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PEOPLE

One Last Great Service to Their Country

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Mary Lean meets the British World War II veterans who are calling for reconciliation with Japan.



When Emperor Akihito of Japan visits Britain in May, there is one group of veterans from World War II who will be glad to welcome him. 'We hope the visit will lay the ghost of the past and let us start a new era,' says the Chairman of the Burma Campaign Fellowship Group, John Nunneley.

At a time when larger groups of veterans and former prisoners of war still clamour for apologies and compensation from Japan, the very existence of the BCFG comes as a bit of surprise. Nunneley, Director of the British Railways Board from 1962 to 1987, says that it is the only British ex-servicemen's organization dedicated to reconciliation.

The campaign in Burma's jungles, from 1942 to 1945, was the longest and arguably the most ferocious of World War II. Over 250,000 British, Commonwealth and Japanese servicemen were killed, wounded or went missing. 'The fighting was brutal, elemental -- "kill or be killed", give no quarter and expect none,' Nunneley recalls in *Tales from the Burma Campaign**, a book of memoirs recently published by the BCFG. 'Yet the swing of deep emotion from hatred to compassion can be swift.'

For the book, veterans were asked to write about a 'key personal experience' which had left an indelible impression on their minds. Amid the accounts of battles, bravery and hardship, there are several of encounters with Japanese prisoners which awakened the young British soldiers to their common humanity. One of the writers describes how he shared his malaria pills with a sick Japanese prisoner. 'His obvious initial apprehension was followed by amazement and then by gratitude which he showed in a courteous bow. I then realized that friendship between our two nations was not impossible.'

The BCFG traces its origins to a Welsh engine driver, Gwilym Davies, who decided in the early Eighties that he wanted to shake the hands of his former enemies. To the horror of his fellow veterans in Aberystwyth-who stopped talking to him and his wife -- he made contact with the Japanese Embassy in London. They passed him on to Masao Hirakubo, a Japanese businessman who had fought in the battle of Kohima and had been working for reconciliation for many years. (Hirakubo was later honoured by both the British and the Japanese governments for this work.)

Hirakubo accompanied Davies and another Welsh veteran, Hirwen James, to Japan, each paying his own expenses. There they met Japanese ex-servicemen and returned even more committed to building bridges, to further vilification from their comrades.

Davies, James and Hirakubo joined forces with Louis Allen, author of the definitive history of the campaign, *Burma: the longest war*. Allen, who hosted the *Round Britain Quiz* radio show for many years, had long promoted better relations between Britain and Japan. The BCFG was launched in

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1988 and, with funding from the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, began to organize exchange visits for Japanese and British ex-servicemen.

Nunneley got involved in 1991, when he read Allen's book and went to Durham to meet him. Over post-prandial whisky in his cottage, Allen produced a memorandum which had been given to him 18 months before by a Japanese veteran, Sakae Katagiri.

In 1944, Katagiri had seen a 'gallant British officer' charge to his death in an attack on a heavily defended Japanese jungle position. For 47 years, he had longed to trace the officer's family and express his admiration and sympathy. Allen had offered to help, but had failed to turn up any leads. Nunneley read the memorandum and recognized the incident, in which his own battalion had been involved. The officer concerned turned out to have been a close friend of his.

When Nunneley joined the BCFG it had some 30 members. Today it has grown to 100 (plus some 25 British and Japanese 'friend members'), and includes 12 former prisoners of war, some of whom worked on the infamous River Kwai Siam railway. As well as the trips to Japan, the group organized a Joint Memorial Visit to Burma in 1997 with members of the All-Burma Veterans' Association of Japan. In 1995 and 1997, they coordinated Services of Reconciliation at Westminster Abbey on or near 15 August (the anniversary of the end of the war with Japan and of all World War II conflict), attended by veterans from both countries. This year's service -- on Sunday, 16 August -- will be one of Friendship and Reconciliation, pitched at young people.

During the service in 1997 Nobuko Kosuge, a visiting scholar at Wolfson College, Cambridge, laid a wreath on the Grave of the Unknown Warrior. The previous November, she had got into conversation with a man who had knocked on her door selling poppies for Remembrance Sunday. She had asked if she could take part in the city's remembrance ceremony because she 'wanted to pray for the British who died in the Far East war'. Afterwards, reported the local paper, a former prisoner of war went up to her in tears and said that until then he had vowed never to talk to a Japanese person.

Nunneley believes that the 'unforgiving' stance of Britain's larger veterans organizations has had an adverse effect on British attitudes towards Japan and her people over the last decades. He doubts that those who demand ever more abject apologies will ever be satisfied. And he believes demands for compensation are misplaced. 'After a war, it is the duty of each country to care for its own,' he says. His own wounds, from hand-to-hand jungle fighting, entitled him to a 20 per cent disability allowance, which he suspended some years after the war because he was able to live a normal life.

In spite of the rhetoric, he says, attitudes are slowly changing. He refers to a funeral service where one of the veteran standard bearers privately admitted to him that he thought the BCFG had 'the right idea'. 'People are getting to the end of their lives and see the futility of hatred,' he says.

On 14 January, following Tony Blair's visit to Japan, the British tabloid *The Sun* published an article by the Japanese Prime Minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto, expressing 'our feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology for the tremendous damage and suffering of that time [World War II]'. The paper invited its readers to give their views on 'Is this apology enough?'

Scores of readers responded, most of them in the affirmative. 'The time has come to forgive the Japanese for atrocities they committed against British prisoners in World War II, *Sun* readers declared yesterday,' reported the paper. Its rival, *The Mirror*, weighed in with an article headlined 'Honourable race we must not hate'.

Nunneley's response was published in *The Sun* and read out on BBC Radio 2's most-listened-to programme, *The Jimmy Young Show*. 'As we war veterans come towards the end of our lives we believe there is one last great service all of us can do for our country: forgive the Japanese for their treatment of our prisoners of war; accept the full apology now made by Prime Minister Hashimoto; and in doing so demonstrate a British nobility of spirit which will allow Britain and Japan to go forward as friends and partners into the new millennium.'

With the apologies of Prime Ministers Kishi, Murayama and now Hashimoto, Nunneley and his comrades believe Japan has apologized enough. 'We think the word "apology" should not be mentioned again in the context of Japanese/British relations,' he says.

Mary Lean

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