

For OSN

# Down War Dead Bones

By Diane Maddex Daily News Staff Writer

SAIPAN—The 50,000 Japanese who died on Saipan during World War II are finally going home as fibula by fibula, femur by femur, skull by skull, they are reduced to ashes.

Another retinue of bones collectors from Japan descended on Saipan July 20 to scour the island for the remains of relatives and countrymen.

In ceremonies similar to one on Thursday afternoon, the collected bones were ritualistically cremated and the ashes returned to Japan.

Seventy-one volunteers have come on this mission to Saipan, believed to be the seventh since the war. Others have gone to the Marshalls, Truk and Tinian.

Traveling under the auspices of the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, the volunteers are members of the Nippon War Bereaved Association, the Nankokai, who are former employes of Nanyo Kohatsu Kaisha and the Seinen Dan. About half were university students, dressed in crisp blue uniforms with the rising sun embroidered on their sleeves.

The collectors have gathered so many remains this trip that a special cremation ceremony was arranged for Thursday.

One large and one small funeral pyre of crossed logs mingled with bones and woven through and through with tangantangan were set up at an abandoned and overgrown Japanese airstrip in the Marpi area. To the west is Banzai Cliff, from which Japanese civilians jumped. To the east, 800 feet up, is Suicide Cliff, where the military jumped. To the south is the last Command Post, which was just that.

And on top of the pyres on that cleared patch of runway Thursday afternoon, were the open-eyed, gap-toothed skulls glaring back at those who had come to pay their last respects. There was also rain, first droplets then good-sized drops that caused the pyres to smoke when flaming torches were touched to them.

Before the ritual of the ceremony began, however, there was the ritual of picture taking by and of the volunteers—almost as if it had been a school outing. Then two Shinto priests, one with shaven head, began their chants. There were prayers—and the pyres were lighted. Bucketsful of what looked like kerosene were tossed on the pyres to enrage the flames. Finally, the deed was done.

An unscheduled cremation was held at the same ritualistic site last Sunday. The Japanese bones collectors were able to help with the last rites for a Japanese crewman who drowned four days earlier in a hotel swimming pool.

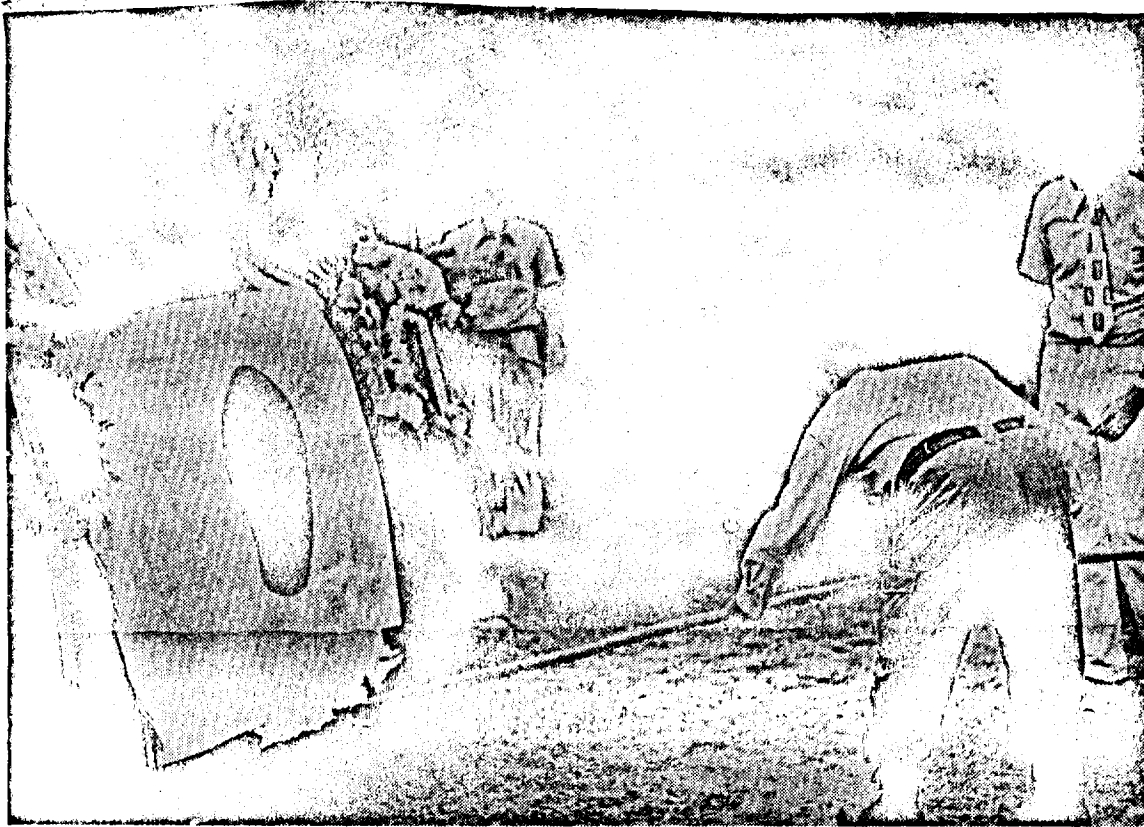
The major cremation ceremony for the collected remains is due to take place on Aug. 12 or 13, said Deputy Marianas District Administrator Dan E. Akimoto, who is coordinating the collectors' visit. The final memorial ceremony will be held Aug. 15 and the group is set to leave Saipan on Aug. 16.

The mission is supposed to recover only the bones of the military, explained Akimoto. They are collecting them all, though, on the rationalization that the civilians were mobilized along with the military during the war.

On Friday a small contingent of older bones collectors exchanged their natty attire for baggy work clothes and began excavating a small memorial triangle in front of Saipan's Daily News Bureau. It is thought that the bones of 600 Japanese are buried in this tiny plot, said Akimoto.

Carefully removing or working around the memorial markers, the diggers gradually started to find chips of bones. The dirt was sifted, the pieces of bone sorted out to be placed in waiting burlap bags, the bags to be placed on yet another funeral pyre.

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AT ABANDONED airstrip in Marpi, Saipan, top, a Japanese lights the funeral pyre for bones of some of the island's 50,000 World War II casualties. Workers near Beach Road, above, unearth more remains from the site of small memorial park. (Daily News Photo by Diane Maddex)