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Ashes Enshrined in Tokyo Monument

Japan Combs Saipan

By Mort Rosenblum

SAIPAN, Micronesia (AP) — Bullets and bombs killed some. Others leaped from cliffs and fell upon swords. Now, decades later, Japan is bringing home many thousands who died for the honor of the Rising Sun.

The return is symbolic. Ashes from mass cremations of bones found by combing the tropical topsoil and undergrowth are sent to be enshrined in a monument near the Emperor's Palace in Tokyo.

Each carefully wrapped bag of ashes is a random token of those who died defending Saipan: Imperial warriors, children of sugar planters, sailors awaiting shipment somewhere else and settlers' wives.

"Since the war we have recovered bones of 14,000 persons who died in the Mar-

ianas Islands," said Y. Tsuda, leader of a month-long government mission to seek the bones. "We will return next year."

JAPAN HAS SENT five teams here since 1968 after a lone mission in 1953. Others have gone to different island chains in the Western Pacific. Workers are mainly student volunteers.

Teams include Shinto priests, with robes and shaved heads, who perform ancient cremation rites.

At one recent ceremony, the bones of 745 unknown Japanese were placed atop a carefully laid pyre and burned on an overgrown fighter strip in the shadow of an 800-foot-high rock face now called Suicide Cliff.

Over the cliff, and a half dozen like it, thousands of Japanese civilian residents caught on Saipan threw their

families and then followed rather than face the shame and uncertainty of American capture.

Most were people who came to stay in the two decades before the war when Saipan was a thriving Japanese Trust Territory.

"There was nothing we could do," remembers Anthony Benavente, now Saipan's sheriff, who in 1944 pleaded in Japanese through a bullhorn with those about to jump.

"I told them the Americans were treating us well and would not harm the Japanese," he said. "But they jumped."

SOME JAPANESE balked at the last minute, he said, including one man who could not jump after his wife and children had already gone over the cliff.

In the spirit of ancient codes, families went over

the edge formally and calmly. The youngest child went first, holding the hand of the next oldest until all the children and the mother had jumped in a single chain.

Then the father would run over the edge backwards.

The U.S. Navy rescued some Japanese who leaped off the lower Banzai Cliff into the Pacific. Benavente said, but of the estimated

30,000 civilian settlers island, less than half found alive.

Tsuda said about Japanese soldiers and sailors died during the for Saipan.

THE TEAMS are I only for unburied de are not unearthing the graves hastily made bulldozers by A mer

forces in a hurry to move on toward the Japanese home islands. They are looking at the base of cliffs and in forgotten caves, fighting through dense foliage that was seeded by air after the war because shelling and bombing had denuded the island. The Japanese teams are working under an accord with American officials who

administer the islands under a United Nations trust. Benavente accompanied all searchers as guide and liaison. A LOT OF Japanese have made private searches for lost relatives, sometimes taking bones back to Japan without permission of local authorities. Others just leave presents

of rice and sake near the spot where they believe their loved ones were lost. "It's almost impossible to make identification now because the bones are so scattered," Benavente said. "But sometimes people do find who they're looking for. One boy found his father's canteen near some bones, and he just set down and cried."

for War Dead



REMAINS BURNED — Skeletal remains of 745 unidentified Japanese persons who died on Saipan during the U.S. invasion of 1944 go up in flames on a carefully built funeral pyre. Japanese volunteers return the ashes of the dead to Tokyo for enshrinement in a place of honor. — Associated Press Photo.