

Letters to the past: Iwo Jima and Japanese memory

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney

Clint Eastwood's film Letters from Iwo Jima finds the humanity behind the brutality of war, thus honouring the past and opening hearts in the present, says the acclaimed author of Kamikaze Diaries.

Clint Eastwood's film Letters from Iwo Jima begins and ends sixty years after the end of the war it depicts. At the start, a team of Japanese investigators is searching for whatever may have been left by Japanese soldiers holed up on Iwo Jima, part of a group of Pacific islands around 1,000 kilometres south of Tokyo.

The team finds a large sack buried where the soldiers had made their last headquarters. The closing scene of the film shows hundreds of letters and postcards the soldiers wrote to their families and friends but were never sent spilling out of this sack.

The letters symbolise the frail thread of humanity that these soldiers, facing imminent death and trapped in a war their country soon lost, managed to hold onto. The two framing scenes highlight both war's brutal destruction of familial bonds and the attempts of those on the frontline to retain their humanity amidst its horror.

Letters from Iwo Jima is an important film for two reasons. For one thing, it is the first filmic attempt to undo the demonization of Japanese soldiers that was propagated by the American mass media during and after the Pacific war of 1941-45. For another, in vividly depicting the brutality and the meaninglessness of war, it is a movie with an anti-war message.

Eastwood's film chooses to portray the immense human cost of war in general by choosing the Japanese troops on Iwo Jima as an example. In a six-week battle from 16 February to 26 March 1945, these troops fought a desperate rearguard action from which 20,129 of the total of 20,933 were killed; the remainder were captured or went missing (the last two survivors emerged from a tunnel and surrendered on 1 January 1949).

The cost to the United States forces was also great: of the 70,000-strong invading force, 6,821 died and almost 22,000 were wounded. The outcome of the Iwo Jima battle was decisive: Japan's loss of the island provided the Americans with a base for the carpet-bombing of Japanese cities which killed more Japanese civilians than the two atomic bombs combined.

A journey into a lost Japan

Letters from Iwo Jima is not an easy film to watch. The viewer must endure scenes that evoke the worst of the battle – from the deafening sounds of gunshots and explosions to the sight of blood and dead bodies. Japanese soldiers had been ordered to defend this strategically crucial volcanic island with their lives. The Japanese navy had been destroyed in the battle over the Marianas, and military headquarters in Tokyo refused to send additional support. Anyone who surrendered and defected to the enemy, as two did, was shot by the Americans. In most wars, soldiers find themselves at the point of no return.

A few 'lunatic patriots' among the Japanese officers killed their subordinates for what they saw as unpatriotic acts, even when they needed each and every soldier. The extreme brutality within the Japanese armed forces is well known. Some inflicted corporal punishment even on the 'kamikaze pilots' on the base, rather than making sure they were in perfect shape for the death mission. Indeed, while the Nazis told their soldiers to kill the enemy, the Japanese military told their soldiers to kill themselves: 'Thou shall fall like cherry petals after a brief life' (OhnukiTierney, 2002).

When Mount Suribachi was lost, for example, the soldiers were expected to commit suicide. Many agonised over the meaning of patriotism, which on Iwo Jima meant death for a certain lost cause. A baker, the most moving character in the film (superbly acted by Ninomiya Kazunari), asks a fellow soldier who was ready to shoot him as a coward: 'Which is better – to die now or to stay alive to fight for the country?' Indeed, it is the baker, Saigo, who is most irreverent toward Japan's militarist ideology, and it is he who buried the sack of unsent letters, thereby preserving the last days of these soldiers for posterity.

Their heart-wrenching agony is portrayed as they write letters to their families (in reply to ones that have been delivered before the battle), knowing that their loved ones may never read them. The baker poignantly pours out his own feelings: only when he is writing to his wife, and a daughter he has not seen, does he find some relief from the unbearable reality.

Although we have letters and diaries of soldiers in many countries from the past, writing diaries and letters was especially important for the Japanese, who confront their own thoughts in writing. Many soldiers left long diaries behind (see Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006).

The film perceptively identifies the strategies employed by the Japanese state to mobilise women and children on the 'home front', in ways both comparable to and very different from those used by other states at war. These included the Patriotic Women's Association; the use of the term hikokumin ('non-subject'), a threatening description of anyone who did not comply with the war effort; and the sen'ninbari (a sash with 1,000 red knots made by 1,000 women and touted as 'bullet-proof').

The Japanese state targeted children with patriotic propaganda, filling school textbooks with stories and songs in praise of the soldiers who were protecting their country. In one scene in the film, General Kuribayashi (played by Ken Watanabe) – who has arrived on the island to take charge of the operation, and who brings some humanity to the soldiers struggling under wretched conditions – is called to the radio to hear an 'important broadcast' from military headquarters in Tokyo: children from his home prefecture are singing to thank the soldiers on Iwo Jima for valiantly protecting the homeland. The state believed that the soldiers' sacrifice for the emperor was not enough; it had to mobilise an emotional appeal by children to fortify their spirits.

The film also offers a glimpse of the way that the cosmopolitanism of pre-war Japan lasted into the war. The curriculum of the higher schools which young men entered at 16 was demanding, requiring study of Latin and two other foreign languages. The students also read world classics in philosophy and literature: Plato and Socrates, Kant and Kierkegaard, Thomas Mann and Romain Rolland, and would form their own symphony orchestras. When the students became soldiers, they often used German, French and English in their diaries.

The cultural filter

At the same time, the film at some points plays with rather than transcends the misleading representations that so often surround the popular depiction of Japanese culture. It is known that Kuribayashi stripped off his insignias and other markings of his rank before he led the mass suicide, and that his remains were never identified. Thus, the portrayal of him as seeking seppuku (hara-kiri) both reinforces the stereotype of the Japanese soldier-warrior and succumbs to Japanese government propaganda, which cynically superimposed the samurai 'aura' on the new conscripts, many of whom came from dirt-poor rural Japan.

A similarly misleading point is the representation of soldiers crying 'hail to the emperor!' before committing mass suicide. At this point in the war, despair had prevailed over whatever ideology soldiers might have previously held, and the gesture had become a hollow ritual without conviction, as is evident in many testimonies.

Yet overall, the film speaks to its intended audience – Japanese as much as American – with

integrity. Eastwood has even referred to it as 'a Japanese film', and dedicated it to the fallen soldiers on Iwo Jima. Many of the 6,500 Japanese who crowded into its two-day premiere no doubt were attracted because of the positive image of the Japanese portrayed in the film. The paradox was well expressed by Onda Taeko, writing on Yomiuri Online: 'Today the person who had the power to tell us the Japanese experience during the war was Clint Eastwood, an American.'

Indeed, the memory of the 1939-45 War in Japan has a chequered history. After 1945, American occupation forces prohibited any reference to the war, including the atomic bombs, literally blacking them out from school textbooks. After the round-the-clock carpet bombing of the cities, most Japanese were relieved that the war had ended, convinced that the war was wrong, and too pressed by the rigours of survival and reconstruction to spend time looking back.

A widespread attitude that the war had been evil even led people to shun or scorn returning soldiers; many limbless veterans reduced to street-begging received little sympathy from passers-by. Sixty years later, a new generation of Japanese is now confronting the country's war experiences, including the atrocities Japan's military forces inflicted upon their 'enemies' and other Asian citizens. The debates on what and how to include Japan's wartime record in school textbooks are passionate.

The deep wounds of the war have spurred enduring peace movements of several kinds: among women and organised labour, by the members of Kyujo-no-kai (The Association for Article 9), which strives to prevent the re-militarisation of Japan, and a group of top scientists at Sogokenkyu University who hold a series of peace symposiums. Clint Eastwood has given this mosaic of groups much needed moral support at a time when elements in Japan's government are seeking ways to increase the country's military power.

On the western side of the Pacific, Japanese soldiers have for six decades remained the utmost 'other,' the epitome of 'the inscrutable Oriental', even after the veterans of Iwo Jima on both sides pledged reconciliation and resolved never to repeat the brutality of a terrible war. In laying aside this image and courageously portraying Japanese soldiers as human beings, Clint Eastwood deserves great credit.

That the film has been enormously successful in the US, receiving sixteen awards so far (including an Oscar nomination), is truly remarkable, perhaps a sign of the times when more than half of Americans oppose the Iraq war. Its deepest message, however, is sent by those letters: the universality of the bonds of love, family and humanity itself.

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Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney is William F Vilas Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. She is the author of *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (University of Chicago Press, 2002) and *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).