

Thinking Peace for the Future: a case of peace campaign into the future in Okinawa

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— Greeting and Awareness survey — (Presenter: Daigo Sunagawa)

Hello, everyone. I would like to offer my heart felt gratitude to all of you for choosing our home prefecture as a place to hold “Peace Forum in Okinawa,” an academic symposium of great significance held jointly by Kyungnam University, the Chinese Culture University and Soka University, based on the theme, “Building a Peace Community in Asia.”

I wish to thank you as well for the privilege of introducing on this precious occasion the activities the Soka Gakkai Okinawa Youth Division has been engaging in for the advancement of peace.

Seventy-two years have passed since the end of World War II and the number of those who survived to tell of its horrors is inexorably dwindling. Given this situation, the young people of the Soka Gakkai in Okinawa launched several initiatives to carry forward the tragic history of the Battle of Okinawa for the sake of future generations.

Described as “an aggregation of every conceivable hell,” the Battle of Okinawa claimed the lives of one out of every four Okinawans. We believe conveying the stark personal truths of that bloody campaign is not only sure to lead the world to a more peaceful place, but that it is our mission as youth to ensure that the lessons it imparts are never forgotten.

The first initiative was a survey to ascertain local awareness of and attitudes toward the Battle of Okinawa that we launched in 2015 in remembrance of the 70th year of the battle. By identifying the perceptions of young Okinawans regarding the Battle of Okinawa, we hoped to

create a knowledge base with which to develop meaningful follow-on initiatives. The survey was conducted under the expert supervision of Masaie Ishihara, a leading authority on local war experience studies and professor emeritus of the Okinawa International University.

The survey targeted an age bracket ranging from 12 to 43, the youngest comprised of junior high school students and the oldest being those who were born in 1972, when Okinawa reverted from U.S. control to Japan. It was conducted throughout the prefecture, with our Youth Division member spilling friends and acquaintances as well as eligible respondents on the street. A total of 34,894 people responded, making the survey among the largest of its kind that we conducted in Okinawa.

The following were among the questions asked and their corresponding results:

Question 1: Have you ever learned of someone's experience of the Battle of Okinawa? An overwhelming 97% answered that they have.

- As to the way they learned of a Battle of Okinawa eyewitness account, 42% of respondents said they heard it from a family member or relative; 68% replied that they did so in class at school; 46% pointed to books or television; and 41% responded they did so through a visit to the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum.
- The responses to Question 1 revealed that nearly half of the respondents reported they learned of such accounts from multiple sources, both direct and indirect. The other noteworthy finding was that a mere 3% said they never heard of a Battle of Okinawa account, with nearly every person in the targeted age bracket saying they were informed of some experience of the battle.

We believe that the result is indicative of persistent effort to convey these narratives by those who survived the battle, as well as by those who followed their lead in the postwar era. It is therefore clear that we, the young people of Okinawa, must work to sustain their effort and build upon it even further.

Question 2: Do you feel you should communicate what you learned of the Battle of Okinawa to others? We found that 64% of pollee replied "Yes," indicating that the level of intent was fairly widespread, while 4% said "No" and 29% were noncommittal — or, when combined, roughly one out of every three respondents felt less or no compulsion to do so.

While an overwhelming majority of people in the age bracket had learned of the horrific

experiences of the Battle of Okinawa, we found that not all were willing to carry these narratives forward.

Question 3: The most prominent reason cited by both those who responded that they would not convey what they learned of the Battle of Okinawa and the noncommittal group was the “difficulty in relaying the experiences to others,” with 33% choosing this answer. Another 21% said they simply lacked the time, while 12% reported they felt the effort was too depressing. Numerous respondents who opted to provide their own reasons said it was not in their place to convey such accounts, or that they believed it was inappropriate for them to do so because they had not experienced the tragedy in person. This finding indicates the challenges inherent in the continued communication of the war experience.

— Publication of Battle of Okinawa Testimonials — (Presenter: Takeo Nakamura)

When our organization began conducting a survey of local youth on their awareness of the Battle of Okinawa in 2015, I had the opportunity to interview my aunt regarding her war experience. She was six years old at the time, with two brothers, aged two and four, living with her mother and grandparents on Geruma, a lush island that belongs to the prefecture of Okinawa.

The U.S. landed military forces on Geruma on March 26, 1945. Because the islanders were taught that American soldiers would do hideous things to them, many chose to commit suicide rather than be caught and held prisoner. My aunt’s family also chose to kill themselves in a dark, dank cave. Her two younger brothers were the first to be strangled by a cord. My aunt, her mother and grandparents then attempted to strangle themselves as well, but as they were falling unconscious, the GIs called out to them, urging them to surrender. While my aunt and the three adult members of her family managed to crawl out of their cave, her two brothers, however, could not be revived.

On Geruma, 53 out of the 100 or so people who inhabited the island committed communal suicide. Those who survived knew who had killed whom, and for many years after the war, the islanders lived in profound shame, loathing and anguish.

I have, in the past, heard of my own family’s experience of the Battle of Okinawa on a number of occasions. But this time, for the first time in 70 years, I learned of a shocking truth: Up to that day, I was told that it was my aunt’s grandfather — my great-grandfather — who strangled her two infant brothers to death. However, I learned that it was in fact my aunt’s mother — my grandmother — who had strangled her own two-year-old son while breastfeeding him.

My grandmother passed away in 2014. I cannot even imagine the suffering and sadness she had to bear, having to live for decades knowing she had choked the life of her baby with her own hands, wracked to the very end with remorse.

Learning of this long-hidden family tragedy, it became painfully clear to me just how important it was for us to interview at this time the survivors of the war, and that this initiative was valuable particularly because it informs us of the ghastly experiences of those whom we hold the dearest — our families and kin.

The young people of the Soka Gakkai in Okinawa agree that we no longer have a moment to spare in learning from those who lived through the Battle of Okinawa, especially since this is likely to be the last opportunity to hear their accounts firsthand.

In 2015, we held sessions to share the war experiences of survivors with young people throughout Okinawa. We also began working to publish their narratives we collected through this initiative for the sake of those generations that are to follow.

In September 2016, our Youth Division published, *Thinking Peace for the Future — True Stories from 14 Survivors*, a work introducing the personal accounts of those who lived through the Battle of Okinawa. This book was also released in English out of our resolve to inform the world of the truth of that tragic campaign. It contains the story of my aunt as well.

Under a program we launched, *Thinking Peace* has now been donated to nearly every elementary and junior high school as well as public library in Okinawa.

— Illustrated Works of the Battle of Okinawa — (Presenter: Daigo Sunagawa)

For the final segment of this presentation, we would like to introduce our activities to encourage Battle of Okinawa survivors to illustrate their experience, an initiative the Soka Gakkai Youth Division has engaged in since 1981.

Nearly all photographs and film footage on the Battle of Okinawa that exist today were taken by the U.S. military. We, however, felt that these records alone fail to convey the horrific truth of that battle.

Every individual who lived through the Battle of Okinawa underwent an untold number of experiences. We hoped that their illustrations would inform future generations of the barbarity of war and the sublimity of peace.

Under this initiative, more than 700 works have been collected to date. It represents a core activity of our movement to advance peace, which we succeeded from those who preceded us.

In 2016, we presented these works for a public viewing in the “The Illustrated Art of the Battle of Okinawa” exhibition we held at the Okinawa Cellular Stadium in Naha City, the main venue for the 6th Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival organized by the Okinawa prefectural government from October 27 to October 30.

The Festival is held once every five years as an event for Okinawans living around the world to return to their home islands. Last year, some 7,300 men, women and children from 28 countries and territories attended the event, taking part in exchanges held at various locations throughout the prefecture.

A total of 6,800 people from Japan and abroad viewed our exhibition over the four-day Festival. One such visitor was a woman, a second generation Okinawan born in Hawaii, who traveled to Okinawa for the first time. She said she had heard stories of the Battle of Okinawa from her mother, but after seeing the exhibit, she was shocked to learn how horrendous the suffering people actually had to endure. She felt it was vital to communicate this history to as many people as possible.

On a message board we set up at the exhibition's exit, viewers posted messages for peace not only in Japanese but also in English, Spanish, Portuguese and other languages. "The Illustrated Art of the Battle of Okinawa" thus served as an invaluable teaching tool for people of numerous nationalities to learn of one of the bloodiest battles in World War II.

Panels featuring the illustrations are available to promote peace education at elementary and junior high schools throughout Okinawa. We have loaned the panels to four schools so far this year, and the response has been quite favorable. In the words of one teacher, "[The panels] enable students to learn of the tragedy of war with their own eyes."

This concludes our presentation of the Soka Gakkai Okinawa Youth Division's peace initiatives. Having taken part in them, one of the strongest takeaways I have is this: To the extent that we, as youth, take action, other youth will respond to us to the very same extent. We are committed to forging a new future with our youthful passion and energy, driven to create wave upon wave for peace that will expand ever outward.

