

## **Chapter 7 - Why Do We Praise The Kamikaze?**

### **Soviet suicide planes and German *Sondercommando***

In 2002, I wrote the book *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods* in English and had it published through Longman, the United Kingdom's largest publishing firm. Longman is known as the publisher favored by Winston Churchill.

My intention in writing the book was to spread awareness abroad about Japanese culture and modern history by taking up the story of the world-famous Kamikaze Special Attack Units.

What I especially wanted the world to understand was that World War II was not a war of aggression provoked by Japan.

I was concerned that if I wrote the book alone it would be dismissed as Japanese propaganda, and so, in order to ensure that the book would be read by as many foreign readers as possible, I asked the American military history writer Albert Axell to be the co-writer. Mr. Axell has been a close friend of mine for the last forty years.

Mr. Axell contributed three chapters to the book dealing with the suicide planes of the Soviet Air Force, German kamikaze-style Special Forces (called *Sondercommando* in German), and the suicide missions of British planes protecting Arctic convoys during World War II.

During the early stages of World War II on the Eastern Front, Stalin responded to bombing raids by the German Air Force on the Soviet capital of Moscow by ordering the Soviet Air Force to form suicide units.

In June 1941, Second Lieutenant Leonid Butelin became the first fighter pilot to kill himself by crashing his own plane into a German Junkers 88 bomber. Kamikaze aviators were certainly not a Japanese invention. According to Soviet announcements, over three hundred German planes were downed as a result of Soviet suicide attacks.

The *Sondercommando*, employed by Nazi Germany in the final stages of World War II, were inspired by the Japanese kamikaze. Germany formed these units by asking for volunteers to crash their own planes into Allied bombers. The *Elbe Sondercommando* was formed by about three hundred volunteers.

In March 1945, 1,300 Allied bombers, protected by 800 fighters, invaded the skies above Desau on the Elbe River in Germany.

They were intercepted by the *Elbe Sondercommando*, consisting of 183 aircraft, mostly Messerschmitt 109s. The *Elbe Sondercommando* attempted to smash themselves into the Allied aircraft, but only succeeded in downing a few of them. Most of the suicide planes were shot down, and only fifteen aircraft survived the attack.

That was the *Sondercommando's* first and last battle. Germany later surrendered in May.

**The worldwide readership of *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods***

*Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods* sold well in the United States, and was subsequently translated into Spanish, Danish, Finnish, and Estonian. I donated a copy of each language edition to the Bansei Kamikaze Peace Museum in the city of Minamisatsuma, Kagoshima Prefecture. The museum put all five of these books on display.

Bansei is one of the three largest sand dunes in Japan and is known for Fukiage Beach. Between 1943 and 1944, local residents worked together to construct the Army's last air base here.

During the Battle of Okinawa, Bansei was the kamikaze base closest to the beleaguered island.

Almost two hundred kamikaze, including young pilots just seventeen or eighteen years of age, took off from Bansei towards Okinawa.

I wrote *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods* on the basis of numerous interviews with the people involved, as well as with the documents, letters, and photographs they provided to me.

I heard many moving stories. The families of the young kamikaze pilots, who were informed in advance about their missions, came to Bansei Air Base or Chiran Air Base from all across the country in order to see them off for the last time.

However, because the railroads throughout Japan had been torn to pieces by American aerial bombing and naval bombardments, it took families in Hokkaido and northern Japan many days to reach the air bases in southern Japan.

In order to protect them from enemy air strikes, the kamikaze planes were concealed in locations some distance from the air base. When the time to attack drew close, students of the local girls' schools, who had been mobilized for public labor, removed the camouflage nets from the planes, and their pilots took the controls.

The kamikaze pilots started up their engines with a roar, and then, as they left the taxiway one by one, they saw all their family members gathered at the side of the runway.

There was one pilot who lifted up his plane's canopy and held out in one hand a stick with a red piece of cloth tied to it. He had told his family about this in advance, so that they would know in which plane he was flying.

Even the residents of the town, including the town mayor, were lined up together with the family members to see off the kamikaze pilots.

Once all the kamikaze planes were lined up on the runway, the family members, townsfolk, female students, and ground crew all shouted *banzai* at the top of their lungs. Some in the crowd shouted out the names of their husband, son, or brother.

The evening before, a father who had come from northern Japan removed the string from one side of the Japanese short-coat he was wearing and handed it over to his son, who was now in the cockpit of a kamikaze plane. It was a symbol of the eternal bond between a father and son.

The Battle of Okinawa took place while the cherry blossoms in Kyushu were in full bloom.

Just before the kamikaze pilots got into their planes, the students from the girls' schools had filled up the cockpits with cherry blossom branches they had picked.

Amidst cheers of *banzai*, the kamikaze planes took off one by one. Once fully airborne, they circled around above the air base one time, as if hesitant to leave, and then soared towards Okinawa.

The family members waved towards the kamikaze planes as they became mere dots on the horizon. As if half-mad, they stood there waving, long after the planes had disappeared from the sky.

At that moment, the petals of cherry blossoms floated down through the air like snow.

The kamikaze pilots had lifted up the canopies of their planes, and the cherry blossoms loaded into their cockpits had been blown out and scattered by the wind.

### **The Banda Unit and the Fugaku Unit**

There is a famous photograph of a group of five young pilots smiling while petting a puppy dog just before leaving on a mission. Many people believe that this group left from Chiran Air Base, but in fact they took off from Bansei Air Base.

Among the documents I received was a personal, handwritten account of Lieutenant General Tominaga Kyoji, who was in charge of the Japanese Army's kamikaze units in the Philippines. He wrote the account at the request of the Japanese Defense Ministry's Military History Office.

Lieutenant General Tominaga took up his post as commander of the 4th Air Army in Manila just two months before the US Army attacked the Philippines in October of 1944.

The Japanese Army's first kamikaze units, the Banda Unit and the Fugaku Unit, were formed under his auspices and sent into action in Leyte Gulf in November.

I shall quote from Lieutenant General Tominaga's account at length. The Japanese word *banda* refers to the branches of a cherry tree heavy with blossoms, and the word *fugaku* is another name for Mt. Fuji.

"I was the one who came up with the names of the kamikaze units including 'banda' and 'fugaku'. It was presumptuous of me to have named them myself, and it probably would have been more appropriate for me to have let the members of the kamikaze units select names of their own preference... Some of the kamikaze units dispatched from the Imperial General Headquarters did not volunteer but rather had simply been called upon. They seemed to have mentally prepared themselves to become kamikaze while on their way to the Philippines from their departure points in Japan. Even so, there were a few who simply couldn't bring themselves to be kamikaze and who were unwilling to voluntarily fly off to their deaths. I couldn't blame them for that. It was not that they had had a change of heart, it was that they had been ordered to die regardless of their wishes. It was a truly sad choice to make... In December of 1944, during air operations accompanying the enemy landing on Mindoro, a part of the 5th Air Brigade of heavy bombers unanimously resolved to become kamikaze against the attack of the enemy fleet. They would die heroic deaths as the 'Kikusui Unit'. They went aboard their kamikaze planes. At the time they had all boldly volunteered, it seemed quite pitiable to have left anyone behind, but even so a unit commander should not thoughtlessly kill his valuable subordinates. The unit commander should have shown more courage and resolutely prevented any more than the minimum number of personnel from boarding the kamikaze planes. On this matter, I blame myself for not having effectively communicated my intentions... The Kamikaze pilots had the pure hearts of heroes and the noble spirits of the Gods. The dignity they exhibited had no equal. However, once they had finally managed to prepare themselves mentally, their shoulders were burdened with the great mission they had to fulfill, and it seems they then wanted to go forward as soon as possible in order to achieve their cherished objective. In the same way, I realized that the unit commanders assigned to them worried day and night about how to put the kamikaze to effective use, and for this reason tended to use them too early. I also got that general feeling just by observing their behavior. We have to take these psychological trends into sufficient consideration in order to seize good opportunities and avoid misusing our personnel."

Lieutenant General Tominaga left the Philippines in March 1945 and returned to Tokyo by way of Taiwan. In July, he was appointed commander of the newly constituted 139th Division in Manchuria. After the end of the war, Tominaga was detained in Siberia by the Soviet Army and was eventually repatriated to Japan in 1955.

Here is another excerpt from Tominaga's account:

"I felt sincerely grateful for the Army's special treatment of the kamikaze units, and for the sympathy and kind treatment given them on the part of Japanese society. And yet, I cannot forget that I also felt deep shame at how differently the kamikaze were treated from the other pilots, who by and large were also certain to be killed in combat during their missions."

Tominaga offered the following words of advice on what Japan should do in case it must again resort to kamikaze tactics in a time of war:

"When that time comes, we need in particular to select a leader with nerves of steel, in other words a commander who will stay the course with this grim strategy without suffering a nervous breakdown from the pain and stress he undergoes."

In his capacity as commander of kamikaze units, Tominaga lamented that, "I feel so deeply ashamed about my own errors and lack of consideration." In the following passage, he commits to paper some of his deepest regrets:

"I should have asked the Army Minister to grant a standing audience with the Emperor to the members of kamikaze units formed in the Tokyo area. If possible, I think that it would have been reasonable to work to have that honor granted to all the members of kamikaze units, not just the ones formed in Tokyo. At the center of their pure hearts, our kamikaze heroes truly thought only of their Emperor and country. I wanted to crown these young, noble gods with the honor of an imperial audience, and if we had just asked the Emperor, probably he would have granted the request immediately. The blame for this failure lies solely with me."

### **The unalloyed patriotism of the kamikaze**

I don't believe there was any need for the Emperor to have met with and personally encouraged the kamikaze pilots.

In the English-language book, *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods*, I did not make use of the account of Lieutenant General Tominaga because I wanted to record the kamikaze pilots' unembellished thoughts about their native country.

Tominaga's eldest son Yasushi was studying at Keio University when he became a member of the Japanese Army Air Service. In May 1945, he was sent on a kamikaze mission to Okinawa, where he died a hero.

Japan had employed kamikaze for the first time in the Philippines in October 1944 as a tactic to weather a critical emergency.

Despite this, the use of kamikaze evolved from an expediency to a strategy in January 1945 when Imperial General Headquarters presented the Emperor with the report, "Overview of the Strategic Plan of the Imperial Army and Navy".

At the time he first resolved to utilize kamikaze tactics, Vice Admiral Onishi Takijiro said, "Kamikaze attacks are a heresy of command." And yet, they were adopted as a national strategy.

I have read the diaries and personal writings of a great number of kamikaze pilots. I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of these young men volunteered to be kamikaze.

Student soldiers wrote an especially large number of the surviving personal accounts. They grappled with the prospect of death in a serious manner. They agonized and vacillated, before finally resolving to volunteer for a kamikaze mission. The young people of those times thought about their lives in a far more serious manner than the youth of today.

Many kamikaze pilots volunteered out of sheer patriotism.

One student soldier wrote in his diary that, "The only option for Japan is a voluntary strategy of using our strength of self-sacrifice and patriotism in order to compensate for our weakness in all material matters, including manufacturing power, science, and equipment." There were many such people who believed that the kamikaze were Japan's only chance to turn the tides. The idea was to pit Japan's spiritual power against America's material power and to destroy one American ship for every one Japanese plane, thus stymieing the enemy's offensive and reversing the course of the war.

Alternatively, there were also those who decided to willingly sacrifice themselves in the hopes of inflicting losses on the enemy forces so great that they would sign a favorable peace agreement with Japan. Some made up their mind to become kamikaze in order to protect their loved ones, family members, or fellow citizens from the American devils.

### **Japan's highly educated common people**

I read through the last words, wills, posthumous poems, and farewell letters to family members of not only student soldiers, but also of kamikaze from lower class commoner backgrounds and kamikaze who were just seventeen or eighteen years of age at the time of their final missions. As I did this, I came to realize that Japanese people then were considerably better educated than those of today.

The Japanese people of the time understood the fact that they had been victims of unjust American persecution and interference, even though Japan had never posed any harm to American interests, and thus had no choice but to fight the war.

Concerning the war between China and Japan, they were also fully aware that it was China's repeated, illegal provocations which had caused the fighting to spread across the vast Chinese mainland.

Nowadays, many Japanese people are convinced that their country was deceived into going to war by their own government and military. However, this belief has no basis in fact. Japan never had any territorial ambitions on China, nor any motivation to seize China's resources.

Professor Herbert Passin, who served as Chairman of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, was one of my few close American friends.

Passin graduated from the US Army Japanese Language School during World War II. When he came to Japan after the end of the war as a member of the occupation army, he was amazed by the high level of education of the Japanese people.

According to his book, *Encounter with Japan*, Second Lieutenant Passin asked a farmer for directions while traveling through the Kyushu countryside, and chatted with him for a while.

The farmer asked him, "How do you like Dazaifu?", and then he recited a poem.

"Splendid is the moon,  
and crystalline sounds the river's purl.  
Come, let us all revel,  
we who go to the capital  
and we who stay behind."

Passin wrote that, "I was startled to learn that it was not just some local Chamber of Commerce plug for the old hometown but from the *Manyoshu*, the great eighth-century compilation of poetry... Later on, when I was doing studies in preparation for the Occupation's land reform program, I often had occasion to remember that incident when I would run into still another example of the very high cultural level that one encounters in Japanese villages."

The Battle of Okinawa began on April 1 when the US Army landed on the island.

During the battle, the Japanese Navy sent 1,005 planes and the Japanese Army sent 886 planes on kamikaze missions. 1,986 members of the Navy and 1,201 members of the Army were killed during these missions.

On the ground, over 89,000 Japanese soldiers were killed in action on Okinawa. On the American side, the US Army and Marine Corps together lost 7,374 men in battle. The US Navy lost 5,000 servicemen, most of whom were killed in kamikaze attacks.

Among the US Navy's losses were three destroyers sunk by kamikaze planes. A great number of large ships, including battleships and aircraft carriers, were also hit by kamikaze and sustained severe damage.

### **Racial equality: Japan's gift to the world**

After the demise of the shogunate in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan strived to modernize based on the models provided by the white men of Western nations. However, Japan at the same time continued to hold a deep-seated fear of the West, as hard as that is to imagine nowadays.

Most of the world was under white domination until the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific when Japan finally broke the back of Western hegemony. In a short period of time, Japan ousted the Western colonial powers, from the British in Hong Kong, which was known as the "Pearl of the Orient", to the Dutch in Indonesia.

Until the Japanese Army marched into Southeast Asia and occupied this vast territory, the Western powers ruled the world and white superiority over colored men was accepted as the natural order of things.

Today, as a result of Japan fighting in World War II, the peoples of Asia and Africa, and even the African-American community of the United States, have achieved equality with white people.

The souls of the kamikaze pilots can rest in peace knowing that they did not die in vain. Rather, their sacrifice completely overturned the historical dominance of white people and created a new world based on the equality of the races.

We have advanced beyond the stage where a person's value is determined by the color of their skin. This stands in the annals of world history as a monumental Japanese accomplishment.

At the end of the long history of the human race, we have now for the first time achieved a world where racial equality is the accepted norm. This was the realization of the great dream nourished by the Japanese people ever since their country was forced out of its isolationism by the Western powers.

### **Worldwide praise for the kamikaze**

On July 9, after the conclusion of the Battle of Okinawa, the Swiss newspaper *Tribune de Genève* published the following editorial:

"The systematic strategy referred to as 'kamikaze attacks' is a very costly one to employ, on both human and material levels. However, the results of these assaults are far greater than normal aerial strikes. On May 24, American ships in the vicinity of Okinawa came under intense attack from Japanese kamikaze planes. As a result of this attack, the Japanese lost

111 kamikaze planes, but they sunk eleven American warships and transport vessels. According to a message from the headquarters of Fleet Admiral Nimitz, the US Navy alone suffered 5,000 killed in action during the Battle of Okinawa. The US Third Fleet sustained losses so great that it had to be relieved by the Fifth Fleet. In war, conventional wisdom has it that one protects his own life and tries to take the lives of the enemy. Sometimes, one can try to inflict the maximum possible damage on the enemy by being ready to die oneself. In their final moments, the kamikaze are barreling towards their targets at a speed of over 1,000 kilometers per hour and then die fiery deaths. Even if they are the enemy, one cannot help but deeply admire the bravery of their acts."

Maurice Pinguet was a French philosopher. He was a professor at the University of Paris, and then, by invitation, at the University of Tokyo.

In his book, *Voluntary Death in Japan*, Pinguet praises the young Japanese pilots who perished in kamikaze attacks:

"Their sacrifice was all the more poignant for being devoid of pessimism and bitterness. When they looked back on the brief time which had been allowed them, they were grateful for it... Pilot Officer Nagatsuka had the gentle, but now for ever unrealizable, ambition of reading the whole of George Sand's *The Master Bell Ringers*. He thought of his mother and sisters, who must be protected from invasion. A good son, a good student, a good soldier, the young pilot of the Special Units was martyr less to his faith than to his good will. He was no daredevil and no boaster: he was serious, industrious... But what reaches us [about the kamikaze pilots] is their sense, their calm, their lucidity. From the outside they looked like raving madmen, or robots, those eager hearts too aware of the ills of their time to cling to their own lives. No one could understand what they were doing, but for them it was simple and spontaneous. People believed they were forced, inveigled, brainwashed, fed on promises, illusions and drugs; people's eyes went through the crystal clarity of their self-denial, so clear it was impossible to perceive. It is this purity which is so unbearably moving. These young men, learning to die well at an age when life might have been so fair, were misunderstood. It is for us to give them the tribute of admiration and compassion which they deserve. They died for Japan, but we do not need to be Japanese to understand them."

*Voluntary Death in Japan* was selected as one of the twenty best books of 1984 published in France. Pinguet found that the Japanese, which was used by the kamikaze pilots in their final memoirs, wills, or poems addressed to their family members, was highly polished. Though there are photos of many pilots heading towards their planes with cheerful smiles on their faces, their thoughts were calm and clear.

There are a great many other non-Japanese who have written or spoken words of praise for the kamikaze. I recommend that interested readers consult *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* by Ivan Morris, a prominent British scholar of Japanese literature.

My book *Kamikaze: Japan's Suicide Gods* was declared recommended reading by Columbia University Professor Gerald Curtis, who is a good friend of mine, Admiral James Lyons, former commander of the US Pacific Fleet, and Professor Edward Seidensticker, famed for his translation of the Japanese classic novel *The Tale of Genji*.

### **The Great Tokyo Air Raid massacre**

On March 10, a vast formation of B-29 bombers carried out an indiscriminate bombing raid against the Japanese capital of Tokyo. The raid centered around the low-lying Shitamachi area, where a relentless rain of incendiary shells was dropped over its densely-packed wooden residences. In one night, 100,000 citizens were killed. One quarter of the buildings in Tokyo went up in flames, leaving more than one million people homeless.

The Great Tokyo Air Raid was intended to slaughter a huge number of civilians. The number of victims was greater than that of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Okinawa fell on June 23. From that moment on, every citizen was aware that mainland Japan would be the next target.

In spite of this, the large majority of Japanese citizens never lost the will to go on fighting.

The reports of Japan's Home Ministry indicate that some people did express anger against Japan's leaders in the military, government, and imperial family through their words or actions such as graffiti. However, this group constituted a very small segment of the population.

If the Emperor had not put an end to the war on August 15, the decisive battle would likely have been brought to mainland Japan and battles as brutal as the one which took place in Okinawa would have occurred on the Japanese main islands of Honshu and Kyushu.

The people of Japan did not falter in the face of adversity. They kept themselves anxiously busy from the time the war began.

Because of this, the suicide rate declined. Statistics on suicide rates began to be recorded in the year 1882, and in the year 1893 the suicide rate was 17.2 people per every 100,000.

After that, there was little variation until the country was put under a more and more stringent war footing as a result of the war in China. By the year 1940, the suicide rate had dropped precipitously to 13.7, and continued to decline to 13.6 in 1941, 13.0 in 1942, and 12.1 in 1943. In 1944, statistics could not be collected due to the start of the B-29 bombing raids.

In the year 2001, the suicide rate was 213.3, so it would appear that the spirit weakens during a time of peace.

In preparation for the decisive battle on the mainland, the military and the newspapers were calling for "one hundred million kamikaze".

Because the original goal of the war had been the preservation of the nation, it was not at all anticipated that the use of kamikaze would be integrated into Japan's military strategy. Even so, Japan struggled to keep on fighting.

### **Western and Japanese views on war**

I have had the opportunity to re-learn the fact that Westerners and Japanese people hold radically divergent attitudes towards war.

Indeed, it is fair to say that the people of Japan alone have a unique philosophy on war. Even the Chinese attitude towards war is based on practicality and self-interest.

Let's take the case of Professor Kenneth Galbraith, a well-known economist who was one of the intellectuals with whom President John F. Kennedy surrounded himself. During the Kennedy administration, he served as US ambassador to India.

After this, following his return to teaching at Harvard University, I once visited his home in Boston. My American friend was close to Professor Galbraith and so I had undertaken, at their request, to translate the professor's latest book into Japanese.

This was during the Johnson administration when the anti-Vietnam War movement, centered around American young people, was at high tide.

Professor Galbraith insisted to me emphatically that, "The Vietnam War is immoral", so I responded by asking him, "But did you not strongly support military intervention in Vietnam at the time that you were President Kennedy's advisor?"

Galbraith gave me a puzzled look, as if he didn't comprehend my question, and retorted, "Is it not immoral to go on fighting a war which we have no chance of winning?"

At that moment, I was astonished to see how different this was from the Japanese attitude towards war. The Japanese people value strength of spirit over practical realities.

I then bid farewell to Professor Galbraith, and while I was heading to the airport, I thought to myself, "If Japan had won the war with America, we would certainly not have become the submissive, pseudo-pacifist state specializing in making apologies that we are today."

Surely, I thought, this transformation occurred because the people felt that it was "immoral" for us to have fought until the situation was hopeless and the war was lost.

The Japanese emphasis on spirit is completely distinct from the Western view of war.

Japan's indigenous haiku poems hit us close to our hearts due to their brevity. Western paintings fill every corner of the canvass thickly with paint, whereas Japanese paintings omit scenery.

Instead of looking at everything, we express, through our hearts, only the core spiritual essence.