

WITNESS TO WAR

Vivisectionist recalls his day of reckoning

Doctor put conscience on hold until war atrocity confession time came

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Eleventh in a series

Donning the crisp, Imperial Japanese Army khakis gave Ken Yuasa a sense of power, as a superior being on a mission to liberate China from Western colonialism.

"The uniform made me feel incredibly sharp.

Once I put it on, I was convinced Japan would triumph," recalled the

wartime surgeon, who was deployed to Changzhi (then Luan) in Shanxi Province in February 1942.



Dr. Ken Yuasa (center) poses for a group photo at the Imperial Japanese Army hospital in Luan, Shanxi Province, China, in 1943. PHOTO COURTESY OF KEN YUASA

His fervor, and the nationalist indoctrination of his schooling, quickly subordinated any sense of conscience. By his second month at Luan's army hospital, Yuasa was aggressively performing vivisections on live Chinese prisoners, and diverting dysentery and typhoid bacillus to Japanese troops for use in biological warfare.

"I was in denial of the things I did in Luan until the war was over. It was because I had no sense of remorse while I was doing it," Yuasa, 90, told The Japan Times in a recent interview.

"We believed that the orders from the top were absolute. We performed the vivisections as ordered. We erased any sense of culpability by doing so, even though what we did was horrendous."

In the six decades since the end of the war, Japan as a whole still has not come to grips with its responsibility.

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But Yuasa, who has confessed his inhumane acts and in so doing suffered condemnation at home, believes the only way for Japan to avoid war in the future is to accept the misdeeds committed by the Imperial army.

Born Oct. 23, 1916, in Saitama Prefecture, Yuasa grew up in Tokyo and attended a high school near Yasukuni Shrine in Chiyoda Ward. The students often were lectured by army officers, who portrayed the emperor as a "living god" and said the Japanese, as a superior people, had an obligation to rule Asia.

Students were compelled to bow toward Yasukuni on their way to school, Yuasa said, recalling that the Hinomaru flag and "Kimigayo" anthem symbolized the wartime zeal.

"And back then, we had no choice but to blindly follow what we were being taught," he said.

After graduating from Jikei University's School of Medicine in March 1941, Yuasa followed in his father's footsteps and became a doctor. Initially, he had intended to visit rural villages that had no doctor and treat unprivileged patients. But at the time, it was near compulsory that graduates enlist in the military.



Dr. Ken Yuasa shows a map of China during an interview this month at his home in Suginami Ward, Tokyo. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO

Once in China, it took only six weeks for Yuasa to become a coldblooded vivisectionist, murdering live prisoners.

The army placed great importance on the operations performed on live Chinese prisoners. It was considered an ideal way to learn how to care

for casualties, as there were few wounded Japanese troops making it back from the front. Surgeons were encouraged to conduct improvised operations in the most authentic battlefield circumstances available, using prisoners as guinea pigs.

Yuasa took part in his first vivisection in March 1942 in the dissection theater in the army hospital in Luan. Two operating tables were surrounded by some 20 people, including medics, surgeons and hospital directors. Chinese prisoners — one tall, brawny young man and an older man who appeared to be a farmer — were handcuffed and waiting beside the tables.

"Many of the Japanese were chatting pleasantly as they prepared," Yuasa said, noting the occasional cries from the older prisoner was the only sign of discomfort.

The vivisection started with an appendectomy, but it took the doctors three incisions to locate and cut out the organ because it was "perfectly healthy." After suture practice, Yuasa proceeded to perform a tracheotomy, causing bright red blood to gush out and spill on the floor. "Impelled by interest," he also amputated the prisoner's right forearm.

Although the farmer was lifeless by the end of the procedures, the young prisoner was still breathing. Yuasa injected anesthetic into his vein and executed him. The two victims were then dumped in a hole near the hospital.

"I was afraid during my first vivisection, but the second time around, it was much easier. By the third time, I was willing to do it," Yuasa said.

Over the next three years, Yuasa said he participated in 14

prisoner vivisections. Calling it "practical training," he once operated on a Chinese prisoner who a Japanese soldier deliberately shot twice in the stomach just for the surgery. To accurately re-create battlefield conditions, doctors were ordered not to use anesthesia.

After the war ended, it was Yuasa's turn to become a prisoner. The People's Liberation Army of China held him in a camp for five years, during which a Chinese officer gave him paper and pencil to describe the atrocities he engaged in at the hospital in Luan.

"I felt no self-reproach at first. I was convinced that compared with what troops must have done at the front, what I did at Luan hospital was of little significance. But facing the paper with a pencil in my hand, I realized the magnitude of what I had committed," said Yuasa, who was allowed to return to Japan in 1956.

Although he provided dysentery and typhoid bacillus strains for Japanese forces, it was only at confession time that he was able to accept that he played a role in biochemical warfare. Until he wrote it down, he had also kept from his conscience that he had provided brain tissue samples taken from prisoners to be used for experiments by Japanese medical companies.

Yuasa now believes at least 1,000 people, including surgeons, nurses and servicemen, were involved in similar atrocities all over mainland China. Only a handful have stepped forward to confess their misdeeds.

"It is difficult for anyone, including myself, to admit having done something evil," Yuasa acknowledged.

But for him, the decisive blow came when he was handed a letter from the mother of a vivisection victim, which demanded that the Chinese army severely punish him for brutally murdering her son and causing intolerable pain.

"I couldn't hold back from crying when I read the letter, because I felt so sorry for the horrible things I did. I was ready and willing to receive the harshest punishment after that," Yuasa said in tears.

After he was released from the Chinese prison and returned to Japan, Yuasa embarked on a path of redemption by

publicly detailing the army's atrocities. His lectures were sometimes met with jeers and scowls from rightwing nationalists. One time, firecrackers were thrown to disrupt his speech.

"After an appearance on TV in 1981, I received a letter with no return address. It was a threat written by a rightwing activist," he said. The writer told him to feel shame for making such revelations and warned him to "be careful when choosing what to say."

Even a former colleague at Luan hospital contacted Yuasa and urged him to "go easy" on the revelations.

But Yuasa, who practiced medicine until he was 84, has been active to this day in exposing some of the darkest secrets of the Imperial army. He is propelled by a sense of guilt, as well as the fear that Japan is on a path toward committing the same mistakes again.

"It is painful to talk of my sins, and the sins committed by my country. But concealing the atrocities will only cause more problems," he said.

Yuasa says that by covering up the wartime atrocities, the government has succeeded not only in justifying a war of aggression but also leading the Japanese people on the path to war again. One example is the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's 2003 directive calling for any public school teacher who refuses to sing the national anthem during ceremonies to be reprimanded.

"Such orders are identical to the wartime schooling I received," Yuasa said.

"The atmosphere in which we cannot freely express our opinions and challenge government orders is eerily similar to that of my time. And back then, before we knew it, we were heading into a wrongful war," the doctor warned.

In this series, we interview witnesses of Japan's march to war and its crushing defeat who wish to pass on their experiences to younger generations.

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