

THE MEDICINE OF HISTORY

UNIT 731

Medical madness in the “other” holocaust

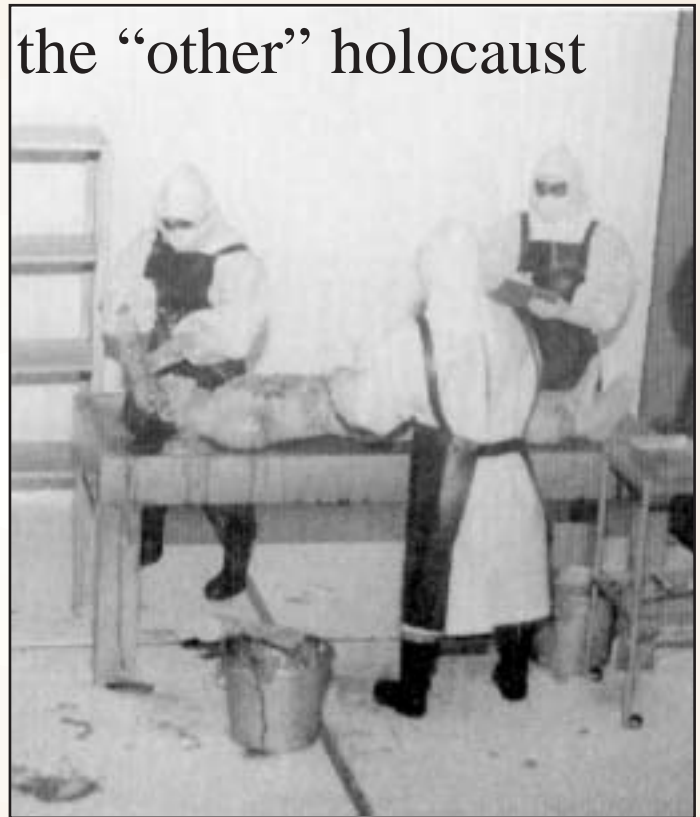
By Lawrence Segel, MD

“He had been injected with plague germs, but did not die. He was put through the phosgene gas test and survived. An army doctor injected air into his veins, and he still did not die. Finally, the doctors killed him by hanging him by the neck from a tree.”

Testimony from an anonymous army major and pharmacist attached to unit 731.¹

The above medical report reads like a Nazi atrocity, perhaps one of the diabolical experiments of Dr. Josef Mengele? Although befitting of Nazi butchery, it is not. One of the greatest secrets of World War Two has come to light in recent years. It was Japan's vast research program to develop weapons of biological (germ) warfare. Few of us have ever heard of the abominable medical research performed by the Japanese Imperial Army Unit 731, or the Pacific War's own version of the “Angel of Death,” Dr. Ishii Shiro.

The task of developing Japan's biological warfare program fell upon Dr. Shiro's shoulders. Born in 1892, he graduated in medicine from Kyoto University in 1920. He was described by classmates as brilliant, arrogant and superhuman. On gradua-



A replica of an experiment performed on Shiro's victims. This victim is being dissected by a team of doctors while one member weighs the man's organs.¹

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tion, he immediately joined the Japanese Imperial Army. Shiro would later go on to acquire his PhD becoming an expert in bacteriology, immunology and preventative medicine. Ironically, his excitement over biological warfare was prompted by the 1925 Geneva Convention outlawing chemical and biological weapons. With twisted logic, he believed germ warfare must possess distinct possibilities, otherwise, it would not have been outlawed by the League of Nations. Shiro, if not moral, was nevertheless pragmatic. He theorized modern war could only be won by science and technology, and that the manufacture of biological weapons was the most economical way for a resource poor country, such as Japan, to triumph. Events unfolding in China would allow him to test his theory.

KILLING FOR SPORT

In 1931, the Mukden incident provided the Japanese with an excuse to occupy Manchuria. The plot involved Japanese secret agents placing a bomb under a Japanese-owned express train. In 1934, Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, was installed by the Japanese invaders as a puppet emperor. In 1937, “The China Incident,” a skirmish of Japanese and Chinese troops near Peking, sparked a full-scale invasion of the Chinese mainland. What was to shortly follow became known as the Nanjing Massacre or the “Other” Holocaust. Thousands of Chinese civilians were buried or burned alive,

beheaded, used as targets for bayonet practice, or shot during mass executions, while the countryside was raped and pillaged. A *Tokyo Times* reporter visiting the area commented that he had never been to hell, but if there was a hell, it was in that city.

It was common knowledge that Japanese soldiers were killing Chinese for sport and pleasure, burying them alive, pushing them into fires, or beating them to death with clubs. Many of the atrocities were witnessed by Reverend John Magee, one of the Westerners in charge of an ineffective refugee area called the “Nanjing International Safety Zone.” He recorded the only known documentary of this Holocaust on 16 mm film (available today on video). At the time, the film was sent by an outraged German diplomat in Nanjing, George Rosen, to the attention of the Nazi government, and the unlikeliest of saviors,

A replica of one of Shiro’s victims, at a Unit 731 exhibition. In sub-freezing temperatures, water is poured over the victim’s limbs.¹



Adolph Hitler. He requested German intercession because the Japanese Army had turned into a violent killing machine. It has been estimated that 300,000 Chinese were killed and 20,000 women were raped over the six-week period.

Slow, vulgar death

The Japanese army, with its control of China, now seized the opportunity to create a haven for its bacteriological research program. Dr. Shiro chose the city of Harbin as the headquarters for Unit 731. Top secret from its inception, Unit 731 was piously labeled the “Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department.” It would eventually relocate to Pingfan, 20 km south of Harbin, where Shiro, now a full colonel, commanded 3,000 Japanese subordinates. The most sinister aspect of Unit 731, the involuntary germ warfare experimentation on live human beings, was to begin in earnest.

Prisoners became nothing more than cheap research animals. Injected or sprayed with deadly biologicals such as plague, anthrax, cholera or typhoid, they would be tied to tables and dissected without the benefit of anesthesia. The warped reasoning was that vivisection needed to be done under normal circumstances and anesthetics might have affected the organs and blood vessels they were examining. The “lucky” prisoners were anesthetized, and then used as practice surgical subjects. Organs would be removed and limbs amputated, and when the researchers were done with them, the patients would finally be killed by lethal injection.

The field tests

Some prisoners were used for “field tests.” They were taken to deserted areas and tied to stakes while planes sprayed the zone with plague culture or infected fleas. Some had their limbs frozen to mimic frostbite, while others had deliberately inflicted shrapnel wounds infected with *Clostridia* to produce gas gangrene. In one procedure, the subjects were bound to stakes some 10 m to 20 m away from a shrapnel bomb loaded with gas gangrene. The object was not to kill the men by exploding the bomb, but to test the effectiveness of gas gangrene as a biological weapon. All the subjects were wounded in the legs or buttocks, and usually would die in great torment within seven days. Children did not escape the abhorrent procedures, but, as always in such circumstances, there was a contrived justification for experimenting on them. It was alleged that their fathers were spies.



A replica of a prisoner being held down and injected with pathogens.¹

Sadly, no moral or ethical considerations ever entered into the equation. The prisoners were dehumanized and referred to as marutas, or “logs,” and identified by a three- or four-digit number. They were nothing more than a means to an end to satisfy a depraved scientist’s quest. Ironically, the “logs” were treated with good food and exercise; a “fattening up” period for the inhumane experimentation. The research facilities themselves came to be known as “lumber mills,” and were surrounded by moats, tall brick walls, electric fences, watchtowers and patrolling aircraft. The rationale for the use of prisoners was based on an old code of “honour in death.” The Japanese had little tolerance for surrender, and believed it was nobler to commit suicide than be captured.

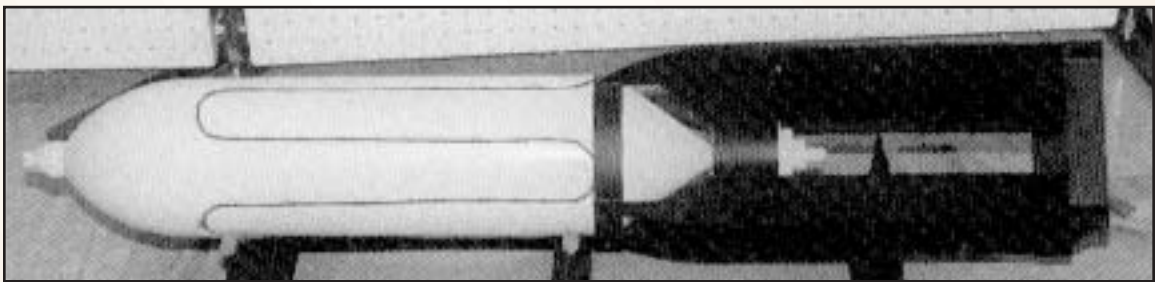
A forced surrender

By 1944, the tides of war changed. Japan was nearing defeat. Unit 731’s efforts became more frantic. Plans were made to launch huge balloons loaded with deadly bacterial pathogens with the hope that the prevailing winds would carry them to the U.S. West Coast. In 1945, Unit 731 was working on the deadliest scheme of all, code named “Operation Cherry Blossoms at Night.” It was a plan to use kamikaze pilots to attack California, and infest the state with bacteria-infected fleas. Luckily, this desperate lunacy was cut short by arguably, another lunacy — the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan was forced to surrender. One of the last acts of Unit 731 was to cover up the secret operation by eliminating all the remaining “logs,” about 150 prisoners. Overall, it is conservatively estimated that 3,000 humans were killed in Unit 731 medical experiments. As well, plague-infected animals were released into the Chinese countryside, killing at least another 30,000 people in the Harbin area between 1946 and 1948.

Immunity comes for Unit 731

One would assume that, at the end of the Pacific War, there would be the same cries of outrage that led to the Nuremberg War Crime Trials. This was not to happen. A secret deal was cut between the U.S. (which feared the Japanese collection of germ warfare data might fall into Russian hands) and Japan, which kept Unit 731’s activities classified and allowed immunity. One week after Japan surrendered, Col. Murry Sanders (head of

the U.S. biological weapons program) was dispatched to Japan. His mission was to locate the Japanese biological war machine. Sanders was eager, perhaps overly eager, to secure the data in this early Cold War environment. His recommendation was that no one involved in Japan's biological warfare be prosecuted as a war criminal. Gen. MacArthur agreed, Dr. Shiro, when fully interrogated, took his cues and spoke as little as possible, minimizing the magnitude of the research, refusing to admit to human experimentation, and denying involvement of Japan's rulers, including Emperor Hirohito. The conspiracy of silence and the rationale for immunity came from the belief that the Japanese biological weapons data was of such value to the U.S. national security as to far outweigh the value accruing from a war crimes prosecution.



Ishii Shiro developed the Uji-50 bacterial bomb.¹

Denial of 731

Dr. Shiro lived peacefully until his death from throat cancer in 1959. A handful of Japanese politicians and soldiers were eventually tried at the Allied War Crimes Trial in Tokyo between 1946 and 1948, but reference to biological warfare was only briefly mentioned, and never pursued. Some individual countries such as the Soviet Union and China, had their own trials. For the most part, Shiro's fellow officers in Unit 731 went on to hold high positions in post-war Japan.

For decades the official Japanese position on the crimes of Unit 731, as well as the Nanjing Massacre, has been one of denial, a striking contrast to Germany's apology and reparations for the European Holocaust. High-ranking Japanese officials continued to ignore the mounting evidence and protested that it was a story made up by the Chinese to tarnish the image of Japan. The fight to break the conspiracy of silence has been very slow. The old imperialistic thinking, which places no boundaries on war because you have to win, dies hard. Still, our best defense against such inhumanity is truthfully exposing the medical madness of Unit 731 and other units like it.

Suggested Reading

1. Gold, H: *Unit 731: Testimony*. Yenbooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996. (introductory quote found on p. 240)
2. Harris, S: *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-45, and the American Cover-up*. Routledge, New York, New York, 1994.