

Remembering the war in New Guinea

Japanese perceptions of the enemy (Symposium paper)

Panel name: Enemies and friends

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This paper examines Japanese impressions of the enemy found in interrogation reports and Japanese wartime accounts published in English and Japanese. There is considerable variation in how the enemy is depicted. To what extent did the behaviour of Japanese fighting men depend upon the race and ethnicity of those who looked back? John Dower suggests that the Japanese have tended to be more concerned with elevating themselves above other races, rather than belittling them.^[1] Allison B. Gilmore has suggested that beliefs in racial superiority were called into question when Americans and Australians were actually encountered in battle.^[2] The powerful ideology of racial purity appears not to have been all encompassing. Even before the war, such ideas were accompanied by considerable debate.^[3] This paper is a tentative attempt to explore such questions within the context of the war in New Guinea and beyond.

Almost twenty years ago, Ben-Ami Shillony discussed how the outbreak of the Pacific War was accompanied by attempts to expel Western influence from Japan. Given that Japan had long been exposed to Western ideas and had learned to admire the USA and Britain, this was easier said than done. Furthermore, it was difficult to draw the line between bad Anglo-Saxon culture and more "friendly" Western cultures in Germany and Italy. Shillony illustrates how flawed the attempt was to eradicate Western culture by relating how a kamikaze pilot described his final hours by writing, "how funny to listen to jazz music on the night before going out to kill the jazzy Americans".^[4]

The pilot, Sakai Saburô, has spoken of how he came across an enemy DC-4 civilian aircraft during the bombing of Java. A blonde woman and young child were on board, along with other passengers. The woman reminded him of a Mrs Martin, an American who had occasionally taught him as a child in middle school and been good to him. He signalled to the plane to fly by.^[5] Sakai could not forget such kindnesses and was able to separate anti-Western ideology from what he knew of the "enemy" himself.

For Japanese who had the enemy at a distance, it was easier to demonise an anonymous foe. In Haruko Taya Cook's and Theodore F. Cook's collection, *Japan at war: an oral history*,^[6] there is a short piece by Sasaki Naokata, who had been evacuated from Tokyo to Miyagi prefecture with his sixth grade elementary school class. He speaks of how morning exercises were accompanied by the repeated chant "Annihilate America and England! One-two-three-four!"^[7] Shillony, too, has written of how schools and the media played an active role in vilifying the Americans and British.^[8] What I find most fascinating is not this, but the surprise and change in attitudes when Japanese military personnel actually encountered the enemy.

Part of the reluctance of the Japanese to describe the Pacific War as a battle against white supremacy is that ideas of hybrid selves had been used to argue that the Japanese were, in fact, white. Japanese settlement in Manchuria and racial mixing were part of the drive towards the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. These images sat uncomfortably with representations of the body of the emperor as white, bright and pure. As Manchuria shows, the making of a Japanese imperial order introduced anxieties over what constituted "Japaneseness". And Japan's alliance with Germany and Italy meant that any crass description of the war as a conflict between white and non-white was inappropriate.^[9]

The many accounts of the wartime experiences of Sakai Saburô, said to be Japan's greatest fighter pilot, are useful in helping us to understand the complexity of Japanese perceptions of the enemy. Sakai passed away recently, in September 2000. There are a number of accounts, including *Samurai!*, which was written by Sakai with the help of Martin Caidin and Fred Saitô. Caidin later wrote *Zero fighter* with an introduction by Sakai in 1969.^[10] *Samurai!* was a revised version of a book entitled *Kôsen kiroku (an account of the battle of the skies)*, first published in 1953 and reprinted in 1992.^[11] Hiromitsu Iwamoto has provided an extensive list of these.^[12]

In Sakai's writing, the enemy is simply referred to as *teki* ("enemy"), and enemy aircraft referred to as, for example, *teki no B17* ("the enemy B17"). Even in Sakai's Americanised account of his military career, which includes time in Rabaul, we can obtain a sense of how he saw the enemy, namely as fighters of different nationalities. A recent addition to the literature is *Shashin, Ôzora no samurai (the photo-story of the samurai of the sky)*.^[13]

Sakai appears in Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook's collection, *Japan at war: an oral history*.^[14] If we refer to the record of interview from the early 1990s that appears in the Cooks' book, it is interesting to get a sense of how Sakai "viewed" the enemy:

Prior to the Pacific War, we received many instructional documents and capability tables for the fighter planes of America,

Britain, France and Australia. They startled me. All of them showed some capabilities superior to those of the Zero. I thought the planes of such advanced nations, moved by the spirit of the Wright brothers, would be magical in their devil-like strength, and that certainly, their pilots would be outstanding, too.[15]

While we can perhaps discount some of his admiration of American pilots, given that the interviewers were American and that much time had elapsed since the end of the war, it is worth noting Sakai's initial surprise that other fighter planes might, in some way, be superior to the Zero. The planes are metaphors for the people themselves, and help us to understand his attitude towards the enemy, as seen in the planes he sought to bring down. His comments illustrate the grudging admiration that the Japanese had of Western nations, especially the Americans.

But Sakai also warns us in *Samurai!* of the danger of equating the make of a fighter plane with the nationality of the enemy who piloted it. He claims that the Navy had evidence that a "foreign legion" of pilots had manned China's air force in the late-1930s. He conceded that Chinese may have flown the Russian, American, British and German planes, but there may also have been foreign nationals flying them as well.[16]

Sakai's life and his experiences have generated a veritable industry. This year, Microsoft is helping to put us in Sakai's shoes with their new product, "Combat Flight Simulator II: WWII Pacific Theater", which includes the Zero fighter. Selected quotes from an interview with Sakai will feature in the manual.[17]

Let us turn to the situation on the land. Tanaka Hiromi has alluded to how the New Guinea campaign and the conditions that they encountered there were outside of the initial expectations and planning that the Japanese had undertaken.[18] This ignorance would cost the Japanese dearly in lost lives. In his words, the development of the war "proceeded contrary to all expectations".[19] Henry Frei has also mentioned how New Guinea did not figure prominently in the Japanese scheme of things. This all shaped how the Japanese in New Guinea viewed the enemy and enemy propaganda. As Toyoda Yukio and Fukushima Atsuko discuss in their survey of Japanese newspaper articles on the war in New Guinea, most of the experiences discussed focus not so much on battles but their stay and survival there.[20] And as Edward J. Drea has described it, New Guinea became both a major battleground and major killing ground of Japanese in the Second World War.[21] In such a situation, ideology and abstract concepts had less impact on Japanese troops than matters of everyday survival.[22] This seems to accord with informal statements by Sakai Saburō and the findings of Toyoda and Fukushima in their paper.

The demonising of the enemy and lack of psychological preparation for the actual encounter of meeting and being captured by the Western enemy is reflected in the surprise at the multi-racial make-up of the American military personnel. The Cooks include an account by Kojima Kiyofumi, a reserve naval officer during the war. Interestingly, he was a leader of the Soldiers Against War Association of Japan at the time of interview. In this chapter entitled "In the enemy's hands", Kojima recounts how he was on duty in the Philippines towards the end of the war and how he surrendered to the Americans, who then drove him and the others with him by jeep back to camp. On reaching camp, he relates his encounter with the Americans:

A swarm of enemy soldiers came out to see us. ... I guess they wanted to get a look at these funny-looking guys they'd caught. But when I saw them! Blond, silver, black, brown, red hair. Blue, green, brown, black eyes. White, black, skin colors of every variety. I was stunned. I realized then that we'd fought against all the peoples of the world. At the same time, I thought, what a funny country America is, all those different kinds of people fighting in the same uniform![23]

He also expresses his strange feeling when he encounters a nisei Japanese-American at the next military camp, who then questioned the group in Japanese. Kojima appears to have been put in a state of confusion, with his expectations of the links between nation and racial groups rent asunder.

John Dower, in his important history, *Embracing defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II*, writes of how the Japanese were, after the war, "locked in an almost sensual embrace with [their] American conquerors".[24] The awe with which the Americans were held can be seen in *Ōoka Shōhei's Furyoki (POW account)* which was recently translated.[25] Like Kojima, Ōoka was also in the Philippines and captured by American forces. In his book, Ōoka relates how he has an encounter with a tall, American GI of about twenty years of age. He is struck by the GI's extreme youth and writes of how,

[t]he beauty of his face struck me with wonder. From the contrast between his pure white skin and the bright red of his cheeks to the individual features of his face so different from our own, I gazed upon a simple yet undeniable beauty—a beauty whose sudden appearance before me held a particular freshness because the world it represented had been banished from my sight since Pearl Harbor.[26]

Upon being captured, Ōoka relates his surprise at the racial diversity of the American troops. "Never before had I seen men of such varied skin tones and hair color gathered together in a single place." [27]

We only need to turn to interrogation reports of Japanese prisoners of war to understand the degree of ambiguity in attitudes towards the enemy. Allison B. Gilmore in her book on the Japanese Army in the south-west Pacific suggests that

Allied propagandists recognised that the attitudes of Japanese soldiers varied considerably. Only a small minority could be described as fanatical fighters or "sons of heaven".^[28] To understand this, we could look at Matsushima Richihei, a 41-year old Warrant Officer (and former farmer) in the Japanese Army, who had been stationed in Manchuria from 1927-1929. He was captured in 1943 and interrogated about Japanese attitudes to people of Allied nations. He diplomatically answered that, "the Chinese dislike the Japanese largely because of the presence in China of an undesirable type of Japanese".^[29] This was echoed by Inagaki Riichi, Naval Paymaster Lieutenant and Tokyo Imperial University graduate, who had visited Sydney as a student in 1938 and had aspirations of joining the diplomatic service. Captured a couple of months earlier than Matsushima, Inagaki too, felt that a large number of hooligan-type Japanese had migrated to China after finding Japan too "hot" for them.^[30]

As for native peoples of occupied territories, Matsushima thought that they should be regarded as the equals of Japanese and thought that they were being well treated.^[31] Inagaki was a little more informed about things and said that he understood that Malays and the people of the Netherlands East Indies were favorably disposed towards the Japanese, but wondered whether their attitude might change once they discovered that civilian supplies that they had grown accustomed to receiving from the British and the Dutch would not be forthcoming.^[32] First Class Private Ikedo Tomoichi, who had run a retail cosmetic business in Nagoya, suggested that some of the native people in New Guinea preferred Japanese to Australians. He told of how a fellow Japanese prisoner of war had spoken of having been sheltered by natives and given bananas.^[33] This seems to be consistent with Army policy, as found in "Regulations regarding use and employment of natives", which advised that

Forces employing natives will maintain kindness as their aim, making the natives take pride in their co-operation with the Imperial Army. It is essential that they be led so as to serve in all labour capacities.

Equitable payment of employment wages (rice) etc, will be strictly observed by each unit.^[34]

As for the Axis nations, all three captured Japanese did not agree with Hitler's idea of German racial superiority. Ikedo argued that, whereas the emperor was a descendant of the Emperor Jimmu, Hitler had only been a lowly corporal and hardly warranted worship in the same way as the emperor.^[35]

Despite the varied backgrounds of the three Japanese servicemen just discussed above, there is an interesting consistency in ideas about the enemy articulated in interrogation reports. We should remember however, that some people defy easy categorisation. Sergeant Andrew William Robb, alias Sakai Shigeru, was captured in September 1944. Aged only 22 years and a resident of Kobe, his father was Scottish, his mother half Japanese and half English. When his father died of tuberculosis at the age of 42, Robb was adopted into his mother's family and took the name Sakai Shigeru, becoming a Japanese subject in the process. He was forced to join the Japanese Army as a translator and interpreter. According to Sakai, American firepower and "armour" were greatly respected, but the individual soldier was not. He stated that, "Australian soldiers were masters of jungle warfare and hand-to-hand fighting, particularly with grenades and bayonets. [Japanese soldiers] considered them 'devils'".^[36]

People such as Sakai Shigeru complicate matters, as do the Asian soldiers in the Japanese Army in New Guinea and their fuzzy status within it.^[37] While the cooperation of indigenous people was clearly desirable, it is unclear whether they were seen as friend or potential foe. Sam T. Kaima writes of how both Allied and Japanese troops used young local men as carriers. Japanese propaganda stories about how the spirits of the dead reside in Japan seem to have been believed by some.^[38] The possibility that New Guineans might assist the Japanese led people such as Captain A.J. Marshall to query whether Australian Aborigines might collaborate with the Japanese. In an appendix to a secret report dated September 1942, it was reported how,

alert stockmen and other residents of the Gulf had feared for a long time i.e. in the event of a Jap invasion of the North, he [the Japanese] would probably find a willing ally in the station and bush blacks which are scattered through the country.^[39]

For Sakai and other pilots, the "enemy" was a fighter plane. But for other Japanese discussed in this paper, the enemy consisted of actual Americans, British and Australians, some of whom they may have actually admired. It is clear that the Japanese couldn't imagine a multi-racial enemy. Asians and indigenous people appear to have had an unclear status - neither friend nor foe - but people whose cooperation could be elicited by a variety of means. Some Australians, too, shared this uncertainty, and this was reflected in their wariness in mobilising Asian and indigenous Australians during the war.

Notes

[1]. John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 204-5.

[2]. Allison B. Gilmore, *You Can't Fight Tanks with Bayonets: Psychological Warfare against the Japanese Army in the Southwest Pacific* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 176.

[3]. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Debating Racial Science in Wartime Japan", *Osiris*, Vol. 13 (1998), special issue edited by Morris F. Low entitled *Beyond Joseph Needham: Science, Technology, and Medicine in East and Southeast Asia*, pp. 354-75.

- [4]. Ben-Ami Shillony, *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 1991), p. 144.
- [5]. Michael Ahn, "Saburo Sakai Interview", April 2000 interview transcript, Microsoft.
- [6]. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook's collection *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992).
- [7]. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook's collection *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992), p. 468.
- [8]. Ben-Ami Shillony, *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 1991), p. 145.
- [9]. John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 208.
- [10]. Martin Caidin, with an introduction by Saburō Sakai, *Zero Fighter*, Purnell's History of the Second World War, Weapons Book, no. 9 (1969) (London: Macdonald and Co., 1970).
- [11]. Sakai Saburō, *Kūsen kiroku (An Account of the Battle of the Skies)*(Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1992).
- [12]. Hiromitsu Iwamoto, "Japanese Images of Air War in Papua New Guinea", paper presented at "Remembering the War in New Guinea", ANU, Canberra, 19-21 October 2000.
- [13]. Sakai Saburō, *Shashin, ōzora no samurai (The Photo-Story of the Samurai of the Sky)*(Tokyo: Kōjinsha, 1996).
- [14]. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook's collection *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992).
- [15]. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook's collection *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992), p. 136.
- [16]. Sakai Saburō with Martin Caidin and Fred Saitō, *Samurai!* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1957), p. 45.
- [17]. Michael Ahn, "Saburo Sakai Interview", April 2000 interview transcript, Microsoft.
- [18]. Tanaka Hiromi, "The Pacific War and New Guinea", paper presented at "Remembering the War in New Guinea", ANU, Canberra, 19-21 October 2000.
- [19]. Tanaka Hiromi, "The Pacific War and New Guinea", paper presented at "Remembering the War in New Guinea", ANU, Canberra, 19-21 October 2000, p. 2.
- [20]. Toyoda Yukio and Fukushima Atsuko, "The War in New Guinea as Portrayed in Japanese Newspapers", paper presented at "Remembering the War in New Guinea", ANU, Canberra, 19-21 October 2000.
- [21]. Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 103-104.
- [22]. Allison B. Gilmore, "'We Have Been Reborn': Japanese Prisoners and the Allied Propaganda War in the Southwest Pacific", *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. LXIV, no. 2 (May 1995), pp. 195-215, esp. p. 203.
- [23]. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook's collection *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992), p. 378.
- [24]. John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 23.
- [25]. Ōoka Shōhei's *Furyoki (POW Account)* (Tokyo: Sōgensha, 1952, Shinchō Bunko, 1967).
- [26]. Ōoka Shōhei, trans. Wayne P. Lammers, *Taken Captive: A Japanese POW's Story* (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1996), p. 20.
- [27]. Ōoka Shōhei, trans. Wayne P. Lammers, *Taken Captive: A Japanese POW's Story* (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1996), pp. 30-32.
- [28]. Allison B. Gilmore, *You Can't Fight Tanks with Bayonets: Psychological Warfare against the Japanese Army in the Southwest Pacific* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 164-65.
- [29]. AWM 55, 6/2, Interrogation Report No. 53 of Official PW No. JA 145431, ATIS Serial 94, p. 11. Captured 8 March, 1943.
- [30]. AWM 55, 6/2, Interrogation Report No. 54, Official PW No. JA 145379, ATIS Serial 95, p. 10. Captured 21 January 1943.
- [31]. AWM 55, 6/2, Interrogation Report No. 53 of Official PW No. JA 145431, ATIS Serial 94, p. 11. Captured 8 March, 1943.
- [32]. AWM 55, 6/2, Interrogation Report No. 54, Official PW No. JA 145379, ATIS Serial 95, p. 10. Captured 21 January 1943.
- [33]. AWM 55, 6/1, Interrogation Report No. 40, Official PW No. JA 145082, ATIS Serial 58, p. 8.
- [34]. AWM 55, 1/15, ATIS Bulletin No. 810, p. 1. Translation of extracts from mimeographed file "File of Miscellaneous Rules and Regulations", August 1943.
- [35]. AWM 55, 6/1, Interrogation Report No. 40, Official PW No. JA 145082, ATIS Serial 58, p. 8. Captured 10 December, 1942.
- [36]. AWM 56, 4/1, ADVATIS Interrogation Report No. 14, PW No. 51-J-10382, p. 4.
- [37]. Kaori Maekawa, "Forgotten Soldiers in [the] Japanese Army: Asian Personnel in Papua New Guinea", paper presented at "Remembering the War in New Guinea", ANU, Canberra, 19-21 October 2000.
- [38]. Sam T. Kaima, "*Ammak Tapduk: Kaiapit-Saidor Track During the Second World War*", paper presented at "Remembering the War in New Guinea", ANU, Canberra, 19-21 October 2000.
- [39]. Capt. A.J. Marshall, "Report of Mobile Topographical and 'I' Patrol (att 5 LRRP), Cape York Peninsula Aug.-Sept. 1942", secret document, courtesy of Nicolas Petersen, Australian National University, Appendix B.

