

U.S. documents solve mystery of war criminal Tojo’s remains

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Until recently, the location of executed wartime Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo’s remains was one of World War II’s biggest mysteries in the nation he once led.

Now, a Japanese university professor has revealed declassified U.S. military documents that appear to hold the answer.

The documents show the cremated ashes of Tojo, one of the masterminds of the Pearl Harbor attack, were scattered from a U.S. Army aircraft over the Pacific Ocean about 30 miles east of Yokohama, Japan’s second-largest city, south of Tokyo.

It was a tension-filled, highly secretive mission, with American officials apparently taking extreme steps meant to keep Tojo’s remains, and those of six others executed with him, away from ultra-nationalists looking to glorify them as martyrs. The seven were hanged for war crimes just before Christmas in 1948, three years after Japan’s defeat.

The discovery brings partial closure to a painful chapter of Japanese history that still plays out today, as conservative Japanese politicians attempt to whitewash history, leading to friction with wartime victims, especially China and South Korea.

After years spent verifying and checking details and evaluating the significance of what he’d found, Nihon University professor Hiroaki Takazawa publicly released the clues to the remains’ location last month. He came across the declassified documents in 2018 at the U.S. National Archives in Washington. It’s believed to be the first time official documents showing the handling of the seven war criminals’ remains were made public, according to Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies and the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records.

Hidetoshi Tojo, the leader’s great-grandson, told The Associated Press that the absence of the remains has long been a humiliation for the bereaved families, but he’s relieved the information has come to light.

“If his remains were at least scattered in Japanese territorial waters ... I think he was still somewhat fortunate,” Tojo said. “I want to invite my friends and lay flowers to pay tribute to him” if further details about the remains’ location becomes available.

Hideki Tojo, prime minister during much of World War II, is a complicated figure, revered by some conservatives as a patriot but loathed by many in the west for prolonging the war, which ended only after the U.S. atomic bombings



of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

About a month after August 15, 1945, when then-Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s defeat to a stunned nation, Tojo shot himself in a failed suicide attempt as he was about to be arrested at his modest Tokyo home.

Takazawa, the Nihon University professor specializing in war tribunal issues, found the documents during research at the U.S. archives into other war crimes trials. The documents, he said, are valuable because they officially detail previously little-known facts about what happened and provide a rough location of where the ashes were scattered.

He plans to continue research into other executions. More than 4,000 people were convicted of war crimes in other international tribunals, and about 920 of them were executed.

Tojo and the six others who were hanged were among 28 Japanese wartime leaders tried for war crimes at the 1946-1948 International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Twenty-five were convicted, including 16 sentenced to life in prison, with two getting shorter prison terms. Two others died while on trial and one case was dropped.

In one of the newly revealed documents — dated December 23, 1948 and carrying a “secret” stamp — U.S. Army Maj. Luther Frierson wrote: “I certify that I received the remains, supervised cremation, and personally scattered the ashes of the following executed war criminals at sea from an Eighth Army liaison plane.”

The entire operation was tense, with U.S. officials extremely careful about not leaving a single speck of ashes behind, apparently to prevent them from being stolen by admiring ultra-nationalists, Takazawa said.

“In addition to their attempt to prevent the remains from being glorified, I think the U.S. military was

CREMAINS LOCATION. Former Japanese Prime Minister Gen. Hideki Tojo is seen speaking into a microphone in Tokyo, Japan, in this undated photograph. Until recently, the location of the executed wartime prime minister’s remains was one of World War II’s biggest mysteries in the nation he once led. A Japanese university professor has now revealed declassified U.S. military documents that appear to hold the answer. (AP Photo, File)

adamant about not letting the remains return to Japanese territory ... as an ultimate humiliation,” Takazawa said.

The documents state that when the cremation was completed, the ovens were “cleared of the remains in their entirety.”

“Special precaution was taken to preclude overlooking even the smallest particles of remains,” Frierson wrote.

Here’s how the operation went.

At 2:10am on December 23, 1948, caskets carrying the bodies of Tojo and the six others were loaded on a 2.5-ton truck and taken out of the prison after fingerprinting for verification, Frierson wrote in a January 4, 1949 document.

About an hour and a half later, the motorcade guarded by truckloads of armed soldiers to protect the bodies arrived at a U.S. military graves registration platoon in Yokohama for a final check.

The truck left the area at 7:25am and arrived at a Yokohama crematorium 30 minutes later. The caskets were unloaded from the truck and placed directly “in the ovens” in 10 minutes, while soldiers guarded the area.

The remains were then transported under guard to a nearby airstrip and loaded onto a plane that Frierson boarded. “We proceeded to a point approximately 30 miles over the Pacific Ocean east of Yokohama where I personally scattered the cremated remains over a wide area.”

Today, even without the ashes, bereaved families and conservative Japanese lawmakers such as former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe regularly pay tribute at Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine, where the executed war criminals are enshrined with 2.5 million war dead considered “sacred spirits” in the Shinto religion. No remains are enshrined at Yasukuni.

After the seven executed war criminals were enshrined there in 1978, Yasukuni has become a flashpoint between Japan and its neighbors China and South Korea, who see the enshrinement as proof of Japan’s lack of remorse over its wartime aggression. Yasukuni also enshrines five other convicted wartime leaders and hundreds of other war criminals.

Hidetoshi Tojo said his great-grandfather was consistently made a taboo in postwar Japan, never glorified.

“Everything about my great-grandfather was sealed, including his speeches. Taking that into consideration, I think not preserving the remains was part of the occupation policy,” he said. “I hope to see further revelations about the unknown facts of the past.”

Tourism boom pressures Tibet’s historic sites

By Mark Schiefelbein and Sam McNeil
The Associated Press

LHASA, China — Tourism is booming in Tibet as more Chinese travel in-country because of the coronavirus pandemic, posing risks to the region’s fragile environment and historic sites.

The number of visitors is limited to 5,000 per day at the Potala Palace, the former home of the Dalai Lamas. Balancing tourist demand with the need to minimize wear and tear on the massive hillside structure is a constant challenge, said Gonggar Tashi, the head administrator.

“The biggest challenge for us is the contradiction between the protection and usage of the cultural relics,” Tashi told journalists in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital.

He spoke during a government-organized tour that gave foreign journalists rare access to Tibet, but under the watchful eye of officials who set the agenda.

The growing numbers of tourists appear unconcerned by political controversies long circling Tibet. China’s communist forces entered the region in 1951, and the Dalai Lama, Tibet’s traditional spiritual and political leader, fled to India during



WEAR & TEAR. A Chinese tourist gets ready to take a photo atop a white yak being led by a Tibetan man in Namtso, in western China’s Tibet Autonomous Region, on June 2, 2021. Tourism is booming in Tibet as more Chinese travel in-country because of the coronavirus pandemic, posing risks to the region’s fragile environment and historic sites. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

an abortive uprising against Chinese rule in 1959. Millions of visitors come to Tibet every year, and 2020 saw a 12.6% increase from the previous year, said Ge Lei, deputy director of the China Tourism Marketing Association. He expects the amount of visitors to roughly double by 2026.

The glut of visitors, far exceeding Tibet’s population of 3.5 million people, means caution is necessary to protect the environment and culture,

he said. Tourists are drawn to the “mystique and myth of Tibet as a remote snow-bound land,” said Travis Klingberg, a cultural geographer at NYU Shanghai. “But Tibet has become a place of beautiful natural landscapes meaningful to the Chinese nation.”

Tibet has shifted its focus from international to domestic visitors as China’s middle class has grown, said

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