

Japan's Special Attack Force: The Motivations Behind the Kamikaze Suicide Pilots

By: Alex Sycher

Denison University

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*Dear Parents,*

*Please congratulate me. I have been given a splendid opportunity to die. This is my last day. This destiny of our homeland hinges on the decisive battle in the seas to the south where I shall fall like a blossom from a radiant cherry tree...<sup>1</sup>*

*-Isao Matsuo, Kamikaze Pilot*

The unorthodox suicide tactics employed by Japan's kamikaze pilots during the Second World War have left behind a lasting legacy in American culture. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans were quick to draw comparisons between the contemporary Islamic Al Qaeda suicide attackers and the Japanese kamikaze pilots of a past generation. Both were viewed by the general public as radical extremists willing to stop at nothing in order to inflict as many casualties upon the American people as possible. Due in large part to the great value placed upon individual life within Western culture, most Americans have difficulty coming to terms with the concept of a predetermined suicide strike. While the history of the United States' Armed Forces is littered with examples of heroic patriotism in the face of almost certain death, the idea of sending a soldier into combat with absolutely no hope of returning is a foreign and certainly frightening idea for most Americans.

During the last years of the war in the Pacific, perhaps nothing struck more fear in a United States Navy sailor than the sight of a Japanese Zero fighter plane barreling towards the deck of a ship. For many Americans the kamikaze missions reinforced the negative racial stereotypes prescribed to the Japanese, who were viewed by most soldiers as crazed savages willing to send their men, women, and children to the slaughter in order to protect their surrounded homeland. While the racial ideology that tended to prevail during the war years may still persist in some circles today, this cultural bias must be discarded in order to discover what exactly drove these young men to make the ultimate sacrifice. Although the Allies cursed the

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<sup>1</sup> Rikihei Inoguchi and Tadashi Nakajima, *The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II* (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute, 1958), 200.

suicide bombers for their perverse insanity, a set of complex motivations eventually pushed thousands of young Japanese pilots to make what they saw as a rational decision to volunteer for death. The eagerness of these young men to volunteer for special suicide missions arose out of a broad range of both traditional cultural values and radical military philosophies adopted by Japanese nationalists prior to and during the Second World War. By examining the lives and writings left behind by the kamikaze pilots and those closely associated with their units, one slowly begins to understand the mindset of a former enemy.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japan quickly established itself as the preeminent military power in the South Pacific. Once a feudal island nation, Japan had worked to rapidly modernize its military beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The temporary disablement of the U.S. fleet stationed in Hawaii allowed Japan's now powerful Imperial Navy to engulf most of the small island chains in the Pacific under the guise of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." Although Japan did not exploit its incorporated territories to the same extreme as its German ally, both Axis powers relied heavily upon foreign resources to provide their militaries with necessary supplies for the war. Key for Japan was its territorial holdings in China and the Dutch East Indies, which combined were able to supply the Japanese military with the adequate fuel, rubber, and food that was in short supply on the home island.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for the Japanese, the attack on Pearl Harbor did not achieve its intended objective of swaying public support in America against a prolonged war with Japan. Instead, the attack on United States' soil prompted a quick declaration of war, a mobilization of armed forces, and a wartime reorganization of industrialized labor that would soon be able to disproportionately out-produce the Japanese. At the Battle of Midway, an early and critical confrontation in the Pacific, United States forces stationed on the island were able to repel a

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<sup>2</sup> John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 240-267.

Japanese attack and inflict irreplaceable losses upon the Imperial Navy. The Battle of Midway cost Japan its strategic naval advantage in the Pacific; the number of aircraft carriers sunk put the Imperial Navy on equal footing with the Americans in terms of capital ships, and the Japanese knew that the United States' production capacity would tip the balance in the Allies' favor. Months later in the South Pacific, the United States Navy, led by Admiral Chester Nimitz, won a decisive battle at Guadalcanal and began to push north towards the Philippine Islands. In July 1944, when U.S. forces succeeded in taking the island of Saipan, a key Imperial holding in the Marianas Island chain, it became clear to Japanese military strategists that more radical measures would be necessary in order to defend what remained of its once mighty Pacific empire. The establishment of an airfield on Saipan allowed the United States, using their new B-29 Superfortress long-range bombers, to consistently bomb the Japanese mainland, threatening the nation's way of life and the safety of its divine emperor. The combined Allied forces also succeeded in cutting off Japan's communication lines to its southern islands, significantly damaging its necessary fuel supply. With its back against the wall, Japan was about to create what it believed to be a revolutionary "super-weapon" that would work to turn the tide in its favor.<sup>3</sup>

The next major strategic amphibious landing by United States forces was to happen on Leyte, a key island within the larger Philippine chain, in October of 1944. Before the impending invasion, Japanese military strategists, working with a limited number of planes (an estimate of fewer than 100 aircraft were available for deployment in the Philippines) and a dwindling fuel supply, devised a daring and unprecedented plan to subdue the large American naval forces

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<sup>3</sup> John Orbell and Tomonori Morikawa, "An Evolutionary Account of Suicide Attacks: The Kamikaze Case," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 2 (April, 2011): 302-304.

stationed in Leyte Gulf.<sup>4</sup> Admiral Takijiro Onishi, the commander of the First Air Fleet in the Philippines, tasked the commanders of the 201<sup>st</sup> Air Corps stationed at Mabalacat Air Field with the daunting assignment of organizing the first “Special Attack” suicide unit. Due to the brevity of the mission, selection for this assignment was to be voluntary. According to Captain Rikihei Inoguchi, “in a frenzy of emotion and joy, the arms of every pilot in the assembly went up in a gesture of complete accord,” as each man enthusiastically volunteered to be the first to die.<sup>5</sup> A few days later Lieutenant Yukio Seki, chosen to lead the illustrious first mission, rammed his plane into the flight deck elevator of the American escort carrier *St. Lo*, causing a series of explosions that resulted in the ship being sunk.<sup>6</sup> With this one devastating blow, the kamikaze pilot was born.

Before investigating what led the pilots at Mabalacat, along with those undertaking subsequent missions, to volunteer for death, it will be helpful to define what constitutes a “suicide mission” and elaborate on the different forms employed by the Japanese throughout the war. True suicide missions, as in the case of the kamikazes, stand apart from other “suicidal” military efforts because in the latter instances there is at least a pretense of survival.<sup>7</sup> Courageous “suicidal” tactics have been used throughout history and by nearly all militaries of every nation. The three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae heroically holding off the mighty Persian army in the face of certain death serves as a poignant example, as does the “suicidal” assaults made by the Russian army in the defense of Stalingrad. While these soldiers surely knew that they would

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<sup>4</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 287.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hill, “Kamikaze, 1943-5.” In *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, edited by Diego Gambetta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

most likely perish in battle, there was for each individual a sliver of hope that victory and survival were possible.

The Japanese were famous for employing similar “certain death” military endeavors throughout World War II. As Japan faced imminent invasion late in the war, men, women, and children (both military and non-military) participated in “suicidal” Bonzai charges on various islands in the face of American machine-gun entrenchments. Although these Bonzai charges stood practically no chance against American firepower (the women and children were often armed with nothing more than bamboo sticks), the goal was still to survive the charges and drive the Americans from the island, however unrealistic that appeared.<sup>8</sup> In addition, with Japan’s limited resources, it was not uncommon for commanders to send their pilots on aerial bombing missions that were theoretically well out of their fuel range. Although pilots readily accepted these missions knowing they might not return to base, there was at least the pretense of them coming home alive. A well-known example was the midget submarine unit that participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Although nine out of the ten men manning these submarines were posthumously venerated by the Japanese government as kamikazes, their original objective was to jettison their torpedoes and fall back in order to be rescued by a Japanese ship.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the creation of Special Attack Units, a few Japanese pilots did use kamikaze-like tactics, ramming their planes into the sides of American ships without bailing out before impact.<sup>10</sup> These were seen as spur of the moment actions. The pilots did not set out with the sole intention of crashing their plane, but instead decided to inflict as many American casualties as possible due to previously unforeseen circumstances, such as their aircraft having been badly

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<sup>8</sup> Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, 299.

<sup>9</sup> David C. Earhart, "All Ready to Die: Kamikazefication and Japan's Wartime Ideology," *Critical Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (12, 2005): 571-572; Denis Ashton Warner Peggy Warner, and Sadao Senoo, *The Sacred Warriors: Japan's Suicide Legions* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Hill, “Kamikaze,” 2.

damaged or the difficulty of bailing out over the Pacific. Unlike these isolated incidents, the uniqueness of the kamikaze suicide missions stemmed from the fact that as soon as these young pilots identified a target and embarked upon their missions they had absolutely no hope for survival. Before leaving on their final sorties, the kamikazes resigned themselves to a certain death, leaving behind final letters, wills, and diaries that were sent to their families upon the completion of their tasks.

The suicide tactics of the Japanese Special Attack Corps during the war took on a range of different and distinct forms, each with varying results. The most common and effective suicide attackers were the *Shimpu*, or “Divine Wind” units.<sup>11</sup> These included the original suicide missions, devised by Admiral Onishi at the battle for Leyte Gulf and were used from October 1944 until the conclusion of the war. In these missions, pilots strapped bombs onto Japanese fighter planes, typically the agile and lightweight Zero fighters, and attempted to crash into the vulnerable decks of American ships. The planes were accompanied by two to three escort fighters, who would defend the *Shimpu* against intercepting enemy aircraft. The *Shimpu* pilots would approach their targets in one of two ways: either by flying at a very high altitude to increase accuracy, or by skimming the ocean surface in order to avoid enemy radar. If the pilots believed their target was out of reach or secretly experienced second thoughts, they were able to turn their fighters around, unlike the other forms of suicide attack developed by the Japanese later in the war. The “Divine Wind” units were named after a thirteenth century typhoon that saved Japan from certain invasion at the hands of the powerful Mongols.<sup>12</sup> Now once again the people of Japan prayed that a new storm arising from the explosion of man and machine would be able to save their home from an even more formidable enemy.

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<sup>11</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Warner, Warner, and Senoo, *The Sacred Warriors*, 41.

A different type of aerial attack, developed by Lieutenant Shoichi Ota in 1944, was put into use primarily against the American invasion forces at Okinawa in April and May of 1945.<sup>13</sup> Named *Ohka*, (“Cherry Blossom”) after the traditional Japanese symbol of beauty and purity, these flimsy human bombs instead came to be labeled the *baka*, or “idiot” bomb by American sailors in the Pacific.<sup>14</sup> These “toy-like” gliders were jet propelled bombs steered by a single Japanese pilot crunched in a tiny compartment. The gliders were attached to the bottom of heavy bombers and carried within range of their targets by the larger mother ship. Once the pilot of the *Ohka* released the safety latch and departed from the bomber, there was no turning back. The bomb fuse was lit; the pilot would surely die whether or not he hit his intended target. Since these gliders were extremely difficult to steer, the *Ohkas* were largely ineffective compared to the standard *Shimpu* kamikaze attacks. Yet the idea of volunteering to steer a human-guided bomb without any plausible escape makes the motivations for these “Divine Thunderbolts” (as the special-attack unit assigned to pilot the *Ohkas* was called) even more curious.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the aerial tactics mentioned above, the Japanese also made use of a few different types of amphibious suicide attacks. The most prominent of the marine units were the *Kaiten*, meaning “Turning of the Heavens.”<sup>16</sup> These submarines consisted of two modified Japanese torpedoes attached to a small cockpit from which a single driver would steer the torpedoes towards an enemy ship. Like the *Ohkas*, a mother submarine carried the *Kaitens* within range of their intended targets. Once they became separated from the mother ship, there was no chance of returning home. The *Kaiten* pilots plotted their course before leaving the mother ship

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<sup>13</sup> Hatsuho Naito, *Thunder Gods: The Kamikaze Pilots Tell Their Story* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 11-14.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, 277.

<sup>15</sup> Hill, “Kamikaze,” 6.

<sup>16</sup> Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore Failer Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute, 1958), 305.

and counted down the seconds until impact using a stopwatch. If the pilots missed their target, they would drift aimlessly in the Pacific Ocean until they eventually perished.<sup>17</sup> Former *Kaiten* Corps member Kozu Naoji graphically encapsulates the horrors of these underwater missions:

It was horrible to contemplate death in a *Kaiten*. Many young men charged into the enemy and died during the war – in Kamikaze planes, in *Ohka* manned rocket bombs, in *Shinyo* boats. If everything went well for them, and the battleship that was their target was close, looming in front of them, at least they could count the seconds to impact... Then, as long as they kept their eyes open, they'd know the moments of their deaths... But the *Kaiten* wasn't like that. You're underwater. You can't look out. You've already determined your course, peering through the periscope... again, you don't know the moment of your death. You may die ahead of schedule. You don't even know that. I can't imagine a crueller weapon. Yet I can't ask anyone how they felt at that moment, because no one who experienced it came back alive.<sup>18</sup>

Despite acknowledging the disturbing nature of a *Kaiten* attack, Naoji nevertheless readily accepted his opportunity to die on a submarine mission during the war. Although Naoji was fortunate to have had technical difficulties before the launching of his *Kaiten*, thousands of other Japanese pilots perished in various suicide missions. Given the proposed voluntary nature of these assignments, it will now be necessary to discuss the many complex motivations driving the kamikazes in their resolution to die for Japan.<sup>19</sup>

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 established the Japanese emperor as the divine god-head of the imperial state, overthrowing the feudal shoguns who had ruled Japan for over six hundred years.<sup>20</sup> At a young age, good citizens of Japan were now taught to “accept the will of the Emperor as both divine and absolute.”<sup>21</sup> The new nationalist state advocated a concept of emperor worship that encouraged all Japanese people to make the ultimate sacrifice for their

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<sup>17</sup> Only two or three *Kaitens* out of over one hundred deployed were believed to have actually made contact with U.S. ships; Hill, “Kamikaze,” 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Cook and Cook, *Japan at War*, 316-317.

<sup>19</sup> Although the term “kamikaze” technically refers only to the original *Shimpu* (“Divine Wind”) missions first adopted by Admiral Onishi in the Philippines in October of 1944, for purposes of simplification I will use the term loosely to encompass all of the suicide tactics employed by the Japanese toward the end of World War II. If the naming of a specific kind of special attack is necessary, I will use the proper name.

<sup>20</sup> Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 71-84.

<sup>21</sup> Naito, *Thunder Gods*, 21.

divine emperor when called upon to do so. Beginning in 1890, the Japanese education system was standardized in order to promote the ideal of extreme loyalty to the emperor, who alone was able to hold the great nation of Japan together. All students were required to memorize the Imperial Rescript on Education, which read in part: “always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourself courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth.”<sup>22</sup> With the United States rapidly advancing towards the home islands in the summer of 1944, the relative safety of Emperor Hirohito became more uncertain. When the Americans established an air base in the Marianas and could theoretically reach the imperial palace in Tokyo with their long-range bombers, the safety of the emperor became a great concern in the minds of many Japanese indoctrinated with the state-sponsored idea of Hirohito’s divinity.

The protection of the divine emperor became a rallying cry for many kamikaze pilots influenced by the more nationalistic and conservative notions of emperor worship. Many of the more eager volunteers in some of the earliest suicide missions appear to place great emphasis upon their sacrifice as a means of protecting the emperor. One kamikaze pilot writes proudly to his parents: “I shall be a shield for His Majesty and die cleanly along with my squadron leader and other friends.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Ensign Teruo Yamaguchi describes the great honor bestowed upon him: “The living embodiment of all wonderful things out of our past is the Imperial Family which, too, is the crystallization of the splendor and beauty of Japan and its people. It is an honor to be able to give my life in defense of these beautiful and lofty things.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, passages such as the ones above reflecting the ideals of emperor worship are not altogether common in the surviving literature. Loyalty to the emperor was most likely held in much higher regard by

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<sup>22</sup> Hill, “Kamikaze,” 15.

<sup>23</sup> Naito, *Thunder Gods*, 200.

<sup>24</sup> Naito, *Thunder Gods*, 199.

enlisted men, who had been thoroughly indoctrinated in state ideology and were among the first volunteers to participate in kamikaze sorties. These men left very little writing behind, perhaps due to the fact that they accepted their fate more matter-of-factly than later college-educated conscripts.

The Shinto religion in Japan was another state-sponsored influence that played a role in the thoughts and minds of the kamikaze fighters. Although religion in Japan had long been a diverse mixture of Shinto, Buddhist, Confucian, and even Christian values, during the Meiji Restoration of 1868 Shinto was established as the official state religion.<sup>25</sup> Shinto was the oldest of Japan's major religions and was centered upon animist beliefs in which the spirits of one's ancestors inhabited the natural world and were to be worshipped posthumously. The Japanese government used the Shinto religion as a means of promoting its emperor-centered ideology. According to Shinto mythology, the Imperial Line was directly descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu and was to be worshipped as a human deity.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, those who were noble enough to give their lives for the emperor, such as the kamikaze pilots, received special honors in the afterlife.

The spirits of the kamikazes were believed to rest permanently in the Yasukuni Shrine on Kudan Hill. The pilots were told that upon death their spirits would inhabit the beautiful cherry blossom trees planted within the shrine itself.<sup>27</sup> Yasukuni Shrine held special significance due to the fact that the emperor himself journeyed there annually in order to pay personal tribute to Japan's fallen heroes. This was quite a posthumous honor for the common soldiers enshrined at

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<sup>25</sup> Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868-1988* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1-27.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, "Kamikaze," 13.

<sup>27</sup> Emiko Ohunki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 10.

this sacred site.<sup>28</sup> Japanese state ideology pushed this aspect of Shinto ideology throughout the war, hoping that kamikaze pilots would attach a certain significance to their deaths if they were to be rewarded for their sacrifice in the afterlife.

Despite this attempt by the Japanese government to immortalize the kamikaze pilots after the completion of their missions, it is highly doubtful that Shinto perceptions of an afterlife were the central motivating factors behind the kamikazes' decision to die. When looking at the surviving diaries and last letters of the kamikazes, references to the afterlife at Yasukuni are surprisingly absent. When one takes into account the diversity of Japanese religious traditions, the idea that many of these pilots did not buy into the beliefs of the imperial state-sponsored Shinto religion does not appear as shocking.

Furthermore, it was often reported that before takeoff, the last words of many pilots to their beloved comrades were something along the lines of "see you in Yasukuni Shrine." However, this was more likely a nostalgic and symbolic farewell than proof of their belief in an actual spiritual transformation, and it may have in fact been largely circulated as propaganda by the government.<sup>29</sup> Kamikaze pilot Ataru Shimamura, writing his final words to his parents before his fatal last mission, urges them to "please visit and worship at Yasukuni Shrine this spring. There I shall be a cherry blossom, smiling, with many other colleagues."<sup>30</sup> This reference may in fact also be symbolic; whether or not Shimamura actually believed his soul would reside forever at Yasukuni or whether he simply wanted to comfort his parents remains ambiguous. Nevertheless, the absence of any reference to Yasukuni in a large portion of the pilots' writings does suggest that it was not a primary influence behind the kamikazes' choice to die.

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<sup>28</sup> Hardacre, *Shinto and the State*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Orbell and Morikawa, "An Evolutionary Account of Suicide Attacks," 311.

<sup>30</sup> Naito, *Thunder Gods*, 114.

Perhaps a slightly more convincing motivation was the concept of *Bushido*, or the “Warrior’s Way,” which was an ancient Japanese ideal that could be traced back centuries to the origins of the legendary *Samurai* class. The *Samurai* were the elite guards of the shogun, who was the feudal lord that ruled over Japan from 1192 until the restoration of the Meiji emperor in 1868. Adhering strictly to the *Bushido* code, the *Samurai* valued extreme loyalty to their superiors and were always prepared to die for their cause. In fact, the greater the chance of defeat, the more certain it was that the *Samurai* would fight to the death in combat or commit suicide before risking the humiliation of being captured by the victorious enemy.<sup>31</sup> The ancient *Samurai* tradition of *Seppuku*, or voluntary suicide, has been traditionally viewed in Japanese culture as a tragic yet honorable way for a war hero to die when faced with an impossible situation. *Seppuku* is a painful process in which the warrior methodically disembowels himself with a short sword in order to symbolize the pain brought on by defeat. Shortly after the disembowelment, it is customary for the warrior to stab himself in the throat, severing his jugular vein in the process.<sup>32</sup>

To borrow from historian Ivan Morris’ classic title, there has long been a certain “nobility of failure” embedded within Japan’s storied history. Nowhere is this more evident than in the story of Kusunoki Masashige, a heroic *Samurai* who eventually became the ancient patron of the kamikazes and their mission. Masashige was the brave fourteenth century leader of a group of *Samurai* attempting to restore the rightful emperor to power by dispelling the mighty shogun. Ordered by the emperor to fight a foolish battle that was doomed for defeat, Masashige stayed loyal to his master’s command instead of relying on his own superior military strategy. Before committing *Seppuku* as the enemy closed in around him and his men, Masashige asked his

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<sup>31</sup> Naito, *Thunder Gods*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, 15.

brother for his last wish. In classic Samurai fashion, his brother answered, “I should like to be reborn seven times into this world of men that I might destroy the enemies of the [Imperial] court.”<sup>33</sup> This level of sincerity to a lost cause was highly valued centuries later when a new set of military heroes were faced with the prospect of death in the face of defeat.

Although the Meiji government ultimately disposed of the power traditionally held by the *Samurai* class, the concept of *Bushido* lived on within the culture of the Japanese military. The nationalist government naturally promoted the warrior ideal of a willingness to die for Japan as a righteous cause. This became evident in the Japanese policy of no surrender in the Pacific, where soldiers and civilians who were surrounded chose to commit suicide over accepting capture at the hands of the Americans. Many kamikaze pilots also placed great emphasis upon the traditional value of *Bushido*, viewing their death as a tragic yet heroic action much like the great warriors of Japan’s past. As one *Kaiten* pilot was reportedly instructed by a superior officer before embarking on his final mission, “Never shirk facing death. If in doubt whether to live or die, it is always better to die.”<sup>34</sup> Harkening back to the story of Kusunoki Masashige, kamikaze pilot Isao Matsuo wrote in his final letter: “I wish that I could be born seven times each time to smite the enemy.”<sup>35</sup> This apparent disregard for human life was not considered fanatical when taken in the context of the ancient *Samurai* tradition; it was instead a sign of the utmost honor. As another pilot wrote in the postscript of his final letter: “Without regard for life or name, a samurai will defend his homeland.”<sup>36</sup>

In accordance with the ancient warrior tradition, Admiral Ohnishi, the father of the original kamikaze attacks in the Philippines, committed the honorable act of *Seppuku* after

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<sup>33</sup> Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, 106-142.

<sup>34</sup> Yutaka Yokota, *Suicide Submarine!* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 159.

<sup>35</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 200.

<sup>36</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 200.

learning of Japan's decision to surrender to the Allied forces. Shortly after Emperor Hirohito's public announcement ended the war on August 15, 1945, Ohnishi successfully disemboweled himself but botched the fatal cut to his throat, causing him to lie painfully on the floor until he bled to death. Instead of attempting to call for medical attention, Ohnishi accepted his painful death as a proper means to follow in the footsteps of his own pilots who had previously sacrificed themselves for Japan.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Admiral Matome Ugaki, commander of the Japanese Special Attack Force at Okinawa in 1945, also committed suicide when faced with the shame of defeat. After hearing that the Emperor had announced surrender, Ugaki organized a final kamikaze sortie in which he himself participated. The following entry from his diary written prior to his fatal mission illustrates the influence of the *Bushido* tradition: "I am going to proceed to Okinawa, where our men lost their lives like cherry blossoms, and ram into the arrogant American ships, displaying the real spirit of a Japanese warrior."<sup>38</sup>

The decision of these two high-ranking officers to die as many of Japan's tragic heroes had before them speaks to the influence of the *Samurai* tradition within the Special Attack Units. However, the ancient tradition of *Bushido*, which had permeated the warrior class of Japan for centuries, most likely had a greater influence upon enlisted men and non-commissioned officers who had been thoroughly indoctrinated with the values of Japanese military culture. These men had been trained since their mid-teens at the *Yokaren*, a military high school where they became familiar with the concept of *Bushido* and were taught to die honorably for their country if necessary.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Matome Ugaki, *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941- 1945* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 666.

<sup>39</sup> Hill, "Kamikaze," 12.

Another plausible explanation for the kamikaze pilots' willingness to die in suicide attacks was a general feeling of xenophobia for the American enemy. Many pilots truly believed that their sacrifice would make a difference in the defense of their home islands and feared that an American invasion would destroy the traditional Japanese way of life. This fear of Western dominance over Japan predates the Second World War and begins centuries earlier when the first European traders arrived upon the island's shores. Fearing that the infusion of Christianity and Western ideals would poison Japanese culture, the ruling shogun closed Japan's ports to all European nations except the Dutch, who were permitted to trade only in the port city of Nagasaki. However, in 1853 an American fleet led by Commodore Matthew Perry established a blockade in Tokyo Bay that effectively forced Japan to open up trade with the United States.

Impressed with the power of American steamships, Japan went through a period of modernization both economically and militarily in the late nineteenth century and borrowed heavily from Western concepts and innovations.<sup>40</sup> However, the incentive behind this "Westernization" was not to become one with the great Western nations. Instead, Japan hoped to establish itself as the preeminent power in a future South Pacific free of American and European influence. After its perceived mistreatment in the Versailles Treaty and at the Washington Naval Conference by its former World War I allies, Japan became even more disillusioned with the Western superpowers. A general distaste for European colonialism and exploitation was rampant among other nations in the South Pacific, giving Japan the opportunity to establish a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" which they hoped would forever free the region from western influence.

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<sup>40</sup> William G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1963), 38-154.

As the Americans began to close in on the home islands of Japan, it became quite apparent that many Japanese soldiers and civilians would rather die than live through an American occupation of their precious homeland. Viewing their deaths as a valiant last stand against an ominous invasion, many kamikazes held xenophobic beliefs that drove them to give their lives in order to halt the American advance. Lieutenant Yukio Seki, the pilot chosen to lead the first kamikaze mission in Leyte Gulf, reportedly confided to a naval correspondent his true motivations for leading his suicide attack:

Japan is finished! Killing ace pilots like me, strewth! If it was up to me, I know I could get a direct hit on the flight deck of a carrier with a number 50 [500 kg bomb] without plane-ramming. I am not going out for the Emperor or the Japanese Empire. I am going for my beloved wife. If Japan were defeated, I reckon she would be raped by American GIs.<sup>41</sup>

By analyzing the writings left behind, it is reasonable to assume that many kamikaze pilots held views that exaggerated the threat the United States posed to the Japanese way of life. This is not surprising considering the history of Western exploitation in the South Pacific. Many kamikaze pilots believed that their actions were the only means left to save Japan from a foreign enemy that would surely destroy its great traditions and inflict pain upon its people.

Possibly the most prevalent motivation, present in a great number of the kamikaze pilots' final letters and diaries, was a responsibility to protect a pilot's own family from the repercussions of a Japanese defeat and an American invasion. Since many of the suicide pilots were young and unmarried, there was particular enthusiasm among these men to protect their parents and siblings from potential harm. This natural inclination to defend one's kin was reinforced by the Confucian value of filial piety, which had been incorporated into Japanese culture from China centuries earlier. Confucian filial piety places great emphasis upon the

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<sup>41</sup> Hill, "Kamikaze," 24.

relationship between a son and his parents. A son should at all times display the upmost respect for his mother and father. When a boy comes of age, it is required of him to repay his parents for the many years they spent raising and nurturing him.

Many kamikaze pilots clearly saw their deaths as the ultimate way to honor their parents and reciprocate the great love given during childhood. Pilot Isao Matsuo acknowledges his filial duty in a letter dictated to his parents as his plane was preparing for its final flight: “Thank you, my parents, for the 23 years during which you have cared for me and inspired me. I hope that my present deed will in some small way repay what you have done for me... This is my last wish, and there is nothing else that I desire.”<sup>42</sup> Cadet Jun Nomoto expresses similar feelings towards his parents, and also hopes that his sacrifice will allow his siblings to live a better life:

Dearest Parents:

Words cannot express my gratitude to you. It is my hope that this last act of striking a blow at the enemy will serve to repay in small measure the wonderful things you have done for me.

My last wish is that my brothers may have a proper education. It is certain that uneducated men have an empty life. Please see to it that their lives are as full as possible. I know that my sister is well taken care of because you have provided for her as you did for me. I am grateful for a wonderful father and mother.

I shall be satisfied if my final effort serves as recompense for the heritage our ancestors bequeathed.<sup>43</sup>

After dying in a suicide attack, kamikaze pilots were given a two-rank promotion by the Japanese military, allowing their families to collect a larger pension.<sup>44</sup> At a time when resources were scarce and many Japanese citizens were experiencing shortages, this increased income may have been another means by which the pilots viewed their deaths as a way to fulfill their filial commitments.

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<sup>42</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 200.

<sup>43</sup> Inoguchi and Nakajima, *The Divine Wind*, 202-203.

<sup>44</sup> Hill, “Kamikaze,” 24.

The Meiji government also incorporated the Confucian ideal of filial piety into their emperor-centered ideology by extending the respect for one's parents to the Emperor himself, who was considered the head of the national family.<sup>45</sup> Students were taught to die for the emperor just as they must die for their parents – in order to repay him for “fathering” the people of Japan. As discussed earlier, the idea of dying for the emperor did not directly appeal to many kamikazes. Instead, it became much more common for the pilots to see their death as a means to protect their closest kin. As *Kaiten* Corps survivor Kozu Naoji writes: “I never thought the Emperor could act on his own. I didn't see myself throwing my life away for him, nor for the government either, nor for the nation. I saw myself dying to defend my parents, my brothers and sisters. For them I must die, I thought.”<sup>46</sup> This kind of noble dedication to one's immediate family served as a primary motivation for many pilots who lost their lives in suicide attacks.

While the motivations analyzed thus far have served as deciding factors for a great number of kamikaze volunteers, a select group of suicide pilots appear to have had less obvious reasons for participating in the Special Attack missions. After the initial success of Ohnishi's *Shimpu* unit in the battle of Leyte Gulf, Japanese military leaders decided that it would be necessary to increase the frequency of the suicide attacks.<sup>47</sup> However, after suffering a few setbacks during the initial wave of attacks, the United States Navy learned how to better defend against the kamikazes and reduced their overall effectiveness. From November 1944 through March 1945, the Allied Forces continued to gain ground in the Philippines and had won a decisive battle at Iwo Jima, leaving only the island of Okinawa to stand between the Americans and the home islands of Japan. It was here at Okinawa that Japanese military leaders believed the

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<sup>45</sup>Wilbur M. Fridell, “Government Ethics Textbooks in Late Meiji Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no. 4 August, 1970): 831.

<sup>46</sup>Cook and Cook, *Japan at War*, 319.

<sup>47</sup>Orbell and Morikawa, “An Evolutionary Account of Suicide Attacks,” 305-306.

decisive battle for the future of Japan would take place.<sup>48</sup> In order to repel the United States Navy from the island shores, an immense number of new suicide pilots were hastily trained for their final missions.

As the bloody battle for Okinawa waged on during the summer months of 1945, the Japanese instituted a dramatic increase in the number of suicide missions, hoping that the brave sacrifice of many young kamikaze pilots would effectively serve as a last ditch effort to save Japan from an impending invasion. Approximately 2,000 kamikaze sorties were launched between April and June 1945, constituting over half of the total estimate for Japanese suicide missions during the entire Pacific War.<sup>49</sup> Given the deadly nature of these attacks, the attrition rate for young kamikaze pilots was undoubtedly very high. With each new mission, a rising number of the more eager volunteers met their fates. If Japan hoped to replenish its dwindling Special Attack Force, the military needed to tap into a new group of young and able recruits.

Prior to the war, students enrolled in Japan's national universities had been exempt from conscription in the armed forces. However, as Japan's situation in the war worsened, Prime Minister Hideki Tojo lifted the draft exemption for all university students on October 2, 1943.<sup>50</sup> As more and more college students were drafted into the military, a large number of them became potential candidates to replace fallen suicide pilots. In the initial kamikaze attacks at Leyte in the Philippines, 87 percent of the volunteers were enlisted men, 7 percent were elite officers, and 6 percent were drafted students. As the number of suicide missions increased off

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<sup>48</sup> Edwin Palmer Hoyt, *The Last Kamikaze: The Story of Admiral Matome Ugaki*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 189.

<sup>49</sup> Orbell and Morikawa, "An Evolutionary Account of Suicide Attacks," 306.

<sup>50</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms*, 162.

Okinawa in 1945, this demographic had changed to only 64 percent enlisted men, 4 percent academy officers, and 32 percent consisting of recently drafted university students.<sup>51</sup>

These college students, whose education and future had been unexpectedly cut short by the draft, were in general not as eager to volunteer for suicide missions as some of the non-commissioned officers and enlisted men who had perished before them. The military gave special consideration to medical and science students because these fields were viewed as vital to the war effort.<sup>52</sup> As a result, a majority of the students drafted from universities were scholars in the humanities. These students had been exposed to a wide variety of ideas and had read literature from both Japanese and Western cultures.<sup>53</sup> They had not been solely indoctrinated in Japanese nationalist ideals as had a majority of the generally uneducated enlisted men before them. The students held varying political, economic, and religious views, ranging from liberalism, Marxism, Romanticism, and Christianity.<sup>54</sup> Some of the drafted student-pilots were even strongly against the Japanese government and its failing war effort. As drafted kamikaze pilot Tadao Hayashi noted in his diary: “The nation is an entity possessing an enormous power to control...I cannot praise Japan any longer. The war is not to protect the country but the inevitable result of the way Japan has developed into a nation.”<sup>55</sup> One pilot even went so far as to strafe his own officer’s quarters in disgust before embarking on his fatal sortie.<sup>56</sup> Despite feelings of anger at having to give their lives in what appeared to be a worthless action, these student kamikaze pilots still volunteered for and completed fatal suicide missions.

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<sup>51</sup> Hill, “Kamikaze,” 12.

<sup>52</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms*, 162.

<sup>53</sup> Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15-17.

<sup>54</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*, 17-21.

<sup>55</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*, 79.

<sup>56</sup> Hill, “Kamikaze,” 28.

Scholar Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney provides a convincing argument as to why these reluctant draftees ultimately decided to give their lives for a cause they did not fully endorse. Considering the circumstances within Japan's military, Ohnuki-Tierney argues that many of these student-pilots may have been forced to volunteer through immense peer pressure and coercion from their commanding officers. Though different squadrons used different methods for selecting volunteers, it was safe to assume that all the members of a unit would be aware if one or more pilots decided not to volunteer for a suicide mission.<sup>57</sup> Some pilots rationalized their decision by writing that they could not possibly leave their comrades to die alone. Others realized the fruitlessness of refusing to accept their officer's request. In 1943 Japan had instituted a policy of 'no surrender' that was punishable by death.<sup>58</sup> Some student draftees probably realized that refusing to participate in a suicide mission would only result in a transfer to the battlefield on Okinawa, where they most surely would die in battle. As student-pilot Norimitsu Takushima put it: "Death is an inevitable absolute."<sup>59</sup> An overwhelming number of kamikaze pilots commented in their writings that they considered death in a suicide attack to be "honorable" or "beautiful."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps these young men saw suicide missions as a preferable option over being stabbed by a bayonet in battle or being forced by their own commanders to commit suicide in the face of defeat. Either way, many of these student-pilots realized that their fate was sealed. "I dreaded death so much. And yet, it is already decided for us... All men born in Japan are destined to die fighting for the country," wrote student-pilot Ichizo Hayashi.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, most of these student-pilots, including Hayashi, met the same tragic fate as the earlier kamikazes before them.

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<sup>57</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Hill, "Kamikaze," 20.

<sup>59</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Orbell and Morikawa, "An Evolutionary Account of Suicide Attacks," 309.

<sup>61</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers*, 173.

After taking a closer look at the lives and writings of Japan's kamikaze pilots, one begins to realize that these young men may not have been as "fanatical" as previously assumed. A broad range of traditional cultural values and radical military philosophies present within Japanese society influenced these men to make what they perceived as a logical decision to give their lives in suicide missions. By removing all cultural biases and attempting to truly understand what motivated these men to accept certain death, the young kamikaze pilots no longer seem so foreign. In their writings they exhibit the same bravery, courage, fear, and sadness experienced by most soldiers thrust into life or death conflicts throughout history. Perhaps a greater understanding of the enemy would aid Americans as they face a new form of suicide terrorism in the Middle East. By attempting to better understand the motivations behind these modern suicide attackers, American forces may be better equipped to defend and negotiate with their contemporary enemies.

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