On 8 February 1944 at around 21.00 hours, I finished my duty which was to oversee the mass bathing of soldiers (fourteen to fifteen hundred soldiers bathed between 16.00 and 21.00 hours in a tiny space so that someone was required to watch lest any theft or any act of indecency occurred) and returned to my barracks to find my colleagues more agitated than usual. ‘Squad Leader’, my subordinates told me as soon as they caught sight of me, ‘Lieutenant Inaba is calling you. It seems, Squad Leader, that we are organized for an operation in northern Manchuria.’ An operation in northern Manchuria suggested a war with the Soviet Union.

‘OK’, I was excited and went to see Lieutenant Inaba.

He produced a piece of paper without uttering a word. It was a document for the formation of a company.

‘Yokoi’, the lieutenant said, ‘you shall take the field in my platoon as the chief of the second section.’ We must be discreet, but we are going to the south.’

I examined the list.

‘Sir’, I said, ‘may I ask if this is final? I would like to bring some soldiers from my own section whom I know well, if this is at all permissible.’

‘Yokoi’, the lieutenant said with a grimace of mild pain, ‘I know what you want to do. But please understand my position. If I allow
you to take your favourites, what would happen to the rest? Yokoi, I think you understand the issue.’

‘Yes, I am sorry for having troubled you, Sir.’

Thereupon, I hastened back to my room. From 22.00 hours onwards, I was subsumed by the mountains of weapons, clothing, provisions, salaries, etc. received, and by checking equipment. When I finished this preparation for a winter operation, it was already 08.00 hours on the morning of 9 February. I completed checking military equipment by 08.30 hours and left the barracks where we had been settled for such a long time. Getting on a convoy of lorries, we headed for the base of the 38th Infantry Regiment. On arrival, the soldiers of the Infantry Regiment were unable to comprehend why on earth we, transport servicemen, had suddenly to join the infantry. Some of them were bewildered. Some of them were so agitated that they did not attempt to hide their dangerously threatening disdain and loathing.

We stayed there for ten days. There was heated debate about what was going to happen. ‘We are sent to the north (to fight the Soviets)’! ‘No, we are being sent to the south (to fight the Americans)’! Although we were in military service, we heard absolutely nothing about our defeats on Attu in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, or on Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands near the equator. We had never heard of these islands nor had we any idea how overstretched our front was!2 Nor were we informed of the retreat on the German fronts. Still, somewhat strangely, all of us sensed that Japan was losing ground to its enemies.

On the morning of 20 February 1944, a departure ceremony under the command of Colonel Jōtarō Suenaga took place. That evening, 3,000 of us were packed and crammed into a goods train and left Liaoyang without knowing where we were going. Our train crossed the Manchu-Korean border on the 21st, and arrived in Pusan (Busan) in southernmost Korea on the morning of the 22nd.

There, we were provided with new summer uniforms. ‘We are being sent to the south!’ Invariably, we imagined what our destination looked like and pondered about a dark destiny awaiting us there. At the same time, we had not yet abandoned a glimpse of