

The Year of the Kamikaze

By John T. Correll

The suicide pilots were sent to die for the emperor—regardless of what the emperor thought about it.

Smoke engulfs USS Bunker Hill, hit by two kamikazes off Okinawa May 11, 1945. Losses included 400 US seamen killed or missing, 164 wounded, and 70 aircraft destroyed.

As Japan entered the final year of World War II in the fall of 1944, its once-fearsome air forces were severely diminished, especially the carriers and aircraft of the imperial Japanese navy.

The Japanese had at first extended their perimeter in a big loop that encompassed Southeast Asia, the Dutch East Indies, Wake Island, and the tip of the Aleutian chain in the Bering Sea. The reversal began in 1942 with the loss of four aircraft carriers at Midway and continued to the “Marianas Turkey Shoot” in June 1944, where US forces gutted what was left of Japanese naval airpower and secured bases from which B-29 bombers could strike the Japanese home islands.

The A6M Zero fighter had lost its quality edge to the US Navy’s FGF Hellcat and F4U Corsair and the Army Air Force’s P-38 Lightning. Experience and training levels fell as Japan’s best pilots were killed in action.

The US was steadily rolling back the perimeter, with Gen. Douglas MacArthur moving northward from New Guinea and Adm. Chester W. Nimitz “island hopping” across the central Pacific. In October 1944, they were converging on the Philippines, where invasion of the island of Leyte was to be a big step on the road to Japan.

Japan hoped desperately to stop the invasion fleet in Leyte Gulf, but it could not do so by conventional military means. Its battleships and cruisers were vulnerable without air support. The remaining carriers were so depleted of aircraft and crews that they could do little more than serve as bait to draw away the US carriers.

The chosen solution—and a standard tactic for the last 10 months of the war—was suicide attacks in which land-based

Seamen on USS Belleau Wood in October 1944 shot down a kamikaze pilot near the Philippine island of Leyte, but the Zero crashed on the ship's aft deck, causing fires that ignited ammunition.



Photo from Robert L. Lawson Photograph Collection, USN National Museum of Naval Aviation

Japanese aircraft crash-dived into American ships. The attacks and the airmen who flew them are known to history as kamikaze, named after the “Divine Wind” typhoons that dispersed the Mongolian invasion fleet of Kublai Khan in the 13th century.

In Kanji, the logographic characters of the written Japanese language, “Divine Wind” can be read either as “kamikaze”—the term used by the Japanese navy—or “shimpu,” preferred by Japanese army airmen. The imperial navy flew 64 percent of the suicide attacks and the army air forces 36 percent.

An alternate term, “tokkotai,” or special attack unit, was often used in deference to the emperor’s ambivalent attitude toward the suicide missions. According to the kamikaze mystique, pilots went forth willingly to die for the emperor. What the emperor actually thought about it was another question, and not all of the pilots were as eager as the propagandists claimed.

Despite the kamikaze’s legend, the results were not strategically significant

in the long run. The kamikaze sank a total of 33 ships, none of them full-sized carriers or battleships, and damaged 286. The Americans just kept coming. Nevertheless, the kamikaze had great symbolic importance and the pilots were revered by the Japanese public.

Seventy years later, a resurgence of that esteem and glory is underway in Japan.

THE SAMURAI TRADITION

Acts of self-sacrifice are not unusual in war, but Japan was a special case, steeped in the legendary traditions of the samurai and their code of conduct, called “bushido,” or the way of the warrior. The samurai were a warrior class employed since medieval times to fight for feudal warlords.

Their badge of office was the sword, which they used freely on anyone who gave them offense. Surrender was unthinkable. In instances of disgrace, their custom was to commit “seppuku,” the suicide ritual known popularly in the

West as “hara kiri.” The greatest honor was to die in the service of one’s lord.

The samurai were disbanded in the 1860s, but officers of the imperial Japanese army kept the traditions alive and imposed them on the armed forces with more radical intensity than ever existed in the heyday of the samurai. They brought back the sword and other trappings. The 1872 military code for the army and navy prescribed death as the punishment for surrender.

The militaristic fervor spread to the general population. “Almost all Japanese boys were brought up—mentally at least—as warriors,” said historian Syohgo Hattori. “Self-sacrifice to the emperor was thought to be a highly honorable deed.”

By the 20th century, these beliefs were firmly implanted in the national culture. Public opinion tolerated and usually supported the excesses and atrocities of the Japanese army in China and elsewhere. The customs were carefully observed. “Japanese pilots in China were issued

L-r: Rear Adm. Tamon Yamaguchi, Vice Adm. Shiro Takatsu, and Rear Adm. Takijiro Onishi after being awarded the Order of the Rising Sun medal in 1940. Onishi was the founder of the Kamikaze Corps and later argued that Japan could win the war with the sacrifice of 20 million lives in a special attack effort.



revolvers and swords but no parachutes,” said Edwin P. Hoyt in *Japan’s War*.

In January 1941, War Minister Gen. Hideki Tojo issued the senjinkun military code, “Instructions for the Battlefield,” which told soldiers they should “never live to experience shame as a prisoner,” and that “a sublime sense of self-sacrifice must guide you through life and death.”

THE FIRST KAMIKAZE

There had been instances dating back to Pearl Harbor of pilots deliberately crashing into American ships, but these were individual efforts, unrelated to each other. What set the kamikaze attacks apart was that they were planned and organized by higher authority as regular, continuing operations.

The first kamikaze unit was formed Oct. 20, 1944, by Vice Adm. Takijiro Onishi, commander of the First Air Fleet, which owned all of the land-based fighters in the Philippines. As the invasion force approached, Onishi’s command had fewer than 100 aircraft still in operational condition.

Meeting with officers at Mabalacat, adjacent to Clark Field northwest of Manila, Onishi announced his conclusion that Japanese air strength was so meager that the only way to meet the invasion was with suicide attacks. All hands agreed heartily and there were more volunteers than Onishi could use.

Twenty-six ordinary A6M Zero fighters were assigned to the special attack unit, half of them to the crash-dive mission and half as escorts for the suicide planes. The strike fighters were stripped of all unnecessary weight, including self-defense capability, and armed with 550-pound [250 kilogram] bombs.

“Our small Zero fighters were unable to carry the great weight of a torpedo, so that weapon was not considered,” said Commander Tadashi Nakajima, the unit’s flight operations officer. “They could, however, with slight alteration be fitted with a 250-kilogram bomb.”

Lt. Yukio Seki, a Japanese naval academy graduate and one of the best pilots in the fleet, was chosen to command the kamikaze unit. Seki had been married only a few months before but he embraced his new assignment without hesitation.

A few days later, Onishi sent Nakajima to form a second kamikaze unit at Cebu, 400 miles south of Mabalacat and the most forward special attack base in the Philippines. Additional units were set up at other fields, but the principal bases were Mabalacat and Cebu.

The first successful suicide attack came Oct. 25, with Seki leading the Zeros out of Mabalacat. Among the American ships moving through Leyte Gulf that morning was USS *St. Lo*, an escort or jeep carrier, which was about half the size of a fleet carrier.

The Zeros found the ships, climbed to 5,000 feet, and dived into the attack. Several of them were shot down, but the last one—flown by Seki—crashed into *St. Lo*, broke through the flight deck, and exploded its bomb. *St. Lo* sank 20 minutes later.

Emperor Hirohito’s reaction to the kamikaze attacks was ambiguous. “Was it necessary to go to this extreme?” he asked the Navy chief of staff, but then added, “They certainly did a magnificent job.”



Corporal Yukio Araki, holding a puppy, and four other kamikaze pilots in May 1945. The day after this picture was taken Araki, age 17, died in a kamikaze attack on US ships near Okinawa.

PHILIPPINE FALLBACK

There was no chance the Japanese could hold the Philippines. In the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October, they sustained “catastrophic losses: four carriers, three battleships, six heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, and 10 destroyers,” said historian

John Toland. “Never again would the imperial Navy play more than a minor role in the defense of the homeland.”

The Japanese army air forces continued with conventional operations until November, but formed their own suicide units when it became apparent that the navy’s kamikaze tactics worked better.

Not enough Zeros were available for the expanding mission, but the army and navy still had thousands of airplanes at various locations around the Asian rim. Many of them could be converted for kamikaze use.

All kinds of aircraft were thrown into action: fighters, trainers, dive bombers, wood and fabric biplanes—anything that would fly. There was some new production. A few navy Zeros were built to carry a larger 1,100-pound bomb.

The kamikaze could not stop the invasion of the Philippines, but they enforced serious losses, sinking 16 US ships and damaging many more. One kamikaze hit the cruiser

own doctors to prevent their capture by the Americans.

The Japanese lost more than 500 aircraft on kamikaze missions in the Philippines. Even with an all-out effort to replace their losses, the Japanese were unable to mount a full kamikaze effort when the battle for Iwo Jima began in February 1945.

Most of the veteran pilots motivated and available for kamikaze missions had been killed. After the Philippines, the policy of relying on volunteers was quietly dropped and training was cut back. Some suicide pilots had no more than 30 hours of flying time, sufficient for them to take off, stay in formation, and hit the target.

TACTICS AND TRADITIONS

Myths about the kamikaze abound. One of the most enduring is that they drank a cup of sake at planeside before the last mission. In fact, they avoided sake and all other alcohol before flying lest it impair

However, depictions of kamikaze pilots wearing white headbands imprinted with a red rising sun are correct. The headbands, called “hachimaki,” were a custom borrowed from the samurai and symbolized courage and pre-battle composure.

The original formations for the first kamikaze attacks consisted of three suicide planes and two escorts. The escorts remained close by the strike aircraft, no matter what happened. They could not break away to attack enemy fighters or change course to defend themselves. Their sole duty was to protect the suicide aircraft all the way to the target. Later on, the kamikaze switched from small formations to mass attacks, concentrating all of their aircraft into a single wave to saturate defenses.

The preferred target was a US carrier. “Against carriers the best point of aim is the central elevator—or about one-third the length of the ship from the bow,” said Capt. Rikihei Inoguchi, senior staff officer



Nashville, flagship of the invasion, killing 137. MacArthur had planned to be aboard but his staff talked him out of it.

Among the ships taking heavy damage was the fleet carrier *Bunker Hill*, hit by two kamikazes with almost 400 US seamen killed or missing, 264 wounded, and 70 aircraft lost.

The no-surrender rules were enforced harshly in the fallback from the Philippines. Some wounded or bedridden Japanese soldiers were killed by their

their sharpness and abilities. It was water they drank for the ritual farewell toast.

Another story is that the kamikaze were given only enough fuel for a one-way flight, making it impossible for them to turn back. The truth is that the fuel tanks were filled completely. If the pilot was unable to find a target, he was to return and preserve the aircraft and himself for another attempt. In addition, the maximum fuel load caused a bigger explosion and fire when the airplane plowed into a ship.

Schoolgirls from Chiran, Japan, wave cherry blossoms in farewell to a kamikaze pilot in April 1945. The aircraft is a Hayabusa III fighter, carrying a 250-kilogram bomb.

to Onishi. “Next best is either the fore or aft elevator—both being vulnerable locations since the destruction of these sections destroys the operational effectiveness of the ship. Against other types of ships the base of the bridge, where the ship’s nerve center is located, is the most desirable target.”



US Navy personnel inspect an Okha two-seat trainer aircraft. The rocket-propelled aircraft was constructed around a 2,645-pound warhead, carried into battle by a bomber, and released to fly at 600 mph toward its target.

Pilots were to arm their bombs only when the target was sighted. Inexperienced pilots sometimes forgot, so the escort crews checked and reminded them if necessary. Pilots were instructed to release their bombs before impact, hoping to damage the ship at two separate points.

“Kamikaze pilots were taught not to close their eyes until the last instant before they collided with their target,” said historian Hattori. “High-ranking Japanese officers believed that kamikaze pilots who overshot their targets had closed their eyes well before that last instant. Despite this instruction, reports of kamikazes overshooting continued.”

OKINAWA

Suicide attacks reached their peak in the battle of Okinawa, April-June 1945, as the war closed in on the Japanese home islands. The principal kamikaze bases were Kanoya and Chiran on opposite sides of Kagoshima Bay at the southern tip of Kyushu. The pilots were the greatest heroes of the nation.

Small formations were a thing of the past. Kamikaze attacks in the Okinawa campaign were conducted mainly in 10 massed waves. Seventeen US ships were sunk in the Okinawa campaign, one of them an escort carrier. Nearly a quarter of the American ships engaged were hit by a suicide airplane.

Hardest hit were the destroyers and smaller ships, deployed around the carrier task forces as the first line of defense and as a picket line for early warning. Sailors

on one radar picket destroyer had enough of it. They put up a big sign with an arrow pointing to the rear reading, “Carriers This Way.”

On April 15, a suicide pilot crashed his Zero through the starboard side below the main deck of the battleship *Missouri*. It started fires but the bomb did not explode and no Americans were killed. The next day, despite protests from some of the crew, the battleship’s captain gave the kamikaze pilot a military funeral at sea. This event would be remembered in a different context 70 years later.

About half of the kamikaze aircraft were shot down by gunners on US ships or by Navy interceptors. The best defense was by the “Big Blue Blanket,” as the Navy fighters were called.

Okinawa also saw the introduction of the piloted glide bomb called Okha, or Cherry Blossom. The Okha was a single-seat craft, 20 feet long, built around a huge 2,645-lb armor-piercing warhead carried into battle by a bomber. An Okha sped to its target at 600 mph, propelled by rocket engines. A total of 77 Okhas were launched, sinking a US destroyer and damaging three other ships.

The Japanese employed other kinds of suicide forces as well, including manned torpedoes, midget submarines, crash boats, and kamikaze frogmen. These programs were not very successful. Neither was the effort of suicide fighters to destroy B-29 bombers by aerial ramming. By US count, nine B-29s were lost to ramming and another 13 were damaged

THE LAST STAND

The emperor, touring firebombed areas of Tokyo in March and weighing reports from elsewhere, reached the conclusion that the war was lost and had to be ended as soon as possible. The emperor supposedly “lived beyond the clouds” and almost never interfered directly in the affairs of government. Not until the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August was he able to advance the case for surrender.

Although devastated, Japan still had considerable military forces left, including almost five million regular army troops and assorted paramilitary reserves. Between them, the army and navy could scrape together 10,700 aircraft from all corners of the war front, about 7,500 of them, which could be adapted for suicide missions.

Hardliners insisted that Japan must keep fighting. Hearing the news of the atomic bombs, Onishi—founder of the kamikazes and now vice chief of the naval general staff—said, “If we are prepared to sacrifice 20 million Japanese lives in a ‘special attack’ effort, victory will be ours.”

Army rebels surrounded the palace and tried to seize the emperor’s recorded rescript of surrender before it could be delivered for broadcast by NHK national radio. They attacked members of the imperial household and burned the home of the prime minister, declaring that “our intention is to protect the emperor.”

Within hours of the surrender announcement Aug. 15, Onishi and War Minister Korechika Anami killed themselves in the ancient disembowelment ritual of



“seppuku.” Later, former Prime Minister Tojo unsuccessfully attempted suicide, choosing a .32 cal. Colt pistol rather than seppuku. Tojo lived to be tried and hanged as a war criminal.

Moderate air base commanders removed the propellers and fuel from airplanes to prevent unauthorized suicide missions. The last kamikaze was Vice Adm. Matome Ugaki, commander of the Fifth Air Fleet, to which naval suicide aircraft were assigned. Late in the day on Aug. 15, Ugaki took off, accompanied by 10 other aircraft, and headed toward Okinawa. About 7:30 p.m., a static-riddled radio transmission reported that they were attacking, but there is no US report of a kamikaze action on that date. Ugaki was not heard from again.

Statistical records for the 10 months of the kamikaze operations vary considerably and the numbers are difficult to reconcile. A reasonable estimate is that the Japanese flew 2,550 suicide sorties, not counting escorts and observers.

They sank 33 US ships and damaged 286, killing 4,900 American sailors and wounding 4,800. Some ships were hit by more than one suicide attacker. The largest of the American ships sunk were three escort carriers and 13 destroyers. Smaller ships took most of the losses and damage.

Almost 4,000 Japanese airmen died in various aspects of the kamikaze effort.

HEROES AGAIN

Japan posthumously promoted the deceased kamikazes by two ranks and provided generous pensions for their families.

After the war, however, the public image of the kamikaze changed. Adoration for them declined and so did interest in what they had done.

“Over the decades since the end of the American occupation in 1952, kamikaze pilots gradually have regained the status of national heroes that they once enjoyed during the final stages of the war,” says Bill Gordon, who operates a website about the kamikaze. “Much of the turnaround in public opinion came about through the efforts of the Chiran Peace Museum for Kamikaze Pilots, which opened in 1975 on the site of the former Chiran Air Base.”

Chiran and several other such museums “portray the pilots as brave young men who voluntarily sacrificed their lives to defend their country and families,” Gordon says. The museums “generally remain silent on responsibility for the war other than brief explanations, such as western nations cutting off imports of oil,” he says. Chiran draws visitors by the tens of thousands.

The Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo has a heroic statue of a kamikaze pilot. The city of Minamikyushu, home of the Chiran museum, has asked the United Nations to add letters from the kamikaze pilots to its Memory of the World register, which recognizes such documents as the Magna Carta.

A moment after this picture was taken, the incoming Zero crashed through the starboard side of USS Missouri. The bomb did not go off and no Americans were killed. The battleship captain ordered a military funeral for the pilot.

Veneration of the kamikaze gained major momentum with the release of a new movie, “The Eternal Zero,” in December 2013, the Zero in the title being the classic A6M. The pilot hero of the story joins a suicide unit in the last days of the war. He wants to survive but accepts his responsibility and dies in a blaze of glory. It is already one of the 10 top-grossing Japanese films of all time. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe described himself as “deeply moved” by the film.

The film is based on a novel by Naoki Hyakuta, governor of the NHK public broadcasting system. In a political speech in 2014, Hyakuta said that the notorious massacre of Chinese civilians by Japanese soldiers at Nanjing in 1937-1938 “never happened.”

The most recent recognition of the kamikaze was April 11, 2015, when the Battleship Missouri Memorial, now anchored at Pearl Harbor, remembered the 70th anniversary of the attack on the battleship in 1945. Concurrently, an exhibit opened onboard with artifacts lent by the museum at Chiran. The exhibit was scheduled to continue through Veterans Day. ✪

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “Their Finest Hour,” appeared in the July issue.