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'After the war my father didn't recognise me'

by Chris Summers
BBC News Online

Lieutenant Masao Hirakubo was a young Japanese soldier fighting in Burma when news came through that Emperor Hirohito had ordered an unconditional surrender. Now 84, he lives in Britain and has been awarded an OBE for his reconciliation work.

The fighting in Burma - among the fiercest in the whole war - changed Mr Hirakubo inexorably.

"At the beginning of the war I was a very right-wing nationalist. Everybody was at that time. Everybody intended to give their lives for the nation," says Mr Hirakubo.

But he remembers thinking, when he heard about the attack on Pearl Harbour, that Japan could not possibly win a war against Britain and the US.

Mr Hirakubo joined the Japanese Army in 1942 and fought throughout the Burma campaign, ending the war as a lieutenant.

His disillusionment with Japan's militarist policies was completed in March 1944 when he was given an "impossible job" by his superior officer.

The Imperial Japanese Army's 31st Division had just embarked on its ill-fated Imphal campaign, on the eastern edge of India.

Lt Hirakubo was a battalion supply officer whose job it was to feed 1,000 soldiers perched precariously on hills surrounded by thick jungle and pounded mercilessly from the sky by the RAF.

"I was told there was no plan to supply food from the rear. It was left to me to concoct enough food for 1,000 men. Where was I to get it? From the sky? From the villagers? From the enemy?"

"From that point on my belief in the government and the Army was completely destroyed," he said.



Masao Hirakubo began the war prepared to die for his nation

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The battle of Kohima

On 6 March 1944 the Japanese 15th Army, led by General Renya Mutaguchi, launched Operation U-Go. The target was the strategic towns of Kohima and Imphal, just inside British India.

By 7 April the British 14th Army had fallen back considerably but General William Slim ordered his men to defend Kohima at all costs. The fighting raged throughout April and May, with British and Indian troops, resupplied by the RAF, doggedly defending Garrison Hill.

Finally on 31 May General Kotoku Sato, whose 31st Division had been charged with taking Kohima, ordered his men to retreat. They had run out of supplies. Gen Sato ignored Gen Mutaguchi's order to fight to the death. 65,000 Japanese troops died at Kohima and Imphal. Nearly 18,000 British and Indian soldiers were also killed.

The battles for Kohima and Imphal in March-July 1944 were the turning point of the Burma campaign.

They were the first defeat for the Japanese Army and from then on they were forced on the back foot.

The victory, achieved by an almost superhuman effort, gave a big boost to the morale of the British and Indian troops.



Masao Hirakubo (front right) with fellow raw recruits

Kohima and Imphal claimed the lives of 65,000 Japanese troops and 18,000 British and Indian soldiers.

Mr Hirakubo said the words on the memorial in Kohima summed up the sentiments he felt about those lost lives.

It reads: "When you go home, tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow, we gave our today."

Mr Hirakubo said: "After Kohima we were saved by our commander, General Sato, who decided to retreat even though his superior General Mutaguchi said we should keep fighting to the last man."

When he returned from the war his father did not recognise him.

Repatriated from Burma in 1946 he returned to Yokohama but found the family home destroyed by Allied bombing.

Eventually he tracked down his father to Tokyo but Mr Hirakubo says: "We met at Shinbashi station but he couldn't recognise me. I was muddy, and my face was thin and he just didn't realise it was me."

Mr Hirakubo said: "I told him he had been right about the war.

"He had always said Japan was a trading nation. He said we had no natural resources but by trading we could buy anything, even iron ore and coal. He said trading nations must not use military power and we could not win a war with the British and Americans."



Kohima and Imphal sat on top of a vital ridge

When he was a young man in Japan in the 1940s he was taught to hate the British and Americans.

'Brainwashed'

"We were told that the British and Americans were animals, with hairy bodies. We used to call them monkeys because they had hairy chests, unlike most Japanese men," he recalls.

Now living in a quiet London suburb, Mr Hirakubo readily admits his generation were "brainwashed" by the militarist Japanese regime.

"The official purpose of the war was to chase the colonial powers out of the Far East," he says, although he concedes now that the hidden agenda was replacing British, American, French and Dutch domination with Japanese overlordship.

Mr Hira Kubo has been back to Burma several times since the war and has organised visits to the sites of the crucial battles of Kohima and Imphal.

He also helped raise 12 million yen (£60,000) towards the building of a new Catholic cathedral in Kohima.



Gwilym Davies: "You lived like an animal and killed like an animal"

Gwilym Davies, a former corporal in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, was on the opposite side at Kohima.

'Depressing country'

He remembers how the British troops' determination was boosted by propaganda about the atrocities the Japanese had committed in Singapore, including bayoneting hospital patients and raping nurses.

He has vivid memories of Burma: "It was a depressing country, terribly hot in the day and cold at night. We were wet all the time and you couldn't see the enemy because of the jungle.

“ We lived like animals and we killed like animals - it was shoot first and ask questions later ”

Gwilym Davies

"We lived like animals and we killed like animals. It was shoot first and ask questions later."

Both men, and hundreds of other Burma campaign veterans, will be marking the end of the war at a series of ceremonies all over the UK on Sunday.

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