of their status. However, the government was adamant in prioritizing compensation for former military personnel and civilian workers for the military.

In 1994, legislation was enacted to aid survivors of U.S. atomic bombings even as survivors of non-nuclear bombings were ignored. The government uses the social security system to aid victims of air raids, but aid given under this system is insignificant.

Kogure Takeko, 75, of Tokyo's Setagaya Ward, who lost her right arm in an air raid, receives 134,000 yen four times a year in welfare pensions for the disabled. If she had been wounded as soldier, she would get 4 million yen a year, according to Kogure.

For payment of aid, the welfare law for the disabled requires a more serious disability than does the law that applies to wounded military personnel. Furthermore, it does not apply to facial scar tissue, a serious problem for women. Loss of hearing in one ear or loss of one eye is not enough to qualify for a physical disability certificate, which entitles the holder to various benefits.

3.Tokyo in ruins

Thanks to the campaign by Sugiyama and her group, legislation for aid to victims of wartime disasters, jointly sponsored by opposition parties, was presented several times to the Diet in the 1970s, but it failed each time. A group of relatives of some 500,000 private citizens killed in the war once petitioned the Diet and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party for the payment of condolence money, but to no avail.

By contrast, former military personnel wounded in the war are eligible for disability pensions and relatives of those killed in action are entitled to survivors' pensions and condolence money. Eligible relatives include spouses, children, parents, grandchildren and grandparents. In some cases, siblings of those killed in action are paid special condolence money.

The government is indifferent to aiding war-distressed private citizens on the grounds that they were not government employees during the war. By contrast, in former West Germany, those wounded in air raids as well as relatives of those killed in air raids -- military personnel and private citizens alike -- became eligible for pensions under a 1950 law. Beginning in 1952, material damage to homes and household effects lost in air raids was covered by government compensation. In Britain and France, pensions and lump-sum payments were given to war-affected private citizens.

4. “Grave of the Fireflies” cartoon image of children fleeing the bombing

In the American movie "The Fog of War," directed by Errol Morris and screened in 2004, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara quoted Air Force Gen. Curtis E. LeMay's comment on the U.S. air attacks on Japanese cities: "If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals."

LeMay, who served as a commander of strategic bombing attacks against Japanese cities, making use of low-altitude, nighttime incendiary attacks, expressed a strong sense of guilt over the massive number of civilian casualties in the attacks.

5. Curtis LeMay, architect of strategic bombing in Japan, Korea and Vietnam

Yet, the government, in planning compensation for wartime damage, prioritized aid to former military personnel -- who failed to protect the lives and properties of citizens. Private citizens hit by air raids should be regarded as victims of the reckless actions of the Japanese military.

Unlike the official "war dead," those killed in air raids are not honored at Yasukuni Shrine. The only aid the government gives in connection with dead air-raid victims is travel expenses for about 100 representatives of the bereaved families it invites to the annual Aug. 15 memorial service for the war dead in Tokyo.

Sugiyama and her group say they will campaign to the very end for legislative action to aid war-distressed private citizens. The association of bereaved families of Tokyo air-raid victims also intends to file a class-action suit against the government for damages and an official apology.

The government, before considering the creation of a new war memorial to replace Yasukuni and the separate enshrinement of Class-A war criminals now honored at Yasukuni, should make plans to compensate private citizens hit by air raids. Efforts should be expedited as they are getting old.

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