

JUNE 4, 1945

The Kamikaze Ashore

American troops on Okinawa thought they knew all there was to know about Jap fanaticism. But last week the Japs served it up with a new twist. The evening of May 24 started out like any other on the battle-torn island. The enemy sent its usual flight of Kamikaze suicide planes to strafe American airfields and dive into shipping off shore. But as wave after wave of Jap fighters kept streaming in from the north, the Americans realized something big was up. Fleet anti-aircraft guns ripped the sky with red-tracer bullets, and night fighters took off after the careening Japs. At the height of the ear-splitting air battle, the Japs played their trump card.

One-Way Ticket: Twin-engined bombers, stripped of armament, loaded with troops, and fueled for a one-way trip, cut their motors and glided silently toward the American-held Yontan airstrip. Before the Japanese reached the target area nightfighters jumped them and sent down six or seven planes with long lances of fire. The rest kept on. Four of the big planes missed the field and crashed in orange puffs of flame. But another, winging over a glowing wreck, made a belly landing and screeched to a stop.

Startled American ground crews watched about fifteen Japs pile out. The Japs gathered in a huddle while the pilot shouted instructions, then rushed back to the plane for machine guns, grenades, rifles, mines, and knee mortars. Next, they fanned out among the hundreds of American planes parked nearby to set them on fire. Cooks, mechanics, and fliers grabbed the nearest weapons and dashed after the Japs.

While a pitched fight raged, another enemy bomber skidded in and hit the base of a hill, sending the badly burned bodies of thirteen Japanese soldiers pinwheeling through the air. A Seabee, spotting the accident, saw five Americans sealed in a radio-control dugout by the debris of the Jap plane. He clawed frantically at the earth until the three who still lived were rescued.

After almost two hours of furious fighting, all the airborne Japs—members of the *Giretsu* (heroic) unit of the Kamikaze Corps—were killed. The suicide-plane raid against American shipping resulted in the damaging of eleven light American naval units, but 166 Jap planes were destroyed.