

# BEHIND THE JAP FRONT



*Hirohito—"Just a puppet of the military, but, to his millions of subjects, a god"*

*by Max Hill*

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**I AM** one of the few Americans whom the war trapped in Japan. We had been expecting trouble for weeks, but the final crack-up was just as much of a surprise to us as it was to 70,000,000 Japanese.

Before the war, I lived with the Japanese, studied them, and reported all I could about that empire to the newspaper readers of the United States. But it

DRAWING BY ARTHUR SZYK





*On the Japanese home front, school girls receive training in marksmanship*

took six months of association with them in prison really to give me an insight into their patience, their determination, and their willingness to sacrifice anything and everything to win this war.

I was arrested at 6 A. M. (Tokyo time) the morning Pearl Harbor was attacked. Later, I received a suspended sentence of 18 months in prison (for sending stories which the Japanese said were detrimental to their diplomacy), but I was released from prison on June 2, 1942, and soon was deported to the United States.

During my entire stay of a year and a half in Japan I tried daily to find out something definite about her army. But the most tangible fact I obtained was that even the Japanese themselves know nothing about the strength of their army and navy. And they know better than to ask questions.

Japan's preparation for this global war caused the neglect of many ordinary phases of living which are nonessential to plain-living Japanese, but quite conspicuous to a foreigner accustomed to the plenty of America.

In Tokyo, when I arrived, the busy main streets were as rutted as a little-used country road in our Midwest. Why didn't they repair them? Well, asphalt is useful for runways for bombers, and concrete is a satisfactory material for throwing together jerry-built factories to manufacture war materials.

The few automobiles on the street, gasping for power from the charcoal-burning apparatus attached to the rear end, would have been piled on junk heaps in America months before. Did that mean the Japanese didn't have gasoline,



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*Japanese war bond promotion*

ordinary and high-test, for airplanes? No, indeed! Day and night, formations of military planes roared over my prison cell. Even the army used charcoal burners on its trucks *in* Tokyo; the gasoline goes to the fighting front in China and all over the Orient.

One day I saw three disabled army trucks, all fueled by charcoal, being towed to garages by three other charcoal-burning army trucks. I smiled to myself; so this is Japan's vaunted strength. Perhaps American military and naval attachés were as amused.

But one Sunday afternoon, months before my arrest, I had a glimpse into another side of the motor power of Japan's army. I was on a railroad train, returning to Tokyo after spending Saturday night at a seashore resort near Yokohama. A cloudburst about midnight had washed out the main line in several places.

Men and machines for war move at night in Japan, and even the Japanese seldom see them. But this time the army was in a quandary. You can't just drop a string of freight cars into your pocket and go on about your business.

A few miles out of Yokohama, we passed a train of at least 30 flatcars on a siding. They were loaded with sturdy steel landing boats and new army trucks. and all of them were equipped to use gasoline, not charcoal. The Japanese in my car regarded me with open suspicion



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and steady stares which suggested I should start studying the floor instead of looking out the windows. In all, we passed five such trains before we ground to a stop in Yokohama station.

By a rough count, those landing boats, each capable of holding 20 soldiers, could carry an attacking force of at least 1,500 men, and they were the same type as those used in the Philippine campaign.

Remember that this occurred when the Japanese, with characteristic Oriental duplicity, were still talking peace in Washington. They had already set up some 15 production zones for war materials, scattered through Japan and as far away as Manchuria. They had stopped the manufacture of all goods and articles for civilian use which weren't absolutely essential, and diverted this energy and the factories to preparation for the coming war.

I had a long talk one afternoon in the lobby of Tokyo's Imperial Hotel with a German whose business at home was building tanks. He had once worked in the United States, and was in Japan to speed up production. He had just returned from a village far in the interior.

"It was raining when I got there," he said, "and it rained for several days. I had to walk through mud almost up to my calves on village roads, but the tank factory was modern and busy. There is a railroad spur track on one side, and you can be sure they don't have any trouble getting finished tanks out where they are needed."

Our bomber pilots will need luck to find that secluded factory and many others like it in the innocent-appearing Japanese countryside.

Besides using essential materials down to the last scrap, the Japanese are skillful in substituting an available product for one which is scarce.

One day in prison I waited in a side room while the authorities questioned another foreigner. There were about a hundred boxes in the room, some of them open.

I investigated. They were packed with trench-type helmets. A few discreet taps disclosed that they were molded not of steel, but of heavy papier-mâché. Don't laugh, as I did.

As we were being repatriated aboard the Gripsholm, an American army officer told me, "Papier-mâché helmets will ward off a glancing blow in an air raid just as well as steel ones. And if the hit is direct it doesn't matter."

The home front took the substitute; the troops in the field got the steel. This is typical of Japan's entire economy.

I hadn't been in Japan many days before I learned the Japanese didn't want the news of their country covered by foreign correspondents. They set up what they blandly described as a Board of Information. Those of us who had to deal with its members promptly dubbed it the Board of No-Information.

Official spokesmen of the staff were delib-



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erately kept in ignorance. Once, at the regular press conference, I asked Koh Ishii, an official spokesman, whether the Russian government had replied to a certain note sent by the Japanese. No, he replied, adding that the Japanese were getting pretty mad about the delay. But that afternoon the Russian Embassy told me that they had sent a blunt reply a couple of days before. I still think Ishii was honest in his answer; he just hadn't been told.

**J**UST how much the Japanese resent any and all news about their country being published abroad is illustrated by the wrath of Inspector Takehara, who often questioned me during my imprisonment, over a story I had sent out on the construction of air-raid shelters in Tokyo. The information had come from a handbill distributed to hundreds of people.

Takehara was furious. Didn't I know, he asked, that I was disclosing a military secret?—This, regardless of the fact that everybody in Tokyo, foreigner and native alike, knew Japan was building air-raid shelters.

Then he showed a sense of humor rare in a Japanese. "Why were we building these shelters?" he asked.

"To prepare for war, I guess," I answered.

"War? Against which country?"

I hesitated. He laughed, rubbed his close-shaved head with a fat hand, insisted I answer.

"The United States," I responded.

He turned to another subject in good humor.

I have heard a lot of loose talk about starving the Japanese out. I don't believe it can be done.

After my incarceration in Sugamo prison, Yamada, an official with big, yellow buck teeth and a chronic cough caused by the inferior cigarettes the Japanese smoke, told me coolly, "Hill-san, you can't starve us out. A little rice, a piece of fish—that's all a Japanese needs to eat."

He was right. Yamada, who was graduated from the University of California, might have liked to vary his diet with bread and potatoes, but he knew he couldn't. Potatoes make industrial alcohol, and so does grain.

A few months before the war, more chickens appeared on the market than the remaining foreigners could buy. We wondered why we had fried chicken every night, and a few weeks later no eggs for breakfast. The reason? The army needed the grain to turn into alcohol. With nothing to feed their chickens, the owners sold them. After that there just weren't any eggs. This may annoy the Germans and Italians still in Japan, but it certainly won't weaken the war effort.

But the Japanese have one real problem. Through 2,000 years of the most intensive cultivation known to man, their soil is exhausted. Until a few years ago Japanese depended upon a combination of chemical fertilizers imported from Chile and Germany. Today that supply is cut off.

In prison, my lunch or supper plate often held a thin portion of beans in the pod. There were pods, all right, but no beans. By the time the vines had grown and the pods formed, the soil had lost its vitality; thus the beans themselves never materialized.

Japanese once used great quantities of sugar in their cooking. They don't any more. Today they get about half a pound per person each month. I thought of these humble, patient Japanese the day I arrived back in New York. Broadway was busy that morning. At the street corners, automobiles and taxis roared their impatience at traffic lights. I was accustomed to a land where gasoline is "precious



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as a drop of blood."

So, I thought, this is gasoline rationing!

I entered the breakfast-room of a large hotel, hungry for bacon which didn't taste like fish (Japan's few hogs are fed on fish meal and bones) and for fresh eggs and butter and white bread. All around me were people in clothes that were clean and new, shoes that fit and boasted stout leather soles. The Japanese wear suits of substitute materials and paperlike shoes without complaint.

Just a few more words on food. The Japanese diet literally starves a white man. I lost 25 pounds during my first two months in prison eating Japanese food which would have made a native fat. American prisoners from Guam are in a prison camp at Zentsugi, where they are losing weight; their teeth are going bad, and they go to bed hungry every night. But they receive the same food on which the Japanese army fights—rice and fish, a slice of pickled radish called daikon, and a soup best described as weed-and-water. I had plenty of it in prison. . . .

**T**HE reverence in which the Japanese hold their emperor is fantastic to us, but it is what holds the empire together. Emperor Hirohito is just the puppet, actually, of the military. But to his millions of subjects he is a god.

I am sure that the emperor, personally, and his closest palace associates opposed war until they could hold out no longer. But a little thing like opposition from Hirohito (newspaper correspondents, including many Japanese, privately called him Charlie) wouldn't deter the men who really rule Japan—the military men and the publicity-shy dictators of the secret societies.

But you couldn't mention this to the average Japanese. Day after day, riding to work in Tokyo, I would pass the palace, distant and secure behind its moat and protective screen of trees. All of the Japanese riding with me would face this holy place and bow. They don't understand, and never will, that the emperor must abide by the wishes of others.

He is the most convenient shield any group of thugs ever found to ruin a country. He provides the reason there probably will never be a revolt in Japan. To the populace, the emperor is never wrong; he just wasn't properly advised. The misguided men responsible may be liquidated, and new lieutenants take over, but the emperor still sits on his puppet throne, secure and serene.

The secret societies are ruled by a stern, white-bearded patriarch named Mitsuru Toyama, whose Black Dragon Society spawns other countless secret organizations.

Before every recent war in which Japan has been involved, elite, sinister zealots, calling themselves nationalists and super-patriots, have turned up in the country which was to be their victim and ostensibly engaged in ordinary pursuits. They were all Toyama's henchmen. I am sure great numbers of them were busy in the United States. In fact, Tetsuma Hashimoto, leader of the resolute right wing Shiunso and intimately associated with Toyama, traveled throughout the United States in 1941. The reports he collected from his agents would make interesting reading now for the Federal Bureau of Information. But they are safe in the archives of the War Ministry in Tokyo. . . .

**T**HE Japanese are the most suspicious people I have ever encountered, but in their



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peculiar way they are also the most honest. Even their burglars have a code of honor. Should a thief break into your house in Japan, he will limit his pilfering to a token payment placed in some conspicuous place for him, provided, of course, that you have remembered to provide for him. Otherwise he will ransack the place. It's a polite form of blackmail, and it works.

Japanese aren't suspicious only of foreigners. They spy on themselves. The 30,000 members of the Black Dragon Society and its affiliated organizations comprise an elite group of secret agents. Besides, there are the regular police and the army gendarmes. The police spy on the people. The gendarmes and the Black Dragon zealots watch not only the people but also the police.

As one result of this official prowling, at least 50,000 young students disappear every year in Japan. They have done nothing really improper. They merely have studied the wrong books, or expressed an opinion contrary to what the government thinks. In Sugamo prison I found many of them, underfed and poorly clad.

I had a chance to talk with one of them in prison. A clean, intelligent chap from a good family and an honor student in school, he insisted that his only crime was to think out loud—the wrong way. "I didn't agree," he whispered furtively, "with all that was going on."

Before war broke out, we Americans in Japan felt the police bothered us, but we had an easy time of it compared to the Germans. I couldn't go around the corner for a package of cigarettes without some detective's making a notation in his little black book. But no less than five specially selected officers trailed staff members of the D. N. B. (German News Agency) for months, peering through their windows, rummaging through their papers, and questioning their Japanese servants.

Even the Nazi ambassador, General Eugen Ott, saw his protests tucked away in a police pigeonhole with no more than a "So sorry" for his pains. If the Japanese guessed the private thoughts of these Germans it wouldn't do the cause of Axis solidarity a bit of good.

Side by side with Japanese suspicion of everything and everybody marches a spirit of brutality which can't be stemmed. They are brutal both abroad and at home. On the Gripsholm, I talked with a woman who saw unarmed and helpless Canadians bayoneted in the back after the surrender of Hong Kong. She, herself, had stood with her arms in the air facing a wall for an hour while Japanese soldiers argued whether to shoot her.

As I stood on the deck of the Asama Maru off Singapore, I watched Japanese seamen torture a monkey hour after hour. You find an occasional American or Englishman who is cruel. But it isn't a universal trait. It is with the Japanese. Every seaman on the water tender alongside us enjoyed tormenting and abusing that monkey.

Cruelty and suppression are nothing new to Japanese women. They have been trampled on for centuries. Woman simply doesn't count, even with Japanese educated in America. Once they get back home the men revert to type. Not long after arriving in Japan I was invited to a dinner at the home of a friend. Another guest was Goro Murata, a Nisei, or American-born Japanese. Because a foreigner was going to be present, he brought along his wife.

We met at the dingy, red-brick Tokyo sta-



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tion. Goro was magnificent with his English clothes, spats, and stick. Placidly waiting five paces behind him, wearing her best kimono, was his wife. Timidly she moved up to be introduced. That, in itself, was a concession on Goro's part. According to Japanese etiquette, she should have remained back where she was. All of the way to the home of our friend, she kept her proper distance, five paces behind her husband, while he grandly stalked along with his stick.

**I**T IS futile to try to reconcile the Japanese way of thinking with our own. But we must remember this: They didn't enter this war believing they were licked to begin with. They waited until they felt sure they had a good chance, and then they struck.

They haven't changed their mind about that chance. They sit smugly in Singapore and Hong Kong and in the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. They will depart only by the force of superior arms and manpower.

In a neighborhood shop in Tokyo, I was talking one day, before my arrest, with the frail, poorly clad owner. The China Affair came up in our conversation. His grandchild, a friendly little chap with wide brown eyes and thick black hair, toddled into the store. He stooped over, picked up the child, and held him in his arms.

"It isn't for me that we are fighting," he said, "or for his mother. It's for this boy, my grandson."

We Americans must realize that, too. It is not for ourselves alone that we are fighting, but for our future—for the future of America. The two systems can't mesh, can't be reconciled. It's either Japan, or America. One must go down. It's our way of life, or theirs.

### The Author:

When Japan attacked our fleet at Pearl Harbor Max Hill, a veteran American newspaperman, was head of the Associated Press news bureau to Tokyo. Hill was held prisoner for seven months, was finally released and exchanged with other prisoners. Besides being known as the author of "Exchange Ship"—written about his experiences—he is a lecturer and radio commentator for Press Association. He was born in Colorado Springs, Colo., is 39, and lives in New York with his wife and daughter. He worked as a newspaper man in Denver, then with the AP in New York and Washington, D. C., before going to Tokyo.



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