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UNIT 731

JAPAN'S ANGELS OF DEATH



PROLOGUE

After the conclusion of the First World War in November 1918, the Japanese government began to consider the possibility of authorizing a series of projects for the development and creation of biological weapons to be used in future warlike confrontations, based on previous studies carried out in Europe.

The highest authorities of the Japanese government eventually approved these projects and founded a research group made up of forty prominent scientists led by Dr. Ito and supervised by Commander Terunobu Hasebe. For this purpose, a research center was founded south of the city of Harbin, in the Chinese region of Manchuria, occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army since February 1932.

At the end of that year, the center began its first investigations under the supervision of the Kamo-Togo unit, a division of the Imperial Japanese Army dedicated to the development of different biological weapons. Although according to official guidelines, the objective of the investigations carried out in Harbin were aimed at preventing epidemics and ensuring a regular supply of drinking water to the Kwantung Army, their projects went much further. The person in charge of directing the operations was Medical Lieutenant General Shiro Ishii.



The Kwantung Army marching in a Manchurian town in 1932

I. LIEUTENANT GENERAL SHIRO ISHII

Born on June 25, 1892, in Shibayama, Chiba Prefecture, Shiro Ishii studied Medicine at the Kyoto Imperial University. In 1921 he enlisted in the Imperial Army with the graduation of medical lieutenant, and the following year he was transferred to the military hospital of the First Army and the Tokyo School of Medicine where he won the favor of his superiors thanks to the results of his medical investigations.



Shiro Ishii in his early years in the Imperial Army

At the beginning of 1928 he was appointed military attaché in Europe and the United States for a period of two years with orders to collect all relevant information on the effects caused by the use of biochemical weapons since the First World War. Ishii's mission turned out to be a resounding success for Japanese interests, earning him the admiration of Sadao Araki, Minister of War, who proposed him for promotion to the rank of Major in 1931.

In 1932 he was appointed head of the Imperial Army's Epidemic Prevention and Research Laboratory at Zhongma Fortress, a prison camp located near Beiyinhe, 100 kilometers south of Harbin. Ishii's military career was on the rise, and in 1935 he was appointed a medical Lieutenant General. In 1936 he will receive instructions from the military high command to shape what will become known as Unit 731.



Lieutenant General Shiro Ishii

II. ORIGINS

In addition to the unconditional support of Minister Araki, Ishii also achieved the trust of the rector of the Tokyo Military College of Medicine, Chikakiko Koizumi, who approved without reservation a biological experimentation program that would be developed by the Department of Immunology, created by Ishii himself in the the last years of the 1930s. Among the tasks of this department were, among others, the prevention of diseases among the Japanese troops, although the most important was the study and creation of epidemic propagation systems.

The first experiments, carried out in animals, were promising, but Ishii was eager to verify its effectiveness in humans, for which he requested authorization from his superiors. Due to ethical conflicts and the express prohibition of conducting any medical research with human beings on Japanese territory, the request was denied.



General Sadao Araki, Minister of War between 1931 and 1934

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria, which had taken place at the end of 1931, was used by Ishii to satisfy his wishes, largely due to an environment more prone to conducting medical experiments on human beings which, in this case, would take place on Chinese territory and on prisoners of war of that nationality, although they were not the only ones.

The first experiments on human beings were carried out in a large building located in what had been Beiyinhe, destroyed by the Imperial Army, and its inhabitants deported to different concentration camps in Manchuria. That building, known as the Zhongma Fortress, had a prison camp surrounded by large 3-meter-high earthen walls topped with electrified barbed wire, as well as trenches and drawbridges around each of the buildings that made up the complex. Inside they housed small laboratories, offices, barracks, dining rooms, warehouses, powder magazines, crematoria and cells.

For the construction of the fortress, the Imperial Army employed Chinese prisoners of war as labor, who were forced to enter the place blindfolded, to keep the project secret. Those assigned to areas of the complex considered top secret, such as the medical laboratories located in the vicinity of the prisoner barracks, ended up being executed.



Zhongma Fortress

Among those held in Zhongma were common criminals, members of the anti-Japanese resistance, political dissidents and anyone who was considered a "subversive element" by the Kempeitai. Altogether, the facilities in Zhongma could house a thousand prisoners simultaneously.

Zhongma hosted several medical experiments on humans. Before taking part in them, the prisoners were well fed with rice, wheat, meat, fish and alcoholic beverages, in order to carry out the different experiments on individuals as healthy as possible. Many of these prisoners were bled for days to check their physical and mental deterioration while they were deprived of food and water; others were inoculated with microbes and bacteria to study the development of infections and subsequently perform vivisections. The average life expectancy of a prisoner did not exceed a month, and the few that managed to survive were used in other medical experiments.

In August 1934, coinciding with the celebration of a traditional summer festival during which prisoners were given extra rations of food, there was an escape attempt involving several prisoners. One of them, named Li, despite his poor health, managed to neutralize one of the guards and steal his keys, which he used to free forty of his companions. Ten of them were killed by Japanese soldiers, while many others were again arrested and severely punished.



Unit 731 members conducting various experiments

The few who managed to escape devoted all their efforts to report abuses taking place in Zhongma. To quell increasingly insistent rumors about their activities, in 1936, the Japanese occupation forces in Manchuria decided to move the facilities to Pingfan, 24 kilometers south of Harbin. From that moment on, the project was called Unit 731, with more resources for its biomedical research, including human beings.

III. UNIT 731 APPEARS

As a result of the promulgation of an imperial mandate, two investigation units were created in 1936, one of them being the Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Unit, led by Ishii. This special section of the Imperial Army was established in the new facilities erected at Pingfan. In June 1938, the facilities covered an area of 32 km², with 3,000 Japanese scientists and technicians working there. As of 1941 it was known as Unit 731.

The other was called the Veterinary Disease Prevention Section, under the command of Yujiro Wakamatsu. This unit carried out its activities in the town of Mengchiatun, and would later be known as Unit 100, developing experiments very similar to those of Unit 731.

On August 13, 1937, and to the indifference of the Western powers, the Imperial Japanese Army used biochemical weapons for the first time against the Chinese Army, and continued to do so on at least five other occasions. On October 4, 1940, the Japanese air force dropped several bacteriological bombs on Chuhsien, causing 21 deaths. On October

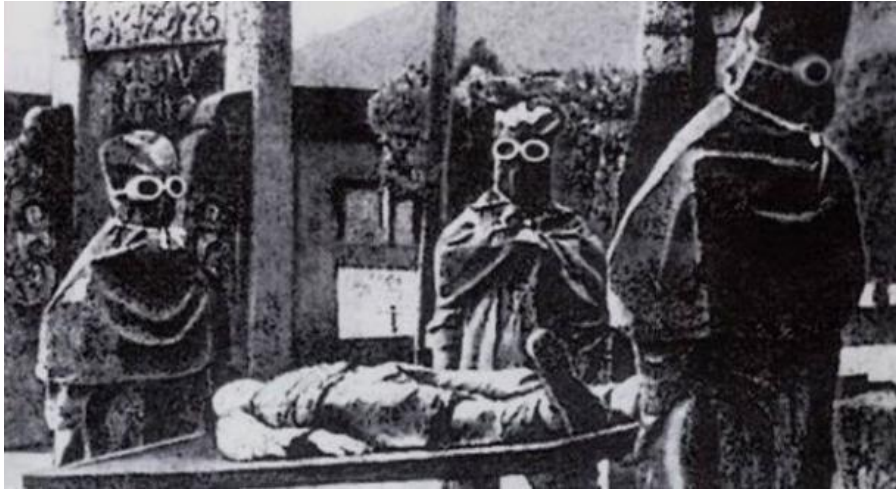
29 of that year, an airstrike took place on Ningpo, killing 99 people. On November 28, 1940, the Allies became aware of these actions by the Imperial Army, which was bombing Chinchua that same day. In January 1941, the Japanese air force attacked the towns of Suiyan and Shasi with biochemical weapons, causing painful skin eruptions to their inhabitants.



Present-day Pingfan

Although the US government was aware of these Japanese actions, it showed no interest, considering that the use of these biological weapons did not pose any serious threat to the United States. Various reports from US military intelligence downplayed the Japanese achievements in biochemical warfare, as the racial theories of the time considered Asians incapable of developing cutting-edge technology without Western advice and assistance. An article published in August 1942 in the *Rocky Mountain Medical Journal*, titled “Japanese Bacteriological Warfare Tests Against Chinese Citizens”, showed how wrong the US authorities were regarding Japanese biotechnology.

The interrogations carried out by the Americans to various Japanese prisoners of war captured in the South Pacific, among which were several members of the medical corps of the Imperial Army specialized in biochemical warfare, several of their experiments became known. Ishii's name and mentions of Unit 731 appeared during the course of several interrogations.



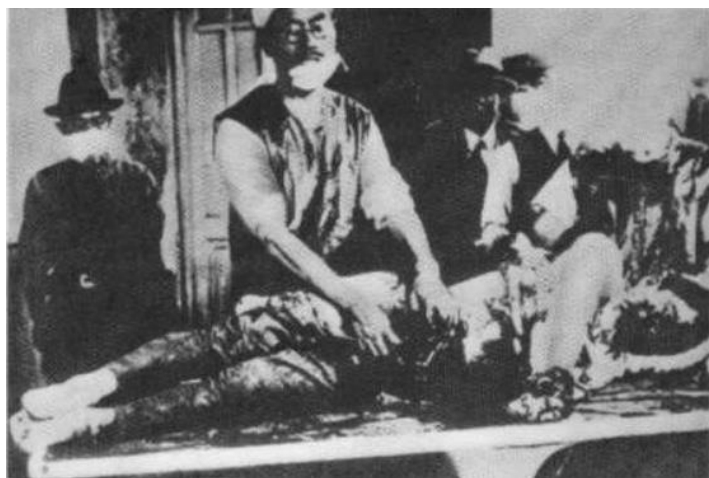
Unit 731 members in Chuhsien

Although the US authorities were not concerned about the possibility of biochemical attacks on their territory, the Japanese had managed to develop an ingenious means of spreading terror in the United States by launching hot air balloons from submarines near the North American coast. The American government considered it ridiculous, and did not take any action to prevent a possible biochemical attack on the American population.

IV. THE EXPERIMENTS

Among the various experiments carried out by Unit 731, it is worth mentioning the following:

- Vivisections and murders of prisoners to document the moments immediately after their death. According to research conducted by US forces, 400 to 600 humans were used per year.



Unit 731 members dissecting the corpse of a prisoner

- Frequent use of biochemical weapons against Chinese troops and civilians, deliberately spreading diseases such as cholera, typhus, diphtheria and dysentery.



- Freezing of living human beings.
- Severe deprivation of water and food to verify its effects on the human body.
- Mutilations and physical damage caused with explosive material to subsequently practice effective cures that would allow the successful treatment of Japanese troops and citizens.
- Attacks on the civilian population with biochemical agents, such as flea bombs infected with various diseases and the distribution of contaminated sweets to Chinese children.
- Deliberate contamination of water and food.
- Testing of various chemical agents in humans.
- Lethal X-ray exposures.
- Electrocutions.
- Air or horse urine injections into the prisoners' kidneys to study embolisms.
- Sexual abuses.

According to estimates made by various scholars, the death toll in the experiments may have reached 20,000.

V. THE END OF UNIT 731

Following the Japanese capitulation on September 2, 1945, United States Army Lieutenant Colonel Murray Sanders traveled from Fort Detrick, the current US Army biological experimentation center, to Tokyo to locate Ishii and gather information on the Unit 731.



Lieutenant Colonel Murray Sanders

Sanders managed to interrogate some members of the Imperial Army related in one way or another to Unit 731, including the following:

- Yoshijiro Umezu, Chief of Staff of the Kwangtung Army.



- Colonel Tomosa Sakuda, commander of the Kwantung Army and deputy of the Japanese Parliament.
- Junichi Kaneko, medical researcher.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to find any trace of Ishii and his whereabouts after the war. In October 1945 Sanders managed to retrieve enough information to evaluate the operations of Unit 731, making his findings known to General Douglas MacArthur. Japanese scientists had not only experimented with Chinese prisoners, but also with American prisoners of war. After learning the facts, General MacArthur simply advised Sanders to keep quiet and continue investigating.

Sanders was in Japan for 10 weeks, returning to the United States after being diagnosed with tuberculosis, from which he did not recover until 1947.

The investigation into Unit 731 passed into the hands of Lieutenant Colonel Arvo T. Thompson of the US Army Veterinary Corps. By the time Thompson arrived in Japan, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East had begun trying several Japanese war criminals. Finally, and after arduous investigations, the Americans managed to capture Ishii, whose arrest was concealed. Instead, to prevent Soviet meddling, his death was reported and a funeral was even held in Shibayama, Ishii's hometown. Ishii was interrogated by the US intelligence services between January 17 and February 25, 1946.

Aware of the American interest in his medical research, Ishii managed to negotiate a satisfactory agreement for both himself and his closest collaborators in Unit 731. He managed to have his criminal record completely erased, living like any other Japanese citizen until his death on the 9th. October 1959 for throat cancer. After spending some time in the United States, Ishii returned to Japan, where he was received with great honors, running for mayor of Tokyo, as well as serving as president of the Japan Medical Association and the Japanese Olympic Committee. In the last years of his life he converted to Christianity.

Several of the US servicemen who took part in the interrogations of Ishii and other members of Unit 731 showed their deepest and most energetic rejection of the pacts signed with these war criminals. MacArthur himself protested to the president of the United States, Harry S. Truman, presenting him with his resignation. Lieutenant Colonel Thompson ended up committing suicide saddened by guilt.

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