

# **Japanese Involvement in Laos: From the Invasion of the Japanese Army in Northern French Indochina in 1940 to the End of World War Two**

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## **Introduction**

It can be said that the Second World War propelled Japan to take an interest in Laos for the first time. Even though there were scholars such as Iwamoto Chizuna who explored Laos and published a record of the country before the war,<sup>1</sup> there was no national interest in Laos in Japan. Only when the Japanese Army invaded northern French Indochina in 1940 did such an interest in Laos develop. In this paper, I examine how the Japanese army became interested and involved in Laos in its campaign to subjugate northern French Indochina at the end of the Second World War by using documents which I have collected.

These documents include regimental histories and memoirs of former Japanese soldiers which were mainly published more than 30 years after the war.<sup>2</sup> It cannot be denied that errors exist, especially since these records rely on memories which can be fallible. Moreover, they may not accurately reflect the intentions and policies of the Japanese Army because these are personal memories based on experiences in Laos. On the other hand, it is possible to examine the behavior of the Japanese soldier and the situation of Laos in a time that is more difficult to understand based solely on documents from the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Institute for Defense Studies of the Ministry of Defense. Though I do not have sufficient documents to explain every aspect of the Japanese involvement in Laos, I attempt to explain a part of it, and this is a preliminary study of the topic.

## **1. The Invasion of Northern French Indochina by the Japanese Army in 1940 and Laos**

The Japanese Army invaded northern Indochina in September 1940 before moving into the southern half of the colony in July 1941. Japanese troops were stationed in Vietnam and Cambodia, but not in Laos. After the first stage of the Japanese invasion Thailand got an opportunity to recover its lost ter-

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<sup>1</sup> Iwamoto Chizuna, *Shamu, Raosu, Annan Sangoku tanken jikki* [The record of three states: Siam, Laos and Annam] (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1897).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the earliest memoirs related to Laos that I have collected were written in the second half of the 1960s, but others were written in the 1980s and '90s.

ritories because of French weakness. Laos suffered greatly from this development. The subsequent border dispute between Thailand and French Indochina broke out in November 1940 and Japan played a mediation role in this dispute. When the ceasefire treaty was signed in Saigon on January 31, 1941, mediation for this dispute began in Tokyo in February, and the Peace Treaty was concluded in May. As a result, the French returned part of the territory of Cambodia and Laos to Thailand.

According to the cease-fire treaty, Japan was to oversee the implementation of the cease-fire and the Japanese committee for cease-fire inspected the border between Thailand and French Indochina (Laos and Cambodia) in February. After the Peace Treaty, Japan also dispatched a border delineation committee which worked through July 1942. The delegation of the Japanese cease-fire committee (chaired by Sumita Raishiro) inspected Cambodia and southern Laos (Pakse on February 20) from February 8. Lieutenant Commander Sugaya Atsuji and two other people left Hanoi on February 17 and inspected Luang Phrabang. The areas around Pakse and Luang Phrabang had been Lao territory at the time, but the Peace Treaty stipulated that everything on the right bank of the Mekong now belonged to Thailand. The Japanese committee inspected these border areas because they were in dispute. A journalist accompanying this delegation wrote an article on this inspection and Luang Phrabang in a Japanese newspaper.<sup>3</sup>

According to the report by the border delineation committee which was submitted to Foreign Affairs Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru by its chairman Yano Makoto on May 29, 1943,<sup>4</sup> Yano inspected the river route of Savannakhet from March 26 to April 5, 1942 and inspected Vientiane, Champassak and Savannakhet from June 1 to June 16.<sup>5</sup> The report emphasized “the necessity to recognize the real situation and problems of the border region”<sup>6</sup> for determining the border between Thailand and French Indochina. The border dispute thus created opportunities for the Japanese to visit Laos at a time when there were very few visitors from Japan.

Cho Isamu, the representative of the Supreme Commander of the Japanese Army, probably inspected Laos in April 1942.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the inspection and its precise itinerary are not clear but Cho

<sup>3</sup> A correspondent of *Asahi Shimbun*, Goto, who accompanied the delegation to Luang Phrabang at least once, wrote an article published in that newspaper on March 13, 1941. According to this article, the delegation of the Japanese committee for cease-fire left Hanoi on February 17 and arrived in Luang Phrabang on February 19. Goto returned to Hanoi on the morning of February 21 before the delegation. (The schedule of this inspection is not clear.) A report on Luang Phrabang, which appears to have been written by the same correspondent, was published in “Minsei” (March 1941, no. 329, Minseisha p. 12) as “Luang Phrabang, French Indochina: A field report.” It is recorded in these two sources that the author is the first Japanese to visit Laos (Luang Phrabang). However the truth of the matter is that Iwamoto Chizuna had already visited Luang Phrabang. No newspaper articles appeared about Pakse, but there are some pictures of Sumita, the chair of the Japanese committee who inspected Pakse in the documented records of Fujisouko (The records consist mainly of photographs taken during the Second World War period. These are kept in the Osaka headquarters of *Asahi Shimbun*. I would like to thank Professor Hayase Shinzo for this information). That is why I believe that the *Asahi Shimbun* correspondent accompanied the delegation to Pakse at least once.

<sup>4</sup> JACAR (Japan Center for Asian Historical Records) Ref. B02031249900 Taikoku Futsuryo Indoshinakan Kokkyo Funso Ikken (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

<sup>5</sup> JACAR Ref.B02031251200 Taikoku Futsuryo Indoshinakan Kokkyo Funso Ikken (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> According to Nakamura Yoshio's *Travel to Laos* (Yamane Syobo, 1944), Nakamura accompanied Cho Isamu's inspection tour of Laos (p. 7). It is not clear when they travelled to Laos, but they stayed in Luang Phrabang during the Lao New Year in April. Considering the timeframe of Cho's visit to French Indochina, the tour most likely occurred in April 1942.

embarked on an inspection tour from Saigon to Cambodia and then onward to places in Laos like Pakse, Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, and Xieng Khouang and finally to Hanoi. The survey team investigating French Indochina resources (Third Nonferrous Metals Group) also inspected the Paya copper ore deposit in Xieng Khouang and the Bonen and Phontieu tin ore deposits in Thakhek, Khammouane, and Laos in 1942.<sup>8</sup> Some Japanese doing business in Vietnam tried to visit Laos and explore its economic possibilities.<sup>9</sup> But according to a report made by the survey team, there would be no real profit for Japan to develop these mines,<sup>10</sup> and as it turned out there were only a few enterprises which developed business in Laos. After the Japanese invasion, Laos was recognized as one region of French Indochina, but neither Tokyo nor the Army on the ground were quite sure on how to involve themselves in Laos in the near future.

## 2. *Coup de force* of March 9, 1945 and Laos

In 1944, the war situation was progressively getting worse for Japan as seen in the series of setbacks in their military campaigns: defeat in the Battle of the Marianas and the subsequent surrender of Saipan, and the catastrophic failure of the Imphal campaign, to mention just a few. With de Gaulle establishing a new government in Paris in September 1944 and the American recapture of the Philippines in October 1944, the possibility that the Allied forces would land in French Indochina was becoming increasingly likely. Thus, the Japanese Army carried out the “*Meigo sakusen*” operation on March 9, 1945.

There was now a need for Japanese troops to be stationed in Laos to implement “*Meigo sakusen*.” It is not certain when the first troops arrived, but according to the history of the 83rd Infantry Regiment, about 200 soldiers from the 12th Company were dispatched to Thakhek via Nape from Vinh, Vietnam at the end of January 1945 for the preparation of “*Meigo sakusen*” and were redeployed from the guard of the 34th Independent Mixed Brigade.<sup>11</sup> Therefore it can be determined that the Japanese guard soldiers had been stationed in Thakhek before January, though their exact numbers and duties are not clear. In any case, by early January at the latest there were Japanese forces stationed in Thakhek. The 2nd Company of the 83rd Infantry Regiment was dispatched to Xieng Khouang from Vietnam, the above-mentioned company was sent to Thakhek and the 11th Company was redeployed to Savannakhet from Vietnam for the preparation of “*Meigo sakusen*.”<sup>12</sup> About 200 soldiers were to be stationed in Thakhek, making it the largest Japanese detachment in Laos.

The troops dispatched to Laos had been initially stationed in northern Vietnam. The three areas in

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<sup>8</sup> Manuscript Library: Business and Economics section, Kyushu University Documents of Wartime Resources 110, 111.

<sup>9</sup> For example Mizutani Otokichi, who published *Futsuin Raosu* [French Indochina: Laos] (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1942).

<sup>10</sup> Manuscript Library: Business and Economics section, Kyushu University, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Ogata Hirowaza, *Tsuiso: Hohei dai83 Rentaishi* [Recollection: the history of the 83rd Infantry Regiment] (November 1982, privately published), p. 509.

<sup>12</sup> Depending on the memoir and whether or not it was based on regimental history, the timeframe for when each unit arrived in Laos is recorded differently in various sources. The dates fall anywhere between the end of January and the middle of February 1945. The account above follows the history of the 83rd Infantry Regiment.

Laos to which they were deployed in preparation for “*Meigo sakusen*” were easily accessible from Vietnam via RC (Route Coloniale) 7 from Vinh to Xieng Khouang, RC 8 from Vinh to Thakhek, RC 9 from Lao Bão to Savannakhet or RC 13 and 8 from Vinh to Savannakhet via Thakhek. The road network in Laos was inadequate at that time and some roads were impassable for motor vehicles in the rainy season. Roads from Vietnam, however, were paved, and thus these routes were convenient for the movement of army units to Laos.

The main force of the 83rd Infantry Regiment was also dispatched to Thakhek at the beginning of February. Tsuchihashi Yuichi, Commander of the 38th Army, visited Thakhek to address the Japanese soldiers. After that, he went to inspect the troops in Vientiane, returned to Thakhek, went to Savannakhet and addressed the detachment there, and went to Cambodia via Pakse.<sup>13</sup>

The military police were also dispatched to Thakhek prior to their deployment in other areas of Laos: a detachment of 11 men was sent there at the end of February.<sup>14</sup> A Thakhek branch office of the Saigon goods commissary of the 7th Regional Army was established.<sup>15</sup> Thakhek was a logical choice as the center of Japanese operations in Laos because it was located near the middle of Laos and had good access to Vietnam. At that time, Vientiane was the administrative capital of Laos while Luang Phrabang was the royal capital. However, the Japanese Army made their decision based on logistical rather than administrative criteria. In addition, the 1st Battalion of the 85th Infantry Regiment (about 240 soldiers) was dispatched to Savannakhet at the end of February for the preparation of “*Meigo sakusen*.”<sup>16</sup> On March 9, 1945, in the aforementioned three areas, the Japanese units already stationed there launched “*Meigo sakusen*,” but the 3rd Battalion of the 8th Infantry Regiment moved to Vientiane from Thailand and the 1st Battalion of the 8th Infantry Regiment also moved to Pakse from Thailand.<sup>17</sup>

The Japanese Army developed a plan to execute the first phase of “*Meigo sakusen*” in Laos by taking into account its geographical situation. Xieng Khouang, Thakhek and Savannakhet were the towns where Japanese forces had already been stationed while Vientiane and Pakse along the Mekong were the targets of the first phase of the operation. For “*Meigo sakusen*,” some units were redeployed from as far away as China and Sumatra. Japanese military power was decreasing and in view of the war situation, it was difficult for the Japanese spare large numbers of forces for Laos. Based on my understand-

<sup>13</sup> Maeda Tooru ed., *Moyai Tsuna dai3bu: Futsuin Shinchu kara Syusen made* [The Ties Part 3: From the invasion of French Indochina to the end of the war] (Nagano-ken Futsuin Sanhachikai Matsumoto Chiku Ichido, privately published, September 1985), pp. 79–80; and Ogata, *Tsuiso*, p. 509. Kitayama Toshio, a platoon commander in the 11th Company, 83rd Infantry Regiment, who was stationed in Savannakhet, did not remember Tsuchihashi’s speech in that town (interview with Kitayama Toshio, August 29, 2015, Nomi).

<sup>14</sup> Oshima Chikamitsu ed., *Nanpogun Daiichi Kenpeitaiishi* [the history of the military police of the Southern Regional Army] (privately published, May 1979), p. 203; I counted 19 names in the list of members (pp. 24–44).

<sup>15</sup> Aizawa Afu, *Yashi to Minami Jujisei to Gakutohei* [A memoir of palm trees, the Southern Cross and student soldiers] (privately published), p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Tsunoda Toshio, *Magotachi ni Tsutaeru Ojichan no Jugunki* [Grandpa’s war memories told to his grandchildren] (privately published, 1993) p. 103. Kitayama Toshio (interview, August 29, 2015), who was already stationed in Savannakhet, said that the arrival of the 1st battalion encouraged him in the implementation of “*Meigo sakusen*.”

<sup>17</sup> Nakano Kosaku ed., *Hohei dai8 Rentaiishi* [History of the 8th Infantry Regiment] (Hohei dai8 Rentaiishi Hensan Inkaikai, 1983), pp. 568–571

ing, these were the only units that the Japanese Army could spare in Laos in the first phase. Contrary to expectations, the French did not put up much resistance at Vientiane, “There were small-scale clashes, but the Japanese Army was able to occupy the capital without engaging in a full-scale battle.”<sup>18</sup> In Savannakhet, a Japanese soldier later recounted, “it wasn’t a heated battle like being in a shower of bullets and it finished more quickly than I expected.”<sup>19</sup> The Japanese Army was able to complete the first phase of “*Meigo sakusen*” in these five areas as planned.

The Japanese military leaders decided to grant independence to the three kingdoms of Annam, Cambodia and Luang Phrabang (Laos) after “*Meigo sakusen*.” Tsuchihashi, Commander of the 38th Army, had three administrative policies: 1) maintain the administration established under French rule to avoid confusion; 2) try not to intervene in the internal affairs of the three kingdoms; and 3) ensure that the three kingdoms cooperated with the Japanese Army as much as possible.<sup>20</sup> According to the testimonies from the Japanese side, after the occupation of Vientiane and Savannakhet, they announced that Japan would not replace France as the rulers of Laos and would allow the Lao to administer their own affairs.<sup>21</sup> Prince Phetsarath, who would later be called the father of the Lao independence movement (he served as Prime Minister for the kingdom of Luang Phrabang during the period of Japanese-granted “independence”)<sup>22</sup> claimed that under Japanese rule “the Japanese didn’t intervene in the administration of Luang Phrabang”<sup>23</sup> and Phoumi Vongvichit, who was the governor of Houa Phan<sup>24</sup> in 1945, also stated in his memoir that the Commander of the Japanese Army did not intervene in internal affairs, telling Phoumi that Japan had liberated Sam Neua to help the Lao.<sup>25</sup> Therefore it can be said that in accordance with official policy the Japanese Army did not intervene in the internal affairs of Laos.<sup>26</sup>

After the first phase of “*Meigo sakusen*” was finished, the Japanese began to attack Luang Phrabang and the other inland areas.<sup>27</sup> Consul Watanabe Taizo was dispatched from Hanoi to inform the Lao King about “*Meigo sakusen*” and he arrived at Luang Phrabang around March 20. But the King did not

<sup>18</sup> Sako Masanori, “Raosu ha Koushite Dokuritsu Shita”(2) [Laos became independent in this way], *Syukan* (Boeicho Rikujō Bakuryō Kanbu), July 1963, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Tsunoda, *Magotachi ni Tsutaeru*, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> Boeicho Boeikenshujō Senshishitsu, *Senshi Soshō: Shittan Meigo sakusen* [War History Series: Shittan and Meigo Operations] (henceforth *Senshi Soshō*) (Tokyo: Asakuma Shimbunsha, 1969), pp. 621, 647.

<sup>21</sup> Tsunoda, *Magotachi ni Tsutaeru*, p. 105 and Sako, “Raosu,” p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> I use “independence” in inverted commas because the independence given by Japan was only nominal.

<sup>23</sup> “3349,” John B. Murdoch, tr. *Iron Man of Laos—Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1978), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> The capital of Hua Phan province was Sam Neua. At this time it was usually called Sam Neua province. I use “Hua Phan” to refer to the province and “Sam Neua” for the city.

<sup>25</sup> Phoumi Vongvichit. *Khuamsongcham nai xivit khong hao* [Memoirs of my life] (Vientiane, 1987) Here I am using the Japanese translation by Yutaka Hirata: *Gekido no Raosu Gendaishi wo Ikite* (2010), p. 54. The Commander mentioned by Phoumi was Yamaki Kyozo. Yamaki confirms that he told Phoumi the Japanese would not intervene in Lao internal affairs and would limit their activities to disarming the French (interview with Yamaki Kyozo, May 10, 2008, Shinjuku).

<sup>26</sup> In actuality, it was not that the Japanese Army had a deliberate policy of non-intervention in the kingdom’s internal affairs; rather, they could not intervene because the soldiers dispatched to Laos had almost no knowledge and information about the country. (Interviews with Kitayama and Yamaki; interview with Sako Masanori, July 30, 1993, Matsudo)

<sup>27</sup> *Senshi Soshō*, pp. 640–646.

have immediate confidence in the successful execution of “*Meigo sakusen*” and did not declare “independence.” The 3rd Battalion of the 83rd Infantry Regiment which left Vinh to occupy Luang Phrabang on March 21 knew that the 3rd Battalion of the 8th Infantry Regiment had left Vientiane to occupy Luang Phrabang on March 29. When the former unit (about 200 soldiers) arrived in Luang Phrabang on April 4, the French military and officials had already fled, thus the Japanese entered the town without a fight. At around 9 o’clock at night on the very same day, the 8th Infantry Regiment contingent (about 450 soldiers) also arrived in Luang Phrabang.<sup>28</sup> The influx of Japanese soldiers persuaded the King that “*Meigo sakusen*” was successful, and he declared “independence” for the kingdom of Luang Phrabang on April 8 on the advice of Consul Watanabe.

The Japanese Army occupied the main cities of Laos, but did not capture all the French troops in the colony. French soldiers stationed in various towns escaped to China or hid in the jungles of Laos after “*Meigo sakusen*.” The Japanese dispatched small units from their bases in the towns to pursue the French. These operations were conducted based on information or rumors about French soldiers escaping or hiding in the jungles. Sometimes, such information was brought forth from local inhabitants (Vietnamese and Lao).<sup>29</sup> The unit pursuing the French soldiers who had fled from Vietnam to China was dispatched to Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang. Subsequently some of these units were redeployed to work on road construction (to be discussed below). Thus even though the Japanese seized almost all of Laos by the middle of April, the French forces were not all captured or disarmed. After that, the Japanese forces maintained the status quo or constructed roads. When the kingdom of Luang Phrabang became “independent,” the 3rd Battalion of the 8th Infantry Regiment returned to Vientiane and then to Thailand.<sup>30</sup> The 11th Company of the 83rd Infantry Regiment which was dispatched from Vinh was engaged in the defense of Vientiane as the follow-up unit.

The period of “*Meigo sakusen*” was the first time that such a large contingent of Japanese, in the hundreds, appeared in Laos. The Army seized almost all of Laos by mid-April but was generally stationed in cities except for the road construction units; although they did not intervene in internal affairs, some Lao officials chose not to cooperate with them. Not many Lao came in direct, regular contact with the Japanese. Some Lao officials fled together with French officials or soldiers after “*Meigo sakusen*” and others fearful of the Japanese Army hid in the forests.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the Japanese soldiers who did come in contact with Lao were also few in number because their main duty was to maintain the status quo and to pursue the French.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 646; Sako interview and Sako Masanori, *Raosu Dokuritsu no Shinso* [The truth about the independence of Laos] (Asakumo Shimbunsha, 1964). These documents describe the situation of Luang Phrabang. But in this paper, I use “Tenka no kasiko dai1go” [The noncommissioned officials of the world], *Hohei dai83 Rentai Showa 19nendo Kashikan Kouhosatai Doinshi* (Doukamakai Henshubu, 1978) and Tsuji Takashi, “*Meigo sakusen* Ruanpuraban Shinchu no Shinso” [*Meigo sakusen*: The truth about the advance into Luang Phrabang] (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense National Institute for Defense Studies, 1979).

<sup>29</sup> Kitayama (interview) said that almost every day the local people informed the Japanese in Savannakhet about the movements of French soldiers.

<sup>30</sup> Kitayama interview.

<sup>31</sup> Luam Insiengmai, interview (August 15, 2014, Savannakhet).

### 3. Road construction

When the first phase of “*Meigo sakusen*” was complete, Tsuchihashi decided to construct a road from Hòa Bình in Vietnam to Paksane in central Laos via Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang.<sup>32</sup> As the war situation worsened, some staff officers of the 38th Army came up with the idea that the Plain of Jars and the Boloven Plateau would be the most suitable for a last stand in Laos against the Allied forces.<sup>33</sup> Hayashi Hidezumi, a staff officer of the 38th army, shared his recollections of Laos after the Second World War:

The war situation to the South was getting worse and the Japanese Army was under pressure. It could be completely destroyed at the coast, but it didn't want to be completely destroyed along the coast of Indochina. That would have been so humiliating. In inland Indochina, there were good plateaus like the Boloven Plateau and the Plain of Jars, which was called Trấn Ninh in Annamese. It didn't want to face the humiliation of being completely destroyed without using those plateaus. So I wanted to take up two positions, the Boloven Plateau and the Plain of Jars to which the Southern Regional Army in the mainland [of Southeast Asia] could retreat and hold as their front lines. I came to the conclusion that the Plain of Jars in particular should be the final position of the Southern Regional Army.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, considering Japanese military capabilities, equipment, and stores of ammunition by this time, Tsuchihashi thought that even if the two positions could be taken up quickly, they would easily be destroyed by U.S. and British aerial bombings. Therefore he did not take this idea seriously.<sup>35</sup> Still, it was necessary for him to show a strong will to fight to the end; his urgent task was to secure the connecting roads between Thailand and Indochina safely in preparation for expected Allied landings. Under these circumstances, the road construction from Hòa Bình to Paksane via Sam Neua began. At that time, the paved road from Hanoi to Sam Neua was open to traffic, but there was no road from Sam Neua to the Mekong. In the event of an Allied landing on the coast of Indochina, there was a fear that the Japanese units stationed in Tonkin would be isolated.<sup>36</sup>

The 85th Infantry Regiment and the 22nd Construction Regiment were among the units engaged in road construction. One unit was dispatched to Sam Neua to construct roads heading south, another was dispatched around Xieng Khouang and constructed roads in the south to Paksane and in the north to Sam Neua; yet another was deployed to Paksane to construct a road to Xieng Khouang. In this way, road construction was being carried out from three directions; according to the plan, the new

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<sup>32</sup> *Senshi Soshō*, p. 642.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 571.

<sup>34</sup> Hidezumi Hayashi, “Indoshina Sangoku Dokuritsu no Kei” [Details on the independence of the three Indochinese kingdoms], *Showa Gunji Hiwa: Dodai Kurabu Koenshu* (Tokyo: Dodai Keizai Konwakai, 1989), pp. 394–395.

<sup>35</sup> I think that the military police and the Thakhek branch office of the Saigon goods commissary of the 7th Regional Army were probably preparing to take up the two positions, but the details are not clear.

<sup>36</sup> *Senshi Soshō*, pp. 670–671.

roads would be open to traffic by September. The battalion of the 85th Infantry Regiment (the 3rd or 4th Company, the machine gun platoon, the radio communications platoon with Yamaki Kyozo as battalion leader) was ordered to disarm the French unit stationed around Sam Neua.<sup>37</sup> This battalion consisted of about 500 soldiers and Vietnamese prisoners who had been captured from the French forces<sup>38</sup> who were forced to engage in road construction. Yamaki said that the supply of manpower available for construction shrunk day by day, as Vietnamese prisoners escaped every night to return to Vietnam after arriving in Sam Neua.<sup>39</sup>

When the Japanese unit arrived in Sam Neua on April 14, the local French officials had already fled and Phoumi, as the governor of Hua Phan, was waiting to meet them. Yamaki requested that Phoumi provide food and labor and ordered the Japanese soldiers not go out at night, to pay money for anything they took and not to rape women.<sup>40</sup> Yamaki and other Japanese soldiers who were engaged in road construction in Sam Neua recalled that the Lao side cooperated with the Japanese closely and responded to their requests.<sup>41</sup>

A group of 50 to 100 laborers were gathered for road construction in Sam Neua every day and food was also offered to the Japanese soldiers daily. Even when the soldiers gradually went further south from Sam Neua in their task to construct the 6-meter-wide road, food was still delivered to them on a daily basis. Yamaki discussed the situation of the villages around Sam Neua. “The villages (10 to 20 houses each) were located about 10 kilometers apart and a village had paddies of about a half-hectare at most, fields of about a tenth hectare at most, 40 to 50 chickens at most and 4 or 5 pigs.”<sup>42</sup> The villagers in Sam Neua offered pigs and vegetables to the Japanese soldiers on a daily basis. Iwakuni Yasuhiko, the High Staff Officer of the 38th Army and the Chief Staff Officer for road engineering, visited Sam Neua for inspection from 23–28 May. He inspected a part of the road and wrote in his diary that sufficient food was supplied.<sup>43</sup> Yamaki also remembered Iwakuni’s inspection, noting that Iwakuni was surprised to see villagers rope a pig with vines and lead it to the road construction spot.<sup>44</sup> This also showed that the Lao side was very much concerned with keeping their promise to supply food.

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<sup>37</sup> Yamaki Kyozo, *Phoumi Vongvichit Raosu Daitouryo Daiko tonon Saikai* [A second meeting with Phoumi Vongvichit, Acting President of Laos] (undated, unpublished), p. 2

<sup>38</sup> Yamaki said that there were about 1000 Vietnamese prisoners, but Sakaino gives a figure of around 300; Yamaki Kyozo, “Furansujin to Wain” [Frenchmen and wine] and Sakaino Hiroaki, “Sagyū Shotai Senki” [Short history of my platoon], in Fujikake Torashichi ed., *Gunki no moto ni: Hohei dai85 Rentaishi* [Under the battle flag: A history of the 85th Infantry Regiment] (privately published, 1986), pp. 616 and 620 respectively.

<sup>39</sup> Yamaki, “Furansujin to wain.”

<sup>40</sup> Yamaki, *Phoumi*, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ueda Shukichi, “Raosu Shinchu to Doro Keikai Sagyo” [Occupation of Laos and road construction], in Fujikake ed., *Gunki no moto ni*, pp. 598–600 and Nameki Hideya, *Minami Jujisei no moto Raosu wo Yuku* [In Laos under the Southern Cross] (privately published, 2001), pp. 22–23.

<sup>42</sup> Yamaki, *Phoumi*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Yasuhiko Iwakuni, *Nanpo Sakusen Jugunchu no Nikki* [Diary of military operations in the South] (privately published). I used the version edited by Takasaki Sadao as *Iwakuni Taisa Hanoi Nikki* [Hanoi Diary of Colonel Iwakuni]. I am grateful for Mr. Takasaki’s assistance.

<sup>44</sup> Yamaki, *Phoumi*, p. 2.

The villagers of Laos assisted the soldiers not only with food but also with accommodation. About 50 to 100 villagers were engaged in road construction every day, for which they provided their own food. Each platoon of Japanese soldier stayed at a villager's house, if the villager welcomed them.<sup>45</sup> Iwakuni also stayed at the house of a Lao village chief during the inspection. He wrote in his diary that the village chief cooperated by offering laborers/workers and the Japanese paid about one yen per day for their wages.<sup>46</sup> When they were forced to halt construction temporarily due to the rain, some soldiers who had been farmers in Japan helped out the villagers in planting rice. They remembered that the Lao villagers were so pleased at having finished the planting job in a matter of hours when it usually took an entire day, that they invited the Japanese soldiers to dinner and gave them a hearty welcome.<sup>47</sup> The memoirs from the Japanese side often bring up this cooperation and the warm welcome they received from the Lao, showing that the days in Laos were "peaceful" for the Japanese soldiers despite the war.

Even so, it should not be forgotten that the roads were being constructed during the busy planting season. Even if the villagers received wages, it was still a heavy burden for them to be diverted from their farm work. Nevertheless they accepted the burden, which indicated that the Lao side was under pressure to offer labor and food to the Japanese Army. This aspect must be examined more closely and further details will have to be collected on the Lao cooperation, including labor, food, wages, among others. A case can also be made that fear of possible retaliation drove the villagers to cooperate.

After the 2nd Battalion of the 85th Infantry Regiment (under the command of Nameki Hideya) pursued French troops around Điện Biên Phủ and Phongsali at the end of May, they joined the road construction in Sam Neua. Phoumi offered food and labor for them also. When the battalion moved their base southward from Sam Neua to expand the road network, Nameki went to say farewell to Phoumi, who handed him a document written in Lao. Nameki did not understand the contents, but when he showed the document to the villagers in the village that he visited, they offered food and houses for soldiers to rest in.<sup>48</sup>

The document dated July 14, 1945, stated the following:

To the *tasaeng*<sup>49</sup> and the village chiefs,

The governor of Hua Phan informs you that the man with this document in his possession is a Japanese military officer going to Xieng Khouang from Sam Neua. If he asks for labor and food, offer them to him because he shows favor to the Lao people, and he promises that his unit will never destroy your villages.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ueda, "Raosu Shinchu," pp. 598–600.

<sup>46</sup> Iwakuni, *Iwakuni Taisa*.

<sup>47</sup> Ueda, "Raosu Shinchu," pp. 598–600.

<sup>48</sup> Nameki, "Minami Jujisei," pp. 22–23.

<sup>49</sup> In those days the *tasaeng* (sub-district) administrative unit comprised several villages.

<sup>50</sup> Nameki Hideya brought this document back to Japan and has generously shared it with me.

This document indicates that Phoumi wanted to cooperate with the Japanese so as to avoid having the Lao suffer any harm from them and prevent any conflict with the Japanese.

While some of the Japanese troops working on the road in Sam Neua returned to Hanoi at the beginning of July, others were given orders to halt construction and were sent to the border of Thailand and Burma at the end of that month. They left for Thailand via Thakhek.<sup>51</sup>

The 3rd Battalion of the 85th Infantry Regiment was dispatched from Vinh to Xieng Khouang on March 29 and another unit from the same regiment was deployed there from Qui Nhon for road construction. The head office of the Battalion was established at Ban Ban, the 9th Company was stationed in Xieng Khouang and the 10th Company in Thatom. The 10th Company negotiated with the village chief and used the village temple for accommodation. They secured the cooperation of the local people in the form of food and labor here as well. When they set up telephone poles and installed telephone wires in the middle of May, local people helped them to fell wood and dig holes in order to complete the installation process. Available sources show clearly that they got cooperation from local people through food and labor but further details of the cooperation remain unclear.

The 3rd Battalion was commanded to go to Paksane on July 23 and then to Thailand on August 5. The 10th Company was commanded to leave for Thailand as well and arrived in Mukdahan on August 8.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, the 1st Battalion of the 85th Infantry Regiment (commanded by Yaegashi Chojiro) was commanded to construct roads and was dispatched to Paksane from Savannakhet with captured Vietnamese soldiers at the beginning of April. After they arrived in Paksane, they began to construct a road to the north. They cut their way through the jungle, but it was extremely difficult for them to construct a motor road without gravel. Without a road, securing food supplies were also difficult. They cut bamboo in the jungle, boiled it, chopped it into small bits like rice, sliced it thin, put it into soup and ate it with salt.<sup>53</sup>

They also had to supply their own food on the spot since there were no means to facilitate the transport of goods. In Paksane it was difficult for them to procure labor, unlike Sam Neua where they had the cooperation of the local people. Five hundred Vietnamese prisoners were sent to Thakhek from Hanoi via Vinh and they went to Paksane by boat from Thakhek in June, though after numerous escapes only 360 remained.<sup>54</sup> It was difficult for the Japanese troops in Paksane to secure a steady supply of food and labor compared with Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang. The key issue was whether or not the Japanese managed to build relationships with a particular leader of Lao society in their area.

The 1st Battalion which was commanded to go to Thailand went back to Paksane, leaving the road still closed to traffic, and crossed the Mekong at the end of June. In the end the road between Sam

<sup>51</sup> Nameki, "Minami Jujisei," p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Hohei Dai85 Rentai Dai3 Daitai Dai10 Chutai Hensyu, *Shito Fumetsunari* [A soldier's soul is immortal] (Privately published, 1989), pp. 424-441.

<sup>53</sup> Tsunoda, *Magotachi ni Tsutaeru*, pp. 107-109.

<sup>54</sup> Tanaka Masatoshi, "Betonamuhei ni Kansha" [Gratitude toward Vietnamese soldiers], in Fujikake ed., *Gunki no moto ni*, p. 621.

Neua and Paksane never opened to traffic. This was of course the purpose for which the soldiers and villagers had been laboring, but if the road constructed was actually for the purpose of expressing the Japanese will to fight to the last as Tsuchihashi said, then the Lao were being used to preserve Japanese honor. The roads were necessary for the army to continue carrying on with the war, but this was of no concern to the Lao. When the war came to an end, the Japanese disappeared, except for a few soldiers who stayed and joined the Lao independence movement. As for the roads, only those never opened for traffic were preserved.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

It was during the Second World War that relations between Japan and Laos began. After the invasion of northern Indochina, Laos became important to Japan. Eventually it became an indispensable region to the war when the Japanese were facing the prospects of defeat rather than further expansion. Japan became involved in Laos without any information and knowledge of the country. I would like to collect as many documents as possible and clarify the details about the Japanese troops and conditions in other areas in Laos that I have not been able to cover sufficiently in this paper.

This paper has focused mainly on the Japanese Army in Laos. In the future, I would like to examine the Lao side of the story. It could be said that Japan made the kingdom of Luang Phrabang “independent” and did not intervene in its internal affairs. It is a fact that Japan had no intention to instigate a nationalist movement in Laos during this time, but it was also a period when French power was swept away and the anti-French Lao Issara movement, emerged in Laos. This period is important for the history of Lao nationalism. I would like to examine the importance of this period by approaching the topic from the perspective of both Japanese and Lao history.

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<sup>55</sup> Yoshito Yamane, a former Japanese soldier, who wrote *Raosu ni Sasageta Waga Seishun* [My youth devoted to Laos] (Tokyo: Chuo Koronsha, 1984), is well-known. According to Singkapo Sikhotchounamali, a key Lao figure in the events of 1945, 12 Japanese soldiers stationed at Thakhek fled and participated in the Lao independence movement. (Interview with Singkapo Sikhotchounamali, February 3, 1995, Vientiane)