

The Real Identity of Military Comfort Women I Saw

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The issues of the Japanese Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine and the so-called military comfort women, about which many people are now debating, rest on absolutely baseless accusations made by people outside of Japan. I have always thought that the comfort women, like the so-called Nanking Massacre, would not require much of an explanation; and I am simply amazed at the level of stupidity, the falsehoods and intemperate language surrounding this issue have yet to disappear.

Now that more than 60 years have passed since the end of the Greater East Asian War and the number of living people who took part and survived is decreasing, I have decided to leave a written testimony to the effect that being a "comfort woman" was nothing but a "commercial activity."

For military units that are called out and stationed in foreign parts, the problems that most seriously hamper the maintenance of security and pacification activities are rape, looting and arson by soldiers. For this reason, as is generally known, every country takes some sort of measures to prevent these acts. At the time of the Greater East Asian War, "comfort women" did exist on battlefields, which was quite reasonable because Japan had licensed prostitution in those days.

It was not necessary to be an officer or soldier involved in field operations to know the term *jugun kangofu* "military nurse"; it was common knowledge shared by the general public. However, nobody heard of or used the term *jugun ianfu* "military comfort woman." This term was obviously coined at a later time in an attempt to demean Japan.

To use lewd words, Chinese and Korean prostitutes were respectively referred to as "*tsunko pi* (Chinese P) and *chosen pi* (Korean P)" on the China front, as I remember. Acts involving such women were something that could not take place in front of another person, so naturally, few people made accurate presentations in public about what they saw or heard about "comfort stations" or "comfort women." And anybody claiming to have detailed knowledge about these things would have been greeted with scorn and phrases such as "Oh,

how well you know!"

I can imagine readers asking me, "Then, how can you know?" Fortunately, I was in a position to observe the actual situations as an outsider. That is why I can make my observations public for the purpose of dispelling public misconception without feeling abashed.

◆Visit to a "comfort station" in Hankou

As a trading company employee, I went to Hankou (currently called Wuhan), in the middle reaches of Yangtze River in China, in the 17th spring of my life. I began to live in this town only five months into its capture by Japanese troops, with the smell of gun smoke still lingering, so to speak. In those days, the town of Hankou was divided into the Refugee, Chinese, and Japanese-Chinese Zones and the French, Japanese, former German, former Russian, and former British Concessions, each of which had its own security measures in place according to the circumstances.

The Japanese-Chinese Zone was an area shared by Japanese and Chinese residents. The Chinese living in the zone carried "civilian passports," while those without such passports were placed in the Refugee Zone for the purpose of security.

The Refugee Zone was not open to Japanese soldiers and Japanese residents in foreign areas, like us, were barred from entry without express permission. This shows how dangerous the area was.

Because my job was trading, I walked around the city extensively except for the Refugee Zone. One day on the street, I was asked by a soldier in a dirty uniform if I knew where the comfort station was. The term did not ring a bell and puzzled me for a moment, but I soon remembered a place with a sign hung up on the wall saying "Hankou Special Comfort Station" in deep black bold letters and soldiers wearing "Military Police" armbands as well as sentries standing out front, and I showed him the way. The station was in the Japanese-Chinese Zone as was the movie theater. Judging from the dirty uniform, he must have just returned from a military operation. The soldiers policing the town would not be out in such a dirty uniform.

Oh, I see, "special comfort station," I concluded hastily. Soldiers coming back from military operations would certainly need comfort. They would not have much spending money so rice cakes, buns, noodles, etc. would probably be

served for free.

However, a trading company run by my associate, who imported *tatami* mats as well as everyday sundries, which were delivered to the “comfort station” together with other goods such as condoms, had free admission to the “comfort station.” Invited by him to come along, I snapped at the chance to visit the station, which was closed in general to Japanese residents.

We explained our errand of bill collection to an MP and finished this business first. With the sun already down, many “tea grinders” (disengaged prostitutes) came out and tried to join in the conversation between the operator and us, but were told to go away. There were women from Japan, as well as *Senjin* (Koreans) and Chinese. (Although the term *Senjin*—an abbreviated form of *Chosenjin* meaning a Korean—is now considered politically incorrect and not in use, in the days when the Korean Peninsula was under Japanese rule, talk of distinct “Japanese and *Chosenjin*” tended to be strongly refuted by Koreans because they also claimed to be Japanese.)

The women that flocked around us started to use blandishments, showing their “keenness on business”. The MPs did not go into rooms inside the station to search, aside from exceptional circumstances. There was first, second and third class pricing depending on where a woman was from. The “visiting” hours varied depended on military rank: common soldiers had curfew at sundown so were only allowed in the station during the day but curfew was later for noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers, who were allowed to use the service all night. The prices were higher for higher ranks, which naturally meant that the women could make more in the same amount of time.

I heard that some women from the Korean Peninsula were making serious efforts by saying in Japanese, with an accent, “Oh, you are *heicho* (soldier), not *gocho* (noncommissioned officer)” or “Make up your mind and come on up right now, we’ll discuss the price in bed,” which was more tear-provoking than funny. One prostitute from Japan said that it took quite a long time to get straight (with debts) in Japan but working in China would enable her to settle her debts in one half or one year. There was even a stalwart who boasted about serving 27 customers in one day.

◆ “Sex slaves” found nowhere

Let me tell you about the operator of the station, with whom I became friendly. He revealed his honest feelings, saying that “There shouldn’t be much

difference in physical strength but women from Japan tend to get very serious in “service” and forget the business, perhaps because they can communicate with soldiers in the same language and feel sympathetic. So they damage their health, which obliges them to be sent back home, bringing in less profit for the operators. For the soldiers, the operations should have involved only women from Japan, if circumstances allowed.”

The town where I grew up had its demimonde and I frequently saw *geisha* and barmaids. Those demimondaine seen out and about in the streets were easy enough to tell apart from other women. If viewed with the same eyes, it was the same in the town of Hankou as well, and the Korean demimondaine there were especially distinctive. This was because they went about in small groups and wore not ethnic costumes but Western-style two-piece dresses with which they were unfamiliar, and they dressed themselves poorly for that reason, in addition to which they had a characteristic way of walking. So I could distinguish them at a glance.

These women appeared very jolly and cheerful. They displayed absolutely no sign what so ever of the kind of stigma that would fit the term “sex slaves,” of which people are making such a big deal today. Certainly, there is an old saying, “Loan sharks and brothel masters cannot die in bed.” Human trafficking was banned in the Meiji Era and replaced by the practice of *maegari* (borrowing in advance), which was no different for the young girls involved: they were sold.

“Getting straight,” as I mentioned earlier, means clearing off the loan “borrowed in advance” to be freed. I often heard that some people gathered women by unscrupulous and deceitful means in the Peninsula. Women who were deceived have my sincere sympathy, but not all the stories I have heard were pure tragedies. One example was of a tough woman who lied to soldiers and noncommissioned officers by telling them in tears that she—a girls’ high school graduate—had been deceived by recruiters of “military nurses” and forced into becoming a “comfort woman”, and thus cheated the soldiers into paying more than the stated fees. It is also true that some of the more naïve soldiers believed her story without question. This sort of mirthless comedy was made possible by the women’s Japanese language ability because of Japanese rule.

Now, let’s take a look at how much money flowed into the “comfort station,” which points to a positive fact that working as a “comfort woman” was very

much a “commercial activity.” My second oldest brother, a paymaster official working in a field clothing and food depot with a direct connection to the military headquarters in Hankou, gave me the following statistical information about the “comfort station.”

At that time a military force of about 330,000 was stationed near Hankou and for whatever reason he studied the financial records of the entire force. As a result, he discovered that about one-third of the men’s wages were used for food and drink, another third for postal savings and the remaining third for the “comfort station.” Although saving money was not convivial to the low-paid soldiers, they were obliged to do so out of regard for their superiors, who instructed them to save as a discipline. When I was in Nanchang, Jianxi Province for one year as a recruit, I also held back my hunger in order to save.

This is not to say that every soldier divided his money equally between three purposes. However, it is interesting that this result correlates closely with what are said to be the three major human desires, namely desires for food, sleep and sex—if sleep is replaced by saving. Incidentally, the salaries for soldiers in those days averaged about 13 yen a month. To take four yen as one-third of this amount for the purpose of calculation, the monthly savings of the 330,000 men would have amounted to 1.32 million yen. Fighter planes such as the model Zero were said to have cost 30,000 yen each, which means that these savings were worth the equivalent of 44 planes.

This was a time when a salaried worker’s starting pay was around 40 yen. No wonder the accounting department was surprised.

This was the reality of the “comfort station” and “comfort women” as I was able to observe and hear about them, over the course of about three and a half years from the outside, as a trading company employee.

I have compared my views with those expressed in the “Hankou Commissariat,” a document written by an officer who was an adjutant of the commissariat (a body in the rear of the operations forces that was in charge of supplying, replenishing and repairing vehicles and military stores and ensuring the lines of communications) in Hankou and who supervised the “comfort station,” etc. after the summer of 1942, when I left Hankou. Although I found some differences with respect to place names and locations, there was no difference concerning the “comfort station,” which is the subject of the present article, and the document provides further details of the station’s internal affairs. Based on this account, nobody would think of this practice as anything other

than a “commercial activity.”

Anybody who still makes the farfetched claim that the military was behind “sex slavery” is either ignorant, gullible, or, perhaps, the sort of person who would prompt some people to jokingly ask, “Are you getting paid to say this?” In any case, the accusation is simply ridiculous.

◆ The agenda of those making a lot of noise

Now, let me offer some evidence against the nonsense about the involvement of the military. I joined the army as an active duty soldier when I was 20 and was immediately sent to a front-line unit in Nanchang, Jianxi Province in Central China. After undergoing recruit training, I participated in operations, which were followed by officer candidate education, interrupted by more operations. Thus, I was unable to take even one period of leave during the whole year before I entered the Reserve Officers Academy in Kurume on the mainland. Accordingly, I did not have the good fortune of being able to enter through the gates of the “comfort station.”

However, senior soldiers were allowed to go out during the period of my recruit training. There was a fourth-year first-class private who used to give me a present every time he went out. On one occasion I saluted him with the question, “Are you going out, sir?” “Yes, I’ve saved enough money and now I’m going to the Korean bank to make a deposit,” he replied with a smile. This phrase was commonly understood and men around us let out a chuckle.

Divisional headquarters was in Nanchang. In the “comfort station,” women from Japan, Korea and China were working and I suppose soldiers chose women according to the state of their pocketbooks. I received officer candidate training at regimental headquarters, in a rural location over 30 km away from Nanchang.

The “comfort station” operated within wire entanglements in a corner of the defensive position of regimental headquarters. During the final period of their training, candidates were sent out alone on headquarters guard duty. Of course it was 24-hour duty.

Since I was in charge of barracks and did not stand sentry, I led sentries on patrol many times. The patrol area included the “comfort station.” Sentries at the front were always under arms and so were those on vigil at the barracks: with helmets on and guns loaded, and during the night, with bayonets fixed as a matter of course. Equipped in this way, they patrolled not only the areas around

the “comfort station” but also within, and they checked the records of the current occupants submitted by the person in charge. This was intended for the observation of army regulations as well as a defense against a possible surprise attack by guerrillas.

It requires no pause for consideration to realize that soldiers using the service there were not only unarmed but in a totally unprotected and unsecure state. Obviously, the responsibility to protect the officers and soldiers lay with the unit. Another issue concerned venereal diseases. No doctors or hospitals were available in such a rural area, which left no option but for army doctors and medics to carry out tests.

The operator of the “comfort station” was Chinese and the workers, referred to as “licensed prostitutes” in Japan in those days, were also Chinese. They naturally needed food and other commodities. They comprised a large group and also needed adequate means of transportation. The rural nature of the place obliged them to depend on the unit. This was also the case at times when the unit was moving from place to place.

I managed to make myself, in general, understood with knowledge of the language of Hubei Province and was able to chat with the operator to find out certain things about the women. I still remember myself awkwardly patrolling the middle corridor with rooms on both sides but such less-than-comical scenes were reality. I do not think my unit was unique in this respect.

This was what was happening six decades ago. Naturally, times have changed and the situation in peacetime differs from that in wartime as well. Accordingly, the interpretation of licensed prostitutes, which is equivalent to comfort women here, has also changed. In spite of this, some people are taking advantage of the fact that the reality of the situation has now become difficult to ascertain and are making a lot of noise about this matter after all these years. What are they attempting to do? The only thing that can be said for sure is that they are trying to gain something by continually ranting about it because of the “incompleteness” of the evidence.

As a man who has been exposed to the battlefield and received the baptism of the enemy’s bullets, I would like to finish with these thoughts. One thing is certain. Who protects troops in the field? They have to be alert at all times because they are surrounded by enemies or hostile residents. It would be quite another story if they could depend on something stronger and more reliable than themselves for defense, but this was not the case. Protecting themselves

was their only option.

The military was not involved in “comfort stations” but only carried out actions to protect themselves and nothing more than that.

It has been said that, “too much fruit produced by a tree is a sign that it is dying,” which can be explained as “an example of the law of preservation of the species.” Psychology based on this “natural law” is said to apply to soldiers in the field, whose precarious existence is placed at the mercy of savage conditions. How can one possibly ask them to play the role of saints or Buddhist priests who have achieved Zen enlightenment?

The reality of their situation is evidenced by the fact that these soldiers took as much as one-third of their small salaries to the “comfort stations.” This was not money to burn.

After all, the honorable soldiers who were given a flag-waving send-off by the people at home as “heroes” were young men. On the other hand, the existence of a society with women in poor and unfortunate circumstances that obliged them to go as far as they did in order to earn a living was the reality. Whether it is buying or selling that comes first, this sort of activity cannot be stopped by anyone and will continue as long as human beings exist on earth. At the root of the issue is the natural feeling to continue the human race.

So-called “military comfort women” never existed. “Women selling their favors and brokers who controlled them” exploited a weakness of the military and were engaged in a highly profitable business on the battlefield. It is as simple as that. If anybody wants to make a big deal out of such a thing, they should consider that rather than the women, the principal victims may have been the soldiers who paid large fees and the military.

Author Profile

ONODA HIROO

Onoda Hiroo was born in Wakayama Prefecture in 1922. After graduating from Kainan Secondary School, he was hired by a trading company, which sent him on assignment to Hankou, China (today Wuhan). In 1944, Onoda matriculated at the Kurume 1st Military Academy. In the same year, he entered the Futamata Annex of the Japanese Army’s Nakano School. In December 1944, he was sent to the Philippine Islands. In the absence of orders to cease operations, Onoda continued to perform his duties until he returned to Japan in March 1974. Details of his life during those 30 years can be found in his writings, *Reminiscences of My Life on Lubang Island and Thirty Years of Solitude*. In 1975, Onoda moved to Brazil, where he became a cattle rancher. In 1984, he opened the Onoda Shizen Juku, a camp for young people in Fukushima Prefecture. Now 82 years old, Onoda continues to work with young people, to whom he has dedicated his new book, *How Will You Shape Your Future?*