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ASIA PACIFIC

Retired Japanese Fighter Pilot Sees an Old Danger on the Horizon

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The Saturday Profile

By **MARTIN FACKLER**

NAGANO, Japan — Kaname Harada was once a feared samurai of the sky, shooting down 19 Allied aircraft as a pilot of Japan’s legendary Zero fighter plane during World War II. Now 98 years old and in failing health, the former ace is on what he calls his final mission: using his wartime experiences to warn Japan against ever going to war again.

This has become a timely issue in Japan, as the conservative prime minister, Shinzo Abe, has called for revising Japan’s pacifist Constitution. On a recent afternoon in this alpine city near his home, Mr. Harada was invited to address a ballroom filled with some 200 tax accountants and their business clients.

After slowly ascending the stage with the help of his daughter, he stopped to hang up hand-drawn war maps and a sepia-toned photo of himself as a young pilot in a leather flight suit glaring fearlessly into the camera.

It was the same face that now turned to look at the audience, creased by age, and somehow softer and wiser. His body was so frail that his suit hung loose like a sail, but he spoke with a loud voice of surprising vigor.

“Nothing is as terrifying as war,” he began, before spending the next 90 minutes recounting his role in battles, from Japan’s early triumph at Pearl Harbor to its disastrous reversals at Midway and Guadalcanal. “I want to tell you my experiences in war so that younger generations don’t have to go through

the same horrors that I did.”

It is a warning that Mr. Harada fears his countrymen may soon no longer be able to hear. There are only a dwindling number of Japanese left who fought in the war, which in Asia began when Imperial Japan invaded northeastern China in 1931, and claimed tens of millions of lives over the following 14 years.

In an interview after his speech, Mr. Harada described himself as “the last Zero fighter,” or at least the last pilot still alive who flew during that aircraft’s glory days early in the war with the United States. He recounted how in dogfights, he flew close enough to his opponents to see the terror on their faces as he sent them crashing to their deaths.

“I fought the war from the cockpit of a Zero, and can still remember the faces of those I killed,” said Mr. Harada, who said he was able to meet and befriend some of his foes who survived the war. “They were fathers and sons, too. I didn’t hate them or even know them.”

“That is how war robs you of your humanity,” he added, “by putting you in a situation where you must either kill perfect strangers or be killed by them.”

Mr. Harada said that as he and other aging veterans pass from the scene, Japan will lose more than just their war stories. He said it was his generation’s bitter experiences, and resulting aversion to war, that have kept Japan firmly on a pacifist path since 1945.

While he tries to avoid wading into politics, he let slip a jab at Japan’s current leaders, who he said seem a bit too eager to discard Japan’s renunciation of war, and too forgetful of what an accomplishment its long postwar period of peace really has been.

“These politicians were born after the war, and so they don’t understand it must be avoided at all costs,” he said. He sat on a tatami mat in his living room, which is decorated with pictures of aircraft and an aluminum fragment from the Zero in which he was shot down in 1942. “In this respect, they are like our prewar leaders.”

Similar concerns are shared by many Japanese, as the nation approaches the 70th anniversary of the war’s end. Warnings about the passing of the war generation have been voiced all the way up to Crown Prince Naruhito, 55, who in February urged his nation to “correctly pass down tragic experiences and history to the generations who have no direct knowledge of the war, at a time memories of the war are about to fade.”

Such worries have made Mr. Harada a highly sought-after public speaker. He said he has spoken dozens of times in recent years, though he has had to cut back since collapsing from exhaustion in a bathroom after a talk last year. Despite a recent diagnosis of throat cancer, he speaks with a passionate conviction that left some in the Nagano audience brushing away tears.

“I am 54, and I have never heard what happened in the war,” said Takashi Katsuyama, a hair salon owner, who like many in the audience said he was not taught about the war in school. “Japan needs to hear these real-life experiences now more than ever.”

Mr. Harada’s talk was filled with vivid descriptions of an era when Imperial Japan briefly ruled the skies over the Pacific. During the Battle of Midway in 1942, he said, he shot down five United States torpedo planes in a single morning while defending the Japanese fleet. He described how he was able to throw off the aim of the American tail gunners by tilting his aircraft to make it drift almost imperceptibly to one side as he closed in for the kill.

He also described his defeats. He said he had to ditch his plane in the sea after Japan lost all four aircraft carriers it sent to Midway, the battle that turned the tide of the war in favor of the United States. Four months later, he was shot down over the island of Guadalcanal. He survived when his plane crashed upside down in the jungle, but his arm was so badly mangled that he never fought again. He spent the rest of the war training pilots back in Japan.

After Japan surrendered, he said, he hid from what he feared would be vengeful American occupiers. He worked for a time on a dairy farm, but found himself plagued by nightmares that made it tough to sleep. In his dreams, he said, he kept seeing the faces of the terrified American pilots he had shot down.

“I realized the war had turned me into a killer of men,” he said, “and that was not the kind of person I wanted to be.”

He said the nightmares finally ended when he found a new calling by opening a kindergarten in Nagano in 1965. He said he was able to alleviate the pangs of guilt by dedicating himself to teaching young children the value of peace. While he has now retired, he said he still visits the school every day he can to see the children’s smiling faces.

He said it took many more years before he could finally talk about the war itself. The turning point came during the Persian Gulf war in 1991, when he was appalled to overhear young Japanese describe the bombing as if it were a

harmless video game. He said he resolved to speak out.

He has been talking about his war experiences ever since.

“Until I die, I will tell about what I saw,” Mr. Harada concluded his speech to the accountants’ group. “Never forgetting is the best way to protect our children and our children’s children from the horrors of war.”

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