

The Roshigumi and Shinsengumi

In 1863 a ronin from Dewa province named Kiyokawa Hachiro formed a group of 234 soldiers called the Roshigumi (or "Kyoto Defenders") to be protectors of the Tokugawa Shogun in Kyoto. On April 10th, while in Kyoto, Kiyokawa revealed that the true intentions of the Roshigumi was to be the protector of the Emperor and commanded the soldiers to return to Edo. This act resulted in the group breaking up, and of the original 234 ronin that made up the Roshigumi, 13 members left to become the founding members of the Mibu Roshigumi (aka "Mibura" or "Ronin of Mibu"). The Aizu clan soon granted them permission to officially police Kyoto, battling revolutionaries who advocated direct Imperial rule. It was during this time that they were given the title Shinsengumi (or "newly chosen group"). This special police force consisting of ronin, farmers and peasants trained in the Mibu district of Kyoto and became the first samurai group of the Tokugawa Era to allow non-samurai classes to join. In 1864, led by Kondo Isami, the Shinsengumi attacked and defeated the anti-shogunate forces known as the Ishin Shishi, effectively preventing the burning of Kyoto and the capture of the Daimyo of the Aizu clan. After this stunning victory, known as the Ikedaya Affair, the Shinsengumi became instantly recognized as a force to be reckoned with, and their immediate fame brought new recruits by the dozens. At its peak, the Shinsengumi numbered around 300 people, most of whom were samurai. They remained a strong force for several years, until the collapse of the Tokugawa Bakafu (the "Shogunate") in 1868, when they were driven from Kyoto and most of their members, including Isami Kondo and Toshizo Hijikata, were killed, effectively putting an end to the Shinsengumi's reign of terror (or protection, depending on what side you were on).

The Shinsengumi followed a strict set of regulations:

1. All members must follow the code of Bushido
2. No member can leave the Shinsengumi
3. No member can raise money privately
4. No member can take part in another's litigation
5. No member can engage in private fights

Punishment for deviating from any of the rules was seppuku.

Shinsengumi Commanders

Kondo Isami (1834-1868)

Kondo Isami was the most famous of the Shinsengumi warriors who fought to preserve the Shogunate. Born into a farming family in the Musashi Province in Western Tokyo, Kondo was a studious reader and trained in the Ten-nen Rishin-style swordsmanship under third generation master Kondo Shuusuke; he later became the fourth generation master himself and trained his Shinsengumi soldiers in this style of fighting.

He was captured and beheaded on May 17th. Although his actual grave site is unknown, his friend Hijikata Toshizo erected one in Aizu.

The characters of Kondo and his Shinsengumi brigade have appeared in numerous films, television shows, books, anime and manga.

Hijikata Toshizo (1835-1869)

Hijikata Toshizo was Kondo Isami's best friend and chief advisor throughout the Shinsengumi years, and served as an executive officer of the group.

Born in the Hino district of Tokyo, Hijikata was raised by his older brother and spent his youth selling Ishida Sanyaku (his family's home remedies) and teaching himself the art of kenjutsu. He first met Kondo in 1859 when he enrolled in his Tennen Rishin-ryu's school and began to develop his own fighting style, the "Shinsengumi-Kenjutsu."

In addition to his duties as an executive officer and later Deputy-Commander, Hijikata was responsible for writing the official Shinsengumi regulations. As portrayed in the film, Hijikata forced each member of the Shinsengumi to dutifully follow the strict code of Bushido, which often included seppuku for disobedience.

After Kondo's execution, Hijikata led the Shinsengumi through several more battles. On June 20th, 1869, he was killed by a bullet to the back during the Battle of Hakodate.

His statue stands at the Takahata Fudo Buddhist Temple in his hometown of Hino, Tokyo.

Okita Soshi (1844-1868)

Okita Soshi served as the senior staff officer for the Shinsengumi and was known as one of its best swordsmen. Born in an Edo mansion, Okita came from a distinguished samurai family and began training with Kondo Shuusuke's Ten-nen Rishin-style school at age nine. He was immediately recognized to be a prodigy and by age 18 he received the "Menkyo Kaiden" scroll which showed that he had attained "total transmission" of his swordsmanship. In addition, his signature technique, called the "Mumyo-ken or Sandanzuki" (or Three-piece thrust), was rumored to hit an opponent's left shoulder, neck, and right shoulder in one strike.

Okita contracted tuberculosis around the time of the Ikedaya Affair in 1864, but lived through many more battles before succumbing to the disease on July 19th, 1868. He was buried in his family temple in Edo.

Serizawa Kamo (1826-1863)

Serizawa Kamo was the first commander of the Shinsengumi. He came from a family of Goshi rank samurai in Mito, which is now the capital of the Ibaraki Prefecture. Serizawa was the youngest son, and began practicing swordsmanship as a young child. He grew into a bold and fearless leader known for his pro-Shogunate idealism, but he was also terribly selfish and volatile, possibly because of his heavy drinking. His full name was Serizawa Kamo Taira no Mitsumoto, and in his free time, he enjoyed drawing, long fights on the beach, and expelling foreigners from his country.

Niimi Nishiki (1836-1863)

Niimi Nishiki was one of the three original commanders of the Shinsengumi and a master of Shintomunen-ryu school of swordsmanship. Niimi was an original member of Serizawa's band of ronin and was forced to commit seppuku on October 19th for his reckless actions which had tarnished the reputation of the Shinsengumi.

Film Notes

The Shogunate, pressured by the arrival of the Black Ships, signed the open-ports treaty.

The term "kurofune" was the name given to the Western ships that arrived in Japan during the 16th and 19th centuries. The most famous of these "black" vessels was the fleet of four ships commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry that landed at Yokosuka in 1853.

With the strong military force, Perry forced Japan to open itself to trade with the Western world.

His arrival, along with the arrival of Admiral Townsend Harris in 1856 offered convincing proof that the Western nations were far more advanced than Japan in many ways, especially in matters military, economic and technological. This realization planted the seeds of the final downfall of the Shogunate, which was by this time considerably weakened.

Here, have a sugar candy.

Kompeito is a Japanese candy similar to rock candy. It was originally made in Portugal and introduced to Japan around the 15th or 16th century by European traders. The candy is small and covered in smooth bulges, which form during the 7-10 day handmade cooking process of showering sugar water into a spinning tub. Viewers of the excellent Science Channel show "How It's Made" will recognize that this is exactly the technique used to make "JawBreakers"

And we'll be able to show the world the true value of Shieikan's Ten-nen Rishin-style swordsmanship.

Ten-nen Rishin-ryu was a sword-fighting style founded in 1789 by Kondo Kuranosuke Nagahiro. The style teaches kenjutsu (the use of the katana), bojutsu (the use of the bo staff), and jujutsu. Kondo Isami was a master of Ten-nen Rishin-ryu, and he taught it to the core members of the Shinsengumi. The style is still practiced today, despite the fact that several of the techniques were lost at the beginning of the Meiji era.

How dare you neglect to provide lodging for Commander Serizawa, leader of our troop of ronin?!

During the Roshigumi's pilgrimage from Edo to Kyoto, Kondo Isami was given the task of assigning lodging for all the soldiers, but accidentally forgot about Serizawa's ronin. As a result, Serizawa lost his temper and, with the help of his fellow ronin, started the massive bonfire to insult Kondo.

We're remnants of the Tengu Group.

Literally translated as "heavenly dogs," Tengu are a class of supernatural creatures popular in Japanese folklore, art, theater, and literature. Although the tengu take their name from a dog-like Chinese demon, they are typically depicted with both human and avian characteristics, often as a human with a beak or long nose. Buddhist teachings long held that the tengu were malevolent demons and harbingers of war, but their image has gradually softened into one of protective, albeit dangerous, spirits of the wild. Tengu are worshipped in some Japanese religious cults, and still appear in folk tales and Japanese popular culture.

Third year of the Bunkyu period (1863), Spring. The troop of ronin arrive at the capital, Kyoto.

The Japanese era after Man'en and before Genji, the Bunkyu period spanned from February 19, 1861 to March 27, 1864. The reigning Emperor during this time was Komei, who was against foreigners and opposed to opening Japan to the West, even as the Shogun continued to give in to foreign demands. The Bunkyu period was one of great change for Japan, and Komei was known to be infuriated with nearly every development during his reign. He suffered an agonizing death at the age of 35 due to smallpox, though some believe he was poisoned by his political enemies in the Shogunate.

All I know is that a Dewa ronin named Kiyokawa Hachiro's been spouting off for over an hour.

An old province of Japan, the Dewa province was split from Echigo in the 8th century, and grew as the Japanese pushed back the indigenous people of northern Honsh. During the Meiji Period in the 19th century, the Dewa province was split into Uzen and Ugo before being reorganized into prefectures. Today, it is composed of the Yamagata prefecture and Akita prefecture, except for the city of Kazuno and the town of Kosaka.

Sign: "Shinsengumi Quarters, Officially Authorized by Lord Matsudaira"

Matsudaira Katamori was a samurai who rose to prominence during the Meiji period. He was the 9th Daimyo of the Aizu clan (which gave him the title Higo no Kami) and the Military Commander of Kyoto during the Bakumatsu period. During the Boshin War, Katamori and the Aizu fief were defeated by the Meiji Government, but his life was spared and he later became the Chief of the Toshogu Shrine. He and his three brothers (collectively called the four Takasu brothers) had highly influential roles during the Meiji Restoration. Katamori

was a strong protector of Kyoto, and was responsible for hiring city patrol units such as the Shinsengumi in order to achieve his objectives.

This is the Shinsengumi. Go apply at a clothing store or move to Gion.

Gion is a district of Kyoto, Japan, famous for its "Yasaka Shrine," as well as for its diverse festivals and entertainment. Their geisha are known locally as "geiko," and are highly skilled entertainers. Though the number of geiko have considerably declined in the last century, the district is still famous for its preservation of traditional forms of architecture and entertainment. The district's largest modern attraction is the Miyako Odori, or "Cherry Blossom Dances" staged by the geiko, which run for a month during the cherry blossom season and attract visitors from around the world.

My name is Kawai Kisaburo, the son of a sake merchant of Okayama.

Okayama is the capital city of Okayama Prefecture in the Chugoku region of Japan. Founded in 1889, the city is known as the site of a very large zen monastery known as Sogenji, its expansive Korakuen Garden, and the modernly reconstructed Okayama Castle. Today, it's one of the few Japanese cities that still operates a tram system. It has a population of nearly 700,000, and one of its sister cities is San Jose, California.

...will be the single word "Makoto."

"Makoto," a typical given name for Japanese males (though occasionally also used for females), has a variety of meanings. Among them are "truth," "sincerity," "devotion," "fidelity," and "faith."

Off to Shimabara today?

Shimabara, established in 1640, was a courtesan's district in Kyoto. During the Edo period, male and female prostitution flourished, but the Tokugawa Shogunate attempted to restrict prostitution to designated districts (such as Shimabara, Shinmachi, and the famous Edo district of Yoshiwara). The restrictions did not arise from a moral opposition to prostitution, but a desire of the Shogunate to compartmentalize certain activity, including theatres and other entertainment establishments, within the cities. The district was eventually closed in 1958 when prostitution was outlawed in Japan, and today serves as a tourist attraction and historical site.

Oh. The Mibu scabs.

Mibu is a town located in Shimotsuga District, Tochigi, Japan, which presently has a population of around 40,000. The original Shinsengumi members were known as "Miburo" or "Ronin of Mibu." However as their reputations became tarnished they soon earned the nickname "Wolves of Mibu."

We have the important task of expelling the Choshu clan from the Imperial court.

Choshu was a feudal domain of Japan during the Edo period, occupying the whole of modern day Yamaguchi Prefecture. Because of an earlier defeat at the hands of Shogunate forces, Choshu was a hotbed of anti-Tokugawa activities.

Display their heads at Senjo-gahara.

Senjo-gahara, translated as "battlefield" due to its origins as a myth, is the site of a beautiful plateau characterized by its elevated wetlands.

On the other hand, "a withered tree is the mountain's prosperity."

This is the literal translation the Japanese proverb "Kareki mo yama no nigiwai." The English equivalent of the phrase is "something is better than nothing" or "beggars can't be choosers."

It's no good, I couldn't persuade them. The councilor's still at Nijo Castle.

Located in Kyoto, Nijo Castle consists of two concentric rings of fortification, as well as the Ninomaru Palace, the ruins of Honmaru Palace, various support buildings and several gardens.

In 1601, Tokugawa Ieyasu ordered all the feudal lords in Western Japan to contribute to the construction of the Nijo Castle. Intended as the Kyoto residence of the Tokugawa Shoguns, the construction was completed in 1626. In 1867, the Ninomaru Palace was the setting for the declaration by Tokugawa Yoshinobu returning the authority to the Imperial Court, and the Imperial Cabinet was installed in the castle the next year. In 1939, the palace was donated to the city of Kyoto and opened to the public the following year.

1st year of the Genji period (1864) - The Hamaguri Gate Incident

The incident at the Hamaguri Gate of the Imperial Palace in Kyoto took place on August 20, 1864 and reflected the discontent of Shogunate and anti-alien groups. During the bloody crushing of the rebellion, the leading Choshu clan was held responsible for it.

Here is a reward from Lord Matsudaira to the Shinsengumi.

Matsudaira Katamori (1836-1893) was the Kyoto Shugoshoku (Kyoto Military Commissioner) and the Daimyo of the Aizu fief during this period. He attained his position of "higo no kami" (the traditional title of the Daimyo) at age 18, just around the time of Commodore Perry's visit. His job as Commissioner was to maintain public order in Kyoto and supervise the affairs in the Kyoto-Osaka area as a representative for the Shogun.

Following the Boshin War, Matsudaira's life was spared and he became Chief Priest of the Nikko Toshogu Shrine where he lived out the rest of his life.

Edo Castle

Built in 1457 by Ota Dokan, Edo Castle is located in what is now the Chiyoda ward of Tokyo, but was then known as Edo, Toshima District, Musashi Province. Tokugawa Ieyasu established the Tokugawa Shogunate here, and as the residence of the Shogun and location of the Bakufu (the Shogunate government), it functioned as the military and political capital during the Edo period of Japanese history.

After the Meiji Restoration, it became the residence of the Emperor of Japan. Though the grounds were originally much more extensive, encompassing other landmarks of the area, only a few moats, walls, and ramparts survive, and the compound is now known as the Kokyo, or "Imperial Palace."

I suppose you're here in Edo because you couldn't stand it anymore in Kyoto.

Edo is the former name of the Japanese capital Tokyo. The city was located on the site that is now known as Tokyo Bay.

Kyoto is another large city in the central part of the island of Honshu Japan. Formerly the Imperial capital of Japan, it is now the capital of Kyoto Prefecture.

Lord Awa...

Katsu Kaishu was best known as commissioner of the Tokugawa navy and chief negotiator between the Shogun forces and anti-Shogun domain of Choshu. He is largely responsible for negotiating the final and peaceful transfer of power from the Shogunate to the Imperial forces.

We have brought Master Ito Kashitaro.

Trained in the arts of kinjutsu and well versed in western studies, Ito joined the Shinsengumi in 1864 and quickly became its Military Advisor. Over the course of his tenure Hijikata and Kondo grew suspicious, coming to believe that he was trying to convert them to the Imperialist cause. After several unsuccessful attempts (due to their strict set of regulations) to leave the Shinsengumi, Ito received orders from the Imperial Household to “guard” Emperor Komei’s tomb in Kyoto.

On November 18, 1867 Ito attended a dinner with Kondo and Hijikata at the home of Kondo’s mistress. On his way home he was attacked by Shinsengumi members and mortally wounded when a spear sliced his throat. He managed to retreat to a nearby temple where he committed seppuku.

Satsuma and Choshu are plotting to use the new Emperor’s ascension to destroy the Shogunate.

Also known as the Kagoshima fief, Satsuma was one of the most powerful domains in Tokugawa era Japan. Partly because of its distant location on the tip of Kyushu island, Satsuma was exempt from many of the Shogunate’s restrictions which kept clans from gaining too much power. This geographical advantage allowed Satsuma to continually grow in strength and eventually help topple the Shogunate near the end of the Edo period.

But you already knew that. So why did you leave Tama to come here?

Tama is a municipality classified as a city, located in Tokyo, Japan. It was founded on April 1, 1889 as “Tama Village” in what was then the Minamitama District from the merger of 10 pre-Meiji villages. In 1964, Tama Village was reclassified as Tama Town, and is now known as the site of Tama Hills, a U.S. Air Force recreational facility, and also the well-known Sanrio theme park (“Hello Kitty-land”).

I won’t be returning. The Aizu clan left for Osaka Castle with the Shogunate forces.

Aizu is a region comprising the westernmost third of Fukushima Prefecture in Japan. During the Edo period, Aizu was a feudal domain known as Aizuhan and part of Mutsu province.

Osaka Castle is a castle in Chuo-ku, Osaka, Japan. Much of the castle was burned in the civil conflicts surrounding the Meiji Restoration. Under the Meiji government, Osaka Castle was converted to a barracks for Japan’s rapidly-expanding Western-style military.

The Battle of Toba and Fushimi

The Battle of Toba-Fushimi was contested between pro-Imperial and Shogunate forces during the Boshin War, which began on January 27, 1868, and lasted for four days, ending with the defeat of the Shogunate forces. The Shogunate forces were delivering a letter to the Emperor, and were attacked by the forces of Choshu, Satsuma, and Tosa, who were outnumbered 3:1 but had superior military cohesiveness. They also won because the Shogunate forces of around 15,000 had no clearly defined intent to fight, evident from the fact that many of the men had empty rifles, and they also suffered from poor leadership, as the commanders immediately fled in flight, leaving their men to die in bloody chaos.

...you made me a junior elder, and now you’re kindly giving me a place to die.

The junior elders or “Wakadoshiyori” were Tokugawa officials who supervised craftsmen, doctors, and vassals of the Shogun.

Signpost: “Shimofusa, Nagareyama”

Shimofusa and Nagareyama are both cities located in Chiba, Japan. Shimofusa was a small town of around 8,000, until March 27, 2006, when it merged with the town of Taiei to form the city of Narita. Nagareyama was founded in 1967, and now has an estimated population of around 150,000. This city is home to Toyo Gakuen University, as well as three newly-built train stations on the Tsukuba Express.

The former Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu...

Tokugawa Yoshinobu was the 15th and last Shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate of Japan. Born in 1837 in Mito, Ibaraki, Japan, and eventually a member of the 5-man council of elders, Yoshinobu, then known as Keiki, took numerous steps to quell the rising tide of rebellion during his reign. When the Tokugawa Shogunate was at its weakest, Yoshinobu stepped up to save the government, immediately initiating major changes with a massive program of governmental reform, which reinvigorated the Shogunate. However, anti-government rebellion led to the Boshin war, and he was forced to step down as shogun after only one year of rule, transferring all his powers to the Emperor. He was stripped of his titles and land, and placed under house arrest, which eventually transformed into a quiet retirement filled with a wide variety of hobbies.

And so, “history is written by the victors.”

The phrase “kateba kangun” is a Japanese proverb that translates to “Win and you become the government army.” This follows the old adage that the winning side is the vindicated side in history books and the losing side is the wrong side.

In the 4th year of the Keio period, on April 25, Kondo Isami was executed at Itabashi.

Itabashi is one of the 23 special wards of Tokyo, Japan, and it was formerly one of the Four Edo Post Towns that travellers visited when leaving the Shogunate's capital. Itabashi literally means “plank bridge,” derived from the wooden span over the Shakuji River, which was remarkable at the time of the Heian period. The ward is now home to four universities and has a population of around 500,000.