The Significance of Military Mail for the Soldier

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The trend in recent studies in military history is to make "the soldier" the main theme of research. This tendency corresponds to a rising demand by nations to re-investigate Japan's war-guilt, now that fifty years have gone by since the end of WW II. In trying to face such demands, which call for examination into the relationship of the Japanese people, rather than Japan as a nation, to the war, it is inevitable that the soldier emerges as a focal point in the research.

Military mail provides essential material in our consideration of "the soldier". This paper focuses on the letters sent to TAKAHASHI Minejiro, who served for many years as an elementary school teacher in Fujine Village in Waga County, Iwate Prefecture, by his former pupils, looking to the letters as a starting point in approaching the soldiers of the village as our subject.

TAKAHASHI was a man devoted to activities ranging from local reform to military assistance, both of which were strongly linked together in his mind. The SHINYU (True Friend), which TAKAHASHI edited and continued to send to the battlefront, served as the backbone of his activities.

Why did the soldiers, in their communications from the battlefront, almost unanimously write of their mission to bring "eternal peace to the Orient"? There was more to this cliche than a simple repetition of the war objective advocated by the state; the soldiers struggled to bridge the gap between their own fates as drafted soldiers and the country, which was responsible for their call to arms. This paper attempts to seek evidence of this struggle in the difference between the wording in communications sent by drafted soldiers and that of letters written by professional soldiers who had voluntarily enlisted for service. Furthermore, all of the soldiers' correspondences were filled with a sense of longing for home. Or rather, they were practically bound by a sense of honor with regard to their hometowns. This was not just homesickness; there was dire concern on the part of the soldiers about whether the families that they had left behind could manage to survive. Because their anxiety about their futures was so deep, the soldiers tried all the more to severe such sentiments by identifying with the ideal of a righteous war and this led also to a sense of pride in belonging to the "division of the national treasure". These soldiers harbored a spirit of allegiance, which had no connection with the samurai spirit, or bushido, which was also popularized at around the same time.

In addition, this paper also examines the psychological conflict of the soldiers, arising as a result of being forced to take part in the act of killing, and the soldiers' habituation to such circumstances. The paper also addresses the question of why the Chinese resistance was so strong: an issue, which they ultimately could not overcome.