

The Kamikazes: Japanese Suicide

Tatsuno was leading the last V in an all-but-defunct navy plane, a Mitsubishi Type 96.

Already the 12 had opened their cockpits and fluttered their silk scarves in the wind. Always the wind—the divine wind . . .

Now, we seem to be almost on top of them! I am sweating watching . . . that Mitsubishi. It's Tatsuno! Yes, I'm positive . . .

The two of them are diving, knifing for the convoy's core. Suddenly the trainer next to him is hit, virtually clubbed from the sky. His wing and tail rip off, and he corkscrews insanely away, out of my line of vision.

Tatsuno is alone now, still unhit, making a perfect run, better than they ever taught us in school. Tatsuno! Tatsuno! Fire sprouts from his tail section, but he keeps going. The orange fingers reach out. His plane is a moving sheet of flame, but they can't stop him. Tatsuno! A tanker looms, ploughing the leaden liquid. They're closing! A hit! An enormous explosion rocks the atmosphere. For a curious instant embers seem to roll and dance. Now a staccato series of smaller bursts and one mighty blast, shaking the sea like a blanket. The tanker is going down. No trace but the widening shroud of oil.

That was my friend.

—From *Kamikaze* by Yasuo Kuwahara and Gordon T. Alfred

By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

While the heat of battle might occasionally force someone to decide whether or not to lay down his life, there are only a few examples of organized units whose mission was to sacrifice themselves. In modern history, no group is as well known as the kamikaze pilots of Japan during the late Pacific war.

The so-called suicide pilots of the Imperial Army and Navy were not the drug- or sake-soaked automatons that the western press made them out to be. This form of wartime journalism, however understandable, was largely untrue. Ridicule was the only way to explain to an incredulously fearful hometown audience, as well as the sailors in the targeted ships, why an enemy pilot would deliberately plunge himself and his aircraft into their ship, blowing himself to atoms.

Soviet air force pilots occasionally rammed German bombers during the opening phases of the Nazi onslaught. Japanese army pilots also resorted to

ramming American B-29s as fleets of the giant, well-protected bombers roamed over the home islands by late 1944.

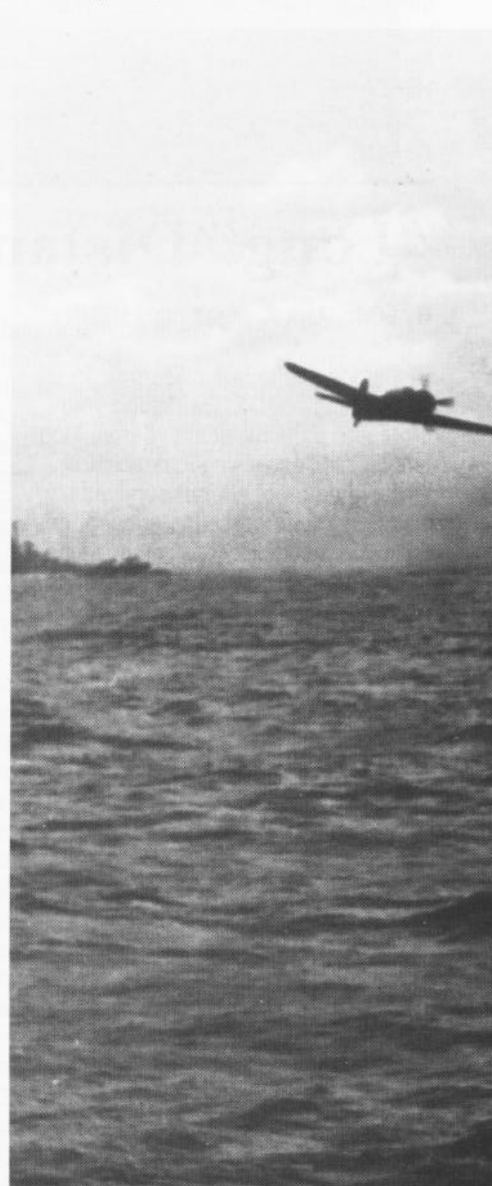
Nazi Germany tried several desperate measures to counter the growing fleets of Allied bombers. The Bachem Ba 349 *Natter* (Viper), a vertically-launched, rocket-propelled interceptor, was armed with 24 73mm unguided rockets in the nose. The *Natter*, though flight tested with limited success, was never used in combat. The Japanese were interested in this disposable interceptor but only constructed a few examples before war's end.

By late 1943, many Japanese senior officers knew that the overwhelming strength of the Allies, spearheaded

Right: a Nakajima "Jill" torpedo bomber makes a run on Essex (CV 9) during Leyte Gulf ops, 14 Oct 44, a week before the first organized kamikaze raid. **Far right:** gun crews aboard Missouri (BB 63) get a close-up view of a Zero as its pilot makes a kamikaze strike, 8 May 45. More Zeros were destroyed in kamikaze attacks than any other type.

by American industry and technical expertise, would soon win the war, no matter how strenuous a defense the Japanese offered. A way had to be found to slow the advance toward the home islands, or to make the Allied offensive as costly as possible.

Turning to the innate dedication to their emperor, several leaders consid-



Units



As they took over former Japanese installations, American soldiers discovered several examples of unused Ohka suicide rocket planes; this one was found on Okinawa. Crude in construction, the Ohka was an unusual weapon that "enjoyed" some success. The forward fuselage was reserved for the large warhead. Note the primitive ring-and-bead gunsight just forward of the windscreens.

ered suicide squadrons, whose pilots would use outmoded aircraft loaded with bombs in a final long-reaching thrust against the Allied carrier groups that were edging toward Japan.

In June 1944, senior commanders offered a plan to Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi to form dedicated suicide squadrons. "Provide me with 300

planes, and I will turn the tide of the war," promised Captain Motoharu Okamura, an air group commander.

Onishi finally gave his permission to organize these units, designated "special-attack" squadrons that would become the *kamikaze* (divine wind) to repel the Allied invaders—much as a legendary wind had risen to disperse a

Mongol fleet in 1281. Each suicide unit used a different name—such as *tokko tai* (special attack), *shimpu* (another way of reading the letters that spelled "kamikaze") and *tai-atari* (body-crashing), but "kamikaze" has come to mean the entire corps of special-attack squadrons.

The kamikazes were dead men



USN 373663 USN 315811



FG-1D Corsairs of VMF-323 return from a rocket strike against Japanese positions on Okinawa, June 45. Marine Corsair squadrons were very busy against kamikaze raiders. VMF-323 CO Maj. George Axtell, Jr., shot down 5 kamikazes 22 Apr 45, becoming an ace in one day.

the moment they took off and had no honorable choice but to complete their missions or be shot down in the process. We can only guess at these pilots' last thoughts. Historians have speculated over the years on how many of the kamikazes were truly volunteers. The ideals of family honor, patriotism and, above all, devotion to the emperor were strong motivations. Even the most unrelenting Japanese had only to look skyward at the fleets of Allied bombers over the homeland or out to sea at the vast array of ships of all types that dotted the waters of harbors, once home to only the Imperial Navy.

Eventually, members of the 201st Air Group in the Philippines were selected to mount the first special-attack operation against the invading American fleet in October 1944. Lieutenant Yukio Seki, a graduate of the Japanese naval academy at Eta Jima, would lead the flight.

At dawn on 20 October, Lt. Seki led his squadron off, but they soon returned, unable to locate any Allied ships in bad weather. After three more days of launches and aborted attacks, the special-attack corps accomplished its first strikes.

On October 25, Seki and his fellow pilots found a task force of U.S. aircraft carriers in Leyte Gulf. He dove his *Zero*, followed by four other pilots, into the carriers. Seki is generally credited with hitting the escort carrier *St. Lo* (CVE 63), which eventually sank, while

the other kamikaze pilots damaged *Kalinin Bay* (CVE 68), *Kitkun Bay* (CVE 71) and *White Plains* (CVE 66).

The initiation of the suicide squadrons was a bloody introduction for Allied crews, who would take the brunt of the furious kamikaze attacks off Okinawa and Japan beginning in March 1945.

Two dedicated suicide weapons were the *MX-7 Ohka* (Cherry Blossom) and the *Kaiten* (human torpedo). The *Ohka* was a single-seat, rocket-propelled aircraft that was more of a flying bomb. Mass produced between September 1944 and March 1945, 755 Model 11 *Ohkas* were delivered; 852 *Ohkas* of all models were produced, including Model 22s (a smaller version), Model 33s (larger *Ohkas*) and Model 43s (two-seaters). The Model 11 carried a 2,646-pound warhead in the nose, a fairly large amount of explosive.

Modified Mitsubishi G4M2 "Betty" bombers carried the Model 11 to the battle zone before releasing the *Ohka* about 20 miles from the target. The *Ohka's* three-rocket engine produced 1,764 pounds of thrust for approximately 10 seconds, allowing the tiny aircraft to reach just over 400 mph before the pilot started his dive.

The first *Ohka* operation came on 21 March 1945 when 18 Bettys approached Task Group 58, the American fleet nearing Okinawa. Three *Hellcat* squadrons intercepted the enemy force some 70 miles from the task group. VF-17 and VBF-17 from *Hornet*

(CV 12) and VF-30 from *Belleau Wood* (CVL 24) fought a 20-minute engagement, eventually destroying all 18 Bettys and 12 of their *Zero* fighter escorts. Lieutenant (jg) Murray Winfield of VF-17 shot down 4.5 Bettys, sharing the fifth kill with an F4U pilot.

VF-30's Ensign James V. Ward accounted for three Bettys. He came up under the large Betty formation, and to his surprise, he could see what appeared to be tiny aircraft hitching a ride beneath the ponderous, twin-engine Mitsubishi bombers. Not sure what the little planes were, Ward called them "Gizmos" in his debrief. However, the name that has stuck through the years was the Japanese word for "fool," *Baka*.

Ohkas scored their first success on 1 April, D day for the Okinawa invasion. They hit and damaged four American ships but did not sink their first victim until 12 April when the destroyer *Mannert L. Abele* (DD 733) went down off Okinawa after taking kamikaze strikes from a bomb-carrying *Zero* and an *Ohka*. The same day, another destroyer, *Stanly* (DD 478), took two *Ohka* strikes in 10 minutes but survived.

Seventy-four *Ohkas* sortied beneath their Betty carrier planes, and 56 were released or shot down while still attached to their mother aircraft. Fifty *Ohkas* were lost when the giant carrier *Shinano* was sunk on 29 November 1944 off the port city of Osaka by the U.S. submarine *Archerfish*.

While perhaps the most common

form of suicide attack vehicles and crew, aircraft were not the only type of the fearsome weapon. The Japanese designed the Kaiten, a modification of the famous Long Lance torpedo, one of the best torpedoes of the war. The Kaiten was 54 feet long and carried a huge 3,000-pound warhead.

The Kaiten went into battle on the deck of a submarine and after its pilot had entered the torpedo, the Kaiten launched, accelerating to its top speed of 40 knots. The pilot sat in a small compartment using a periscope to navigate toward his target.

The first Kaiten operations, in November 1944, involved VP-17, a squadron of PBM *Mariners* based at Ulithi Atoll, a major U.S. anchorage. VP-17's Crew No. 1 flew five night patrols around the harbor and engaged Kaitens twice. On 16 November, Crew No. 1 was nearing the end of their patrol just before dawn when their radar operator got a contact running on the surface.

The target turned out to be the Imperial Navy submarine *I-36*. Alerted for action, the PBM crew dropped sonobuoys over the bubbles left by the submarine, which had crash dived at the *Mariner's* approach.

Three nights later, the *I-47* launched four Kaitens, and the *I-36* launched one against the Ulithi anchorage. Crew No. 1 was up at this time, too, and saw a ship erupt in flames. It was the fleet oiler *Mississinewa* (AO 59) carrying 400,000 gallons of aviation fuel. The oiler went down at anchor, along with 50 of her crew.

On 28 June 1945, the destroyer *Sproston* (DD 577) was attacked by a Kaiten launched from the Japanese submarine *I-36* near the Marshall Islands. Lookouts had spotted the tell-tale wake of a periscope, and the destroyer turned toward the threat.

The submarine's crew was intent on watching the Kaiten's progress and did not see or hear the destroyer approach on a ramming course.

Finally, a sonarman alerted the Japanese skipper, who crash dived to escape the looming destroyer. Although the collision was missed by scant feet as the sub slid beneath the tin can, *Sproston* depth charged the *I-36*. Hampered by its load of Kaitens, the *I-36* was moments away from sinking.

Several Kaiten pilots volunteered to counterattack. Launching from the stricken submarine, one of them headed toward the American destroyer, but the gun crews on *Sproston* were ready and blasted the conning tower off the suicide torpedo. Distracted by the Kaiten attack, the destroyer turned away from the *I-36*, which escaped, arriving back in port by 6 July.

Ultimately, the Kaitens were not as successful as the "conventional" kamikaze vehicles. Kaiten attacks accounted for only two U.S. ships sunk, while eight of the submarine carriers were sunk, along with their crews and Kaiten pilots.

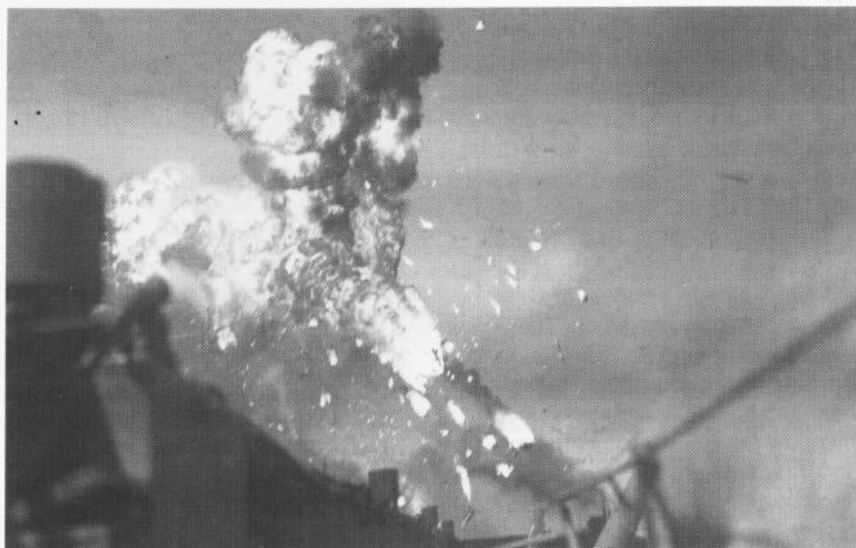
Another dedicated kamikaze design was the Nakajima Ki.115 *Tsurugi* (Sabre), 105 of which were produced between March and August 1945.

None of these small, single-engine aircraft was used in combat; however, their main use was intended for the anticipated invasion of the home islands that would come sometime in 1946.

While all types of aircraft were used in kamikaze operations, some were heavily modified for the special-attack mission. One such modification was the Ki.67-I KAI, a variant of the highly successful Mitsubishi Ki.67 *Hiryu* (Flying Dragon), codenamed "Peggy" by the Allies. One of the Imperial Army's best bombers, the twin-engined *Hiryu* was fast, lending itself to the kamikaze mission.

The bomber's gun turrets were removed and the normal six-man crew reduced to three. A long, nose-mounted rod would explode the warload, which could be two 800kg (1,764-pound)

USN 270951



Intrepid (CV 11) takes a kamikaze strike, 25 Nov 44. Usually filled with gasoline and explosives, the kamikazes exploded spectacularly—bringing terror to ship crews.

Selected Results from Kamikaze Raids

Philippines	Okinawa	Overall
421 sorties	1,809 sorties	2,314 sorties
378 expended	930 expended	1,228 expended
16 ships sunk, including: 2 CVEs 3 DDs	17 ships sunk, including: 1 CVE 10 DDs	34 ships sunk, including: 3 CVEs 13 DDs
87 ships damaged including: 7 CVs 2 CVLs 13 CVEs 5 BBs	198 ships damaged, including: 8 CVs 4 CVEs 10 BBs	288 ships damaged, including: 16 CVs 3 CVLs 17 CVEs 15 BBs

Naval Aviation in WW II

bombs, or a single 2,900kg (6,393-pound) charge.

Kamikaze attacks continued unabated through most of the last six months of the war, wherever and whenever the Japanese could assemble a strike force. The massive Allied fleet, spearheaded by U.S. ships and aircraft carriers filled with thousands of sailors and Marines, took the brunt of the terrifying suicide dives. The only defense seemed to be smothering curtains of anti-aircraft fire and orbiting patrols of fighters, whose pilots often braved their own forces' flak to get to the frantic Japanese pilots bent on their own destruction.

In truth, the Japanese were not in complete agreement amongst themselves as to the value and effectiveness of their suicide squadrons. Top fighter ace Saburo Sakai had originally supported the formation of the kamikazes. Badly wounded over Guadalcanal in August 1942, he had lost most of the sight in his right eye, yet had returned to full flight status by early 1944 and went on a one-way mission in early July 1944.

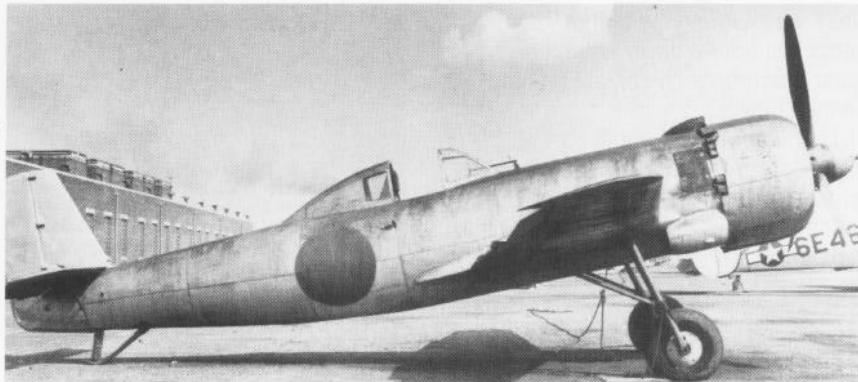
Based on Iwo Jima, Sakai took off at 1600 with eight other Zero pilots and eight torpedo bombers to strike American ships to the south. The light began to go and the weather worsened. The Japanese pilots could not find their targets, and soon they were engaged by the *Hellcat* combat air patrol. Under orders to avoid aerial combat, Sakai and his fellow escort pilots desperately tried to escape until they realized there was no other way but to shoot their way out of the trap. Sakai shot one Grumman fighter down, but as the weather deteriorated, he decided to ignore orders and bring his flight home. Enraged and embarrassed at being sent out on this futile mission, Sakai was gratified to find that other pilots had also decided to abort the mission.

Later on, he realized how ineffective the kamikazes had been, no matter how pure their motivation. He questioned the obvious pressure the young, inexperienced pilots were under to volunteer and carry out their missions. Failing to enthusiastically volunteer was a disgrace to the family and to oneself.

Sakai also knew that many attacks

had resulted in only misses. As a former test pilot, he knew that the lightly built Japanese aircraft, such as the Zero, were not intended for near-vertical dives and frequently broke apart under the stress of the dive.

In the final months of the war, July and August, as the Japanese waited for the inevitable invasion of the home islands, they consolidated their remaining resources, marshaling the last aircraft, crews and bombs to confront the huge Allied fleet that would soon appear off the beaches of the home islands. Aviation gasoline was scarce, and school children scoured mountain forests to gather pine cones to process into oil that would fuel ancient biplane trainers for a huge, final kamikaze attack.



Although 105 Nakajima Ki.115 Tsurugi (Sabre) dedicated suicide planes were built, none were used operationally. The aircraft's main gear was jettisoned after takeoff, and the Tsurugi could carry a 1,764-lb. bomb.

Although kamikaze strikes continued till the end of the war, no greater concentration was mounted than during the bloody three-month Okinawa campaign. Men and ships that had survived previous combat tours died in the flames of the diving Zeros. (Actually, Zeros were only a portion of the different types that the Japanese used. Anything that flew and could carry a bomb eventually made the one-way mission.)

For the kamikaze pilots, the main prize was either the battleship or the aircraft carrier. Two big attack carriers (CVs) became symbols of the kamikaze campaign as they weathered devastating attacks, but survived to return home.

Franklin (CV 13) took a kamikaze strike on 19 March 1945 while engaged in strikes against the home islands. The Japanese plane and its two small

bombs exploded on the hangar deck, killing everyone in the area and starting more fires around other aircraft that were fueled and armed, waiting to go on another strike.

Smoke and fire quickly enveloped the stricken carrier as her men strove to save her. *Franklin* eventually made it back to the States under her own power to be repaired, having lost 832 of her crew.

On 11 May 1945, *Bunker Hill* (CV 17) took a Zero, then a "Judy" dive-bomber, which also released a bomb before it crashed onto the carrier's flight deck. As her crew fought the fire, task force commander Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher had to transfer his flag to another ship. Finally, the fires were brought under control and, with 389

Photo via Robert Mikesch

NH 73096



Despite the smiles, these pilots will soon be involved in serious business, flying their kamikaze mission. One crewman helps his friend tie the traditional headband named "hachimaki"—a mark of samurai courage.

dead, *Bunker Hill* also returned to the U.S.

Another veteran carrier to be hit by kamikazes was *Enterprise* (CV 6), at one time in mid-1942 the only operating American carrier in the Pacific after Pearl Harbor. Although damaged on 20 March 1945, *Enterprise* was repaired at Ulithi and returned to the fight.

However, on 14 May, an early morning attack by kamikazes did far more damage to the "Big E." A bomb-carrying *Zero* hit the carrier's flight deck just behind the forward elevator. The *Zero* pilot, originally mistakenly identified as Tomi Zai, was actually Lieutenant (jg) Shunsuke Tomiyasu. Superb preparedness and firefighting techniques saved the ship from the breadth of damage suffered by *Franklin* and *Bunker Hill*. But the strike was enough to take the carrier out of the war for good, although she remained on station for two more days before heading for Pearl Harbor.

When the Japanese accepted Allied terms for surrender on 14 August 1945, some 2,600 kamikaze sorties had been flown. For such a simple, nontechnical weapon, the suicide squadrons caused a lot of damage and killed a lot of people besides their own pilots. In May alone, kamikazes killed 330 carrier crewmen, destroyed 90 carrier aircraft and put 4 fleet carriers out of action, not to mention other damaging attacks against other carriers

Jul 6: A special Air Unit was formed under ComAirLant, with Cdr. James A. Smith as officer in charge, for transfer without delay to Commander Fleet Air Wing 7 in Europe. This unit was to attack German V-1 and V-2 launching sites with PB4Y-1s converted to assault drones.

Jul 6: The Bureau of Aeronautics authorized Douglas to proceed with the design and manufacture of 15 XBT2D airplanes. The single-seat dive-bomber and torpedo plane thus initiated was designed jointly by BuAer and Douglas engineers. Through subsequent development and model redesignation, these aircraft became the prototypes for the AD *Skyraider* series of attack planes.

Jul 14: PB4Y *Liberators* of VB-109

based at Saipan made the first strike on Iwo Jima by shore-based planes.

Aug 5: The Fast Carrier Task Force was reorganized into First and Second Fast Carrier Task Forces, Pacific, commanded by VAdm. M. A. Mitscher and VAdm. J. S. McCain, respectively.

Aug 10: The operating aircraft complement of Carrier Air Groups was revised to 54 VF, 24 VB and 18 VT with the provision that four night fighters and two photo planes be included among the 54 VF.

Aug 24: The first night carrier air group, CVLG(N)-43, was established at Charlestown, R.I. Its component squadrons, VF(N)-43 and VT(N)-43, the latter the first of the night torpedo squadrons, were established the same day.

and other ships like destroyers, cruisers and battleships.

Overall, 474 U.S. ships were victims of kamikaze attacks, and 3,253 officers and men were killed. Three escort carriers were sunk and 28 other carriers damaged, including 12 big fleet carriers. Several carriers took two or more strikes, sometimes on the same day. *Intrepid* (CV 11) and *Enterprise* each sustained four separate kamikaze hits, while *Franklin* was hit twice before the cataclysmic strike on 19 March 1945.

For all the terrifying holocaust of the

NH 73098

kamikazes, the eventual outcome of the war was never in doubt. What Admiral William F. Halsey, commander of the U.S. Third Fleet, referred to as "the only weapon I feared in the war" did little to forestall the Allied victory.

After the war, Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific, said, "Nothing that happened during the war was a surprise ... except the kamikazes ... we had not visualized these."

Learning of the emperor's acceptance of the Allies' surrender terms on 15 August, Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi followed the young pilots of his kamikaze corps and committed suicide, leaving a note, which said, in part:

"I wish to express my deep appreciation to the souls of the brave special attackers. They fought and died valiantly In death I wish to atone for my part in the failure to achieve victory . . . I wish the young people of Japan to find a moral in my death. To be reckless is only to aid the enemy You are the treasure of the nation . . . strive for the welfare of Japan and for peace throughout the world." ■

Cdr. Mersky is assistant editor of *Approach* magazine.

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Cheered on by his friends, a *Zero* pilot taxis his suicide plane. The *Zero* carries a 550-lb. bomb on its belly, usually reserved for a range-stretching fuel tank, but this is a one-way flight. Photo was taken during the October 1944 Leyte Gulf operations and shows one of the first kamikaze missions.