

‘I HAVE FINALLY DECIDED TO KILL MYSELF...’

By Ken Wright

On 18 January 1946 an arrest warrant was issued by the Allied Supreme Headquarters in Tokyo for the former Lieutenant Commander, Norihiko Ozaki of 18 Naval Construction Unit.¹

This unit was stationed on Ballale Island, part of the Shortland Islands south of Bougainville. Ozaki was to be interrogated and possibly tried as a war criminal in connection with the deaths of 517 POWs from the British Royal Artillery who were sent to work as slave labour on Ballale.

Other persons of interest to be interrogated were Vice Admiral Jinōchi Kusaka, formerly Commander in Chief South Eastern Area Fleet; Lieutenant Commander Isamu Miyake of the anti aircraft unit and Captain Senda, Commander of the army battalion and POW labour.

As the following account will show, there was no trial, no charges laid and the accused were released to continue their normal lives.

Japan, 1946. Lieutenant Commander Ozaki, on learning of the order for his arrest, decided the time had come to take matters into his own hands and wrote a note to be found his body:

‘Upon finding my body and this letter, please report the fact to the nearest police station or to the Military Police of the Occupation Forces. My name is Norihiko Ozaki, and I was formerly a Lieutenant-Commander. On 18 January 1946, my arrest as a war criminal suspect was ordered by the Supreme Headquarters.’

‘No matter how I ponder the matter, I cannot bring myself to feel like surrendering to the authorities. Therefore, I have finally decided to kill myself without saying a word to anyone. My mental state is not explainable, but please try to understand. My relatives and friends do not know about this intention. Please regard everything solved by my suicide, and I appeal to your tolerance in this affair.’

‘I ask your pardon for all the trouble I will cause by this act. I’ll be satisfied with any kind of treatment, but if possible, I should like my close relatives to conduct the burial service. Again asking for your kindness.’

In an extract from a letter to his family, Ozaki describes his military service:

‘For approximately three years, from the time of my induction in August ‘42 until my discharge in May ‘45, I did my utmost in the service of my country. Looking back on my service in the South Seas and in China, I am certain I did my best. Please believe that my conscience bears no guilt, because I swore by heaven and earth, and to the gods, to do my duty as a soldier, and I have fulfilled that pledge.’

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‘Nevertheless, the war was of no advantage and Japan today is a pitiful, defeated nation. I don’t know for what reason, but I am going to be tried by our former enemies as a suspected war criminal. The question of justice is beside the point, but as for myself, I do not think I will be able to bear it.’²

But Ozaki decided not to go through with his planned death, and was arrested on the morning of 19 January and detained in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. He would later, during questioning about the fate of the POWs on Ballale Island, make a 10 page confession on 8 August 1946 and, on the last page, explain why he decided to face a trial instead of committing suicide.

In summary, after much soul-searching, he decided not to die for a Japan that had lost its honour and integrity during the war, and sought the opportunity to divulge the complete truth, to expose the whole matter to the public and hopefully get a fair trial.

The circumstances leading to Lieutenant-Commander Ozaki’s arrest began on 15 February 1942 with the fall of Singapore, the jewel in the crown of British colonialism. The surrender of Singapore and the capture of over 120,000 men was the greatest and most humiliating defeat in British history and the highpoint of Japanese expansion in South-East Asia.

Amongst the thousands of Allied prisoners, many nationalities were represented: Gurkhas, Scotsmen, Australians, British, and Indian Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. Included with the British prisoners were men from assorted Royal Artillery units. In early October, the Japanese announced that 600 men of the RA under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John Bassett [35th LAA Regiment] would be transferred to camps in Japan.

They departed Singapore aboard one of the –hellshipsø possibly the *Masta Maru*, and suffered appalling conditions. Many became sick and one died of dysentery. Unknown to the British prisoners, the ship was not enroute to Japan but to Rabaul. It was here the prisoners were put to work as slave labour and subjected to vicious beatings by the Japanese.



In November, 517 of the fittest RA men were selected to be transported by ship to Ballale [left]. After a two-day trip they arrived to begin work with Chinese prisoners and natives recruited from near by islands to construct an airstrip.³

Officially, the Japanese reported the ship carrying the 517 POWs –missing at sea–presumed lostøand this version was accepted by the British Government during the war and for many years afterwards. With the benefit of hindsight, this can only be viewed as an attempted cover up by the Japanese.

Ballale Island is pear-shaped and approximately 2000 yards east-west and 1900 yards north-south, sufficient for a single wide strip and taxiways on either side. A fringing reef surrounds the island. Four Japanese Naval units and an Army unit initially occupied the island. Engineer Lieutenant Commander Ozaki and 18 Naval Construction Unit [Kensetsu-tai] arrived on the island 26/27 November just prior to the prisonersøarrival.

Ozaki took up the position of Commander until early January 1943, when Commanding Officer Lieutenant Reichi Kimbara arrived. Both men took their

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orders from the South East Area Fleet Commander in Chief, Vice Admiral Jinichi Kusaka based in Rabaul.

Lieutenant Commander Ozaki said in his 8 August 1946 confession:

'It was probably several days later after landing on the island that we saw a comparatively large-sized transport, anchored off the coast of the island starting to unload several hundred persons, who appeared to be prisoners. In the meantime, a Second Lieutenant [if my memory is correct] acting as the commanding officer, came to me and said, I have brought you 527 army prisoners from Rabaul according to orders. You may set them to work on the construction of the airfield.'

Captain Isamu Miyake, in charge of an anti-aircraft battery, who would be arrested on 17 June 1947 in connection with the events on Ballale, recalled one British officer who attempted to swim away from the island the same day the POWs disembarked from the ship was recaptured. A discussion between Ozaki and another officer as to his fate resulted in an agreement that in wartime, in front of the enemy, desertion meant the death penalty. ⁴

Lieutenant Commander Ozaki:

'From the standpoint of strict observance of military law, there was no alternative. Without thinking deeply we decided a summary justice. The execution was carried out by an army guard, who used a pistol, in the deserted jungle at the east beach of the island. I thought that I would execute him with a Nihonto [Japanese sword] however I became frightened and could not do that.'

The prisoners were housed in tents between an Army unit and the shore on the western tip of the island and were set to work on the crushed coral airstrip. When the men arrived they were already in poor shape and it was not long before they began to physically deteriorate due to the lack of medical supplies, malnutrition and the effects of exhaustion.

An unknown number of Chinese also suffered, a few had been executed if they could not or would not work. They were on the island for about three months and lived in the same area as the POWs, which was strictly out of bounds except to Japanese on duty. The airstrip was finished towards the end of March 1943 and quickly became operational.



The Japanese, POWs and presumably Chinese died from sickness, disease and Allied bombing attacks. Initially, the Japanese cremated their dead and the prisoners who died of disease were tied in sacks that were taken out to sea and thrown overboard. As air raids increased, all bodies were buried instead.

Sadly, the vast majority of the British POWs were killed in Allied air raids and strafing attacks which began in mid-January 1943 and continued consistently over the next 12 months. Although a number of air raid shelters were built through out the island, it seems the POWs were not even allowed to dig their

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own slit trenches let alone use available shelters. They continued working during air raids. During the month of March, the island was bombed at least ten times and one air raid by B24 aircraft on the night of 12/13 resulted in the deaths of approximately 300 POWs.

Lieutenant Commander Ozaki:

'I believe it was during the night in the middle of March that there was a sudden air raid in the area of the army and the prisoners. In this raid, the place where the prisoners were quartered was directly hit by 3 large bombs. These areas had practically been free from damage until this occasion. The reason for the heavy casualty was that the area was far from the air approach to the airfield so that the occupants felt secure and did not take shelter.'

Early in the following month, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto [right], the architect of the attack on the American fleet in Pearl Harbor on 7 December, 1941, decided to make an inspection tour of the Japanese bases in the South Pacific area. It was an attempt to bolster the morale of the Japanese forces which had reached a low point since their defeat at Guadalcanal in early February at the hands of the American forces during the six months of bloody fighting.



One of the places on his moral boosting tour was a short stop on Ballale. Unfortunately for the Admiral, US Naval Intelligence in Hawaii had already broken the Japanese codes and intercepted, decoded and translated the message concerning his proposed movements. Part of the communiqué read:

*'0600 depart Rabaul by medium attack plane [accompanied by 6 fighters]
0800 arrive Ballale. Depart immediately for Shortland by Sub chaser [1ST
Base Force will prepare one boat] arriving Shortland 0840.'*

With the full authority of the American President, Franklin D Roosevelt, –Operation Vengeance,– the plan to kill Admiral Yamamoto, swung into action.

At approximately 0935 on 18 April, two Mitsubishi –Betty– bombers carrying Admiral Yamamoto and his staff began the initial approach toward the newly constructed airfield on Ballale. The fighter escort of six [some records say nine] Mitsubishi Zero–s possibly from the 205 Kokutai Naval Air Unit formed a protective screen above the two bombers.

It was all over in minutes. Four United States Army Air Force P 38 Lightning–s from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal attacked the two bombers while ten more P38–s gave top cover engaging the escorting Zeros. Both bombers went down in flames; one into the sea, and the other, with the Admiral on board, crashed into the jungle.

A search party later found Yamamoto–s body and the news of his death was a severe blow to the already low Japanese morale. Why additional aircraft from Ballale which could possibly have prevented the Admiral–s death were not in the air as a guard of honour for such an important man is unknown. ⁵

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On 27 June, 13 USAF aircraft carried out another of their usual air raids and during the night of 29 June, the US Navy Task Group 36.2, on a mission to bombard Japanese positions in the Shortlands and carry out mining operations, took up position off Ballale. At 0155 the following morning, selected targets on the island were shelled from a range of 16,400 yards with the bombardment ceasing at 0212.

Itø likely that the air raid two days before so closely followed by the shelling of the island, led the Japanese to assume an invasion was about to take place. The contingency plan prepared for this possibility was activated, and it included the disposal of the prisoners.

The Ozaki and Senda units were to be responsible for carrying out the executions. There are no accurate figures but it is thought that 70 to 100 POWs were lined up and killed by bayonets or swords [the original plan had been to use hand grenades] sometime on 30 June and the bodies buried in a large pit.

Lieutenant Commander Ozaki wrote:

‘Every regiment was making arrangements for the eventual enemies surprise landing and attack and were working hard all night, but the enemy did not attack our island. After all, because of vigorous changes and disadvantages in the war situation, everybody’s morale was strained by extreme excitement. Under this pressure the provisions of the defence plan, including the execution of the prisoners was carried out automatically. It can also be said that faced with a crisis, this action was unavoidable.’

The cold blooded killing of the POWs was premature as the Japanese were unaware the Americans had no intention of invading the tiny island. Having carried out the assigned mission, the American Task Group moved on to its next objective.

The callous premeditated murder of defenceless prisoners on Ballale was not an isolated incident. Massacres of POWs sometimes occurred after an Allied air attack or threat of an enemy landing. In order to get the POWs out of the way or to prevent them from being liberated, they were simply disposed of.

In October 1942, on Tarawa before the American invasion, 22 prisoners were beheaded after American aircraft had attacked Japanese ships in the area. On Nauru, the Japanese killed all their prisoners after the first air attack and in the first week October 1943, 96 POWs were blindfolded, had their hands tied and were machine gunned after American ships bombarded Wake Island.

On Palawan Island, where 151 American prisoners of war had been slaving to build an airstrip for the Japanese, an American plane appeared overhead. The garrison commander ordered all the prisoners into their air raid shelters and then ordered his troops to pour petrol over the shelters and ignite them. Most of the trapped Americans were burned to death. Those who managed to escape were machine-gunned. Only nine men survived by jumping into the sea and swimming to another island where they eluded the Japanese. ⁶

When the war in the Pacific ended 14 August 1945, the fate of the 517 POWs sent to Ballale could have remained, as the Japanese preferred it, –missing at sea, presumed lost.øHowever, information about a possible war crime was

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supplied to Australian Military authorities in Rabaul by Chinese who were part of the forced labour on Ballale.

As a result, 19 War Graves Unit AIF arrived on Ballale on 6 November 1945. With Chinese guides, the unit spent the remainder of November and most of December exhuming 436 ‘European’ and 14 Asiatic bodies, the latter Japanese.

Unfortunately individual remains were unable to be identified as there was only one dogtag belonging to an American pilot found at the burial site. It is not known how many American pilots survived being shot down over the island nor their ultimate fate. They may have been executed and buried along with the other POWs or sent elsewhere for questioning.

Among the items found were the remnants of black leather boots, a few NAFFI spoons, a teaspoon with an RAE crest, a water bottle stamped Rosebery Metal Works Coy 1940, a British penny and an artillery arm badge with the motto; *Utrique Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt*, a key stamped A Brown and Co Birmingham, and a copper badge from the Southern Suburban League April 1930/31 October 1931.⁷

On 10 March 1946, Major E C Millikin of B Squadron, Royal Australian Armoured Regiment, reported on his intensive interrogations of 108 Japanese and two Koreans regarding the events on Ballale. This was carried out at 11 Compound at Kokopo and in the Witness Compound, Rabaul.

His conclusion was that all the Japanese who were interrogated either had been ordered to conceal the truth or each individual decided he knew and saw nothing regarding the ultimate fate of the English prisoners. Major Millikin concluded that the only person who could be held responsible is the commander of the unit, Lieutenant Commander Ozaki.⁸

After his arrest in 1947, the Captain Isamu Miyake, former commander of the anti aircraft battery, made a lengthy statement to Major Harold Stannett Williams, Australian Military Forces attached to 2 War Crimes Section SCAP at Tokyo on 16 March the following year, stating in part:

‘I think that the plan for the defence of the island and for the disposal of the prisoners would have I think, been submitted to Buin for approval so when the battle order came from Buin, the intention of I Base Force Headquarters was that the prisoners should be disposed of.’

‘After the cessation of hostilities at about the end of August 1945 so far as I can recall, I received an order from 8 Fleet Headquarters in Buin through a staff signals officer to the effect that in the event of any enquiries being made into the happenings on Ballale Island, I was to state my unit arrived on Ballale Island early in June 1943 and that I knew nothing concerning the POWs on the island. On receipt of that order I appropriately instructed my subordinates.’

Lieutenant Commander Ozaki’s 18 Naval Construction Unit was comprised of 324 naval personnel including two Koreans, Kanehara Kanshyo and Kanshiro Fukukan. It is unclear as to their function within the unit. Apart from some Chinese witnesses who were able to give statements about some of the events on the island, the Koreans were prepared to tell everything they knew.

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However, a legal problem existed, as their evidence was based on hearsay overheard from groups of Japanese discussing various matters. They had heard the prisoners were Englishmen from Singapore. The two Korean witnesses also made statements that they heard rumours from the Japanese that the officer recaptured after the prisoners disembarked was beheaded by Ozaki, who claimed he couldn't carry out the beheading and the prisoner was shot instead.

One Chinese witness said when the 300 prisoners were killed in a night bombing raid they [the prisoners] were forced to remain in the target area by the Japanese with machine guns.

The lengthy statement by Miyake and the confession by Ozaki, whilst possibly self-serving, did at least give a greater insight into the fate of the 517 members of the Royal Artillery. Although the best sources of information were the two Koreans, no charges were able to be laid against any of the accused as the evidence presented was only hearsay and circumstantial.

Once it became obvious that the investigations were floundering with no positive proof that a war crime was committed, Ozaki and his co-accused had to be released.

All Vice Admiral Jin'ichi Kusaka did was submit a statement admitting responsibility for any actions of those under his command but denying any knowledge of the events. He was never required to make an appearance nor was he personally interrogated.

Based on available evidence, it can be safely assumed the 517 members of the British Royal Artillery prisoners arrived on Ballale Island from Rabaul. Apart from the identification disc found on one American pilot, and because the other 435 remains exhumed were unable to be identified, there may be a small number of American airmen amongst them.

There are many who are still missing and, in all likelihood, it will remain that way. The American forces retrieved the remains of the airman; the others were re-interred in graves at Bomana Commonwealth War Cemetery in Port Moresby, tended by the Australian War Graves Commission.



It would be fair to assume that, if the many relatives and friends of the men who never returned from Ballale had been aware of Ozaki's decision in January 1946 to kill himself, they would have wished he had carried it out.

Footnotes

1-As the Japanese put their surname first and given name last, for the sake of clarity and to save confusion, the English method of surname last and given name first has been used.

2- All statements made by Lieutenant Commander Ozaki and Captain Miyake in italics are reproduced with kind permission from the National Archives of

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Australia [Melbourne branch] Document MP742/1 336/1/1460. Trial information is also from the same document source.

3-Eighty two men were considered too sick to go with the others to Ballale Island and remained in Rabaul. Of these, only 18 survived to return to the UK.

4- The right to escape and not be punished unduly was enshrined in the Geneva Convention but the Japanese were not signatories to the convention. With their attitude that surrender was a disgrace, they generally treated Allied prisoners who surrendered with utter contempt.

5-Yamamoto's remains were cremated at Buin on Bougainville and his ashes returned to Japan on his last flagship, the battleship *Musashi*. He was replaced by Admiral Mineichi Koga as Commander in Chief of the combined fleet.

6-Gruhl. Werner. Imperial Japan's World War Two 1931-1935. Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, USA. Page 136.

7-*Urique Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt* ó Everywhere Where [or whither] Right and Glory Lead.

8-Interrogations took place at No 11 Compound Kokopo and at the witness Compound Rabaul.

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