

# War Memories, the Risks of Oral History and Moments of Hope : Unearthing the “Field of Spears”

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## Abstract

This paper considers a number of problems which arose after the publication of my earlier work entitled *Field of Spears*. I will discuss how I sought clarity in the murky waters of war memories, and consider instances in which I encountered inconsistent evidence and difficult decisions about how much to report of the sometimes tragic or shameful actions of informants during the stressful conditions of war. The manner in which I dealt with these issues will also be discussed. I will also consider how the problems facing oral history researchers do not end with the fieldwork process, but may begin in earnest after the publication of their results. I close with an account of how positive experiences can help to heal the scars of earlier trauma.

Key words : Oral History, Qualitative Methodological Issue, Peace & Reconciliation Studies

## Introduction

On the night of July 19/20, 1945, a B-29 crew under the command of Captain Gordon “Porky” Jordan was shot down during a routine mining mission to the harbor of Niigata City in Northwest Honshu on the Inland Sea. Most of the crewmen bailed out over the countryside on the outskirts and touched down in darkness, where each awaited his turn to face air raid wardens, soldiers from anti-aircraft battalions, local defense groups and spear-wielding civilians. Jordan’s crew had manned a lead bomber at the forefront of the Allied air campaign, which had turned sixty-four major Japanese cities to ashes. Wartime propaganda and grief for the loss of family members among turned to fierce anger as the remains of Jordan’s bomber burned in an open field. In a drama that was replayed elsewhere throughout Japan, a race was on between the Japanese military and civilians for who would find the crewmen first. In the aftermath, four crewmen were confirmed dead. The surviving seven were imprisoned, tortured and repatriated after the war. Many of the Japanese villagers and military personnel were left to deal with their own painful memories of their participation in the capture of the Jordan Crew.

This incident is the focus of *Field of Spears* (Paulownia Press 2007) which reconstructs what happened on that July evening in 1945. The book is presented in narrative form and draws heavily from oral interviews of both Japanese eyewitnesses and surviving B-29 crewmen. These interviews were cross-referenced to declassified military documents, wartime letters, diaries, and photos taken by Japanese during the time of the crew’s capture.

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*Field of Spears* explores the disturbing transformations that ordinary people may undergo in times of war, seeks to solve the mystery surrounding the deaths of several crewmen, and considers the manner in which people try to deal with the remorse of later years, when war memories become a source of silent suffering.

Research for this book took over three years as I worked to gain the trust of eyewitnesses in small Japanese farming villages on the outskirts of Niigata City, the gatekeepers of rarely-accessed archives in Niigata City and the former city of Yokogoshi, and the survivors of the B-29 crew living quietly in rural American towns. All were initially suspicious of my attempts to make contact. In the end, however, both Japanese villagers and B-29 crewmen were united in the common desire to be heard, to be remembered, and to be understood. Many had stayed silent about their recollections for over half a century, but as they reached the sunset of their long lives, they wanted to lay down the burden of those days — to get it out of their bodies, so to speak — and to communicate their pain to someone who would listen sympathetically.



Figure 1 : Japanese Photo of Jordan Crew Survivors Being Transported to Niigata for their First Round of Interrogations (Courtesy of George McGraw / Valery Burati)

However, as I began to investigate beneath the surface of the accounts, I began to learn that even as virtually all of the informants had something valuable to share, many had something dreadful to hide. How they sought to relate their experiences often depended upon the place they chose to tell the story as well as the quiet presence of others who accompanied informants as a support community. In later opportunities when I had the chance to speak with some informants privately, the accounts would often contain important details that had been omitted or framed quite differently during earlier interviews. This experience highlighted for me what I call “the plasticity of war memories”.

This view is based on current scientific research that suggests memories are encoded by proteins in the brain. These proteins are broken down and resynthesized each time the memory is accessed. People literally “re-member” each time they bring memories to conscious thought. Each and every time, the process of remembering is a renewed experience connected to the past and relived in the present. However, memories are also slightly altered each time they are resynthesized. Memories are broken down in this altered form, and undergo slight changes each time they are accessed. Constant interaction with others who have had similar experiences can also create false memories, especially when strong emotions affect parts of the brain such as the amygdala.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding and deconstructing this “human element” is a regular issue for many oral historians, but some committed to a more positivist view would contend that current research on the plasticity of memory explains why testifiers change the historical record so that the story becomes increasingly about them and less about what may or may not have happened. Essentially, they can’t help themselves. Because of this, oral history studies are seen as rather fraught. This point must be given serious consideration: because informants, especially elderly ones, will have memories which have been altered over years of re-sequencing, and may have acquired false memories about their actions during wartime. Some may have simply forgotten key details. Given these facts, do oral history works such as *Field of Spears* have any value?

This paper considers a number of issues related to this question, many of which have arisen after the publication of *Field of Spears*. I will discuss how I sought clarity in the murky waters of war memories. I consider instances in which I encountered inconsistent evidence, instances in which aspects of the written record appeared questionable, and incidents in which I suspected that testifiers were either not telling the truth, or were attempting to sanitize their stories. The manner in which I dealt with these issues will also be discussed. What follows is less a prescriptive guide on how to do oral history research, and is more akin to a methodological case study, a qualitative confessional of sorts, that reflects upon the difficulties and personal dilemmas one can face when doing fieldwork of this nature.

I will also consider how the problems facing oral history researchers do not end with the fieldwork process, but may begin in earnest after the publication of their results, as informants react to how their stories have been retold. I close with an account of how positive experiences can help to heal the scars of earlier trauma, even in spite of the manner in which informants have re-membered past events.

### Dealing with Inconsistent Evidence

One of the crucial issues that emerged as I tried to reconstruct through oral testimony what actually happened that night in July 1945 was the inconsistent testimony surrounding

the place and manner in which the four crewmen of the B-29 perished. Immediately following the war, the surviving B-29 crewmen were debriefed by US military investigators. They reported that Japanese military police interrogators and guards were quite forthright about the fact that three of the four were killed on the ground, and that the fourth crewmen had gone down with the plane.

By contrast, in the days of the Occupation and even up to the present, villagers have maintained that all four crewmen died in the crash. Nevertheless, the villagers' story was often inconsistent. In the first report, from the head of the village, a man named Meguro Keiichi, all four crewmen were found dead in the aft cabin of the B-29 after the fires had died down.<sup>2</sup> Meguro reported later that two men were in the front cabin and two were in the rear, adding that a body was found hung over the gun spindle in the aft cabin of the plane.<sup>3</sup> But other witnesses report two crewmen being thrown clear of the plane, while some speak of two being at the crash site, one in the plane and another being brought back later.<sup>4</sup>

To understand from where such discrepancies might emerge, one must also account for the "fear factor". As indicated earlier, on the day after the crash, Captain Jordan was told during his interrogation in Niigata (through an English-speaking interpreter) that two of his crew had resisted capture and, as the military police interrogators put it, "couldn't be taken alive." Another had "died gloriously" by going down with the plane.<sup>5</sup> This confirmed for Jordan that interrogators spoke of the co-pilot, who had always stated to him and others in the crew that, if they were shot down, he would never bail out. Later when imprisoned in Tokyo, another guard who claimed to have been on rotation in Niigata approached the crew and spoke of how he and a group of soldiers were shot at by a member of their crew, and then how they chased him down and killed him in retaliation. The guard showed a pair of lieutenant's bars that he kept as a souvenir.<sup>6</sup> The crew surmised this guard spoke of the bombardier, who also vowed that he would never let himself be taken alive if shot down over Japan.

Knowledge of some or all of these incidents circulated widely among people living in the vicinity of the crash, and was still remembered vividly by the wife of Meguro many years later during a recorded interview with local Japanese historians.<sup>7</sup> During the final days of the war, there was little fear among villagers of relating what may have happened to the crewmen who had perished, especially since American flyers were placed on Imperial Japan's military version of death row for their role in the firebombings of Tokyo and other major cities. Conversely, fear of what local residents would interpret as retaliation from occupation forces certainly would color postwar testimony, especially if they felt that something needed to be withheld in regard to the mistreatment of the downed flyers. Today, speaking about the fate of the lost crewmen has been something of a taboo subject in the area, and most now firmly attest to stating that all crewmen perished in the plane crash, even though some of the

earliest evidence suggests otherwise.



Figure 2 : Japanese Photo of the Bodies of Two Members of the Jordan Crew Recovered Following the Downing of their B-29 (Courtesy of George McGraw / Valery Burati)

One example of this was the discovery of a set of photographs taken when Japanese military police arrived at the scene. One photo showed the bound and battered bodies of the two enlisted crewmen outside the plane, with one of them tied to a small sled. For crewman tied to the sled (Florio Spero), he had frequently told others on the crew that if they had to bail out, he would rather go out in a blaze of glory than be taken alive. A surviving crewman who bailed out in the vicinity of Spero first reported to investigators that after touching down he listened to Spero's screams as he was being captured and beaten, though later for personal reasons, he retracted this part of his testimony and stated that he would take the secret to the grave.<sup>8</sup> In another account written by a now deceased Japanese man who participated in the capture of another crewman, he reported that through his basic English skills, he learned that the crewman was 22 years old. During his escort to the Kyogase Village Offices, where captured crewmen were being first held, the informant writes about how the crewman was set upon by villagers wielding clubs, stones and farm implements. The crewman, though bleeding and injured, was delivered into military police custody.<sup>9</sup> The only member of the Jordan Crew who was 22 years old at the time was Max Adams, the body of the second crewman in the picture.

Discussing where the bodies were found with one of the surviving B-29 crewmen shed further light on this issue : it established the impossibility of one account of anyone being able to hang upon a machine gun spindle, either before or after a crash, since it is not possible to make physical contact with the spindle, due to its place within the firing mechanism in the

gunnery position, which is inside the hull of the plane. Photographs in the *Niigata Nippo* newspaper and eyewitness sketches showed this part of the plane to be only barely intact at the crash site.



Figure 3 : Japanese Photo of B-29 Crash Site (Courtesy of George McGraw / Valery Burati)

Nevertheless, the villagers I have spoken with have always maintained, even in the face of contradictions within their story, that all four crewmen died in the crash. In *Field of Spears* I wrote that, despite inconsistencies in their narrative, the overall story cannot be discounted outright, because the last time any of the four crewmen who died were seen alive was just before the crew had bailed out of the B-29. The final military investigative report also reaches the same conclusion, and I highlight this fact in the book. At the same time, I also suggested that it *might* have been possible that three of the four crewmen were killed by Japanese *military personnel* after bailing out. In the end, with contradictory evidence and an awareness of the sensitivities involved in challenging the long-held narratives of witnesses, I decided to report various theories as to what might have taken place and gave scope to readers to draw their own conclusions, something along the lines of *Rashomon*. The conclusions drawn by the villagers about what I had said, with the help of an error-strewn article in the *Asahi Shimbun*, were to jeopardize the reconciliation process that I had hoped to initiate. I will return to this point later in the paper.

### Counterbalancing Reconstructed Memories with the Written Record

Confusion is a part of battle. The first public document to come out in Japanese about the downing of the B-29 over Niigata (a *Niigata Nippo* newspaper article on July 21, 1945) reported that two B-29s had been shot down. This was in contrast to US military reports revealing that only one B-29 had been shot down in the missions of the Sixth Bombardment Group stationed on the South Pacific island of Tinian.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in the early days of

the occupation, US war crimes investigators devoted time to finding out how many B-29s were actually lost, and Japanese historians are still asking the same questions.<sup>11</sup>

My interviews helped to piece together what likely took place. After an exhaustive search, I tracked down both Japanese and American eyewitnesses, and compared their accounts to declassified military documents. There were several mining missions to Niigata from April 1945 up to the end of the war, but according to US records, up until July 19/20, no B-29 was reported to have been hit by anti-aircraft fire before this mission. There was a low risk of another incident being confused with the Jordan crew mission. Another B-29 copilot on the same mission over Niigata on the night of 19/20 July confirmed that all of the other planes actually returned, with damage.<sup>12</sup> This was confirmed in part by the navigator of the Jordan Crew, who reported to a Japanese historian about seeing another B-29 burning,<sup>13</sup> as well as by a replacement crewman on another B-29 by the name of Robert Geltenbach, who reports the terror he felt when his crew dealt with an engine fire over Niigata.<sup>14</sup>

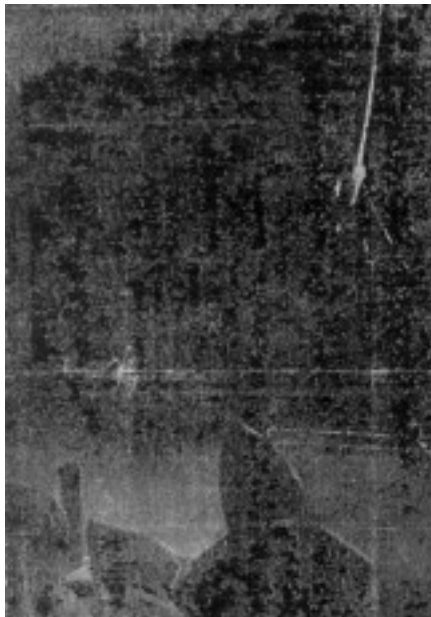


Figure 4 : Grainy photo from the front page of the *Niigata Nippo* on July 21, 1945. The white streak in the upper right corner is Jordan's plane as it burned in the nighttime sky. The ghostly figures at the bottom are Niigata citizens in clothing designed to offer protection from flak.

Crews were trained in strategies for facing these situations ; they returned and Geltenbach lived to a ripe old age. Japanese eyewitnesses closer to the crash site and returning crewmen both reported seeing one B-29 that broke up in the air before it finally crashed.<sup>15</sup> The *Niigata Nippo* article showed pictures of the wing which had broken off and a burned-out

engine which had crashed in a different location. The engine of the B-29 was as large as some aircraft of the time. I deduced that while two B-29s had been hit, one made it back, and the eyewitnesses further from the crash site had misinterpreted the separate flaming light going down in the night sky as the first of two B-29s instead of what it really was — a fuel-rich B-29 engine burning brightly as it plummeted to the ground.



Figure 5 : Photo of B-29 Wreckage (*Niigata Nippo*, July 21, 1945).

For local leaders at the time in Niigata, however, two B-29s were better than one, and better for Niigata citizens' morale, which had plummeted by the end of the war. This episode exemplifies the possible fallibilities in the documentary record and how oral testimony may sometimes actually help to correct documentary errors.

### Sanitizing the Truth

Informants often struggle with the image they wish to maintain of themselves. Sometimes this is at odds with their actions in war. There are regrets. An oral historian is often seen as one who enters the lives of people with the intent of rummaging around in the dank basement of painful personal memories. Before embarking on such a quest, oral historians have to face some hard questions, especially when working with elderly people remembering their most vulnerable of moments: How far does one dig? Of what is discovered, how much should be told before finding oneself either on the slippery slope to sensationalism, or on the frigid coast of objectified judgmentalism?

For me, a Caucasian American who had lived in Japan for nearly twenty years, I had to



deal with these issues while working with informants from both sides of the conflict. For example, there was the case of one crewman who had died on the mission to Niigata, but whose personal effects, which included a considerable amount of written material, were sent to his family. Based on those records, he was idolized by his children, who had been too young to know their father before he died. During my research, they were extremely helpful in providing additional documents and photos, with the understanding that they wanted to know as much as they could about their father. However, I began to learn how this particular crewman had been at the center of a number of difficult and sometimes awkward events. For example, it emerged that he had visited a bordello a few nights before they were to begin their flight to Tinian, and found to his chagrin as they were on their way to Tinian that he had contracted venereal disease. His need for immediate treatment stateside delayed the crew on their maiden flight. Even after this incident, the crewman continued to get involved in further episodes with other women at Tinian, and disciplinary problems that put him at odds with his commanding officers. To further complicate matters, this crewman's death was particularly grisly and the manner in which his body was later abused by villagers was graphic. I was caught between compassion for the pain I was sure to cause for one who wanted to know everything about a father he had never known, and a desire to portray an unvarnished view of young men at war.

Faced with this delicate situation, I turned to other crewmen in an attempt to include them into the decision-making process. This did not make things easier: Some advised me to be frank about human strengths and frailties, while others vented rage that their unmentionable secrets had been discovered by an outsider. After some soul searching, I decided that there was value in conveying the multiplicity of views expressed. At the same time, not wanting to risk losing key informants for the book, I chose to mention the event concerning the crew without naming names. The aim was to shed light on the crew's humanity without deconstructing anyone's personal character.

I experienced greater difficulty during an incident involving the crew's navigator. He frequently told me during interviews of his regret about his youthful pride, and on a couple of occasions, he spoke of feeling underprepared for navigating a B-29 on perilous low altitude combat missions. Further reasons for his regrets became apparent when I learned from a letter that he had written earlier to a Japanese historian, and which was in the Yokogoshi city archives, that this navigator remorsefully mentioned that in his youthful overconfidence, he had attempted to cut a few hours off their return trip, and directed the captain to take a return route that took them over the middle of Niigata City on a direct course to their base in Tinian.<sup>16</sup> There had been intelligence reports and mission debriefings from B-29 crews back from Niigata that radar-guided searchlights and better trained anti-aircraft crews had been sent to protect the port area.<sup>17</sup> However, it seems clear that the navigator was unaware that his decision put their bomber in the range of the crack anti-aircraft units transferred in

from Tokyo, who quickly shot them down.

Unfortunately, I was to learn later that the navigator had never shared this information with his family and this revelation from my research was especially painful for his patriotic sons, who occupied responsible positions in the military, clergy and the US federal government. Learning of their father's youthful error was at odds with the image they had constructed over the years of their father being a war hero. As this aspect of my research was crucial for understanding the reasons behind the downing of the Jordan Crew, I felt I would have been remiss if I did not include it in the book, but in an effort to soften the blow to the navigator's family, I sought also to indicate the captain's culpability in this tragic incident. Interpersonal issues had resulted in the captain distancing himself from the navigator. The bombardier on the crew, who was the captain's best friend, was required by regulations to learn how to navigate so that he and the navigator could work in shifts on the long flights back and forth from Japan. However, the bombardier never wanted to learn how to navigate, the captain never pressed the issue, thus leaving the entire burden of navigation to one man. This opened the door for errors related to exhaustion. By not paying more personal attention to crew training, I suggested that he was at least partly responsible for the failure of their last mission. In the end, however, this did little to assuage bitter feelings, and I lost contact with informants in this family as a result.

Similarly in my interviews with Japanese informants, sometimes what I learned from my investigations clearly clashed with local folklore. This was apparent during an interview with a small group of villagers, who at the time of the B-29 crash were young teenage boys. They had witnessed some of the events that took place and participated in a number of incidents that today remain a source of quiet shame.

The elderly men spoke in great detail about the crash and, as their stories shifted to the fate of the dead crewmen, all spoke about how one had died when he had bailed out and his parachute had not opened in time. Later, however, they spoke of approaching the plane in the morning and of finding two bodies in the rear cabin. They were lying side-by-side in the aft cabin with both their parachutes half-opened. It was obvious, the villagers said, that all had died in the crash.

In most interviews, I tended to let people speak as much as possible, but before I could catch myself I blurted out the obvious: "If at least one of the crewmen had died after bailing out, how did he get back into the plane?" The men were stunned by the question. They had mostly been talking and reminiscing among themselves, and I had been sitting there mostly as a silent spectator. Now all turned their eyes to me with cold and hostile stares. The silence grew heavier with each passing second. A local Japanese historian, who had set up the meeting and was present during the interviews, recognized the awkwardness of the

moment and quickly inserted, “Oh, but he was brought back to the plane from somewhere else, right?” The men looked visibly relieved: “Oh, yes, that’s right. That’s right. That’s how it was. He was dead when we found him, though.” Everyone’s face was saved, local memories were preserved. I ventured no more questions with this group of informants.<sup>18</sup>

In this case as in others, I decided to report the villagers’ story and their reactions to my question. I placed this event alongside the other features of the story that I had uncovered during my research, such as reports in the archives from Japanese witnesses to severe beatings of the crew from other villages further away from the crash site, and the memoirs of other Japanese eyewitnesses to attacks by civilians in the grip of war hysteria.<sup>19</sup> By laying out all the clues I had found, I wanted to include readers in the process of considering possible implications.

Throughout the research, I had hoped to somehow serve as a bridge between both the American and Japanese informants. This proved to be far more difficult than I had realized. When I approached the elderly American B-29 crewmen, speaking to someone like me, one who had lived in Japan for nearly twenty years, could not be considered as truly “American” in a traditional sense. Visits to the United States were expensive and rare, and some informants died before they felt comfortable with sitting down and speaking with me face-to-face. Talking with American informants over the phone and communicating through letters had their relative strengths and weaknesses, but my desire for interaction that was up close and personal was not always satisfied.

For villagers on the outskirts of Niigata, no amount of time of me living in Japan could change the fact that my face reminded them of the young men captured in the area so many years ago. Japanese language issues were especially challenging, since the villagers spoke a country dialect that is heard along the Agano River Valley area in Niigata Prefecture. It is as difficult for a native Japanese to understand this dialect as listening to a strong Louisiana bayou accent would be for an American from Minnesota. For this reason, I was careful to work with competent interpreters and translators who would relate informant data to standard Japanese and English in order to verify and crosscheck everything used for the book.

I wanted to give this linguistic resource team greater acknowledgement in the book, but because of the controversial nature of the story, they, as well as local Japanese historians, requested anonymity. This is often the case when dealing with testimony about painful war memories. Many want the message to get out to a wider audience, but are understandably afraid of the personal social fallout that could result from participation in such a project. I had no choice but to allow people to work with me in the manner they felt most comfortable, though I worried about whether the use of anonymous sources would risk degrading the

book's credibility in the minds of skeptical readers. In a way, this did come back to haunt me when difficulties arose from my interaction with elements of the Japanese media. Some Japanese colleagues sought to come to my aid by proposing that, as a second language speaker of Japanese, I had most likely misunderstood my informants, unaware that native Japanese had helped me throughout the project. Except for being able to explain this point in this journal and to Japanese residents in Niigata during times in the summer when local groups typically invited me to speak about *Field of Spears*, I lacked a means for getting this point mentioned in media sources.

In the end, I decided that a reconstruction of the last mission of the Jordan Crew required the presentation of several possible scenarios. Such an acknowledgement of the inability to create a definitive account is the final conclusion of many historical inquiries. The past does not always reveal its secrets to those seek them; and where gaps remain between agreed historical facts, there are always the "suggestions" of contemporary society on how these gaps may best be filled. Herein lies the growing skepticism regarding "objective, scientific history", and the recent growth in interest in the narrative turn, postmodernism and memory studies.

### The Risky Nature of Oral History

War memories are often the source of deep-seated trauma for witnesses. The oral historian therefore faces dilemmas concerning how to use informant testimony. There is a difficult balance between respecting the wishes of witnesses and the researcher's goals of verifiable conclusions. This accounts for a large part of the explanation for why so much published testimony of war experiences in Japan by Japanese historians and journalists draws from verbatim testimony with no accompanying commentary. Witnesses are happy because their personal reasons for testifying — whether therapeutic or ideological — are fulfilled. Testimony collectors do not need to go through the risky process of verifying, assessing or exposing errors in the testimony.

Oral historians use testimony to aid the construction of a narrative about the past. Our interest in the pursuit of the "truth" and verifiable conclusions may not necessarily be what our witnesses want. They want to be heard, to be understood, and to transmit their views of the past to a wider audience. They may not wish to have their memories challenged, or exposed as contradictory to other evidence. They feel their reconstructed memories in the present and relive them as they remember. To question them is to deny the passion and pain they feel at that very moment.

Therefore, while *Field of Spears* received a number of positive reviews in both scholarly history journals and in the Japanese and American media for its depth of research and message of reconciliation, problems arose with informants in the villages where I conducted

my research, especially in the hamlet of Yakeyama in Niigata prefecture, which was closest to the B-29 crash site. Most notably, the book in some quarters was represented by a conclusion attributed to me but which I did not make: “American soldiers were murdered by villagers in Yakeyama”.

How could such a situation arise? Part of the problem lies in that *Field of Spears* has not been translated into Japanese, with the exception of the most sensational sections in *Sekai* magazine.<sup>20</sup> I had contacted the publishers of *Sekai* for a translation of the entire book. Their decision, which mirrored that of others I have approached, was that a Japanese-language version of *Field of Spears* would be unprofitable. The editors wanted the focus of the articles to be upon trauma, and in an effort to meet this demand (and get published in a prestigious magazine) I made the grave error of cherry picking sections of the book that I felt would relate to the interests of the editorial board. That mistake on my part was compounded by space limitations for magazine articles, which left me unable to go into the detail of the original book and thereby outline all the complex nuances of the various hypotheses about what might have happened on the night the B-29 was shot down. Consequently, later on, news reporters lacking the time or language ability to read the book in English have often read only the *Sekai* articles, extrapolated from there, and related to testifiers what they thought was written in *Field of Spears*. Even putting aside for the moment the issue of language, having one's work traduced by the media is a risk that scholars may have to face. But in my situation, given my errors in trying to relate a complex story back into Japanese with limits on space and focus, in the minds of some Japanese readers, I had furthered the perception that a foreign writer could only be critical of the Japanese. They did not know that, at least in the English version, an honest attempt at a balanced and compassionate account had been written.

Additional problems with Japanese media sources can be seen in an article in the *Asahi Shimbun* on 14 August 2009, which has to the left of the main title (“*Takeyari no mura*’, *shogen no hakkutsu*”, Unearthing testimony from the “Field of Spears”) was the subtitle “*Beihei satsugai*” *ni jimoto hanpatsu*, Locals React Against “American Soldiers Murdered”. The inverted commas around the phrase *beihei satsugai* could have two nuances: first, that “American soldiers murdered” was a quotation of my conclusion, and second, that the newspaper was distancing itself from that conclusion. The body of the article clearly stated that the book said some of the surviving airmen were murdered by villagers (*sonmin*), albeit contradicted a few sentences later by a sentence that more accurately, though not precisely, conveyed what I had said in the book: there was a “possibility” that the airmen had been killed by villagers.<sup>21</sup> What I had actually said was that there was a possibility the airmen were killed by military personnel, specifically members of a local anti-aircraft battery. The differences are extremely significant. Uniformed Japanese military personnel killing uniformed American aircrew who refused to surrender would be entirely legal within the laws

of war. The word “*satsugai*” in the Japanese article contains the nuance of criminality and suggests I had accused villagers of killing the soldier. If this were true, I would have been accusing the villagers of a war crime — something that one of my closest Japanese research collaborators, deeply angered at what he saw as my betrayal of Japanese village informants, was quick to point out. Even giving the *Asahi Shimbun* the benefit of the doubt (and the reporter who wrote the article has ignored all requests from myself to present my side of this story), the fact remains that villagers in Yakeyama reacted angrily by canceling subsequent meetings and cutting off contact. The message of reconciliation that I hoped would result from publication of the book had been replaced by quiet recriminations.

In actuality, as mentioned above, issues of legality were less of an issue, given that some of the B-29 crewmen resorted to using their .45 automatic pistols to evade capture, but clearly there was controversy over whose viewpoints and interpretations were valid. In addition, as one military historian in Australia who read *Field of Spears* observed, regardless of having “set out all the possibilities and evidence for what happened on that night — which is what a historian has to do if he’s going to be fair — . . . the trouble is that the reader (or *Asahi* journalist) then ‘makes up his mind’ as to which is the stronger case, and then ‘remembers’ that as the author’s ‘conclusion!’”<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps inconsequential that the precise reasons for the misunderstandings regarding my conclusion of there being a “possibility” (and not a firm conclusion) that the airmen were killed by military personnel (not villagers) on the ground. The fact that my account did not repeat verbatim the narrative passed down in the village as the definitive account of what happened that night in itself risked evoking the anger of witnesses. As a practitioner of oral history, being interviewed and seeing how my own words had ended up being misused in the writings of someone allowed me to understand the pain of some informants. The whole experience, therefore, while painful, became an important personal lesson.

### Shared Trauma

I found myself facing a situation where my local reputation had been tarnished and my relationship with local informants had been seriously damaged, if not lost altogether. This robbed me of any sense of satisfaction from the positive reviews coming from abroad. Feeling as if I had both failed and been deeply misunderstood, in the end I decided to put *Field of Spears* to rest. I was psychologically exhausted, and perhaps it was just best to move on.

The story would have finished there, were it not for two people: Fuyoko Nishisato, a journalist attached to the German media network ZDF in Tokyo, and Susan Kae Grant, daughter of Robert Grant of the Jordan Crew, a professor at Texas Women’s College and an internationally acclaimed artist. Nishisato had for many years been involved with the Japan POW Research Network, which engages in the creation of oral histories, works to uncover hidden documents and refutes revisionist efforts to skew public perceptions of Japan’s

activities during the Second World War. Another part of this group's mission has been to invite former POWs back to Japan where they can meet their former captors, visit places of past trauma and in the process, find a measure of healing and reconciliation. Grant, as the daughter of a former POW, was able to see firsthand the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on her father in the years after the war. Reading *Field of Spears* helped her to better understand what her father went through, and she was moved after witnessing the positive changes in her father's demeanor after he had opened up and shared about his ordeal in Japan. She had her own issues to work through as well, since research does suggest secondary post-traumatic stress can affect the children of former POWs.<sup>23</sup> Grant wanted to come to Japan, to retrace her father's footsteps, and if possible, to go the village where his plane had gone down. Nishisato was willing to help in all aspects of the logistics necessary for getting Grant and others who wished to travel with her. My participation was needed.

This invitation to help had arrived just as things had quieted down from the *Asahi* article. I did not relish the thought of trying to re-approach people who believed that I had somehow betrayed them. I also began to be conscious of feelings of aversion, which puzzled me. Oral historians have noted that, in the process of listening to graphic accounts of torture, death and rage, and through empathizing with the pain and suffering of informants, the trauma of the informant can transfer to the researcher.<sup>24</sup> It becomes a shared story, and a shared trauma.

I thought that I had been objective and had somehow avoided this, but I was mistaken: I realized that the years of working with informants, of delving deep into their stories and lives, and then of losing the trust of some, had all taken a toll on me. Anticipating the stress of having to re-member what had been shared to me by informants evoked waves of exhaustion, and I realized that I would rather avoid the pain. "Perhaps," I thought, "this is how my informants felt when I first approached them to research *Field of Spears*."

Such reflections then sparked within me a deep sense of shame: I had no right to feel traumatized. The informants had experienced deep fear, hunger, and in some cases, torture, but not I. They were the ones who truly suffered, not I. I needed to rise above my feelings and reach out, just as my earlier informants had done. This was their story, not mine, and what was required was that I step up to the plate, help where I could, and then get out of the way.

### New Hope

And so began the next stage of this story. During the time of preparation and of reestablishing contact with area informants, pain was indeed felt, words were said, things were expressed, and in the end, there was a quiet yet guarded sense of forgiveness. The door was now open for Susan Grant to retrace her father's footsteps and reach out to villagers in Yakeyama in what became, for all involved, a surprising moment of peace.



Figure 6 : Photos of Yakeyama Storytellers (Left) and Susan Grant (Right) at B-29 Crash Site on July 20, 2010

Pictures truly capture the spirit of what happened. Sixty-five years later to the day, on July 20, 2010, village leaders and bearers of local memories met Susan Grant at the barren ground where her father’s plane went down. Everyone was tense at first, and then the storytellers began to relate their memories to Grant through an interpreter. As she listened intently with a mixture of respect and wonderment, everyone began to relax. Things were working out. Grant’s listening attitude was having a positive effect.

Throughout the afternoon, the villagers took Grant to other places of interest. At times, she would briefly reach out and touch the old storytellers. I observed how this had a disarming, softening and almost therapeutic power. Expressions lost their intensity and the tough farmers gradually became increasingly gentle and grandfatherly in their demeanor.



Figure 7 : Photos of Susan Grant (Left) and Keeper of Village Memories Tadashi Saito (Right)

Near the end, many more villagers came out to greet Grant. An interesting aspect of this hamlet is that most continue to keep pieces of the B-29 in hidden places, and produce them at special moments. To me, it was almost as if some wanted to say through the wreckage of that long-dead plane, “This is where it all changed for me. No matter how hard I want to



forget, I can't throw it away." And yet, in the simplicity of the moment with Grant, new and healing memories were added to the old. From the genuine smiles and warmth expressed during that day, something good truly happened. Sometimes hope can spring forth after all. That, I believe, is a lesson worth remembering.



Figure 8 : Yakeyama Villagers Displaying Wreckage of B-29.

### Concluding Thoughts

In this essay, I have reviewed some of the methodological issues encountered during the writing of *Field of Spears*, an oral history reconstruction of the downing of a B-29 over Niigata. I considered challenges and issues related to the proposition of recording traumatic memories, and recounted how the subsequent misrepresentation of my conclusions when misreported in the Asahi Newspaper unraveled the painstaking work of building trust and mutual understanding between witnesses and researcher, thereby risking the loss of a peace initiative. Were it not for the determination of others who had read the book and were equally invested in reconciliation, the project would have collapsed. My experiences as an oral history researcher reveal not only the invaluable nature of testimony as evidence, but also some of the inherent risks in oral history or testimony-based historiography, especially when dealing with controversial topics.

If the research for *Field of Spears* has demonstrated anything, it is that testimony, even if flawed and inconsistent, may be of great value, either in shedding light on the complex processes by which individuals remember and reconstruct the past or in highlighting flaws in the documentary record. As demonstrated by the example given earlier about the *Niigata Nippo* newspaper article saying two B-29s were shot down, the use of testimony with careful cross-referencing to all other available evidence may reveal errors in documentary sources. Such arguments clearly undermine the claims of some positivist historians, that synthesizing the documentary record carries more weight than working only with spoken discourse.

Despite such benefits of an oral history approach, publications based on testimony risk

affecting the memories and emotions of witnesses, perhaps even to the extent of causing complete breakdown in the researcher-witness relationship. While these risks can be minimized by solid communication during the article writing process, once the research is published there remains the possibility of a third party entering the researcher-witness relationship. The priorities of third parties are not necessarily in accordance with either researcher or witness. In the case of the newspaper reportage regarding *Field of Spears*, for example, it is not hard to see why the angle “American researcher claims villagers killed downed flyers, villagers respond angrily” made a catchier headline than “American researcher suggests various hypotheses about what happened, villagers reject one of those hypotheses”.

Behind these problems lies the “history issue”, which at the state level merely obscures the myriad of individual cases in Japan and across Asia where history remains raw, unresolved and contested. My dream for a reconciliation process based on this specific oral history project came to a rude awakening as I faced the real world of my informants’ private trauma and long-standing issues. Thinking about the problems caused by my erstwhile dealings with the Japanese media, and how this had compounded the pain of some informants remained a nagging source of regret until Susan Grant decided to come to Japan in order to meet villagers in a spirit of peace and acceptance. Even out of the scars of traumatic war memories, sometimes there emerges the surprising possibility of hope. My experiences illustrate that however much Japan and its former enemies can forge new relationships at the level of the state, in the end, it will be up to individuals to transcend their personal experiences and memories of war, and add to them new memories of peace. Despite the risks involved, as both an academic and oral historian, I feel this is something well worth striving for, both now and in the future.

#### Endnotes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Of particular interest in this area are works by Joseph LeDoux (1998) *The Emotional Brain : The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York : Touchstone), Nobel Prize Winner Eric Kandel’s (2006) research *In Search of Memory : The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (New York : W.W. Norton & Company) and studies by Karim Nader (2003) at McGill University in “Memory Traces Unbound” (*Trends in Neuroscience* Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 65-72).
- <sup>2</sup> ‘Investigation Division Reports # 226’ (GHQ/SCAP Records. Record Group 331 : National Archives and Records Service, March 1946 — April 1948. NARA, Washington DC, photocopied).
- <sup>3</sup> John Reitze (2nd Lt.), ‘Report of Recovery Team 1 (T1J27-141)’ (HQ Eighth Army APO 343, Memorial Branch, Quartermaster General, 1946, photocopied).
- <sup>4</sup> Miyo Meguro, interview by Toshihide Uemura, July 1, 1998, tape recording, The B-29 Downing Incident, Former Yokogoshi City History Department, Yokogoshi, Niigata.

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- <sup>5</sup> Edmund Steffler (Capt.), 'Missing Air Crew Report # 14786' (College Park, Maryland: NARA, 1945, July 23, photocopied).
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Burkle, 'Affidavit' (Judge Advocate General (Army), Record Group 153, War Crimes Branch Case Files, Case 33-130, 1944-1949, photocopied).
- <sup>7</sup> Chozo Shimizu, Kyomi Shimizu, Choei Nagai, Miyo Meguro, Masao Saito, Rinbei Kuga, interview by Toshihide Uemura, July 1, 1998, tape recording.
- <sup>8</sup> Edmund Steffler (Capt.), 'Missing Air Crew Report # 14786' (College Park, Maryland: NARA, 1945, July 23, photocopied). Robert Grant, interview by author, April 23, 2004, MD Recording.
- <sup>9</sup> Teitaro Sato, 'Digressions about the B-29 Downing,' Gozu Hometown Culture 7, December, 1984, 60-61. Translated by Hiromi Hadley.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert K. Hall, 'Report on Capt. (Now Major) Gordon P. Jordan and Crew, Missing in Action 19/20 July 1945' (San Francisco, California: Sixth Bombardment Group, Office of the Group Intelligence Officer, 15 August, 1945, photocopied), 1-2.
- <sup>11</sup> Chozo Shimizu, Kyomi Shimizu, Choei Nagai, Miyo Meguro, Masao Saito, Rinbei Kuga, interview by Toshihide Uemura, July 1, 1998, tape recording.
- <sup>12</sup> Harry George, interview by Gregory Hadley, August 24, 2003, notes.
- <sup>13</sup> Paul Trump, Lititz, PA, to Hitoshi Fukuda, Questionnaires to B-29 Crewmen Lost over Yokogoshi, Yokogoshi Town Department of History, Yokogoshi, Niigata, Japan.
- <sup>14</sup> Lawrence Smith, 9th Bombardment Group (VH) History (Princeton, NJ: 9th Bomb Group Association, 1995), 338.
- <sup>15</sup> Yoshikazu Nakamura, interview by Toshihide Uemura, July 1, 1998, tape recording, The B-29 Downing Incident, Former Yokogoshi City History Department, Yokogoshi, Niigata. Robert K. Hall, 'Report on Capt. (Now Major) Gordon P. Jordan and Crew, Missing in Action 19/20 July 1945' (San Francisco, California: Sixth Bombardment Group, Office of the Group Intelligence Officer, 15 August, 1945, photocopied), 1-2.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Trump, Lititz, PA, to Hitoshi Fukuda, Questionnaires to B-29 Crewmen Lost over Yokogoshi, Yokogoshi Town Department of History, Yokogoshi, Niigata, Japan.
- <sup>17</sup> 20th Air Force Headquarters, Tactical Mission Report (9/10 July to 14/15 August), 116. 20th Air Force, Air Intelligence Report (San Francisco: Commanding General, USASTAF, APO 234, 1945), 20-22.
- <sup>18</sup> Motoichi Fujita, Tadashi Saito, Hikaru Sato, interview by Gregory Hadley, January 16, 2004, MD Recording.
- <sup>19</sup> Teitaro Sato, 'Digressions about the B-29 Downing,' Gozu Hometown Culture 7, December, 1984, 60-61. Translated by Hiromi Hadley., Tomonojo Kanazuka, 'The B-29 that Went Down in Yokogoshi and Those who Parachuted into Kyogase,' Hometown Niigata 6, February, 1965, 14., Kaiichiro Aboshi, 'War Memories,' Hometown Niigata 6, February, 1965, 16., 'Investigation Division Reports # 226' (GHQ/SCAP Records. Record Group 331:

National Archives and Records Service, March 1946 — April 1948. NARA, Washington DC, photocopied), ‘Investigative Division Reports # 472’ (GHQ/SCAP Records. Record Group 331, National Archives and Records Service, May 1946 — March 1947. NARA, Washington DC, photocopied).

<sup>20</sup> グレゴリー・ハドリー, 石井信平 (訳) 「竹槍の村に墜ちた B-29 (上)」 (2008 年 4 月号) 「世界」 269-277. Hadley, G. and Ishii, S. (trans), (2008, April). “The B-29 that Fell in a Village of Spears, Part 1” (in Japanese). *Sekai*, 269-277. グレゴリー・ハドリー, 石井信平 (訳) 「竹槍の村に墜ちた B-29 (下)」 (2008 年 5 月号) 「世界」 258-266. Hadley, G. and Ishii, S. (trans), (2008, May). “The B-29 that Fell in a Village of Spears, Part 2” (in Japanese). *Sekai*, 258-266.

<sup>21</sup> The exact wording of the sentence stating the airmen were murdered in Japanese is: “*Da ga, ikinokotta toujouin wo sonmin ga satsugai shita to suru naiyou wa, jimoto juumin kara tsuyoi hanpatsu wo uketa.*”. The more accurate statement later in the article reads: “‘Take no mura’ wa, kono uchi san nin ga sonmin ni satsugai sareta kanousei ga aru to shiteki suru.” My reasons for highlighting this “possibility” stemmed from the following that I uncovered during the course of my research :

A) My interviews with the B-29 crewmen found that many in the crew were terrified about the possibility of being shot down over Japan, since they had participated in the horrible firebombings of Tokyo and other major cities. The crew discussed among themselves what they would do if they had to bail out. Most said they would surrender, but two of the crewmen stated they would fight to the death rather than be captured. The co-pilot stated he would rather go down with the airplane than bail out.

B) In military reports available in the National Archives, Captain Jordan and other surviving crewmen reported to investigators about hearing two or three exchanges of small arms fire in the early morning before they were captured. Jordan also stated that while he was interrogated in Niigata, the Kempei-tai officers told him (through an interpreter) that two of his crewmen fought back and couldn’t be taken alive and another had died a glorious death by going down with the plane. The two in Jordan’s report were the same two I found from my interviews to have stated that they would never be taken alive. The one who went down with the plane turned out to be the co-pilot. According to the memoirs of an air raid warden near Kyogase, he and his group captured crewman that night. Though the air raid warden’s English was limited, he was able to find out that the crewman was twenty-two years of age. He reports that as they returned to the Kyogase town hall, they were set upon by a group of angry villagers seeking justice for the loss of family members in Tokyo and on distant battlefields. Although the crewman was badly wounded by the attack, he was delivered to the Kempei-tai, who were waiting at the town hall. However, there was only one crewman who was 22 years of age, and he was one the

four who died. What happened to this crewman after being placed in Kempei-tai custody is unknown.

- C) Another document in the archives reports that, after the surrender, the Jordan Crew was transferred to the main Tokyo POW camp in Omori. Military personnel from the Niigata POW camps were frequently transferred back and forth from Tokyo. A member of the Jordan Crew reported how one of the guards in Omori approached them. He told them that he had been in Niigata the night that Jordan's crew was shot down, and was with a group of soldiers who had a shootout with one of their crew. He told them that, after the crewman had emptied his weapon, they had chased him down and killed him. He showed the crew the lieutenant's bars that he had kept as a souvenir.
- D) Documents in the preliminary investigation of the B-29 crash by Robert Groh, a war crimes investigator, show that they had received reports that soldiers from the 1993<sup>rd</sup> Regiment (the *Haru Butai*) had killed some of the B-29 crewmen and robbed their bodies of valuables. I contacted Groh, then in his early 90s, to ask why he did not follow this lead. Groh was somewhat evasive on this point, but stated that he simply did not want to believe the reports after seeing the well-kept gravesite that the villagers in Yakeyama had made for the dead crewmen. He also told me there were more important cases to deal with. He was a key investigator in the manhunt for Kato Tetsutaro, who some readers will know to be the commandant of Niigata Camp 5B and the later author of "Watashi wa Kai ni Naritai."

Based on these findings, I wrote that it might have been possible for some of the crewmen to have been killed in a shootout with soldiers. However, I was careful note that no eyewitnesses came forth during the investigation. There was little physical evidence, since the bodies of the crew were already badly decomposed when recovered by the US Military. Reports of shootouts with military personnel surfaced only after the bodies were en route by ship back to the United States. GHQ had decided that all war crimes investigations were to be finished by 1948, and this made any further attempts at investigating these questions extremely difficult.

<sup>22</sup> James Oglethorpe, personal communication, 15 May, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Edna Hunter (1988) "Long-Term Effects of Parental Wartime Captivity on Children: Children of POW and MIA Servicemen" (*Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 312-328).

<sup>24</sup> Jo Stanley (1996) "Including the Feelings: Personal Political Testimony and Self-Disclosure" (*Oral History* Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 60-67); Mark Klempner (2000) "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma" (*The Oral History Review* Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 67-83).