

〈Research Article〉

The Vietnam War and the Japanese, Part 1:

Testimonies of a Japanese Soldier Remaining in Vietnam and a Landing Ship, Tank Seaman

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Abstract

This paper presents the testimonies of two Japanese individuals, in the context of the relationship between the Vietnam War and the Japanese people. The first account is from a Japanese man who remained in Vietnam after Japan's defeat in the war and joined the fight against the French army, which sought to recolonize Vietnam. He married a Vietnamese woman, assumed the responsibility of training Vietnamese militia, playing a vital role in transporting supplies by bicycle during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. However, because the Japanese government was supporting the United States, he was forced to leave his family and return to Japan alone. After the Vietnam War ended, he eventually reunited with his sons and maintained their relationship, including collaborating on the construction of an elementary school in Vietnam.

The second account is of a Japanese man who served as a seaman on a Landing Ship, Tank (LST). The LST transported U.S. military weaponry, munitions, and troops. Despite being aware of the inherent dangers of the job, he had chosen a career at sea because of the lucrative salary and the prospect of traveling abroad. However, he later realized that he may have transported raw materials for defoliants, which filled him with regret, especially after witnessing the plight of disabled children at a Vietnamese hospital. He eventually stated, "The victims of war are the vulnerable, particularly women and children."

KeyWords

Vietnam War, Testimony, Japanese Soldier, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, LST

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1. Introduction (First author)

My formative years, specifically, from elementary to high school, occurred at the time of the Vietnam War era, specifically, from the full-scale involvement of the US until the signing of the Paris Agreement (1965-1973). This period was marked by student movements, with university students staging demonstrations in the city streets. Chants protesting the Vietnam War resounded across buildings and echoed through the streets.

On television, the connection between the US military bases in Okinawa and the Vietnam War was frequently reported. US strategic bombers, B-52s, would arrive at the Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, refuel, resupply ammunition, and then depart for Vietnam. However, during that time, I was ignorant of the significance of the Japan-US Security Treaty and why US military bases were concentrated in Okinawa. The only memory that remained was the comedian Mitsuo Senda's gag: "Today's topic is the Okinawa issue. Nahā, Nahā, Nahā." In a sense, the Okinawa issue and the Vietnam anti-war movement were common social phenomena and issues in Japan, to the extent that they became fodder for comedians.

I was a high school sophomore in 1973 when the Paris Agreement was signed and it was decided that the US military would completely withdraw from Vietnam. On that day, a usually reserved ethics and social studies teacher muttered quietly before class, "This is a victory for the Vietnamese people." These words came from a teacher who had been a student soldier during the Pacific War, served in the Japanese Army, endured harsh treatment from superiors during basic training, and miraculously survived on the Southern Island Front. However, at the time, I did not grasp the significance or gravity of those words.

Upon entering university and immersing myself in the works of journalists such as Kyoichi Sawada, Kaiko Takeshi, Koichi Kondo, and Minoru Omori, I gradually felt the need to delve into the background of the Vietnam War, the reality of the war itself, the relationship between Japan and the US post-defeat, the Japan-US Security Treaty, the Status of Forces Agreement, the issue of US military bases in Okinawa, and various aspects of security. Consequently, after graduating from university, I chose to become a journalist.

However, once I became a reporter, I found myself ensnared in the daily demands of the profession, making it challenging to pursue the goal of investigating the relationship between the Vietnam War and the Japanese people. I had the opportunity to report on the Vietnamese community in the Nagata Ward of Kobe after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. Nevertheless, I never had the chance to conduct in-depth research on the topic of "the Vietnam War and the Japanese people."

It was only after becoming a university professor that I, alongside my seminar students, initiated the "Vietnam War and the Japanese People" project in March 2017. The purpose of the project was to meet Japanese individuals who had been involved in the Vietnam War, record their testimonies, and preserve them for posterity.

We conducted interviews with relevant individuals in Japan and visited Vietnam, particularly Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), as well as various museums, memorials, and archives within the country on approximately ten occasions. During these visits, we conducted research, collected materials and documents, and interviewed individuals connected to the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, as the Vietnam War concluded on April 30, 1975, achieving ethnic and national reunification, questions arose about whether the country had followed the path envisioned by the 'Vietnamese Dream'. The swift implementation of socialist policies, the invasion of Cambodia, and the Sino-Vietnamese War led to a significant number of refugees. This caused unease and disappointment among citizens, students, and labor union members who had been engaged in global anti-American and anti-war movements to support Vietnam's freedom and independence.

In this project, our focus extended beyond the Vietnam War to include the refugee issue that followed the war. We completed 20 journalistic reports based on our research, investigations, and interviews. Additionally, we extracted testimonies and factual information from these 20 reports and reconstructed them as oral histories.

In this paper, we initially examine the testimonies of two individuals: a Japanese soldier who remained in Vietnam and a Landing Ship, Tank (LST) crew member.

2. Testimony of a Former Japanese Soldier Who Remained in Vietnam

Testimony by: Mr. Takeshi Sugihara

Interview Date: July 28, 2018

Interview Location: Tsurumi Ryokuchi Park, Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture

Interviewer: Ibuki Kuwayama (Fourth-year student at Chuo University, Faculty of Policy Studies at the time, currently a broadcasting producer)

Supervisor: Ryoichi Matsuno (First author of this paper)



Mr. Sugihara, a former Japanese soldier who remained in Vietnam. Source: Photograph taken by the author.

2.1 The Journey to Becoming a Japanese Soldier who Remained in Vietnam

Mr. Sugihara was born on October 13, 1921 in Shiga Prefecture as the third son of three siblings. Until the age of 20 years, he worked as an apprentice at a kimono store in Kyoto. In those days, if you were not the eldest son inheriting the family, the second or third son would often be sent to work as an apprentice. However, as the Second Sino-Japanese War began, Japan intensified its involvement.

“I often heard people in the town shouting, “We won! We won!”

Mr. Sugihara was conscripted into the military in May of 1941. He was enlisted in the Imperial Japanese Navy at the Maizuru Naval Base in Kyoto Prefecture. The naval base oversaw the rear of the fleet and served as a key location for the Imperial Japanese Navy. At the time of his enlistment, Mr. Sugihara held the rank of Rear Support Seaman 4th Class. He and others of the same class wore a navy-blue uniform, which appeared black from a distance, earning them the nickname “Crow.”

Just a few months after Mr. Sugihara’s enlistment in the early morning of December 8, 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbor marked the outbreak of the Pacific War. Japan had finally initiated a war against the Allied Powers, including the US.

Subsequently, Mr. Sugihara was assigned to the Dispatch Headquarters of Hainan Island, west of Taiwan. Approximately 100 servicemen were dispatched from the Maizuru Naval Base. Mr. Sugihara was a member of the 5th Platoon of the Dispatch Headquarters and was tasked with securing soldiers' rations. Their main duty was to transport rice, a vital food source, from occupied areas outside Hainan Island. One of the occupied areas was Vietnam.

On August 15, 1945, Mr. Sugihara, at the age of 23 years, had risen to the rank of Seaman 2nd Class.

"I didn't hear the Imperial Rescript announcing Japan's defeat because I was on maritime patrol duty. So, I only learned about Japan's defeat from my superior after returning to Hainan Island. I couldn't believe that Japan had lost. The military was in a state of turmoil. However, we had to secure food supplies. We continued transporting rice from Vietnam using sailing ships."

Shortly after the war ended in November 1945, Mr. Sugihara and his companions were on a ship headed to Vietnam. However, they were caught in a typhoon along the way and the ship was wrecked.

They drifted ashore on the coast of the Nam Dinh Province in Vietnam, where they found themselves surrounded by the Viet Minh, the Vietnam Independence League. They were asked the following question: "Will you cooperate with Vietnam's independence?"

The day after the Imperial Rescript was broadcast, the Viet Minh issued a general uprising order in Vietnam. On September 2, the day Japan signed the surrender document, Ho Chi Minh, who had established the Viet Minh, declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, the French, who had colonially ruled Vietnam since the 19th century, sought to thwart the country's independence.

"Everyone on the wrecked ship discussed whether to cooperate with Vietnam's independence. Considering the current situation in which the ship was damaged and we couldn't return, we decided that there was no turning back and chose to cooperate with the Viet Minh. The ship was broken, Japan had lost, and I wasn't the eldest son with land to return to, even if I went back. But we couldn't go back anyway."

Mr. Sugihara and other former Japanese soldiers stayed in Nam Dinh for approximately a month before moving to Thanh Hoa around February 1946. Subsequently, they move to various locations.

"The rural areas of Vietnam were quite challenging compared to Japan. Approximately 90% of the population were farmers, and landlords took two-thirds of the crops from sharecroppers. Sharecroppers lived a difficult life. There were no blankets at home, and there were many mosquitoes but no mosquito nets. Sleeping on bamboo beds with straw mats was the norm."

Next, they moved to a town called Phuc Ly.

"Phuc Ly was an area inhabited by a minority ethnic group. The Viet Minh couldn't publicly disclose the presence of Japanese soldiers, so we, the remaining Japanese soldiers, were given the name 'New Vietnamese.' At the time, there were elderly people who could understand Chinese characters, so we could communicate through writing."

On December 19, 1946, clashes between the French forces and the Viet Minh erupted in Haiphong, northern Vietnam, marking the beginning of the First Indochina War. Further conflict broke out in the capital, Hanoi. To escape the bombing, Mr. Sugihara and his companions moved to Thanh Hoa.

"I began to seriously study the Vietnamese language when I returned to Thanh Hoa and was formally

asked to provide militia training. I stayed at the house of an influential local figure whose son was a teacher and had some knowledge of Japanese. He help me learn Vietnamese.”

“As for the militia training for the Viet Minh, we initially started by teaching them how to handle firearms. In my case, being from the Navy, I also taught them about semaphore signaling. Japanese semaphore signaling uses Iroha characters; therefore, we developed an alphabet-based system. Additionally, I taught relatively basic skills such as knot tying for ropes. The people who gathered for training were mostly intellectuals. They were awakened under French oppression. By 1949, near Thanh Hoa, we were involved in making explosives in what could be described as a munitions factory or blacksmith’s shop. The materials used were unexploded shells dropped by the French military, which we collected and disassembled to manufacture the explosives.”

Subsequently, in 1954, the Viet Minh achieved victory over French forces in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

“We were involved in transporting food and military supplies during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Bicycles were used for transportation. Japanese ‘Miyata’ bicycles proved to be sturdy and useful. We transported goods in bicycle convoys at night because it was dangerous during the day.”

“At first, we carried rice using shoulder poles, but it was inefficient, and we would end up eating the rice we carried, depleting our supplies. It also took a long time. Therefore, we switched to bicycles and adopted a relay-style transportation method. With this, one bicycle could carry up to 200 kg of rice. Thanh Hoa’s role in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu was significant. This can be seen as the precursor to the subsequent Ho Chi Minh Trail that came later.”

Peace talks were held in Geneva, Switzerland in July of the same year, resulting in the signing of the Indochina Ceasefire Agreement, which designated the 17th Parallel North as the provisional military demarcation line. However, this agreement later became the cause of Vietnam’s division into North and South.



The bicycles used during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Source: The Vietnam Military History Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam.

2.2 A New Life and Separation

In the midst of the First Indochina War, Mr. Sugihara met a woman named Honey Nyat Kuan, who was seven years his junior, through an introduction from a militia unit leader. When Mr. Sugihara was 28 years old, he married Kuan.

“She had big eyes and long hair. She resembled the Japanese actress Yamamoto Fujiko. I thought I could live in Vietnam.”

Marriage to a Vietnamese woman solidified Mr. Sugihara's commitment. At that time, the First Indochina War was ongoing and there was a shortage of food. Nevertheless, Mr. Sugihara became the father of two children and settled down in Vietnam. He was well-regarded by the local community, and it seemed that he had found happiness with his family. However, this period of happiness was short-lived.



Mr. Sugihara (on the far right) pictured with other remaining Japanese soldiers and their wives and children. This photograph was taken in Thanh Hoa. Source: Provided by the Osaka Prefectural Federation of the Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association.

“In February 1954, I was summoned to a gathering called a ‘study’ organized by the Vietnamese government. There were international concerns about the involvement of the Japanese in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. The Vietnamese government sent trucks to villages to gather the scattered former Japanese soldiers. Approximately 80 former Japanese soldiers were brought together in barracks in Tien Kwan, north of Hanoi. There, we were separated from our families and kept in cramped conditions in the barracks for approximately six months. We received explanations of what was happening in Japan and the rest of the world during that time.”

In 1947, the world entered the Cold War, with the division of countries into the communist-socialist and capitalist-liberal blocs. Vietnam was no exception. The Geneva Accords were signed in July 1954 and ended the First Indochina War. This agreement resulted in the division of Vietnam into North and South, becoming a divided nation.

Thanh Hoa, where Mr. Sugihara lived, was on the North Vietnamese side and aligned with the socialist bloc. However, Japan, his home country, was aligned with the capitalist bloc. In other words, the former Japanese soldiers were repatriated to Japan due to the historical circumstances brought about by the war.

“While in the barracks, we were forced to decide whether to return to Japan. However, repatriation was somewhat mandatory. Japan was on the side of the US and had supported the US from behind the scenes. I think it would have been problematic for Vietnam if we, the Japanese soldiers, remained in Vietnam because the US intervened militarily later on.”

Mr. Sugihara thought that the only option for the former Japanese soldiers was to return to Japan and leave their families in Vietnam. How did he convey this decision to his Vietnamese family when they were reunited after six months?

“When I told my family that we had to return to Japan, they said, ‘Maybe it’s okay for you to go back to Japan.’ When I parted with my family, I gave my eldest son (Hong Nyat Kuan) a dove badge that I received from the Vietnam Peace Committee in Tien Kwan and told him, ‘I will definitely come back.’ A

dove represents peace. The local administrative officer in Thanh Hoa promised to take care of the families that were left behind. I had various thoughts, but there was no other choice. It was because of the global situation. We had to go with the flow.”

The repatriation of former Japanese soldiers to Japan began in October 1954 and was conducted in three groups. Mr. Sugihara was part of the first group, which consisted of approximately 300 former Japanese soldiers; family members were not allowed to accompany them. However, in the subsequent second and third repatriation groups, family members were permitted to accompany them.

“Why were family members prohibited only in the first repatriation group? Our group also wanted to bring our families back to Japan,” Mr. Sugihara wondered.

2.3 Returning and Starting Over

In late October 1954, Mr. Sugihara and his group departed from Vietnam. He described their journey, saying, “We walked to the Chinese border and then traveled by train once inside China. At the end of November, we boarded the ship “Koan Maru” in Tanggu, China, and set sail for Japan. We docked at Maizuru Port in Kyoto Prefecture on December 1st. I experienced a complex mixture of emotions.”

Upon returning to Japan after nearly a decade in Vietnam, the former Japanese soldiers encountered a Japan that had transformed significantly. Mr. Sugihara recalled, “When reporters saw us wearing padded jackets, they asked, ‘Did you come back from prison?’ That’s how shabby we looked.”

Upon their return, each received 1 million Vietnamese dong as financial assistance from the Vietnam Peace Committee. They converted this money into 100,000 Chinese yuan in China, and when converted in Japan, it became 10,000 yen. At that time, 10,000 yen was a significant amount of money, roughly equivalent to three months’ salary.

Mr. Sugihara expressed his amazement at the changes in Japan upon his return, particularly noticing that women were wearing lipstick. During the wartime years in Japan, it was unimaginable for women to wear makeup.

Upon their return to Japan, the former Japanese soldiers never spoke about their time in Vietnam. Vietnam was considered a socialist country opposing capitalist Japan, so they kept their experiences secret. Nonetheless, in November 1954, they participated in the establishment of the “Japan–Vietnam Friendship Association,” a goodwill organization between Vietnam and former Japanese soldiers, in Tokyo. In May, Mr. Sugihara founded the Osaka branch, using his own home as a liaison office.

When asked why he chose Osaka, Mr. Sugihara explained, “It was a working-class town. Labor unions existed in every company and factory. Therefore, I thought that there was a foundation for establishing a friendship association with Vietnam.”

He devoted himself to promoting the association and recruiting members. While doing this in Osaka, he met a woman at his workplace in 1955, who would later become his wife. He told her about his family in Vietnam, but she did not say anything significant in response.

Meanwhile, Vietnam saw the escalation of the Vietnam War in 1964 after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and the US became deeply involved in the conflict. The bombing of North Vietnam began in 1965.

Mr. Sugihara said, “Every time I saw news about the Vietnam War, I worried about my family in Vietnam. I was so concerned that my heart ached. Even in Thanh Hoa, where my family lived, they were

affected by the bombing. I wrote letters to my family in Vietnam, but it was difficult for the letters to reach Vietnam amid the intense warfare. I didn't receive any replies."

Subsequently, the anti-war movement in the US grew, leading to the gradual withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. On March 29, 1973, the US completed its withdrawal from Vietnam.

2.4 Reunion with Son

A family reunion that had been delayed for many years finally came to fruition in 1980. Mr. Sugihara's eldest son, Hong Nyat Kuan, who had been living in Vietnam, managed to locate his father. Kuan sent a letter written in Vietnamese to Mr. Sugihara. While Mr. Sugihara could not remember exactly what was written in the letter, he expressed his happiness, saying, "I was so glad..."

In 1996, Kuan made his first visit to Japan, and father and son were reunited. This opportunity arose when Mr. Sugihara organized an economic delegation from Thanh Hóa to visit Osaka. After exchanging letters with his son, Mr. Sugihara thought about how he could make their reunion possible. He decided to collaborate with the Thanh Hóa Chamber of Commerce and Industry and arranged for Kuan to visit Osaka as part of an economic inspection delegation.

"Even though 42 years had passed since we were separated, I recognized my son immediately!" Mr. Sugihara recalled.

During the delegation's visit, Diem Bien Phu's district chief mentioned that what Vietnam needed the most at that time were school buildings. In response, Mr. Sugihara promptly reached out to labor unions in Osaka Prefecture to initiate a fundraising campaign. They collected 12 million yen, which was sent as funds to build a school in Thanh Hóa. To this day, there is a monument in the principal's office of the Diem Bien Primary School in Thanh Hóa bearing the names of the donors who contributed to the construction.



Completion ceremony of the Diem Bien Elementary School building in Thanh Hóa (August 17, 1998). Source: "Japan-Vietnam-Osaka: 45 Years," Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association Osaka Prefecture Federation.



Children who participated in the completion ceremony. Source: "Japan-Vietnam-Osaka: 45 Years," Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association Osaka Prefecture Federation.

In 2014, Mr. Sugihara's grandson Nam came to Japan to study and later found employment there.

"Sometimes, I talk to Nam on the phone. However, after returning to Japan, I haven't visited Vietnam. I told my family that I would return to Vietnam when we parted but I didn't. It's a broken promise..."

Mr. Sugihara concluded with these words:

"I find myself in two different positions, Japan and Vietnam. If you were to ask if I love Vietnam, of course I do! However, if you were to ask which one I love more, it would be difficult to choose. I love them both."

On December 18, 2019, a year and a half after the interview, Mr. Sugihara passed away peacefully at the age of 98 of natural causes. May his soul rest in peace.

3. Testimony of a Landing Ship, Tank (LST) Seaman

Interviewee: Minoru Gomi (81) - Age at the time of the interview

Date of Interview: November 1, 2018

Location of Interview: Escar Yokohama (Yokohama Seaman's Club), Yamashita-cho, Naka-ku, Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture

Interviewer: Naohiro Koenuma (at the time, a third-year student at Chuo University, currently a newspaper reporter)

Supervisor: Ryoichi Matsuno (First author of this paper)



Photograph of Mr. Gomi providing testimony. Source: Photograph taken by the author.

3.1 Facts about LSTs

During the Vietnam War, Japanese individuals were employed by the US military to transport military



US military Landing Ship, Tank, commonly known as an LST. Source: National Archives of the United States.

supplies from Japan to Vietnam. At the peak of the conflict, it was reported that approximately 1,400 Japanese workers were involved in this effort. This historical fact is not well known in Japan.

Mr. Gomi was on a US military transport ship known as an LST (Landing Ship, Tank). His task was to transport US military supplies, including tanks, ammunition, soldiers, and chemical materials of Agent Orange from Japan and Okinawa to Vietnam. The question arises as to why Mr. Gomi, a Japanese citizen, was involved in the military operations of the US during the Vietnam War.

The LST was originally conceived in 1941 in the United Kingdom during World War II. At that time, the Allies, including the United Kingdom and France, had lost their foothold on the European continent after France, also an Allied power, surrendered to Germany. To secure victory, the Allies needed to conduct amphibious landings on European shores, which were often heavily defended by German forces. LSTs were designed to overcome this challenge by beaching themselves on the shore without the need for a dock, allowing for the rapid offloading of troops and equipment directly onto the beach.

The roots of Japanese personnel's involvement in operating LSTs can be traced back to the Korean War, which began in 1950. During the Korean War, the US Navy's transport fleet faced a severe shortage of crew members. To address this shortage, the US established a new corporation in April 1952. This company entered into contracts with Japanese civilians to operate the US Navy LSTs. However, when the Korean War armistice was signed in Panmunjom in 1953, the operation of LSTs by Japanese personnel ceased.

Seven years later, at the end of December 1960, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF), commonly known as the Viet Cong on the US side, was established to achieve Vietnam's reunification. The Viet Cong intensified its activities in 1961. While there are different opinions on when the Vietnam War officially began, some argue that 1961, when the Viet Cong's activities escalated, marked the beginning of the war. In 1961, the operation of LSTs resumed.

During the Vietnam War, the primary mission of LSTs was to transport US military supplies from Japan to Vietnam. These supplies included tanks, ammunition, and the notorious Agent Orange and its precursors that caused significant harm in Vietnam. Each LST had a crew of approximately 40 personnel responsible for ship maintenance, all of whom were Japanese, from the captain to the deck crew. The LSTs departed from 12 different ports across Japan: Wakkanai, Tomakomai, Hachinohe, Yokohama,



The ports used for LST departures and stopovers during the Vietnam War. Source: Fig. made by the author.

Yokosuka, Nagoya, Kobe, Kure, Iwakuni, Shimonoseki, Fukuoka, and Sasebo. Okinawa, which had not yet returned to Japanese control, was treated as a port of call. By 1965, when direct US military involvement began, over 800 Japanese personnel operated seven LSTs. At the peak of the Vietnam War in 1968, the number of LSTs operated by Japanese personnel increased to 28, involving approximately 1,400 individuals, including Mr. Gomi, who was in his twenties at the time.

3.2 The Reasons for Boarding

Mr. Gomi was born in October 1939 and spent his childhood in Fujimi-machi, Suwa-gun, Nagano Prefecture, Japan.

“After graduating from the local high school, I worked for a school meal company in Yokohama. However, the working conditions were poor and I grew tired of my monotonous daily routine. During this period, a life-changing event occurred. My nephew was aboard an LST and he invited me to visit the LST.”

When Mr. Gomi visited the LST docked at Yokohama Port, he received a reception that was unimaginable at his current workplace.

“I was immediately offered coffee and chocolate, which were not readily available at my workplace at the school meal company. I couldn’t even have a proper meal there. It didn’t take long to decide whether to board an LST. I also had other reasons for making that decision. I wanted to experience going abroad and receive a decent salary. Additionally, they would provide meals on the ship. These were all appealing factors. That’s what made me embrace the allure of being a seafarer.”

“The salary on the LST was exceptionally high. The basic pay per voyage was \$110. At an exchange rate of 1 dollar = 360 yen at the time, the basic pay was 39,600 yen. Considering that the starting salary for college graduates in 1961 was approximately 15,000 yen, this was a significant amount. Furthermore, there were additional allowances such as hazardous cargo allowances, which made the total salary nearly triple the basic pay. For example, an approximate breakdown of the salary at the time would be approximately 40,000 yen (basic pay) + approximately 60,000 yen (allowances) = approximately 100,000 yen. Back then, 100,000 yen was equivalent to roughly 1.3 million yen today. In any case, there were so many allowances that they couldn’t all fit on the salary slip.”

One particularly high-paying allowance was the Battle Damage Allowance. If an artillery shell landed in the bay where the LST was anchored, a bonus called the Harbor Attack Bonus of \$100 was paid to each crew member. Furthermore, if the LST itself was directly hit, an allowance known as the Straight Attack Bonus was paid. In this case, each crew member received a higher amount of \$150, surpassing the Harbor Attack Bonus.

Depending on the number of voyages, it has been reported that the annual income could exceed 10 million yen. This was substantial for someone in their twenties. Consequently, Mr. Gomi was able to build a single-family house in Yokohama by the age of 27.

Additionally, Mr. Gomi wanted to explore foreign countries, as he had never left Japan. “Until then, I had never left Japan, so going abroad was truly an unknown world for me. The LST would load supplies in Japan and, on its way to Vietnam, make port calls for refueling and food resupply in places such as Korea, Taiwan, and Cambodia. Those days spent abroad were enjoyable, and I had no sense of being

directly involved in the war.”

船種船名	LST 613	航行区域又は 従軍船名	South Sea Area
総トン数	Gross Tonnage 2319 トン	主機の種類、 噸数及び出力	Brake Horsepower 1800 (2) 馬力
船舶所有者の 住所及び氏名 又は名称	MSTSPAREASTAREA	船長の住所氏 名	YAKAHASHI, Yoshiyuki
職 務	Ordinary Seaman	給 料	\$110.00
年齢十八年に 到達する年月日	昭和 年 月 日	手 当	
雇 入 期 間	INDEFINITE	公 司 Name Placement Telephone Branch 年 月 日 MISTPEARAREA	
雇入年月日 及び雇入地	1 AUG 1962 日 AT SEA	及 官庁名 DEC 5 1962	

The employment contract details as recorded in the Seaman's Book. Source: Photograph taken by the author.

3.3 Feelings of Guilt and Enjoyment

Mr. Gomi, who decided to board the LST at the age of 21 years, could not bring himself to tell his family about it.

“I didn't say a word. I didn't want to worry my mother and siblings. Boarding an LST meant going to Vietnam, a war zone, multiple times. To avoid causing them worry, I kept it a secret from my family. However, I was unable to hide it forever. About a year after I started my journey on the LST in the winter of 1962, I visited my parents during my vacation. My parents asked me about my current job. I couldn't hide it any longer and finally told them that I was aboard an LST. I still vividly remember what my mother said to me at that moment: 'Don't go to dangerous places. Stop doing this.' However, my father remained silent. I desperately tried to persuade him. Finally, my father said, 'Be careful because it's dangerous.'”

“My father, Mr. Yasuharu (now deceased), was a soldier sent to the Chinese mainland during the Asia-Pacific War. I often wonder what emotions my father, who had experienced the battlefield, felt when he sent his son to Vietnam. I couldn't ask him about his state of mind at the time. However, my father's words still remain in my memory.”

Mr. Gomi had a certain amount of guilt about boarding an LST, but what awaited him after joining was days far removed from the war, filled with enjoyment.

“Vietnam was simply peaceful, tranquil, and it felt like true peace. It didn't look like we were in the midst of a war.”

How could Vietnam be so peaceful during wartime?

Mr. Gomi had a hobby of filming with an 8 mm camera, and he captured his days on the LST on film. He shared some of these special moments. The footage shows Mr. Gomi happily fishing with his comrades, and scenes from their visit to Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam. Indeed, the serene landscapes were far from what one would imagine in a war zone.

Of course, there were also records of military supplies such as artillery shells and drums onboard the LST. However, the overall footage showcased a serene atmosphere, with crew members relaxing on the ship, enjoying games such as Go, and scenes of towns such as Da Nang.

Furthermore, Mr. Gomi mentioned that he made extra money in addition to his salary.

“I bought many matches in Japan and brought them to Vietnam. Japanese matches burn for a long

time, so they are sold at high prices in Vietnam. Colorful umbrellas were also popular among young Vietnamese women. In addition, since it was wartime, radios, which served as a source of information, could be sold at even higher prices. These became good sources of extra income, and there were times when I didn't even touch my salary".

Listening to his story, it is difficult to believe that Vietnam was indeed a war zone.



Mr. Gomi enjoying fishing. Source: A frame from Mr. Gomi's 8 mm film.

3.4 Was it Agent Orange?

In 1965, the US began retaliatory bombing raids on North Vietnam using the pretext of the previous year's Gulf of Tonkin incident. In addition to bombs, herbicides, such as Agent Orange, were sprayed over the Vietnamese land. LSTs are believed to have been involved in the transport of such herbicides and their raw materials.

Regarding the ongoing effects of Agent Orange, was Mr. Gomi aware that he might have transported it?

"In reality, no one saw me load Agent Orange onto the LST, and there's no concrete evidence of it. However, there's something I can't forget to this day. It happened while we were unloading cargo in Vietnam. We used a forklift to load items onto a truck and it accidentally pierced one of the drums. The powder started leaking out, and when the forklift engine started, it was blown into the air. Suddenly, everyone started sneezing. I began sneezing too, and it didn't stop for approximately 20 minutes."

Among the drums being transported, some appeared to have a yellowish hue mixed with earthy tones, possibly indicative of Agent Orange. Agent Orange was a chemical weapon that comprised approximately 60 percent of the herbicides used during the Vietnam War.

"I had no idea what we were transporting, and I wasn't interested in knowing. I didn't have any



LSTs transported various drums. Source: A frame from Mr. Gomi's 8 mm film.

awareness of fighting the Viet Cong. Even when I was aboard the LST, I focused solely on the ship's operations."

At that time, Mr. Gomi believed that he was not involved in the Vietnam War. However, the Viet Cong viewed him and the LST crew differently and did not consider them unrelated to the conflict.

3.5 LSTs Became Targets

In the 8 mm film, there was a glimpse of a young Mr. Gomi wearing a bulletproof vest.

"When we sailed through narrow parts of the river, we would come under attack from the Viet Cong. There were American soldiers on board the LST for protection, but some of them were on drugs or drunk, stumbling around. Since the ship was moving, these American soldiers would shoot in all sorts of crazy directions. So, sometimes they would tell me, 'You take over and shoot,' and I did."

LSTs sailed along the Saigon River to deliver supplies to the US military. The Viet Cong targeted these LSTs, and Japanese crew members began wearing bulletproof vests in the most dangerous areas.

When this information reached Japan, discussions about LST crew members took place in the Japanese parliament. Here is an excerpt from the proceedings of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on April 7, 1965.

Mr. Sekikazu Nishimura (Socialist Party of Japan):

What I want to inquire about is the issue of protecting the lives and property of the over 800 Japanese crew members on the LST ships, whatever the circumstances may be. What responsibility will the government assume regarding this matter?

Mr. Etsusaburo Shiina (Foreign Minister):

In this case, as long as it is based on voluntary wishes to board the ships, the government cannot forcibly stop it. However, if the situation deteriorates significantly in the future, such that it becomes dangerous even for the ships to approach or other serious risks arise, we would want to take appropriate measures. But for now, we do not believe the situation has deteriorated to that extent. (Parliamentary Record, April 7, 1965)

The government's response, which could be viewed as irresponsible, would later lead to a tragic incident.



Mr. Gomi wearing a bulletproof vest. Source: A frame from Mr. Gomi's 8 mm film.

On April 20, 1967, the first casualty occurred among Japanese crew members aboard a ship. Military tensions in the Mekong River region peaked on this day. The US military was conducting a massive military operation aimed at eradicating the Viet Cong. Under these circumstances, a single LST, operated by Japanese crew members, was transporting military supplies.

The LST had departed from Yokohama and, after passing through Okinawa, was navigating the Lông Tàu River, a tributary of the Mekong River. The ship had two American soldiers on board as escorts, and everything seemed to be going smoothly. However, five shells were fired from a 75 mm recoilless rifle hidden in the bushes on the riverbank, aimed at the LST.

At 16:35 local time, the LST was hit. At that moment, one Japanese crew member on deck lost his life, while four others suffered varying degrees of injuries. The deceased crew member was Mr. Hisaya Furuya (50 years old at the time). Mr. Gomi and Mr. Furuya had been close colleagues who had sailed together several times.

“The loss of a colleague is so sad and tragic...” Mr. Gomi did not elaborate further.

When this incident was reported by the Japanese media, it further heightened Japanese anti-war sentiments about the Vietnam War. Simultaneously, criticism was directed at the Japanese crew members who boarded the LSTs. When Mr. Gomi returned from his voyage to Yokohama, he was advised by his US military employer to be cautious of anti-war demonstrators. Despite public criticism, why did Mr. Gomi remain on the LST?

“As long as I was on the LST, there was a sense of duty. I believed I had to fulfill the tasks assigned to me. And it was for my livelihood. I think most people felt the same way. It was to support their families.”

(子) 新聞定価 1ヵ月550円・1部(税別)15円(送料10円)

LST船員一人死ぬ

四人がベトナム砲撃で



ベトナムの南西部に位置する、メコン川に注ぐロンタウ川に、日本軍の輸送船LSTが、20日午後4時35分、米軍の砲撃を受け、乗組員4人が犠牲になった。死者は、50歳の古谷久寿さん。負傷者は4人。船は沈没し、乗組員は救助された。

古谷久寿さん



ベトナムでの死者は二
LST 米軍の直接雇用

乗組拒否も検討する

ベトナムの南西部に位置する、メコン川に注ぐロンタウ川に、日本軍の輸送船LSTが、20日午後4時35分、米軍の砲撃を受け、乗組員4人が犠牲になった。死者は、50歳の古谷久寿さん。負傷者は4人。船は沈没し、乗組員は救助された。

Mainichi Shimbun reporting on the incident (April 21, 1967).

3.6 Desperate Return

Mr. Gomi continued to serve on the LST despite the life-threatening risks. There were moments when he felt that his life was in danger.

“There was a time when I secretly entered a town that was off-limits for landing. It was a town called Qui Nhon, located in northeastern South Vietnam. I was at a bar having a drink when we suddenly got caught in a Viet Cong attack. I tried to rush back to the LST, but there may have been other Japanese crew members in the town. So, I ran through the town shouting, ‘Let’s get back to the LST!’ We found four other Japanese crew members. The ground was shaking from the bombings and it was already past midnight. The surroundings were pitch dark. The harbor where the LST was anchored was approximately a two-hour walk from the town. We had to make it back to the LST before it sailed the next day. The five of us relied on our instincts, huddled together, and ventured through the pitch-black darkness. However, what was scarier than the darkness was the presence of the Viet Cong lurking in it.”

“The US military had given us certificates written in English and Vietnamese in advance, stating that we were unrelated to the Vietnam War. However, we didn’t know to what extent this would convince Viet Cong soldiers. If we were captured, there was a possibility of being killed. Darkness, bombings, and the Viet Cong; we fought through multiple fears but miraculously made it back to the LST. I still can’t forget the fear I felt that night.”

3.7 Sudden Layoffs

In January 1968, following the Tet Offensive by the North Vietnamese People’s Army and the Viet Cong, anti-war sentiments spread worldwide. This triggered an escalation of the anti-war movement in the US. After the Tet Offensive, most people began to consider the Vietnam deployment a mistake, causing support for President Johnson, who had continued the war, to plummet. Eventually, he decided not to run for re-election.

Subsequently, President Nixon, who took office as the 37th president, began to compromise on the intermittent Paris Peace Accords that had been ongoing since 1967. Gradually, the US began to withdraw troops from Vietnam. In 1973, the US signed the Paris Peace Accords and completely withdrew from Vietnam in March of the same year. The withdrawal of US troops also directly impacted LST operations.

“When the war ended, we knew there would be nothing left to transport, and the ships would be anchored. I thought that our days on the LST were over.”

With the end of the Vietnam War, there was relief but also anxiety about losing their jobs and the loneliness of leaving a workplace where they had worked for over ten years. Mr. Gomi’s emotions at that time were complex.

During this period, an issue arose for Mr. Gomi and his fellow Japanese crew members. Since their direct employer was the US military, the Seamen’s Insurance Law did not apply to them. In other words, they were unable to receive benefits such as unemployment insurance, which were naturally available to Japanese crew members. Even when they were on the LST, Mr. Gomi paid taxes to Japan as a Japanese citizen. On returning from their voyages to Yokohama, they took immediate action.

In 1973, Mr. Gomi and his colleagues first went to the Seamen’s Union. However, they did not receive

assistance. Dissatisfied, they decided to go directly to the Prime Minister's Official Residence. What awaited them was a cold reception. Despite their desperate explanations, their pleas fell on deaf ears and they were treated dismissively. This led to a heated argument.

Amid this commotion, one man came to their aid. Gotohda Masaharu (at the time, the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary) had served as a right-hand man in the first Tanaka Cabinet. Gotohda invited Mr. Gomi and his colleagues into the Cabinet Room and listened to their stories.

Consequently, this incident led to the gathering of volunteers from among former LST crew members who filed a national compensation lawsuit against the government. However, their pleas did not reach the government. Approximately nine years after the LSTs were anchored, on September 25, 1984, the Tokyo High Court rejected the claims of the former crew members. The main reasons for this decision were twofold: that the employment relationship was formed voluntarily, and whether to apply the Seamen's Law was a matter of government discretion. The government's response remained unchanged, and former crew members were paid only a lump sum of 200,000 yen as temporary compensation.

3.8 Transporting American Troops

LSTs, which transported military supplies such as tanks and ammunition, were also used to transport American troops to the frontlines. Mr. Gomi recalls, "I've transported airborne troops from Iwakuni (Yamaguchi Prefecture), and I've also transported Marines stationed at Atsugi Base to Vietnam. During one of these transports, there's something an American soldier said that I cannot forget. He asked us, 'Why do you guys call it WAR? It's not WAR.' They were probably only thinking about local disputes since it was a recurring conflict between North and South Vietnam, two parts of the same nation."

Furthermore, Mr. Gomi points out that he observed factors during the transports that made him think about why the US may have eventually faced defeat. "One day, I was talking to an American soldier about Japanese and English. Surprisingly, he couldn't spell the word 'TRUCK' in English. He mentioned that after retiring, he would receive a scholarship to attend college; therefore, he wanted to study further. He was already thinking about his life after service, even before going to the battlefield. Thus, some soldiers from the US went to the war zone with the aim of earning scholarships for college education. By contrast, soldiers from the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam fought to reunify their homeland. Considering this, I think it was unlikely that the US could win against Vietnam. Vietnam, which had long been under colonial rule, had a strong sense of national identity. Therefore, I believe that they had a strong determination to protect their own country. Their love for their homeland, Vietnam, was probably stronger than that of the American soldiers sent into the country."

This perspective highlights the differences in motivation and determination between the Vietnamese forces fighting for their homeland's reunification and American troops, some of whom were motivated by the prospect of future educational opportunities.

3.9 A Change in Perspective

By the time the Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975, it was estimated that approximately eight million people from North Vietnam, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, South Vietnamese government forces, and civilians from both North and South Vietnam had lost their lives or gone missing.

The US, which deployed approximately 2.5 million troops during the war, suffered casualties totaling approximately 300,000, including deaths, missing personnel, and wounded. More than 40 years after the Vietnam War ended, how does Mr. Gomi reflect on this conflict? Mr. Gomi's perspective has changed significantly due to a particular event.

In 2015, more than 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War, Mr. Gomi revisited the country. He went to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), which was the capital of South Vietnam. He also visited Danang, a port where LSTs frequently docked, and the Agent Orange Victim Protection Centre. What he witnessed there were children, not even ten years old, suffering from the lingering effects of Agent Orange.

"I never thought that the impact of Agent Orange would continue."

These were words of regret that Mr. Gomi uttered for the first time. He began to speak as if retracing his memories.

"There were times when I loaded something like chemicals into drums at Tengan Pier in Okinawa. Looking back now, I wonder if that was Agent Orange."

He did not personally spread Agent Orange, but might have been involved in transporting it to Vietnam. Mr. Gomi described experiencing a complex mix of emotions when he witnessed the enduring effects of Agent Orange. His days on the LST had been filled with joy, but he was made aware of the true horrors brought about by war 40 years after its end.

"Wars that inconvenience children like this should never happen. Ultimately, children and women suffer the most from war."

Mr. Gomi fell silent with a complex expression on his face.

4. Conclusion

The theme of this discussion has been "The Vietnam War and Japanese Individuals." Both of the individuals we have examined were caught up in the historical fact of "Japan's defeat."

Mr. Sugihara was in the northern part of Vietnam when Japan surrendered. Typically, he would have surrendered and been disarmed by the victorious Allied forces, but on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared independence. Soon after, a conflict arose between France's new colonial ambitions and the Vietnamese independence movement. Mr. Sugihara remained in Vietnam as a 'New Vietnamese' and provided military guidance to Vietnamese militia, even participating in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. However, it was decided that it would be inappropriate for citizens of Japan, who had joined the Western camp, including the US, after Japan's defeat, to be involved in the Vietnam War. Consequently, Mr. Sugihara was repatriated to Japan and separated from his family. If he had not been in the northern part of Vietnam at the time of Japan's surrender, it is unclear whether he would have remained.

Mr. Gomi's life is also closely related to "Japan's defeat." Japan was occupied and governed by the GHQ (General Headquarters, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers), primarily under the US military, from August 1945 to the entry into force of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in April 1952, during which time a new constitution was enacted (in November 1946) and the (former) Japan-US Security Treaty was signed (in September 1951). During the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the US military recruited Japanese crew members to operate LSTs. Mr. Gomi chose this profession because of the high pay and his desire to travel abroad despite the risks involved.

While it is unclear whether the LSTs operated by Mr. Gomi and his colleagues transported Agent Orange, he testified that they had loaded drums in Okinawa and transported them to Vietnam. He also mentioned a poignant incident in which a forklift tine pierced a drum and caused uncontrollable sneezing.

In conclusion, we express our heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Sugihara and Mr. Gomi for providing their valuable testimonies which we will cherish and pass on to future generations.

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