

The Reluctant Kamikazes – from *Mail Online*

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As dawn rose on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, the six Japanese pilots went through a simple ceremony.

They stood in a half-circle as their commanding officer poured each of them a small drink and raised his glass in a toast. 'You are now as gods,' he told them. 'Free from all earthly desires. I wish you success.'

The pilots drank to each other and to Emperor Hirohito, and bowed low in the direction of the Imperial Palace. They then wrapped white scarves across their foreheads, climbed into their bomb-armed Mitsubishi Zero fighters and took off on a one-way flight to certain death.

The date was October 25, 1944. To the north of Mindanao, the last and largest naval battle of World War II was being fought between the Japanese and U.S. fleets in the Pacific. It was at this decisive moment that a new and terrible weapon was officially unleashed on the Allied Forces: the suicide bombers known to the world as kamikazes.

The six pilots located a group of American warships in Leyte Gulf and began their descent from 10,000 feet. Instead of dropping their bombs and veering off, they attempted to crash into the flight decks of four U.S. aircraft carriers.

One of them badly damaged the USS Kalinin Bay. Another crashed into the USS St Lo, causing a series of explosions which detonated the ship's magazine.

Within half an hour the St Lo had sunk - the first of 36 Allied warships which were sunk by kamikaze pilots, including three large aircraft carriers. Another 369 ships were damaged, including 36 carriers, 15 battleships, 15 cruisers and 87 destroyers. Several of them were put out of action for good.

For the kamikazes (the name meant Divine Wind, referring to a typhoon which had saved Japan from a Mongol invasion fleet in 1281) aimed to cause maximum damage. It was a kind of warfare no one had seen before.

If they succeeded in crashing their aircraft into a carrier's flight deck, it caused terrible injuries. Their plane's petrol tanks would explode and burning petrol flowed through the splintered deck, starting fires among aircraft in the hangar below. Sailors would suffocate in the dense black fumes caused by petrol, oil and burning rubber.

There had been earlier cases of Japanese aircraft flying into warships, but those were accidents or isolated acts of desperation. In the 1940s, half a century before human suicide bombers in Israel and the attacks on the Twin Towers, the kamikazes were the stuff of nightmares.

That Japanese pilots were prepared to transform themselves into human bombs - about 2,000 pilots of the Japanese Imperial Navy were killed in 2,550 kamikaze missions - made the Allies feel they were fighting an enemy which had no moral boundaries or respect for life.

Sixty years on, the image of the kamikaze pilot is as frightening as ever and subconsciously still feeds into the image of Japan abroad. But a new book, *Kamikaze Diaries*, by a Japanese-American professor, should change all that.

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney has studied the diaries and letters of many of the pilots, fresh out of Japan's universities, who were conscripted into the Japanese armed forces in 1943 and assigned to the kamikaze corps. It turns out that far from being the fanatical militarists of popular myth, they were agonised, despairing, thoughtful individuals who were placed in an impossible situation and went far-from-willingly to their deaths.

None of them signed up to die: they signed up to fly - in fighters which were expected to return to base if not shot down on their mission.

When the kamikaze units were formed, the student pilots were usually summoned into a hall together. After a lecture on patriotism and sacrifice by a senior officer, they were asked to step forward if they wished to 'volunteer' for the suicide units.

Nearly all did so; not just from the intense peer pressure but because they could not bear to protect their own lives while seeing their friends and comrades offering up theirs.

And pilots who did refuse were liable to be treated as moral outcasts. In many cases, they were consigned to the Philippine battlefields, where death was almost guaranteed.

Many of these student soldiers were the elite of Japan's youth, educated to the highest degree in world philosophy, history and literature. Their diaries are passionate debates about the meaning of the life which was about to be taken from them.

Hachiro Sasaki was born in 1922 into an upper middle-class Japanese family and drafted from the University of Tokyo in 1943. He was a fine sportsman and a brilliant student.

Left-wing and idealistic, Hachiro was against the war but nevertheless felt he had a responsibility to play a part in it and eventually to sacrifice himself. He thought that Japan had become corrupt - like its enemies - and that the only solution was to build a new Japan out of the ashes.

At the same time, he was resigned to his fate. He felt that, like the poet Rupert Brooke in the 1914-18 war, 'if one must die, one must die beautifully', falling like the cherry blossom.

Just before Hachiro was drafted, he handed over all the essays he had written to his brother. He died on a kamikaze mission on April 14, 1945.

Tadao Hayashi was also 21 when he was drafted. At school in 1940, Tadao wrote: 'Two important tasks in my search are to master the English language and to identify a principle which will intellectually uphold me - which is none other than liberalism.'

He wrote about his feelings for beauty and his sexual desire. Very few of the student kamikazes were married and most were virgins; their codes of conduct seem to have discouraged them from going to prostitutes.

'I dream of a lover's breathing,' wrote Tadeo in 1942. 'The touch of a warm body, the joy of the embrace of two in love, playing around without the feeling of shame, the frenzied dance of love and falling asleep in her arms ... I daily struggle with this pain. Conquer yourself; take control of yourself!'

On December 1, 1943, between 200,000 and 300,000 students were drafted into the armed forces. Tadeo was sent to a succession of naval air bases, including one which was notorious for its brutality.

'The military kills passion and transforms people, making them indifferent, turning them into cogs that turn a wheel mechanically,' he wrote in 1944. He dreamed of floating in a warm sea, intoxicated with random thoughts as his body bobbed over the waves.

But as the enemy approached, he saw there was no avoiding his destiny and gave up the diary he had kept all his life. In June 1945, at the Miho Air Base, by now a pilot, he told his elder brother: 'All finished. No more hope.'

In July 1945, shortly before Japan surrendered, his plane was shot down by an American fighter that took off from an aircraft carrier that Tadeo had sighted on his suicide mission. A poem, written the night before his final flight, ended: How unbearable to die in the sky.

From the beginning of their training, cadet pilots were told they had to be ready to sacrifice their youth for the nation. Trainees had to learn by heart the sacred words of the Emperor laying down the duties of a soldier.

The reason why the young men accepted they had no option but to fly their suicide missions has to be understood in the context of the the Japanese military code.

Surrender, escape and all other actions by which soldiers might save their lives - even in situations of unavoidable defeat - were punishable by death. Any soldier who did not obey his commander's orders was shot on the spot.

The first lesson taught to a soldier in training was how to use his own rifle to kill himself rather than be captured alive - pressing the trigger with a toe while pointing the gun under the chin. In some camps, trainees were beaten by NCOs and officers for minor offences.

Ryuji Nagatsuka, who had been drafted into Flying School from the University of Tokyo, recalled that cadet pilots had almost no time for themselves. Cadets were allowed one day's rest each month.

Nagatsuka's Flying Officer told them: 'Your hearts must be as pure as the sky. When you're piloting a plane, the least impurity will fester and lead to your death. Forget your family, your girlfriend, your studies.'

This was all very well, but Nagatsuka knew it took more than moral purity for a Kawasaki fighter with a wingspan of 57 feet to bring down an American B29 superfortress with a wingspan of 140 feet.

After the first kamikaze attacks, the Royal Navy air observer attached to the U.S. Pacific Fleet had reported that he saw no reason why the suicide pilots should not be able to put entire Task Forces of U.S. aircraft carriers out of action. But gradually the kamikazes began to lose the initiative.

The American navies employed a line of destroyers to confront incoming aircraft, and a fighter unit constantly in the air.

When the kamikazes countered this by flying very low over the sea and slamming into ships at deck level, the Allied aircraft carriers fired shells down into the water around them, sending up great plumes of water so that the kamikazes lost sight of their target.

Ichizo Hayashi was being trained to skim the waves in his KI-27, carrying a primed bomb. His instructor kept insisting that pilots should not close their eyes instinctively at the moment of crashing or they might miss the target.

This is behind one of Hayashi's last letters home - a cry of despair which summed up the predicament of the kamikaze: 'For someone who has had a good life, it is very difficult to part with it. But I have reached a point of no return. I must plunge into an enemy vessel.'

'As the preparation for take-off nears, I feel a heavy pressure on me. I don't think I can stare at death . . . I tried my best to escape in vain. So now that I don't have a choice, I must go valiantly. Despair, despair is a sin.' Hayashi died off Okinawa in April 1945.

Since to lose Okinawa (considered Japanese territory) would not only be a staggering blow to Japan's morale but give the U.S. a vital springboard for a landing in Japan itself, that battle saw the greatest concentration of kamikaze sorties in the war.

To prepare the young men for their deaths in the onslaught, all the pilots were indoctrinated with the belief that to dive upon a carrier or a battleship was to become a 'hero-god of the air'.

Yet to reach its target, every kamikaze plane had to fly through a curtain of fighter jets, avoid anti-aircraft fire spitting from every warship, choose its potential target and dive with pin-point accuracy.

No one would know if they succeeded. Their last communication would be 'I'm diving...' Then silence.

As it happened, a few hundred kamikaze pilots did survive. Ryuji Nagatsuka was one of them. On 28 June, 1945, he was given a few hours to prepare for a kamikaze sortie on the U.S. Third Fleet.

In his sleeping quarters, he made his will, cut his nails and a lock from his hair, then settled down to write to his family. He started: 'My dear parents, I shall depart this life at 0700 hours on 29 June, 1945.'

At 4am he left his belongings on his bed and, after a frugal breakfast, went to the briefing room.

At 5.30am, 18 suicide pilots lined up in front of two rickety tables covered with a white cloth. On it were 18 cups and a bottle of sake. The commandant poured each pilot a glass and declared: 'I have nothing more to ask of you but to die heroically for your country.' The pilots smoked a last cigarette.

As Nagatsuka walked to the plane he felt lighter than usual, and realised that of course he wasn't wearing his parachute.

Led by Flight Lieutenant Takagui, they took off under grey skies. A feeling of terrible solitude froze Nagatsuka's blood as he thought of the abyss of nothingness ahead. But in the rain-lashed clouds there was no glimpse of the U.S. Fleet.

They had a choice of ditching in the sea or turning for home. Takagui chose the latter. The commandant, enraged that they brought their planes back instead of dying like heroes, had them arrested. They were punched and insulted, but they were alive.

At the end of that week, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima - and the kamikaze pilots passed into history.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-407784/The-Reluctant-Kamikazes.html#ixzz3uahHwO1D>

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