

U.S NAVY OPERATIONS IN WORLD WAR II

"ON THE VERGE OF BREAKING DOWN COMPLETELY"

**SURVIVING THE KAMIKAZE OFF
OKINAWA, 1945**



GUY J. NASUTI

Presented with the Compliments
of the
Director of Naval History



805 Kidder Breese Street SE
Navy Yard
Washington, DC 20374-5060
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*Naval History and Heritage Command
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Cover image: Battleship *Missouri* (BB-63) about to be struck by a Japanese Mitsubishi A6M “Zeke” fighter while operating off Okinawa on 11 April 1945. The kamikaze hit the ship below the main deck, causing minor damage and no casualties. A 40-mm quad gun mount’s crew is in action in the lower foreground. (Naval History and Heritage Command [NHHC], NH 62696)

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FOREWORD

Much has been written about our Navy's heroic actions in the Pacific Theater during World War II. The writings usually begin with the initial actions at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, progressing with our Navy taking its stand in the battles of Coral Sea and Midway, and culminating with the island battles necessary to ultimately attack the Japanese home islands. As heroic and fierce as all these battles were, requiring great sacrifice and courage from American sailors, perhaps none were more demanding than the attacks on our ships during the kamikaze campaigns in late 1944 and early 1945. The story of how devastating these actions were to our war effort and our ships has been detailed in numerous stories and texts, but most histories concentrate on the engagements themselves, the battle damage to our ships, and sadly, the horrific casualty numbers.

In this book, Guy Nasuti captures the story behind the story. It is the story every sailor who has served on sea duty knows must exist. It is the story of the toll that battles can inflict when those who are fanatically committed to death seek the destruction of those who courageously fight so that they and others might live. In telling this story, Guy addresses the physical and psychological effects those who endured the campaign suffered.

This is something with which I have some personal experience. My father was a young sailor serving aboard the battleship *Mississippi* (BB-41) during this battle. Lying about his age, he joined the Navy at 16, and arrived in the Pacific Theater in 1943. Although he didn't share many of his experiences with me, there were two occasions I distinctly remember, both of which involved kamikaze attacks. On the first occasion, I overheard him telling some poker buddies about being sent for battle messing rations for his 40mm gun crew after an extended period at battle stations, and how they were killed by a kamikaze hit in his absence. The other instance occurred while I was looking at a photo of night antiaircraft fire during such an attack. I remember asking him, "How could anything fly through all that?" His simple reply was, "They flew through it as if it wasn't there."

In capturing this human experience and the price sailors paid for their uncertain life expectancy, Guy brings forth, perhaps for the first time, how this deeply affected those who endured. It goes far in explaining why some, such as my father, never forgot it and how they managed for those long years before we finally put a name to and treatment for the trauma such things cause, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Every sailor who faces the possibility of sailing into harm's way, as well as anyone who values the price of service to our country exacts, should read this. It will bring home the sacrifice required in conflict, the value of being prepared with those skills to save the ship, and the resiliency of the human body and spirit to endure the chaos of war.

James L. Herdt
9th Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy
1998–2002

PREFACE

As a U.S. Navy veteran, I know a little of what sailors serving on a ship for weeks and months at a time experience in combat-like situations. I began writing a series of short essays for the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa in April 2020, just as much of the nation began struggling with the coronavirus disease. As the shutdown unfolded, I began wondering how American sailors at Okinawa, undergoing their own daily dread of kamikaze attacks for days and weeks with little end in sight, withstood their new reality. It remains difficult for many of us, so far removed from the fighting in those early months of 1945, to imagine young men willingly flying aircraft into a moving ship in order to kill as many other young men as possible. What I am hoping to do with this book is expand upon specific themes the short essays often hinted at, but did not allow for. Rarely touched upon in the literature of the battle was the necessity of damage control aboard ships hit by kamikazes, the immense strain suffered by crews at the radar picket stations, and the grief for shipmates killed as the result of kamikaze attacks.

Like so many other Americans, I became enthralled with those of my grandparents' generation and their stories from World War II. In particular, the stories my grandfather, a former infantryman with the 9th Infantry Division who fought in Normandy, shared with me (and only me). The "Greatest Generation," as they have become popularly known in the past few decades, rarely spoke with anyone about the difficult months and even years spent far from home, suffering deprivations borne in battle, or the difficult loss of friends to enemy action. What I have found interesting in speaking with the veterans of Normandy, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, or a myriad of other battles is how their stories are almost universally positive, such as a friend's humorous antics in boot camp, or a thrilling but often clumsy escape from the clutches of the military police after a bar brawl. Often left out are the stories of the horrors faced in the midst of so much death, or losing many good friends to enemy fire. I noticed it sometimes became necessary to probe the few kamikaze survivors I have had the privilege to interview for further insight into the attacks on their ships, which they

eventually shared. For several of them, even several decades later, the memories remained fresh. However, the majority of American veterans believed fighting the war was nothing more than a job they had to do. Once completed, they could finally return home to live in the peace that they and their comrades well deserved.

As the years and decades passed, the veterans of the most destructive war in history took their rightful place in the nation's consciousness as heroes (a label they were the first to refute). In their twilight years, the men and women that served during the war finally began to open up about the more difficult events and emotions they experienced. Several repositories, including the Library of Congress and the National World War II Museum, began hurriedly collecting interviews with aged veterans of the European and Pacific battlefields. Terrific as this was for posterity, many historians generally treat oral histories conducted decades after an event with a healthy dose of cynicism.

The reasons for this are many, but generally the assumption is that human memory is often unreliable—the further away a person is removed from the event, the greater small details have a good chance of being mistaken or forgotten. These occasionally erroneous details (not only limited to names and dates) can often skew a narrative or lead to gaps in the historiographical account of an event. For years, I was under the mistaken impression that my grandfather had landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day (because that is precisely what he had told me). When I got older and began researching his unit's involvement in the Normandy campaign, I discovered my grandfather indeed landed on D-Day +4 and not at Omaha, but at Utah Beach.¹ This seemed highly forgivable, as most enlisted men often knew very little about where they were, other than the country or area of operation in which they served. Often, in the fog of war, even this seemingly small, but important, detail remained unknown to them.

Still, many historians, including me, believe these testimonies can help an audience gain better insight into the conditions, thoughts, and actions of participants in extreme life or death situations that most of us never encounter. A smaller piece of a much larger puzzle gets filled in, and

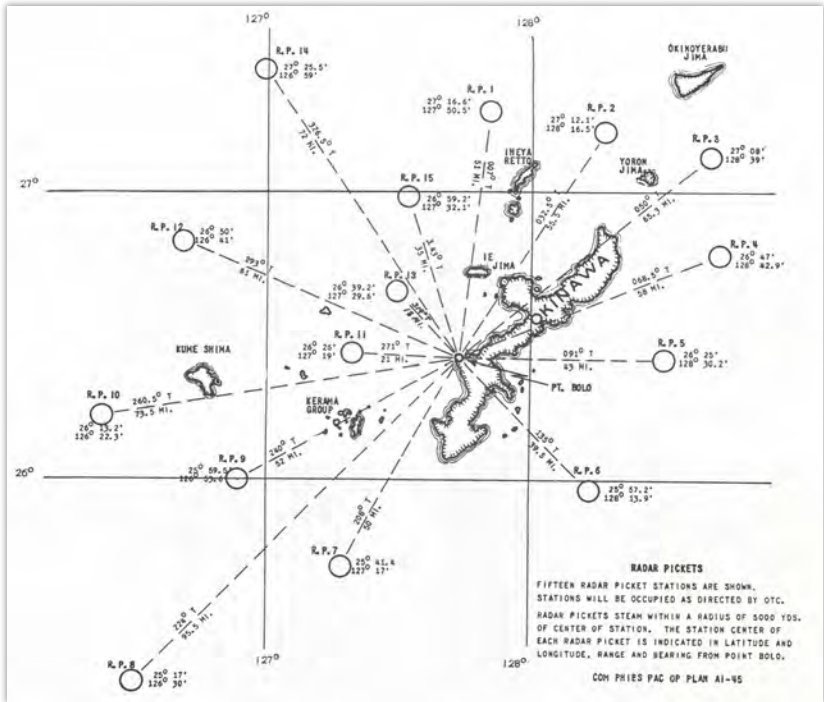
1 D-Day +4 is 10 June 1944, four days after D-Day (6 June 1944).

we can gain a better understanding of a person's involvement, no matter the size of the role they played in a historical event. Often, I found the testimonies from the Battle of Okinawa sailors were also great sources for an invaluable quote or two. I remained in awe at their abilities to maintain matter-of-fact attitudes and plainspokenness, even at times allowing raw emotion to spring forth from the recounting of their experiences. Aside from helping save the world from tyranny, another of the greatest gifts bestowed by the victors are the oral histories they have left behind. The ranks of the World War II veterans continue to thin, and I firmly believe I will not be the only one to feel the loss when all are gone. I humbly dedicate this book to all of them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Two people in particular made this book eminently more readable than it otherwise might have been. Martin R. Waldman and Charles E. Brodine Jr., both supervisors, colleagues, and friends, acted as constant sources of guidance but also spent countless hours carefully copyediting the manuscript and suggesting ways to improve the text. I am also indebted to several other colleagues and friends who read drafts, made suggestions, or caught errors that I overlooked, including Robert J. Cressman, Christopher B. Havern, Tyler R. Bamford, Richard A. Hulver, Jeremiah D. Foster, Pedro A. Loureiro, Stephanie Harry, Shawn R. Woodford, Mark L. Evans, James Slater, and NHHC's Publishing and Website Management Branch. Laura A. Waayers, Michael D. Rhodes, and Timothy A. Duskin of NHHC's Archives helped immensely in suggesting and locating the records used to write several of the ship histories appearing in this volume. Finally, branch head Gregory D. Bereiter first proposed and supported this project from its inception and granted its editors the time and resources necessary to see it through to completion.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this work to the memories of four men, now sadly gone from this world, who inspired me to continue telling the stories of those who have served our great country and in their own small roles helped contribute to maintaining its freedom. First, I dedicate this book to my grandfather, a combat veteran wounded during World War II, who started me on the journey of discovering my love for history by sharing with me his own war stories. Secondly, I dedicate this book to my father, a former signalman second class petty officer in the Navy, who inspired me with his descriptions of faraway adventures in foreign lands and who instilled in me a fascination with American history. He and I would have phone conversations (deeply missed now), sometimes for hours, about the battles and leaders in the European or Pacific Theaters. Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to the memories of two kamikaze attack survivors, Bruce F. Meyers (*Bunker Hill* [CV-17]) and Jack V. Stewart (*Essex* [CV-9]). Both of these old sailors patiently shared their war stories with me, even the difficult parts, and for that, posterity will remain forever grateful.



Radar Picket Stations at Okinawa. Map reprinted from "Battle Experience: Radar Pickets and Methods of Combating Suicide Attacks off Okinawa," COMPHIBSPAC Operation Plan Ai-45, (Washington, DC, 1945).

INTRODUCTION

During the savage fighting at the Battle off Samar, Philippines, on 25 October 1944, a Japanese Mitsubishi A6M5 Type 0 carrier fighter (Allied code name “Zeke,” also referred to as a “Zero”) purposefully crashed into the flight deck of the escort carrier *St. Lo* (CVE-63). As a series of deadly explosions tore the ship apart, nullifying heroic damage control efforts, its commanding officer gave the order to abandon ship. With most of the wounded evacuated first, *St. Lo* sank in less than 20 minutes, taking 114 of its crew with it.¹ As the first major Allied warship sunk by a kamikaze, *St. Lo*'s loss marked a chilling new milestone in an already horrifically brutal war. The premeditated attack by a single pilot to crash his plane into an



Off Samar Island on 25 October 1944, escort carrier *St. Lo* (CVE-63) becomes the first Allied ship struck by a kamikaze during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. (National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], 80-G-270516)

1 Robert J. Cressman, “*Midway II* (CVE-63),” *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* (DANFS), Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), updated 20 February 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/m/midway-ii.html>. Originally laid down as *Chapin Bay* and later renamed *Midway*, it received the name *St. Lo* in early October 1944.

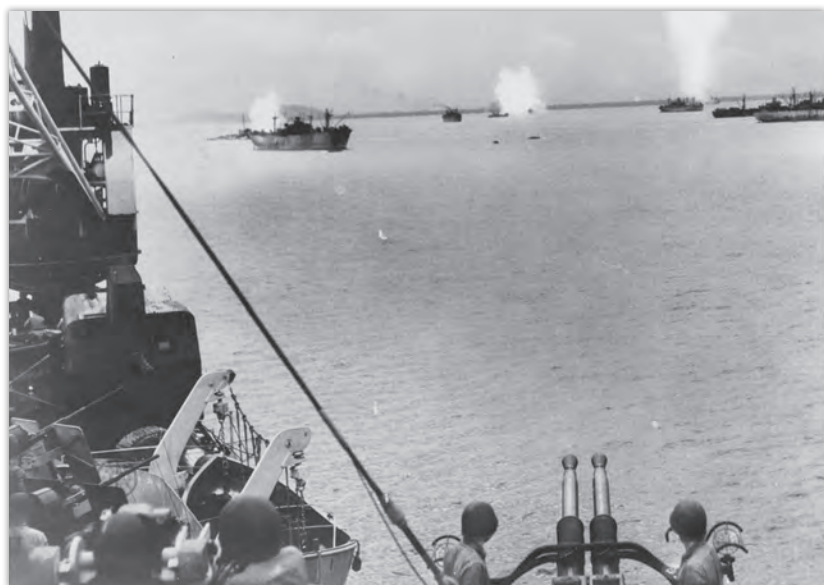
enemy ship ushered in the era of the infamous kamikaze, or “divine wind.”² Utilized as a defensive weapon by the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy, kamikazes initiated a deadly new nightmarish tactic that aimed to destroy as many U.S. Navy ships, and kill as many American sailors, as possible.

The slugfest between the American and Japanese navies off the Philippines in late 1944 witnessed the first sporadic suicide attacks of the war. A more organized series of kamikaze assaults would reach its terrifying crescendo during the Battle of Okinawa (1 April–22 June 1945). As the Allies closed in on Japan, steadily eroding the Imperial Navy’s fighting capabilities in each contest, the Japanese desperately sought a strategy to prevent the enemy from invading the home islands and force a negotiated settlement rather than an unconditional surrender.

To pursue this end, as early as 25 June 1944, Japanese officers began discussing the option of launching suicide attacks against Allied ships. “In our present situation I firmly believe that the only way to swing the war in our favor is to resort to crash-dive attacks with our planes. There is no other way,” Captain Motoharu Okamura (commanding officer of the 341st Air Group and Tateyama Air Base at Tokyo) told Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukudome (Commander Second Air Fleet). Okamura compared the tactic to a swarm of bees: “They Sting, They Die.”³ Even prior to suffering terrible losses at the Battle of Leyte Gulf, several officers in the

2 Robin L. Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks of World War II: A Complete History of Japanese Suicide Strikes on American Ships, by Aircraft and Other Means* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 7–8. The “divine wind” referred to the major typhoons that saved Japan from invasion by Kublai Khan in 1274 and again in 1281. However, the kamikaze units were originally termed the Special Attack Corps by the Japanese, with the Imperial Navy calling these units the *shimpu tokubetsu kogeki tai*. Japanese pilots referred to the units as *Tokko-tai*, or simply *To*. Although there were several vehicles and devices employed by the Japanese to conduct suicide attacks on Allied ships and personnel (including the rocket-powered *Oka* [Baka bombs], torpedo boats, and swimmers), this work will strictly discuss the attacks by air of Imperial Japanese Army and Navy aircraft. To avoid confusion, the author will simply use the term most often employed by Western historians when referring to Japanese pilots attacking U.S. ships, that of kamikaze. Historian Rielly further points out that although he (and many other historians) use the term “suicide” while referring to kamikazes, the Japanese never thought of the special attacks as suicide, but as a “means to an end.”

3 Peter C. Smith, *Kamikaze: To Die for the Emperor* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2014), 7. Two days prior to the Battle of Leyte Gulf, Captain Eiichiro Jyo, commanding officer of the carrier *Chiyoda*, sent a memo suggesting the formation of a special crash-dive unit; he also volunteered to command it.



Three kamikaze aircraft crash on three U.S. Navy ships off Leyte in November 1944. (NARA, 80-G-1022358)

Imperial Japanese air arm reintroduced the idea of aerial suicide attacks, and by year's end, the early stages of massed kamikaze tactics began to take shape. The empire's leaders embraced this strategy of sacrifice, hoping the suicide attacks ordered in the Philippines could delay a deteriorating combat situation. On 18 January 1945, however, the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War made the attacks official government policy and decided to convert all armament production to special attack weapons of a few major types.⁴

Just prior to securing the island of Iwo Jima in late March 1945, the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet began steaming for Okinawa, to stage for the invasion of Japan. In response, Japanese military strategists began hurriedly planning the new tactics for the Special Attack Corps (exclusively kamikaze aircraft from the Imperial Army and Navy) that would prove most effective in destroying enemy ships and preventing carrier strikes against Japan itself. After the war, Lieutenant Colonel Naomichi Jin, who led air

4 Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War: 1931–1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 183.



Aircraft carrier *Essex* (CV-9) prior to being struck by a Japanese Yokosuka D4Y Suisei "Judy" dive bomber during kamikaze attacks off Luzon, the Philippines, on 25 November 1944. The enemy plane, aflame from anti-aircraft fire, struck near the carrier's forward elevator. (NARA, 80-G-270738)



A kamikaze strikes *Essex* (CV-9) in its forward elevator while the carrier steamed off the Philippines on 25 November 1944. The single strike killed 15 and wounded a further 44 American sailors, giving the U.S. Navy a grim preview of the upcoming battle for Okinawa. (NHHHC, UA 478.12)



During the fight at Okinawa on 15 May 1945, a Zeke fighter is photographed just before it crashes into the sea after an unsuccessful kamikaze attack on carrier *Essex* (CV-9). (NARA, 80-G-324121)

strategy efforts for the Japanese during the battle for Okinawa, identified three reasons for the adoption of kamikaze tactics. First, orthodox methods of air warfare offered no prospect of victory in repelling Allied invasion forces. Second, suicide attacks were more accurate, deadly, and effective. Third, suicide attacks provided spiritual inspiration to ground units and the Japanese public at large. To this end, Japanese naval officers stridently reinforced this third point, repeatedly inflating the numbers of U.S. ships sunk by kamikazes in their reports back to Tokyo.⁵

Between Leyte and the start of the Okinawa campaign in March 1945, kamikazes harassed the U.S. fleet in gradually increasing numbers. Over time, the Japanese learned that kamikazes needed to be employed as frequently as possible and in large enough numbers to make a difference. They also refined their tactics after Leyte, allowing kamikazes to attack individually or in small groups. With the irretrievable loss of highly skilled and trained pilots, new trainees began flying monoplanes and biplanes.

⁵ Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 47.

Some of these slower and less maneuverable planes, incorporated into kamikaze units, allowed remaining veteran Japanese pilots to fly control aircraft to direct, distribute, and encourage attacks on Allied ships. At Okinawa, Japanese pilots continually probed the picket stations surrounding the island, looking for any gaps in the enemy's air and radar coverage, before relaying the information to suicide pilots attempting to exploit the gaps. The kamikazes then flew erratic courses from all directions and at varying altitudes in order to do the most damage to American ships. The Japanese also began timing their attacks to arrive over the U.S. fleet at dusk and dawn, adding nighttime attacks to the hazards faced by Navy ships. Such sporadic tactics not only increased the dangers, but sowed confusion, fear, and frustration into American sailors.⁶

The overall Japanese plan at the outset of Okinawa, termed Operation *Kikusui* (Floating Chrysanthemums), involved 10 massed kamikaze attacks against the U.S. fleet between the end of March and June 1945. The term "kikusui" originated from an ancient Japanese song celebrating a fountain of youth. The song, "Kikujidou," related the tale of Jiduo, a 700-year old hermit, creating kikusui by distilling the water (*sui*) from the chrysanthemum (*kiku*). An old Japanese family with the surname Okusukou adopted the term as their family motto, signifying the longevity of their line. By 1945, the Kamikaze Corps adopted the term as symbolizing the "achievement of eternal youth by youthful sacrifice to the Chrysanthemum Throne."⁷ The military operation (rather perversely named for falling flowers, symbolizing Japan's dead youth), although ultimately unsuccessful, resulted in a marked physical and psychological impact on American sailors. In the 10 main kikusui attacks, some 9,400 aircraft headed toward the U.S. fleet, though not all were kamikazes. Over the course of the nearly three-month battle at Okinawa, 1,840 Japanese sorties were suicide missions, of which 960 participating aircraft were

6 Shawn Woodford, "'The Most Difficult Antiaircraft Problem Yet Faced by the Fleet': U.S. Navy vs. Kamikazes at Okinawa," NHHC, updated 20 June 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-warii/1945/battle-of-okinawa/antiaircraft-problem.html>.

7 Smith, *Kamikaze*, 96.



A comrade tightens a *hachimaki* headband for a Japanese kamikaze pilot ready to sortie, c. 1944–45. The ancient samurai, in preparing for battle, wound this folded white cloth about their heads to confine their long hair and to keep perspiration from their eyes. The *hachimaki* thus came to symbolize manly composure and were worn by kamikaze pilots resolved to strike American ships. (NHHC, NH 73096)



A Japanese kamikaze pilot salutes as he receives his sortie orders. The two bars on his right sleeve indicate that he is a naval lieutenant. (NHHC, NH 73095)

destroyed, by either antiaircraft fire, combat air patrols (CAPs), or striking their targets.⁸

The majority of these attacks occurred against radar picket ships, which played a vastly important role in the battle against kamikazes off Okinawa. Realizing that Japanese air attacks against the invasion fleet would be intense, an early warning system to alert ships as they approached was required. Protecting the larger ships of the task force, the U.S. Navy established a ring of 15 radar picket stations around Okinawa beginning on 26 March 1945 (see map at the beginning of the introduction). Manned by a destroyer and smaller supporting craft, the picket stations quickly bore the brunt of mass air attacks, with no fewer than 10 destroyer and escort vessels sunk, and another 32 damaged to varying degrees by the end of the battle in late June.⁹



Kamikaze pilots in full flight gear and likely to begin their final suicide missions, c. 1945. (NHHHC, NH 82344)

8 Smith, *Kamikaze*, 96.

9 Mike Yeo, *Desperate Sunset: Japan's Kamikazes against Allied Ships, 1944–45* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2019), 194.

As the defensive measures provided by the radar pickets quickly proved valuable early on in the battle, the Japanese almost immediately began targeting them at each of the picket stations ringing Okinawa. The massed kikusui attacks specifically targeted the pickets in order to knock out radar coverage at the station and allow successive waves of kamikazes to engage the capital ships of the main fleet undetected. Naturally, the most vulnerable to the kamikaze onslaught were the smaller destroyer and escort vessels (not always affectionately referred to as “tin cans”) at the varied radar picket stations. Sailors remained at their battle stations for hours or were recalled several times throughout the day and night. Enduring daily suicidal attacks against their ships, all while attempting damage control to maintain watertight integrity if struck, took a tremendous toll on crew morale and the ability to make quick, dependable decisions. Often, these decisions led to combat fatigue, accidents, and a breakdown of combat readiness. More far-reaching was the psychological trauma inflicted upon these men, some of which would haunt the memories of tin can sailors long after the war was over. With this in mind, let us examine how American sailors dealt with each of these challenges in turn, starting with their efforts to deal with the immediate impact (both physical and psychological) of a kamikaze attack.

The 10 Major *Kikusui* Attacks during the Battle of Okinawa

Operation *Kikusui* was the generic name given for the 10 major attacks against the Allied invasion fleet and their covering task forces during the March–June 1945 battle off Okinawa. During the 10 main *kikusui* attacks, some 9,400 aircraft sortied towards the U.S. fleet, though not all were kamikazes. There were also patrol aircraft, escorts, and bombers involved. Over the course of the nearly three-month battle at Okinawa, 1,840 Japanese sorties were suicide missions. Of the 1,465 kamikaze aircraft involved, 960 were destroyed by antiaircraft fire, combat air patrols, or impact with their targets.¹

CHRONOLOGY OF OPERATION KIKUSUI ATTACKS

Number	Date	Navy Planes	Army Planes	Total
1	6–7 April 1945	230	125	355
2	12–13 April	125	60	185
3	15–16 April	120	45	165
4	27–28 April	65	50	115
5	3–4 May	75	50	125
6	10–11 May	70	80	150
7	24–25 May	65	100	165
8	27–28 May	60	50	110
9	3–7 June	20	30	50
10	21–22 June	30	15	45
Total		860	605	1,465

Source: United States Strategic Bombing Survey (Pacific) Naval Analysis Division, *The Campaigns of the Pacific War* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 328.

Note: The above chart shows the numbers of aircraft involved in the 10 *kikusui* attacks during the Battle of Okinawa from 6 April–22 June 1945.

¹ Smith, *Kamikaze*, 96.



Crashing very near carrier *Essex* (CV-9), off Okinawa on 14 May 1945, a Zeke kamikaze aircraft makes a futile attempt to escape intense anti-aircraft fire. Note the plane's broken tail and hole in its wing. (NARA, 80-G-324120)

PART 1

EVERY SAILOR A FIREFIGHTER

The strain on the destroyer crews in the first month after the invasion of Okinawa (1 April 1945) increased substantially after the Japanese began massed kamikaze attacks against Allied ships. Launching the first four of 10 kikusui operations in the first month of the battle alone, the seemingly ceaseless attacks by Japanese aircraft against the picket stations were intended to sink the smaller destroyers, taking out the radar, before striking the capital ships. Sailors not only constantly watched the skies for enemy air raids, but also kept alert for surface contacts and various other threats. Despite their best efforts, kamikazes sometimes slipped through, crashing into ships and causing significant damage. In these instances, the difference between life and death often came down to swift, well-executed damage control by crews of targeted vessels. In addition, although luck, fate, and the enemy's determination to kill them played roles in their survival, the resolve and skill of the American sailors off Okinawa should forever be remembered.

After the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, through the Battle of Savo Island on 9 August 1942, the U.S. Navy made huge strides in damage control. Banning flammable material on all warships, as well as scraping off years-old paint from decks and bulkheads, reduced the chances of shipboard fires burning out of control. The introduction of better firefighting equipment—including the fog nozzle, foam generators, and fireproof clothing—improved the odds of damage control teams in successfully battling and suppressing fires at sea. The Navy also established damage control and firefighting schools, leading to the training of teams of sailors who specialized in those fields and went out to the fleet to train others. The results from these changes became evident at the Battle of Tassafaronga on

30 November 1942, after four heavy cruisers suffered damage that only months earlier would have resulted in the loss of all four. By early 1945, U.S. Navy ships possessed crews that were highly trained in all aspects of damage control, training put to the test repeatedly by the kamikazes at Okinawa, and the results of which sometimes seemed more a result of luck than the skill of the sailors.¹

The old axiom that every marine is a rifleman could certainly be applied to sailors and firefighting as well. Every sailor is a firefighter at sea, because one cannot simply call the fire department to fight fires on board ships. Therefore, American sailors learned through training and experience borne in battle how to fight fires and extinguish them in order to save their ship from conflagrations or explosions that could potentially send them to the bottom of the ocean. During normal routines at sea, damage control remained important, but during months-long battles, it



Enterprise (CV-6) crew members engage in firefighting operations on the carrier's flight deck after a kamikaze crashed into it on 20 March 1945. The burning planes are Grumman F6F Hellcats. (NARA, 80-G-274216)

1 Adrian Stewart, *Kamikaze: Japan's Last Bid for Victory* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2020), 105–6.

became imperative to the survival of ship and crew. At Okinawa, damage control was an unremitting effort to keep a ship afloat and provide water-tight integrity following severe structural damage caused by enemy bombs or the deadly crash of one or more kamikazes.

Although there are several stories of heroic U.S. Navy ship crews that fought off the omnipresent kamikaze threat at Okinawa, few equal that of the destroyer *Laffey* (DD-724). The indomitable veteran of the landings at Normandy, Luzon, and Iwo Jima steamed for Okinawa on 21 March 1945 with Task Force 54 (TF 54). On 13 April, after participating in the capture of Kerama Retto and providing screening duties, the tin can pulled into the naval anchorage at Kerama Retto, surrounded by the broken and battered remains of several other U.S. Navy ships—all victims of kamikazes. The eerie, haunting anchorage had already received the nickname “the bone yard” by dark-humored American sailors. While his ship anchored,



Destroyer minesweeper *Rodman* (DMS-21) and destroyer escort *Witter* (DE-636) undergo repairs at Kerama Retto on 9 April 1945. Both ships received heavy structural damage from kamikaze attacks on 6 April, off Okinawa. (NHHC, NH 69111)



A starboard view of the destroyer *Morris* (DD-417) shows damage received from a kamikaze on 6 April 1945, while operating off Kerama Retto, c. June 1945. (NHHHC, NH 94448)



Ships in the Kerama Retto anchorage spread an anti-kamikaze smoke screen on 3 May 1945. The ship at left center is evacuation transport *Pinkney* (APH-2), which suffered damage from a kamikaze on 28 April. (NARA, 80-G-342629)

Commander Frederick Julian Becton, *Laffey's* commanding officer, received orders to embark a fighter-director team (consisting of two officers and three enlisted men). For the experienced Becton, that could mean only one thing—he and his crew were to steam immediately for and take up station on the radar picket line. In fact, *Laffey* was to report to radar picket station number 1, which already had a reputation as one of the deadliest of the forward positions off Okinawa, with several ships damaged there while conducting early-warning missions of Japanese aircraft sorties for the fleet.²

Two days later, on the morning of 16 April 1945, *Laffey* arrived nearly 30 miles north of Kerama Retto when air search radar detected several planes incoming from north of its position. While its fighter direction officer requested CAP aircraft, the destroyer began varying its course and speed. Soon after, *Laffey's* radar picked up too many approaching aircraft to count. The enemy were part of Kikusui III, involving 165 kamikaze aircraft and another 150 assorted planes providing escort and conventional strike sorties. Realizing CAP protection would not arrive until later, Commander Becton knew he and his men were in for the fight of their lives.³

By 0830, Japanese planes appeared and began attacking *Laffey* in a relentless 80-minute assault by at least 22 kamikaze aircraft and dive-bombers. During the battle at radar picket station number 1, *Laffey's* crew fought back valiantly, shooting down at least eight aircraft (six in the first 12 minutes of the attack) and damaging all six of the kamikazes striking it. The destroyer received immense damage from four enemy bombs (in addition to those carried by the six kamikazes targeting it), while fires raged near the ordnance stacked near the gunners and ammunition handlers. With the loss of its after 5-inch mount, one quad-mount 40-millimeter gun destroyed (and another on fire), a rudder jammed 26 degrees over, and both surface and air search radars destroyed, the situa-

2 Robert J. Cressman, “*Laffey* (DD-724),” DANFS, NHHC, updated 20 May 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/l/laffey-ii.html>. For further reading on the kamikaze attacks against *Laffey*, see F. Julian Becton’s *The Ship That Would Not Die* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing, 1987).

3 Cressman, “*Laffey*.”

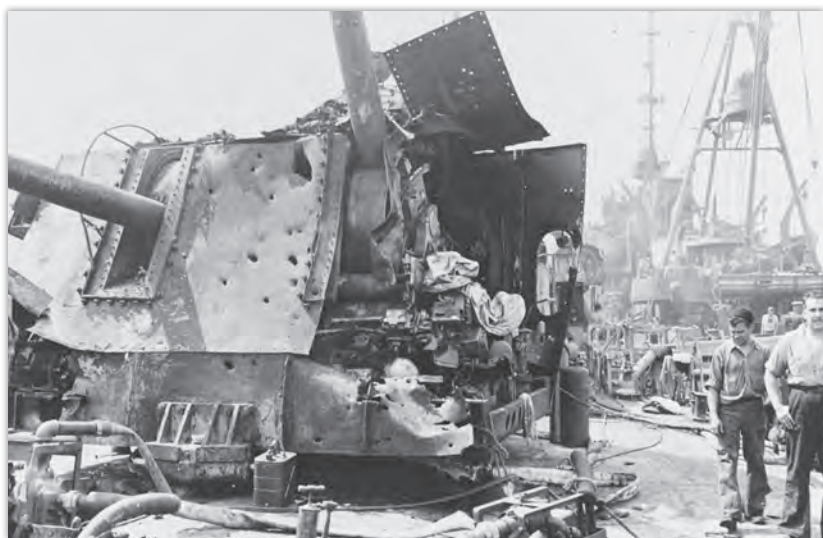
tion on board *Laffey* undoubtedly appeared grim to both the Japanese and the ship's own crew. Upon being asked if the crew should abandon ship, however, Commander Becton declared resolutely, "No! I'll never abandon ship as long as a single gun will fire!"⁴

Laffey's crew never wavered in their duties. Despite the chaos all around them, they continued to conduct extraordinary damage control measures that saved the ship during the barrage of kamikaze aircraft strafing, bombing, and suicide runs. While Commander Becton deftly maneuvered the destroyer, its 20-millimeter gunners kept up intense antiaircraft fire at incoming enemy planes while other men bravely battled the flames caused by aviation gasoline spreading across the after part of the ship. As *Laffey* continued fighting, the CAP—U.S. Marine Corps Vought F4U Corsairs of Marine Fighting Squadron VMF-441—thankfully arrived to provide relief to the besieged destroyer. Courageously flying into friendly antiaircraft fire, the Marine pilots downed several kamikazes and chased off the remainder. When the attacks finally ended by 1100, *Laffey* had suffered a grim total of 32 dead and 71 (or 72) wounded. Although receiving the Navy Cross for the action, Commander Becton gave all credit to his crew, declaring, "Performance by all hands was outstanding. . . . Damage control parties were undaunted, although succeeding hits undid much of their previous efforts and destroyed more of their firefighting equipment. They were utterly fearless in combating fires, although continually imperiled by exploding ammunition. . . . Especially deserving of mention were the 20-mm gunners of whom at least four were killed 'in the straps' firing to the last."⁵

The sudden calm that descended upon the destroyer just after the attacks must have been jarring for the resilient *Laffey* sailors. The horrific aftermath of the fight likely caused exhaustion and an overwhelming sense of grief among the crew, especially upon seeing the twisted metal and fire-ravaged condition of the ship, as well as the bodies of dead and wounded shipmates scattered across its decks. On 17 April 1945, several

4 Samuel J. Cox, "H-045-1: "The Ship That Wouldn't Die (2)—USS *Laffey* (DD-724), 16 April 1945," NHHC, updated 16 April 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams/h-gram-045/h-045-1.html>.

5 Cox, "The Ship That Wouldn't Die."



Destroyer *Laffey* (DD-724) received severe damage from four bombs and five kamikaze hits on 16 April 1945 in action on picket station number 1, approximately 30 miles north of Okinawa. (NHHC, NH 75430)



Laffey continues steaming on picket station number 1 after being struck by five kamikazes, four bombs, and some near misses on 16 April 1945. (NHHC, NH 78233)

of *Laffey's* dead received a burial at sea according to naval tradition, as tugs towed it back toward Kerama Retto for hurried repairs. Renowned naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison stated, "Probably no ship has ever survived an attack of the intensity that she experienced."⁶ In recognition of the courageous and resolute conduct of *Laffey's* company on 16 April, its crew received well-deserved honors, including 2 Navy Crosses (Commander Becton and a posthumous award for Ensign Robert C. Thomsen), 6 Silver Stars, 18 Bronze Stars, a Navy letter of commendation, and a Presidential Unit Citation.⁷

The chaos at the picket stations continued throughout the battle, even as the ground war on Okinawa raged on. Destroyer *Isherwood* (DD-520), a veteran of 14 island invasions, had arrived off Okinawa on 26 March 1945. Actively participating in the initial pre-landing bombardments off Kerama Retto, it remained on station as troops from the U.S. Tenth Army stormed ashore on 1 April in the largest amphibious assault of the Pacific War. Two days later, on 3 April, *Isherwood* steamed with minesweeper *Swallow* (AM-65) and landing craft support (large) *LCS(L)-15* to a position off the beaches of Ie Shima to provide fire support for ground forces fighting their way inland. The destroyer remained in this role until 16 April, before receiving orders to help fellow destroyers *Pringle* (DD-477) and *Laffey* off Ie Shima, both of whom were victims of kamikazes. Steaming to the area where the remnants of *Pringle's* crew were struggling afloat for their own survival, *Isherwood's* men helped their fellow destroyer sailors out of the sea to safety. The horrifically grim tale of *Pringle's* destruction, splitting in two before sinking, spread quickly around the ship, and left several of *Isherwood's* crew shaken. Adding to the nervous strain of the

6 Cox, "The Ship That Wouldn't Die."

7 Cox, "The Ship That Wouldn't Die." According to his citation card, Ensign Thomsen, serving as navigator on board *Laffey*, proceeded aft to assist in firefighting efforts after two direct hits from kamikaze crashes and a bomb detonation destroyed *Laffey's* radar. While fearlessly leading a hose team into compartment C-204-LM, where fires threatened to set off ammunition in the 5-inch mount 53 upper handling room and the 5-inch magazine, two further suicide planes struck nearby, killing the brave ensign. Although his primary duties were in the combat information center, Thomsen unhesitatingly led damage control efforts when the "urgency of the situation" threatened destruction of the ship.

crew, several of its sailors reasoned that it was only a matter of time before they themselves would fall victim to a kamikaze.

Just six days after the rescue of *Pringle's* survivors, on the evening of 22 April 1945, and while still on radar picket duty, *Isherwood's* crew finished the evening meal when warning of an impending air attack sent men scrambling to their battle stations. Sharp-eyed lookouts spotted three Aichi D3A type 99 carrier bombers (Allied code name "Val") flying low toward *Isherwood* from off its port quarter. Weaving in an attempt to make it difficult for the destroyer's guns to target them, the kamikazes closed in on *Isherwood* at an alarming pace. Seaman First Class Homer D. Stewart, USNR, watched in awe as one of the Vals dove on his ship, recalling the enemy pilot "looked just like a jockey riding a horse coming in on that plane."⁸ The kamikaze continued its steep dive on the destroyer, prompting Lieutenant Commander Louis E. Schmidt Jr., commanding officer of *Isherwood*, to maneuver away from the Val.



Destroyer *Isherwood* (DD-520) steams off Ie Shima during the fighting in mid-April 1945. (NARA, 80-G-K-4732)

8 Homer DeVon Stewart Collection (AFC/2001/001/56626), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 14 October 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.56626/>.

Stewart later theorized his captain's injudicious response inadvertently put *Isherwood* in the path of the kamikaze. Commander Schmidt "tried to take evasive action. As a matter of fact, if he'd have turned toward the plane instead of away . . . it would've missed us."⁹ At 1740, the kamikaze plowed into the 5-inch, number 3 gun mount, wiping out most of the men stationed there, as well as the ammunition handling room. Stewart, operating a 20-millimeter gun just below the main deck, recalled the kamikaze caused the barrel of a 5-inch gun to flip over, smashing his own gun. Aviation gasoline "ignited around the depth charge next to us."¹⁰ Realizing he had to put the fire out, Stewart grabbed a fire hose, voluntarily becoming the number one nozzleman. As he fought to keep the blaze from reaching a depth charge, an officer grabbed Stewart by the shoulders and ordered him below to seek medical attention for wounds the young sailor had failed to notice in his single-minded resolve to combat the fire.

Fighting furiously to save *Isherwood*, damage control crews continued battling the blaze that threatened to reach the destroyer's lone depth charge. A rescue ship coming alongside to offer assistance received a signal to stay away, while Commander Schmidt deliberately remained outside Kerama Retto's harbor, fearing an explosion aboard ship would damage other vessels anchored in the area.

Twenty-five minutes passed between the kamikaze striking *Isherwood* and the explosion of the depth charge. Only two minutes after arriving in the wardroom with several shrapnel wounds to his back, Homer Stewart felt *Isherwood* shake violently. A sudden blast turned the after engine room into a mass of twisted steel and killed outright a firefighting team of 10 men. With all fires put out and only its starboard engine functioning, *Isherwood* put into Kerama Retto, before steaming under its own power for Ulithi in May. It had suffered 42 men killed and another 41 wounded and would not return to action during the remainder of the war.¹¹ Stewart realized he would have been among the dead had he not been ordered below. Transferred to *Pinkney* (APH-2), a troop transport converted into

9 Stewart Collection, Veterans History Project.

10 Stewart Collection, Veterans History Project.

11 Stewart Collection, Veterans History Project.

a casualty evacuation vessel, Stewart remained on board for treatment of his wounds for a week before returning to *Isherwood*. Once safely back on board the destroyer, he later discovered a Mitsubishi G4M twin-engine bomber (code-named “Betty”) struck the transport shortly after he left. Told the enemy aircraft’s “burning wing went through the bed that was assigned to [him],” Stewart explained his two recent near death experiences, proclaiming, “So that’s why I think that I have the Lord on my side. All the way.”¹²

CARE OF THE WOUNDED

Shortly after the U.S. designated and began assigning destroyers to the various radar picket stations, the Japanese launched the first kikusui mission. Damage control measures on board ships struck by kamikazes remained of the utmost importance and ranged from protecting and keeping the ship afloat to the rescue of sailors at sea and medical care of the wounded. In fact, as noted in *Isherwood’s* story, wounded men often remained at their battle stations to continue firing at enemy aircraft, help extinguish a fire, improve watertight integrity, or provide care or comfort to the wounded. American sailors conducting all measures of damage control, therefore, were often a common occurrence, as exemplified in the story of the medium landing ship (rocket) *LSM(R)-188*.

On the night of 28–29 March 1945, *LSM(R)-188* conducted an aggressive harassment patrol only eight miles off the town of Naha, Okinawa Jima. At 0557 on 29 March, Japanese suicide dive-bombers appeared overhead, and the crew quickly went to battle stations, immediately opening fire with their antiaircraft guns. With one enemy plane already allegedly shot down, a second kamikaze came under fire from gunners on board *LSM(R)-188*. While at least three or four of the dive-bombers passed overhead, another enemy pilot circled from starboard to port and received the bulk of the gunners’ attention. The ship’s 40-millimeter guns opened up and set the enemy aircraft afire, at a range of only 150–200 yards. As

12 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 245.



A wounded sailor helps a shipmate wrapped in pressure bandages aboard hospital ship *Solace* (AH-5) after their ship was struck by a kamikaze. (NARA, 80-G-0346694)

the kamikaze passed overhead, part of the plane broke off, causing an explosion on deck. The dive-bomber crashed into the sea only 75 yards to starboard, burning intensely before sinking. Later, an intelligence officer asserted his opinion that the evidence of a high-order explosion on board resulted from a combination of the flaming debris of the aircraft and the pilot managing to drop a bomb onto *LSM(R)-188*.¹³

The resulting explosion destroyed the ship's 5-inch gun director tower, leaving a large hole in the main deck where it once stood. Watertight doors blew outwards, while bulkheads and decks throughout the compartments just below and off the main deck splintered and dished inwards. Radio communications failed throughout the ship, while fires raged top-side and below, threatening rockets stored in ready service racks on the

13 Report of Action against Enemy Aircraft off Okinawa Jima, Ryukyu Islands, *LSM(R)-188*, 29 March 1945, 1, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, Record Group (RG) 38, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD.



A wounded sailor is placed on a stretcher inside a temporary first aid station within the photo lab aboard carrier *Essex* after a kamikaze strike on 25 November 1944. (NARA, 80-G-270729)

main deck. Fortunately, the fires never reached the rockets' fuses, preventing further catastrophe.¹⁴

LSM(R)-188's crew quickly learned that saving lives and tending to the wounded was just as much a part of damage control as firefighting. One of the first sailors killed aboard ship was Pharmacist's Mate First Class Harold C. Zahn. The loss of the corpsman "was felt keenly," as several wounded men's cries for the well-respected "Doc" at first went unheeded.¹⁵ About three-quarters of an hour later, *LCI(G)-452* came alongside to deliver Pharmacist's Mate First Class William W. Lowder, replacing the fallen Zahn. While the crew of *LSM(R)-188* battled the fires, high-speed transport *Loy* (APD-56) and the venerable battleship *Arkansas* (BB-33) passed badly needed blood plasma to the stricken ship for treatment of its wounded. Nine men were cited in the after-action report for gallantry

14 Report of Action against Enemy Aircraft off Okinawa Jima, 1–2.

15 Report of Action against Enemy Aircraft off Okinawa Jima, 2.

during the short but deadly fight with the enemy. Seaman First Class Michael R. Masoka, despite burns to his eyes and face from the explosion, managed to drag his gun captain to safety from their 5-inch gun mount. Despite being unable to see due to cuts caused by flying shards of glass, Masoka also helped care for his wounded shipmates.¹⁶

After observing Zahn's death, Yeoman Third Class Fred N. Piedmonte sprang into action, procuring medical supplies, dressing wounds, and performing other duties normally only performed by trained corpsmen. Gunner's Mate Second Class Walter R. Venters, despite being seriously burned, toured the ship after the explosion, turned on the remote control magazine sprinkling valves, and contributed valuable damage control efforts. The wounded gunner's mate's actions made it possible for the crew to extinguish the fires as soon as pressure resumed to the water mains. He also went on to treat the wounded until he received orders to lie down to allow medical personnel to work on him. His commanding officer, Lieutenant Harry C. Crist, noted, "The work of this man was largely responsible for the saving of the ship."¹⁷

After the incredible damage control performance by its crew in saving *LSM(R)-188*, it steamed under its own power to Ulithi. Despite the loss of radar, communications, and all aft guns, the ship underwent repairs and rejoined the battle as an ammunition carrier. In all, *LSM(R)-188* suffered 15 sailors killed in action and 32 wounded, providing a grim preview to the heavy casualties sustained by the Navy during the Battle of Okinawa.¹⁸ While the sailors on board *LSM(R)-188* valiantly employed damage control measures to save their ship and comrades, the attacking kamikazes unfortunately did not always provide sailors the time or opportunities to conduct ship-saving abilities. The men serving in destroyer *Pringle* would discover such an unfortunate event through no fault of their own.

16 Report of Action against Enemy Aircraft off Okinawa Jima, 7.

17 Report of Action against Enemy Aircraft off Okinawa Jima, 8.

18 Report of Action against Enemy Aircraft off Okinawa Jima, 9.

DOOMED TIN CANS

Keeping the pressure on the U.S. Navy, the Japanese launched Kikusui III on the morning of 16 April, sending up approximately 500 aircraft, of which 220 were kamikazes. After staging off Ulithi for the upcoming invasion of Okinawa, *Pringle* weighed anchor on 27 March 1945. Joining the screen for Transport Group Baker, it arrived off Okinawa on the morning of 1 April and assumed screening duties while troops of the Tenth Army landed at their assigned beaches. After spending 6–13 April performing escort duties, *Pringle* received orders to picket station number 14 on the 14th, steaming to approximately 70 miles northwest of Okinawa's Motobu Peninsula.¹⁹

Sonarman First Class Jack Gebhardt had already witnessed firsthand the devastation suffered by the tin cans. Steaming into Kerama Retto on 14 April, *Pringle's* crew gawked at several damaged destroyers at anchor in the harbor, most victims of suicide attacks. No stranger to kamikazes,



The destroyer *Pringle* (DD-477) steams off Pearl Harbor, c. 1943. (NARA, 19-N-48619)

¹⁹ Stephanie Harry, "*Pringle* (DD-477)," DANFS, NHHHC, updated 10 February 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/p/pringle.html>.

the crewmembers of *Pringle* had already experienced these devastating tactics during the invasion of the Philippines in November 1944. The day after it arrived at Leyte Gulf, suicide pilots attacked the anchored fleet on an almost continuous basis, causing sailors to remain at battle stations for hours on end. Petty Officer Gebhardt recalled the stress from the near constant attacks escalated throughout the battle and “fear could be seen in the eyes of every man.”²⁰ On an escort run to Mindanao in December 1944, Gebhardt watched a kamikaze crash into an ammunition freighter, exploding in a blinding flash. The pilothouse from the ammunition ship landed on board a nearby ship, which in turn also blew up. “The debris rained down on *Pringle*, almost a full mile away from the blast,” recalled Gebhardt.²¹ There were no survivors from the freighter, and the enemy air raids continued incessantly.

While patrolling its station, the radar picket ship reported multiple air contacts on radar at 30 miles out. At 0815, while a CAP of F4U Corsairs flew overhead for protection, a group of enemy aircraft approached from the north-northwest. Chasing some of the enemy off, the Corsairs eventually returned to base without being properly relieved. With more enemy aircraft approaching by 0840, further requests for a new CAP went unheeded. Eleven minutes later, a kamikaze began a suicide run at *Pringle*. The destroyer helped send the kamikaze down in flames before managing to turn another away with a hail of gunfire.²²

At 0910, three Vals flew toward the task group at an altitude of 2,000 feet, weaving in and out of range, keeping just outside of gun range from 11,000 to 12,000 yards. *Pringle*’s 5-inch guns opened fire when the Vals closed to within 10,000 yards, splashing the first kamikaze. Lieutenant Commander John L. Kelley Jr., the destroyer’s commanding officer, later

20 George A. Tusa, ed., “War in the Pacific: Actions in the Philippines by Sonarman 1st Class Jack Gebhardt,” updated 22 September 2015, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/library/oral-histories/wwii/war-in-the-pacific-actions-in-the-philippines-by-sonarman-1st-class-jack-gebhardt.html>.

21 Tusa, “War in the Pacific.”

22 Harry, *Pringle* (DD-477).

stated that the enemy pilots' constant maneuvering fatigued his gun crew loaders.²³

One of the Japanese pilots began a shallow dive from 1,000 feet, coming about off *Pringle's* stern. At 0920, the kamikaze slammed into the destroyer's forward stack, obliterating the starboard wing of its bridge and smashing through the main deck into the forward fireroom. At 0926, an explosion tore through *Pringle*, splitting it in half and sending it quickly to the bottom in only five minutes. Commander Kelley later remarked, "There was no opportunity to institute any damage control. The word was passed to abandon ship. . . . The men who were injured . . . were later helped on a life raft."²⁴

After giving the order to abandon ship at approximately 0931, survivors spent the next two to three hours awaiting rescue as the battle still raged around them. Kelley listened as his men sang songs to pass the time and resumed waiting. The reason for the delay in picking up the survivors occurred due to the continual harassment of the rescue ships by Japanese aircraft. High-speed minesweeper *Hobson* (DMS-26), already struck by a kamikaze's bomb on its main deck during the fighting, noted in its after-action report that the enemy pilots were attempting to strafe *Pringle* survivors. After holding off the kamikaze threat, *Hobson* eventually pulled 100 *Pringle* survivors from the sea, at one point firing its 20-millimeter guns at a pair of sharks swimming toward the last of the swimmers. *Hobson*, *Isherwood*, landing craft support (large) *LCS(L)-34*, and *LSM(R)-191* managed to rescue 251 *Pringle* survivors. In the end, 62 of *Pringle's* crewmembers lost their lives while 43 out of the 113 sailors wounded received transfer to the hospital ship *Hope* (AH-7). After Japan surrendered, Lieutenant Commander Kelley received the Silver Star for having fought off several attacking aircraft during the attack just prior to his vessel's sinking.²⁵

23 Narrative by Lt. Cmdr. J. L. Kelley Jr., USS *Pringle* (DD-477), 16 June 1945, 1123–24, Personal Interviews, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, RG 38, NARA.

24 Narrative by Lt. Cmdr. J. L. Kelley Jr., 1125.

25 Narrative by Lt. Cmdr. J. L. Kelley Jr.



A series of four images shows a Japanese kamikaze shot down by U.S. Navy anti-aircraft fire off Okinawa on 3 April 1945 while attempting to attack escort carrier *Wake Island* (CVE-65). In the foreground, sailors aboard escort carrier *Tulagi* (CVE-72) watch the enemy aircraft fall into the sea.



(Left to right, top to bottom: NARA, 80-G-339259; NARA, 80-G-339260; NARA, 80-G-339261; NARA, 80-G-339262)

The same day a suicide plane managed to sink *Pringle*, the Japanese damaged seven other U.S. Navy ships, including the carrier *Intrepid* (CV-11). Despite the heroism displayed on board the picket ships during the seemingly constant air attacks, the crews remained at a grueling and heightened state of alert, often manning battle stations for hours and sometimes days on end. With the front lines of the battle extended out to sea, the sailors fighting off Okinawa gained valuable experience in gunnery, damage control, and the care of badly burned and wounded shipmates, learning lessons that reduced the destructive toll kamikazes were increasingly exacting on the fleet. The severe stress, fear, and weariness, however, remained, taking a further toll on the crews of the tin cans. For Petty Officer Gebhardt, the memories of the shattered *Pringle* remained with him for the rest of his life. As he noted in an interview conducted after the war, “To this day I still remember the shipmates who didn’t survive. . . . The sight will never leave my mind or forget the faces of friends killed.”²⁶

26 Tusa, “War in the Pacific.”

PART 2

THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT

For the U.S. sailors serving on the picket stations at Okinawa, the constant state of alertness continued into the second and third months of the battle. In time, their hypervigilance began revealing cracks that inevitably led to telltale signs of what psychologists of the time called “combat fatigue.” Breakdowns in performance occasionally led directly to deadly mistakes in damage control, watchstanding, or shiphandling. Fighting off swarms of enemy aircraft proved both physically and mentally exhausting, and the constant stress manifested itself in various ways. For example, lulls in the action could lead sleep-deprived sailors to fall asleep at their general quarters stations, putting the entire ship at risk. If sunk, the survivors’ next battle involved waiting for rescue while enduring occasional strafing by Japanese pilots. American sailors also remained on the alert against terrifying shark attacks, or the possibility of becoming a prisoner of war of the Japanese. Despite all of the seemingly insurmountable problems caused by kamikaze attacks, camaraderie among the destroyer crews made all the difference in terms of survival. The small, tight-knit crews serving on the destroyers and escort vessels knew one another intimately, and in many cases had served for two or more years together. Closer than brothers, they looked out for, encouraged, and often died for one another. The destroyer sailors came to call their shared experiences on the picket station patrols the “graveyard shift,” due to the extreme vulnerability and danger involved while acting as early warning vessels for the fast carriers. Still, as the battle raged on into June of 1945, combat stress among American sailors began steadily making an appearance, with seemingly small mistakes leading to larger mishaps.

Perhaps no other ship exemplifies how combat fatigue affected a tin can crew's ability to handle and fight their ship as that of destroyer *Longshaw* (DD-559). Although ultimately not a victim of a kamikaze, the end result of its crew's fatigue led to an unfortunate accident and loss of the ship due to shore battery fire. Having fortuitously escaped kamikazes on two separate occasions in April 1945, *Longshaw* continued steaming off Okinawa into the first half of May. Conducting fire-support missions during the day and frequently participating in nocturnal bombardments on enemy positions inland, it only occasionally left its station, mainly just to steam around Kerama Retto anchorage to replenish its ammunition from any ship able to spare it.

This demanding tempo of operations would exact a heavy price on *Longshaw's* crew when at 1719 on 18 May 1945, the destroyer abruptly ran aground on Ose Reef—a circumstance most likely due to human error compounded by exhaustion. With the destroyer listing eight degrees to starboard, its crew battened down all watertight doors and began moving ammunition from below to the main deck. Lieutenant Commander Clarence W. Becker, its commanding officer, arrived to relieve the officer of the deck (and the ship's damage control officer), Lieutenant Raymond L. Bly Jr. The resulting action between *Longshaw* and Japanese guns ashore would later result in Lieutenant Bly's recommendation against keeping destroyers on the picket stations for weeks at a time without relief.¹

After several attempts to free the destroyer from the reef, Commander Becker welcomed help from fleet ocean tug *Arikara* (ATF-98). Assessing the situation, Lieutenant John Aitken, *Arikara's* commanding officer, advised Becker to wait for high tide in order to free *Longshaw*. Accepting the advice, Commander Becker had his exhausted crew move 5-inch ammunition from the forward section of the ship to the main deck on the fantail. As *Arikara* attempted to pull the stuck destroyer off the reef, both crews watched in horror as a Japanese shell splashed between them. While the tin can's crew frantically ran to their battle stations, the enemy shore battery struck the destroyer's forward engine room, and another round hit

1 War Diary of USS *Arikara* (ATF-98), May 1945, 3–5, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, RG 38, NARA. For a minute-by-minute account of *Longshaw's* battle against the Japanese shore battery, see *Arikara's* war diary entry for 18 May 1945.

amidships near a 40-millimeter gun mount. Further shells hit the number four 5-inch upper handling room, the bridge, the combat information center, and the number two upper handling room, all on the port side.²

Seaman First Class Bill N. Boston stood near the port side 40-millimeter gun mount when *Longshaw* took the first salvo from the enemy battery. “The first shot went in between us and the *Arikara*, and the next one was right on us in the port side,” he later stated.³ After helping carry ammunition from below to the fantail and attempting to flee the fires topside, he abandoned ship. Once in the water, however, Boston decided to “climb back onboard. . . . It had already quieted . . . and here are all these guys laying around dead.”⁴

After returning fire with four 5-inch rounds, *Longshaw* took a direct hit from the Japanese shore battery to its forward magazine, blowing off the forward part of the destroyer in a catastrophic explosion. Trapped below and having no way to escape, several sailors died even after the mortally wounded Commander Becker apparently passed the word to abandon ship before succumbing to his mortal wounds on the bridge. Still stuck on the reef, with communications knocked out and the commanding officer dead, word passed by mouth to abandon ship. While several of the crew attempted to put raging fires out using only two hoses, a few others began throwing the ammunition on the fantail over the side. For several more minutes, the Japanese continued firing, wounding several more men on the destroyer. Petty Officer Boston again abandoned ship, this time jumping off the opposite side of *Longshaw*, spending two hours in the sea before whaleboats finally picked him up. The firing ended as quickly as it began, and a strange silence, save for the burning fires and cries of wounded men, settled upon the water. Later that same day, after rescue ships picked up all remaining survivors, destroyer *Picking* (DD-685) scuttled the battered *Longshaw* by sending five torpedoes into its side.⁵

2 Guy J. Nasuti, “*Longshaw* (DD-559),” DANFS, NHHC, updated 18 July 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/l/longshaw.html>.

3 Bill N. Boston Collection (AFC/2001/001/3185), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 22 May 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2001001.31851.sr0001001/>.

4 Boston Collection, Veterans History Project.

5 Nasuti, “*Longshaw* (DD-559).”



The destroyer *Longshaw* (DD-559) patrols off Nakagusuku Wan, Okinawa, on 11 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-320329)



Longshaw is blown in half after running aground and taking fire from Japanese shore batteries on 18 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-333684)



On 18 May 1945, the destroyer *Longshaw* explodes off Okinawa. The ship had run aground and taken fire from Japanese shore batteries. *Longshaw* was ultimately destroyed by U.S. Navy gunfire and torpedoes after its crew abandoned ship. The other ship in this image may be *Arikara* (ATF-98). (NHHC, NHF-075-C.04)



A view of *Longshaw* three minutes after the forward magazine of the ship blew up. *Longshaw* ran aground and took fire from Japanese shore batteries on 18 May 1945. (NHHC, NH 62570)

Heavy cruiser *Salt Lake City* (CA-25) and large infantry landing craft *LCI(L)*-356 pulled 113 *Longshaw* survivors from the sea. The small 291-man crew lost 86 killed in action and another 95 wounded, for an appalling 62 percent casualty rate. Gunner's Mate Third Class Harry W. Leonard recalled being in the water "about an hour and a half" before a small boat came in to rescue him and several other survivors. After a troopship brought the men back to San Francisco, "We were told (by the Navy) 'don't tell anybody your ship was sunk . . . don't write letters, don't write any letters, everything's quiet.'" After calling his mother in Philadelphia, "the first thing she says is, 'My God, are you alright?'" "I said, 'What do you mean am I alright?' She says, 'Your ship was sunk.'"⁶



Survivors from *Longshaw* arrive on board cruiser *Salt Lake City* (CL-25) on 18 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-343594)

6 Harry W. Leonard, Harry Walter Leonard Collection (AFC/2001/001/32406), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 20 May 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.32406/>.

Lieutenant Bly, the damage control officer, laid *Longshaw's* loss "indirectly to the fatigue of officers and men." Citing long months of operating with little to no breaks in its schedule, the crew "had no recreation except the meager amount available" at Ulithi or Eniwetok, the facilities in both places so poor "that many men preferred to remain on board." Bly stated in an attachment to *Longshaw's* after-action report that the psychological condition of the entire crew contributed to the destroyer's sinking. His report claimed "several times after the first three weeks of the campaign [that] many of the men on board were on the verge of breaking down completely with combat fatigue."⁷

Lieutenant Bly believed a fair and regular rotation of the destroyers on station would have remedied crew fatigue. He also opined that men suffering combat fatigue be relieved of duties and transferred off the ship. The plan was twofold in that it would allow the individual a respite from the war, and arguably keep a ship's company safe, while avoiding potential human errors. However, with only 291 sailors assigned to *Longshaw*, Lieutenant Bly recognized that any system of rotating individual crewmembers was unlikely to win the approval of Navy leadership. Rotating ships and crewmembers that had trained and fought as a team in and out of the war zone during combat operations was not sustainable while ships continued taking damage from kamikazes. Bly later received the Silver Star for his efforts on board *Longshaw*, but the young officer's recommendations in the thick of the fighting at Okinawa unsurprisingly went unheeded. Nevertheless, while combat fatigue may have played a role in *Longshaw's* predicament, the Japanese continued to refine kamikaze tactics, slightly increasing their rate of destruction. The carnage both ashore and at sea continued unabated until Imperial Japan's ultimate defeat some two months after the Battle of Okinawa reached its conclusion.⁸

7 Nasuti, "*Longshaw* (DD-559)."

8 Nasuti, "*Longshaw* (DD-559)."

NEW DEADLY TACTICS BY THE ENEMY

The punishing tempo of operations was not the only thing that sorely tested the endurance and awareness of those serving off the picket stations. Sailors continued to adapt to new tactics of the kamikaze pilots as the battle wore on, which even in the later stages of the campaign still had the potential to surprise American commanders. Even veteran crews sometimes found themselves at the mercy of these relentless and ever-changing tactics employed by the kamikazes. One such ship was the destroyer *Morrison* (DD-560), which served on picket duty alongside several other ships with experienced crews.⁹

During the campaign, *Morrison*, a veteran of several battles and campaigns over the course of the Pacific War, held an impressive record at sea, including the destruction of an enemy submarine during the Okinawa campaign. While on station off the island on 31 March 1945, *Morrison* spotted



Destroyer *Morrison* (DD-560) underway c. mid-1944, in a photo taken from escort carrier *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73). (NARA, 243852)

⁹ Guy J. Nasuti, “*Morrison* (DD-560),” DANFS, NHHC, updated 12 August 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/m/morrison.html>.

and attacked Japanese submarine *I-8*. After dropping 11 depth charges and forcing *I-8* to surface, a furious half-hour gun battle erupted. While taking fire from the submarine's deck guns, the destroyer responded with an onslaught of 40-millimeter and 5-inch gunfire, sending *I-8* to the bottom.¹⁰

Not two weeks later, *Morrison* came to the assistance of sister ship *Anthony* (DD-515) after several suicide boats attacked that destroyer on the night of 11 April 1945. *Morrison* also assisted in sinking or damaging several Japanese landing craft making way for the northern section of Oshima Beach. Despite these and many other dangers that *Morrison* had already encountered, its next several assignments would prove to be some of the most hazardous of the war. On 14 April, the destroyer received orders to take up radar picket duty, and it steamed to the west to take its turn on the graveyard shift.¹¹

Near the end of the month, on 30 April, *Morrison* steamed north to take up radar and fighter-director duties. Picket station number 1 remained the deadliest spot on the radar picket line and scene of frequent kamikaze attacks, claiming a destroyer per day.¹² Expecting air attacks around the clock, the crew remained at general quarters for the next few days. On 4 May, at 0715, the anticipated attack finally materialized as 25 Japanese aircraft appeared to begin their assaults. While the CAP engaged the enemy fighters, forcing several kamikazes to break off their attack runs, a Zeke managed to drop a bomb near the destroyer, just missing *Morrison*'s starboard beam. At 0825, a Zeke or Val struck the destroyer's number 1 stack and bridge, destroying its radar, main battery, and radio. Gunner's Mate Third Class William A. Mann recalled, "The first one to hit us was close enough you could just see the guy sittin' there in the cockpit smiling. He was just as happy as he could be."¹³ As communications went down throughout the ship, a second kamikaze smashed into gun mount number 3 only minutes later, while the third to strike *Morrison*

10 Guy J. Nasuti, "The 'Graveyard Shift': The Most Dangerous Place off Okinawa," NHHC, updated 7 May 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1945/battle-of-okinawa/dangerous-okinawa.html>.

11 Nasuti, "*Morrison* (DD-560)."

12 Nasuti, "The 'Graveyard Shift.'"

13 William A. Mann Collection (AFC/2001/001/31662), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 14 October 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.31662/>.

(possibly a Zeke or Val) crashed into gun mount number 5. Attacked and taking severe damage from four enemy aircraft in less than five minutes, *Morrison* burned intensely, listing to starboard.

Remaining at his gun station, Mann quickly realized *Morrison* was in trouble and hurried to the main deck before he abandoned ship as it rolled over on its side. “Within ten minutes our ship was sunk and out of sight,” he remembered. “It gives you quite a feeling when you know that you’re going to have to swim.”¹⁴ With the ship’s intercom wiped out, most of the sailors below never heard Commander James R. Hansen’s order to abandon ship. Verbal orders quickly passed throughout *Morrison*, especially from Lieutenant Commander Jack Simpson, the executive officer, before two simultaneous and deadly explosions sealed the ship’s fate. “Everybody below deck went down with the ship,” Petty Officer Mann lamented, although a few from the forward and after engine rooms managed to survive.¹⁵

Sonarman Second Class Sidney Bick, wounded during the sinking, recalled the horror of seeing *Morrison* going down by its stern. “We were all scared to death,” he later stated. “I was lucky to slide off the ship before she went down. . . . I swam over to the captain and the next thing I know he is slapping a bandage to my neck.”¹⁶ As the men awaited rescue, Japanese aircraft strafed survivors, killing and wounding several more. After *Morrison*’s men spent a couple of hours in the water, landing craft support (large) *LCS(L)-21* arrived to pluck the survivors from the sea. Several of the men, helped on board due to wounds or exhaustion, neared complete collapse. “I couldn’t climb the cargo net,” Mann recalled, “I was so exhausted.”¹⁷ While most of the survivors recuperated at Guam before transport home, many of the more seriously wounded recovered on hospital ship *Mercy* (AH-8). The loss of *Morrison* and 159 of its crew at picket station number 1 proved one of the most deadly kamikaze attacks

14 Mann Collection, Veterans History Project.

15 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 256–57. For information concerning awards to Commander Hansen and the crew of *Morrison*, see the ship’s DANFS entry cited in note 9 of part two.

16 Sidney Bick Collection (AFC/2001/001/28051), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 14 October 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.28051/>.

17 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 257.

of the entire battle. Commander James Hansen, its commanding officer, later received the Navy Cross, the Navy's second-highest decoration for valor (second only to the Medal of Honor) for his actions against a nearly overwhelming enemy. In recognition of the crew who fought on board *Morrison*, the destroyer received eight battle stars during the war, as well as two Navy Unit Commendations, the second for its role during the graveyard shift at Okinawa.¹⁸

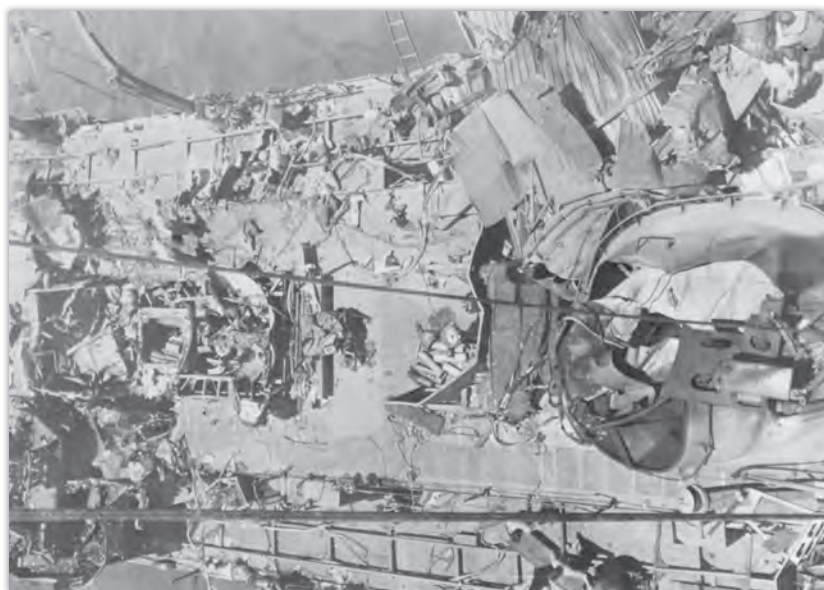
Another such instance of the Japanese refining the deadly tactics of kamikaze aircraft occurred in May 1945, when they targeted the destroyer *Little* (DD-803). Ordered to patrol the waters of picket station number 10 off Okinawa, *Little* steamed in company with light minelayer *Aaron Ward* (DM-34) and smaller vessels *LSM(R)-195*, *LCS(L)-15*, *LCS(L)-25*, and *LCS(L)-83* (commonly referred to by the destroyer men as "pall bearers").¹⁹ Continuing its early detection of impending air attacks, *Little* provided the fleet advance notice of any enemy aircraft sorties. The position of the picket ships so far in front of the rest of the fleet also increased the likelihood that *Little* and its companions would themselves become targets. Although well prepared for the possibility of attack at any moment, the unprecedented degree of coordination and tactical innovation exhibited by the Japanese kamikaze pilots when the attack finally arrived on 3 May stunned *Little's* crew.²⁰

As *Little* spent its fourth consecutive day at picket station number 10, Japan commenced Kikusui V, sending approximately 450 aircraft against Allied ships in various numbers throughout the week. The mass kamikaze attacks had at this point already sunk at least 12 ships, killing hundreds of sailors. As *Little* steamed through calm seas to the west, Seaman First Class Allen W. Barnhart stood at his general quarters station at gun mount number 4 reflecting on what sort of mentality drove the Japanese to launch suicide attacks, especially against the destroyers off Okinawa. He

18 Report of Action with Enemy Suicide Aircraft and Resulting Loss, USS *Little* (DD-803), 3 May 1945, 1–2, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, RG 38, NARA.

19 Guy J. Nasuti, "Those Suicide Pilots Knew Where to Hit: The Sinking of USS *Little*," NHHC, updated 7 May 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1945/battle-of-okinawa/sinking-of-little.html>.

20 Nasuti, "The Sinking of USS *Little*."



A view of the damage *Little* (DD-803) received during kamikaze attacks off Okinawa on 3 May 1945. Note the destroyer's greatly distorted forward smokestack in the lower center. This photograph was taken from the minelayer *Aaron Ward's* (DM-34) foremast while *Little* was in Kerama Retto on 5 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-330107)

remembered the horror that came over him as he thought to himself, “The Japanese were so suicidal that they were just murdering us.”²¹

At 1813 on 3 May, 18 to 24 enemy planes approached *Aaron Ward's* group from the west. The CAP of four Grumman F6F Hellcats scrambled to find the enemy, but failed, most likely losing the incoming enemy in the heavy cloud cover. Shortly thereafter, at approximately 1841, a suicide pilot plunged his mount into *Aaron Ward*, and a second attacked *Little*. Its crew opened up with 20-millimeter and 40-millimeter gunfire, hitting the Val, but the bomber continued its trajectory, crashing into *Little* amidships near its number 4 gun mount. A second kamikaze, hit by antiaircraft fire, crashed into the sea only moments later.²² Seemingly coming in from

21 Allen W. Barnhart Collection (AFC/2001/001/39392), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 18 October 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.67650/>.

22 Report of Action with Enemy Suicide Aircraft, USS *Little* (DD-803), 7.

every direction, two more kamikazes struck *Little* in quick succession, one amidships, in nearly the same spot as the first. The ammunition in the gun mount ready service began exploding, causing fires to ignite. The second aircraft, a Zeke, struck the destroyer amidships on its starboard side. A third kamikaze came down in a vertical dive and crashed into the torpedo mount and main deck, breaking the destroyer's keel and opening the lower decks to the sea. With no power throughout the ship, *Little* lay dead in the water. The kamikaze "just blew us up. . . . We were in deep trouble," Seaman Barnhart later remembered.²³

Seaman First Class Charles E. DeMann watched in horror from his battle station at a 5-inch gun above the bridge. After the last kamikaze struck the ship, he recalled, "I was blown off the top of the director and came down onto the bridge . . . maybe a drop of 25 feet."²⁴ Somehow still attached to his sound-powered telephone, he heard Commander Madison Hall Jr., the commanding officer, give the order to abandon ship. Shaking off the impact of his fall, DeMann staggered to the side of the ship and went over. It was fortunate that he did so, for at 1855, *Little* broke in two and slipped beneath the waves, some 30 miles off Kume Shima. As survivors entered the water to await rescue, the battle continued around them. Minutes after the destroyer sank, a kamikaze crashed into the medium landing ship (rocket) *LSM(R)-195*, sending it to the bottom. For nearly an hour, *Aaron Ward* fought on so smaller vessels in the group could save survivors from *Little* and *LSM(R)-195*, suffering six kamikaze hits itself during this time.²⁵

23 Barnhart Collection, Veterans History Project.

24 Charles E. DeMann Collection (AFC/2001/001/84788), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 20 May 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.87488>.

25 Report of Action with Enemy Suicide Aircraft, USS *Little* (DD-803), 7-8.

American Tactics against the Kamikaze

Throughout the Battle for Okinawa, the U.S. Navy continuously refined its combat tactics to counter the kamikaze threat by using several technological innovations and systems that had been developed throughout the war to thwart the enemy's aerial suicide assaults on the American invasion fleet. One such tactic was the use of aggressive fighter sweeps and strikes upon Japanese airfields to destroy the enemy's planes on the ground before they could even be launched in attacks against U.S. naval forces. Prior to the battle, the Fifth Fleet's fast carrier task force, Task Force 58 (TF 58), raided Japanese airfields on Kyushu from 18 to 19 March 1945, destroying an estimated 528 enemy planes. This was considered extremely effective as it resulted in as many Japanese aircraft being destroyed on the ground as in the air.¹

In the two years following the Battle of Midway, American carriers made great improvements in fighter direction by combining radar and the recently developed combat information center (CIC) to enable combat air patrol (CAP) fighters to intercept and destroy enemy aircraft before they could close with and attack U.S. ships. The CIC, making its first appearance in November 1942, was an "integrated human-machine system where officers and enlisted personnel used automated, semiautomated, and manual techniques to collect, organize, process, evaluate, and disseminate information."²

One of the more effective roles of the CIC, especially after kamikazes first began targeting U.S. ships off the Philippines, became that of fighter direction. As unidentified planes approached a ship, its long-range search

1 Nicolai Timenes Jr., *Defense against Kamikaze Attacks in World War II and Its Relevance to Anti-Ship Missile Defense*, Vol. 1, *An Analytical History of Kamikaze Attacks Against Ships of the U.S. Navy during World War II* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, Operations Evaluation Group, 1970), 61.

2 Timothy S. Wolters, *Information at Sea: Shipboard Command and Control in the U.S. Navy, From Mobile Bay to Okinawa* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 5. The loss of nearly 5,000 sailors killed during the campaign for Okinawa suggests the failure of the fleet's system of air defense. Wolters notes, however, that most on-scene commanders praised the CIC and fighter director teams for providing "timely information" prior to kamikaze attacks. Despite this praise, Wolters writes that a number of high-ranking Navy leaders expressed "displeasure over several equipment problems related to shipboard command and control," including Admiral Marc Mitscher, commander of the fast carrier task force. Mitscher believed that existing radars regularly failed to provide adequate warning against low-flying enemy aircraft, that ships' electronic equipment was too often disrupted by interference, and that the fleet's standard aircraft identification devices did not work owing to the congestion of ships in the battle zone. Vice Admiral Richmond K. Turner apparently agreed with Mitscher, expressing "similar sentiments." Wolters, *Information at Sea*, 216.

radar detected the enemy aircraft, or “bogey.” The radar operator then reported the bearing and range of the aircraft to the CIC, the tactical brain center of U.S. Navy ships, which then relayed the information via radio to American combat planes to intercept and destroy the enemy. Although improved fighter direction proved invaluable to countering the kamikaze threat, enemy pilots could occasionally slip through a CAP screen to hit their targets. Therefore, the most important anti-kamikaze technique utilized by the U.S. Navy during the Battle of Okinawa involved the use of radar picket ships, employed on a more frequent basis after the first kamikaze attacks at Leyte Gulf and as the Americans advanced on Japan.³

Tasked with alerting the larger ships of the fleet against incoming enemy aircraft, the radar picket ships created a perimeter around the entire island. The destroyers assigned this hazardous duty bore the brunt of kamikaze attacks as they were often the first ones spotted and targeted by Japanese pilots. As early warning radar helped alert the destroyers to approaching swarms of suicide aircraft, the adjustment of kamikaze tactics during the nearly three-month battle, combined with an increasing number of ships damaged or sunk, also caused the U.S. Navy to seek out better tactical solutions before the final invasion of Japan.

In terms of antiaircraft defenses, the Navy had significantly improved the firepower and accuracy of its antiaircraft weaponry throughout the fleet since the war began. On most warships, 5-inch/38-caliber dual-purpose guns superseded 5-inch/25-caliber and 3-inch guns for long-range defense, while 40-millimeter and 20-mm automatic cannon batteries replaced 1.1-inch guns and .30 and .50 caliber machine guns for short-range coverage. Newly installed radar and computer-equipped dual-purpose fire directors (Mk. 19, Mk. 33, Mk. 37, and Mk. 1 analog computer) calculated range and

³ Wolters, *Information at Sea*, 218. Other U.S. Navy tactics during the Okinawa campaign included prompt detection by ship radar and lookouts, expert recognition by sailors of enemy versus friendly aircraft, and the employment of maximum firepower provided by 40mm Bofors antiaircraft batteries. Maintaining an antiaircraft gun's maximum rate of fire became crucial as hits on an armored enemy aircraft did not always bring it down before it reached its target. Thus, firing until the aircraft disintegrated or hit the water was given the utmost importance. Ship commanders also employed speed and maneuverability (especially in smaller ships) to avoid kamikaze hits and ensured all nonessential personnel remained belowdecks during an action or an imminent attack to lessen casualties topside. Admiral Chester Nimitz also appealed to the Twentieth Air Force to bombard airfields in southern Japan in an attempt to destroy kamikazes before they could take off to strike U.S. ships.

bearing to automatically guide the 5-inch guns onto target. Variable time shells, incorporating tiny radar proximity fuses, were increasingly used to damage aircraft even without scoring a direct hit. Nevertheless, as most American sailors realized, even damaging an approaching kamikaze was not enough, as shot-up aircraft could continue their trajectory and strike a ship. Thus, it became essential to destroy the aircraft.⁴

Shortly after the end of the Battle of Okinawa, on 1 July 1945, the Navy formed TF 69, a special experimental unit under the command of Vice Admiral Willis A. Lee Jr. The unit, composed of battleship-turned-training ship *Wyoming* (AG-17), one cruiser, two destroyers, two destroyer escorts, two LSMs, three LCS(L)s, plus an assortment of drones and aircraft, was tasked with finding effective defenses in anticipation of even greater kamikaze strikes. Admiral Lee's outfit quickly began exploring innovations and technology for ships to employ in defending themselves against suicide attacks. The first, and most promising, adaptation, included a new



Crew of a Bofors quad 40-mm anti-aircraft mount onboard the aircraft carrier *Portland* (CV-33) in 1944. (NHHC, NH 81994)

4 Woodford, "The Most Difficult Antiaircraft."

3-inch gun able to fire proximity-fuse projectiles to knock enemy aircraft out of the sky. The 3-inch mountings were expected to replace the less reliable 40-mm mounts with one 3-inch mount substituted for each pair of the 40-mm mounts. Experiments with the 3-inch guns showed that anti-kamikaze firepower was increased by two to five times. By early July, the Navy Bureau of Ordnance requested "overriding priority" for the 3-inch project.⁵

In terms of radar, the Navy continued throughout the war to develop and test new types of various shipboard models. One of the first experimentations undertaken by TF 69, Project Cadillac, focused on developing a radar system with the ability to extend its surface reach beyond the horizon. By early 1944, faced with an increasing threat of kamikazes, the project's requirement changed abruptly to detecting low-flying aircraft approaching below the beams of shipboard radars. Navy technicians installed the new APS-20 radar in a Grumman TBF Avenger, linking the radar display to the host ships CIC via radio. The design allowed the APS-20 to operate in harmony with the ship's radar. Although testing began in February 1945, problems with the radio link feed were not resolved until May, and plans to equip four fleet carriers with the new radar system did not begin until after the war ended.⁶

During the first four months of kamikaze attacks, roughly October 1944–January 1945, the Navy's Operations Research Group (ORG) began analyzing conventional and unconventional enemy aircraft tactics. The tactics utilized by kamikaze sorties (unconventional) were estimated to be seven to ten times more effective than conventional assaults, accounting for 121 hits from 352 aircraft out of a total estimate of 1,444 Japanese aircraft attacking throughout the battle for the Philippines. The Japanese believed they had found the solution to wearing down the U.S. Navy's resolve to fight as the kamikaze success rate of 34 percent leapt higher than conventional aircraft scoring just 23 hits, or only a 2 percent success rate. During the battle for Okinawa, ORG reported unconventional attack estimates of 793 kamikazes with 181 (23 percent) hitting ships, and another 95 (12 percent) crashing near enough a ship to cause damage.

5 Trent Hone, "Countering the Kamikaze," *Naval History*, October 2020, 28–29.

6 Hone, "Countering the Kamikaze," 29–31.

Again, conventional attacks proved far less successful. Of 1,119 attempts, only 16 (a highly ineffective 1.4 percent) did any damage. Still, the majority of kamikaze pilots targeted the first ships coming into view, usually the radar picket ships, accounting for an incredible 86 percent of attacks. Compared to the 61 percent of unconventional attacks in the Philippines against all ship types, it is clear the radar picket ships at Okinawa received undue attention.⁷

To the Japanese it remained clear that the unconventional tactics of the kamikaze were worth pursuing and continuing at Okinawa. Realizing the war was already lost, but refusing an unconditional surrender, the Japanese military desired to exact maximum damage to U.S. ships in order to wear out American resolve to continue the war. What also remained clear was the U.S. Navy's determination to continue fighting, despite the numbers of men and materiel lost, all while making adjustments where needed. Although the advancements in radar, proximity fuses, and antiaircraft platforms made great strides from infancy through testing until final incorporation into the fleet in the final years of the war, the available technology only gave ships the equipment needed to defend against kamikaze attacks. In terms of learning, adjusting, and conducting the fighting necessary for victory, the fleet's survival continued to depend upon the determination and skill of the American sailor to adapt and overcome in the face of the chaos and carnage wrought by the kamikazes in the waters off Okinawa.

7 Hone, "Countering the Kamikaze," 32–35.

Approximately two hours passed before rescue came for the survivors of both ships. Petty Officer Barnhart remembered bobbing in the rough seas, darkness enveloping them. During the anxious period of waiting, Barnhart and his shipmates rode out the swells before suddenly spotting the beam of a searchlight not far from him. Astonished that anyone would turn on any type of light in a war zone, Barnhart watched with relief as a gunboat spotted him and put in near him to pull him from the sea. Despite the swift and deadly kamikaze attacks from nearly all sides, in such rapid succession, most of *Little's* complement of 339 men were rescued. Still, the loss of 30 sailors killed and a further 79 wounded only added to the dreadful toll of casualties the U.S. Navy continued to suffer off Okinawa.²⁶

Commander Hall, entering the water with his men, later wondered if the kamikazes sinking his ship did so out of luck, skill, or a combination of both. "That such coordination could be achieved is almost unbelievable," he later commented, "but such appears to be the case."²⁷ During the first few weeks of the battle, it appeared the kamikaze pilots, often operating individually, were able to strike targets based solely on luck. If able to survive the CAP and a seemingly impenetrable barrage of anti-aircraft fire, a lone kamikaze might get through to attempt an attack run. For many Allied sailors, the realization that the enemy was beginning to coordinate their suicidal attacks only increased their terror and fatigue. It appears that the Japanese pilots had not only learned to break up their massed assaults into smaller groups, but also to attempt strikes on vessels amidships from both the port and starboard sides. The kamikaze diving in vertically on *Little* from high above, smashing into and breaking it in two seemed to confirm this theory. *Little's* unfortunate crew were among the first (but not the last) to witness this innovative and deadly series of tactics employed by the kamikaze pilots. "Those suicide pilots knew where to hit," claimed Petty Officer Barnhart.²⁸

26 Barnhart Collection, Veterans History Project.

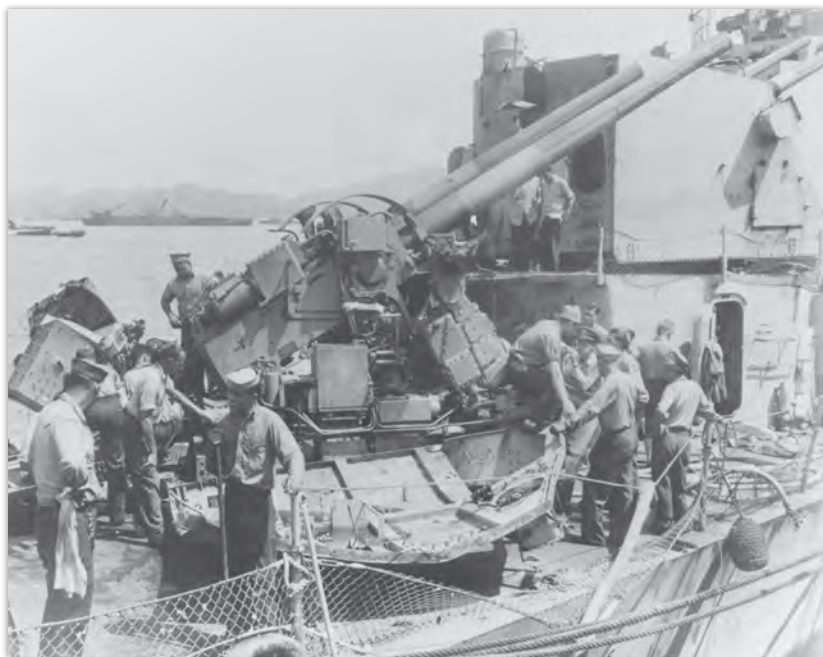
27 Stephanie Harry, "*Little* (DD-803)," DANFS, NHHC, updated 26 April 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/l/little-ii.html>.

28 Barnhart Collection, Veterans History Project.

TIN CAN BROTHERHOOD

U.S. sailors serving and working together—whether in the past, present, or future—naturally create bonds of brotherhood. Those bonds, strengthened in the heat of battle, were most common at Okinawa among the sailors on the destroyers. Relying on their fellow shipmates, often at the cost of their lives, the tin can sailors' bond remained unshakeable. Unfortunately, for the destroyer crews, the kamikazes continued to target them, even away from the picket stations, as was true of the unfortunate *Twiggs* (DD-591).

A veteran of several Pacific battles, including Luzon and Iwo Jima, *Twiggs* arrived off Okinawa on 25 March 1945, as part of a screen for the carrier *Ticonderoga* (CV-14). While en route, Seaman John W. Lindsay had noticed several passing ships damaged by kamikazes: “Every day we’d pass one or two more ships being towed . . . but we get to Ulithi . . . there must’ve



A kamikaze hit off Okinawa on 17 May 1945 damaged a 5-inch gun mount aboard destroyer *Douglas H. Fox* (DD-779). (NARA, 80-G-330102)

been twenty or more ships that had been hit.”²⁹ Although kamikaze attacks had been occurring since late 1944, the frequency and intensity of such attacks had increased drastically in recent months. *Twiggs* crewmembers knew what they were likely to encounter at Okinawa, with Lindsay recalling he and his shipmates were anxious about confronting kamikazes.

The crew of *Twiggs* was very tightknit, with many having served with the destroyer since its shakedown cruise off Bermuda in December 1943. Reflecting on the camaraderie decades later, Torpedoman’s Mate Second Class Donald Witmer could still vividly recall many of their shared experiences: participating in a crossing-the-line (equator crossing) ceremony off Truk in early 1944, witnessing the explosion of ammunition ship *Mount Hood* (AE-11) in Manus Harbor on 11 November 1944, and the constant call to battle stations during repeated kamikaze assaults. While off the Philippines on 4 January 1945, the escort carrier *Ommaney Bay* (CVE-79) had received such severe damage that the destroyer *Burns* (DD-588) sent torpedoes into its side to sink it. *Twiggs* was on the scene at the time, rescuing 211 survivors from the stricken carrier. *Twiggs* would subsequently escape a near hit by a kamikaze on 17 February, while supporting operations off Iwo Jima.³⁰

After steaming to Okinawa, *Twiggs* supported the bombardment group on 1 April, and then joined with the other destroyers a week later to take up picket duties to the west of the island. According to Witmer, the destroyer was “one of the first ships . . . to come off radar station two without being damaged in any way.”³¹ Both he and his shipmates recognized how lucky all of them were to leave the area unscathed, as several other destroyers at the picket stations had not been as fortunate.

The good luck previously experienced by *Twiggs* began to change on 28 April 1945, after a kamikaze’s bomb landed near the destroyer’s hull plating, causing significant structural damage. The grazing hit resulted in

29 John W. Lindsay Collection (AFC/2001/001/60619), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 22 October 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.60619/>.

30 Robert Naczi, *Oral History of Torpedoman Second Class Donald Witmer* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Foundation, 1988), 1–5.

31 Naczi, *Oral History of Donald Witmer*. 8.

a 20-foot gash near the bow of the ship, which received rapid repairs before it took on much water. Petty Officer Witmer recalled the damage control party made an unfortunate error in calculating the incoming kamikaze's trajectory. The damage control crew, stationed amidships, "saw the action coming in on the port side and they kind of went to the starboard."³² The enemy pilot flew over the ship, turned, and came down the starboard side before crashing into the ship, killing 10 men and wounding 8, including a few members of the damage control party. After serving with the gunfire and covering forces for a month, *Twiggs* received orders on 25 May to make its way to one of the dreaded radar picket stations. While in the western fire-support area at 2030 on 16 June, a low-flying enemy aircraft dropped a torpedo that punched into *Twiggs* on its port side, detonating its number two magazine. The kamikaze quickly circled the destroyer before smashing into it, causing further damage and intense fires to break out. Commander George Philip Jr., the destroyer's commanding officer, lay mortally wounded on the bridge. Having served with distinction for all 84 days of combat action *Twiggs* encountered off Okinawa, he would posthumously receive the Navy Cross.³³

Several men trapped below decks looked for any escape topside while others attempted damage control measures to put out fires and burning fuel oil engulfing the ship. Eventually, it became clear that the ship was going to sink, leading many of the crew to abandon ship. Destroyer *Putnam* (DD-757) rescued 114 of the 188 survivors, and it was from *Putnam*'s deck that many of *Twiggs*'s crew witnessed their ship's final moments, with *Putnam*'s war diarist recalling a "tremendous explosion on the *Twiggs*, followed by a momentary inferno of fire. . . . She sunk in less than a minute."³⁴ Such was the violence of its end that a hail of fragments and debris fell over the survivors and several rescue ships.

32 Naczi, *Oral History of Donald Witmer*. 9.

33 Report of the Rescue of Survivors from USS *Twiggs* (DD-591), USS *Putnam* (DD-757) War Diary, 18 June 1945, 1–3, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, RG 38, NARA.

34 Report of Rescue of Survivors from USS *Twiggs*; "*Twiggs II* (DD-591)," DANFS, NHHC, updated 7 August 2018, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/t/twiggs-ii.html>.

Petty Officer Witmer, pinned down by wreckage at his battle station on the bridge, barely made it off *Twiggs* before it sank when shipmates pulled him out before abandoning ship. Witmer managed to get into the water just as the ship was beginning to go down. Suffering from burns and a broken leg that bent the wrong way, he watched with great sadness as *Twiggs* slipped beneath the waves. After two hours in the water, a whale-boat picked him and his shipmates up and brought them on board *Putnam*. Although spared the fate of so many of his shipmates, he would still have to endure nearly a year of moving back and forth between Navy hospitals before finally receiving an honorable discharge from the service.³⁵

In total, *Twiggs* lost 152 men to the kamikaze attack off Senega Shima; it was one of five destroyers to have over half their crew killed and wounded in suicide attacks during the battle, the others being *Halligan* (DD-584), *Luce* (DD-522), *Morrison*, and *Drexler* (DD-741). With Okinawa secured a little over a week later and the war nearly over, the survivors received 30 days leave upon returning home, with several being permanently discharged from service after the Japanese surrender on 15 August. Despite its tragic end, Seaman Charles W. Knittel nonetheless fondly remembered



The destroyer *Twiggs* (DD-591) steams on 7 December 1944. (NARA, 80-G-215535)

35 Naczi, *Oral History of Donald Witmer*, 14–16; Yeo, *Desperate Sunset*, 323.

Twiggs. Recalling the good times with shipmates on board the destroyer and its service during the war, he said, “When you go to a small ship like that, you’re closer than brothers, believe me.”³⁶ Born in 1927, Knittel was the youngest man serving on the ship, but discovered friendships forged in war that lasted the rest of his life. As he recounted, “Everybody looked after one another. . . but we fought together all the time . . . and it just instills something in you.”³⁷

Despite the mounting battle fatigue and casualties to American sailors, as well as damage to their ships at Okinawa, the lessons learned in damage control and anti-aircraft defenses continued to improve. Thus, the kamikaze as a tactic—crude but terrifying—began suffering a steady decline in the rate of effectiveness. During the Philippines campaign, 326 aircraft made suicide attempts, and 120 (or 37 percent) actually hit their target. Although there was a lull before Okinawa, where the Japanese put forth a supreme effort, the sortie rate was much higher. As anti-aircraft and CAP defenses tightened up in the interim, at Okinawa, only 29 percent of kamikazes actually struck their target, an 8 percent decline in effectiveness.

Still, the overall suicide tactic at Okinawa proved three to four times more successful in scoring hits on ships than conventional bomb and torpedo attacks, only 10 percent of which had resulted in damage to the ship target. There is no doubt that the seeming ubiquitousness of kamikazes at Okinawa produced levels of combat fatigue unknown to U.S. Navy crews at the time, and on occasion led to horrific miscalculations and accidents, often proving fatal to hundreds of American sailors. As the battle wore on, an increasing sense of fatalism among the destroyer crews settled in. The sinking of several destroyers while serving on the picket stations, as well as the number of casualties inflicted upon the crews, proved the suicidal tactics of the Japanese at least moderately successful. In the end, however, the Japanese could not maintain such a level of attrition against the naval might of the United States.³⁸

36 Charles W. Knittel Collection (AFC/2001/01/49877), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 15 July 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.49877/>.

37 Knittel Collection, Veterans History Project.

38 Nathaniel Patch, “Kamikazes! When Japanese Planes Attacked the U.S. Submarine *Devilfish*,” *Prologue* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 21.

Face of the Enemy: The Kamikaze Pilots

Flowers of the special attack are falling,
When the spring is leaving.
Gone with the spring,
Are the young boys like cherry blossoms?
Leaving cherry trees only with leaves.¹

Rear Admiral Matome Ugaki

American sailors and marines fighting for their lives off Okinawa could not fathom the extreme lengths to which Japanese pilots were prepared to go in order to destroy U.S. ships. Purposefully flying an aircraft into a ship to sink it did not make any rational sense to men who valued their own lives so much. Such an act reeked of desperation, which it most assuredly was. When American veterans recalled kamikazes' attempts to destroy the U.S. invasion force, they often spoke of the suicide pilots with a mixture of revulsion, horror, and astonishment. "They had one thing in mind, and that was to crash into our ships, bombs and all," Seaman First Class James Fahey, a sailor on board light cruiser *Montpelier* (CL-57), wrote in his diary. "You have to blow them up; to damage them doesn't mean much."²

For many, the kamikaze attacks in the late stages of the war continue to epitomize Japan's final desperate attempt to stave off an ignominious defeat. Only in recent years have historians exhibited a renewed interest in the motivations of Japanese pilots who allegedly volunteered in droves for their one-way missions. Although wartime literature depicted kamikazes as little more than fanatics with a singular purpose of dying for the emperor, further examination of their letters and diaries, as well as interviews with some of the kamikaze pilots who managed to survive, has painted a more nuanced picture of the mindset and background of the typical suicide pilot.

For nearly eight decades, writers have commonly described kamikazes as being enthusiastic "volunteers." But, given the existing culture prevalent

1 Smith, *Kamikaze*, 82.

2 Robert L. Willett, "Inside the Mind of the Kamikaze," *America in WWII*, October 2017, 30.

in Japan (and especially in the military) at the time, many Japanese pilots assigned to kamikaze operations had little choice but to raise their hands when senior officers asked for men to carry out special attack missions. Confronted with a severe shortage of trained and experienced pilots, Japanese military commanders exerted intense pressure on new recruits to carry out the unconventional air attacks. Although many passionate young volunteers joined special attack units, this pressure prompted others to join after receiving promises of a glorious death in battle (with oft-repeated allusions to beautiful cherry blossoms falling to earth). These young men also received assurances of preserving their family honor, defending Japan from an encroaching enemy, and dying for God-Emperor Hirohito with their souls departing to Yasukuni Shrine.³



Japanese kamikaze pilots are briefed the night before a sortie, c. 1944–45. (NARA, NH 73094)

³ Yeo, *Desperate Sunset*, 17.

Like the majority of fighting men during the war, the average kamikaze pilot was young and only beginning to make the awkward transition from adolescence to adulthood. Photographs of most suicide pilots in training show young men between the ages of 18 and 22 years old celebrating before their sortie. The youngest kamikaze was most likely just 17, and the oldest pilot on record was 32. A popular but ultimately propaganda-like image of the era shows five kamikaze pilots, all smiling and laughing, with the man in the center holding a small puppy. The caption notes that two of the pilots were only 17 years old, two were just 18, and the eldest was 19. Although the photograph presents a somewhat endearing human side of young men willing to fly aircraft into a ship to kill as many of the enemy as possible, it remains a haunting image of youthful lives lost to an inglorious cause. All five of the pilots perished the next day off Okinawa on suicide missions.⁴

It soon became custom for kamikaze pilots to write final messages to loved ones, usually composed on the day or night prior to their mission. Most men addressed final goodbyes to their families, especially their mothers, while others sent their last thoughts to their wives and children. The length of the letters varied, as revealed by 18-year-old Second Lieutenant Torao Kato, who composed a short, blunt letter to his mother. In his final message he wrote, "Dearest Mother, Please live a long life with full vigor. I will try to destroy a big one."⁵ In one of the more chilling letters, 29-year-old flight instructor-turned-kamikaze pilot Major Hajima Fujii learned that his wife, upon discovering his assignment to a special attack unit, drowned their two young daughters and herself, apparently in the hope that he would not have any worries about leaving his family behind. Writing to his two dead children, he sadly stated:

It was a day when the cold wind blustered hard.
Some lives went out as if they were dew.
I have a soft spot for my young children who died with their
mother before I die.

4 Willet, "Inside the Mind of the Kamikaze," 31.

5 Willet, "Inside the Mind of the Kamikaze," 32.

They must understand my mind, that I throw out my life for the
country. Moreover, they seemed as if they were smiling.
I shall get after you soon.
Let us lie while I hold you in bosom on my knee.
Please await me without crying while I go.
Dear Kazuko, please take care of Chieko when she cries.⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the special attack unit pilots were well educated. Prior to undertaking a mission, two kamikaze pilots visited an elementary school and seated themselves at a piano in one of the classrooms. Upon receiving permission from the teacher, the pilots played a moving version of Ludwig van Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata for the students. It so happened that the young flyers were both music academy graduates. The writing of poetry, not uncommon among kamikaze pilots, seemed to be not only a good way to pass the time but a way to contribute something to posterity. A poem written by 22-year-old Captain Kanji Eda prior to his death on 6 June 1945, exemplifies the duality of a sensitive human being with a reckless warrior spirit, capturing the struggle of living while devoted to his duty and preparing to give his life for his country and its ideals:

The green is too beautiful.
I may forget that I even go to die now.
The sky is blue without limit.
I see a cloud floating in the sky.
I feel the summer in Chiran in June while hearing the song
of cicadas
While I wait the operation order.
The song of birds seems to be happy.
"I will be a bird next."
I hear Sugimoto say such words while he is stretching himself
out on the grass.
Don't amuse me!
13:35 p.m. today

⁶ Willett, "Inside the Mind of the Kamikaze," 32–33.

At last, I will take off.
Our good old homeland! Good-bye.
I leave the used fountain pen as a remembrance.⁷

It seems unlikely that American sailors and marines, straining under the seemingly constant barrage of kamikaze attacks off Okinawa, would have been moved by the poetic leanings and university education of their foes. Few also would have empathized that the typical kamikaze pilot was a son, husband, and father, much like themselves. After a Mitsubishi A6M Zeke struck the battleship *Missouri* (BB-63) amidships on 11 April 1945, crewmembers found the mutilated body of the pilot near an aft 40-mm gun mount. Captain William M. Callaghan, the commanding officer of *Missouri*, angered several members of the crew after announcing that they would honor the enemy pilot with a burial at sea instead of letting his sailors simply toss the remains overboard. Captain Callaghan's act demonstrated his respect for a fallen enemy even within a total war that made it difficult to retain respect for human life.⁸

7 Willett, "Inside the Mind of the Kamikaze," 34.

8 Yeo, *Desperate Sunset*, 217.

PART 3

HONORING THE FALLEN

U.S. officers and enlisted men serving on the warships off Okinawa quickly and successfully adjusted tactics to combat the kamikaze threats against them. As the campaign moved forward, the number of kamikazes shot down rather than striking their targets increased. This occurred because of increased fighter protection, the employment of antiaircraft ordnance with proximity fuses, and the employment of longer-range radar, giving the U.S. Navy earlier warnings of incoming sorties.¹

Despite these adjusted tactics, as well as the increased combat experience and bravery of the American picket crews, Japanese pilots still managed, on occasion, to penetrate the deadly antiaircraft barrages and CAP screens and score hits on Fifth Fleet's capital ships, inflicting tremendous damage and death. Fortunately, for the majority of sailors on larger ships, the inexperienced kamikaze pilots exhibited poor target recognition skills when selecting prey, routinely attacking the first ships they saw, which happened to be the faultless picket ships. If an enemy pilot achieved even a thread of luck after beating the CAP and striking the larger targets, the combustibility of great quantities of fuel, fuel lines, and ordnance proved catastrophic, causing large numbers of casualties. The unarmored flight decks of the U.S. carriers also contributed to some of the more severe damage among flattops at Okinawa, as penetrating kamikazes caused instantaneous conflagrations among fueled and armed aircraft in the hangar bays.²

The struggle of American sailors at sea during the heat of battle off Okinawa was a grim affair, and many veterans often noted that only a slight matter of inches or feet could make all the difference between life

1 Smith, *Kamikaze*, 98.

2 Yeo, *Desperate Sunset*, 338–39.

and death. Not often mentioned, due to the graphic nature of the topic, is how American sailors dealt with the extensive damage to their ships or the often-extraordinary numbers of casualties in a ship remaining afloat. The solemn duty of committing the remains of the fallen to the deep and the much longer challenge of grappling with the grief and psychological trauma that these attacks caused are a lesser-known aspect of the Battle of Okinawa.

During the course of the battle, the pickets were not the only ships to suffer considerably. In fact, battleship and carrier crews experienced their own horrors inflicted by Japanese air attacks. After kamikazes slammed into both the battleship *New Mexico* (BB-40) and the aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) on 12 May 1945, the crews of each carried out slightly different ceremonies for their dead shipmates, in keeping with naval traditions, while always constrained by time, location, and mission. A burial at sea is a time-honored naval tradition at the core of a sailor's experiences, whether in peacetime or in combat. It reflects not only the acknowledgment and respect for those who went before, it provides a boost to the morale of the living, preserving the memory of those who gave their lives for their nation and shipmates. Due to being deployed for weeks on end, necessity often dictated those killed on board ship by bombs or kamikazes be buried at sea. The importance of maintaining tradition while in the midst of hellish circumstances was paramount in showing respect to deceased sailors and beginning the process of healing for the shipmates mourning them.

No stranger to the deadliness of kamikaze attacks, the crew of the veteran battlewagon *New Mexico* took the brunt of a suicide attack at Lingayen Gulf on 6 January 1945. Plunging into the battleship's port navigation bridge, the attacking Val's bomb also went off as it crashed, adding to the carnage on board and killing Captain Robert W. Fleming, as well as 29 other sailors. Within 10 minutes, *New Mexico* received a second blow, this time by a kamikaze on the port bow, causing little damage and no casualties. Due to further attacks over the course of the next four days, it became impossible to evacuate the 87 sailors wounded during the initial strike from the ship for a further 13 days.³ With the memory of

³ Smith, *Kamikaze*, 50–51.

The sailors of battleship *New Mexico* (BB-40) stand by to fire 5-inch gun batteries during the bombardment of Saipan on 15 June 1944. (NARA, 80-G-K-14162)



Admiral William F. Halsey Jr. (left) and Admiral Raymond A. Spruance aboard the battleship *New Mexico* (BB-40) at Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, 27 April 1945. (NARA, 80-G-322429)

the January attacks fresh in the minds of its sailors, *New Mexico* took its place in the combat zone off Okinawa, steaming on station for 62 days. Its crew remained exhausted at the tempo, especially having gone to general quarters on 82 separate occasions and manning anti-aircraft guns 86 times to defend from enemy air attacks. In addition, its gunners supported the ground campaign, firing 21,876 rounds at inland targets with a combined weight of 4,708,517 pounds, an amount greater than any previous campaign.⁴

Just after sunset on 12 May, *New Mexico* was steaming to her berth in Hagushi anchorage when a Nakajima Ki-84 Hayate “Frank” and Kawanishi N1K-J Shiden “George II” set upon it. The two planes began final dives on the ship. American anti-aircraft crews fired a 5-inch shell that burst directly under the Frank, flaming it and lifting the kamikaze clear of the mastheads. The first aircraft plunged violently into the sea just as the second kamikaze sped closer to the ship. Hit several times by anti-aircraft fire, its trajectory sent it wildly into the gun deck, tearing into the funnel and leaving a 30-foot gaping hole. The kamikaze’s bomb exploded, causing several more casualties as a spray of shrapnel tore through everything in its path. Flames from the bomb and the aircraft’s ruptured fuel tank shot 200 feet into the sky, causing one sailor to exclaim, “The top of the stack looked like a gigantic blow torch.”⁵ Damage control parties extinguished the fires within a half hour.



The battleship *New Mexico* (BB-40) on fire immediately after a kamikaze crashed into its stack on 12 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-328654)

4 USS *New Mexico* War Operations Press Release, 19 May 1945, 8, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, RG 38, NARA.

5 USS *New Mexico* Press Release.

The dead on board *New Mexico* surpassed that of January's casualties, totaling 54 sailors and marines killed, with another 119 wounded. As was the case with countless other ships facing similar attacks off Okinawa, the identification of numerous extensively mutilated bodies proved difficult. After placing the bodies in shrouds, the process of identifying the slain took until sunrise the following day due to repeated air alerts. A quick but solemn service in remembrance of the lost on board *New Mexico*, attended by Admiral Raymond Spruance, Commander Fifth Fleet, commenced at 1050 on 13 May. Because *New Mexico* was already at anchor in Hagushi Harbor, the Graves Registration Service removed several of the fallen for burial at the U.S. Army's 27th Infantry Division Cemetery at Okinawa.⁶



Chaplain Harold E. Buckley conducting services from the podium on 13 May 1945 for crew killed in kamikaze attacks the previous evening. Admiral Raymond Spruance, Fifth Fleet commander, stands to the left of the musicians at the center of the photo. To the immediate right of Buckley is *New Mexico*'s skipper, Captain John M. Haines, and his executive officer, Commander Charles B. Beasley. (NARA, 80-G-326656)

6 Richard Hulver, "A Kamikaze Attack on *New Mexico*, Fifth Fleet Flag: A Photo Essay," NHHC, updated 8 May 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1945/battle-of-okinawa/kamikaze-attack-new-mexico.html>.

Despite the kamikaze putting three of its four boilers out of action, *New Mexico* spent another three weeks on station (although it did not conduct any further patrols) before steaming to Guam for repairs. Throughout the ordeal, Seaman First Class Hugh H. Alexander recalled the intense strain on the crew of the damaged ship remaining in the highly dangerous combat zone under near constant attack: “We were [there] about another 21 days; we couldn’t do nothin’ but sit there. And they [the Japanese] tried runnin’ suicide boats at night . . . and they had men to swim out and try to board the ships . . . killed several marines.”⁷

The veteran aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill*, struck by two kamikazes earlier on the same day as *New Mexico*, received tremendous damage to its flight and hangar decks. While the battleship conducted a short burial at sea for some of its dead prior to returning to its berth in Hagushi Bay, the majority of the 54 killed received burial at one of the U.S. Army’s cemeteries. In contrast, the losses aboard the *Essex*-class flattop would result in the largest burial at sea in U.S. Navy history. For 58 consecutive days prior to the kamikaze attack that heavily damaged it, the carrier’s air group had actively struck enemy targets at Iwo Jima, Tokyo, Kure Harbor, and Okinawa. On 11 May, at 1005, while *Bunker Hill* was readying its air squadrons for strikes against Okinawa, a Zeke penetrated the anti-aircraft screen and released a 550-pound bomb above the carrier’s flight deck. Smashing through the deck, where 34 fighters, torpedo bombers, and dive-bombers awaited takeoff, the Zeke’s bomb soared out the side of the hangar deck and exploded over the sea. The pilot then crashed into the fully fueled and loaded aircraft on the flight deck, beginning a chain reaction of exploding munitions and gasoline fires across the after part of the ship. Destroyers later rescued several men blown over the side by the blasts or driven to jump off the ship due to the intense smoke and flames.⁸

7 Hugh H. Alexander Collection (AFC/2001/001/75691), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 20 December 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.75691/>.

8 Mark L. Evans and Guy J. Nasuti, “*Bunker Hill I* (CV-17),” DANFS, NHHC, updated 25 March 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/b/bunker-hill-i.html>.



Aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) afire after being hit by two kamikaze suicide planes in just 30 seconds off Okinawa, 11 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-274266).



The horrific scene on *Bunker Hill's* flight deck, looking aft, while its crew is engaged fighting fires caused by kamikaze hits off Okinawa, 11 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-323712)

Not 30 seconds later, a second kamikaze hit *Bunker Hill's* flight deck with its own 550-pound bomb. The explosion devastated the hangar deck and pilot ready rooms below. The pilot aimed for the carrier's island structure, crashing nearby and just missing Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher and Commodore Arleigh A. Burke, his chief of staff. One of the aircraft's wings passed through the flag office, killing 3 officers and 11 enlisted men on Mitscher's staff. Damage control teams immediately went to work, fighting several fires throughout the ship and attempting valiantly to control flooding below the waterline. Engineers led by the resolute Lieutenant Commander Joseph R. Carmichael Jr., the ship's chief engineer, worked tirelessly in hellish conditions. Their efforts prevented an already horrific situation on board from turning into a catastrophically fatal one, and undoubtedly saved several lives, often at the sacrifice of their own. Electrician's Mate Second Class Norman Lasman remembered well the heroic Commander Carmichael, who rescinded an order for those in the after engineering spaces of *Bunker Hill* to abandon ship. Instead, he ordered his men to stay at their stations and continued speaking to and encouraging several of them even as they died of smoke inhalation. Of the 21 men in Lasman's division, only he and two others survived.⁹

Recovery efforts of the dead on board *Bunker Hill* began almost immediately after the fires had all been extinguished later that afternoon. With most of the dead sailors remaining in the spaces below decks, it became necessary for the physical removal of the bodies, most found in passageways and damaged compartments. This process, often done in the dark, was both unnerving and dangerous, yet necessary. The recovery teams slowly made their way through smoke and water-filled compartments below, often not seeing any bodies of shipmates until physically walking into them. The teams placed the bodies side-by-side at the forward section of the hangar deck in neat rows before moving the identification process to the flight deck. Petty Officer Lasman, rescued from his smoke-filled engineering space some 19 hours after the kamikaze attack,

9 Norman Lasman Collection (AFC/2001/001/90983), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed 13 September 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.90983/>.



Aircraft wreckage on *Bunker Hill's* flight deck after most of the fires had been suppressed, following hits by two kamikaze aircraft off Okinawa, 11 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-259904)

Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, Commander Task Force 58, is high-lined from a destroyer to carrier *Randolph* (CV-15) via boatswain's chair on 15 May 1945. This was the third time Mitscher transferred his flag in four days, as his two previous flagships, carriers *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) and *Enterprise* (CV-6), received damage by kamikaze strikes off Okinawa. (NARA, 80-G-320987)



awoke to find himself lying on the flight deck among his dead shipmates. Still unnerved by the experience decades later, he recalled, “The next day we buried almost 400 guys.”¹⁰

Before the burials at sea could commence, the task of identifying the dead began in earnest. Although there were several horrific ways to die on board a warship off Okinawa, one of the most terrifying, yet typical, was by fire. The majority of those killed in action during the kamikaze



Bunker Hill holds a Catholic memorial service on the hangar deck in honor of the men killed after receiving two hits by suicide planes on 11 May 1945. Photograph taken 20 May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-323704)

10 Guy J. Nasuti, “A Ceremony for the Fallen: Aftermath of a Kamikaze Attack,” updated 11 May 2020, NHHHC, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1945/battle-of-okinawa/ceremony-for-fallen.html>. As a former photographer’s mate, I personally witnessed (and photographed) a few burials at sea during my service on board *Nassau* (LHA-4). The ceremonies are extremely solemn, respectful, and quite emotional. My father Dennis, a former signalman second class, made it known prior to his death that he wanted a burial at sea. Conducted on board *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN-69) in 2019, his final request was granted. Active duty sailors, retirees, and honorably discharged veterans can request a burial at sea through the U.S. Navy, which involves a 21-gun salute, the playing of “Taps,” and the passing of the folded national ensign to the commanding officer. For more on U.S. Navy burials at sea, see “Burial at Sea,” NHHHC website, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/browse-by-topic/heritage/customs-and-traditions0/burial-at-sea.html>.

attacks died from smoke inhalation, asphyxiation caused by intense heat, or fire, with several men burned almost beyond recognition. According to *Bunker Hill's* after-action report, there were four ways medical personnel identified the deceased. The first involved finding the service member's identification tags (dog tags) or bracelets. With the majority of the deceased identified this way (despite not all men wearing their dog tags), other means of identification often became necessary. A stenciled last name, usually found on a belt or jacket, became the second method of establishing a man's identity. The third means of identification involved comparing a corpse's teeth against dental charts, while the fourth involved inspecting the clothing of the deceased. The last method was not fool-proof, since "several persons were found who were wearing someone's else [*sic*] clothing (in one case clothing from two other people)."¹¹

After completing the identification of a deceased sailor, shipmates sewed the bodies of their friends into burial shrouds of white canvas. Aviation Machinist's Mate Third Class Joseph E. Vignati recalled helping sew the canvas shrouds and placing "a 5-inch [shell] with them."¹² In order to weigh the body down and enable it to sink, sailors placed two 55-pound, 5-inch projectiles upon each body. One was tied around the chest and the other positioned between the legs. Realizing the three burial chutes available on board were an insufficient number for the ceremony, crewmembers discovered three undamaged olive drab stretchers for use in the burials, adding these in order to cut down on the length of the ceremony and release six bodies at a time over the side.

The longest burial at sea in U.S. Navy history commenced on board *Bunker Hill* on 12 May at three minutes past noon. A rabbi, a Protestant minister, and a Catholic priest prayed for the 352 crewmembers (of 393 killed in action) arrayed according to the deceased's religious preference. In the case of 24 unidentified crewmembers, all three officers said a

11 Report of Air Operations against Kyushu & Honshu, Japan, Ryukyu Islands & Japanese Task Force, USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), 18 March–11 May 1945, 270, World War II War Diaries, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1875–2006, RG 38, NARA.

12 Joseph E. Vignati Collection (AFC/2001/001/72980), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed on 29 August 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.72980/>.

prayer over the individual. The surviving *Bunker Hill* crew remained on the flight deck during the nearly eight-hour-long ceremony. At various points throughout, several wandered off, often overcome by the emotional tribute to their dead shipmates. After a Marine honor guard fired a 21-gun salute for the fallen and the six burial chutes delivered all of the bodies of the slain to the deep, the somber ceremony finally ended at dusk, at approximately 2000. The physically and emotionally exhausted crew next made ready to get underway to Ulithi Atoll.¹³ After arriving at Ulithi on 14 May, the body of a previously missing crewmember found on board the ship received a burial on the island. Following a brief stopover at Pearl Harbor, *Bunker Hill* got underway for Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton, Washington, for repairs. The crew, entitled to 30 days of survivors' leave, left to visit family and loved ones.¹⁴

The war ended a few months later, and the carrier, after repairs were completed, served once more during Operation Magic Carpet, bringing American service members home from the Pacific. Although moving on with their lives after the war, many *Bunker Hill* survivors carried the physical and mental scars of one of the worst kamikaze attacks of the war with them until their dying day. Decades after the end of the war, former *Bunker Hill* Gunner's Mate Third Class Bruce Meyers was reading a book about the exploits of the carrier. He vividly recalled receiving orders to help recover the bodies of the deceased the day the kamikazes struck, but in later years attempted to forget the nightmarish things he witnessed. However, after coming across a photograph of dead shipmates in the book, he claims the memories came flooding back. Walking out of his office, he "cried like a baby for an hour. I had stood in that same spot and saw those bodies."¹⁵ The valiant crews of *New Mexico* and *Bunker Hill* proved that

13 Maxwell Taylor Kennedy, *Danger's Hour: The Story of the USS Bunker Hill and the Kamikaze Pilot Who Crippled Her* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 424–25.

14 Kennedy, *Danger's Hour*, 426.

15 Bruce Meyers, in discussion with the author, 13 July 2016. Several veterans claimed an average of four hours sleep or less per night during action off Okinawa, but factors such as watchstanding, cleaning equipment, or repairing weapons meant some men averaged even less than that. Mr. Meyers, a sailor serving on board *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), operated one of the gun mounts at the aft end of the flight deck. He related a story, occurring prior to the Battle of Okinawa, in which he fell asleep while on watch at his general quarters station.

their commitment to recovering and burying fallen shipmates, despite the grief and exhaustion suffered from the kamikaze attacks, was in keeping with both the highest order and traditions of the U.S. Navy, and a testament to the resilience of those who served off Okinawa.

Hauled in front of Captain George A. Seitz, the commanding officer of *Bunker Hill*, Seitz ordered the young sailor to stand at attention in his gun tub for at least a few hours before being relieved. Meyers claimed he never fell asleep again while on watch, and definitely not while under threat of kamikaze attacks.

Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi: Father of the Special Attack Corps

Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi of the Imperial Japanese Navy is credited with being the father of kamikaze operations during World War II. A 1912 graduate of the Imperial Naval Academy, Onishi saw service during World War I and received his first carrier command in 1928. Trained as a naval aviator, he helped plan the Pearl Harbor attack and commanded naval air forces in Taiwan, directly supporting the invasion of the Philippines in 1941. Receiving a promotion to vice admiral on 1 May 1943, he took command of the First Air Fleet in the Philippines more than a year later, on 20 October 1944, just prior to the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Upon receiving orders to destroy the American carrier fleet as part of the *Sho-Go* plan (designed to hurl back the American assault on the Philippines with concerted air attacks), Onishi quickly realized that drastic measures had become necessary due to the severe limitations of Japanese naval air power.

With these restrictions in mind, Onishi met with his staff on 14 October 1944 and made a stunning suggestion: "In my opinion, there is only one way of assuring that our meager strength will be effective to a maximum degree. That is to organize suicide attack units composed of Zero [Zeke] fighters . . . with each plane to crash-dive into an enemy carrier. What do you think?"¹ Several of Onishi's staff officers noticed a look of relief mixed with sorrow upon his face at the conclusion of the meeting, but most of them sided with their commander. Admiral Onishi, a writer of haiku poetry, was not proud of his decision to send young men to commit suicide, but felt he had little choice. Having consented to his plan, Onishi's superiors only stipulated that all of the pilots considered for such duty be volunteers. On 19 October, five days after Onishi proposed his new plan, the first Imperial Navy's kamikaze units were formed into the Special Attack Corps. As Admiral Onishi toured the base of the 201st Air Group, at Mabalacat, Philippines, 27 of its members volunteered for the first organized kamikaze mission. These men were well-trained pilots, unlike those that came after them at Okinawa, and were among the best pilots in the air group—some of the few remaining in Imperial Japan's armed forces.²

On 21 October, the four groups comprising the Special Attack Corps (the *Asahi*, *Shikishima*, *Yamato*, and *Yamazakura*) began conducting sorties to seek out and destroy American ships. Four days later, during the Battle

1 Smith, *Kamikaze*, 7.

2 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 45.

off Samar, five Mitsubishi A6M Type 0 carrier fighters (Zekes) and four accompanying aircraft from *Shikishima's* unit spotted an escort carrier group under the command of Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague. Sinking the American escort carrier *St. Lo* and damaging several other ships, Admiral Onishi's strategy received validation.³

By the time of the Battle of Okinawa, the kamikaze pilots rushed into service did not possess the level of training of those who conducted suicide missions in the Philippines. Onishi relocated his headquarters back to Taiwan on 10 January 1945 and continued commanding the First Air Fleet until May, when he received new orders to return to Japan to become vice chief of the naval general staff. Once reluctant to attack Pearl Harbor and begin war with the United States, Admiral Onishi strenuously advocated for Japan to fight until the very end. After Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender on 15 August, Onishi attempted ritual suicide but botched cutting his own throat. Eventually dying in intense agony some 15 hours after the attempt, he would not allow anyone to put him out of his misery, believing he must atone for ordering so many young men to their horrific deaths.⁴



In late 1944, a group of the earliest Japanese kamikaze special attack pilots receives a ceremonial cup of sake from Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi (*right, with bottle*), arguably the most prominent proponent of suicide attacks. (NHHHC, NH 73097)

³ Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 46.

⁴ Yeo, *Desperate Sunset*, 18.

CONCLUSION

The fighting on Okinawa ended on 22 June 1945, but the war continued for nearly two more months. Already, Allied planners readied forces for an invasion of Japan, where estimates of casualties to both Allied forces and Japanese soldiers and civilians were in the millions. Not until the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did Japan finally surrender, on 15 August. Despite their best efforts, kamikazes failed to dissuade the Allies from continuing their build up against an invasion of the home islands. Although sinking (or putting out of action) 66 Allied ships and damaging some 400 others (between January and August 1945), the Japanese also failed to break the morale and fighting spirit of U.S. sailors. The horrors of kamikaze tactics at Okinawa proved just how dearly the Japanese were willing to sell their own lives to prevent total capitulation. From 2,027 enemy aircraft fired on between March and August 1945, 793 were suicide planes (39 percent of the total). At Okinawa, kamikazes concentrated on smaller ships with 86 percent hitting destroyers or lesser targets, obviously not causing as many casualties had aircraft carriers been the main target, but still causing great carnage among the forward-serving picket ships, ultimately sinking 12 destroyers.¹

On average, a successful kamikaze attack during the Okinawa campaign killed an estimated 40 sailors and wounded approximately the same number. Despite the fleet's ability to put up a large volume of antiaircraft fire, the smaller ships heavily relied on CAP cover to knock the kamikazes from the sky. Moreover, as the tragedy of *Bunker Hill* proved, neither anti-aircraft guns nor CAP protection could always keep the Navy's capital ships safe from one or two lucky enemy pilots getting through its air defenses

1 Yeo, *Desperate Sunset*, 337–38; Samuel J. Cox, H-Gram 044: “Floating Chrysanthemums”—The Naval Battle of Okinawa,” NHHC, 3 April 2020, https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/about-us/leadership/hgram_pdfs/H-Gram_044.pdf.

to hit their target. American sailors at Okinawa shared something deadly in common with their Army and Marine Corps brethren, as most of the fighting men ashore, or at sea, never received a respite from fighting on the front lines unless they became a casualty. The air attacks by Imperial Japan's "floating chrysanthemums" claimed the lives of over 4,900 U.S. Navy personnel by mostly kamikaze attacks in the waters off Okinawa. As a result, more sailors died offshore than U.S. Army soldiers (4,675) or Marine Corps personnel (2,938) killed in the brutal struggle ashore, a vivid illustration of the desperation and all-or-nothing determination of an enemy on its last legs.²

The casualty figures at Okinawa would undoubtedly have increased had U.S. sailors not mastered damage control. The ability of the destroyer and escort vessel crews to combat raging fires, explosive ordnance, and the potentiality of their ship sinking from underneath them is obviously a topic of study for the guidance of training and safety in the U.S. Navy. Sailors must continually strive to achieve and prepare for the eventualities of major casualties to ship and crew, even in peacetime.

Combat fatigue, or what is now called "post-traumatic stress disorder," or PTSD, while an often overlooked but important aspect of the battle for all U.S. Navy crews involved, never slowed the overall tempo of the battle. The Japanese also failed in breaking American morale as intended. Although the crews of the harried picket ships never enjoyed the luxury of the kind of rotation thoughtfully suggested by Lieutenant Bly, they nonetheless dutifully remained in the battle line and did not depart until suffering damage or being sunk. The almost superhuman-like endurance of the crews, especially among the tin can sailors, continues to inform and inspire future generations of warfighters.

Even as fatigue took its toll and the crews were pushed to the breaking point, these sailors never wavered in their duties to the fallen. Honoring the dead killed on board the picket and capital ships at Okinawa not only kept proud and time-honored traditions alive, it allowed shipmates to mourn and grieve together. The short respite of a burial at sea ceremony, even while in the combat zone, also enabled crews a small chance to catch their

2 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 300.



The escort carrier *Sangamon* (CVE-26) is attacked by a Kawasaki Ki-61 Hien “Tony” fighter aircraft off Okinawa on 4 May 1945. This plane missed the ship by 25 feet or less. (NARA, 80-G-334505)

breath. Moreover, they allowed shipmates to honor the life of a sailor, and therefore the lifeblood of their ship, who received honor and recognition. Morale also received a much-needed boost. Traditions remain important to navies the world over as signs and symbols of respect, bonding sailors to one another through shared hardships, especially the severe trials of war.

In hindsight, kamikaze pilots continue to hold a controversial place in history. While some view them as honorable men fighting determinedly for their comrades, families, and nation, others consider them to be little more than misguided youths who bought into their government’s propaganda. Just prior to the surrender of Japan, in mid-August 1945, Admiral Matome Ugaki wished to share in the “noble spirit of the special attack.” Wishing to adhere to the samurai tradition, he stated, “Though an emperor’s order must be followed . . . I think many things remain to be done after consulting with those brave men willing to die. . . . I renewed a resolution today of entrusting my body to the throne and defending the empire until death takes me away.”³

3 Smith, *Kamikaze*, 210.



Sailors killed off Okinawa in a 7 April 1945 kamikaze attack on the carrier *Hancock* (CV-19) are buried at sea two days later. (NARA, 80-G-328574)

For the sailors of the U.S. Navy, Admiral Ugaki's mindset, which led him to undertake a mission from which he never returned, was nearly as difficult to comprehend as the kamikazes themselves. The Japanese achieved considerably more success with the kamikaze as an unconventional tactic than with conventional bombing methods against American ships at Okinawa. Had the Imperial Army and Navy been more successful in suicide attacks against the fleet carriers of the fast carrier task force, the U.S. Navy's casualties would have been substantially higher. Instead, the heaviest and deadliest enemy blows fell on the destroyers and escort vessels assigned to the radar picket stations encircling Okinawa. Viewing the enemy with a mixture of awe, revulsion, and a grudging respect, the American sailors who survived the suicide attacks off Okinawa often struggled to explain what it was like to live through the strain, fear, and chaos caused by Japan's kamikazes. The kamikaze was doomed to failure from its inception, outdone both by the production of America's military might and the warrior toughness of its sailors. Despite the intense tempo

and destruction of the battle suffered by the U.S. Navy, American sailors transcended their own individual limitations to fight for their ships and shipmates as a team. The resiliency, tenacity, and bravery of American sailors in undertaking heroic damage control efforts, fighting through intense combat fatigue, and managing to carry on such naval traditions as burying dead comrades at sea helped to bring to a close the most brutal war in human history and provide an enduring example for today's sailors to emulate.

APPENDIX

KAMIKAZE BY ANOTHER NAME: OTHER JAPANESE SUICIDE TACTICS USED AT OKINAWA

While the most infamous kamikazes used by the Japanese were undoubtedly conventional aircraft, there were in fact several other types of suicide craft employed in an effort to destroy Allied ships and personnel, some of which were used at Okinawa. Below are a few of these lesser-known kamikazes.

Oka

The Yokosuka MXY-7, nicknamed *Oka*, or “cherry blossom,” was a rocket-powered, manned kamikaze aircraft built to target Allied ships. First used off Okinawa, the Okas were designed to be carried within range



A Japanese Yokosuka MXY7 *Oka* piloted flying bomb is guarded by a military policeman at Yontan Airfield, Okinawa, c. April–May 1945. (NARA, 80-G-K-4930)

of their targets by Mitsubishi G4M “Betty” Type 1 land attack planes before being released to strike the enemy. The Oka pilot then took over, gliding his craft towards the Allied ship before firing its three solid-fuel rockets and crashing into the targeted vessel. With a top speed of 390 miles per hour, and over 500 mph in a dive, the rocket-propelled Okas proved extremely difficult for Allied ships to shoot down. The Japanese planned to use submarines, coastal bases, and caves as launch platforms for later versions of the Oka, but the war ended before the Japanese could adopt these new modes of deployment.¹

The battleship *West Virginia* (BB-48) was initially believed to have been the first ship hit by an Oka, but postwar analysis revealed that the ship had instead sustained damage from a near miss. The first ship sunk by the flying bomb was destroyer *Mannert L. Abele* (DD-733), which split in two before it sank on 12 April 1945. The speedy Okas hit five other U.S. Navy



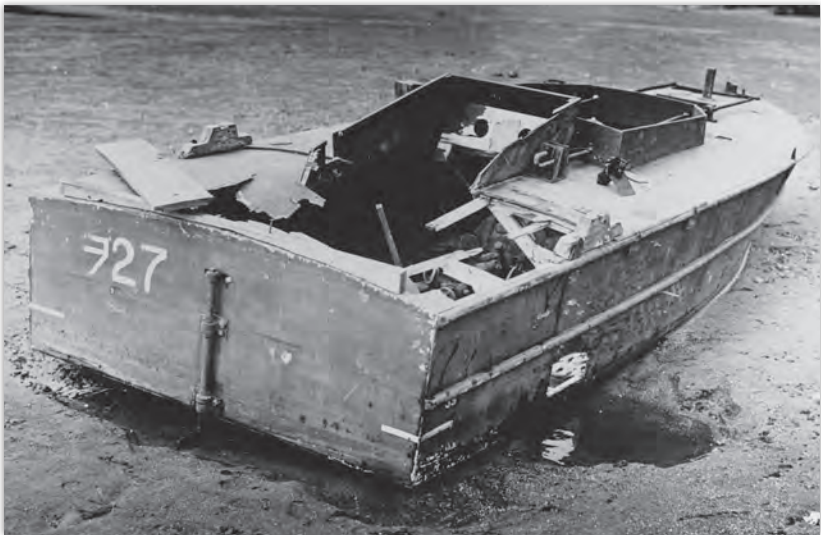
This Japanese Yokosuka MXY7 *Oka*, photographed on 26 June 1945, was captured intact by Marines on Okinawa. (NARA, 80-G-K-5885)

1 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 29–38.

ships, causing significant damage and casualties, but none sank. Despite the enemy's desperate efforts, the defensive anti-aircraft tactics employed by the destroyer squadrons and other task force vessels proved effective enough to keep the rocket-powered kamikazes from damaging any of the U.S. fleet's capital ships, ensuring the success of the Okinawa campaign.²

Explosive Speedboats

Another kind of suicide tactic the Japanese planned to use at Okinawa was the explosive speedboat. They first used such craft during the Philippines campaign in February 1945, mainly against landing craft support (*LCS*) (*L*) ships. Although the army boats were known as *Maru-re* (liaison boats), the Japanese navy called them *Shinyo* (ocean shaker). The army boats contained two depth charges, and the pilots would approach their target at high speeds before dropping the charges as near to a ship



A Japanese *Shinyo* explosive motorboat found on the beach at Lingayen Gulf, the Philippines, c. early 1945. U.S. Navy motor torpedo boats destroyed many of these suicide boats during the Philippines campaign. (NHHHC, NH 44316)

2 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 39; Guy J. Nasuti, "Mannert L. Abele (DD-773)," *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, last modified 6 February 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/m/mannert-l-abele.html>.

as possible before veering away. The pilots who drove these speedboats, often 15- to 16-year-olds recruited by the Japanese, generally did not have enough time to escape the blast of the explosives. The boats were made of wood in small, local shipyards with various types of engines. The vessels usually had beams of about 6 feet and lengths between 16.5 to 21 feet and could make between 21 and 25 knots.³

On Okinawa, underwater demolition teams (UDTs) thwarted a plan by the Imperial Japanese Navy to use explosive speedboats to damage and sink as many American ships as possible in the invasion fleet. Arguably the UDTs' greatest accomplishment during the battle was the elimination of the kamikaze suicide boats that arrived from Kerama Retto on Okinawa for staging by the Japanese military prior to the invasion. The UDTs destroyed approximately 400 suicide boats hidden in caves and intended to be deployed as nighttime kamikazes. The successful destruction of the speedboats prevented Japanese crews from using the explosive-laden vessels, rendering them weaponless and undoubtedly saving the lives of countless American sailors and marines offshore.⁴



Sailors watch as the U.S. Navy oiler *Mississinewa* (AO-59) sinks in Ulithi anchorage after being hit by a *kaiten* suicide torpedo on 20 November 1944, during the battle for the Philippines. (NHHHC, NH 97981)

³ Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 73–77.

⁴ Benjamin H. Milligan, *By Water Beneath the Walls: The Rise of the Navy SEALs* (New York: Bantam Books, 2021), 181.

Kaiten

Besides aircraft and speedboats, Imperial Japanese Navy officers devised yet another suicide weapon: the *Kaiten*, or “heaven shaker.” These manned torpedoes were the brainchild of midget submarine pilots Ensign Sekio Nishina and Lieutenant (j.g.) Hiroshi Kuroki. The *Kaiten* combined the features of midget submarines and the fast Type 93, Model 3 “long lance torpedo” to make a weapon capable of damaging ships upon impact. The Japanese navy began producing *Kaiten* in August 1944 in Kure, and a pool of 100 select volunteers began top-secret training at Tsuchura and Nara before the establishment of a *Kaiten* base at Otsujima Island. Lieutenant Kuroki, co-creator of the *Kaiten*, became one of 15 volunteers to lose their lives in a training accident on 6 September 1944. Despite sinking the oiler *Mississinewa* (AO-59) at Ulithi (20 November 1944) and escort vessel *Underhill* (DE-682) at Hollandia, New Guinea (11 January 1945), the success rate of the *Kaiten* would prove abysmal. Approximately 75 *Kaiten* pilots died during missions against Allied ships, while the entire crews of eight larger submarines carrying *Kaitens* were also lost. While the Japanese navy also armed some of its surface ships with the manned torpedoes in the last few months of the war, not a single ship ever launched a *Kaiten*.⁵

Suicide Swimmers

At Okinawa, American sailors remained on constant alert for Japanese suicide swimmers. Unbeknownst to U.S. Navy planners at the time, a unit of trained divers named *Fukuryu* (crouching dragon) was stood up to destroy Allied shipping prior to the invasion of Japan. American servicemen later styled these suicide divers “kamikaze frogmen.”⁶ Although Japanese naval planners sought to establish a force of 6,000 frogmen to receive training around the time of the invasion of Okinawa, only 1,200 were ready for missions by the end of the war. During the battle, approximately 1,000 dive suits had been authorized for use by the unit on 17 May

5 Rielly, *Kamikaze Attacks*, 90–96.

6 Steven J. Zaloga, *Kamikaze: Japanese Special Attack Weapons, 1944–45* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2011), 43.

1945. Although most of these were delivered by August, not a single one of the 10,000 Type-5 attack mines ordered for use by the Fukuryu were completed until 15 August, the day Japan surrendered. The Type-5 attack mines contained 33 pounds of explosives attached to a 16-foot pole. Using the pole, a diver would attach the mine to the hull of a passing ship with the expectation that the swimmer would be killed in the resulting explosion. However, the combined lack of equipment and weaponry needed to disable or sink Allied ships rendered the unit tactically ineffectual. The Japanese had simply run out of time.⁷

Thousands of Imperial Japanese Army and Navy personnel ultimately served in units conducting suicide operations against U.S. and Allied forces, and the total number of Japanese killed on such missions will probably never be known. Moreover, the overall Japanese strategy of using massed or individual suicide tactics in order to prevent the U.S. Navy from invading Japan ultimately failed to achieve this objective since planning for the invasion continued. Furthermore, the U.S. Navy's staggering losses off Okinawa made it clear that an invasion of the Japanese home islands would be extremely bloody and played no small role in President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic weapons to end the war.

7 Charles A. Barton, "Underwater Guerrillas," *Proceedings*, August 1983, 46–47.

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