**Present-Day Ironmaking at Nittōho Tatara**

In 1977, Nittōho Tatara rekindled the fires of *tatara* ironmaking that had been extinguished for three decades. Ever since, their efforts have kept modern swordsmiths supplied with vital *tamahagane* steel.

*Tamahagane* is high-grade steel that can be produced only through the direct method of *tatara* smelting. The strength and ductility of *tamahagane* have made it an irreplaceable material for swordsmithing since the Edo period (1603–1867). However, when faced with the competition of imported reverberatory furnaces and increased industrial demands for steel, *tatara* ironworks were unable to compete, and they closed down in the 1920s. A small-scale operation was launched in 1933 to continue *tamahagane* production for military sabers, but this endeavor was ceased following the end of World War II (1939–1945).

Japanese swords later came to be appreciated and collected throughout the world as works of art, but only 5 to 6 metric tons of *tamahagane* remained after the war. In order to provide high-quality steel for the country’s swordsmiths, the Society for Preservation of Japanese Art Swords (NBTHK, or Nittōho) established atraditional clay *tatara* furnace in Okuizumo.

The secrets of *tatara* ironmaking had been closely guarded, so Nittōho went to great lengths to find people with firsthand experience. The vital role of *murage* (foreman) fell to Abe Yoshizō (1902–1995) and Kumura Kanji (1903–1979), two men who had worked at regional furnaces in their youth. They passed on their knowledge to Kihara Akira (b. 1935) and Watanabe Katsuhiko (b. 1939), who in turn took on their own apprentices, ensuring the *tatara* tradition would continue for future generations.