

BRIEFING/PACIFIC RIM

Surgeon tries to unmask Japan's medical horrors

By Tony Emerson
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Government still silent about secret World War II unit

TOKYO — Ken Yuasa travels the lecture circuit, haunted by guilt, telling over and over a World War II story that official Japan would rather not hear.

Dr. Yuasa was a Japanese Imperial Army surgeon working in association with Unit 731, the germ-warfare unit that tried to advance military medicine through experiments on live humans.

Dr. Yuasa says he drilled holes in the skulls of prisoners to remove brain tissue for study.

He began bullet-removal demonstrations by shooting prisoners in the stomach.

Now 77, Dr. Yuasa hopes to purge his guilt and his nation's by testifying before parliament.

"They will never invite me," Dr. Yuasa says. "Sometimes I feel no hope for Japan."

Japan is confronting its role in World War II, but the story of Unit 731 remains officially off-limits.

Postwar American occupiers agreed not to prosecute Unit 731's leaders in exchange for data from their tests.

Japanese authorities have never publicly investigated. The Ministry of Health and Welfare at last acknowledged that Unit 731 existed — but would say no more.

Now a growing movement is exposing the unit's work to unprecedented scrutiny. Since July 1993, close to 200,000 Japanese have attended a traveling exhibit that describes Unit 731 as "Japan's Auschwitz."

Under its founder, Lt. Gen. Shiro Ishii, Unit 731 aimed to develop

biological and chemical weapons, as well as defenses against these and other military threats.

He exposed prisoners to plague, anthrax and mustard gas, scorching heat, subzero cold — all while taking meticulous notes on how they died. Many of the records were destroyed.

Previous estimates put the death toll around 3,000, but in a recent book U.S. historian Sheldon Harris says at least 12,000 were put to death in Ishii's labs and far more in clandestine "field tests," such as the poisoning of water wells.

As Japan seeks a global leadership role and a seat on the U.N. Security Council, it is shedding its postwar silence. Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama has apologized to the women forced to serve Japanese troops as prostitutes.

A Cabinet minister resigned last month after denying Japan waged "a war of aggression." But high-ranking officials still turn quiet at the mention of Unit 731.

Japanese activists believe that the Health and Welfare Ministry wants to destroy dozens of bones discovered in 1989 during construction at the former site of the Army Medical School in Tokyo.

In a lawsuit that will go to trial this fall, they will try to force the ministry to preserve and investigate these remains as "hard evidence" of Unit 731's war crimes.

Families of Chinese victims also are pressuring Japan to open the books on Unit 731, which did most of its work in northern China.

From the early 1930s until 1945, when his operation was shut down by advancing Russian troops, Ishii employed thousands of Japan's best doctors at facilities in Manchuria.

"Japanese nationalism was so strong," Dr. Yuasa says, "that we felt we could do anything outside Japan." There were buildings for

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raising rats, fleas and other disease-carrying pests and for cultivating viruses and bacteria.

At open-air testing grounds, prisoners were chained to stakes and bombarded with bacterial weapons. In the 1989 book "Unit 731," two British authors offered evidence that British and American prisoners of war in Manchuria were injected with fatal viruses by Unit 731's doctors.

The hub of Ishii's domain was a 2½-square-mile complex at Ping Fang, outside the Manchurian city of Harbin. At its center was a steel-walled prison block that at any time held up to 300 prisoners, including women and children.

It had a hot-drying room that

left victims looking like mummies and a pressure chamber that also was fatal. Ishii understood this "science" defied basic morality and global bans on biological and chemical weapons.

He kept it top-secret and warned underlings they would be killed if they spoke about Unit 731.

This summer, activist Ryuji Takahashi helped bring the traveling 731 exhibit to his hometown of Morioka. He has urged unit members to break their silence.

Some activists point to the example of Germany, where doctors have investigated human experiments in Nazi concentration camps.

A spokesman for the Japan Medical Association says it has never investigated or spoken out on Unit 731. For the Japanese medical elite to investigate Unit 731, historian Keiichi Tsuneishi says, would be to "disclose their own war crimes."

Two weeks ago, in a quiet Buddhist temple in Morioka, several Unit 731 members met for the first time with a Chinese relative of some of its victims. It was a remarkable encounter, organized by Mr. Takahashi.

Jing Fu He listened as a Japanese participant recalled that as a 14-year-old recruit he had wondered how the smoke-belching Ping Fang incinerator could burn so many "maruta," or logs, in a region denuded of trees.

"Maruta," he learned, was the unit's slang for prisoner — or parts of prisoners. Another Unit 731

member said he had witnessed live dissections and seen thousands of jars containing body parts, including what he thought were the heads of a Briton and an American.

To cover his traces, Ishii attempted to raze the Ping Fang complex before fleeing to Japan. China has preserved the bombed-out ruins as a memorial and has set up a 731 Exhibition Hall in Harbin. It receives 4,000 foreigners each year, most of them Japanese. The hall is old and cramped.

In June, a Japanese group established a fund-raising committee to help China rebuild and preserve the whole complex.

"I am moved to hear that Japanese people want to cooperate," said the museum's director, Han Xiao.

At the Morioka gathering, Mr. Jing recalled the explosions as the Ping Fang complex went up in flames near the end of the war. Mice were soon flooding nearby villages, letting loose a plague that killed more than 100 people, including 12 of Mr. Jing's relatives.

Mr. Jing, 60, told his Japanese hosts he had come for healing, not retribution. Unit 731 member Takeo Wano, 71, said he had been ordered to poison the wells of villages near the Mongolian border. Then Mr. Wano limped over to Mr. Jing, bowed and presented him an envelope of cash.

It was a traditional Japanese gesture of sorrow and condolence, 50 years late. Mr. Jing look surprised but accepted the envelope with a polite nod. For Japan's government, reconciliation with old enemies is still to come.