

NATIONAL

Ex-soldier who reconciled with British sparks fond memories

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KYODO

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LONDON – Tributes have been paid to a former Japanese soldier who while living in Britain played a crucial role in fostering reconciliation between men who were previously wartime enemies.

Masao Hirakubo, who died at age 88 in March, has been described as a “lynch pin” in organizing meetings between former British and Japanese troops interested in mending past differences.

He was also one of the main supporters of joint Anglo-Japanese war memorial services.

Despite being honored by the British and Japanese royal families, his efforts were snubbed by many former prisoners of war who still harbored deeply held anti-Japanese feelings.

“Hirakubo-san was the only Japanese war veteran in Britain who talked publicly about his wartime experience,” said Phillida Purvis, who worked with him on many projects. “He had a drive to bring veterans together and was a channel to Japan. I don’t believe that reconciliation between the British and Japanese veterans could have been achieved without him.”

Kenji Hiramatsu, minister and consul general at the Japanese Embassy in London, said, “Few people did more for postwar reconciliation . . . than Masao Hirakubo. His admirable legacy to Japan and the United Kingdom speaks for itself and he will be sorely missed.”

Hirakubo, who was born in Kobe, saw active service in Burma (now Myanmar) during the war and was part of the ultimately ill-fated Japanese mission to capture the Indian border settlement of Kohima from the British in April 1944.

The battle saw heavy casualties on both sides and Hirakubo was nearly killed before the Japanese moved back from their positions into Burma.

Food supplies were short and he became disenchanted with Emperor Hirohito (known posthumously as Showa) as well as the military hierarchy for its lack of planning.

He saw many of his colleagues die and he reasoned that somehow he was allowed to survive to strive for reconciliation after the war, Purvis said.

Hirakubo also said that reconciliation was important to help rebuild Burma, which had been damaged by the fighting.

After the war, he resumed working for Marubeni Corp. and in the 1960s came as its representative to Britain, where he stayed and raised a family.

In the late 1980s, two former British soldiers who had served in Burma were put in touch with Hirakubo to seek reconciliation with their former foes.

He joined the two men on a visit to Japan where they were shown great kindness.

Because he had links with the All Burma Veterans Association of Japan he was able to arrange trips to Japan with other British veterans between 1989 and 1995, and organized reciprocal trips in 1992 and 1994.

Hirakubo and his team were able to translate moving statements of reconciliation from the former soldiers which were read out on the visits.

It was out of this initiative that in 1995 the Burma Campaign Fellowship Group was established.

Hirakubo was one of the driving forces in the group made up of former British soldiers and prisoners of war who were seeking reconciliation with Japan.

He supported Anglo-Japanese joint commemoration services that have taken place since 1999 in various British cathedrals and Buddhist temples.

Philip Malins, a Burma veteran who made several reconciliation visits to Japan said: "Of all the Japanese, he did more for reconciliation than anybody else.

"Because he was a Japanese veteran of Burma the great majority of prisoners of war and those who fought in Burma didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"But he was a very persistent man and he didn't let all this get him down."

Hirakubo returned to Kohima, where he helped with the building of a cathedral, and traveled to nearby Imphal to take part in acts of reconciliation.

Despite his age, he remained a constant figure in the reconciliation movement in Britain and helped launch the Burma Campaign Society when the Burma Campaign Fellowship Group closed down in 2001.

"He has enriched our lives. Our former enemies are now our greatest friends," Malins said.