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The Battle of Sekigahara

By: Nicholas Lanza

The Battle of Sekigahara was a pivotal battle in October of 1600 that truly unified Japan and also established a new shogunate that lasted for 268 years. The battle was fought between two factions: the Eastern Army, under the command of Ieyasu Tokugawa, and the Western Army, commanded by Mitsunari Ishida. The forces at the Battle were roughly evenly matched, the outcome could have easily been different if not for the actions of certain commanders.

The powerful daimyo and successor to Nogunaga Oda, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, died in 1598 with an under-aged heir, Hideyori. Before Hideyoshi died, he formed a council to raise his successor, “his most powerful and wealthy vassals Tokugawa Ieyasu, Maeda Toshiie, Uesegi Kagekatsu, Mori Terumoto and Ukita Hideie… became the five tairo, a council of regents” (Bryant, 8). They were to govern the country in the name of Hideyori, but divisions began to rise, especially against Ieyasu. This was because following Hideyoshi’s death Ieyasu moved into Hideyoshi’s Fushimi Castle and soon after that when Toshiie Maeda died, Ieyasu took Osaka Castle where Maeda had been personally raising Hideyori. As a result Tokugawa was now the personal guardian of Hideyori which only further raised accusations from several lords that he was an usurper.

Japan became split between Toyotomi loyalists, which would eventually be called the Western Army, and Tokugawa supporters, also known as the Eastern Army. Mitsunari Ishida was the leader of the Western Army, but he did not possess much martial prowess, so one of his allies assumed military coordination, “Mori Terumoto was the nominal commander-in-chief of the Western Army” (Bryant, 20). Terumoto was one of the tairo, a relatively powerful daimyo
whose “holdings were calculated at 1.2 million koku yearly” (Bryant, 20), and a superb commander. However Terumoto was ordered by Mitsunari to remain in Osaka Castle, after Tokugawa left and it was captured, during the coming campaign so he actually would have little effect in commanding during the campaign as well as specifically during the battle. Ukita Hideie, another tairo and therefore very influential man was placed as second in command of the Western Army. Kobayakawa Hideaki was another major general in the Western army who would play a decisive role in Tokugawa’s victory.

The Eastern Army was under the command of Ieyasu, undisputedly the most powerful daimyo in Japan at the time, “domains that yielded him a total of 2.5 million koku… his armies were the largest, his men the best trained, his friends the most loyal” (Bryant, 14). Many generals who sided with Tokugawa during this conflict were originally loyal to Hideyoshi but did not want to fight for the loyalist faction because it was headed by Mitsunari. Mitsunari was a considered a schemer by many, it was very questionable whether he had any loyal towards Hideyori or if he was just trying to advance his position and gain power. He also agitated several generals who participated in Hideyoshi’s Korean campaigns which created unforgotten grudges. Kato Kiyomasa, Kato Yoshiaki and Kuroda Naomasa are examples of the generals who joined Tokugawa because of these two reasons.

Uesegi Kagekatsu in northern Honshu had made agreements with Mitsunari to attack Tokugawa alongside the main Western Army so as to surround him. Uesegi began constructing fortifications in his territory prior to the campaign which aroused suspicions in Tokugawa who inquired what his intentions were and was basically ignored. In response Tokugawa ordered a war council to be held where it was decided that military action would be taken against Uesegi. Tokugawa began marching east, “Ieyasu gathered his army and on 24 July began a leisurely
march eastwards,” (Bryant, 36) from his castle in Osaka to subdue Uesegi even though Tokugawa’s allies probably could have handled Uesegi on their own, “when Kagekatsu struck… Tokugawa allies Mogami Yoshiakira and Date Masamune immediately counter-attacked” (Bryant, 36). In August the Western Army captured Osaka Castle where Mori Terumoto established his base. The western army continued eastwards without him, conquering Fushimi Castle and others along the way.

Ieyasu arrived in Edo in September where he divided his forces in order to deal with the threats present to him at the moment, aside from the main Western Army. The biggest threat was Nobunaga’s grandson, Oda Hidenobu, who controlled Gifu Castle which was one of the castles located close to the vital Tokaido and Nakasendo roads, “whoever controlled those two castles controlled the traffic” (Bryant, 39). He also sent his son Hidetada to travel down the Nakesando and meet up with his father’s force in Mino, but along the way Hidetada encountered Ueda Castle controlled by Toyotomi loyalists. Instead of continuing along the path as per his father’s orders, he decided to siege the castle. The time Hidetada spent laying siege caused him to miss the Battle of Sekigahara. This is significant since Hidetada commanded around 30,000 men on this march. Tokugawa “left Edo on 7 October at the head of his own 30,000-man army, making a forced march towards the west” (Bryant, 41).

The Eastern Army arrived in Akasaka, “a small village facing the Western headquarters at Ogaki Castle, around noon on 20 October” (Bryant, 48). A small skirmish occurred in this village, but significant hostilities would not begin until the next day. Mitsunari moved his forces to a nearby village that was in a better position on the Nakasendo road that could better prevent Ieyasu from advancing towards another of Mitsunari’s important holdings, Sawayama Castle. Kobayakawa and his 15,000 men were positioned on Mount Matsuo which gave them a perfect
position for flanking potential targets when the two main armies clashed. Mori Hidemoto of the Western army along with around 20,000 soldiers were located on a nearby mountain and instructed by Mitsunari to strike when the opportunity presented itself. The factions were equal, “exact numbers are impossible to come by, both sides were fielding roughly 85,000 men” (Bryant, 55). The Western Army’s frontline consisted of around 15,000 men under several different generals, Tokugawa’s main force remained behind them.

The Battle of Sekigahara began on the morning of October 21st with Ii Naomasa’s vanguard from the Eastern Army charging the Western Army. The Eastern Army soon followed and full combat was soon at hand. The fighting was fierce, the Western Army initially held their positions well against the Eastern Army. However, Eastern forces began to get the better hand over the Western Forces who refused to retreat.

Ieyasu was somewhat nervous at this climatic battle, “the enemy had some 80,000 men in the field, but of them, so far only about 35,000 had engaged... what about the rest of Mitsunari’s alliance” (Bryant, 64). The inaction and defection of several of the Western Army generals are one of the greatest reasons that the Western Army was defeated. Yoshihiro Shimazu in the Western Army’s main unit had remained inactive even when threatened by Ii’s vanguard attack. Mitsunari urged Shimazu to fight, but he refused by stating, “each unit must look to its own affairs and fight its own battles with all its might” (Bryant, 65). Another vital Western unit that remained stagnant was Kikkawa Hiroie who was attached to the Mori unit and was supposed to initiate the attack for that unit when given a signal from Mitsunari. Since he did not act when the signal was given, the rest of the Mori unit could not act and so for the remainder of the battle, 15,000 Western soldiers remained still on a nearby mountain watching the combat progress.
Mitsunari signaled to Kobayakawa’s unit to join the battle, but Kobayakawa was another general who remained still. Tokugawa also noticed this hesitation but was not very relieved since although he was not engaging the Eastern Army, he could in fact do so at any time. Tokugawa was relieved when Kobayakawa and his 15,000 man unit descended upon Otoni Yoshitsugu. He suspected treachery and planned countermeasures, but was defeated since he was already engaged with the Eastern army and couldn’t efficiently cover two fronts. None of the other Western officers prepared for a betrayal so Kobayakawa ran rampant through their ranks. The Western Army was assaulted on two fronts and began to crumble. Mitsunari and his forces were forced to retreat, all the while Kikkawa and Mori watched without acting.

Tokugawa seized “6.5 million koku in total” (Bryant, 82). He added a lot of this territory to the Tokugawa clan, but he also distributed this territory among his allies during the war as well as those who did not ally with him but swore loyalty afterwards. Mitsunari was captured by Tokugawa samurai and subsequently executed in Kyoto. Mori Terumoto was forced out of Osaka castle and “whose estates produced 1.2 million koku, was reduced to fiefs yielding only 360,000” (Bryant, 79). Ukita Hiroie fled to Kyushu but was discovered and exiled to Hachijojima. The traitor Kobayakawa was awarded several fiefs and given the honor of conquering Sawayama Castle. Hidetada, with his contingent of 30,000, arrived at Sekigahara after the battle was already over which infuriated Ieyasu. Since many people were still loyal to Hideyori, Tokugawa treated Hideyori relatively well by awarding him several fiefs. However 12 years after the conclusion of the war, Tokugawa would eliminate Hideyori and thus the Toyotomi clan.

In conclusion the Battle of Sekigahara was a decisive battle that could have been won by the Western Army if not for turncoats and reluctant generals in the Western Army. The Western
Army also would have had a better chance if not for the abrasive character of Mitsunari which caused those generals to defect or ally with Tokugawa in the first place. Tokugawa established a new shogunate that lasted into the 19th century.

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