

Sakae Ōba - The Last Samurai

Written by Andy Owen



Sakae Ōba was a remarkable man.

He was an officer of the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II - and he served in China and, more notably, in the Pacific campaign.

His story is inspirational.

He was born in Japan on 21st March 1914 in Gamagori. He was the son of a farmer and as he grew up, he worked with his father in the fields.

He joined the 18th Infantry in 1934 and was stationed in Toyohashi, which was close to where he grew up. There was clearly something special about him, even at an early age - and he was quickly identified as officer material.

He was designated a Ground Officer Candidate, First Class - and underwent specialised training.

In July 1937, Ōba and his regiment deployed to China where they joined the amphibious invasion of Shanghai in the Second Sino-Japanese War.



Landings at Shanghai

By 1939, he had been promoted to First Lieutenant - and by November 1941 he was commanding a full infantry company. By March 1943, he was promoted to Captain.

Early in 1944, the 18th Regiment was pulled out of Manchuria and re-deployed to the Pacific Theatre. Captain Ōba was placed in charge of the regiment's company of combat medics.

Ōba and the regiment were aboard a transport ship - Sakito-Marū - when, on 29th February 1944, it was hit with a torpedo, near the island of Saipan, fired by the American submarine USS Trout.



Sakito-Marū

It was a devastating strike.

The ship sank quickly, taking with it, 1,700 of the 3,500 men on board, including the regimental commander, Colonel Monma Kentaro. Also lost on the transport was a significant number of supplies and vehicles, including several tanks and most of the regiment's equipment.

Escort vessels moved in very quickly and rescued about 1,800 survivors and delivered them to Saipan. While the rescue was taking place, the convoy's other three escort destroyers went after the USS Trout.

They dropped depth charges and sank the submarine.



USS Trout

The 1,800 rescued troops were delivered to Saipan.

There was a speedy re-organisation – and then, to their collective horror, most of them were told to board another ship, as they were going to Guam.

You can't begin to imagine how traumatic that would have been for all of them.

Captain Ōba and around 600 troops, remained behind on Saipan, as his talents were badly needed. He was given the responsibility to organise a 225-man medical company composed of tankers, engineers, and medics that survived the Sakito-Marū disaster.

They obtained what few medical supplies were available and by mid-May had set up a medical aid station.

But the Americans were coming.

They wanted retribution.

And they wanted Japan.

The Pacific campaign had started successfully and was continuing. In the spring of 1944, powerful U.S. forces invaded Japanese-held islands in the central Pacific Ocean along a path toward Japan.

An armada of 535 U.S. ships with 127,000 troops, including 77,000 Marines, had taken the Marshall Islands - and American high command made the Mariana Islands a priority, as they formed a critical front line for Japan's defence of its empire.

Saipan was the next target. A vital stepping stone.

On the morning of 15th June 1944, United States Marines landed on the beaches for the Battle of Saipan.



US Marines Landing on Saipan

Despite a fierce defence, the Japanese were gradually pushed back with heavy losses.

The Japanese commander organised defensive lines around his position.

But he was desperately short of supplies and he knew there was minimal chance of re-supply or relief. The US Marines were strong and well equipped.

He realised he stood no chance of victory. So, he ordered a final attack.

Captain Ōba was part of that attack. On 7th July, the largest Banzai charge of the war in the Pacific, took place in the Matanza district of Saipan.



Just before 5am, the Japanese attacked. At the front, were Japanese officers swinging their swords over their heads, screaming at the top of their lungs, with suicidal troops close behind them.

The wounded were in the rear, some armed only with rocks or knives mounted on sticks.

It was absolutely horrific. Hell on earth, for the troops on both sides.

Bloody hand-to-hand combat with no quarter.

The Japanese came right through the gap between the US 1st and 2nd Battalions and some of the Marines described the attack as looking like a cattle stampede from a western movie.

The one difference was, the Japanese just kept on coming.

The Japanese overran the 105th Regiment, continued down the coastal plain and attacked a 10th Marine Artillery Battery positioned behind the 105th.



The Marines were firing their 105mm howitzers, line of sight, directly into the oncoming waves of Japanese troops.

But they still kept moving forward.

The Marines were becoming overwhelmed and had to destroy their guns and fall back. Some soldiers who were cut off by the Japanese, had to swim to the US destroyers offshore, to survive.

But slowly, the Marines gained the upper hand.

The attack lasted for close to 15 hours before the Japanese were finally wiped out. They had advanced over 1,000 yards.

It had been a slaughter. A total of 4,311 Japanese troops had been killed.



The Americans preparing a mass grave for the dead Japanese soldiers

The American losses were also high. The first and second battalions of the 105th had nearly been wiped out, with 406 killed and an additional 512 wounded.

And it had shaken the battle-hardened Marines to the core.

Two days later on July 9th, 1944, Saipan was declared secure, but the horror didn't end there.

The next day brought mass Japanese suicides, including that of Emperor Hirohito's hero at Pearl Harbor and Midway, Vice Admiral Chūichi Nagumo.

In addition, hundreds of Japanese civilians, brainwashed by Japanese propaganda that they would be killed if captured, jumped off cliffs or drowned themselves in the sea.

Ōba had somehow survived the carnage.

He quickly pulled together 46 other soldiers who had survived the massacre and they joined with him.

As his small group lurked in the jungles, they continued to collect pockets of Japanese survivors.

In the end, Ōba had gathered more than 150 soldiers and 200 civilians who lived on the island, all determined to continue holding out until the Imperial Japanese Navy returned to recapture Saipan.

Dividing the group into various camps, Ōba's men protected the civilians, who in turn did all they could to support the efforts of the troops.

Ōba convinced them that help was on its way and he told them that fighting a guerrilla campaign was vital to their survival and ultimate victory.

He used Mount Tapochau as his primary base. It was over 1,500 feet high and a superb vantage point, giving him an unobstructed 360-degree view of the island.



From their base camp on the western slope of the mountain, Ōba and his men conducted regular guerrilla-style raids on American positions.

By 30th September 1944, the Japanese Army made an official presumption that all personnel of unknown status, were declared killed in action.

That included Captain Ōba - and he was awarded a posthumous promotion to Major.

His family were devastated.

But, Ōba was very much alive. And still in the war.

He sincerely believed that help would be coming. And he convinced his group that they must continue to fight until they could be rescued.

The Japanese tried.

Cargo ships, with a fleet of warships, were dispatched from the Philippines to try and get to Saipan.

But they were intercepted by the U.S. 3rd and 7th fleets off the Philippines.

They were decimated in October 1944 in the Battle of Leyte Gulf - considered by many to be the greatest sea battle of World War II.



Ōba received reports of that maritime defeat – but refused to believe them.

He also refused to believe later reports of Japan's surrender in August 1945.

And he dismissed completely, photographs dropped by U.S. aircraft, of a devastated Hiroshima after it was atom-bombed on August 6th, 1945.

He thought they were doctored fakes. The war, he believed, was still there to be won.

Ōba and his men continued their battle against the garrison of U.S. Marines, which was now 45,000 strong.

He had trained his small force superbly and planned his raids down to the finest details. He mainly stole things they needed – medical and other supplies.

As well as doing infrastructure damage when he could.

Ōba's foraging patrols continued, with the Captain himself often accompanying his men on operations.



During one food raid, Ōba himself snatched freshly baked bread from the window sill of an American bakery.

On another mission, he boldly strode into an enemy shower and after finishing, opened fire with his pistol at American troops as he left.

Another raiding party snuck onto an airfield and destroyed a B-29 bomber while it was parked on the tarmac.

He also rescued Japanese POWs to gather information – and incredibly, he replaced them with the same number of his own men, so the Americans would not realise what he was doing.

He was so smart that even when the American soldiers set up an outside cinema in a field near the camp, they never knew, that among the trees behind them, Ōba was taking a seat in the back row.

What an amazing man.

The Marines were getting very upset that key items were disappearing and decided that enough was enough. They started to conduct patrols in the island's interior, searching for the perpetrators.

These patrols sometimes encountered Japanese soldiers or civilians, and when they were captured, they were interrogated and sent to an appropriate prison camp.

It was during these interrogations that the Marines learned of Ōba's name.

Because of the speed and stealth of his operations - and the frustrated attempts to find him - the Marines on Saipan eventually referred to Ōba as '*The Fox*'.

By this time, the US Marine commander was under great pressure to get Ōba.

So, he devised a plan in which his men would line up across the width of the island, with a six-foot space between them - and they were to march from the south end of the island to the north.



The commander felt that Ōba and his men would have to fight, surrender, or be driven north and eventually captured.

As this dragnet progressed, a number of older and sick civilians surrendered.

As the Marines got closer to their position, a lot of Ōba's soldiers wanted to fight.

But he reminded them that they had two primary roles - protect the civilians and stay alive to continue the war.

As the line of Marines approached the area, most of the remaining soldiers and civilians climbed up to a concealed mountain clearing, while others stood on narrow ledges and clung to the side of the mountain.

They maintained their precarious positions for most of the day, as the Marines crossed through the area, ransacking huts and gardens as they found them.

In some places, the Japanese on the ledges were less than 20 feet above the heads of the Marines. But none of them were spotted.

The Marines' search proved futile, and eventually led to the US commander's reassignment.

On 27th November 1945, former Major General Umahachi Amo, commander of the 9th Independent Mixed Brigade during the Battle of Saipan, was able to draw out some of the Japanese in hiding by singing the anthem of the Japanese infantry branch.

But Ōba and most of his group remained defiant.

He continued fighting because he believed the war was continuing.

And, as he was cut off from his command, he therefore felt he should continue the war until communication was re-established and new orders received from his superiors.

But, Amo was then able to present documents from the defunct Imperial General Headquarters to Captain Ōba, ordering him and his men to surrender themselves to the Americans.

These documents finally convinced Ōba that the war was over.

On 1st December 1945, three months after the official surrender of Japan, the Japanese soldiers gathered once more on Mt. Tapochau and sang a song of departure to the spirits of the war dead.



Ōba marched down from the mountain with his remaining survivors, singing a song 'Spirit of Infantry'.

Captain Ōba and his men had held out on the island for 512 days, or about 16 months.

It was a stupendous feat.



With great formality and commensurate dignity, Captain Ōba surrendered his sword and ordered his men to surrender their arms and colours, to Lieutenant Colonel Howard G. Kirgis of the 18th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Company.

This marked the end of the last organised resistance of Japanese forces of the Second World War.

In recognition of his exploits, Ōba was feted by the U.S. Marine Officer's Club on the island, before being repatriated to Japan.

Those assembled, lined up to shake his hand.

After the Japanese government confirmed that Ōba was alive on Saipan, his 'posthumous' promotion was rescinded.

Ōba insisted that continuing to fight for their country was more honourable than so-called honourable suicide, but, because of Ōba's decision to fight on, many Japanese labelled him a coward after the war.

The Bushido Code dominated the Imperial Japanese Army and Imperial Japanese Navy's way of thinking. Bushido means '*the way of the warrior*' and stressed martial spirit, self-sacrifice, loyalty, justice, a sense of shame if dishonoured - and honour being more important than life itself.

Bushido also stressed an indifference to pain as an essential virtue and also strongly emphasised self-discipline, loyalty to one's superiors, to Japan and fearlessness in the face of death. "We must give our lives to the Emperor and Country, with death in battle and no surrender to the enemy."

Corporal Don Jones remarked of the captain:

"If Oba had been an American, he'd have been put up for a Congressional Medal of Honor."

Following his release from Allied custody, he was repatriated.



Once back in Japan, Ōba was reunited with his wife and met his son for the first time.

The child had been born in 1937, just after his father had left for China.

They went on to have a second son.

Ōba was hired by the Maruei Department Store Company, where he was employed as a representative and spokesman for the board of directors until 1992.

From 1967 until 1979, Ōba served on the city council in the town of Gamagori, in Aichi Prefecture.

Don Jones, a former U.S. Marine stationed on Saipan and once part of a group ambushed by Ōba's men, was intrigued by the story of the Japanese holdouts - and sought out Ōba after the war.

With Ōba's cooperation, Jones wrote a book about his experiences on Saipan and became a lifelong friend of the Ōba family.

He also located the retired Lieutenant Colonel Kirgis, to whom Ōba had surrendered in 1945 - and asked if he could return the sword that Ōba had handed over when he surrendered.

Kirgis agreed, and Jones took the sword to Japan where he presented it to his grateful friend.

The heirloom sword remains in the possession of the Ōba family.

To a Samurai, his sword is much more than an ordinary weapon.

It is his *soul*.

Revered as a symbol of strength and honour, swords are passed down from one generation to the next, the eldest son always inheriting the cherished weapon.

It was a fitting tribute to the legendary "Fox of Saipan."

Sakae Ōba died on 8 June 1992, at the age of 78.

His remains were interred in the Ōba family grave at Kou'un Temple in Gamagori.



In May 2010, Sakae Ōba's second son, Hisamitsu, discovered more than 1,200 pages of letters and postcards written between his parents Sakae and Mineko, most dated between 1937 and 1941, though some are dated as late as 1944.

A selection of the letters has been compiled and was published in January 2011 under the title '*Senka no rabu retah*', or '*Love Letters from the Fires of War*'.

The film '*Taiheiyo no Kiseki - Fokkusu to Yōbareta Otoko*' ('Miracle of the Pacific - the Man they called Fox.') the official English title of '*Ōba: The Last Samurai*' follows the 1986 book by U.S. war veteran Don Jones, on which the film is based.

I saw the film a few years ago. In fact, I was so taken by the story that I decided to research and write this article.

It is an excellent film and I strongly recommend it to you.



Sakae Ōba was the last Samurai.

He was a truly remarkable man...