

War Crimes in WWII: Japanese Practised Cannibalism on Indian Soldiers

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08/11/14 AT 7:44 AM



Soldiers of the Indian Army were subjected to torture by the Japanese captors during the World War II. Reuters

For the 10,000-odd soldiers of the Indian Army who endured extreme torture at the hands of their Japanese captors, cannibalism was the culmination. Evidence suggests the practice was not the result of dwindling supplies, but worse, it was conducted under supervision and perceived as a power projection tool.

The Japanese Lieutenant Hisata Tomiyasu who was eventually found guilty of the murder of 14 Indian soldiers and of cannibalism at Wewak (New Guinea) in 1944 was sentenced to death by hanging.

Tracing the terrible narrative, [Times of India](#) recalls vignettes from its news reports during the period.

Refusing to join the Japanese-sponsored Indian Independence League or INA came as a death warrant they had signed. Only 5,500 Indians came out of Japanese captivity alive.

After the fall of Singapore on February 15, 1942, 40,000 men of the Indian Army became prisoners of war (PoWs). Around 30,000 of them joined the INA. But those who refused were packed off to Japanese concentration camps.

It was a long journey of horror for those shipped out to the Pacific islands. Surviving on two cups of water in 24 hours, often the men were forced to drink the saline seawater. Many didn't survive the journey. At the camps, the average day saw them working for 12 hours at a stretch, and often left exposed to allied air raids. Food was scarce and many resorted to stealing rice and livestock. If caught or suspected of theft, they were shot.

Brave officers who raised the banner of revolt at the camps were tortured and beheaded.

But the most spine-chilling of all Japanese atrocities was cannibalism.

"At the village of Suaid, a Japanese medical officer periodically visited the Indian compound and selected each time the healthiest men. These men were taken away ostensibly for carrying out duties, but they never reappeared," the Melbourne correspondent of *The Times*, London, cabled the version of Jemadar Latif of 4/9 Jat Regiment of the Indian Army, on November 5, 1946.

Latif's charges were reinforced by Captain R U Pirzai and Subedar Dr Gurcharan Singh. "Of 300 men who went to Wewak with me, only 50 got out. Nineteen were eaten. A Jap doctor — Lieutenant Tumisa, formed a party of three or four men and would send an Indian outside the camp for something. The Japs immediately would kill him and eat the flesh from his body. The liver, muscles from the buttocks, thighs, legs, and arms would be cut off and cooked," Captain Pirzai told Australian daily *The Courier-Mail* in a report dated August 25, 1945.

Many other testimonials of the PoWs gave details of the cannibalism practised. These were used by the war crimes investigation commissions set up by the Allies, based on which several Japanese officers and men were tried.

The senior-most Japanese officer found guilty of cannibalism and hanged was Lieutenant General Yoshio Tachibana.

Initially, the Japanese did not accept the charges. Then in 1992, a Japanese historian named Toshiyuki Tanaka found incontrovertible evidence of Japanese atrocities, including cannibalism. In 1997, Tanaka came out with his book, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes In World War II*.