

The War is Over . . . Please Come Out

By Jennifer Rosenberg & Alan Bellows

In 1944, Lt. Hiroo Onoda was sent by the Japanese army to the remote Philippine island of Lubang. His mission was to conduct guerrilla warfare during World War II. Unfortunately, he was never officially told the war had ended; so for 29 years, Onoda continued to live in the jungle, ready for when his country would again need his services and information. Eating coconuts and bananas and deftly evading searching parties he believed were enemy scouts, Onoda hid in the jungle until he finally emerged from the dark recesses of the island on March 19, 1972.



Called to Duty

Hiroo Onoda was 20 years-old when he was called up to join the army. At the time, he was far from home working at a branch of the Tajima Yoko trading company in Hankow (now Wuhan), China. After passing his physical, Onoda quit his job and returned to his home in Wakayama, Japan in August of 1942 to get into top physical condition.

In the Japanese army, Onoda was trained as an officer and was then chosen to be trained at an Imperial Army intelligence school. At this school, Onoda was taught how to gather intelligence and how to conduct guerrilla warfare.

In the Philippines

On December 17, 1944, Lt. Hiroo Onoda left for the Philippines to join the Sugi Brigade (the Eighth Division from Hirosaki). Here, Onoda was given orders by Major Yoshimi Taniguchi and Major Takahashi. Onoda was ordered to lead the

Lubang Garrison in guerrilla warfare. As Onoda and his comrades were getting ready to leave on their separate missions, they stopped by to report to the division commander. The division commander ordered:

- You are absolutely forbidden to die by your own hand. It may take three years, it may take five, but whatever happens, we'll come back for you. Until then, so long as you have one soldier, you are to continue to lead him. You may have to live on coconuts. If that's the case, live on coconuts! Under no circumstances are you [to] give up your life voluntarily.¹

Onoda took these words more literally and seriously than the division commander could ever have meant them.

On Lubang

Once on the island of Lubang, Onoda was supposed to blow up the pier at the harbor and destroy the Lubang airfield. Unfortunately, the garrison commanders, who were worried about other matters, decided not to help Onoda on his mission and soon the island was overrun by the Allies. The remaining Japanese soldiers, Onoda included, retreated into the inner regions of the island and split up into groups. As these groups dwindled in size after several attacks, the remaining soldiers split into cells of 3 and 4 people. There were four people in Onoda's cell: Corporal Shoichi Shimada (age 30), Private Kinshichi Kozuka (age 24), Private Yuichi Akatsu (age 22), and Lt. Hiroo Onoda (now age 23).

They lived very close together, with very limited supplies: the clothes they were wearing, a small amount of rice, and each had a gun with limited ammunition. Rationing the rice was difficult and caused fights, but they supplemented it with coconuts and bananas. Every once in a while, they were able to kill a civilian's cow for food.

The cells would save up their energy and use guerrilla tactics to fight in skirmishes. Other cells were captured or were killed while Onoda's continued to fight from the interior.

The War is Over...Come Out!

Onoda first saw a leaflet that claimed the war was over in October 1945. When another cell had killed a cow, they found a leaflet left behind by the islanders which read: "The war ended on August 15. Come down from the mountains!"² But as they sat in the jungle, the leaflet just didn't seem to make sense, for

another cell had just been fired upon a few days ago. If the war were over, why would they still be under attack? No, they decided, the leaflet must be a clever ruse by the Allied propagandists.

Again, the outside world tried to contact the survivors living on the island by dropping leaflets out of a Boeing B-17 near the end of 1945. Printed on these leaflets was the surrender order from General Yamashita of the Fourteenth Area Army. Having already hidden on the island for a year and with the only proof of the end of the war being this leaflet, Onoda and the others scrutinized every letter and every word on this piece of paper. One sentence in particular seemed suspicious, it said that those who surrendered would receive "hygienic succor" and be "hauled" to Japan. Again, they believed this must be an Allied hoax.

Leaflet after leaflet was dropped. Newspapers were left. Photographs and letters from relatives were dropped. Friends and relatives spoke out over loudspeakers. There was always something suspicious, so they never believed that the war had really ended.

Onoda and his men lived in the jungle for years, occasionally engaging in skirmishes and carrying out acts of sabotage as part of their guerrilla activities. They were tormented by jungle heat, incessant rain, rats, insects, and the occasional armed search party. Any villagers they sighted were seen as spies, and attacked by the four men, and over the years a number of people were wounded or killed by the rogue soldiers.

In September of 1949, over four years after the four men went into hiding, one of Onoda's fellow soldiers decided that he had had enough. Without a word to the others, Private Akatsu snuck away one day, and the Sugi Brigade was reduced to three men. Sometime in 1950 they found a note from Akatsu, which informed the others that he had been greeted by friendly troops when he left the jungle. To the remaining men, it was clear that Akatsu was being coerced into working for the enemy, and was not to be trusted. They continued their guerrilla attacks, but more cautiously.

Three years later, in 1953, Corporal Shimada was shot in the leg during a shootout with some fishermen. Onoda and Kozuka helped him back into the jungle, and without any medical supplies, they nursed him back to health over several months. Despite his recovery, Shimada became gloomy. About a year later, the men encountered a search party on a beach at Gontin, and Shimada was fatally wounded in the ensuing skirmish. He was 40 years old.

For nineteen years, Onoda and Kozuka continued their guerrilla activities together, living in the dense jungle in make-shift shelters. Every now and then they would kill another cow for meat, which alarmed the villagers and prompted the army to embark on yet another unsuccessful search for the men. The two remaining soldiers operated under the conviction that the Japanese army would eventually retake the island from the Allies, and that their guerrilla tactics would prove invaluable in that effort.

Nineteen years after Shimada was killed, on October of 1972, Onoda and Kozuka had snuck out of the jungle to burn some rice which had been collected by farmers, in an attempt to sabotage the "enemy's" food supply. A Filipino police patrol spotted the men, and fired two shots. 51-year-old Kozuka was killed, ending his 27 years of hiding. Onoda escaped back into the jungle, now alone in his misguided mission.

News of Kozuka's death traveled quickly to Japan. It was concluded that since Kozuka had survived all those years, then it was likely that Lt. Onoda was still alive, though he had been declared legally dead about thirteen years earlier. More search parties were sent in to find him, however he successfully evaded them each time. But in February of 1974, after Onoda had been alone in the jungle for a year and a half, a Japanese college student named Norio Suzuki managed to track him down.

When Suzuki had left Japan, he told his friends that he was "going to look for Lieutenant Onoda, a panda, and the abominable snowman, in that order." Onoda and Suzuki became fast friends. Suzuki tried to convince him that the war had ended long ago, but Onoda explained that he would not surrender unless his commander ordered him to do so. Suzuki took photos of the two of them together, and convinced Onoda to meet him again about two weeks later, in a prearranged location.



When Onoda went to the meeting place, there was a note waiting from Suzuki. Suzuki had returned to the island with Onoda's one-time superior officer, Major Taniguchi. When Onoda returned to meet with Suzuki and his old commander, he arrived in what was left of his dress uniform, wearing his sword and carrying his still-working Arisaka rifle, 500 rounds of ammunition, and several hand grenades.

Major Taniguchi, who had long since retired from the military and become a bookseller, read aloud the orders: Japan had lost the war, and all combat activity was to cease immediately. After a moment of quiet anger, Onoda pulled back the bolt on his rifle and unloaded the bullets, and then took off his pack and laid the rifle across it. When the reality of it sunk in, he wept openly.

By the time he formally surrendered to Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos in 1974, Onoda had spent twenty nine of his fifty two years hiding in the jungle, fighting a war that had long been over for the rest of the world. He and his guerrilla soldiers had killed some thirty people unnecessarily, and wounded about a hundred others. But they had done so under the belief that they were at war, and consequently President Marcos granted him a full pardon for the crimes he had committed while in hiding.

He returned to a hero's welcome in Japan, but found himself unable to adjust to modern life there. He received back pay from the Japanese government for his twenty-nine years on Lubang, but it amounted to very little. He recorded his story as a memoir, entitled "*No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*," then moved to Brazil for a calm life of raising cattle on a ranch.

In May of 1996, Hiroo Onoda returned to Lubang, and donated \$10,000 to the school there. He then married a Japanese woman, and the two of them moved back to Japan to run a nature camp for kids, where Onoda could share what he learned about survival through resourcefulness and ingenuity. Reportedly, Onoda is still alive in Japan today.