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Aso Mining's Indelible Past: Verifying Japan's Use of Allied POWs Through Historical Records

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Translated by William Underwood

[The article below, from the June 2009 issue of SEKAI (World), was written before the mid-June visit to Japan by an Australian survivor of forced labor at Aso Mining and the British son of an Aso POW who died after the war. They retraced the trail of the POW experience in Fukuoka and Kobe before meeting in Tokyo with sympathetic lawmakers from the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. Prime Minister Aso Taro refused to meet the visitors or apologize to them, but talks were held with officials of Aso Corporation, who insisted they could not confirm the presence of POWs at Aso Mining despite being shown records produced by the family firm in 1946. Seeking apologies and compensation, the visitors walked away with corporate lapel pins instead. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation provided text and video coverage of these recent developments.]

Mr. Aso Taro served as foreign minister from October 2005 to August 2007 and has been prime minister since September 2008. Born as the scion of the Aso conglomerate that accumulated wealth by mining the Chikuho coalfields of Fukuoka Prefecture beginning in the Meiji era, Mr. Aso served as president of Aso Cement Company, one of Aso Group's core businesses, before becoming a member of the Diet in 1979.

During World War II an estimated 10,000 Korean laborers were used by Aso Mining Company, which was headed by Mr. Aso Taro's father and was the mainstay of the Aso zaibatsu. Details were revealed in two recent *SEKAI* articles: "The Aso Family's Past and Present" by Mr. Yokota Hajime (January 2009), and "Aso Mining and Korean Forced Labor" by Nishinarita Yutaka (March 2009 issue). Moreover, Aso Mining has a history of using 300 Allied prisoners of war from May 1945 until Japan's surrender.

Continued denials of Aso Mining's use of POWs by Mr. Aso and the Japanese government

When Mr. Aso Taro assumed the posts of foreign minister and prime minister, overseas media wondered what stance he would take concerning Japan's war responsibility and its diplomacy with neighboring countries. This was because he is an heir to Aso Mining, which used Korean and POW workers, and is regarded as a neo-nationalist who defends Japanese actions before WWII.

Christopher Reed, a British journalist then living in Japan, contributed an article to *Japan Focus* on May 6, 2006, that triggered responses in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Reed described the historical background of the Aso family and criticized Aso Mining for using many Koreans and Allied POWs for wartime forced labor without compensating them. The article also blamed Mr. Aso's neo-nationalist attitudes for creating obstacles to good-neighborly relations with other Asian countries.

In July 2006, Foreign Minister Aso attended a memorial service at Juganji temple in Higashi Osaka for prisoners who perished in Osaka POW camps, prompting British and Australian media to run articles on the history of POW mistreatment by the Japanese military and POW labor by Aso Mining.

The New York Times and the *International Herald Tribune* carried articles in November 2006 by Norimitsu Onishi, who faulted the Japanese government's responses to wartime forced labor involving Chinese and the abductions of Japanese by North Korea. The latter article stated: "The family of the current foreign minister, Taro Aso, owned a Fukuoka-based coal mining company, Aso Mining, which used Asian and Western forced laborers."

In response Japan's Consulate General in New York issued the following rebuttal on its homepage: "It is totally unreasonable to make this kind of judgmental description without presenting any evidence."

Joe Coombs, right, with Japanese researchers during his June visit to the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Yokohama. Two of Coombs' fellow Australian POWs died in the custody of Aso Mining and are buried at the cemetery. (All photos courtesy of Japan Network for Redress of WWII Victims)

William Underwood, then a lecturer at Kurume Institute of Technology, provided proof that Aso Mining used POW labor in a May 29, 2007, article in *The Japan Times* that also criticized the disputing of this fact by Mr. Aso and the Foreign Ministry.

In this way foreign journalists and researchers living in Japan as well as overseas news organizations successively reported Aso Mining's use of POWs and questioned the Japanese government's position on the matter. But the state and Mr. Aso Taro stuck to their denials.

On November 13 last year, however, the issue of POW labor at Aso Mining was raised by Diet member Fujita Yukihisa of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the House of Councilors' Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense.

Diet member Fujita presented the "Aso Mining Report" possessed by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and questioned Prime Minister Aso and Foreign Minister Nakasone Hirofumi about Aso Mining's POW workforce. This document, submitted by Aso Mining to the Japan POW Information Bureau (PIB) immediately after the nation's surrender, states that the POWs were treated very well and offers a glimpse into corporate posturing aimed at evading war crimes prosecutions. Written on company stationery and stamped with the company seal, the Aso Mining Report represents undeniable proof of POW labor.

As a result, last December 16 the government presented Diet member Fujita with records that the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry had taken over from the former PIB. On December 18, in response to questioning by Fujita at the House of Councilors' Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense, the government officially acknowledged the reality of POWs at Aso Mining. The Consulate General of Japan in New York then deleted from its homepage the article refuting the *New York Times* report.

Lots of evidence for POWs at Aso Mining existed

It is true that many records concerning the use of Allied POWs by Japanese companies were lost because the Japanese army ordered that military-related documents be burned as soon as the war ended. But at the very least, materials such as prisoner name rosters were preserved by the PIB. GHQ ordered Japanese authorities to compile and submit documents following Japan's surrender so that the abuse of POWs could be prosecuted by war crimes tribunals. The Japanese government assigned this task to the PIB, which became part of the First Demobilization Ministry (formerly the War Ministry), and required companies to submit reports anew [even though they had regularly submitted reports throughout the war]. A portion of these materials was preserved among GHQ records at NARA in the United States, while a portion was taken over by the Welfare Ministry (currently the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry) via the PIB [which was abolished in 1957].

Australian ex-POW Joe Coombs, 88, at the Yokohama Commonwealth War Cemetery last June. The large urn contains the remains of 335 Allied military personnel who died in Japan.

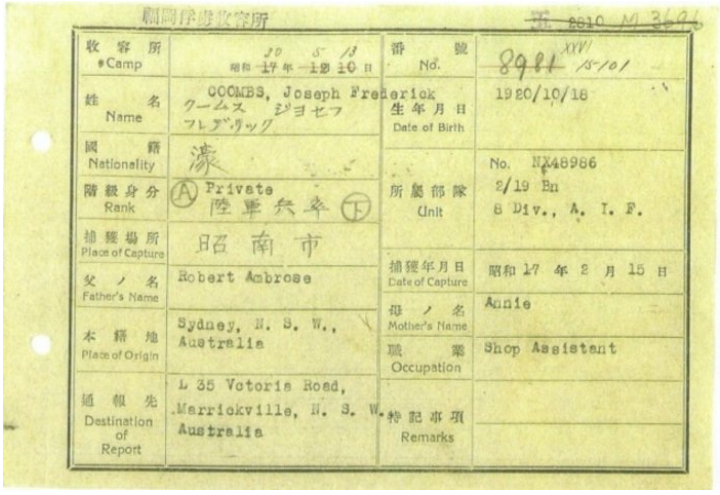
These types of records were not open to the public, making it difficult to know the reality of the POW camp system in Japan. However, *Records of the Treatment of POWs* (*Furyo Toriatsukai no Kiroku*, held by the Library of the Japan National Institute for Defense Studies) was produced by the PIB in 1955 and, based on this compilation, Prof. Chaen Yoshio of Anan National College of Technology produced *Imperial Japan's Domestic POW Camps* (*Dai Nippon Teikoku Naichi Furyo Shuyojo*, Fuji Publishing) in 1986.

These sources state that during WWII a total of about 36,000 POWs were incarcerated in about 130 POW camps in Japan. They also show that the camp for Aso Mining's Yoshikuma coal mine (located in Yoshikuma, Keisen-machi, Kaho-gun, Fukuoka Prefecture) opened as Fukuoka POW Branch Camp 26 on May 10, 1945, and held 300 prisoners (197 Australian, 101 British and two Dutch) at war's end. In addition, GHQ Legal Section records (microfilm) held by the Constitutional Government Materials Room of the Japan National Diet Library include a name list for the roughly 3,500 POWs who died in Japan, indicating that two Australian soldiers died at Camp 26. I posted this information in 2004 at the Web site of POW Research Network Japan (www.powresearch.jp).

In 2006 I conducted research at NARA and discovered Camp 26 records including the "Aso Mining Report" (dated January 24, 1946) that Diet member Fujita later presented during the parliamentary questioning discussed above. I subsequently found other materials such as a GHQ report on the treatment of POWs at Camp 26 (Report No. 174 by the GHQ Legal Section's Investigation Unit, dated February 1, 1946); affidavits by camp personnel; a diagram of the camp compound; a roster of the camp's Japanese staff; and a roster of the camp's prisoners. It also became clear that these records had been micro-photocopied by the Japan National Diet Library and were being stored in the Constitutional Government Materials Room.

GHQ International Prosecution Section records (microfilm) at the Constitutional Government Materials Room of the Japan National Diet Library include sworn affidavits (given in Manila on October 6, 1945) by three Australian soldiers who became POWs in Singapore before being sent to the Kobe Kawasaki Shipyard and then to Aso Mining's Yoshikuma coal mine. The Australian War Memorial also maintains memoirs of Australian POWs who were at Aso Yoshikuma.

Although these documents already constitute sufficient proof, the Japanese records that the Health Ministry submitted to Diet member Fujita last December 16 included the PIB-compiled *Records of the Treatment of POWs* and various appended tables, along with the "Monthly Reports" prepared by the Fukuoka POW camps. The ministry also informed Fujita of the existence of prisoner name lists arranged by camp and nationality, similarly arranged name lists for deceased prisoners and "POW Individual Cards"—though these records still have not been released because they contain personal information.



收容所 Camp	20 5 13 昭和 17 年 12 月 10 日	番號 No.	8981 XXVI 15-101
姓名 Name	COOMBS, Joseph Frederick クームス ジョセフ フレデリック	生年月日 Date of Birth	1920/10/18
國籍 Nationality	濠		No. NX48986
階級身分 Rank	Ⓐ Private 陸軍兵卒 ㊦	所屬部隊 Unit	2/19 Bn 8 Div., A. I. F.
捕獲場所 Place of Capture	昭南市		
父ノ名 Father's Name	Robert Ambrose	捕獲年月日 Date of Capture	昭和 17 年 2 月 15 日
本籍地 Place of Origin	Sydney, N. S. W., Australia	母ノ名 Mother's Name	Annie
		職業 Occupation	Shop Assistant
通報先 Destination of Report	L 35 Victoria Road, Marrickville, N. S. W. Australia	特記事項 Remarks	

Citing privacy concerns, Japanese authorities deny the general public access to decades-old records like this "POW Individual Card" belonging to Joe Coombs. The top line of the card shows Coombs was transferred to Camp 26 on May 13, 1945.

These records now being held by the Health Ministry are extremely valuable for the purpose of clarifying the full picture of the POW camps both in and out of Japan, not merely at Aso Mining. It is thus highly desirable that these materials be made available to the public. Yet the present situation is a fresh reminder that the Japanese government does possess various records concerning forced labor by Koreans, Chinese and POWs. It is inexcusable that the state, while continuing to conceal such documents, evades responsibility during postwar compensation lawsuits and in other contexts by claiming that "facts are unclear and no records exist."

There is other evidence more powerful than all these documents: Australian ex-POWs who worked at the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine are still alive today. At the beginning of 2009 Diet member Fujita interviewed three of these former soldiers by telephone—Mr. Arthur Gigger (born in 1920), Mr. John W. Hall (born in 1919), and Mr. Joe Coombs (born in 1920). Mr. Coombs was also interviewed by Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) for a news program that aired last March.

It should be noted, too, that the former site of Aso Mining's Yoshikuma coal mine has been turned into the Aso Iizuka Golf Course and the POW camp is known to have been situated slightly to the south, among the company row houses in the Yoshikuma area of Keisen-machi. Local residents still recall seeing the POWs during the war and watching American military planes dropping supplies over the camp after Japan's surrender. No matter how hard the Japanese government and Prime Minister Aso tried to feign ignorance, the truth about the Aso POWs was impossible to hide.

Were POWs mistreated at Aso Mining?

In any case, since Prime Minister Aso himself has conceded that Aso Mining did use POWs at the Yoshikuma coal mine, the problem of establishing this fact has been solved. The next question is, "Were those POWs abused?" International law permits making POWs engage in labor, but unless humane living and working conditions are provided, international law becomes violated.

By verifying the situation according to the various records discussed above, the following points become clear.

Fukuoka POW Branch Camp 26 was surrounded by a fence that was three meters high and the compound contained six buildings for housing

prisoners. The newly constructed buildings were not bad. There was no violence by guards such as severe mass punishments; camp supervision was better than what the POWs previously experienced at the Kobe Kawasaki Shipyard or in Singapore. (But some POWs did testify that they were beaten; face slapping was common behavior for Japanese guards and must have been rampant.)

Harsh labor was performed day and night at Aso Yoshikuma in two shifts, with POWs working for 12 hours at a stretch at jobs like shoveling coal and pushing heavy trolley carts full of coal. It took about 30 minutes to walk from the mine entrance down to the coal face, a distance of about one mile. Support posts in the mine shafts were old and weak, making dangerous cave-ins a regular occurrence. The ventilation was bad and the air was full of coal dust.

The food was extremely poor—the worst the POWs experienced anywhere—and there were no provisions of clothing or medicine; even sick prisoners were forced to work in the mine.

Coombs, wearing hat, is flanked by his two sons at the Yokohama cemetery. James McAnulty of Scotland, whose father survived his imprisonment at Aso Mining but died a broken man in 1971, is holding the large photo of newly liberated Aso POWs.

These conditions surely represented mistreatment from the perspective of the POWs. A Japanese point of view might involve the excuse that food, clothing and medicine were in short supply all over Japan, meaning that the POWs were not particularly abused. But this reasoning based on the domestic situation within Japan cannot be accepted internationally. There is no justification for forcing the POWs to work like dogs 12 hours per day in order to further Japan's war effort—and none of the Aso POWs testified that they received wages.

It is fortunate that the number of deaths among the POWs at Aso Mining was held at two. Because the prisoners had reached the limit of their strength, however, had the war lasted a little longer it is possible that many more would have died.

Postwar redress issue is not resolved

The Japanese government contends that all redress issues concerning forced labor by Allied POWs were resolved by the San Francisco Peace Treaty. But is that really so?

Article 14 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, signed in September 1951, stipulates that the Japanese government is responsible for paying reparations. But because Japan did not have the economic wherewithal to pay reparations at the time, the Allied nations and their citizens waived their claims rights. Article 16 states that Japan's overseas assets will be handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross and then distributed to Allied POWs. Under these provisions, in 1956 and 1961 compensation payments were made to around 200,000 former POWs belonging to 14 nations. As can be seen in the British case, though, these payments were as little as 80,000 yen ($222) per person. (See Asahi Shimbun Postwar Redress Issues Research Group, *What is Postwar Redress?*) In the United States in 1948 and 1952, former POWs were paid around $3,000 each using the proceeds from the disposal of Japanese assets in the U.S.

Then in the 1990s, Asian war victims and ex-POWs in the former Allied nations began filing lawsuits for compensation against the Japanese government and Japanese corporations. This movement produced a global chorus of voices questioning Japan's postwar responsibility and led to cases of former Allied governments independently providing consolation payments to former POWs and civilian internees, as the following examples show.

Canada, 1999: $24,000 CAD

United Kingdom, 2000: 10,000 pounds

Australia, 2001: $25,000 AUD

New Zealand, 2001: $30,000 NZD

Netherlands, 2001: 3,500 guilders

(See, among others, Utsumi Aiko, *Japan and Asia from the Standpoint of Postwar Compensation*.)

James McAnulty offers prayers at the Commonwealth War Cemetery in June.

The rationale for these states to shoulder the burden of compensation, which originally should have been paid by Japan, was that Article 14 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty abandoned the right to claim reparations. There are logical grounds for these states to have paid this money, but the background context of the treaty's claim waiver should be recalled. The U.S. suppressed reparations demands by other Allied nations and established Article 14 in order to minimize Japanese expenditures from the aid the country was receiving amidst its dire financial straits—and in exchange for saddling Japan with the role of "anti-communist seawall."

This was why compensation for individual war victims who were citizens of Allied and various Asian countries was snuffed out. The preservation of an individual's life and property, and compensation in the event these are damaged, are requirements of the order of natural rights. There is thus fundamental doubt about whether these rights can be arbitrarily negated via negotiations among governments. Moreover, the above-mentioned sums of money disbursed are by no means sufficient compensation in light of the unpaid wages plus interest (an amount that would be quite large if converted to current monetary values) and the suffering endured by the POWs.

At any rate, Japan's government and private companies have never directly compensated individual former POWs, and no adequate words of apology or gestures of sincerity have ever reached them.

[This article was written before Japan's ambassador to the U.S. apologized in Texas in May at the final convention of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor. Media reports included video of Ambassador Fujisaki Ichiro's remarks. The Aso administration, under fire due to the prime minister's handling of the Aso POW issue, quietly issued official apologies in the Diet to "all POWs" in February and March.]

Assuming for the sake of argument that the Japanese government and industry have been absolved of their legal liability by the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan was then granted the favor by the former Allied countries and Asian countries of paying quite small compensation in relation to the damage Japan inflicted on those countries and their people. Japan was able to rapidly overcome post-surrender hardships and be reconstructed into the "economic superpower" it is today in part due to this favor. Based on the attendant moral responsibility, I believe it is necessary for Japan to create a redress foundation, funded by corporations and the state, similar to the German "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" foundation.

Australian soldiers John Watson and Leslie Wilkie both died at POW Camp 26 in July 1945 and are buried at the Yokohama cemetery. Wilkie, whose grave marker is shown, kept a wartime diary that was published by his nephew in 1987.

The Japanese government is considered to have issued a general apology for its war responsibility in the form of the Murayama Statement of 1995. But unless there is concrete resolution to the postwar redress problem, other countries will continue to view Japan with distrust. POW abuse by the Japanese military during World War II has been regarded as a very serious matter in the former Allied nations of the West, and the issue should not be taken lightly.

If the government acknowledges the facts about POW labor at Aso Mining, makes the most of the discovery of precious records at the Health Ministry and makes additional efforts for reconciliation and friendship with each country, it will definitely benefit diplomatic relations in the future.

The above article, part two of a two-part series, appeared in the June 2009 issue of SEKAI. Fukubayashi Toru is a visiting researcher at the Asia Pacific Research Institute, Osaka University of Economy and Law. He is also a co-representative of POW Research Network Japan.

This article was translated by William Underwood, an Asia-Pacific Journal coordinator and researcher on wartime forced labor.

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Fujita Yukihisa, "Aso Mining's Indelible Past: Prime Minister Aso Should Seek Reconciliation With Former POWs," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 16-4-09, April 19, 2009.

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