The Battle of Aizu

by

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The period of Japanese history from the 1850s to 1868 is known as the Bakumatsu ("End of the Shogunate") period. This era was characterized by the fall of the reigning Tokugawa shogunate, the end of feudalism, and the start of Japan s rapid drive toward modernization. There were many battles fought in this period, and though feudalism was rapidly being eclipsed, great and enduring examples of adherence to Bushido, the Way of the Warrior, emerged. This was all the more apparent on the side of the Tokugawa, where many managed to remain loyal, despite knowing full well that they were fighting for a lost cause. The Battle of Aizu, in the old province of Shimotsuke in northern Japan, was one of these instances, made all the more painfully significant by the fact that the entire population rallied behind their lord and participated in the battle. Some of them kept fighting even after their castle had been breached. (Of Spirits Walking in the Red Shadow , p.1)

Aizu-Wakamatsu, in what is now Fukushima Prefecture, was the capital of the Aizu domain and the flashpoint of much of the later fighting during the Bakumatsu period. The city grew up around a castle originally called Kurokawa-jo (Kurokawa Castle), built in 1384 by Asahina Naomori. However, much of the present city dates from 1590, when Gamo Ujisato renovated the castle and renamed it Tsuruga-jo (also known today as Wakamatsu-jo). After the climactic battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the Tokugawa shogunate was founded, and the

castle was given to the Matsudaira family, a branch of the Tokugawa. (Britannica, p.712)

In the Bakumatsu period, the daimyo, or feudal lord, of Aizu was Matsudaira Higo no Kami Katamori, who also held the title of Lord Protector of Kyoto (also known as Miyako; the ancient Imperial capital). From 1864 to 1867 he was mainly in Kyoto, overseeing the Kyoto Shugoshoku, or Military Commission , which kept the peace in the city and kept the streets relatively clear of any Ishin Shishi, or revolutionary samurai opposed to the Shogun s rule. The Aizu domain was renowned in the Kyoto area for funding the famous police troops of the Shinsengumi and the Kyoto Mimawaarigumi, as well as helping to thwart the plot of the Choshu domain s Ishin Shishi to burn Kyoto to the ground and to kidnap the Emperor, who in those days resided in Kyoto. For a time, the Aizu domain was in control of Kyoto, with the support of the great domains of Satsuma and Kuwana, as well as the Kyoto Shoshidai (official government office for the administration of Kyoto), and successfully drove out repeated Choshu attempts to take the city. In late 1867, though, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the last shogun, resigned, making the Emperor the legitimate ruler of the country. The lord of Satsuma, Shimazu Hisamitsu, had had a falling out of sorts with the shogun, so he had switched sides, and his domain now assisted Choshu in the fight against the forces still loyal to the Shogun. Aizu s fortunes in Kyoto took a turn for the worse, and after a resounding defeat at the Battle of Toba-Fushimi, the daimyo had no choice but to return home. At least one of his chief counselors advised him to peacefully declare allegiance to the Imperial side, but Lord Matsudaira,

loyal to the last to his family, refused, deciding to put up a fight in defense of the old order (Reischauer, p.120). It was in his making this decision that the fate of Aizu was sealed (The Shinsengumi , p.1).

In July of 1868, Nagaoka Castle, to the southwest of Aizu, fell after a long siege, despite the fact that the defenders had "new" Gatling guns. Thus, the Aizu domain braced for the storm that was heading their way, and on August 23rd, 1868, the Battle of Aizu began. For their part, the Aizu forces had some successes. Under the command of the chief retainer, Sagawa Kampei, they organized shock troops that slipped out at night and wreaked havoc in the enemy encampments, especially amongst the artillery, which lost half its effectiveness due to nighttime raids. During the daytime, Tsuruga Castle came under heavy fire from enemy gun positions on nearby Mount Oda. However, the women and children fought the fires under the command of a fire brigade from Edo (later Tokyo). There was also a Buddhist monk named Nikkai, who climbed the castle tower and, praying to Amida Buddha, rang the bell every hour, day and night, throughout the battle (Takeda, p.2). Thus, despite the fact that they were besieged, the people of Aizu hung on tenaciously, without any hope of outside assistance, especially since the remainder of the forces still loyal to the Shogun, under the leadership of the Shogun s admiral, Enomoto Takeaki, were gathering at the port of Hakodate in southern Ezo (now Hokkaido), and preparing for the final standoff with the Imperial army. (Takeda, p. 1-2)

Perhaps the most famous and controversial example of bravery in the Battle of Aizu is that of the Byakkotai, or White Tiger Corps . This group was composed of teenagers who accompanied Lord Matsudaira to the front. Forty members of the second unit, the Shichu Byakkotai (the sons of the high-rank samurai), engaged the enemy near Tonoguchi village, and concentrated their fire on them. The counterattack, however, was tremendous, and they were forced to retreat through a tunnel to nearby Mount Iimori. From there they saw a sea of flames in the town surrounding the castle. Assuming that the castle was aflame and that their lord was killed (whereas the castle was not on fire and Lord Matsudaira had taken refuge in a Buddhist temple), all but one of the Shichu Byakkotai committed seppuku, ritual suicide. Later, a woman came to the Iimori Hill, and found 19 bodies, and one survivor, Sadakichi Iinuma (The Byakkotai and the Boshin War , p. 4). In the ancient tradition, warriors whose lord was killed had to commit ritual suicide and follow their lord in death, or else live a life of dishonor. In this way, despite their age, the Byakkotai members displayed their dedication to bushido and to their lord. It is from the survivor that the details of the unit s last moments are known. (The Byakkotai and the Boshin War , p.4)

In the Second World War, the Byakkotai were touted by the Axis as one of the finest examples of militarism. A stone column from Pompeii was sent to Aizu on December 1, 1928. The Byakkotai was used then for militarism (The Byakkotai and the Boshin War , p.4). Also, another Japanese military unit called the Byakkotai acquired an equally renowned status, in continual action against the British in Burma from 1942 to 1945. (Storry, p. 102)

To this day, though, the demise of the Byakkotai remains a controversial issue. Some view it as yet another example of adherence to bushido that was so commonplace during the course of this battle. However, an opposing viewpoint is that the mass suicide of the Byakkotai is yet another example of war snuffing out the lives of the young, like the Children s Crusade in Medieval Europe. Ultimately, though, no matter how people choose to view it, the unit members had been educated in the principles of Bushido and Confucianism (which both stress giri, or duty), and it was a conscious choice that they made(The Byakkotai and the Boshin War , p. 4).

As the battle wore on, things became more and more desperate. Later in the battle, after arriving at the front lines near the town of Aizu-bange, the Joushitai (Aizu Women s Troop), a unit of 20 women, later went on to participate in the fighting at Yanagibayashi. Historically speaking, Japan had many famous female samurai, as far back as the Gempei Wars in the twelfth century A.D., but since then the role of women was gradually confined to the home. This was not the case in the entire country, though, as the Aizu samurai and some others on other extremes of the country considered martial education just as important for women as for men. Many women from the Aizu domain were very skilled with the naginata, or halberd (Takeda, p.2).

The Joushitai unit was led by Nakano Takeko, a young woman from Aizu, renowned for her skill with the naginata as well as for her beauty. Even to this day, she seems to have an almost legendary status. Takeko had trained in

naginata under Dengoro Kurokochi, other martial arts and calligraphy under Taisuke Akazeki, and practiced swinging the sword one thousand times every morning (Takeda, p. 2). Her sister Yuko and mother Kouko were also skilled in the use of the naginata(Female Samurai , p. 3).

The group fought tenaciously against enemy riflemen, determined to try and turn the tide of the battle. During the battle she charged into the midst of the enemy harassing them with her naginata but finally caught an enemy bullet in the chest and fell (Takeda, p.2). Carried away from the firing line after being shot in the chest, Nakano, barely 22, begged her crying sister to remove her head and take it home. She feared that otherwise she would be captured, a destiny which each samurai felt was a huge disgrace (Of Spirits Walking in the Red Shadow , p.1). Nakano Takeko is today remembered through her cenotaph that proudly stands in Kozashi-machi (The Joushitai women vanished in battle , p.1). A monument was also erected in her memory in Bangemachi. Every year during the Aizu Autumn Festival, a group of young girls dressed in hakama (pleated skirt) and white headbands join the procession as a reminder of the sacrifice of the Joushitai women. In addition, there is a tower erected in the Zenryu Temple in memory of the 236 Aizu women martyred during the battle(The Joushitai women vanished in battle , p.1).

It is interesting to note that the common people throughout Japan greatly respected the sole survivor of the Byakkotai and the survivors of the Joushitai. Many books and songs were written about them, including the famous tune Kojo

no Tsuki (The Moon over the Desolate Castle). Though they had been in insurrection against the new government, these warriors had stood up to the Imperial forces honorably, and had valiantly upheld the ancient tradition of loyalty to one s clan and lord, as codified by bushido. Surprisingly, the Imperial government later even awarded medals to some of the survivors of the Joushitai, such as Yamamoto Yaeko. However, the survivor of the Byakkotai, Iinuma Sadakichi, was not so fortunate. He moved to the coastal city of Sendai, and was not able to return home until after his death, when, as he requested in his will, he was buried on the same hill where his comrades-in-arms had committed suicide(Kiyota, p.96).

Bushido, the ancient Way of the Warrior , has endured for centuries. Throughout the ages, it has had to adapt to changing circumstances and political climates, such as revolutions, foreign invasions, new technologies, and so on. The Battle of Aizu shows that even despite overwhelming odds and a huge disparity in weapons and technology, the Way of the Warrior and its related teachings and philosophies had become so ingrained in the psychology of the population of Aizu and several other regions of Japan that a great many people, even those who were not samurai themselves, refused to betray their lord, family, or clan, and instead remained loyal, and fought to the last, whether it was at Aizu in 1868, Hakodate in 1869, or Satsuma in 1876. It is partly because of these incidents and the attention and analysis they drew that bushido survives to this day, although it has once again been transformed by new ideas, new technologies, and new circumstances. A quote from Nabeshima Naoshige, the 17th-century lord of the

Nabeshima domain on the island of Kyushu, can appropriately sum the Battle of Aizu up: Warriors are not the only ones who die. All classes of people know their duty.