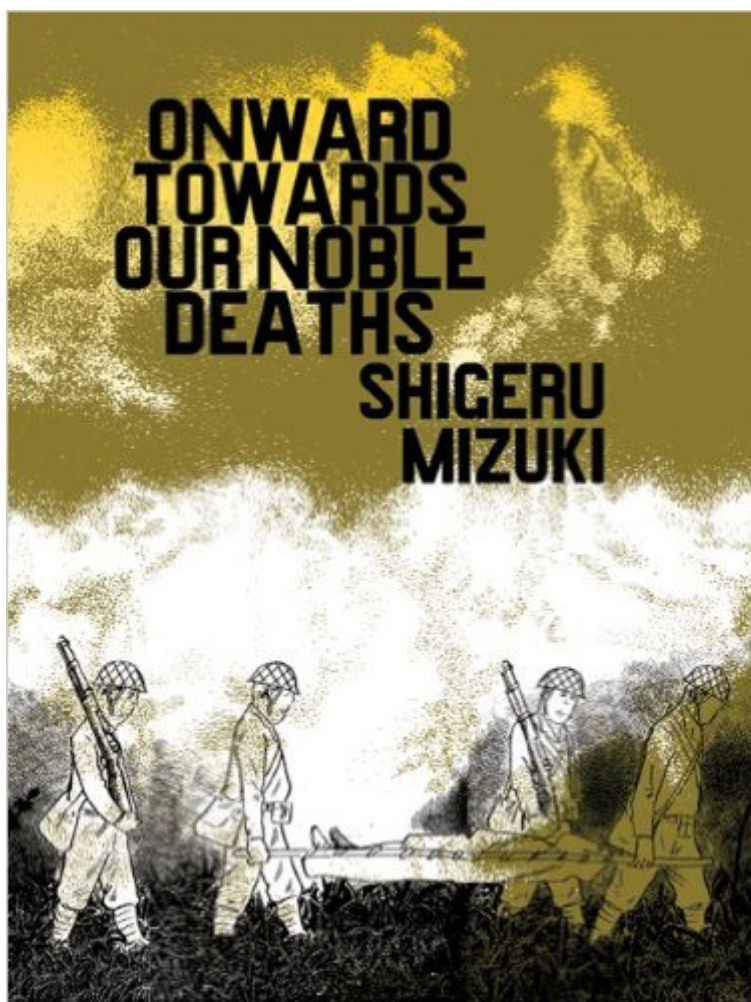


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Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths



Synopsis

A landmark publishing event of one of Japan's most famous cartoonists Shigeru Mizuki is the preeminent figure of Gekiga manga and one of the most famous working cartoonists in Japan today a "a true living legend. Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths is his first book to be translated into English and is a semiautobiographical account of the desperate final weeks of a Japanese infantry unit at the end of World War II. The soldiers are told that they must go into battle and die for the honor of their country, with certain execution facing them if they return alive. Mizuki was a soldier himself (he was severely injured and lost an arm) and uses his experiences to convey the devastating consequences and moral depravity of the war. Mizuki's list of accolades and achievements is long and detailed. In Japan, the life of Mizuki and his wife has been made into an extremely popular television drama that airs daily. Mizuki is the recipient of many awards, including the Best Album Award for his book NonNonBa (to be published in 2012 by D+Q) and the Heritage Essential Award for Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize Special Award, the Kyokujitsu Sho Decoration, the Shiju Hosho Decoration, and the Kodansha Manga Award. His hometown of Sakaiminato honored him with Shigeru Mizuki Road a street decorated with bronze statues of his Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro characters and the Shigeru Mizuki International Cultural Center.

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Customer Reviews

Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths chronicles the last days of a doomed unit of the Japanese

Imperial Army in the last days of World War II. In an afterword, Shigeru Mizuki describes the story as "90 percent fact," and because it is drawn from his own experiences in a very similar unit, it is at heart 100 percent true. Like Maruyama, the main character in the book, Mizuki was an enlisted man in a unit in Raibaul, which is now part of Papua New Guinea, and like Maruyama, he lost all his army buddies in the war. The first half of the book is a tale of steadily increasing misery; The soldiers are poorly fed, suffering from untreated diseases, and forced to work in dangerous conditions. Enlisted men were regarded as less than human by the Japanese army brass, who refer to them as "worms." Nonetheless, their humanity shines through in their vastly different personalities, their memories of home, and their humor. Even the cruel Sergeant Honda, who dispenses blows as casually as orders, shows rare empathy when he gives his boot to Maruyama (who lost his in a gross but funny incident involving a latrine and a rice bucket) and declares his intention to go barefoot. The soldiers may be less than human to their commanders, but they are very much alive to the reader--which makes it so terrible when we see them die horribly, one by one, from jungle diseases, accidents, or just plain stupidity. As the book progresses, the enemy closes in, and the Japanese commander, Tadokoro, makes the decision that the unit must hurl itself against the Allies in one last suicide charge.

If you have ever seen a WWII movie set in the Pacific--with beady eyed, cruel Japanese soldiers rushing from the jungle, seemingly immune to the idea that they were charging into death-- then this is their story. The Eisner award-winning "Onward to Our Noble Deaths" is a look at the other side of the enemy lines. It tells the story of the regular human beings who were conscripted, torn from their homes and family, shipped off to a small island jungle they barely knew the name of, then ordered to charge into certain death, all for the sake of an "honor" that few really believed in. It's impossible to overstate author Mizuki Shigeru's importance in modern Japan. This is a man who literally has his own museum, and bronze statues raised in his honor. I wouldn't be surprised at all if he showed up on the money, someday after his death. He is best known for his folklore monster comic "Ge ge ge no Kitaro," but he exorcises a different kind of demon in his WWII historical comics. In one of the defining acts of Mizuki's life, he was conscripted and sent to Papua New Guinea, where he lost his arm. But the loss of his arm also saved his life--while he recovered in a hospital Mizuki's platoon was ordered into a suicide charge just like the one depicted in "Onward to Our Noble Deaths." Mizuki's style has always been about blending discordant elements: comedy with tragedy, cartoony, exaggerated art with photorealism, sacred with the profane. As a comic artist, he is a true grandmaster who has been perfecting his craft for more than fifty years--which is a wonder in itself.

How many other artists stay vibrant and vital in their nineties? But even from his high throne of respected artist, he doesn't take himself too seriously.

Full disclosure, I do not like "manga" art and actively avoid it both in print and on TV (I do of course realize there are several genres of manga, which is in reality a generic term that we sometimes unfairly lump together here). For that reason I passed on picking up "Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths" several times, a mistake on my part until a discussion on the Clint Eastwood movie "Letters from Iwo Jima" led back to this excellent graphic novel. For people who are not a fan of comics books, I would classify this more as a graphic novel on the history of World War II (from a Japanese perspective). The main theme of the work is compelling: a group of Japanese soldiers have been ordered to perform a blatant suicide charge, but through the fog of war are inexplicably not killed. In the meantime however, their superiors have already announced their deaths 'for the glory of Japan'. Upon learning of the survival of the men, they are not rescued or cared for, but are ordered to attack again for no strategic purpose so as to not bring "dishonor" upon all involved. The message: get it right this time and die. Can't you do anything right? And do the officers who order them back to die join in the suicide charge? No. The story explores how each person involved in the attacks uniquely reacts to the situation, from rank soldier to superior to those watching safely from the sidelines. Considering that the author of "Onwards" (Shigeru Mizuki) actually served in similar WWII circumstances, even losing his arm, these subplot stories are equally captivating and focus on some of the nontypically portrayed (but sometimes equally deadly) tasks of war that deal with staying alive in order to fight: building shelter, getting food and water, cleaning latrines, etc.

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