

Aso Tetsuo, a military doctor

Excerpts from his memoir, *A Consideration of women in the Frontline* (1957, 1983)

OVERVIEW: Tetsuo Aso (1910-1989) served as a medical officer in the battlefields in Shanghai, Nanjing, Hankow, and Wuqiang in China for four years from 1937-1941 during the Sino-Japanese War. He wrote a memoir, A Consideration of women in the Frontline, based on his diary and letters during the war. This article was published in magazine, Uwasa, published in Fukuoka (1957) and was later reprinted in a photograph collection, A Consideration of Women in the Frontline (1983).

Having served at a military hospital for the Imperial Japanese Expeditionary Army in Shanghai, China, Tetsuo Aso was deployed as a medical officer to examine and manage the “comfort women” at “comfort stations” in Shanghai and Rabaul. He recorded a detailed description about the circumstances around the “comfort stations” in this personal memoir. One incident that stands out from his memoir is a case where the Japanese military performed an abortion on a “comfort woman” who was found to be pregnant during a check-up. After the check-up, an abortion procedure was done to her immediately, without hesitation. It was an extremely unsafe procedure, he observed, which was done without proper tools on a 5-months pregnant woman, who later is believed to have killed during a U.S. air raid. This memoir illustrates the vulnerable situation where the “comfort women” were exposed to, including unwanted pregnancies and forced abortion while being forced to sexually serve the soldiers.

Excerpts:

[Opening of Army recreation facility]

“In early 1938, while serving as a surgeon at the surgical ward of the Army commissariat hospital that belonged to the Expeditionary Army in Shanghai, I was contacted by the Department of Special Affairs in the military, who said they needed gynecologist.

I was extremely busy treating wounded soldiers from ferocious battlefield at Dachangjun, Shanghai and I couldn't quite understand the relationship between the battleground and a gynecologist. However, I hurriedly left with a fellow gynecologist as instructed.

The instruction read, “Medical officer Aso is hereby ordered to conduct check-ups for 100 or so women, who are waiting at Shajing primary school on Geemei road, to work at a recreation facility for the Army.” We immediately formed a team of 11 people, including medical officers, soldiers, and two nurses from Fukumin hospital. It was the beginning of the “comfort station” management as part of the duty of the commissariat department throughout the duration of the Asia Pacific War, after the Sino-Japanese War.

The transportation regulations for the military at the time included clauses on soldiers and horses, but not on women. It would be insolent of me to say this, but I still find it very odd that the transportation of women was included in the supply transportation clause. Those women were recruited from all over Korea and north Kyushu as the “comfort envoy” for soldiers of the Imperial Army.

Interestingly, there were many who considered the women from Korea to be, in general, very young and physically pure, while most of the women from various region of north Kyushu had already been doing such work, and in some cases, had large incision scars in their groin area.

A little later, I wrote a paper for the medical officers' meeting to demand an improvement in the quality of these prostitutes. It is entitled, "Active measures to prevent venereal diseases." In the paper, I argued that it would cause a great harm to the soldiers if those women who were potentially eroding the country were to be sent to the battlefield. It maybe awakening to those who are serving in the military in China, but it wouldn't be my wild imagination that the large number of Korean women in the officers' clubs in such places as Nanjing and Hankow has something to do with such circumstances. Therefore, a "comfort station" under the direct management of military was established in a well-organized barracks in Yang Jiazhai(楊家宅) near Jungong road(军工路), Shanghai.

"Comfort station" regulations were as follows:

One. Army soldiers and civilians attached to the military (except the military authorities) are permitted to visit this "comfort station." Visitors should carry a "comfort station" pass.

One. A visitor should pay and receive a ticket and a 'sakku' (condom) when he signs in at the reception.

One. Rates for a ticket are: 2 yen for noncommissioned officers, soldiers, and civilians attached to the military

One. After purchasing a ticket, the visitor should enter the designated room. (Time duration is 30 minutes).

One. After the business is done, the visitor must leave immediately.

As shown above, the regulations were written in unpolished words. Before long, responding to this, a number of "comfort stations" for civilians were established near Jiangwan village (江灣鎮) district.

These private "comfort stations" were set up using private homes, and their hygiene and disinfection equipment had much room for improvement, which constantly required my advice and guidance as a medical officer in charge of these facilities. On the other hand, the services were of higher quality, and they elaborated the sign with some lewd expressions:

"Welcome! The warriors of great victory at the holy war
Dedicated Japanese women's services with their bodies and souls are here!"

As such, private stations were free enterprise style, compared to the "comfort stations" directly controlled by the military.

Later, I was transferred to South Pacific, where I served as a medical officer at an anti-aircraft camp at the Kokopo airfield, across from Rabaul. Rabaul was where the Navy had its 8th base headquarters and the Army also established its 8th Area headquarters. There were various "comfort" recreation facilities in the town and some cafés had piano and cute children of mixed blood. The Navy was somehow maintaining its dignity here.

Right after the campaign on Guadalcanal Island, the Army's "comfort stations" were moved to here and became very crowded with visitors. During and after battles, these "comfort station" buildings have become targets of blind firing from U.S. aircrafts flying at low-altitude, resulting in casualties. The commanding officer in his speech said, "Do not be idle, either on or off the saddle." It was a wise saying.

Several "comfort stations" were established in Kokopo district, too. One of them was called

“Gyeongsyeong-ru” (京城樓), filled with 20 Korean women and about 5 Korean men operators. It was in the same building as a watch repair shop attached to the army headquarters. At some point, soldiers began to say a jargon expression, “Let’s go repair Seiko.” Seiko (精工舎) was a watch brand. One day, I was called by the army headquarters as a gynecology doctor. I was ordered to train a young medical officer how to examine women and I was assisted by him for a while.

In the first round of checkups, we found two women pregnant. Because the progress of battle was unfavorable, these women were transported to a rear base in Palau. Although we tried an abortion surgery, we did not have necessary medical equipment. We transported them to a Catholic hospital and tried abortion using quinine (キミ-ネ, medication for malaria). We used “Hegarü,” cervical dilator, to replace equipment for abortion. After we started the surgery, an air raid by U.S. forces began and there was a big commotion. The surgery was stopped and the “comfort station” building disappeared, without leaving any traces. Under the destroyed building, we found a large number of unused condoms. We collected them and used them to store valuables and medications.

Having been produced in the local, these condoms were very thick, not flexible, and shaped in a plain envelope. Thus, they were more useful for storing objects, rather than to be used as condoms.

I heard the ship with the “comfort women” who were being transported to the rear was attacked and sank near the equator that some said they were rescued and staying in a lodging near Palau, giving up all the money that got wet when the ship sunk. Others said that most of the women were drowned because they didn’t know how to swim.

I clearly remember a cute girl whose name was Junko(ジュン子), who was past 5 months pregnant at the time. I don’t know if she was safely rescued, or disappeared into the Pacific Ocean and was eaten by fish... I still wonder about her at times.