

Bones of WWII soldiers recovered

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Miyuki Toyoshima, 49, lost her grandfather in 1942 in the New Guinea campaign, one of the major military campaigns of World War II from 1942 to 1945, and his body never made it home to Japan. Almost seven decades later, Toyoshima found herself volunteering at least two weeks a year to help recover the bones of thousands of Japanese soldiers who perished in the CNMI, Guam, the Philippines, and other parts of the world and repatriate their ashes to Japan, including two of three recovered in an area in Achugao on Saipan last week.

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Visiting Japanese volunteers, mostly from Kuentai Group, take stock Saturday afternoon of the human bones and other memorabilia believed to belong to two World War II Japanese soldiers, recovered last week from Achugao in Saipan. Japanese volunteers also recovered a third set of human bones believed to be of an American soldier, prompting the arrival to Saipan of a team from the Hawaii-based U.S. Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command during the weekend.

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BONES

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"I hope and pray everyone gets home," Toyoshima, of Osaka, told *Saipan Tribune* in an interview at the recovery site Saturday afternoon.

The retrieval is being led by the Japanese nonprofit organization Kuentai Group, which has been carrying out recovery missions for years in cooperation with the Japanese government.

A third set of bones retrieved by the Japanese volunteers is believed to be that of an American soldier who was on Saipan during World War II.

This prompted Saturday night's arrival of a team from the Hawaii-based U.S. Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, or JPAC, whose mission is to search for the fullest possible accounting of the more than 83,000 Americans still missing from past conflicts.

The JPAC team started its own investigation yesterday at the site. If the bones are confirmed to be that of an American soldier, it could trigger another U.S. recovery mission on Saipan where heavy battles took place between American and Japanese forces during the war.

The Battle of Saipan, a battle of the Pacific campaign of World War II, was fought from June 15 to July 9, 1944.

Among the items found in the Achugao area last week were U.S. military dog tags, a school ring purportedly bearing the year 1939 and American coins.

Kuentai Group is accompanied on Saipan by three representatives from Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and three from Japan Youth Memorial Association, to which Toyoshima, a gardener, belongs.

Hiyori Toba, of Kuentai Group, said there are still a lot of bones to be recovered and repatriated almost 70 years after the war.

"I'm very happy to be part of this recovery," Toba said in an interview Thursday afternoon at the project site in Achugao.

Randy Harper of the Saipan-based Swift & Harper Archaeological Resource Consulting said there have been at least 738 remains of Japanese soldiers recovered in the last few years as part of Japan's recovery missions in the CNMI.

Of the estimated more than 30,000 Japanese soldiers who perished in the CNMI, only about half of their remains have been recovered. An untold number of Japanese civilians also lost their lives on Saipan during the war, including those who committed suicide by jumping off the cliffs near Marpi Point.

American casualties were

also heavy, estimated at some 15,000.

Usan Kurata, also of Kuentai Group, said he is honored to be a part of efforts to send home the remains of these Japanese soldiers.

The Japanese groups recovered the first set of bones belonging to a Japanese soldier on Wednesday, volunteers at the site said.

The following day, they recovered bones they believed to be that of an American soldier, with military boots still on its left foot, along with two U.S. military dog tags, a school ring, and American coins. With these discoveries, Kuentai Group had to communicate with the U.S. JPAC to further investigate the bones and belongings.

On Friday, the third set of bones of a Japanese soldier was also found.

The bones of Japanese soldiers are scheduled to be cremated today and the ashes will be repatriated to Japan, Kurato and other Japanese volunteers said.

Kurato said the ashes will be brought to the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in Tokyo.

Toba and Kurato said Kuentai Group has also retrieved in the last seven years some 15,000 remains of the estimated 512,000 Japanese soldiers believed to have died in the Philippines during World War II.