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# The second world war turned Okinawa into a graveyard. Now it's in China's sights

A peace activist collects the bones of the dead as conflict brews once more



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By Noah Sneider

**G**ushiken Takamatsu crouched inside a damp cave beside a pile of dusty bones. He wore rectangular glasses with ruby-red frames that rested at the end of his nose, lending him the appearance of a man appraising jewels. He held up a chipped crescent-shaped fragment and caressed it with weathered hands. The end of a femur, he said. Based on the size, probably a child's.

Other relics followed. A comb that belonged to someone called Yago. A watch-face and two buttons. The head of a toothbrush and the rusted cap of a grenade. Outside the cave, golden orb-weaver spiders with long yellow-and-black legs hung from dense webs. Something rustled in the brush, and I worried that it might be one of the venomous Habu snakes that haunt the jungles of Okinawa, an island in the south of Japan. Gushiken gave the sounds little attention.

Gazing at the remains, Gushiken seemed instead to hear the voices of the past. Towards the end of the second world war, Japan concentrated forces on Okinawa, hoping to delay the invasion of the mainland. On April 1st 1945, hundreds of American warships sent shells flying at the island and 50,000 troops poured onto its beaches. During three months of combat, the armies discharged so much ordnance that the struggle became known as the “typhoon of steel”. The battle of Okinawa left 90,000 Japanese and 12,000 American troops dead. Its brutality helped convince President Harry Truman that a conventional advance into the rest of Japan would be unconscionably costly; instead, he decided to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The typhoon wreaked the most havoc on Okinawan civilians, who had themselves been early victims of the Japanese empire's drive for conquest in Asia. During the battle, the Japanese army conscripted thousands of locals into service, forming entire brigades of teenage soldiers and nurses. Japanese soldiers distributed hand grenades to noncombatants, encouraging Okinawans to kill themselves rather than surrender to the enemy, in whose hands, they were told, they would be raped and dismembered. Around 100,000 civilians perished in total, roughly a quarter of the pre-war population. The scale is hard to comprehend: more people may have been killed on Okinawa than in both atomic bombings combined; the civilian death toll during the three-month-long battle was 15 times higher than last year in Ukraine.

## **During three months of combat, the armies discharged so many shells that the struggle became known as the “typhoon of steel”**

For the past 40 years, Gushiken has been traversing the island in search of Okinawa's war dead, many of whom were never found. By his count, he has personally discovered the remains of around 400 individuals. “We must not abandon the people of the past,” he told me. “The dead are the weak among the weak.” He formed and leads an organisation called Gamafuya, or “cave diggers” (the island's limestone caves are known as *gama*). The group includes a handful of other bone-hunting volunteers, but he is a solitary activist, spending six-hour shifts alone in the *gama*, digging by hand. He has become the keeper of Okinawa's darkest memories, the therapist of its deepest trauma.

Today, the spectre of war has returned to haunt Okinawa, and Gushiken's quest has taken on a new urgency. After the second world war ended, America turned the island into its most important military outpost in Asia. Dozens

the second world war ended, America turned the island into its most important military outpost in Asia. Dozens of American facilities there house forces that would be mobilised in the event of a clash with China over Taiwan, making Okinawa a prime target for Chinese missile strikes.

In Japan, talk of “Taiwan contingencies”, the current euphemism for a war over the island, is rife. When I met Yamashiro Hiroji, a prominent Okinawan pacifist, he carried a copy of a local newspaper featuring a story about plans to hold exercises for evacuating residents during a battle. “There will be another war. We’ve been saying no more war, but that’s exactly what is about to happen,” he said. “Gushiken will have a lot more bones to collect.”





**Digging up the past** Opening image: Okinawa remained under American control after the second world war until 1972. From top to bottom: Remains of war dead continue to be found across the island. A campaign in 1955 to collect remains and bury them with a religious ceremony. For 40 years, Gushiken Takamatsu has conducted searches for these remains

Gushiken grew up hearing first-hand stories of the horrors of conflict. When relatives gathered on the island, he

told me, “talk always turned to the war”. His father was drafted into the imperial army but his ship sank en route to the Battle of Imphal in north India in 1944. He managed to swim to safety. His mother took shelter in the *gama* in Okinawa’s remote north, and his aunt ended up hiding along the southern coast. “She said that it was hard to run because there were so many dead women strewn along the roads,” Gushiken told me. “Your feet would get caught in their long hair.”

As he guided me through the caves on one of his expeditions, Gushiken was sure-footed, passing through dark crevasses without fear, sensing where the ground was stable and where it would give. As we made our way through thick brush and up muddy hills, I could tell why the remote *gama* proved such effective hiding places when the battle began – and why the victims’ bodies proved so hard to find after it ended. Gushiken’s mother was among those who survived thanks to the shelter the limestone offered. She later told him that the last words of the war dead were not “Long Live His Majesty the Emperor”, as government propaganda had urged. Instead, when American troops approached with their flamethrowers, or when Japanese soldiers handed out their grenades, Okinawans in the caves cried out for their mothers.

**O**kinawa has long been caught up in the struggles between great powers. For most of its history, the island was the seat of power of the Ryukyu, an independent kingdom with its own ruler, language and culture, stretching across the islands from just south of Kyushu nearly all the way to Taiwan. By the 14th century, Ryukyuan were flourishing as intermediaries between China, Japan and the kingdoms of South-East Asia, their ships heaving with copper and spices, porcelain and gold-leaf lacquerware. They regarded themselves as a distinctly peaceful people, destined to bind the region together.

**“There will be another war. We’ve been saying no more war, but that’s exactly what is about to happen. Gushiken will have a lot more bones to collect”**

Trouble began when Japan tried to conquer China and Korea in the 16th century. Ryukyuan envoys whispered to the Chinese about the plans, which failed after six years of bloody battle. Partly in retaliation, Japanese samurai invaded the Ryukyu in 1609. The Japanese conquerors allowed the kingdom to maintain a form of independence in order to use it as a conduit for trade with China at a time when Japan’s rulers turned to isolationism. Ryukyuan paid tribute at two courts for centuries. When Western ships started poking around Okinawa’s ports in the late 19th century, Japan’s Meiji-era government moved to annex the Ryukyu kingdom, turning it in 1879 into Okinawa prefecture, part of a modern nation-state with hard borders. The strategic position of the islands, said Inoue Kaoru, a Meiji-era statesman, made them valuable as a “protective wall for the Japanese empire”.

Ryukyuan were forced to take Japanese names. Officials dispatched from Tokyo discouraged the use of indigenous languages, which bear about as much resemblance to Japanese as German does to English. Children who spoke them at school were made to wear wooden placards around their necks. Okinawa became a laboratory for the repressive imperialism that Japan would implement on a greater scale in Taiwan and Korea.

During the second world war, Japan utilised its “wall” to the devastation of its inhabitants, and the island continued to make sacrifices after the fighting stopped. When America and Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty which ended the occupation of Japan in 1951, Okinawa was exempted. The treaty left the once-proud kingdom under the control of an American military commander, whose troops pushed Okinawans out of their homes, seizing their land to build new military bases. Okinawans refer to the period as the era of “bayonets and bulldozers”. The dollar became the official currency and cars drove on the right-hand side of the road. The Americans introduced baseball, hamburgers and Christmas, but also brought rowdiness and crime. Okinawa became the hub for cold war era operations in the region, with bombers taking off for Korea and later Vietnam.

The second world war turned Okinawa into a graveyard. Now it's in China's sights became the hub for cold-war era operations in the region, with bombers taking off for Korea, and, later, Vietnam. The island was dubbed the "keystone of the Pacific".





**Bones to pick** From top to bottom: Gushiken has been on several hunger strikes in protest of the treatment of the remains of war dead. The ruins of Naha, Okinawa's capital. On Memorial Day Okinawans gather to observe a minute's silence

Only in 1972 did America return Okinawa to Japan. While officials in Tokyo celebrated, protesters on Okinawa gathered in the pouring rain to denounce a deal that allowed America to retain its military bases on the island. “We all perceived the mainland as a bigger family, we hoped we would return to this,” Gushiken told me. “Eventually we came to realise that we’re not Japanese, we’re Okinawans.”

The long alienation from the rest of Japan created a cleft in national memory. Mainstream Japanese narratives of the war tend to focus on the suffering of atomic-bomb victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, rather than the battle of Okinawa. Japan’s revisionist right wing questions the veracity of the atrocities that Japanese soldiers committed against civilians on Okinawa, and has tried to excise references to forced suicides from Japanese school textbooks. The focus of attention in post-war Japan has tended to be on the spirits of the dead, while their bodies, by contrast, have been neglected.

In traditional Okinawan culture, bones are believed to have a life of their own. Large family tombs, from elaborate stone structures in the shape of turtle shells to modest concrete crypts, line the island. Relatives gather among their ancestors’ remains to pay their respects and pass messages. Though uncommon today, traditional funerary rites included the practice of *senkotsu*, or bone washing: interred bodies would be removed from their tombs after several years, any remaining flesh scraped away and the bones washed, as a means of expressing reverence and devotion.

On Okinawa after the war, bones were everywhere. In “Bones”, a short story published in 1973, the Okinawan writer Shima Tsuyoshi tells the tale of a mainland construction firm that comes to erect a hotel on the island. They begin building on a hill, but an old woman from a nearby village comes to stop them. “Underneath it’s nothing but bones,” she says, recounting how the locals had gathered up all the bodies and put them in a pile during the battle. “There was no one to care for them when they died,” she continues, “and now their bones have been completely abandoned.”

**G**ushiken discovered his first bones at the age of nine. He and his friends would often find unexploded shells and loaded rifles when playing in the hills near their homes. For fun, Gushiken would empty the gunpowder in patterns on the ground, set it alight, and watch it crackle. One day, the boys came upon a hole, about one metre wide. Inside they saw a metal helmet and a human skull. They screamed and ran. Their parents told them not to touch the bones, saying that the family of the dead man would return for him one day.

**“She said that it was hard to run because there were so many dead women strewn along the roads. Your feet would get caught in their long hair”**

By the time Gushiken encountered his next set of bones, he was in his 20s. One summer, he received an invitation to join a group of volunteers searching for the remains of war dead. During the outing, he ended up alone on a hill. He noticed a big curved rock with enough space underneath for a person to take shelter. He began digging and pulled up bone after bone. “There was a jarring sense of disconnect between the daily life I was living up until that morning, and the reality that the bones of the war dead are still left outside in the fields,” he wrote in a short autobiography published in 2012.

Gushiken began to study with an earlier generation of Okinawan bone-collecting volunteers, a cohort who had helped clear the island after the war. He learned from an archaeologist at a local university how to distinguish human bone fragments from stone and coral. He pored through archives and listened to survivors’ stories in order to understand the course the battles took, so he could posit where victims may have hidden.

In the ensuing years, he mounted his own searches. Help was hard to come by. Gushiken has appealed for state funds to expand his activities to little avail – he notes ruefully that the American government has an entire agency dedicated to recovering the remains of its dead from past conflicts. For decades, Japanese bureaucrats told Gushiken that they were unable to help because there were no laws pertaining to bone-collecting. Even after a law establishing procedures was passed in 2016, little changed.







**Out with the old, in with the new** *From top to bottom:* A guard protects the site of the new American military base in Henoko. The American invasion of Okinawa. The current Futenma base is due to be replaced by the Henoko project

When Gushiken finds human remains, he must first contact the local police to confirm that they are not related to a crime under investigation. The bones are then moved to an interim storage facility at the memorial cemetery in Okinawa, a cramped building next to a tool shed overlooking the southern coast of the island. “As you can tell, the room is very small,” the head of the prefecture’s bone-collection division told me when I visited. “We want a proper building.”

Around 700 people currently lie in the storage facility. Identifying the remains is a slog: officials demand evidence of a presumed identity before performing DNA tests. “They say things like, ‘OK you found the bones, but can you provide two witnesses?’” Gushiken said, shaking his head.

Gushiken sees the dead as his contemporaries, and takes offence at this indifference on their behalf. “He can actually hear the voices of the bones,” Ueda Keishi, the head of a volunteer group that works to return bones of the war dead to their families, told me. “What he feels is what the bones feel.” Gushiken makes no distinction between Japanese and American, or between soldiers and civilians – all are worthy of attention.

When I visited Okinawa last summer to observe Gushiken at work, Yoshikawa Hideki, an anthropologist, told me that he was the “conscience of the Okinawan people”. Tani Daiji, a Catholic priest and one of Gushiken’s close friends, compared him to a prophet from the Old Testament: “He has moral clarity. What is right is right, what is wrong is wrong.” Several people told me, without a hint of irony, that he may be a buddha.

Gushiken, a slight 69-year-old with a light grey goatee and a birthmark on his left jaw that looks like caked mud, comes off as otherworldly. He has trouble remembering the names of the living – several times, I had to remind him of my own. When I asked him how he makes a living, he grimaced and replied that he was “self-employed”. Two people close to him told me that they think he repairs dental equipment, but even they were unsure. Gushiken met other personal questions with silence and a disarming gaze.

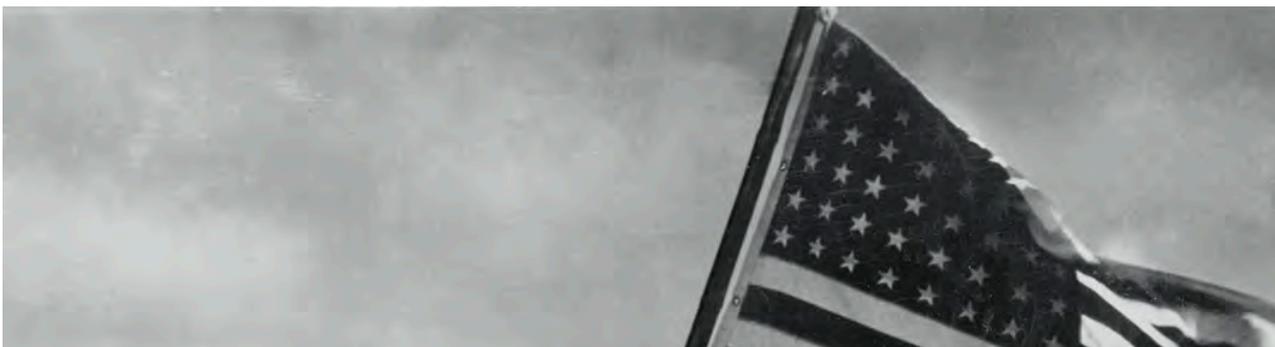
## **Okinawa became a laboratory for the repressive imperialism that Japan would implement on a greater scale in Taiwan and Korea**

On the rare occasions that Gushiken socialises with fellow activists, no one dares ask about his family. “No one wants to penetrate the veil,” said Yamashiro, the pacifist campaigner. Gushiken keeps the conversation focused on the war dead and their memory. “During the battle humans became demons, they engaged in unspeakably inhumane acts. What Gushiken is doing is about making demons back into humans again,” Yamashiro told me.

When digging, Gushiken will share his water with the undiscovered bodies underground by sprinkling it on the earth around him. After he first discovered the child’s remains that he showed me at our initial meeting, he brought snacks for it. Okuma Katsuya, a documentary-maker who shot a film about Gushiken, recalled to me that he sought out a particular kind of treat that would have been available before the war. “He thought it would be weird to bring contemporary snacks – he imagined what this child might have eaten.”

**I**n late 2020, Gushiken was digging in the south of Okinawa, the island's most bone-dense region, when he noticed another group working in the area with bulldozers and backhoes. He thought they might be miners, but it turned out to be a construction company gathering soil, which would be used to build an American military base in a bay called Henoko.

Gushiken, concerned about the use of soil that probably contained the bones of the war dead, rushed to the Defence Ministry to tell them what he had seen. "I assumed they didn't know," he told me. But the bureaucrats stonewalled. "I couldn't comprehend their reaction: 'We will share this internally,'" he recalled. "I said to them: 'You are not human.'" The discovery drove him to more direct political action. In late 2021, Gushiken sat down outside the prefectural administration and declared a hunger strike. He cried out, "tasuketi kumisore", or "please help me" in Okinawan, the phrase many civilians had shouted during the battle. He called on the government to stop using soil that might contain remains, and asked that the south of the island be preserved as a "sacred space". "You can never find all of the bone fragments," he told me.







**Occupation** From top to bottom: An old entertainment district for the US military near Camp Schwab, an American base on Okinawa. Raising the flag in 1945. Camp Kinser, one of many bases on the island

For many Okinawans, the Henoko project, which will replace Marine Corps Air Base Futenma, another American military installation, epitomises their unjust treatment. Even after the reversion to Japan, politicians from the mainland have been happy to keep American troops concentrated there, away from the vast majority of their voters; many Okinawan elites have found ways to profit from their presence, raking in subsidies and lucrative construction contracts. The island, which comprises less than 1% of Japan's land mass, is home to about half the American troops stationed in the country – around 25,000 soldiers. The roar of fighter jets and helicopters has become part of the local soundscape, along with the lapping of waves and the chirping of the Ryukyu robin.

In 1995 three American soldiers stationed at Futenma kidnapped a 12-year-old Okinawan girl, tied her hands and feet with duct tape and raped her repeatedly. The commander of the American forces on the island dismissively told journalists that a prostitute would have cost the rapists less than they paid to rent the car used in the abduction. In response, massive protests erupted across Okinawa. The commander was forced to resign, and the Japanese and American governments decided to “consolidate and reduce the facilities and areas used by US forces” on the island. It was announced that Futenma would close by 2003.

The plan was to shift some marines to Guam, but others would be moved to a new base that would be built off the coast in Henoko. Construction would require filling in the bay and its pristine coral reef and artificially reinforcing the sea floor. It has, unsurprisingly, become a boondoggle. In 2011, with work yet to start, three American senators called the plans “unrealistic, unworkable and unaffordable”.

## **Okinawa became the hub for cold-war era operations in the region, with bombers taking off for Korea, and, later, Vietnam. The island was dubbed the “keystone of the Pacific”**

As construction pressed ahead, locals expressed their displeasure. In a non-binding referendum in 2019, more than 70% of Okinawans voted against the Henoko plan. Tamaki Denny, Okinawa's governor, told me that scrapping the project would “significantly restore Okinawans' trust toward the Japanese government and America”. But with the base now part-way built, the Japanese government is committed to finishing it. The new target date is the mid-2030s.

Recently, China's increasingly aggressive posture towards Taiwan has further raised the stakes for Okinawa and its bases. American and Japanese officials believe the best way to avoid a conflict is to convince China that starting one would not be worth the cost. As one American commander stationed on Okinawa put it to me, “The tragedy will be if war begins because of overconfidence, because of a lack of deterrence.” Japan has built a string of new bases throughout the Ryukyu in recent years, and in January, America announced plans to station a new

Marine unit on Okinawa. Completing the Futenma Replacement Facility is now presented as an essential part of this broader strategy. If deterrence fails, America's ability to come to Taiwan's defence depends on Japan assenting to the use of American forces stationed in Okinawa – and success in the battle probably depends on Japanese forces joining the fight.

Fear of China has begun to change the way many Okinawans see the world too. The anti-base movement has shrunk over the past decade or so to a small if vocal fringe. Opposition to the American presence has begun to fade among younger Okinawans in particular. "My father and his friends are still scheming, waiting for the day when the Americans leave – but I don't think people my age feel that way," Komine Ayako, the 30-something head of the AmerAsian School, a primary school that caters to children of mixed couples, told me. But even Okinawans who favour a tough posture towards China cannot escape the fact that if it came to war, they would suffer more than any other part of Japan.





**In memoriam** From top to bottom: School children gather in Peace Memorial Park on Memorial Day. A crying baby alerts a passing marine to hidden civilians in 1945. High-school students from Tokyo visit Henoko in the south of the island to learn about its history

Across the political spectrum, Okinawans complain that the government in Tokyo is indifferent to their plight. Many on the island see a grimly familiar dynamic playing out: their home is again the wall protecting the rest of Japan. “In the mainland they talk about deterrence but that really means shoving all the risk and responsibility onto Okinawa,” Tani, the priest, griped. “They are making Okinawa a sacrifice again, the structure hasn’t changed since the war.”

**E**very year on June 23rd, the anniversary of the end of the Battle of Okinawa, the island marks its Memorial Day. Last year, I attended the largest commemorative gathering, which takes place at the Peace Memorial

■ Park, a sprawling complex near the caves that Gushiken had shown me. On a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, rows of stone slabs carved with names fan out around an eternal flame. The monument honours all the war dead, Okinawan civilians and American soldiers.

Gushiken had decided to mount another hunger strike to coincide with the ceremony. The day before, he set up a tent on the edge of the park, under a grove where a group of activists had gathered to read the names of the war dead aloud. He brought along a small white box filled with bone-studded soil, which he spread out on a white bedsheet. Above, he displayed a handwritten sign: "Can you find it?" Young children took turns trying to pick out which fragments were bones.

Late in the afternoon, Gushiken addressed a small crowd of a few dozen people. The quiet man from the caves transformed. He appeared to be on the verge of tears, voice shaking, lips quivering. The effect was oracular, as if he were channelling the spirits of those whose bones he had found. The act of hunger striking is a nod to the memory of those who went without food during the war, he explained. The Henoko project is "blasphemy against the war dead", he said. "It's as if we're killing them for a second time."

The next day, the official Memorial Day ceremony unfolded under big white tents in a field next to Gushiken's camp. Protesters lined the blue fences and dangled from the trees. Some held signs: "Don't turn Okinawa into a battlefield again". Dignitaries and relatives of survivors sat in neat rows, alongside Japanese and American military officers in crisply ironed uniforms.

**“During the battle humans became demons, they engaged in unspeakably inhumane acts. What Gushiken is doing is about making demons back into humans again”**

Tamaki, the governor, gave a fiery speech that drew cheers from the crowd outside. "We experienced the absurdity of war...We must remember that war emerges from people's hearts. It starts from within humans. That means we must fill those hearts with love." Kishida Fumio, Japan's prime minister, followed him. Clad in a black short-sleeved shirt, he had the forgettable manner of a local news anchor reading from a teleprompter. The words he recited were ones Okinawans had heard many times before. "The Okinawan people have borne the burden of concentrated bases; we must do our best to solve that issue," he said. The protesters cried back: "Liar! Stop saying things you don't even mean! Get rid of the bases! Listen to our voices! Go home!"

After the official event ended and the politicians packed into their black cars, I found Gushiken back at his encampment. He looked weary. "Kishida gave a eulogy but it should have been an apology," he said, shaking his head. "It wasn't a ceremony for the war dead, it was a ceremony for bureaucrats and government officials." He had stayed silent throughout the speeches. He turned down an offer to join the activists for dinner, and opted to eat soup alone instead.

After Gushiken headed home, carrying a small blue backpack and his box of bones, I made my way back through the park. I stopped one last time amid the obelisks carved with the names of the dead. I started to wonder who had found them.

**A**mong the American troops fighting on Okinawa in 1944 was a young lieutenant called Richard Sneider. I never had the chance to ask my grandfather about the battle, or whether he heard the Okinawans in the caves calling for their mothers. Though he survived the war, he died of cancer five years before I was born.

Papa Dick, as he is known in our family, was born in 1922 in Brooklyn, a world away from Okinawa. His parents were Jewish intellectuals; the family business was handbags. He aspired to a safe civil-service job, perhaps in the

Agriculture Department. But Papa Dick was in college when Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, and he decided to enrol in a Japanese-language course for his senior year. "The war came and I started to scramble around to find something to be other than a foot soldier, a doughboy," he recalled in an interview decades later.





**Life and death** From top to bottom: Reading the names of the dead in Peace Memorial Park. The stark reality of war in 1945. Gushiken in the Cornerstone of Peace during his hunger strike

Papa Dick was assigned to the army's 96th division and in February 1945, he was deployed to Okinawa as one of a small cadre of intelligence officers known as "language men". By the time his parents heard from him again, the battle was nearly over. His job was to question Japanese prisoners; he told his family he fired his rifle just once, at a captive who was trying to flee. Once the fighting stopped, men in his position were called upon to persuade survivors hiding in the caves to surrender.

After the war, Papa Dick became a diplomat. Shaping the relationship with America's foe-turned-ally became his life's work. Over the ensuing decades, through two tours at the embassy in Tokyo and stints at the State Department and National Security Council in Washington, DC, he became one of America's leading "Japan hands", an inconspicuous but influential figure, the kind of official who lurks on the margins of photographs of epoch-making moments at the White House. His most consequential assignment was negotiating the terms of Okinawa's reversion to Japan.

After I moved to Tokyo in 2020 to cover Japan for *The Economist*, I began a closer study of my grandfather's involvement with the country, and in particular with Okinawa. As I leafed through his letters, scoured declassified government cables and perused diplomatic histories, my readings of the past would often echo the conversations I was having during the day about Okinawa's relationship to the mainland, Japan's own security policies and the risks of conflict in this region. I would quietly query Japanese generals and policymakers about what would

happen if conflict broke out over Taiwan – and then find my grandfather, in 1970, warning a Japanese envoy that “Communist China had announced its intention of liberating Taiwan come what may and had made no promise to refrain from armed action,” and pressing Japan to promise “to agree to the mobilisation of US military forces in the event of tensions in Taiwan”. Today’s flashpoints, I came to understand, are the geopolitical equivalent of Gushiken’s bones: remnants of the last war that continue to haunt the present.

**A** few days before Memorial Day, Gushiken took me out to the caves one last time. I hadn’t yet mentioned Papa Dick, but I wanted, more than anything, to find the right moment to tell him. Two colleagues and I met him and Okuma, the film-maker, in a parking lot. Gushiken arrived on a beat-up Honda motorbike, wearing torn trousers and a worn shirt. A headlamp sat atop his camouflage-patterned baseball cap, which was perched backwards on his head, and a mosquito coil dangled by a string from his belt, the smoke trailing behind him. The ruby-red glasses hung around his neck. We followed in our car as he led us through banyan groves, stopping at a small clearing by the side of the road. From there we took off into the jungle by foot.

## **Fear of China has begun to change the way many Okinawans see the world too. The anti-base movement, like Japan’s left in general, has shrunk over the past decade or so to a small if vocal fringe**

Gushiken moved through the landscape as if the battle itself were still raging, ducking and pausing, looking, listening. After a time, we came to what looked like an unremarkable crevice between two large rocks, and Gushiken stopped: “I look for this kind of place,” he said, “where people could escape to.” He put his hand on the stone, and it was as if he could see what had unfolded years ago: here lay the child, here sat the mother, here stood the soldier. In this crevice, he told me, he had found a shattered skull. He suspected it was a suicide. The body had only one shoe on, a telltale sign – the rifles that Japanese soldiers carried were too long to shoot themselves with by using their hands, so they killed themselves by wedging the rifle barrel under their chins and pulling the trigger with their toes.

Making our way through the trees, we came to a second cave. Gushiken pulled out a handful of buttons he had found on an earlier trip. “Since I found buttons, I’m hoping I can find bones too.” A pot for water suggested that civilians had been taking shelter there. He got down on his hands and knees and began digging. I asked Gushiken why he spends his days crawling through the dirt and communing with the dead. “Is there a reason not to do it?” he answered, with an impish smile. He tossed a small object up to me from deeper inside the cave. To my untrained eye, it looked like a bone, and I began to wonder how the person died and who they were. Gushiken told me it was a shell fragment.

Standing there, I recalled the survivors’ tales I had read, the descriptions of mothers crying silently as they strangled their wailing infants to avoid detection, the accounts of fathers who pulled the pins from the grenades rather than risk capture. I checked my map and realised that America’s 96th division had operated in hills not far from where we stood. I decided to tell Gushiken about Papa Dick. I expected to encounter anger; I braced myself for hostility. But Gushiken’s face, a cragged landscape that has taken on the character of the caves he traverses, drooped instead into a pained, sympathetic expression. He had only one question for me: “Did he come back alive?” ●

**Noah Sneider** is *The Economist’s* Tokyo bureau chief

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