

“Banzai!”: Imperial Japan’s Perfect Storm

by Matthew Walters

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Honorable Mother, please forgive the impiety of my premature departure. However, I am certain that both you and my departed mother will be happy that in serving the Emperor your Yoshitaro is becoming one of the guardian spirits of Yasukuni Shrine. It pains me deeply that I am causing you sorrow in your twilight years. Please forgive me.
—Lieutenant Yonetsu Yoshitaro (“Last”)

These are some of the final written words of a man who intentionally ended his own life by attempting to fly his explosive-laden aircraft into American and British warships in the Pacific. Lieutenant Yoshitaro was a Kamikaze. He, and many thousands of others, volunteered for this fate. This brief, detached letter is the last message he ever sent to his stepmother. His letter is little more than an apology and it is obvious that Yoshitaro is cognizant of the consequences of his actions, and regrets them. He can barely squeeze out four sentences before begging her forgiveness. Yet, despite this reluctance, Yoshitaro and thousands of others gave their lives for Japan with such ferocity that it stalled the war efforts of nations several times Japan’s size for years. Why did so many willfully choose oblivion over family?

In the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of Japanese soldiers charged to their

deaths for Japan. They used a myriad of zealous tactics to carry out the will of the Emperor. Japanese soldiers charged American positions in massive Banzai bayonet charges and ran civilians off cliffs to prevent their capture by the Allies. Japanese pilots filled their planes with explosives and rammed Allied vessels. Others strapped themselves into specially made torpedoes and guided themselves into ships’ hulls, or drowned trying. On Iwo Jima over 30,000 Japanese soldiers fought to the death for a patch of land little more than three miles long, and only a few hundred allowed themselves to be captured. Something possessed these men to fight to the last man no matter the circumstances—a feat that no other army during the time could consistently replicate (Orbell and Morikawa).

This single-minded devotion led American soldiers and marines of the time to believe that the Japanese were simply a primitive, fear-driven culture, that they gladly wished to give their lives for their Emperor. After all, the phrase “Tennoheika Banzai!” literally means “Long live the Emperor!” It was the phrase uttered by every Kamikaze as he crashed into an aircraft carrier. Marines and Soldiers attested to hearing the Japanese soldiers uniformly shouting the phrase as they attacked their positions (Orbell and Morikawa). Thousands of men uttered these as their last words in a single-minded devotion to the Emperor—or so it seems. If the Japanese were just a massed horde with a hive mind and little regard for individuals, why was Lieutenant Yoshitaro so reluctant to serve his Emperor with his “premature departure”?

It seems that there is more to the story, and that Japan is more complicated than our simple fear or with connections to a cult of the Emperor. Every country during WWII was existentially threatened, yet only the Japanese could muster zealous fighters in such numbers and frequency. According to anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-tierney, most countries had central ties to

religion, and a majority of soldiers in the war were religious in some way. Furthermore, many countries had imposed very powerful and far-reaching central governments that actively influenced the minds of their citizens and soldiers. On top of all that, every country's home front was very supportive of the war, and fighters kept very close ties to their loved ones abroad. Only one country had all of these traits and more—Japan.

Imperial Japan was an extreme case of metaphorical abstraction. The Japanese twisted their filial piety to project traditional familial ties beyond their immediate kin and onto the nation itself, forcing citizens to unwittingly focus on the abstraction of the nation over their families. To further support their narrative, the government of Japan aestheticized the deaths that each pilot would face, drawing on myth and literary tropes to mask the horror of the actions they had agreed to—what was once terror and death became beautiful meaning. These factors, plus the factors inherent to every nation in WWII created the Kamikaze—the original suicide bomber.

Smarter Than You Think

These zealots were not ravenous killers foaming at the mouth at the thought of their next kill. While these types did exist, Kamikaze pilots were often highly educated individuals—and that may have been why they were so eager to volunteer. In his piece on the Kamikaze student pilots, Emiko Ohnukiterney states that "...the total corpus of about 4000 pilots [consisted of enlisted men] and close to 1000 student soldiers whom the government graduated early so that they could draft them" (15). The drafted students were not required to volunteer for the Kamikazes, yet nearly a quarter of the corps was made up of students. This set of student-pilots is by far the most interesting sect to study. It is easier for a government to manipulate somebody without an extensive education who grew up on propaganda, as did many enlisted men at the

time. That fact can be attributed to their willingness to become suicide bombers. But these student-pilots were, "...the intellectual crème de la crème of the time. Their motto was *Cogito ergo sum*... [and] the 'rite of passage' for incoming students... was reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in German" (Ohnukiterney 15). Many of these men were the among intellectual elite of the world. Some refused the mission, and one educated sect of officers refused to join the corps citing the fact that it was a "meaningless death mission not worth volunteering for" (qtd. in Ohnukiterney 1). Every single military academy graduate (from institutions comparable to America's West Point) refused to volunteer their lives for their country in this way. Of those with higher education within the ranks of the Kamikaze, 0% were military academy graduates.

Why would any such hyper-intelligent men volunteer to kill themselves on behalf of the Emperor while their military-educated counterparts sat on the sidelines? Shouldn't it be the nationalist military grads throwing themselves into American aircraft carriers? One reason that Ohnukiterney suggests is that the Japanese government was very good at aestheticizing their actions. For example, the government of Japan was quick to promote the symbolism of cherry blossoms amongst the ranks of the Kamikaze. The cherry tree (a very prevalent Japanese cultural item) only blossoms once per year, and it does so unpredictably. The blossoms only last for a very short time before dying out and falling to the Earth in beautiful waves, and in doing so, they blanket fields in rolling color. Ohnukiterney writes that "...successive governments had aestheticized the deaths of soldiers on the battlefield using the symbolism of the cherry blossom...[which] became the trope of Japan's imperial nationalism" (19). Japanese soldiers became these blossoms by fighting, and dying, for their emperor. Their brief lives were well lived in service to the greater needs of Japan. Like the blossoms, their time to serve was

unpredictable and required their deaths in uniform droves; however, their deaths meant tranquility for the others in Japan. This rhetoric pointed to "...the Japanese soul—an exclusive spiritual property of the Japanese that endowed young men with a noble character, enabling them to face death without fear—'Thou shalt die like *beautiful* [emphasis added] falling cherry petals for the Emperor" (Ibid.). Safe in the knowledge they would die for a greater cause, the men threw themselves into harm's way. The key difference between military academy graduates and ordinary student-soldiers was their education. While the student-soldiers spent much of their time focused on government-pushed theory and ideals that would prepare them for civil service, the military academy grads learned pragmatism and effectiveness for battlefield application. They were simply less susceptible to the national rhetoric and the romance behind that beautiful death than ordinary student-soldiers were.

So, that vast wealth of knowledge and intellect at the student-soldier's command actually proved to be their Achilles heel. After volunteering, many tried to continue to accept the state-promoted rhetoric in the final weeks of their lives—but many had trouble doing it. Ohnukitierney brings some of the final letters of Hayashi Ichizo into account, showing how very few truly died for the Emperor: "There must be some peace of mind for dedicating my life to the emperor...To be honest, I cannot say that the wish to die for the emperor is genuine, coming from my heart. However, it is *decided for me that I die for the emperor*" (qtd. in Ohnukitierney 18). Those last few words, "... it is decided for me," demonstrate that Ichizo's will to die was not genuine, yet he still acted upon his national rhetoric. Ohnukitierney points out that he did this "...while not embracing [the rhetoric] and sometimes even while defying it" (18). For Ichizo, outside pressure was not the motivation for his act, the will to die must've come from within.

Dolls and Anchors

Ohnukitierney's research reveals that a typical last night for a pilot was an equivocal affair. Those destined to charge into hell the next day spent their last hours somewhere between a state of turmoil and ecstasy. Pilots converged in massive dining halls to celebrate and commemorate their lives with rivers of sake and camaraderie. Such festivities included sitting face-down on the tables, drinking until blackout, smashing vases with swords, and slicing hanging lights off the ceiling. To complement their revelry, there were long intersessions with men crying in heaps for their girlfriends and mothers back home, begging them for another chance at life and love. The next day, they all would strap themselves to flying bombs, emboldened by the rising sun on the wingtips, and crash into other humans sacrificing their youth for the Emperor. These were the "crazed fanatics" that we Americans came to recognize. In truth, they were deeply conflicted men faced with a grave task (Ohnukitierney 18).

Obviously, pilots were no great fans of their work, and desired another way out. They wished to return to their families and proceed with their normal lives. Still, they continued their duties far from their families anyway. In most people's minds, family is the end-all, but for these pilots family became the motivation for their suicide bombings. To help them with this hurdle, many pilots carried dolls with them—grown men carried dolls into combat, for what?

According to Ellen Schattschneider, *imon ningyo* (comfort dolls) were actually a very common sight amongst Japanese soldiers in WWII; no matter what happened to the soldier, he would remain with his family through the presence of the doll. In the event of his death, he would *become* one with his family. For one soldier, his doll was more than just a friendly face in hell—it was a reminder of his kin back home. Schattschneider tells us he named his doll "Ema" after the young girl who made it and sent it to him. He also called it his mother and sister, and it

served as his anchor to home. After witnessing his friends losing limbs, bleeding to death before him, and committing terrible acts, he would take the doll out and remember better times. The man swore that both this doll and he would make it through the war. They saw the rape of Nanking, skirmishes in China, and the bayoneting of the Chinese populace together; until one day a sniper's bullet struck the soldier. He collapsed, choking on his own blood, gasping and clawing for air until he carried as much life as the doll. His squad-mates, knowing the attachment he had for the doll, took it off his corpse before his body was taken away. It was dirty, stained with the grime of war and the blood of their friend. They wrote to young Ema back home, asking that she make a new dress for the doll so that they could carry it through the war and remember both their friend and Ema, who had so lovingly supported them. And they did (Schattschneider 329).

To the Japanese fighting man, his doll was more than mere cloth meant for a child. It represented his connection to his closest kin; the destruction of both the body and the doll in the same event meant that the spirit of the fighting man and that of the maker/owner of the doll would be forever intertwined. The men in the Kamikaze corps were especially fond of the comfort dolls for this reason. Lieutenant Uemura Masahisa demonstrates this in a letter to his child by saying that; “The toy doll you had as a child I took with me in my airplane as a good-luck charm – this way you are always with me. I tell you this because I think that it would be wrong for you not to know” (“Last” 121). Lieutenant Masahisa's act is no small gesture. In Japanese culture, everyday objects such as dolls become imbued with the spirit of their owners, and cannot be disposed of without special ritual (Schattschneider 332). Lieutenant Masahisa's act bound him to the spirit of his child attached to the doll. He united them for life, just like the hundreds of others who united themselves with the makers of their dolls.

Their belief in comfort-doll spirits belief made it far easier for pilots to sacrifice themselves as Kamikazes – it gave them faith that they would remain with their loved ones forever, even after death. The act was so significant to Masahisa that he ensured his child knew they were bound together after his death. He did not say, “It would be wrong for you not to know” because he expected his child to come looking for their favorite doll, but because he wanted them to know that he was looking over them. Pilots were able to overcome their Earthly attachments to their loved ones by becoming *spiritually* attached to their kin. Still, it was only a mere substitute for being with family in person.

Extended Family

While the pilots' comfort dolls helped take away some of the pain of knowing their deaths were coming by their own hand, they were merely crutches that couldn't stand on their own. It takes an incredible force to cause somebody to willingly forsake their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and children, not necessarily the Emperor, as the second pilot we met has shown. As I have in this essay, psychologists John Orbell and Tomonori Morikawa asked why. They set out to discover whether or not there is an evolutionary process for cultures utilizing suicide attacks. They decided the best example is Japan, noting that less than 1% of pilots left traces of them being coerced into roles as Kamikaze fighters, while nearly 80% stated they sought an honorable or *beautiful* death. Over half the fighters mentioned they joined to make a significant contribution to the war effort and to inspire others (Orbell and Morikawa 309).

Despite all of these reasons, it is hard to justify the masses volunteering for the job of Kamikaze fighter. Certainly, not everyone so eager for a “beautiful death” when the war began; surely some of the pilots thought they could contribute to the war in some other meaningful way. John Orbell and Tomonori Morikawa

developed a paradigm to define the specific mindset one must have in order to sacrifice oneself, which essentially states that when my coalition (in this case, nation) is under direct and dire threat to the point that a heroic sacrifice must be made, I am willing to make it because *I identify with my countrymen as if they were members of my own family*, and the dire threat to my family (my countrymen) has manipulated my mentality to accept my death. I am dying for the nation of Japan because the turmoil of war has united us as one people. I care for the other 100 million faceless people in my country because, if we do not come together, we will all be destroyed by outside powers. War is the crucible that solidifies peoples into nations. I have become engrossed with the manipulative ideals promoted in my culture – my death is not fire and brimstone, but a cherry blossom floating in the wind as on a beautiful wave. Through this death, my spirit will become irrevocably bound to the one I love most, and only through this death is this bond possible. Thus, the paradigm truly becomes: *If Japan is under attack, and if becoming a Kamikaze is the cost of eliminating the threat, then I will respond to my countrymen as if they were my kin (and defend them as such), and I will be willing to sacrifice myself because I will die a beautiful death and become permanently bonded to my loved one.*

Like parents rushing into a burning high-rise to save their children, young Japanese men threw themselves into the flames of Allied fire in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to save their country. Their country *was* their family, so the distinctions dictated by blood did not exist. There was no choice. Sacrifice meant saving one's family. Late-war Japan met every criterion for such desperation. It was existentially threatened by the Allied powers closing in to Japan's borders. The Allies positioned themselves near enough to actively firebomb Japanese cities, killing hundreds of thousands of citizens. The people were already well united after a decade of war, and kept strong ties between their soldiers

and the home front. And their soldiers were consumed by the ideal of self-sacrifice, so it was no great leap for them to choose the ultimate sacrifice, to die beautiful, aestheticized, cherry-blossom deaths.

These men did not go quietly into the night, however. They ranted, raved, begged and pleaded for another way. They were deeply conflicted and troubled people, grasping at the notion that their loved ones were being burned to death by Allied bombs back home, and only their deaths had even the tiniest sliver of hope to save them. These people could see that their country, their family, was on the brink of destruction. They made themselves into the Divine Wind – *the Kamikaze* – to save Japan and all they had ever known. Wouldn't I have done the same?

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