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By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

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MORIOKA, Japan — He is a cheerful old farmer who jokes as he serves rice cakes made by his wife, and then he switches easily to explaining what it is like to cut open a 30-year-old man who is tied naked to a bed and dissect him alive, without anesthetic.

"The fellow knew that it was over for him, and so he didn't struggle when they led him into the room and tied him down," recalled the 72-year-old farmer, then a medical assistant in a Japanese Army unit in China in World War II. "But when I picked up the scalpel, that's when he began screaming.

"I cut him open from the chest to the stomach, and he screamed terribly, and his face was all twisted in agony. He made this unimaginable sound, he was screaming so horribly. But then finally he stopped. This was all in a day's work for the surgeons, but it really left an impression on me because it was my first time."

Finally the old man, who insisted on anonymity, explained the reason for the vivisection. The Chinese prisoner had been deliberately infected with the plague as part of a research project — the full horror of which is only now emerging — to develop plague bombs for use in World War II.

Unmasking Horror
A special report.

That research program was one of the great secrets of Japan during and after World War II: a vast project to develop weapons of biological warfare, including plague, anthrax, cholera and a dozen other pathogens. Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army conducted research by experimenting on humans and by field testing plague bombs by dropping them on Chinese cities to see whether they could start plague outbreaks. They could.

A trickle of information about the program has turned into a stream and now a torrent. Half a century after the end of the war, a rush of books, documentaries and exhibitions is unlocking the past and helping arouse interest in Japan in the atrocities committed by some of Japan's most distinguished doctors.

Scholars and former members of the unit say that at least 3,000 people — by some accounts several times as many — were killed in the medical experiments; none survived.

No one knows how many died

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the “field testing.” It is becoming evident that the Japanese officers in charge of the program hoped to use their weapons against the United States. They proposed using balloon bombs to carry disease to America, and they had a plan in the summer of 1945 to use kamikaze pilots to dump plague-infected fleas on San Diego.

The research was kept secret after the end of the war in part because the United States granted immunity from war crimes prosecution to the doctors in exchange for their data. Japanese and American documents show that the United States helped cover up the human experimentation. Instead of putting the ringleaders on trial, it gave them stigmas.

The accounts are wrenching to read even after so much time has passed: a Russian mother and daughter left in a gas chamber, for example, as doctors probed through thick glass and timed their convictions, watching as the woman sprawled over her child in a futile effort to save her from the gas.

The Origins
Ban on Weapon Entices Military

Japan’s biological weapons program was born in the 1930s, in part because Japanese officials were impressed that germ warfare had been banned by the Geneva Convention of 1925. If it was so awful that it had to be banned under international law, the officers reasoned, it must make a great weapon.

The Japanese Army, which then occupied a large chunk of China, evoked the realities of eight villages near Harbin, in Manchuria, to make way for the headquarters of Unit 731. One advantage of China, from the Japanese point of view, was the availability of research subjects on whom germics could be tested. The subjects were called marutus, or logs, and most were Communists, sympathizers or ordinary criminals. The majority were Chinese, but many were Russians, expatriates living in China.

Takeo Wano, a 71-year-old former medical worker in Unit 731 who now lives here in the northern Japanese city of Morioka, said he once saw a six-foot-high glass jar in which a Western man was pickled in formaldehyde. The man had been cut into two pieces, vertically, and Mr. Wano guessed that he was Russian because there were many Russians then living in the area.

The Unit 731 headquarters contained many other such jars with specimens. They contained feet, heads, internal organs, all newly labeled. “I saw samples with labels saying, ‘American,’ ‘English,’ and ‘Frenchman,’ but most were Chinese, Koreans and Mongolians,” said a Unit 731 veteran who insisted on anonymity. Those labeled as American were just body parts, like hands or feet, and some were sent in by other military units.

There is no evidence that Americans were among the victims in the Unit 731 compound, although there have been persistent and unproven assumptions that American prisoners of war in Mulin (now Shenyang) were subject to medical experimentation.

Medical researchers also locked up diseased prisoners with healthy ones, to see how readily various ailments would spread. The doctors locked others inside a pressure chamber to see how much the body could withstand before the eyes popped from their sockets.

Victims were often taken to a proving ground called Anda, where they were tied to stakes and bombarded with test weapons to see how effective the new technologies were. Planes sprayed the same with plague-infected fleas or dropped bombs with plague-infected fleas to see how many people would die.
The Plan

Taking the War To U.S. Homeland

In 1944, when Japan was nearing defeat, Tokyo's military planners seized on a remarkable way to hit back at the American homeland: they launched huge balloons that rode the prevailing winds to the continental United States. Although the American Government considered reports at the time, some 500 balloons landed in Western states and carried biological weapons that killed a woman and three men in Montana and six people in Ohio.

Half a century later, there is evidence that it could have been far worse: some Japanese generals proposed loading the balloons with weapons of biological warfare, to create epidemics of plague or anthrax in the United States. Other army units wanted to send cattle-plague virus to wipe out the American livestock industry or grain used to feed the troops.

There was a fierce debate in Tokyo, and a document discovered recently suggests that at a crucial meeting in late July 1944 it was decided to send Hideki Tojo — who had been hanged for war crimes, and was no longer in power — who rejected the proposal to use germ warfare against the United States.

At the time of the meeting, Tojo had just been ousted as Prime Minister and chief of the General Staff, but he retained enough authority to veto the proposal. He knew by then that Japan was likely to lose the war, and that any final military assaults on the United States would involve retaliation on the Americans being developed by America.

Yet the Japanese Army was persistently trying to use biological weapons against the Allies in some circumstances. When the United States prepared to attack the Pacific island of Japan in the late spring of 1944, a submarine was sent from Unit 731 to carry biological weapons — it is unclear what kind — to the defenders.

The submarine was sunk, Professor Tsuneichi says, and the Japanese troops had to rely on conventional weapons alone.

At the end of the war, the United States in 1945, Unit 731 embarked on its most ambitious mission: it extended its operations to include California with the plague.

Toshimichi Misumi, who was an instructor for new recruits in Unit 731, said the idea was to use 20 of the 731新 troops who arrived in Har-20,989 new troops who arrived in Harbin in July 1945. A submarine was to carry a few of them to the area off California. Two men were to fly in a plane to be loaded with the submarine and flown to San Diego with plague-infected fleas. The target date was to be Sept. 22, 1945.

Jabob Obama, 73, who now lives in Rhinebeck, Mich., acknowledged that he had been a chef of the Cherry Blossoms at Night attack force for the strike against San Diego.

"I don't want to think about Unit 731," he said in a brief telephone interview. "Fifty years have passed since the war. Please let me remain silent."

It is unclear whether Cherry Blossoms at Night ever carried out the attack on San Diego.

In addition, Dr. Yuasa said he was inexperienced about what he did, and he cultivated anthrax and passed them to his students as they were being developed for biological warfare.

Dr. Yuasa was a professor of microbiology at the University of Tokyo, and he was also a member of the Japanese Imperial Army. He said he had been instructed to do so, and he did not give his permission to anyone to use the tools they had been given.

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