

# TEARING OUT THE TRUTH

## Okuzaki Kenzo's Crusade Makes the Film of the Decade

by Tom Gill

It's more than 40 years since the end of the Pacific War. 48 years since the Imperial Army started rolling across the Pacific, butchering and destroying in the name of a shy little bespectacled man that they called god. 47 years since that army reached its high-tide and was stopped in its tracks by American and Australian troops in New Guinea. 44 years since the last remnants of the Imperial Forces vanished into the forests of that same New Guinea for a few last weeks of desperate guerrilla warfare in starvation conditions even as the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to break the Empire's back.

44 years. 44 years in which historians have carefully embalmed and sanitized the events of those dark years; in which politicians have rationalized away the policies which led to them; in which the Japanese nation collectively has carefully evaded the question of just how responsible Hirohito was for the war, and how his men came to commit some of the most hideous atrocities ever known in his name.

There's a little nest of uncomfortable taboos sitting right at the center of Japanese society today, taboos which are gently skirted round by the media, the schools, the authorities, and most of the intellectuals, while the protective layer of years grows slowly thicker.

In 1987, a remarkable movie was released in which one man sought to tear away the years, trample on the taboos, and hold up the skeletons of Imperial Japan for all to see. The man, Okuzaki Kenzo, was one of around 30 survivors from the 36th Engineering Corps, a regiment of over a thousand men which was all but annihilated in the

vicious fighting and treacherous conditions of New Guinea. Big and bony, and with a violent vitality burning in him, Okuzaki saw out the war in a P.O.W. camp.

In the film, *Yuki Yukite Shingun (The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On)*, this big and bony man comes lurching out of the tropical hell of New Guinea like a vast and righteous Frankenstein, in search of the truth.

When Okuzaki Kenzo got back to Japan after the war, he came to understand how the people had been systematically brainwashed; how the nobility of the Emperor's War had been a shabby pretence; how millions had died in the name of quasi-religious mumbo-jumbo. The shock of the truth turned him into an anarchist, dedicated to the destruction of Hirohito and the eradication of all other corruption in Japan. He acquired a passing notoriety on January 2, 1969, when he tried to fire four pachinko balls from a slingshot at Hirohito while the Emperor was greeting New Year well-wishers. As he fired them off from the crowd, he howled the name of a comrade killed in Hirohito's war.

The tiny projectiles got nowhere near their target. But notwithstanding the posturing of the Japanese Far Left, this is almost the only direct attack which has ever been made on the person of the Emperor. And ever since then, Hirohito has greeted the crowds from behind a bullet-proof window. Okuzaki Kenzo did a year in prison for the attack. He did another year for distributing leaflets in which the faces of the imperial family were montaged onto pornographic photos.

His deliberate, if eccentric, desecration of the Emperor was something he'd thought out during

another spell inside—ten years for murdering a crooked real estate broker.

By the time we meet Okuzaki in the movie, it's 1982 and he's off on another crusade. This time he's after a very specific truth: why were two privates in his unit in New Guinea executed three weeks after the war ended, in 1945?

As the film proceeds, Okuzaki sets out from his battery shop in Kobe and criss-crosses Japan in his Okuzakimobile, a van plastered with slogans—Kill Tanaka Kakuei in savage red characters—and bristling with loud speakers through which he's wont to harangue the police.

Over the next couple of years, Okuzaki tracks down no fewer than nine old soldiers from that old New Guinea unit and interrogates them as to their role in the execution of the two young soldiers.

Some of the old soldiers are very old, look very harmless, are living shirt-sleeved lives in the Japanese countryside when Okuzaki pays his unexpected and unwelcome visits. He asks them



*Okuzaki interrogating an old soldier in his house.*

this kind of question: were you in the firing squad? What were the charges? Who gave the order? The harmless old men lie. Sometimes they claim they can't remember whether they shot the two young men or not—such a long time you know—or that they weren't around at the time. But as Okuzaki collects statements and compares them, he reaches the point where he can spot a lie.

That's when he jumps on the harmless old men and starts punching them in the face. Partly to punish, partly to bully the truth out of them. As he

wrestles on the floor with them, the camera director/cameraman Hara Kazuo whirrs steadily on.

Briefly, Okuzaki establishes that by the end of the war, the 36th Independent Engineering Co had been reduced to cannibalism—eating "white pigs" (allied soldiers), "black pigs" (the natives of New Guinea) and eventually, "yellow pigs"—their own comrades. While it's never conclusively established, it seems more than likely that the victims went into the pot, and were eaten by harmless old men. Being mere privates, they were low on the brutal "pecking order" of New Guinea, 1945.

While *Yuki Yukite Shingun* has been widely praised by the critics, many have expressed reservations: was it really right for Okuzaki to beat up the old men? How about the artistic ethics of Hara, calmly filming while real, unstaged acts of violence were being carried out? At another time and in another place, such liberal cavils might merit discussion. But this is postwar Japan. In any other country have the outrages of war been assiduously covered up, the implications thoroughly avoided. In 1957 Kishi Nobusuke, a leading member of the Tojo cabinet and formerly in charge of the subjugation of Manchuria, became Prime Minister of Japan.

Imagine Goebbels or Himmler, Chancellor of West Germany.

The fact is that even today the upper echelons of politics and business in Japan include many who cultivated Emperor-worship and imperialism in pre-war years, who cheered as the army set off for New Guinea, who directly or indirectly, have been on their hands.

And then of course there's the Emperor. Hirohito has been buried with all the pomp and circumstance normally accorded to a great statesman. The official line, that Hirohito had no control over the militarists in the Cabinet and was a lover of peace who finally overruled the Cabinet to bring about the surrender, is widely believed, rarely discussed. The question is of course excluded from Japan's much-censored school history-books along with nearly all the unpleasant details of the war which might upset the kids.

Here, in short, is a country that needs more Okuzakis. Its obsessive truth-seekers, its extremists who simply won't let sleeping dogs, and soldiers, lie.

The old soldiers that Okuzaki interrogated him that Captain Koshimizu, who led the unit, gave the order for the execution, though they contradict each other on the charge—some say desertion, some say cannibalism, some say it was

stated. Okuzaki visits Koshimizu, the oldest and frailest of the lot, and asks him whether he gave the order. Koshimizu tells him that he merely passed it on from a superior, and wasn't even present at the execution.

Unconvinced, Okuzaki continues the search. He finds a man who confesses to having been in the firing squad. Sitting at the *kotatsu* with this man, a former corporal, Okuzaki reconstructs the execution, using tangerines to represent the five men in the squad, all of whom he can now name, and the two victims, Privates Yoshizawa and Nomura. Then he picks up another tangerine to represent Koshimizu. Was he here at the back? No, says the man and places the tangerine just to one side of the firing squad.

"He was just here. When the squad fired, the men didn't die right away. Captain Koshimizu finished them off with his own gun. One shot each."

This is the pivotal moment in the film, where the big lie is exposed. The tangerine is Koshimizu, but in a sense it is also Hirohito, for he is the ultimate target of Okuzaki's ruthless logic. As he shouts himself, "It is not the soldiers who committed those sins that should be punished, but Emperor Hirohito who was the Supreme

Commander of the Japanese Army." After all, whatever one may think about Hirohito the man, his public role was to take the glory of victory and total power. When the tables were turned, the rules of the game were changed, so that punishment and humiliation, the natural consequences of his position and actions, were avoided.

Okuzaki Kenzo is a simple man. He believes in the rules of the game. When justice is evaded, he is ready and willing to become a one-man enforcer.

At the end of the movie, we are given a last glimpse of Koshimizu's face. Then, newspapers are flashed up on the screen, whose headlines tell the rest of the story: how Okuzaki went to Koshimizu's house with a gun, looking to kill him; how Koshimizu wasn't around, and Okuzaki shot his son instead, seriously wounding him; how Okuzaki was arrested, saying "Even getting his son was better than nothing"; how he got another 12 years in prison; how his loyal and long-suffering wife died of cancer shortly after he went in.

That final act of Okuzaki's, and his subsequent comment, was proof for some that he was indeed mad. But it says in the Old Testament that "the sins of the father will be visited on the son"—and Okuzaki Kenzo, though he may not know it, is an Old Testament Man.



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