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THE WAR IS OVER ("Sobosanchu B-29 Tsuiraku Hiwa")

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A mountain becomes a stage for various dramas. Since ancient times many of these dramas which have influenced both animals and human beings have become more elaborate with time. Generally, there are various cases in which a mountain becomes a stage for a tragic comedy. Once the drama ends, the mountain, the stage, recovers to a state of calmness, not unlike how it was in ancient times, untouched and towering high above.

This effect from long ago has linked ties between people and mountains, and it is a fundamental occurrence which has become well respected. Because these dramas take place deep within the forest, there are many cases in which a single character stars, loses his life, and the facts about him become lost for future generations.

I will explain one such case. It involves twelve young officers, whose spirits sleep on a mountain in a foreign land. I pray their spirits rest in peace.

On August 30, 1945, only a couple weeks after the war had ended, a B-29 plane named "The Flying Fort" (Fuselage No. 44-61554) headed to Kikuchi City, Kumamoto Prefecture. It flew across the mountain ridge between Mt. Katamuki and Mt. Sobo, past the Bungo Channel. It was flying at an altitude of 1600 meters through dense fog just before a heavy rain fall. According the Miyazaki Region Weather Observatory, at 10 a.m. weather conditions recorded by the Mitai Observatory Office (located in present-day Takachiho) were as follows:

Temperature: 24.2°C
Wind Direction: --
Wind Speed: 0
Degree of Cloudiness: 10
Signs of Rain Existing
Humidity: 99%
Rain Fall: 5.5mm

It is certain that the B-29 was traveling under these conditions of extremely poor visibility due to rainfall.

From November 1, 1944, nine and one-half months before the end of the war, 17,500 planes dropped 160,000 tons of bombs on major cities all around the country, scorching and altering the land. These planes were also of the B-29 type. On August 6, 1945, in the middle of the night the bomb-loaded B-29 "Enola Gay", commanded by Captain Paul Tibbets, Commander No. 509 of the U.S. Army-Air Force Squad No. 20, left Tinian Airfield. On the same day at 8:30 and 17 seconds, this B-29 released its bomb, instantly reducing Hiroshima to ruins. On August 9, the B-29 "Boxcar" piloted by Lieutenant Sweeney also left from the Tinian base. At 10:58 it dropped a bomb on Nagasaki. Because of the dropping of these two "new-type" bombs on what was supposed to be "indestructible divine land," Japan agreed to an unconditional surrender. Thus, the war came to an end.

With the feeling of finally being able to return to their hometowns, Chief Pilot Henry Baker and eleven other crewmembers attempted to fly just over the mountain ridge extending from Kyushu's Mt. Sobo to Mt. Katamuki. All were experienced in flying bomber aircraft

over long distances. All fought in the war, risking their lives for their country. However, even these soldiers of the victorious country were probably in slight disbelief that they had survived the war. They were positioned according to their seating arrangements on board their plane weighing a total of 46 tons with a width of 43 meters and length of 43 meters. They sat unaware of the tragedy about to occur only seconds after entering the dense fog mixed with light rain. Some of these men were possibly lighting a cigarette; again, some may have been gazing at a picture of their loved ones whom they thought they would be able to see soon.

Not having to worry anymore about the attacks by persistent small Japanese Army fighter planes or about flak from anti-aircraft guns, they were quietly performing their last duty, flying through the skies of Kyushu. Their plane attempted to fly over an area about as high as the mountain ridge connecting Mt. Sobo (1757m) and Mt. Katamuki (1603m), near the peak of Mt. Shoji. Right at that moment, a dreadful disaster occurred. A section of the plane made contact with the top of the ridge, instantly causing the plane to crash and be engulfed in flames. Not even the slightest chance of escape was possible.

As the vast sky seemed to turn into a ball of fire, Pilot Jack L. Riggs of the U.S. Army-Air Force plane gave out a sorrowful cry. His plane crashed on the northwestern slope of Mt. Oyaji (1644m) causing a blast of destruction, mowing down trees of enormous magnitude existing in the virgin forests. The quiet, thick forests of beech, white oak and "Himeshara," over which a thick fog lay mixed with light rain, became the stage where this terrible tragedy took place. The twelve young men on board were in miserable condition after being thrown out of the plane, which scattered. The scene of this sorrowful accident was a picture that could only have been of hell.

When I heard about this crash, this news was not quite as old as it is now. Two years ago one day in October, I was hiking as usual within the areas of Mt. Sobo and Mt. Katamuki to continue my research on the habitation of Japanese bears. After I set up a tent in Shikimibaru, my two colleagues and I hiked slowly toward Mt. Shoji from Mt. Oyaji. This hike took approximately 30 minutes. At the beginning of the hike there was large downward incline leading to the center of a saddle located between the two mountains. At the lowest point of the saddle I looked down at my feet to discover a shiny metal object protruding from the ground. With much effort I was finally able to unearth it entirely. It was made of stainless steel, decorated elaborately with engraved numbers and about fifteen alphabet letters, and fastened securely by rivets. This object looked much like a part belonging to an airplane. I thought to myself, "But why did it fall from the sky? And why it is here?" As I walked while holding the object in my hands, I thought about this odd find for a long period of time. I hiked to Bear Monument located on Mt. Shoji and placed the object next to the monument.

When I was a child, I had heard from my father that an American transport plane flew very low in the skies just above my hometown, Mitai District, Takachiho Town, Nishiusuki County, Miyazaki Prefecture. It flew toward Mt. Furusobo (1633m) and Mt. Hontani (1642m), flying across the ridge formed by the two mountains. The plane crashed after coming in contact with trees in present-day Obira Pass, a part of the prefectural highway running through the Takachiho-Ogata area. The site of the accident, however, was geographically different. I thought that this plane accident must have been, therefore, a separate occurrence.

One day in the winter of the same year, after passing the hillsides of Mt. Furusobo and Mt. Shoji, on the Toroku Forest Road which passes through the Obira Pass, I met up with an acquaintance who was a boar hunter. I asked this local man about the plane accident that occurred within the vicinity. Quicker than I expected, I learned about the facts of the accident. It seems on a rainy day not long after the end of the war near Mt. Oyaji, there had been an American military plane which crashed killing about ten people. He remembered

that there were a number of people who went out to collect the relief supplies, making their way through the bamboo grass at the crash site. They picked up and brought back pipes made from unknown metals, bullets, helmets of the deceased, etc. Talking with the man I was finally able to confirm that there was in fact a "plane crash." However, it was not known clearly when it happened, what type of plane had crashed, what had happened before the crash, and who was on board. The feeling of not knowing the concrete details of the crash created a strong urge within me to conduct some research. What was known was that this accident occurred during a time of great confusion right after the War. Moreover, this was a time when, just a short time before, Japanese people thought England and the U.S.A. were enemy nations. Exactly how much research could be done regarding the accident concerned me.

While engaged in my research, many things were discovered about the crash by pure coincidence. The first discovery occurred at a second-hand bookstore in Nobeoka. Without any real objective in mind, I came across a book which contained a summary about the accident. This summary gave me more information about the accident. When I opened the book to the article on the B-29 crash, I would never have guessed that such information would be obtained in this way. The book dealt mainly with the history of the hardships endured by farmers reclaiming their land after the war. It was written by Mr. "K," who was a member of the village at the foot of Mt. Sobo. Reading this information left a great impact on my life. I will always remember it. I would like to insert the following condensed version of the summary:

One rainy day, just after the war had ended, an American Army Air Force B-29 plane crashed near Mt. Shoji with a loud boom. We pushed our way through the land and searched the mountains to find the relief supplies. In a time of much need of these supplies, we wanted the goods for ourselves to use.

We found the crash site, glanced at the ten or so blue-eyed dead American soldiers pitilessly, and picked up the canned goods as well as other usable goods and brought them home.

Some days passed when a jeep from the occupational army came to our village. Coming in actual contact with these Americans and watching them pick up every single article to take back to their home country, I became ashamed of myself, and still am, for thinking such wicked thoughts.

After reading the article, I was finally able to obtain the whole story behind the accident, which I first learned about only after finding that single stainless-steel object.

Coincidences seem to run in groups. A few months later, I went to Kumamoto Prefecture on a business trip. The taxi driver seemed to speak in my native dialect so I conversed with him to make certain this was true. My intuition was correct. I discovered that his hometown was the village at the foot of Mt. Sobo. The conversation extended to my asking about Mr. "K" and the story about the B-29 crash. It turned out that this driver was actually Mr. "K's" younger brother! He said that at the time of the crash Mr. "K" hurried to the crash site. He explained further that most of the debris had been piled in the area, now known as the front of the Gokasho Bus Station, and transferred to somewhere in Kagoshima.

Upon hearing his story I immediately visited the crash site to reconfirm these facts. Since the Third Annual Nature Observation Trip was expected to take place in May 1990 in the Mt. Oyaji-Mt. Shoji region, it was decided that members of the observation group, Mr. Katakabe, Mr. Matsuda and I, would simultaneously take part in the trip as well as make preliminary inspections of the crash site.

I surveyed the position of the metal fragment I found two years ago and designated this area as the "main" area. The distance between the ridge and this area was barely 60 to 70 meters long.

I was hiking down in the direction of Mt. Kuro, when a strange sight suddenly came to my attention. In the vicinity of the destruction, covering a large area, trees were not permitted to age any further after the crash occurred. In other words, not a single tree over 45 years old presently exists in this area – in the awesome debris, not one tree had survived. In addition, all together ten objects were found – bulletproof walls made of asbestos, rubber hoses, objects made of duralumin (an alloy of aluminum) destroyed by the enormous impact, electrical system cords, and objects similar to superchargers with exhaust valves. The cogwheels connected to the supercharger that were made of a considerably hard alloy were completely altered. It appeared to have been rotating at a fairly high speed just before the crash occurred.

After placing all of the accumulated objects together in one place, the three of us thought quietly about the American soldiers and offered silent prayers. I was reminded by this event that I was born in a generation completely ignorant of what war is really like. Hiking through the mountains, I thought about the men, whose souls lie here within these mountains in my hometown, and how they did not know a single person here. Right then it became clear to me that someone had to assume the responsibility of passing on these facts to future generations. It was a strong feeling that dwelled in my heart.

To start, I gathered all of the facts concerning the accident and determined to contact the Authorities on American Affairs in order to somehow record these facts for posterity. As it was obvious that I lacked the ability to write a letter in English, I asked Mr. Atsushi Tomokane of Hinokage town whether or not he would help me to contact the authorities. He had lived in the U.S. for a long period of time and had himself been in the military. He readily accepted my request and promptly telephoned a worker at Yokota Military Base in Tokyo. He also wrote two letters to the Air Force Historical Research Center in Alabama to inquire about the crash. He informed the Center of the contents of the research including the August 21, 1945 date and all of the information we collected. Soon after we received a reply from one of the archivists, James H. Kitchens. The letter stated that the Center could not confirm any of the facts concerning the accident and requested that we reconfirm the date of the accident as well as any other pertinent information.

After conducting a series of interviews, the date of the accident was again determined to be August 21. It was possible that the date was inaccurate, but we thought some type of information similar to our own could be obtained from the Center. We realized that our data was not as precise as it should have been and were partly prepared to give up hope. It was then that we received another letter from Mr. Kitchens. It was a genuine coincidence that the date Mr. Tomokane received the letter was August 30. We were finally able to confirm the fact that the B-29 crashed in the Sobo mountain range exactly 45 years ago on this date. Apparently Mr. Kitchens had contacted another post to confirm the information. According to the files on August 30, 1945, the B-29 (Fuselage No. 44-61554), piloted by 1st Lt. Jack L. Riggs of the 45th Bomb Squadron, 40th Bomb Group, crashed instantly killing all twelve crew members on board.

A written report containing thirty pages of detailed reasons for the crash accompanied the letter from Mr. Kitchens. Although the introductory passage only briefly described the accident, the rest of the report included detailed information such as results of the soldiers' autopsies and the remarkable method used to identify the bodies as well as ages of the soldiers. Also included were the names and ages of the witnesses and other people connected with the research work.

According to the report, the bodies were wrapped and buried. Six crosses were placed in the ground to serve as temporary burial ground markers for the twelve men. On the 27th and 28th of August the following year, people from the American Military Division in Fukuoka City visited the crash site to confirm and remove the bodies. They gently turned up the soil and reconfirmed the bodies' existence. The deceased men's personal belongings included a picture of a woman with black hair, a Ronson lighter, a graduation ring, a card for good fortune, etc. After a year of examining each person's identification tag, personal belongings, hair color and other useful sources, all bodies were positively identified.

While reading the report, I thought about how the American officers quickly but carefully dug up the shallow graves, thinking to return the remains of their peers to their homeland as soon as possible. Words cannot express the emotions I felt as I thought about what had taken place. Although it is unknown as to what happened after this event, it is certain that all twelve crew members, always together in any military activity, now rest peacefully at Arlington Cemetery.

As I felt a deep sense of regret for my lack of study in English, I sat at my desk alone, holding a dictionary in one hand, and attempted to translate the rest of the written report. I followed each and every word and phrase of the poorly photocopied sheets. Unexpectedly, images more vivid than from reading any Japanese material welled up in my mind while translating the written report into Japanese.

The thought of young soldiers from a foreign country losing their lives on a mountain in my home country moved me deeply.

The scene which became the stage for this tragedy is even at present surrounded by thick forest. The forest colors express the change from season to season as though nothing has happened to disturb its cycle. People who know about these American soldiers are few. A memorial monument does not exist and not a flower from any of the four seasons has been offered to the deceased soldiers. Through the cycle of seasons, flowers have naturally covered the area where the spirits of the deceased soldiers rest, and little birds' warble to comfort these men's souls.

At the end of the report, an account of the twelve crew members' names, ranks, and I.D. numbers were given as follows:

Name, Rank, I.D. Number

1. Riggs, Jack L., 1st Lt., 0-750848
2. Cornwell, John G., 2nd Lt., 0-778342
3. Williamson, George H., 1st Lt., O-865008
4. Eiken, Alfred F., 1st Lt., 0-685455
5. Baker, Henry B., Cpt., 0-375237
6. Frees, Henry N., S. Sgt., 16079237
7. Dangerfield, John David, Cpl., 39913681
8. Groner, Solomon H., S. Sgt., 32818450
9. Gustaverson, Walter R. S., Sgt., 13129760
10. Miller, Bob L., Cpl., 39931488
11. Hodges, John W., Jr., Sgt., 33645761
12. Henninger, Norman E., Sgt., 15323591

(Note: Most men at the time were about 20 years old. It was determined from his body that Sgt. Hodges was under 20 years old.)

Postscript:

On August 30, 1945, at 2:05 p.m., a B-29 (Fuselage No. 44-61554) carrying twelve crew members crashed on Mt. Oyaji located in the Sobo Mountain Range. Six hours later, a silver C-54 airplane flying from the east showed itself in the skies above Atsugi Air Field. It was General MacArthur's personal plane the "Bataan." Wearing a khaki-colored uniform, smoking a corn-cob pipe and wearing black glasses, General MacArthur stepped out of his plane and said, "It was a long ride from Melbourne to Tokyo. It was an extremely long flight with many difficulties, but it looks like it's all over."

THE WAR IS OVER! A new era for Japan had just begun. In reality, the lives of many people were sacrificed, leaving their loved ones behind.

For the benefit of future generations, I promptly printed everything that had happened within the past two years. I believed that this task would be difficult for a poor man living in the mountains like me. I had only learned about a segment of the war by chance. Nevertheless, I committed myself to this purpose. This essay is the product of my commitment. It is a long essay for what was supposed to be a small bulletin notice, but it was intended to introduce this tragic accident. In my next essay I would like to write out the entire contents of the 30-page written report.

During my research on the B-29 crash, it was found also that a small one-passenger Japanese fighter plane crashed at the foot of Mt. Sobo in the same year on July 27. It was learned that in another incident, an American military transport plane crashed after hitting the Ohira Mountain Pass, killing four of its crew members. On these above mentioned accident sites, I would like to somehow have memorial monuments built so that they will be remembered by future generations.

On May 12, 1958, a crash occurred in the vicinity of Mochida Valley of the Okue Mountain Range. This disastrous accident, which killed four of the crew members, involved a Yamato Airline Beaver plane. A memorial monument has been built in memory of those who died and many people are aware of this accident. Although research on the B-29 Crash has not been completed, I would like to express my gratitude for the invaluable assistance given by Mr. Atsushi Tomokane of Hinakage, Mr. Keiji Anzai of Kawachi, as well as other members of the research project.

When plans for building the Memorial Monument dedicated to the twelve men are finalized, I would again like to ask the members of the research project for their assistance.

Resource Materials:

"Daichi No Tsume Suru Omoi," Daisan Bumeisha

"Tokyo wo Bangeki Seyo," Sanshodo Sensho

"B-29," Sankei Shinbun Shuppanyoku

"Nihon Senryo," Sankei Shinbun Shuppanyoku

"Omei -- 'Kyudai Seitai Kaibo Jiken' No Shinso," Bunsho Bunko