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Title: Student Service during the Battle of Okinawa: Himeyuri Student Corps

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### Student Service during the Battle of Okinawa: Himeyuri Student Corps

By David R. Krigbaum

During World War II Japan expected everyone to do their part in securing victory and this included teenagers. On the mainland high school students were drafted en masse to work in fields and in munitions factories turning out weapons to supply the war fighters.

On Okinawa, students and faculty from all 21 junior high schools (middle schools) and high schools were conscripted or volunteered to directly support the military. Younger boys were sent to the Signal Corps and the older ones were part of the Blood and Iron for the Emperor Corps (*Tekketsu Kinnotai*), which performed labor tasks such as digging tunnels and moving supplies. More than 500 girls from the 10 girls' schools were given varying degrees of medical training before the battle to assist nurses. Providing 240 students and teachers, the Himeyuri Corps were the largest and best known of those groups.

The Himeyuri Gakutotai (Himeyuri Student Corps) began with two Asato (part of Naha) girl's high schools, Okinawa First Girls High School and Okinawa Women's Normal School. These sister schools taught students ages 13-19 and today they would be a cross between a high school and a junior college; the Normal School also trained aspiring teachers. Students at the schools were nicknamed *Himeyuri*, a combination of the two school newspapers' names and can be translated "Princess Lily." Both schools used a white lily as their insignia.

These were the top girls' school in Okinawa and brought in some of the brightest students from across the island, many from upper class families though not exclusively. School and dorm life was militarily regimented and their mandatory hairstyles were dictated by grade. It was still not that far off from a regular high school or college experience today with clubs, physical activities and special events like festivals.

Militarism began creeping in during the war in China. They drilled like soldiers, practiced marksmanship, conducted air raid drills, practiced with bamboo spear and pole arms, and marching became part of life. They were being molded and indoctrinated into being ideal *gunkoku shojo*, "military-country girls," who would be as loyal and unswerving in their dedication to the Empire as any soldier.

As the Allies came steadily closer to Okinawa, students spent less time in class and more time in the field conducting manual labor and construction work for the military.

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Finally, in November 1944 the Himeyuri students aged 15-19 were pulled for nurse training by the army to augment the Okinawa Army Hospital. Classes had ceased entirely to prepare for the coming battle, by the time the campus was destroyed in a January 1945 air raid.

When the Allies began hitting Okinawa with air raids and naval gunfire on Mar. 23, the student nurses were mobilized. They marched through the night to the Okinawa Army Field Hospital in Haebaru, about five miles away. The hospital had been set up at the Haebaru National (Elementary) School, but it was destroyed in the pre-invasion bombardment along with a great amount of medical supplies.

Instead, the hospital would be a series of 30 muddy tunnels and caves that had been dug nearby as support for the main hospital facility. Beds for patients, little more than pallets, lined the raw cavern walls and there was no Red Cross to mark their position. From the outside it was just another Japanese fighting hole, like all the other ones full of soldiers and weapons.

American troops landed on Okinawa Apr. 1, and casualties began overwhelming the dimly-lit tunnels. The hospital staff was composed of 350 doctors and nurses split into three departments for surgery, internal medicine, and infectious disease, but during its two months of operation, all would become surgery. Instead of anesthesia, patients would be given a whiff of ether and a few encouraging words while a student held his hand and the doctor went to work patching up wounds or removing limbs. It was the girls' duty to collect the discarded body parts and medical waste after a procedure.

Himeyuri did the hospital's tedious, menial daily tasks, such attending to the patients and removing corpses that clogged the 1.8 meter square tunnels. Patients needed feeding, cleaning, and sometimes restraining. Common ailments were tetanus and encephalitis, though without medication or proper nutrition, there was little that could be done except wait for them to die. Men mentally broken by the battle had to be watched constantly to keep them from drinking urine from makeshift tin can bedpans or trampling the injured. The nature of crowded, unventilated tunnels resulted in carbon monoxide poisoning and bouts of "cave fever," that all had to endure.

Sanitation was non-existent; the fly-filled stagnant humid air was heavy with the odors of the dead and dying along with their many bodily fluids. Everyone had lice. Students had to constantly remove maggots from patients' wounds and reuse filthy bandages.

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The tunnels had no potable water source or kitchen, so Himeyuri would have to go outside to collect water and cooked brown rice from a kitchen over the hill. They made the rice into golf ball, later ping-pong ball, sized rice balls and every patient was given two for their daily meals. Those willing to risk the outside to forage could also bring in wild grasses and edible plants. "Bathing" was running outside to get soaked in rain, taking off and wringing out wet clothes then putting them back on. Lack of sanitation, malnutrition and poor hygiene, led to ailments among the Himeyuri such as night blindness, and many had stopped menstruating.

Beyond these hardships, the dangers of war were also a constant threat. The hospital's known position meant students working outside to dispose of corpses, acting as messengers, or bringing food and water, risked being shelled by artillery or strafed by aircraft. Sakugawa Yoneko became the first Himeyuri to die when she was strafed on Apr. 26.

While this was going on at Haebaru, a medical detachment of about 20, including 14 Himeyuri, set up inside the 270-meter limestone cave, Abuchiragama. It possessed the same issues as the main hospital and handled between 500-700 patients.

According to Himeyuri student nurse Yabiku Yoshiko, by mid-month the situation was entirely out of hand. The brain fever cases kept rising and the deranged men were physical hazards to the patients around them. Food was so short that patients would insist that amputated limbs be cooked to supplement their meager rations.

Haebaru and Abuchiragama were ordered evacuated on May 25. The staff, students and walking wounded, or those deemed worth saving, marched south for new positions. Anyone too injured to leave was given a hand grenade to commit suicide with or were tricked into drinking cyanide-laced milk.

Taking up residence in new caves around southern Okinawa, the Himeyuri continued nursing duties, now with nearly no medical supplies. The Allies had taken Okinawa's center and the defenders had reformed a defensive line across the southern end of the island. By mid-June the Americans were on the brink of fully enveloping the final Japanese positions.

It had been 79 days since the Americans landed, but so far only 19 Himeyuri had perished. The battle would officially end on Jun. 22 with the annihilation of the last organized military resistance and the suicide of the army's senior leadership. These last days of battle would be the deadliest for the Himeyuri.

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On Jun. 18 they were demobilized and ordered out of the caves onto an active battlefield.

From the onset of the battle, the Japanese military had made use of local civilians in supporting their forces. These laborers and non-combatants were often armed and pressed into service to fight alongside the military. As the battle moved toward its conclusion, people fled in every direction and it became an inseparable mix of displaced civilian non-combatants or refugees, military and 'non-military participants,' who were potentially armed and willing to kill. Among the Himeyuri, a group of students led by a teacher decided to use grenades they'd been given to commit suicide, to instead attack U.S. troops. Another group joined army soldiers on a night raid.

From the Japanese perspective, they had been told all Americans were devils who would let no one live and rape their women. As loyal Japanese citizens, they would never entertain a thought of surrender. Those who tried to surrender were as likely to be killed by their own as an American.

Most surviving Himeyuri fled and looked for safety, some in whatever caves they could find while evading shells, gunfire and air attacks. Even without the Americans, this also had its hazards as Japanese soldiers would steal their food and kick civilians out of caves forcing them back into the open and on the move again under fire. For others, they fled until hitting the southern coast and cliffs and had to choose between capture or suicide. Some lingered on, hiding in caves among the dead and living off food scraps until after the war ended in late August.

The U.S lost about 12,000 troops on Okinawa. According to Okinawa Prefecture, the Japanese lost 188,000 people in total. Of those, only 65,000 were mainland Japanese troops, the rest were Okinawans. That breaks down into 28,000 military, 57,000 non-military participants and 37,000 civilians, amounting to the loss of one-quarter of the island's population.

Among the students and teachers of the 21 high schools conscripted into the battle, 2,049 were killed.

A total of 136 conscripted Himeyuri students and teachers died during the battle. Ninety-one more students and staff, not conscripted into service, died of war-related causes as well, bringing the total loss of life for the school to 227.

In their memory, the Himeyuri Peace Museum and Cenotaph were established beside the Third Surgical Cave where the single largest Himeyuri loss of life occurred.

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They're the best known of the female students used in the battle, having sent and lost the greatest number of girls. They have also been the subject of books and movies in Japan since the 1950s. While the Himeyuri students from the Asato sister schools accounted for slightly less than half of the mobilized student nurses, the rest came from the island's other eight girl's schools. The latter were attached to lower level military medical units and had similar battlefield experiences.

### **Note**

"Himeyuri Gakutotai" was a name given to the student group post-war and not an official war-time designation.

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