

# THE NOBILITY OF FAILURE

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TRAGIC  
HEROES  
IN  
THE  
HISTORY  
OF  
JAPAN

“If Only We  
Might Fall . . .”

If only we might fall  
Like cherry blossoms in the Spring—  
So pure and radiant!

*Haiku by a kamikaze pilot of the Seven  
Lives Unit, who died in combat in  
10.1 February 1945 at the age of twenty-two*



. . . The aircraft was of simple design and construction without refinements and appropriate for its use. Three solid-fuel rocket motors were installed in the rear fuselage and operated for the final phase of the flight. The [aircraft] was usually carried by a twin-engined Mitsubishi bomber and released at high altitude some distance from the target. When within striking distance the rocket motors were ignited for the final high-speed dive through the defensive screen of the target.

*Description:* Single seat, mid-wing monoplane. Wood and mild steel construction. Span 16'15"; length 19'18 1/2"; weight empty 970 lbs., loaded 4,700 lbs.; weight of high explosive in nose 2,650 lbs.

*Performance:* The aircraft could glide 50 miles at 230 m.p.h. after release from mother aircraft at 27,000'. With motors operating the aircraft dived at 570 m.p.h.

*Power plant:* 3 solid-fuel rocket motors giving a total thrust of 1,764  
10.2 lbs. for 9 seconds.

Thus the visitor to the Science Museum in London is introduced to one of the strangest and most poignant weapons in the history of warfare. Suspended by three slender cables, it hovers inconspicuously in the back of the third floor, where it is overshadowed by sturdy-looking Hawker Hurricanes, Supermarine Spitfires, and Gloster Turbojets—a delicate green cocoon, smaller and frailer and simpler than the nearby V-1 flying bomb,

yet, unlike its German counterpart, equipped to carry a human warrior to his fiery destination.

"Ōka" it was named by the Japanese—"cherry blossom," the ancient symbol of purity and evanescence. The Americans, against whom this diminutive craft was designed, dubbed it the "baka [idiot] bomb," as if by denigrating this eerie weapon they might neutralize the unease it instinctively evoked.

From any common-sense viewpoint it was indeed something of an absurdity. That hundreds of young pilots should have clambered into these contraptions—mere wooden torpedoes with toy-like fuselage and stubby wings—to pit themselves against the leviathan carriers and battleships of the American navy would truly appear idiotic, even incredible, to those unfamiliar with Japan's ancient heroic tradition and the nobility that tradition attributed to forlorn ventures inspired by sincerity.

The principle was simple enough: as conventional methods of aerial warfare were rapidly becoming ineffective, Japan would have recourse to a one-way glider which would be transported at high altitude close to the target and would then dive down at enormous speed to detonate its warhead onto the enemy ship. The use of such dirigible manned bombs would thus allow the transporting aircraft, the mother plane, to return safely to base and be available for future missions. The suicide craft itself with its ton of tri-nitro-anisol would sink, or at least incapacitate, the ships of the enemy navy, which were now slowly strangling the home islands; in addition, the use of this new secret weapon would overawe and demoralize the foreigners, who were psychologically unprepared for such methods.

The Ōka was designed so that it could be tucked snugly under the fuselage of the mother plane, usually a converted Mitsubishi G4 M.2c bomber or, in the homely nomenclature of the enemy, a "Betty." During the main part of the flight towards the target, the kamikaze fighter would sit with the pilot of the carrying plane. As they neared the area where American ships had been sighted, he would briskly make his last farewell, exchange salutes, then climb through the bomb bay of the mother plane into the cramped cockpit of the flying coffin where he would spend the remaining minutes of his life. His equipment, limited to bare essentials, included a steering device and a voice tube that allowed him to communicate with the bomber pilot until the moment of separation. When the target was verified, usually at

a distance of some twenty-five miles, the kamikaze fighter would pull the release handle. His craft would then drop from the belly of the mother plane and glide downwards at a gradual angle gaining a speed of about two hundred and thirty miles an hour. Approaching the enemy ship, a rapidly growing dot in the ocean, he would activate the booster rockets, which were installed directly behind his seat without any protection. They instantly increased his velocity, which soon approached six hundred miles an hour (a fantastic speed for the time) and helped protect his precious cargo from enemy fighters and antiaircraft fire. Preparing for his suicide dive, the pilot would increase his downward angle to about fifty degrees; and, as he plummeted towards his prey, he was supposed to keep his eyes wide open until the last second, for a final adjustment in course could determine the outcome of his sacrifice.

The first Ōka attacks were launched towards the end of March 1945 as the American navy prepared to invade Japan's last line of defence, the island stronghold of Okinawa. At dawn on the 21st a mighty force of enemy ships, including seven aircraft carriers (the prime kamikaze target), had been sighted three hundred miles southeast of Kyushu. Vice Admiral Ugaki, the zealous commander of the Fifth Naval Air Fleet, who had been involved with kamikaze tactics since their inception, decided that the time had come to use the new weapon and to launch the Divine Thunder Unit on its first operation. Almost immediately there was a dispute, of a type common in the annals of samurai warfare, to decide who should lead the attack. After some heated wrangling the honour was awarded to Lieutenant Commander Nonaka, an expert on torpedo bombing. The force consisted of eighteen twin-engine Mitsubishi bombers, of which all but two had Ōka dirigible bombs attached to their bellies, escorted by fifty-five Zero fighters (an absurdly inadequate defence for such a momentous mission). Soon the roll of drums, the sound that traditionally precedes the hero's departure for battle, announced that the planes were ready to take off. The bomber crews hurried onto the field, and the sixteen Ōka pilots ran towards the mother planes that were to transport their little craft. Under the standard flight uniforms all wore white scarves, and in conformity with samurai custom each man, as he prepared for his last sortie, tightened round his helmet a white *bachimaki* cloth—the antique symbol of determination and derring-do. Above them fluttered the unit's

THE KAMIKAZE FIGHTERS  
"IF ONLY WE MIGHT FALL . . ."

pennant, a white banner emblazoned with the slogan 眞理は権を  
TEN. These characters referred to a favourite saying by Kusunoki  
Masashige:

Wrong [*Hi*] cannot prevail over Truth [*Ri*];  
Nor Truth conquer the Law [*Hō*];  
The Law cannot prevail over Power [*Ken*];  
Nor Power conquer Heaven [*Ten*].

10.9

Masashige's disastrous last battle, in which the Emperor's forces  
were routed by the enemy, was clearly in Nonaka's mind as he  
prepared to board his lead plane: "This," he said with a smile, "is  
my Minatogawa." While Admiral Ugaki watched from his com-  
mand post, the young Ōka pilots climbed into the cockpits of the  
mother crafts, shouting their farewells and their thanks for being  
included in the momentous mission. Led by Nonaka's plane, the  
bombers started taking off at half past eleven. As the last craft left  
the ground, the beat of drums ceased abruptly.

10.10

Almost at once it became clear that this might indeed be a  
Battle of Minato River. So defective was the equipment at this  
stage of the war that only about half of the escorting planes were  
able to accompany the mission. Many of them could not take off  
at all, while others had to turn back owing to engine trouble.  
Next it was learnt from reconnaissance reports that the enemy  
force was a great deal more powerful than originally believed,  
and thus it would be harder than ever to break through their  
defence screen. Vice Admiral Ugaki could still have called back  
his planes but he evidently decided that after so many months of  
feverishly preparing this first Ōka venture, such a move could  
have a devastating effect on morale.

The fatal hour came at two o'clock in the afternoon, when  
the mother planes, now some fifty miles from target, were sud-  
denly intercepted by fifty Grumman fighters. In an attempt to  
gain speed the pilots jettisoned their Ōka craft; but they were still  
not sufficiently manoeuvrable, and there were far too few  
fighters to provide adequate protection. The Americans furiously  
assaulted one bomber after another. As each of the huge planes  
caught fire and broke formation, the pilot would wave a final  
salute to his leader, Lieutenant Commander Nonaka, before spi-  
ralling down to the ocean. Soon every single bomber had been  
destroyed, and only a few Zero fighters remained to return to

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base with details of the disaster. Nonaka's bomber had disap-  
peared behind a cloud bank, but one of the fighters reported that  
he later saw it burst into flames and plunge into the water like  
a meteor. The attack of 21st March was a gloomy augur for the  
final weapon that was to save Japan: not a single Ōka craft had  
even approached its target, let alone caused any damage. When  
Ugaki, the commanding admiral, heard the news, he is said to  
have wept openly. . . .

10.11

Ōka bombs, though the most dramatic manifestation of Japa-  
pan's suicide tactics in the Pacific war, by no means dominated  
the kamikaze epic. The history of organizing suicide units as a  
major part of military strategy had started about half a year  
before Ōka bombs were first used. On 17th October 1944, as Japa-  
nese forces in the Philippines prepared to meet an all-out Ameri-  
can attack, a new commander, Vice Admiral Ōnishi, arrived from  
Tokyo to take over the First Naval Air Fleet in Manila. Two days  
later he visited Mabalacat, a little town some fifty miles north-  
west of the capital, and the headquarters of the 201st Air Group.  
The base at Mabalacat now became the scene of one of the most  
fateful conferences in the Pacific war.

The central figure, Ōnishi Takijiro, had made a name for  
himself from the outset of hostilities when he had cooperated  
with the eminent Admiral Yamamoto in planning the attack on

Pearl Harbor. In the Imperial Navy he and Yamamoto were the two most fervent exponents of aviation as the key to Japan's strategy in the Pacific, and they had worked in close partnership until Yamamoto's sudden death in 1943. Ōnishi himself flew every type of aircraft, and during the early, successful part of the war he exercised personal command as Chief of Staff for land-based air operations in action over the Philippines and in the sea battle off Malaya. When Japan's situation became critical in 1944, he was appointed to a key position in the aviation department of the Munitions Ministry and soon came to realize his country's hopeless inferiority in the production of aircraft compared with the enemy's boundless capacity. Like Yamamoto he had a resourceful and imaginative mind, and it was no doubt during this time that he began to seek some new form of aviation strategy that might help offset the absurd material discrepancy between Japan and America.

Considering his key role in the latter part of the war, remarkably little is known about Vice Admiral Ōnishi. The few published pictures show a large, kindly-looking man with round, somewhat puffy features. He certainly does not resemble the impassive, grim-looking Japanese officers who glare at us from most photographs of the time. In the Imperial Navy he was a controversial figure with a "maverick" reputation much like Admiral Yamamoto's. A poor politician, blunt, straightforward, uncompromising, he was endowed with the type of simple-hearted sincerity so often encountered among heroic nonconformists in Japanese history. Like Saigō Takamori and earlier representatives of the tradition, he stressed the importance of resolute action as opposed to talk, and of spirit over "systems." Again like Saigō, he became known as a masterful calligrapher; he was also a keen (though not especially talented) composer of haiku.

Ōnishi's soft appearance belied the toughness of a man who demanded much from others and still more from himself. He was noted for his dynamic energy and for a courage that bordered on foolhardiness: Vice Admiral Ōnishi was the first military man in Japan to practise parachuting and often during the war he seemed to court physical danger. In almost every respect he was the ideal leader for organized kamikaze strategy.

Though recognized as Japan's foremost officer in naval aviation, Ōnishi was not altogether popular in the corridors of power. Owing to his outspoken, somewhat tactless nature, many

regarded him as aggressive, arrogant, even dangerous—the typical "nail that sticks out" and needs a sharp knock on the head. 10.22

Among his own men, however, especially the young pilots, he appears to have been loved, and he reciprocated their admiration by extolling them as "the treasure of the nation" and declaring, in his powerful calligraphy, that "The purity of youth will usher in the Divine Wind." 10.23

These were the young men whose deliberate and systematic sacrifice he was to propose at the meeting on 19th October. The Admiral was tired and in poor health when he reached the headquarters at Mabalacat, and the extraordinary nature of the conference must have added to the strain. Facing the assembled officers, he started by rehearsing the all too familiar facts about Japan's material shortages. Having presented a seemingly insoluble problem, he offered the idea that had been forming in his mind during the past months: "In my opinion, there is only one way of assuring that our meagre strength will be effective to a maximum degree. That is to organize attack units composed of Zero fighters armed with two-hundred-fifty-kilogram bombs, with each plane to crash-dive into an enemy carrier. . . . What do you think?" 10.24

Captain Inoguchi, a senior staff officer who was present at the conference, has described the moment: "The Admiral's eyes bored into us as he looked around the table. No one spoke for a while, but Admiral Ōnishi's words struck a spark in each of us." 10.25

The decision had to be made at once, for time was rapidly running out. Responsibility devolved upon Commander Tamai, the executive officer of the 201st Air Group, who now excused himself and left the room with an aide in order to assess the probable reactions of the pilots themselves. Tamai returned shortly and said, "Entrusted by our commander with full responsibility, I share completely the opinions expressed by the Admiral. The 201st Air Group will carry out his proposal. May I ask that you leave to us the organization of our crash-dive unit?" Not a single officer at the meeting demurred. 10.26

The decision to adopt organized suicide tactics had been made in a matter of minutes, though the psychological groundwork had been laid during many centuries. In less than a week the first kamikaze planes took off from Mabalacat to attack the American navy. Captain Inoguchi ends his description of the meeting as follows: "I well remember Admiral Ōnishi's expres-

10.28 sion as he nodded acquiescence. His face bore a look of relief coupled with a shadow of sorrow." Onishi was indeed the father of the kamikaze units, but he had mixed feelings about his progeny. He knew, of course, that with ordinary tactics there was no longer the slightest chance of stopping the enemy. In addition he attached great importance to the "spiritual" aspect of the operations, quite apart from any practical effect they might have. In a speech delivered a few months later to members of the first kamikaze unit in Taiwan he declared, "Even if we are defeated, the noble spirit of the kamikaze attack corps will keep our homeland from ruin. Without this spirit, ruin would certainly follow defeat." . . .

The typical kamikaze fighter was a university student whose education had been interrupted when military deferment came to an end and who subsequently joined one of the Special Attack units. It is significant that far more of them had been students of the humanities and law than of engineering, science, and other more "practical" subjects. Very few had any military background whatsoever and, though they threw themselves wholeheartedly into their intensive training, many of them experienced moments of nostalgia for their studies, to which they now had scant chance of ever returning. Thus during his months in training camp, and even when he left on what he believed would be his last flight, Lieutenant Nagatsuka clung to his two thumbworn volumes of George Sand's *Maître Sonneurs*, which served to evoke a gentler past. Owing to their "bookishness" and their relatively free, unmilitary approach, the kamikaze candidates were frequently resented by professional soldiers, especially NCOs, who knew that these young, inexperienced ex-students would soon become officers and godlike heroes while they themselves lingered in the ranks.

10.102 Though one must obviously avoid generalizing about personality types when thousands of individuals are involved, most material about members of the kamikaze units shows that they were far from being the fierce, superstitious, jingoistic fanatics that foreigners have usually imagined. From all available records, diaries, letters, and photographs it appears that the principal type was quiet, serious, and above average in both culture and sensibility; Japanese descriptions of them frequently include the word *reisei*, which means "serene" or, in the best modern sense, "cool."

Were these kamikaze fighters in fact volunteers, or had they (as most non-Japanese tend to imagine) been somehow dragooned or "brainwashed" into joining the suicide squads? No simple answer is possible, but there seems little doubt that, at least during the early stage of kamikaze operations in the Philippines and Taiwan, the pilots were all volunteers in the full meaning of the word. Though there must have been many a hesitant young man who succumbed to the psychological pressure exerted by his fellow pilots and by the febrile wartime atmosphere, they were certainly never coerced by recruitment boards or superior officers. On the contrary, it often happened that young men who feared they might *not* be accepted for suicide duties wrote earnest requests and even signed them in their own blood according to ancient tradition. . . .

They were grateful, first of all, to Japan, the country of their birth, and to the Emperor who embodied its unique "national polity" (*kokutai*) and virtues. In description after description of suicide attacks we read that the pilot's last words refer to the Emperor, who, despite his somewhat lacklustre personality, was the supreme father figure in the Japanese nation-family. The following is an extract from the last letter that Lieutenant Yamaguchi Teruo of the Twelfth Air Flotilla wrote to his father just before his suicide mission:

... It is of no avail to express it now, but in my twenty-three years of life I have worked out my own philosophy.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I think of the deceits being played on innocent citizens by some of our wily politicians. But I am willing to take orders from the high command, and even from the politicians, because I believe in the polity of Japan.

The Japanese way of life is indeed beautiful, and I am proud of it, as I am of Japanese history and mythology which reflect the purity of our ancestors and their belief in the past. . . . That way of life is the product of all the best things which our ancestors have handed down to us. And the living embodiment of all wonderful things out of our past is the Imperial Family which, too, is the crystallization of the splendour and beauty of Japan and its people. It is an honour to be able to give my life in defence of these beautiful and lofty things.

More frequently the pilot's sense of obligation was focused on his family, specifically on the favours received from his own parents who had given him the gift of life and twenty years of upbringing, rather than on abstractions like King and country. . . .

Many letters express regrets at not having been able to repay the parents' kindness and apologies for leaving the world before them. This hasty last letter by Lieutenant Nomoto Jun of the White Heron Special Attack Unit was actually dictated from the plane just before his take-off:

Dearest Parents:

Please excuse my dictating these last words to my friend. There is no longer time for me to write more to you.

There is nothing special that I can say, but I want you to know that I am in the best of health at this last moment. It is my great honour to have been selected for this duty. The first planes of my group are already in the air. These words are being written by my friend as he rests the paper on the fuselage of my plane. There are no feelings of remorse or sadness here. My outlook is unchanged. I will perform my duty calmly.

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. . . .

. . . I shall be satisfied if my final effort serves as recompense for the heritage our ancestors bequeathed.

Farewell!  
Jun

10.114

Most often the gratitude of the kamikaze fighter is directed equally to family and Emperor, and his death appears as a sort of combined repayment for all the favours he has received in his life from both personal and impersonal sources. In a typical diary entry Lieutenant Adachi of the True Spirit Special Attack Unit writes that it is because of his parents' love that he can now give his life for the Emperor, and he rejoices that in this last attack he will be able to fight *together with* his father and mother. Similarly Lieutenant Kaijitsu Susumu of the Seven Lives Unit writes to his family:

10.115

Words cannot express my gratitude to the loving parents who reared and tended me to manhood that I might in some small manner reciprocate the grace which His Imperial Majesty has bestowed upon us.

10.116

The last letter of Matsuo Isao of the Heroes' Special Attack Unit also represents his death as a combined repayment to his own family and to the larger, national family, and he even has some additional *on* to spare for his superior officers:

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. . . .

How I appreciate this chance to die like a man! I am grateful from the depths of my heart to the parents who have reared me with their constant prayers and tender love. And I am grateful as well to my squadron leader and superior officers who have looked after me as if I were their own son and given me such careful training.

Thank you, my parents, for the twenty-three 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. . . .

10.117

Another recurrent theme in the writings of the kamikaze fighters is "sincerity" (*makoto* or *shisei*), that traditional concept which looms so large in the history of Japanese heroes. Nagatsuka reports the following typical conversation between two army air force officers that he overheard shortly before volunteering for Special Attack duties. Captain Sanaka, the leader of the Second Aerial Attack Group, was trying to persuade his commanding officer that, since Ki-45 Kai attack planes were now in short supply, the army should use the smaller Ki-27s to intercept American B-29 bombers:

"But how can a Ki-27 possibly take on a plane with the speed and armament of a B-29?"

"I beg your pardon, Sir," replied Captain Sanaka . . . "but under the circumstances I think we are obliged to use every available plane in our base to destroy the greatest possible number of American bombers."

"And what about our pilots? They still aren't properly trained."

"What counts, Sir, is neither the skill of our pilots nor the quality of our planes but the spirit and morale of the fighters. Everything depends on that."

10.118

Kamikaze fighters were repeatedly assured that suicide tactics were the only remaining way to stave off defeat and preserve Japan from catastrophe. My reading of their letters and diaries, however, and my conversations with survivors suggest that few of the actual participants believed that at this late stage their attacks would materially alter the outcome of the war. Especially after the disaster at Okinawa most members of the suicide units,

and certainly the more clear-headed among them, seem to have realized that, while their forthcoming sacrifice was not without honour, it was almost certainly without hope. Thus Lieutenant Nagatsuka recalls his last rambling thoughts as he sat in the cabin of his Ki-27 fighter:

10.119 Do I really believe that suicide attacks are effective? Aren't they, in fact, a foolhardy enterprise for flyers like us without any escort planes or any armaments of our own? . . . Is it true that self-sacrifice is the only thing that gives meaning to death? To this question the warrior is obliged to reply "yes," while knowing full well that his suicide mission has no meaning.

Such doubts, however, never impaired their morale; nor did the countless stories of comrades who had exploded themselves and their craft without any practical effect lead to discouragement or despair. The repeated setbacks seem, if anything, to have added to the verve of the young volunteers. This is the spirit of the popular kamikaze song:

10.120 Never think of winning!  
Thoughts of victory will only bring defeat.  
When we lose, let us press forward, ever forward!

While sincerity takes precedence over the question of victory or defeat, this does not mean that the volunteer regards his efforts as ultimately pointless. The sacrifice may not save Japan from losing the war, but it can lead to some form of spiritual rebirth. A student of literature from Kyoto University, whose plane was shot down one moonlit night only a fortnight before the end of the war, wrote in his last poem:

10.121 Cease your optimism,  
Open your eyes,  
People of Japan!  
Japan is bound to be defeated.  
It is then that we Japanese  
Must infuse into this land  
A new life.  
A new road to restoration  
Will be ours to carve.

The idea that a sacrificial act which produces no practical effect on the war may nevertheless have precious spiritual repercussions is discussed in one of the last entries of the diary by Sublieutenant Okabe, the author of the cherry blossom poem quoted at the head of this chapter:

22nd February 1945  
I shall die watching the pathetic struggle of our nation. My life will gallop in the next few weeks as my youth and life draw to a close.  
. . . The sortie has been scheduled for the next ten days.  
I am a human being and hope to be neither saint nor scoundrel, hero nor fool—just a human being. As one who has spent his life in wistful longing and searching, I die resignedly in the hope that my life will serve as a "human document."

The world in which I lived was too full of discord. As a community of rational human beings it should be better composed. Lacking a single great conductor, everyone lets loose with his own sound, creating dissonance where there should be melody and harmony.

We shall serve the nation gladly in its present painful struggle. We shall plunge into enemy ships cherishing the conviction that Japan has been and will be a place where only lovely homes, brave women, and beautiful friendships are allowed to exist.

10.122

Material victory in the war, far from being the primary goal, may even act as an impediment to spiritual regeneration: "If, by some strange chance," writes Sublieutenant Okabe, "Japan should suddenly win this war it would be a fatal misfortune for the future of the nation. It will be better for our nation and people if they are tempered through real ordeals which will serve to strengthen." The same theme is elaborated by an officer in a Kaiten (suicide-torpedo) unit who had recently amazed a young volunteer by telling him he expected Japan to be defeated:

10.123

I couldn't believe my ears, an officer talking like this! "What was that you said, Sir?" I asked.

"Japan will be defeated, Yokota," he told me.

I was shocked. I didn't know what else to say at the moment, for I had never heard anyone in the military discuss this possibility before, so I came back with, "Then why do you volunteer to die?"

"A man must do what he can for his country," was his simple answer. His death meant nothing, he added. "Japan will be defeated, of that I am sure. But she will be born again, and become a greater nation

10.124 than ever before." [He] went on to explain that a nation had to suffer and be purified every few generations, so that it could become stronger by having its impurities removed. Our land was now being bathed in fire, he said, and she would emerge all the better because of it. . . .

10.165 The main practical difficulty in reporting the effect of kamikaze sorties was that the suicide plane was, by definition, unable to describe the results of his crash; indeed not a single Special Attack fighter ever knew the practical outcome of his sacrifice. The Japanese therefore depended almost entirely on information from the "evaluation" planes—information that was highly inaccurate and always erred on the side of optimism. Often the pilots reported (and believed) that aircraft carriers or battleships had been sunk when the only evidence was huge columns of water and spectacular pillars of smoke, which had in fact been produced by their own exploding planes as they crashed near the warships. Since there was no reliable way to confirm these reports, the commanding officer of the Special Attack unit would usually give his men the benefit of the doubt and transmit the information to Tokyo in all its glorious inaccuracy.

10.167 The blithe optimism of Japanese officials about the kamikaze had its origins in the remarkable results of the maiden attack by the Shikishima Unit on 25th October, when a mere two dozen Japanese pilots and their planes were exchanged for an American aircraft carrier sunk and six others grievously damaged. Such initial success is typical of the heroic parabola, in which it serves as an essential preliminary to the subsequent fall. In fact, from the very outset the war had been a struggle between David and Goliath—in which, however, the giant was bound to be victorious. By the time it came to its explosive conclusion in August, about five thousand suicide volunteers had died in kamikaze craft of one kind or another. For all their frenzied efforts, they had succeeded in destroying only three capital ships, and this did not include a single fleet carrier or battleship. In the entire Okinawa campaign no American ships were sunk by an Ōka and only four were damaged. It is true that almost three hundred vessels were damaged in kamikaze attacks, and many of them had to be withdrawn from the combat areas for repair. Usually, however, they were soon able to return to the fray, and such damage did little to slow down the American advance. Suicide operations and the

entire war ended in unconditional surrender, a unique disgrace in Japan's history. The kamikaze effort was a microcosm of the practical futility inherent in the war effort from the very outset, and in the end Divine Wind became a symbol of ineluctable failure.

10.168 Far from accomplishing its objective the Special Attack strategy may well have contributed to one of the greatest catastrophes that ever befell the disaster-prone Japanese people, namely, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the first (and only) nuclear bombs ever used in warfare. This is hardly what the air-borne samurai had envisaged as the fruit of their dedication, yet such ironic outcomes are familiar in Japanese history where heroic efforts have often led to results totally at variance with those intended. Suicide tactics, instead of overawing the Americans as had been confidently expected, produced indignation and rage out of all proportion to their practical importance and had much the same psychological effect as did the German V-1 and V-2 rockets in England, which were similarly regarded as "unfair" weapons. This probably helped remove such qualms as President Harry Truman and his close associates may have felt about dropping atomic bombs on huge population centres at a time when Japan was already on the verge of surrender and busy with peace feelers. Furthermore, the ferocity of kamikaze tactics seemed a logical culmination of Japan's wartime "fanaticism" and no doubt served to warn the Americans of the immense casualties they could expect if they proceeded with their plans to invade the home islands in the autumn of 1945. It is possible that Japan, faced with the dual threat of atomic attack and the full participation of Russia in the grand alliance, might have capitulated without any invasion at all, and that the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was therefore not only immoral but gratuitous. This we shall never know. Clearly, however, America's decision to use nuclear weapons obviated the need for an invasion—an invasion during which the Japanese would have resorted to mass suicide tactics on a far greater scale than ever before.

10.171 The connexion between kamikaze and nuclear bombs is of course a hypothesis and one that can never be proved. Yet there is no question about the incongruity of their juxtaposition at the end of the Pacific war, when one side resorted to suicide tactics

whose psychological origins lay in the country's remote past, and was defeated by the most modern and impersonal of all weapons, the weapon that ushered in the atomic age.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of 9th August the B-29 bomber *Bock's Car* dropped the "Fat Man" over Nagasaki, killing and wounding some 75,000 people in one terrible blow; on the very same morning the Japanese government received the news that Russia had declared war. Six days later, in the first public address ever made by a Japanese sovereign, Emperor Hirohito informed millions of astounded subjects (including hundreds of kamikaze pilots who were awaiting their missions) that Japan was taking the unprecedented step of surrender and that they must "endure the unendurable and suffer what is insufferable":

After pondering deeply the general trends of the world and the actual conditions obtaining in Our Empire today, We have decided to effect a settlement of the present situation by resorting to an extraordinary measure.

We have ordered Our Government to communicate to the Governments of the United States, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union that Our Empire accepts the provisions of their Joint Declaration. . . .

. . . now the war has lasted for nearly four years. Despite the utmost that has been performed by everyone—the gallant fighting of military and naval forces, the diligence and assiduity of Our servants of the State, and the devoted service of Our one hundred million people—the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest. Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should We continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. Such being the case, how are We to save the millions of Our subjects; or to atone Ourselves before the hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors? This is the reason why We have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Powers. . . .

On the evening of the broadcast Vice Admiral Ōnishi, who had recently been appointed Vice Chief of the Naval General Staff, invited several staff officers to his official residence in Tokyo. During the past four days Ōnishi had done his best to

persuade the leaders of the government that surrender was unthinkable and that, however hopeless the prospects might be, the only honourable course was to continue fighting until the end, using whatever suicidal tactics might be necessary. During his final meeting with the Navy Minister, Admiral Yonai, Ōnishi is said to have wept openly as he vainly urged the Minister to persevere. On the final day, shortly before the decision for unconditional surrender had been announced, he had tried to gain time by suggesting to Prince Takamatsu that a representative of the Emperor should journey to the Great Ise Shrine and report on the situation. Foiled in one effort after another, Vice Admiral Ōnishi became desperate. "Knowing that his own time was running out," writes Captain Inoguchi, who was closely associated with the Admiral during these feverish days, "and that he was dealing with men who were not planning to die, he must have been infuriated at the idea of their accepting the humiliation of defeat. Their complacency must have been galling to this man who was so firm in his resolution not to survive the defeat of Japan."

Now, on the night of the 15th, Ōnishi knew that all his endeavours had ended in failure. He stayed talking with his guests until about midnight. Then everyone went home, and he retired to his study on the second storey. Shortly before three o'clock in the morning he unsheathed the sword that he had borrowed on the previous evening from a young friend named Kodama, and disembowelled himself with the traditional cross-wise cuts (*jūmonji*) that Mishima Yukio was to use in his own deed twenty-five years later. After completing the ritual, he turned the sword round and stabbed himself in the throat and the chest. But death was in no hurry to release him. Perhaps (as he told Kodama later) the weapon was not very sharp; more probably he wished to draw out his agony as long as possible and therefore did not stab deep enough.

Shortly before dawn an employee in the official residence noticed a faint light coming from the study. He opened the door and found the Admiral lying on a blood-sprayed *tatami*. Mr. Kodama and two naval aides were promptly notified and hurried to the residence accompanied by a fleet surgeon. Despite his gaping wounds the Admiral was still conscious. The doctor was amazed by the man's physical endurance, but realized that he was far beyond help. In any case Ōnishi categorically declined medi-

cal attention. "Do nothing that may keep me alive!" he said as soon as he saw the doctor. Then, turning to Kodama, he wryly observed that it was only because his sword was so dull that they had been able to meet again. At this point Kodama frantically seized another sword and was about to stab himself in an act of *junshi* when Ōnishi said in a surprisingly loud voice, "Don't be a fool! What good would it do to kill yourself now? Young people must go on living and build up Japan again."

The Admiral began vomiting blood and was obviously in great pain, but he refused the traditional coup de grace that would have provided his immediate quietus. Shortly afterwards Kodama suggested that he should bring Ōnishi's wife from the country for a last meeting and begged him to stay alive until she arrived. "You silly fellow!" said Ōnishi with a smile. "What could be more foolish than for a military man to cut open his stomach and then wait for his wife's arrival before dying? Instead take a look at that poem!" He pointed to his final haiku, which he had written on a square of thick paper:

Refreshed and clear, the moon now shines  
After the fearful storm.

"Not too bad for an old man!" he commented, and these appear to have been his final words. He lingered in agony for several hours and died about six o'clock in the evening. Mr. Kodama, who stayed with him until the end, has described the dismal funeral:

The casket to contain the remains of Vice Admiral Ōnishi was made by soldiers, but because of a shortage of planks, the casket was five inches too small for the body of the admiral. The naval authorities, who had lost all their dignity and presence of mind as a result of the defeat, did not have the sincerity to provide a casket for one of their own comrades who had committed suicide out of a realization of his responsibilities. Neither did they have the magnanimity to provide him with a funeral hearse.

On the way to the crematorium in a truck carrying his body, I saw one naval plane flying towards Tokyo from the direction of Atsugi Air Base. It circled slowly over our heads dipping its wings. This was the last tribute being paid by one of Vice Admiral Ōnishi's men. Incidentally, this was the last time that I was to look upon a Japanese plane.

Ōnishi's two last letters, which he had composed on the previous night with his usual bold brush-strokes, were found in his study. One was a simple farewell note to his wife, written somewhat in the style of departing kamikaze pilots. In it he made his final dispositions and ended with the haiku:

Now all is done,  
And I can doze for a million years.

The other was a posthumous expression of gratitude to the kamikaze pilots and a testament to the country's youth:

I wish to express my deep appreciation to the spirits of the brave special attackers. They fought and died valiantly with faith in our ultimate victory. In death I wish to atone for my part in the failure to achieve that victory and I apologize to the spirits of these dead flyers and their bereaved families.

I wish the young people of Japan to find a moral in my death. To be reckless is only to aid the enemy. You must abide by the spirit of the Emperor's decision with utmost perseverance. Do not forget your rightful pride in being Japanese!

You are the treasure of the nation. With all the fervour of spirit of the special attackers, strive for the welfare of Japan and for peace throughout the world.

(signed) Vice Admiral Ōnishi Takijirō,  
[died] at the age of fifty-four

Despite Ōnishi's outstanding courage and efficiency as a commander, he never expected glory, or even recognition, after his death. According to an old Chinese proverb, a man's true worth can be judged only when his coffin has been covered by the earth, but Ōnishi once remarked to an aide that in his case there would be no one, even after he had been in his coffin a hundred years, to justify what he had tried to do. While believing in the nobility of the kamikaze venture, he seems to have had a profound sense of its practical hopelessness. From every point of view—personal, historical, and aesthetic—his suicide was an inevitable culmination. "It would be wrong to think that it was merely an atonement," Captain Inoguchi has written. "I believe that his life was dedicated from the moment he organized the Kamikaze Corps. Thereupon he had resolved to take his own life, and

would have carried out that resolve even if Japan had won the war. In imagination he must have journeyed with every pilot of his command as each made his last special attack.”

10.182 Today in flower,  
Tomorrow scattered by the wind—  
Such is our blossom life.  
10.183 How can we think its fragrance lasts forever?

## Chapter 1

- 1.1 *Kojiki* (“The Record of Ancient Events”), Nihon Koten Zensho (Tokyo, 1963), II: 128. (Unless otherwise specified, all translations of Japanese texts are my own.) *Kojiki*, the earliest extant chronicle in Japan (and indeed the oldest extant Japanese book of any kind), was presented to the Court in A.D. 712. See note 1.3 below.
- 1.2 Plain of Noto: for this and all subsequent place names see maps, pp. x–xi, 7.
- 1.3 The main primary sources are *Kojiki* (“The Record of Ancient Events,” A.D. 712) and *Nihon Shoki* (“The Chronicles of Japan,” A.D. 720). In *Nihon Shoki* the hero’s father, Emperor Keikō, is given a far more important role in the campaign against the “rebels” than the *Kojiki* allows; there are also far more foreign touches, for example the Emperor’s commission to his son (VII:22), which is in pure Chinese style. The *Kojiki* account, which is both briefer and more vivid, emphasizes the sacred aspect of the hero’s mission and describes his principal enemies as deities (e.g., “mountain gods, river gods, and gods of the sea straits,” *Kojiki*, p. 129); frequently it uses verbs (e.g., *idemashiki*, p. 128, and *kamuagaritamaiki*, p. 143) which suggest that Yamato Takeru is in fact an Emperor. His character is somewhat more ardent and romantic in *Kojiki*, more subdued, dignified, and “Chinese” in *Nihon Shoki*. In my account of Yamato Takeru, I combine elements from the two main sources, mentioning discrepancies only when they appear significant. *Hitachi Fudoki*, an 8th-century gazetteer, briefly mentions Yamato Takeru as the conqueror of the eastern Emishi; this is the only primary source in which he is actually styled as an Emperor: Yamato Takeru no Sumeramikoto, see *Hitachi Fudoki*, ed. Musashino Shoin (Tokyo, 1956), p. 2.

In the traditional chronologies Yamato Takeru, though not counted as an Emperor, is a link in the direct line of imperial descent that extends from the mythological founding ruler, Jimmu, to the present Emperor, Hirohito. According to a confusing passage in *Kojiki* (p. 148) Yamato Takeru had six wives and one child by each; he does not appear to have lived with any of them, and indeed his career was far too short and hectic for any domesticity. The first and principal wife (the daughter of Keikō’s father, Emperor Suinin) was the hero’s aunt; she gave birth to

FOOTNOTES (abridged)

1. Kike Watasumi no Koe (Tokyo, 1963).
2. Plaque on the third floor of the Science Museum, Exhibition Road, South Kensington, London S.W. 7.
3. [comments on the German plane]
4. Eugen Herrigal, Zen in the Art of Archery (New York, 1971, p. 106.
5. "Baka Bomb."
6. [Comment on the "madness" of heroism]
7. Inoguchi Rikihei and Nakajima Tadashi, Shimpu Tokubetsu Kogekitai no Kiroku, translated (by Roger Pineau) as The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II, Annapolis, 1958, pp. 141-146. Hereafter Inoguchi.
8. Inoguchi, pp. 142-143.
9. Photograph 13 in the Inoguchi Japanese edition.
10. Inoguchi, p. 144.
11. For the traditional connotations of weeping, see Ivan Morris, The World of the Shining Prince, (London, 1964), pp. 145-146.
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18. [Most planes were conventional aircraft].
19. [Comment that the Japanese had plenty of time to prepare]
20. [Comments on Yamamoto]
21. Inoguchi, p. 182.
22. [Comments on Oishi]
23. Inoguchi, pp. 180-181.
24. [Comments on military situation in 1944].
25. Inoguchi, p. 7.
26. Inoguchi, p.7.
27. *Ibid*, p. 9.
28. *Ibid*.
29. Inoguchi, p. 123.
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100. Bernard Millot, L'Epopée Kamikaze (Paris, 1970), pp. 137-138, 147.
101. Quoted in Inoguchi, p. 181.
102. Nagatsuka Ryuji, J'étais un kamikaze (Paris, 1972), pp. 261-262. Hereafter Nagatsuka.
- 103 [Comments on the good character of the pilots]
- 104 Inoguchi, p. 43, Nagatsuka, 224.
- 105 [Comments on eagerness of the pilots and their families]
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112. Inoguchi, p. 199.
113. Inoguchi, p. 198.
114. Inoguchi, p. 202.
115. [Japanese quotation]
116. Inoguchi, p. 197.
117. Inoguchi, p. 200.
118. Nagatsuka, p. 162.
119. *Ibid*, p. 272.
120. Shukan Asahi, 6-8 (1973): 114-117.
121. Mainichi News, 29 September 1968.
122. Inoguchi, p. 207.
123. *Ibid*.
124. Yokota Yukata, Suicide Submarine (New York, 1962), p. 161.
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165. Nagatsuka, p. 140.
166. [Casualties estimated at 4,000-5,000]
167. [Comments by US military on ineffectiveness]

168. [Comments on Mishima Yukio's reactions]
169. [Comments on US reactions]
170. [More on US reactions]
171. [Comments on planned invasions]
172. [Comments on atom bomb casualties]
173. Ivan Morris, Nationalism and the Right Wing in Japan  
(London, 1960), p. 24. Hereafter Morris.
174. Inoguchi, pp. 171-174.
175. Inoguchi, p. 172.
176. Morris, *passim*.
177. [Sword displayed in the Yasukuni Shrine Museum]
178. Morris, pp. 26-28 [discusses other suicides by military men].
179. Kodama Yoshio, I Was Defeated ((Tokyo, 1951), p. 173.
180. Inoguchi, 175.
181. [Comment relating Oishi's comment to a proverb]
182. Inoguchi, 187.
183. Inoguchi, p. 187.