

Our obligation to tell others

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At a coffee house in Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture, in early October of 2010, British resident Hiroko Sherwin, 74, sat face to face with 97-year-old ex-army sergeant Tsuyoshi Ebato.

After World War II, Ebato spent six years interned at the Fushun prison, and since returning home he has continued to share his experiences of war, as a member of the Chugoku Kikansha Renrakukai (Association of Returnees from China).

In June of 1945, Ebato was training 30 new recruits at a village in Shandong province. They were being taught how to stab enemy combatants to death, using live prisoners as targets. Four captured Chinese had been assigned to the unit for this purpose.

"I'm just a farmer. Please don't kill me."

The prisoners begged in unison. One of them was a young man, aged around 15 or 16.

"My mother is my only family. She's waiting for me to come home."

So pleaded the young man as he clung to Ebato's leg, sobbing. Ebato felt sorry for him. Nevertheless ...

The four men were tied to posts.

Ebato commanded four soldiers at the front of a four-row formation to "Approach!" They began crawling along the ground toward the prisoners. When Ebato's commanding officer gave the order to "Charge!" the soldiers drew their daggers from their scabbards and dashed forward in a half-crazed frenzy.

"It was a horrific sight," Ebato recalled. "Even if I tried to excuse myself by saying I was following orders from my commanding officer, from the prisoners' perspective, I was the one who gave the command. It's my obligation as a returnee from the battlefield to keep telling others about the crimes I committed, so that we never repeat the same mistakes again."

Sherwin listened to Ebato speak for over two hours. While in Japan for just over two weeks from late September, she interviewed 16 former soldiers, including those of the Tokko-tai (special attack forces).

"Westerners don't really understand that each Japanese experienced the war differently. I want to write a book about the fact that Japanese also suffered from the war, and convey that reality to the West."

Sherwin is originally from Nagoya. After graduating from Tokyo Woman's Christian University, she emigrated to the United States in 1960 and studied literature and history at Harvard University and elsewhere. She was also married there. In 1991, she moved to Switzerland, and has lived near Bath in the south of England since 1999.

"When I came to England, I noticed that that people were somewhat unwelcoming toward Japanese."

Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that memories of World War II still linger, during which close to 60,000 British soldiers were taken captive by the Japanese military and subjected to severe abuse.



Above: Tsuyoshi Ebato, left, and Hiroko Sherwin; Left: Osamu Komai (Photos by Yoichi Jomaru)



leagues to build a radio, as well as for other infractions. Two of his comrades were beaten to death.

know?"

The ex-soldiers remained silent.

In 1999, Komai viewed British documents from his father's trial for war crimes. The verdict stated that Mitsuo had abused and severely injured Lomax and others, and had beaten two prisoners to death.

When Komai visited to offer an apology, Lomax explained what he had said in court. Lomax said that he had pointed at Komai's father and recounted what he had done. He then told the court that he hoped the Japanese would be sentenced to death.

Lomax had never imagined that one day the man's son would come to apologize.

Komai realized that Lomax had suffered as well. "I apologize to you on my behalf of my father."

Lomax silently accepted Komai's words. The tension finally eased. Lomax asked Komai if he would extend his stay at his hotel for another night.

Editor's Note: This is part of a series titled "Relaying recollections of the battlefield" that originally ran in the venerable Asahi Shimbun.

Many of the POWs died. Sherwin discovered this after she became acquainted with a local family. The father had been a prisoner of war.

This experience led her to visit former prisoners of war around England. One of them was Eric Lomax, 91.

From 1942 to 1943, the Japanese military constructed the Taimen Railway (Thailand-Burma Railway), a 400-kilometer link between Thailand and Burma (now Myanmar). Allied prisoners and other laborers pressed into service from around Asia were forced to endure exhausting labor, malnutrition and illness, which resulted in countless deaths. The project became known as the "Death railway."

Lomax, who worked on the construction of the railway in western Thailand, was tortured by Japanese troops when they discovered he had helped his col-

Morioka city resident Osamu Komai, 73, journeyed to England to meet Lomax in June of 2007. In 1943, Komai's father Mitsuo, a second lieutenant in the Imperial Japanese Army, had traveled to Thailand to assume the post of vice warden at a POW camp.

After the war in March of 1946, Komai was called into a room at his home by his mother. As he sat there with his elder sister, his uncle began to announce something to them but was cut off when Komai's mother tearfully told him to "Stop!"

After Komai graduated from high school, a teacher informed him that his father had been executed as a war criminal. However, he was told nothing of what his father had actually done.

He attended gatherings of his father's military colleagues on several occasions.

"Don't you all have an obligation to tell me what you