



Relatives Hunt for Japanese War Dead: Remains of 1.2 Million MIAs Overseas

By Nakamura Ikemi

Iwabuchi Nobuteru has visited New Guinea more than 200 times over the past 40 years -- not to relax on a tropical beach but to look for human remains.

The divided East Indies island -- the west half Irian, Indonesia, and the east half Papua New Guinea -- saw heavy fighting between Japanese and Allied forces during World War II. Thousands of soldiers died there, and Iwabuchi's father, Keiji, was one of them.



Papua New Guinea map

His father was drafted in 1943 and sent to the northern coast of the island in September 1944. During an air raid later that year, he died at age 34. The government later sent his family just a small, empty wooden box.

"The spirit of my father has not been consoled yet," said Iwabuchi, 65, who founded the nonprofit organization Pacific War History Museum in Ohshu, Iwate Prefecture, in 1993. It displays war-related items and documents, studies war sites on the island and lobbies the government to collect the remains of the war dead.

The war ended 61 years ago, and Iwabuchi is not the only one seeking the return of relatives' remains. It is estimated that 1.16 million Japanese soldiers and civilians -- about 48 percent of the 2.4 million war dead overseas -- remain where they fell, including in the Philippines, New Guinea and Siberia.



Navy troops, among 250,000 Japanese troops dispatched to New Guinea, at rest.

The figure is remarkably high when compared with that of the United States. According to research by Akiyama Kakunosuke, an advocate of a national cemetery for the war dead, only 17 percent of some 506,000 U.S. soldiers who died overseas during World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars remained listed as missing in action as of April 2005.

"I wonder why this has not become a major social issue," said Iwabuchi, criticizing the government's slow pace.

The government started a project to collect the remains of soldiers overseas in 1947. Although between 10,000 and 35,000 were brought back to Japan almost every year for a decade starting in 1967, fiscal 2004 saw only 1,151 and 2005 only 604, according to the welfare ministry.

Information on the whereabouts of remains is hard to come by, especially in the South Pacific, complicating the search, a ministry official said in a statement. The government works with private groups, including Iwabuchi's 260-member NPO.



Members of Pacific War History Museum, a nonprofit group based in Ohshu, Iwate Prefecture, hold skulls found on New Guinea in June 2005. Photo Pacific War History Museum.

Iwabuchi is a veteran tour coordinator for people who want to offer prayers for relatives or friends who died on New Guinea and nearby islands or for government officials looking to collect the remains of the war dead.

This month, Iwabuchi and another NPO member will join a government team as tour coordinators to collect remains on Biak Island -- a small Indonesian island near New Guinea that experienced severe fighting over a Japanese airstrip.

"Many Japanese soldiers died of starvation" after fleeing from the enemy, veteran Ota Yoji said during the NPO's annual meeting last month in Yokohama. The 86-year-old was deployed to Biak in 1944.

"At the time, we were taught that losers must not come home. So we ran off into the jungle," said Ota, who lives in Tokorozawa, Saitama Prefecture.

He said he did not eat or drink for 20 days and finally fell unconscious, only to be captured by the Allies. Ota has visited the islands three times to offer prayers for the dead.

When Iwabuchi or other members of the NPO find the remains of Japanese soldiers, they push the ministry to dispatch a collection team. After the remains are brought to Japan, the ashes of those that are not identified are placed in the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo. It is dedicated to the unknown war dead.



Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery

Akiyama, whose brother died during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, believes the government is not properly caring for the remains at the cemetery, which keeps the ashes of about 350,000 unidentified war dead in two charnel houses. One of them, Rokkakudo, reached capacity in 1990, prompting construction of the second one.

According to Akiyama, Rokkakudo, about the size of two six-tatami-mat rooms, houses the ashes of about 330,000 people, compressed into tiny cubes.

"It's a terrible way to handle the remains," he said. "We should have a (new) national cemetery where the remains are buried individually."

Given the difficulty Japan seems to have in searching for its own war dead overseas, it's no wonder that the government has been reluctant to look for the remains of other people from Asia who died in Japan during the war.

Academics estimate the remains of more than 10,000 Koreans brought to Japan as forced laborers during the 1930s and 1940s are still unaccounted for. The ministry started to look for possible graves in 2004.

A Tokyo citizens' group meanwhile said the government has not tried to identify the human remains dug up in 1989 from the site where a former [military facility](#) was located in Shinjuku Ward. The group suspects the dead were the victims of the Japanese military's Unit 731 wartime experiments on foreign prisoners.

While Yasukuni Shrine has captured public attention in recent years because of its association with Japan's past militarism and apparent lack of atonement for the war, Iwabuchi said the government should resolve to locate all war dead, even establishing a law to make the search mandatory.

"The public indifference shows that Japanese have not thought about what our country did during the war and instead forgot about it," he said. "Even if it's late, we have to do what we must."

This article appeared in The Japan Times on Nov. 1, 2006. This slightly edited version of the article is posted at Japan Focus on November 10, 2006.

Nakamura Ikemi is a staff writer for The Japan Times.

Created by Datamomentum