

JAP KAMIKAZES

Fact and Fancy About Tokyo's Human Bombs



WHEN THE first kamikazes peeled out of the clouds over the Navy's Philippine invasion forces in October 1944, the war's fanciest round of scuttlebutt got a jet-propelled start.

Nurtured by Jap propaganda the suicide plane myth grew to fantastic proportions but the U. S. Navy knew the cold facts were nonetheless grim.

Tokyo propaganda mills seized on the "divine winds" to lift morale on the home front which had sagged with reversal of Jap fortunes in the Pacific. The Jap people were told of great victories won by suicide sacrifices.

A Jap magazine ran a picture in November 1944 showing four purported kamikaze pilots drinking a last toast before taking off. The caption read: "Army Special Attack Unit Confident of Destruction of Barbarian Horde. Flight personnel of the Banda Air Unit, not yet in the prime of life, just before shoving off. They wear the ashes of the unfortunate leaders of the Iwamoto Unit who have fallen in aerial combat." The ashes apparently were in bags worn around their necks; the pilots were shown in flight uniforms.

Again, a Jap publication wrote:

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"The faithful Kamikaze Special Attack Plane Unit, divine eagles, bombs composed of men and planes, which plunge down on enemy ships! Young, ruddy-faced men are ever ascending the glorious road, repeatedly dealing crushing blows to the enemy . . . Each man ties a white silken scarf firmly around his head. Their friends wave sad farewells to these broad shouldered youths who are without even parachutes. The skies are slowly brightening . . ."

Parachutes obviously would seem excess gear for the suicide boys. Nevertheless many wore them and a few used them when they lost their nerve in the final dive. USS *Defense* (AM 317), after a suicide had crashed reported: "Wreckage was all over the decks, most of the pilot was on the flying bridge, and his parachute hung from the yardarm."

In another instance plane and pilot were, as usual, demolished but the parachute came through intact, settling like a shroud over the mess. Crew members of this ship, a DE, found a Jap parachute makes nearly 200 excellent quality silk handkerchiefs as souvenirs to send home.

The suicide myth was heightened by reports the pilots wore ceremonial robes for the occasion and this, like other wild tales, had some basis in fact. One carrier pilot who shot a suicider down said as he made his pass the enemy flier slumped in his cockpit and a full-cut white burnoose trailed out in the slipstream. On another carrier a pilot was dug out of the wreckage he had created and was found to be dressed in green and yellow silk flight clothing. Normal flight dress was the rule, with addition of a white scarf. This is not surprising because white, to the Jap, means death.

Radio Tokyo harped on the kamikaze story, insisting in the first months of 1945 that the suicide pilots were members of a "Special Assault Force", specially chosen, specially trained, specially equipped. Radio Tokyo never threw light on anything yet, so let's turn to U. S. Navy reports for the straight dope.

Pacific Fleet "Weekly Intelligence" for 15 Jan 1945 summed it up: "The suicide crash became a primary combat weapon for the Japanese Air Force in October at the time of the Philippines invasion. In the past enemy planes had attempted this tactic, but only at widely reported intervals and in these cases usually only as the last maneuver of a doomed aircraft. The appearance of suicide planes . . . is consistent with the furious and desperate resistance of all types of enemy arms to the Allied invasion of the Philippines. It was a psychologically predictable tactic developed by a fanatic enemy"

The kamikaze effort was spotty and hastily organized and not at all the unified, determined force Radio Tokyo declared it was. This was evidenced by the wide variety in planes and equipment used, varying levels of pilot skill and the tactics which were some-

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times highly organized but often ridiculously inept.

Just about all types of Jap Army and Navy aircraft suicided at one time or another, from the latest fighters and twin-engine jobs, even piloted Baka bombs, to ancient float-trainers. Some planes were rigged with explosive charges to detonate on contact, bombs, torpedoes, even mortar and artillery shells. Many relied on exploding gas tanks alone.

One float-biplane eluded a Corsair at Okinawa by landing in the wake of a destroyer, taxied up the wake, took off again and crashed into the ship.

Some pilots, frequently Jap carrier pilots, exhibited great skill in evading damage as they pressed home attacks. But as U. S. guns and successful Jap dives imposed staggering losses on the Nip air forces, pilot skill declined. A POW whose suicide had been unsuccessful said volunteers from primary flight schools, qualified to fly only trainers, were accepted for kamikaze ventures.

Skilled tactics during some attacks is evidenced in action reports in the accompanying article. A captured Jap army manual published in February of 1945 urged intensive training in the field in co-ordinated attacks.

The suicide dive fitted Jap psychology; logic in warfare never was their strong point. The "divine winds" satisfied the poetic Jap mind. Even Japanese bobby-soxers were impressed. Fired by patriotism they showered fan mail on air force units. One such letter, found on the body of a kamikazer, likened his soul to the cherry blossom that falls in the spring and concluded: "Take care of yourself."