

CASE REPORT

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The Occurrence of Japanese Trophy Skulls in the United States

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ABSTRACT: The skulls of two Japanese soldiers brought back to the United States following World War II suggest that more may be appearing in forensic science cases. Both cases are cranial vaults without faces or lower jaws. One was a fighter pilot. Both skulls have secondary characteristics of "dry house dust" adhering to the bone and have, to some degree, been painted.

KEYWORDS: physical anthropology, musculoskeletal system, human identification, skull, Japanese, World War II

Forensic anthropologists and pathologists who deal with skeletonized remains should be aware that skulls of Japanese soldiers were brought back to the United States following World War II. Many of the individuals who brought these back are now either reaching retirement and discarding these skulls or are dying and the skulls are being disposed of by the next of kin.

Two cases have occurred in my laboratory in the past few years that illustrate these points. I did not think too much about there being trophy skulls in the United States after the first case but after the second, especially in one state (Tennessee), I thought it best to make other human identification experts aware of the presence of such items.

Case 1

The first case occurred in 1973 and began with the discovery of a body floating in one of the many rivers in East Tennessee. This body had been in the water long enough for the skull, cervical vertebrae, and upper limbs to have decayed and fallen off. I stressed upon the local law enforcement agents the need to find the skull, if possible, and a front-page story in the local county newspaper resulted in two additional skulls (neither one of which matched the torso) being turned over to the police. Only one of these will interest us here.

The detective in charge of trying to identify the floater brought a skull (more properly, the

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cranial vault) (Fig. 1) with no face or lower jaw to my laboratory a few days after the newspaper article. His question was, "Is this the skull that goes with the floating body?" Under the best of conditions, this would be a difficult decision (because none of the cervical vertebrae were present). The broad shape of the cranial vault as well as other secondary characteristics bothered me, and I made a statement that this skull did not belong with the floater but I was not quite sure who the skull was from. I asked the detective to check out the events surrounding the gift of this skull to the police. In two days we had our answer.

After reading the local news story, a man who collects and sells old junk cars turned in to the police a skull he had picked up a few days before. The skull, when found by the junkman, was in a 19-L (5-gal) paint can setting in the motor compartment of a junk car. He had saved the skull and he became worried after reading the news article. Further checking with the land owner on whose property the junk car had been picked up revealed that the land owner had been in the Pacific theater during World War II and had brought the skull back.

While securing one of the islands in the Pacific, he had come across a Japanese fighter

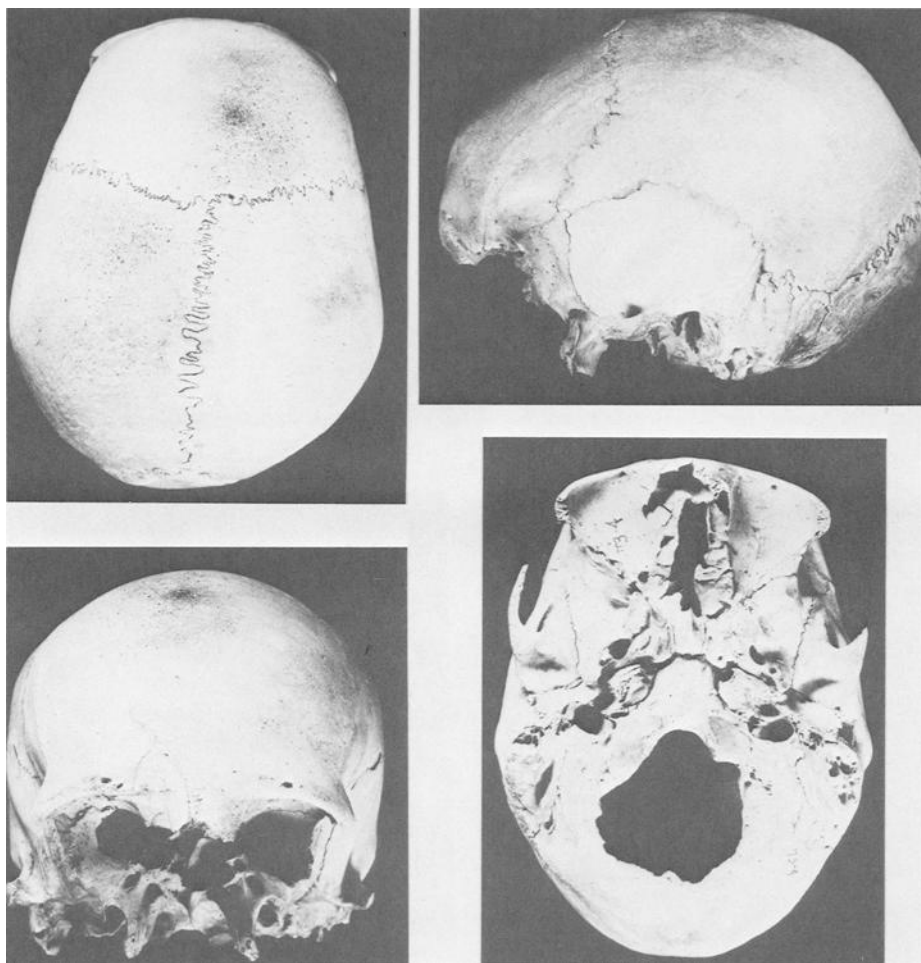


FIG. 1—Top (top left), left side (top right), front (bottom left), and basilar (bottom right) views of the skull of a Japanese fighter pilot from World War II. Note spray paint in top and front view.

plane that had crashed. In the cockpit was the skeleton of the pilot. He reached in, picked up the skull, and brought it back to Morgan County.

I said previously that there were secondary characteristics on the skull that led me to believe that this skull did not go with the floater. This skull had "dry house dust" adhering to the bones and it was evident to me that this skull had set for a long period of time in a dry place collecting dust. In addition, there were specks of paint on the calvarium as if the skull had been sitting close to something being sprayed by a pressurized can. The third item was a separate bone near the anatomical landmark Lambda (it is not large enough for an Inca bone). The sutures are still open enough for this bone to rattle when touched. A skull of this young age (late teens or early twenties) was too young to be associated with the floater who was a middle-aged male. The least convincing feature was the enlargement of the foramen magnum. Force had been used to break away much of the occipital bone to enlarge the foramen magnum.

The land owner, who had brought the skull back from the Pacific, admitted enlarging the foramen magnum so that he could insert a light bulb and use it as a decoration at Halloween. The police also reported that he had used a candle in the cranial vault so that the light would shine out through the eye orbits but no evidence of smoke could be found on the in-

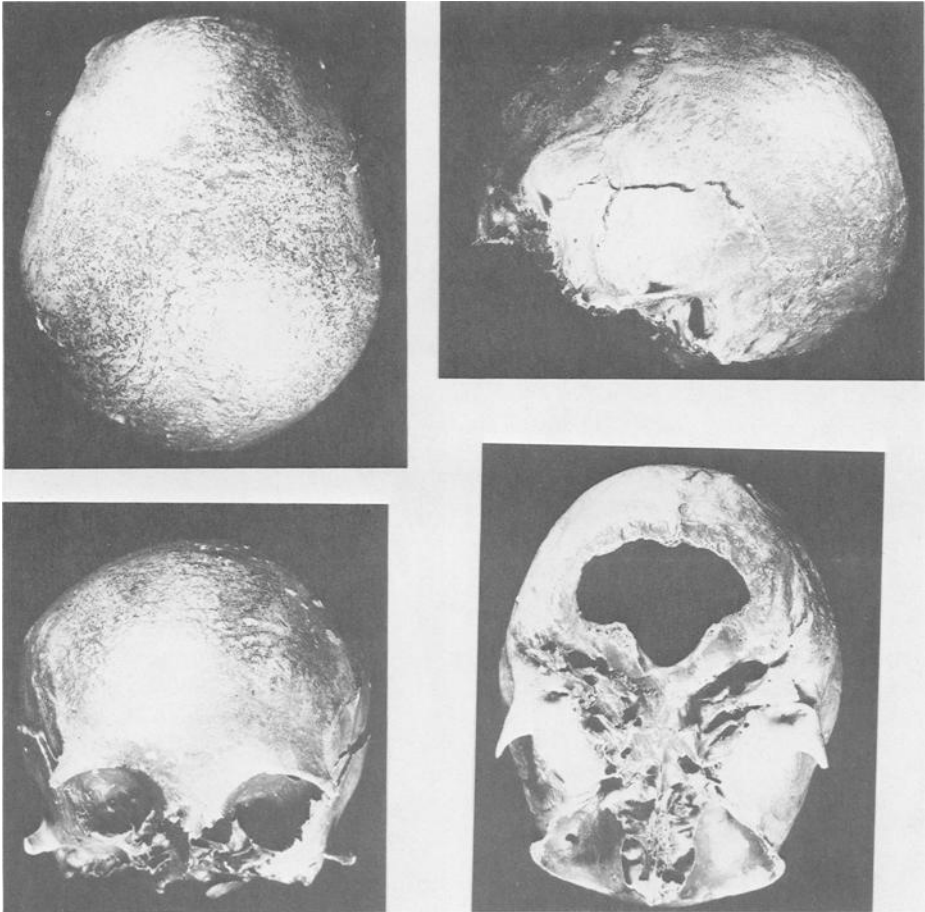


FIG. 2—Top (top left), left side (top right), front (bottom left), and basilar (bottom right) views of the skull of a Japanese soldier from World War II.

TABLE 1—*Anthropometric measurements in millimetres of two World War II Japanese trophy skulls.*

	Japanese Fighter Pilot	Japanese Soldier
Maximum length (glabella-opisthocranion)	195	173
Maximum breadth (curion-aurion)	147	137
Maximum height (basion-bregma)	137	128
Endobasion-nasion	99	94
Minimum frontal breadth	95	87
Bizygomatic diameter	129	120
Basion-porion height	20	18

side of the cranial vault and no wax was found in cracks on the base of the skull. The land owner stated that the face and lower jaw were broken away (possibly from the impact of the crash) when he found it. By the way, we never have found the skull that goes with the floating body.

Case 2

One day a few years ago, my phone rang and a woman's voice on the other end said, "I hear you buy heads." Following a few moments while I collected my thoughts and figured out what she was saying, I assured her that we did not buy "heads" but that if she would like to donate a skull to the University I would appraise its value (based on the cost of biological supply house specimens) and she could count this off on her income tax. She informed me that she did not make enough to file an income tax report but that if I wanted the skull I could have it.

Thinking it must be an American Indian skull, I asked her what kind of skull it was and she answered, "Oh, one of them little Jap fellows." Further questioning filled in the background that her husband, a soldier in World War II and who had recently died, had brought back a skull from the Pacific Islands (Okinawa). She had never liked the skull in the first place and now that he was gone she wanted to get rid of it.

We agreed that I would come to get the skull and I asked where she lived. She said, "Just down the street from the 7-11." Now, I am not an expert on all the 7-11 stores but I was aware that there were at least three in my part of town so I said, "Which one?" She responded, "The one up on the corner." Well, from here on the conversation went downhill. She did not know the name of the street she lived on or in what part of town it was. She did know her house number and by having her describe what she could see out of her windows, we were able to locate her address in a federally subsidized housing project.

The skull we picked up is illustrated in Fig. 2. This entire skull has been painted red and silver.

Both skulls are of young individuals as would be expected from military age individuals. Both show evidence of painting and of rough handling with protrusions such as the spinous processes and the zygomatic arches having been broken off. The foramen magnum in both skulls has been expanded and the facial bones in both are broken away. Both are characteristically Mongoloid in that they have broad skulls.

Since other Japanese skulls of this type are probably scattered throughout the United States, the anthropometric measurements presented in Table 1 may aid other human identification experts if they are faced with similar situations.

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