**Warrior Women**

**Nakano Takeko – Episode 5 Transcript**

**Anna Ward:** This series was made possible with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. With thanks to National Lottery players.

Just a warning before we start, this episode contains references to suicide.

Welcome to Warrior Women. A Royal Armouries series, where we tell stories of women throughout history and explore what it really means to be a ‘warrior.’ We delve into the lives of complex characters, bust some myths and find out about the arms and armour these women would have wielded.

I’m your host, Anna Ward from the exhibitions team at the Royal Armouries.

It’s autumn in Japan. A warrior dressed in intricately laced armour is riding through the street on a horse, he carries a katana and a wakizashi, the swords which mark him out as a Samurai.

Following the samurai, are a group of warriors wearing hakama, the traditional loose trousers of Japan, and crisp white headbands. Instead of swords they carry polearms known as naginata and, on closer inspection are women.

Drums sound and shouts and cheers fill the air, someone poses for a selfie. Hang on…. well, it is 2024 and this is the annual Aizu Autumn festival, a yearly celebration of the famous warriors who came from this area of Japan.

So, what were those women doing in the warrior parade?  Well, I would have thought our series title might give that away…they’re commemorating the actions of a Japanese warrior woman, in today’s episode we’re talking about Nakano Takeko sometimes referred to as ‘the last female samurai’.

A statue of Nakano brandishing her naginata stands in Fukushima, she is respected and revered, but was she really the last female samurai? Spoiler alert – it’s a bit more complicated than that.

Nakano Takeko was born in 1847 in Aizu. Just so you know, Nakano is the family name, and we’ll use that throughout this episode.

Japan’s culture was worlds apart from what westerners would recognise today. A strict hierarchy was applied to society using land ownership to define power. Japan was led by the Shogun, under him were the daimyo, samurai, and artisans, merchants and peasants. There was an Emperor, but at this time, the military government held all the power.

The country was divided into domains managed by the daimyo but owned by the Shogun. Basically, everyone was in service to the Shogun, some through their work on the land or as artisans or merchants, daimyo through their responsibilities for the provinces and others through their military service defending and carrying out the wishes of the daimyo – the now infamous Samurai.

Nakano lived at the very end of The Edo Period, (that’s 1603 – 1868 using western dating). It was a comparatively peaceful period, characterised by economic growth and active participation in arts and culture, but there was always an undertone and threat of rebellion.

Nakano and other women from Samurai families and domains would have routinely learned fighting techniques for the specific purpose of defending their domain if they were ever attacked. They trained not only with the long sword or katana as you might think, but with the naginata.

Naginata students learned how to train hard, conform to discipline, respect etiquette and cooperate with others, preserve Japanese tradition, cultivate the mind, strengthen the spirit and body and promote peace.

Nakano and her family would know their role within the strict feudal hierarchy.  She would have seen it as her life’s work to embody all of those characteristics and be able to defend her feudal daimyo, potentially to the death, without question. Training from the age of six, Nakano became an expert martial artist, to the point where she was adopted by her teacher and travelled away from Aizu with him to teach.

So, what is a naginata? Here I have to admit a great fondness for this weapon. In a past life really, as I haven’t trained now for many, many years, in 2006 in fact, I achieved the level of Shodan in Kobudo, which is Ju-Jitsu with weapons, my favourite of which was the naginata.

It is - in effect - a sword on a stick. Naginata have a curved blade with a single razor-sharp cutting edge mounted onto a long, oval sectioned shaft. The length of the shaft and size of the blade varied over time but think of the shaft about as big as a person, and the blade on top of that.

You can come to the Royal Armouries in Leeds and see naginata on display in our Asian and African Gallery.

Naginata are sometimes referred to as ‘women’s weapons’, especially in the later time periods when they did become smaller and more ornate. They were used as gifts as part of a woman’s dowry when they were marrying into Samurai families.

We don’t believe naginata got smaller because only priests and women were using them…although many people tell that story…we believe that it’s due to the fact that they were mainly being used in peaceful martial arts practice, and that they were becoming more symbolic than practical in a world where conflict was rare.

Early male samurai would have used long, heavy naginata from horseback, as well as bows and arrows and latterly the sword. Another Japanese warrior woman, Tomoe Gozen used a naginata in the Heian Period (794 – 1195 in western times), which would have been larger and heavier.

Although we don’t believe naginata were designed for women, we know they were the weapon of choice for women probably due to its ability to neutralise any physical advantage – I know from my practise, it’s length and versatility make it really difficult for an opponent to get near, no matter what they are armed with. The shaft of the naginata means it is almost easy to keep an opponent back, out of fighting distance.

I remember trying to choreograph a demonstration combat where I was armed with a naginata – a wooden one, in case anyone was worried, and my colleague was armed with a katana – again wooden. We tried for ages to find a way for him to get close enough to represent a real threat and eventually I had to start in a defensive stance where the blade of the naginata was behind me, inviting him to strike.

Apologies for not remembering the name of the stance, as I said, it feels like a different lifetime ago – but it really made me appreciate the strengths of this weapon.

In Nakano’s time Naginata were already seen as more of a ceremonial object than a practical fighting weapon, and this might just be one of the reasons why her story became so legendary.

So come on, I hear you cry, what’s her story? Was she a samurai or not?

Well – yes, is the answer. The word ‘Samurai’ describes a class or caste rather than an individual so there could be samurai families and within those, samurai women. This particular samurai woman also fought as a warrior – which wasn’t what all samurai women did, but she was not unique in this as will be revealed later. But for now, let’s explore the rest of Nakano’s story.

It’s 1868, Nakano is 21 years old. The Tokugawa Shogunate has been in power for 265 years, but their hold over the country was starting to weaken. The Shogun had opened the borders and allowed Westerners in, the economy had started to tank, he resigned his position, but a civil war broke out, known as the Boshin War.

As part of that conflict a huge battle was fought in Aizu, which is in the Fukushima Prefecture just north of Tokyo on the island of Honshu.

Nakano and her neighbours wanted to defend the Shogunate and keep them in power. Unfortunately, they were fighting a losing battle. Seven thousand townsmen, farmers, peasants, older men, teenagers, women and a small number of warriors faced 74 and a half thousand imperial troops.

Not only were they outnumbered, but the imperial troops were also armed with artillery and firearms - no matter how well you can swing your naginata, it isn’t going to defend you against guns.

I’m simplifying of course. Actually, both sides had guns. America, France and Great Britain had started to sell certain arms into Japan before the war had started. Each side had its own – supposedly independent - arms supplier.   The imperial forces used a British man to supply their weapons, and the Aizu forces used a pair of Dutch brothers.

So let me tell you a little more about the firearms that were used at the battle of Aizu.

Restricted by cost and availability, different types of firearms were being used in each different domain, but generally the Imperial troops had more firearms, and they were more modern therefore more accurate. They also fired further and were easier and quicker to use.

Both sides made use of the Minie Rifle. This gun had been used by the British Army since 1851. Although it was probably the oldest technology on this particular field, when it was introduced, it marked a huge progression in firearms technology by using a conical shaped lead bullet instead of the round shot most weapons had fired before.

The bullet could grip the rifling in the barrel creating a spinning projectile that was accurate to around 180 metres. It also inflicted devastating injuries, sometimes to multiple casualties by passing through one victim and into the next.

Diana E Wright who wrote the article ‘Female Combatants and Japan’s Meiji Restoration: the case of Aizu’ claims there were also Spencer Rifles supplied from America, English Imperial rifles, Sniders, Remingtons and Chassepot. Although some of these were very specific to certain domains, the Chassepot for example was only used by imperial soldiers from Satsuma, so they can’t have been there in any great number.

While the Minie was accurate, it was very fiddly to load, the bullet and it’s casing had to be rammed down the barrel each time. All the other weapons mentioned by Wright are breech loaders – meaning the bullet would be loaded straight into the back part of the barrel near to the firing mechanism. There was no need to ram the bullet home as it was already positioned to fire. Breech-loaders were much faster and easier to use giving anyone who had one a significant advantage.

Wright claims the Spencer rifle which could load and fire seven times faster than the Minie, was the best weapon in Aizu. The imperial troops had these. Made in America, they used a metallic cartridge that contained both the projectile and the propellent. Not only was it a breech-loader, but it used a lever action to eject spent cartridges and load the next straight into the barrel – it was the world’s first repeating weapon of its kind. It could hold seven cartridges in its magazine which was drilled into the buttstock. What an amazing piece of kit.

You can see an example of this amazing rifle in Leeds in our Self Defence gallery.

Also in the arsenal of the imperial troops was the English-made Armstrong cannon. It was the newest on the market. The cannon fired incendiary as well as standard munitions. As Wright says, ‘Aizu’s traditional, less powerful cannon could not challenge the Armstrong’s 3000-metre range.’

By week two of the battle, Aizu was being overrun.

Many warriors had been killed, many of the warrior families had killed themselves – a content warning here, I’m going to talk for the 30 seconds or so, about suicide. Some reports claim that over 200 people committed mass suicide as the imperial army breached Aizu’s city walls.

This tremendously sad act which I find really hard to consider was apparently seen by many as a political necessity – in some cases whole families died in this way, particularly the families and retainers of military officers. They had also heard such horrifying stories about what would happen under what they considered ‘foreign’ rule - including the slaughter of all Aizu males and the selling of all Aizu females to westerners – these stories made death an appealing alternative to being captured.

The women who chose to fight, including Nakano had made a choice from limited options. They could take their own life, they could evacuate to the countryside and await the outcome of the battle or retreat to the castle and risk capture, or they could take up whatever weapons they could find, and fight.

Nakano Takeko led a group of women, including her sister and mother, to form the ‘Joshigun’ or Women’s Army. On the night of the mass suicides, they cut their hair, put on white silk headbands and armed themselves with naginata and swords. They took part in a sortie, an attack from a defensive position outside the castle walls. When this was over, they found the castle locked down and were unable to enter so made their way to a gathering point for Aizu forces.

Nakano went to the commander and asked permission for her army to join his forces. He refused, saying that the enemy would see women fighting as a sign of desperation – the cheek of it.

Diana E Wright claims that Nakano threatened suicide if her squad was not permitted to join the fight and despite being refused again by another commander the following day, eventually a newly arrived commander designated the Joshigun as a squad with Nakano as their leader.

The next day, imperial soldiers were found to be gathering at Yanagi bridge – between the castle and the Aizu troops.

The legend states that Nakano and a group of around 25 women armed with naginata launched a charge against a group of imperial soldiers apparently aware that they had very little chance of survival. In a heart-stopping twist, the imperial commanders saw that they were being attacked by women and ordered a ceasefire. This gave the women an in. Nakano killed five or six enemy soldiers alone.

Eventually realising that these naginata wielding women were a real threat, the imperial troops began to fire. Nakano was shot in the chest and killed. We don’t know which type of firearm killed her.

Before her death, Nakano had issued orders to prevent her body from being used as any kind of trophy by the enemy. Her sister oversaw the body being beheaded, some sources claim she was still alive when this happened – unthinkable really. She took the head to be buried with honour at the family temple.  Nakano’s naginata is still on show at her grave.

So, those are the events that are commemorated each year at the Aizu festival - Nakano’s courage in the face of overwhelming odds, her commitment to preserving her honour, even in death. Also celebrated as her legacy is the martial art of naginata, still practised today although now it is less about defending domains and more about gaining spiritual growth.

Without question, Nakano was amazing, skilled and brave, but as mentioned she was not unique in her choice to fight - we know that there were another 25 or so women in her group. Also, the website Japan Porten claims that 236 women from Aizu died during the Boshin war, so why is Nakano singled out?

Well, she was an expert martial artist and a recognisable face in the crowd. People knew her, some were taught by her, and it wouldn’t have taken much for the story of her death to be told and retold becoming a legend easily and quickly.

She was of relatively high social status and perhaps this made her easier to hold up as an example – perhaps she has just been used as a vessel through which the many stories of bravery and courage by women in that conflict can be told.

Perhaps it’s because her weapon still exists.

Perhaps it’s because she died, and by doing that, was frozen in her status as a rebel. She was never integrated into the new Meiji regime, she was never ‘tamed’ as some of the other female survivors were (more on that later).

So, what of those other women?

Wikipedia names 18 women who were led by Nakano into battle. They include Nakano’s mother and sister, three students from a Naginata dojo, a woman trained in the use of that incredibly modern gun, the Spencer rifle and an artist. This is a tiny collective compared to the women who rallied to protect Aizuwakamatzu Castle as part of the same conflict.

There, survivors of several waves of attack on Aizu, including, as I mentioned, with gunfire and incendiary cannon balls had retreated.  Here, under the command of an aristocratic woman, Matsudaira Teru, or Teruhime over 500 women defended the castle against siege. They cooked, cared for the wounded, put out fires caused by incendiary devices and made ammunition.

The siege lasted a month, but eventually white flags of surrender were hung on the gates. The leader of the rebels had apologised to the new Meiji government 11 days earlier. They really did fight to the bitter end. The war saw the fall of the shogunate and the establishing of imperial rule – the Edo period ended, and the Meiji period began. The emperor ruled instead of the Shogun – a bit like the Monarchy ruling instead of the politicians or military.

The aftermath of the battle and the fall of Aizuwakamatzu Castle is bittersweet. Despite being treated as traitors, the women’s fears of being ‘sold’ or killed were mainly unfounded. 576 mid-ranked warrior women and 84 elite warrior women were taken as prisoners when the castle fell, but the terms of the surrender meant they were not harmed. Their city was in ruins and around a year after the battle, 1700 Aizu warrior families were forced to move to a tiny domain in the north of Honshu.

Four of the Joshigun survived. Two were married and survived their forced relocation. One became a police officer and married a former Aizu samurai. The fourth survivor another, Sakuko Yamakawa had a less comfortable life. She was chosen by Meiji officials to go to America and became the first Japanese person certified in nursing.

This sounds like a positive outcome; however, she was being used. On her return she was married to one of the men who had commanded imperial troops to bombard the Aizuwakamatzu castle. This arranged marriage signified the reunification of Japan.  A former Aizu warrior woman had now become a model Meiji woman married to a Meiji commander.

 This must have been a bitter pill to swallow for Sakuko as her mother had been killed defending the castle.

The Meiji period saw the end of the samurai, the warrior class. Every male was mandated to serve in the armed forces – the right to bear arms no longer belonged solely to the samurai and a final nail to their coffin came when the wearing of swords was banned.

As for the naginata, it was introduced to the school curriculum for girls and practiced as a means of developing character rather than as a military skill.

So, the techniques I learned all those years ago were pretty violent and, in a move, that’s going to make me feel pretty uncomfortable, I have brought a tremendous friend into help us with this part. Claire Mead is now going to interview me about my naginata practice.

Hi Claire, welcome.

**Claire Mead:** Hi Anna, yes, we’re turning the tables. You’re going from you being the narrator of these warrior women to us talking about your own experience with a naginata. So, tell me how long you, yourself have trained with a naginata.

**Anna Ward:** Well, as I think I mentioned in the podcast, it was about 2006 when I got my Shodan qualification, and I think that had taken me around about five or six years to get there.

**Claire Mead:** And how did you discover it in the first place?

**Anna Ward:** So, I used to be a Live Interpreter at the Royal Armouries Museum. Part of our job was to demonstrate how objects in the collection were used, by whom? What for? And you know, practically how they worked.

We got this really lucky break, the Armouries brought in a teacher and helped to train a group of us in the real specialist techniques of Japanese weaponry. And yeah, I learned to fight with the sword, the katana, the naginata, a little short stick and tonfa, which were side handled batons. But the naginata was my favourite by far.

**Claire Mead:** What was it about it that you enjoyed so much?

**Anna Ward:** The first time it got put into my hands, I was told it was the “woman’s weapon” and I didn’t think to question that as a bad thing, I just thought that was great. I was really excited by the fact that I was training with this weapon that was used in the main, I thought at the time, by women.

I really liked the way it felt in my hand, and I think that thing that we talk about in the episode, where it didn’t matter that I had a physical disadvantage. There was me and a couple of other girls in the class, I was like the middle sized one. There was one woman who was a lot smaller than me, one woman who was a bit bigger than me and a bit stronger, but all of the men were bigger and stronger.

And I think this weapon just, I didn’t… the difference in our physicalities just didn’t matter when I was holding on to the naginata. Just as a point to note, the woman who was smaller than me was one of the best martial artists I’ve ever seen.

**Claire Mead:** And I remember you were telling me about that time you went up against the katana wielder with a naginata.

**Anna Ward:** So, we had to choreograph a demonstration for a piece about Japanese warrior women, strangely enough. We just went up to the Dojo, we were playing around, and I just stood with the naginata out in front of me and said, “where would we go from here?” And we were laughing because he just couldn’t get near.

So, the katana, shorter and every time he came near, I would just put the naginata in his face, under his chin, to his groin. You know, to all kinds of places where you just couldn’t, you just couldn’t get in. We were playing around with me shortening it, to bring him in a little bit closer but even as I did that, I was saying that it’s not a natural move, we wouldn’t do that, we wouldn’t do it. So, we played, and we played, and we played and eventually, I found this position that I’d learned in a kata, of holding the blade of the naginata behind.

You swing it round and up from the front and then cut down, if you think like looking from right to left across your opponent, so you bring it up, round, cut and a block or thrust or whatever you want to do. And it just, it started off this nice fight, which I think I did still win in the end [laughs], because I had to, because it was choreographed. But I kept, funnily enough as I was doing it, I kept thinking “I’m always going to win this, I’m always going to win.”

**Claire Mead:** And how did you feel when you trained with your naginata?

**Anna Ward:** It sounds really cliched, but I felt powerful. I felt truly armed and a lot of the other weapons I was using, I would feel, I would maybe feel a bit clumsy with or a bit frightened and it would be a lot in my head about how to use them but with the naginata it always felt quite natural. It felt quite flowing. I think I felt a bit of a responsibility to it as well, to all the women who trained with it before to get it right.

Doing this podcast has really actually made me want to pick it up again and it’s bringing back the memories of the way that my body moved when I was holding it.

If you’ve enjoyed this episode of Warrior Women, there are more available in the series.

The Nakano Takeko Episode was written using the following sources:

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