

Chapter 6 - The Japanese Army's "Spirit-First Policy"

"Repositioning" and "honorable deaths"

In August 1942, US Marines landed on the islands of Guadalcanal and neighboring Tulagi with a force of 19,000 soldiers.

The Battle of Guadalcanal was the Japanese Army's first defeat at the hands of the US military since the outbreak of the war.

The Japanese garrison defending Tulagi was completely annihilated in one day's fighting.

Meanwhile a Japanese Navy construction unit was building an airfield on Guadalcanal. The unit consisted of 2,200 men, but a majority of those were conscript laborers.

Japan's Imperial General Headquarters hastily dispatched a naval landing party of 500 men strong plus army units 4,300 men strong, but the troop strength of the attacking American force had been badly underestimated and the Japanese were defeated. The Japanese Army's standard tactic of mass bayonet charges proved disastrous in the face of the US Marines' overwhelming advantage in firepower.

Of the 916 Japanese soldiers who attacked the US military position, 777 were killed in action. Only 126 Japanese soldiers made it back to their bases alive, while the US Marines had lost 40 soldiers.

In October, Imperial General Headquarters recognized the gravity of the situation and sent in the 2nd Division. The men of the 2nd Division traversed the island's unexplored jungles in order to make an all-out frontal assault on the American position, but the result was another devastating defeat.

The 38th Division was also deployed to Guadalcanal, but seven of its eleven transport vessels were sunk before reaching the island. Only 2,000 men made it ashore and all their artillery had been lost.

The United States gained supremacy of the air and sea around Guadalcanal which made it almost impossible to bring in rations. Many Japanese soldiers died of starvation.

Finally, Imperial General Headquarters decided to abandon Guadalcanal and withdrew its forces between January and February of the following year. At the time of the official announcement, instead of calling it a "retreat", the word "repositioning" (*tenshin* in Japanese) was used for the first time.

Since August, Japan had brought a total of 31,404 soldiers to Guadalcanal, but only 10,652 of those managed to withdraw successfully. Over 20,000 had perished through combat or starvation.

Throughout this period, fighting continued to rage on the vast island of New Guinea between the Japanese and the armies of the United States and Australia. In December 1942, Japanese forces in New Guinea had been decimated in fighting around the village of Basabua, losing 800 men in battle. In the following January, Japanese forces were again crushed at Buna, and then, following a fierce fight, withdrew from Giruwa as well. Between Buna and Giruwa the Japanese had lost 7,600 soldiers in combat.

On May 12, 1943, 12,000 American soldiers landed in Attu, one of the Aleutian Islands, under cover of an array of aircraft carriers, battleships, and cruisers.

About 2,500 Japanese soldiers defended Attu, and on May 29, the remainder of these made an all-out suicide charge against US forces.

The next day, Imperial General Headquarters officially announced that, "The defenders of Attu Island had been in an extremely difficult situation since May 12, fighting a non-stop, bloody battle against a vastly numerically superior foe. However, on the night of May 29, they decided to show the enemy the true spirit of the Imperial Army by launching a final blow against the enemy main force. All the remaining defenders made a bold and heroic attack on the enemy. After this, all communications ceased and we assume that every man met an honorable death. Even the sick and wounded, who were unable to participate in the attack, had all committed suicide in advance."

This was the first time that Imperial General Headquarters had used the phrase "honorable death", which is pronounced *gyokusai* in Japanese and literally means "shattered jewel".

The newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* praised the last stand of the defenders of Attu in an article which read, "The word 'gyokusai' neatly sums up the attitude towards life and death of the people of Japan, who, valuing their reputations more than their lives, would give up their lives to live honorably. The heroic destruction of the 'War God Unit' on Attu is the very definition of 'gyokusai', an amazing exploit which will be remembered for ten thousand years."

The article explained that, "The word 'gyokusai' derives from a passage in the Book of Northern Qi's biography of Yuan Jingan, composed at the end of the Six Dynasties period of Chinese history. The passage reads, 'A real man would rather be a shattered jewel than a complete roof tile.' 'Gyokusai' means that it is better to die a gallant and honorable death in service to the state, respected by all like the beautiful light reflected off a jewel. The alternative is to lead a life without achieving anything, emitting no light like a roof tile." The article mentioned that, "We often see the same idea in the words and deeds of the great

men of our own nation's past", and then proceeded to quote the poetry of Saigo Takamori and the prison writings of Yoshida Shoin.

The Japanese Army and Navy lost every battle they fought from the time of the Battle of Attu onwards.

On Attu and on all the other islands after that whose defenders met honorable deaths, the Japanese fought to the last with no hope of resupply or reinforcement. Having lost control of the sea and air, not even a single rice ball could make it to the defending garrison intact.

What could Japanese officers have been thinking in the face of such overwhelming American firepower?

In November, 20,000 American soldiers landed on Cape Torokina of Bougainville Island, which is on the east side of New Guinea. They routed a Japanese Army surveillance team consisting of over two hundred men.

A single regiment composed of 1,200 Japanese soldiers was speedily dispatched to repulse the Americans. Bougainville Island's total land area is over one quarter that of Hokkaido.

After the regiment went ashore, it trudged through fifty kilometers of unexplored jungle and two of its members were eaten by crocodiles while crossing a river. Then the regiment launched a bold night-time attack on US forces, employing the bayonet charges which were the Japanese Army's speciality.

According to *Senshi Soshō*, the history of the war compiled by the Japanese Defense Ministry's Military History Office, the regimental commander Colonel Hamanoe Toshiaki wrote the following concerning the battle:

"Enemy resistance was stiff and the fighting was just getting fiercer. We were unable to advance even one step. During typical fighting in China, resistance was also stiff at first, but when we kept pushing they gave way. Our current predicament seemed completely different from fighting the Chinese Army. The enemy mortars delivered a nonstop barrage of concentrated fire. We divided up the Japanese Army's battlefield and marked our maps with the appropriate numbers indicating depth and width. In short order the enemy fired hundreds of shells at the area we had marked out with numbers, and kept on firing so intensely that not even a single mouse could have survived. So intense was its power and so grand was its scale, we did not even have the strength to advance. If we stayed there our casualties would have risen rapidly and we would have had to accept our annihilation as inevitable. We had no choice but to endure the shame and transfer our units outside of the effective firing range of the enemy mortars so that we could regroup our forces, replenish our ammunition, and prepare a counterattack."

The word "transfer" meant "retreat". Colonel Hamanoe had decided to withdraw and his regiment abandoned the battlefield.

The Japanese Army abhorred the word "retreat" and refused to use it. The Army was closing its eyes to reality out of an obsession of avoiding bad omens. In the Army, a retreat was either a "transfer" or a "repositioning".

The Type 38 Arisaka rifle and the firepower gap

The US Army landed on the island of Tinian on July 23.

The island's 4,000 Japanese defenders, including both army and navy units, launched a close-quarter attack on US Marines on the 25th. The attack ended in failure at the cost of 1,241 men killed in action.

The commander of the 1st Air Fleet deployed at Tinian, Kakuta Kakuji, telegraphed the Navy General Staff on July 27 and reported on the power differential between the US and Japanese militaries.

"The Americans keep a close eye on their positions which are studded with acoustic locators and barbed-wire entanglements. As soon as they detect our approach they hail withering fire on us from their tanks, mortars, and automatic firearms, and as we advance further they make extensive use of flamethrowers. Then their ship cannons and ground cannons surrounding us rain down an endless stream of flares all night long. They are not sparing in their use of every kind of shell, and are firing shots into the air. (Starting from the day before the start of the landing, the whole of Tinian has been hit with probably no fewer than 3,000 such shells each night and somewhere between 600 or 1,000 shells were fired at our headquarters on Mt. Lasso alone.) There are a huge number of obstacles for night-time operations. After the failure of our Army's night attack on the 25th, the regimental commander said, while shedding bitter tears, 'As great as our men's bravery was, the enemy's equipment was greater.'"

The Japanese defenders of Tinian met honorable deaths on August 3.

Whereas the US military made liberal use of ammunition, the Japanese Army compensated for its lack of firepower through sheer strength of spirit. The Japanese Army fought with force of will rather than force of matter.

Against the Japanese Army's Type 38 Arisaka rifles, the US Army had automatic rifles. The Type 38 was developed in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War.

The Type 38 could fire up to five rounds before needing to be reloaded. It was put to use for the first time during Japan's siege of Tsingtao, which was a German leased territory at the time of World War I.

Of course, Japanese soldiers did not fight their battles exclusively with the Type 38. Japanese infantry units also had equipment like light machine guns, heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, infantry support guns, and automatic cannons, but compared with the US Army, the Japanese had fewer weapons and less ammunition. Whereas the US Army blanketed an entire area with a barrage of firepower, the Japanese Army fired only at specific spots. Battles between the US and Japanese Armies were battles of points versus two dimensional space.

Later, when the US Army landed on Luzon of the Philippines, they airdropped a great quantity of propaganda leaflets on the Japanese Army. The leaflets included a photo of the Type 38 Arisaka rifle and the following message.

"As you are all aware, the Type 38 Arisaka rifle which you are using made its debut as a cutting-edge weapon back in 1905, at the time of the Russo-Japanese War, when it replaced the Murata rifle. However, that was forty years ago. People throughout the world know well that, since then, every country has been competing aggressively in the field of scientific research and great strides have been made in the production of scientific weaponry. So why is it that you are still being forced to fight against automatic firearms with lever-action rifles? If you had been fighting with both your martial spirit and the advanced weaponry belonging to the US Army, then perhaps you might have avoided disastrous defeats like the one you suffered at Leyte. No matter how strong your spirits are, how could you ever fight back against a Consolidated 500-kilogram bomb with a Type 38 rifle?"

"Consolidated" refers to the bombers built by America's Consolidated Aircraft Corporation.

The Type 38 Arisaka rifle was the backbone of an army which valued bayonet charges more than anything.

In 2009, two television programs, Fuji TV's "This Concerns Me!" and TBS's "Mino Monta's Morning Straight Talk", broadcast features on how the Japanese Army's old rifles have been used to treat patients at Showa, a long-term care facility in Kasukabe, Saitama Prefecture.

The staff at Showa showed models of the old Type 38 rifle to elderly men suffering from dementia, but though they had been unable to even stand on their own two feet up to then, they immediately rose up, slung the model gun over their shoulders, and started to walk.

According to the TV programs, the facility henceforth found models of the Type 38 rifle to be useful in the treatment of dementia.

The ammunition gap and the Japanese Army's famed close combat tactics

On every battlefield, the Japanese Army employed the exact same hand-to-hand combat tactics it had been using since the time of the Russo-Japanese War.

In April 1945, in preparation for the decisive battle on the mainland, the Army Section of Imperial General Headquarters distributed a pamphlet called the "Citizens' Resistance Manual", which noted that, "Not only guns and bayonets, but everything from swords, spears, and bamboo pikes up to sickles, hatchets, bushhammers, carving knives, and firemen's hooks can be used as weapons in close quarters combat."

The Japanese Army expected that, when the Americans arrived, ordinary civilians would also be taking part in close quarters combat. A bushhammer is a steel hammer used to break stones and a firemen's hook is a rod with a steel hook attached to the tip used to smash things.

Up to the day Japan surrendered, infantrymen were the core of the Japanese Army and close combat was considered the decisive element determining the outcome of a battle. The Japanese adopted a "spirit-first policy" which emphasized the Army's fighting spirit above all else.

Before American soldiers went ashore, they pummeled the target islands with a withering bombardment using their carrier-based aircraft, battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. Most of the land area of the islands was entirely within their firing range, and so the Japanese defenders had to endure a fierce, relentless onslaught of fire from the sea.

The quantity of ammunition carried by an American battleship was equivalent to the ammunition carried by five Japanese Army divisions. An ammunition stockpile so large would have been unthinkable in the Japanese Army.

All throughout the night, streams of flares lit up the sky as if it were broad daylight. For this reason, it was challenging for the Japanese soldiers even to move out of their dugouts.

Starting on June 13, 1944, an American task force consisting of seven battleships, eleven cruisers, and twenty-six destroyers commenced a three-day bombardment of the islands of Saipan and Tinian. Then on the 15th the first wave of US Marines landed on Saipan.

The island's garrison, composed of Japanese Army and Navy units, put up a stout defense, but on July 5, Vice Admiral Nagumo Chuichi, commander of the Central Pacific Area Fleet, and Lieutenant General Saito Yoshitsugu, overall army commander in the Northern Marianas, jointly ordered a final all-out attack.

The order started with, "(1.) Though the invasion of the American devils remains in full swing, all units have shown them on this day what our strength and fighting spirit are really capable of. (2.) The defenders of Saipan shall assemble at the locations indicated in advance, and on the 7th, the day after tomorrow, shall advance to attack the American devils. We are resolved to all die honorable deaths, taking out ten enemy for every one of us."

On the 6th, the time came for the garrison to carry out its last charge. A briefing was handed to the soldiers in the name of Vice Admiral Nagumo, and the following declaration was telegraphed to Imperial General Headquarters.

"The men of the Imperial Army, Navy, and Air Services stationed on the whole island, as well as the civilian employees, have fought well and bravely, and they have successfully worked together as a united force. Everywhere they have done justice to the honor of the Imperial Army... The true value of men of the Empire is that we choose the proper time to either live or die... Now we shall strike the US Army with one great blow and shall cover the island of Saipan with their bones to block their advance in the Pacific..."

Nagumo sent a final parting telegram to Imperial General Headquarters which read, "Though the garrison has fought bravely, and has put as much effort and strength into the battle as possible, ultimately it had no effect. All our forces will charge the enemy with their highest-ranking officers at the vanguard. We shall show them the true worth of the Imperial Army." After that, all communication ceased.

"Banzai charges" and the valor of Japanese soldiers

The US Army referred to the final "honorable death" attacks of the Japanese as "banzai charges". US Army documents show that the Japanese Army left behind 4,311 corpses during the banzai charge referred to above.

The total number of Japanese soldiers killed in action during the Battle of Saipan reached 41,244. On the other side, the US Army suffered 3,441 dead and 11,465 wounded.

Half of the roughly 20,000 Japanese residents of Saipan were also killed in battle.

Between June 19 and 20, three Japanese Navy aircraft carriers were sunk and one was damaged during the Battle of the Philippine Sea. As a result, the Japanese Navy lost the capacity to engage in carrier battles.

On June 21, the US Army landed on Guam with the support of a force of twelve aircraft carriers, six battleships, nine cruisers, and fifty-seven destroyers.

According to America's official history of the Pacific Theater, US forces fired 16,214 shells at the island in the three days prior to the landing.

The 19,000 Japanese soldiers defending Guam engaged the Americans, but as early as July 24, three days after the US Army had landed, their commander Lieutenant General Obata Hideyoshi sent the following farewell telegram to the Imperial General Headquarters:

"The Army wants a single decisive battle utilizing all of our troop strength to take place on the night of the 25th against the enemy's main force. Although there is a very big gap in the

quantity of resources available to the enemy and our own, I have an absolute, unshakeable faith in the spiritual power of our brave and loyal imperial soldiers."

The briefings and the parting telegrams of the Japanese Army contained a lot of flowery rhetoric referring to "the honor of the Imperial Army," "the true value of men of the Empire," and "the true worth of the Imperial Army". Today Japanese people are quite easily intoxicated with buzzwords and phrases like "peace," "pacifist constitution," "protection of the constitution," and "United Nations".

On September 15, 49,000 American soldiers went ashore on the island of Peleliu. They outnumbered the Japanese garrison five-fold.

On that tiny island, there were just 10,500 Japanese soldiers, holed up in caves and dugouts. They fought against the Americans with steely determination for seventy-three days until they all met honorable deaths on November 25.

The United States expected that it could capture Peleliu in three or four days.

Chester Nimitz, the Commander in Chief of the United States Pacific Fleet who led the operation to capture Peleliu, commented in his memoirs that, "overcoming the intricate defenses of Peleliu cost the attackers the highest combat casualty rate (nearly 40 per cent) of any amphibious assault in American history."

Everywhere it fought, the battlefield performance of the Japanese Army was spectacular. Out of admiration for the bravery of Japan's soldiers, Fleet Admiral Nimitz himself composed a poem which is today engraved on a stone monument on the island of Peleliu.

"Tourists from every country who visit this island should be told how courageous and patriotic were the Japanese soldiers who all died defending this island. Pacific Fleet Command Chief (USA) C.W. Nimitz"

The meaning of fighting in order to die

The US Army could not possibly have understood the state of mind of Japanese soldiers.

American soldiers fought in order to survive, but, as unbelievable as it was to the Americans, Japanese soldiers fought in order to die.

Professor Donald Keene is a leading authority on Japanese literary studies and a recipient of Japan's prestigious Order of Culture. He studied at the US Navy Japanese Language School during World War II and was involved in translating interrogation records of Japanese POWs as well as letters and documents taken from the corpses of Japanese soldiers in the Pacific Theatre.

Professor Keene wrote in his book *Meeting with Japan* that, "The diaries often spoke of Guadalcanal as 'Starvation Island.' As I read the diaries of men who were suffering such hardships, it was impossible not to be moved. By contrast, the letters of the American sailors I had to censor once a week revealed no ideals, and certainly no suffering, but only their reiterated desire to return to their former lives... Throughout the war this contrast haunted me - the consecration of the Japanese to their cause and the total indifference of most Americans to anything except returning home... I could not help but feel admiration for the ordinary Japanese soldiers, and in the end I came to believe that the Japanese really deserved to win the war."

In Keene's book, *The Heroic Symphony of the Battlefield: My Experiences in the War between the United States and Japan*, he states that, "I consider the Japanese soldiers, who never complained about anything, to be truly commendable. By contrast the American soldiers just whined about how 'The movie today was boring', 'The cigarettes are awful', or 'I want to go home early.' In none of their letters did I ever see a word about their hopes and ideals, like the objective of the war being to bring democracy to Japan." American soldiers, he writes, did not "hold noble ideas" like Japanese soldiers did.

The Kamikaze Special Attack Units

Peleliu was the island closest to the Philippines, and after it fell, the Philippines were next.

On October 17, a fleet of 314 American ships, including aircraft carriers and battleships, assembled in the sea east of the island of Leyte in the Philippines. They were accompanied by 420 transport vessels. Three thousand two hundred land-based aircraft and 1,200 carrier-based aircraft also joined the attack.

The Japanese Navy's 1st Air Fleet, which was in charge of the Philippines at the time, had already been depleted by previous battles. In terms of usable aircraft, it had thirty-five Zero fighters, and less than one hundred aircraft in total even if we include other sorts of aircraft such as its twelve *Tenzan* torpedo planes and *Ginga* torpedo plane/bombers.

By this point in time, most of Japan's experienced pilots had been killed in action. In the Navy, Japanese pilots spent an average of about three hundred hours in the air, whereas in the Army it was only two hundred hours. A qualified pilot is said to require five hundred hours of flying time.

The commander of the 1st Air Fleet, Vice Admiral Onishi Takijiro, has been called "the father of the *kamikaze*".

Onishi believed that the only remaining option to turn the tides of the war was to use *kamikaze* pilots, who could sink one enemy ship with one plane by crashing themselves into it.

On October 20, Sublieutenant Seki Yukio received an order to constitute a unit. The order stated: "Refer to this attack group as a Kamikaze Special Attack Unit." He took off at the head of eight other aircraft from Mabalacat Airfield, which is on Luzon, eighty kilometers north of Manila. They were the first kamikaze.

Today, amidst the remains of Mabalacat Airfield, there stands a stone monument which was erected by local Filipinos. The inscription on the monument reads, "Sublieutenant Seki Yukio, who became the world's first official human bomb, took off at this location."

The day Sublieutenant Seki first flew out of Mabalacat Airfield was two years and eleven months from the day, at the start of the war, that Sugiyama Hajime, the Chief of the Army General Staff, had prayed at Kyoto's Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine "that we would see this war through to its end without needing the help of the divine wind of the Gods." In Japanese, *kamikaze* literally means "divine wind".

Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine was constructed during Japan's Heian Period (794-1185) as a Shinto shrine to protect the southwest side of Kyoto. The Shrine was the subject of a story in Yoshida Kenko's literary masterpiece *Essays in Idleness*, and its official shrine rank was equal to that of Japan's famous Ise Grand Shrine.

Prime Minister Tojo Hideki is well known for saying, at the time of the outbreak of the war, "Once in his life a man will find it necessary to leap from the veranda of Kiyomizu Temple." The main building of Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto has a high veranda overlooking a deep valley. It was constructed at a high altitude so that visitors would have to exert themselves climbing the steep slope of the mountain.

A war without an exit strategy

During the Russo-Japanese War, Japan's national leaders went to war only after careful deliberation on their means for ending the conflict. By contrast, when Japan launched into war against the United States, none of Japan's leaders had any idea on what their exit strategy would be. By that point in time, Japan was in too desperate a situation to be able to think straight.

On October 20, a huge force of over 200,000 American soldiers began landing on the island of Leyte.

Between October 23 and 26, the Japanese Navy deployed all its remaining sea power in the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

During the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Japanese Navy lost, in quick succession, four aircraft carriers, three battleships including the *Musashi*, six heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, eleven destroyers, and five submarines. These were the heaviest losses ever suffered by a nation in modern naval history.

The United States lost three of its thirty-two aircraft carriers deployed off Leyte, the *USS Princeton*, the *USS Gambier Bay*, and the *USS St. Lo*, as well as three destroyers. All were sunk by kamikaze attacks.

However, none of this altered the outcome of the war.

From then until the end of the war in August 1945, 2,531 Japanese Navy servicemen and 1,417 Japanese Army servicemen flew on kamikaze missions and never returned.

These figures do not include the flight crews who deliberately crashed their planes into American B-29 bombers over the skies of Japan.

The B-29 bombers flew at an altitude of more than 10,000 meters, and Japanese fighters were unable to reach such heights in order to confront them unless they lightened their aircraft by removing weapons such as their machine guns. Japan did not even have any antiaircraft guns with a range of over 5,000 meters. Thus, there was no choice for the pilots but to fly their planes straight into the B-29s.

And yet despite this, Japanese airmen volunteered, one after another, boarding their unarmed interceptor planes and soaring high into the sky. It took them over one hour of flying time to reach an altitude of 10,000 meters.

After the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Japanese Navy completely lost its capacity to challenge the supremacy of the US Navy.