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Please note that Dr Komatsu is a former banker (at the semi-governmental Central Co-operative Bank for Commerce and Industry in Tokyo and NY) and a development specialist (at the World Bank), but not at the Development Bank of Japan as stated in the original newsletter. Dr Komatsu was awarded a doctorate in International Relations from the University of Oxford.

KAMIKAZE.

Editor's Note.

I make no apology for printing in this Issue an article which I requested from Dr. Komatsu. Although it is not concerned with the Burma Campaign, I believe it has a great deal to do with reconciliation, which is one of the main aims of BCS. The avoidance of stereotypes in international relations is essential and yet, in spite of having visited the Kamikaze Museum in Chiran, I myself shared the one which Dr. Komatsu, the author of "Origins of the Pacific War and the Importance of "Magic", seeks to combat.

Towards the Elimination of a Stereotype.

The more time I spent researching the Japanese, British and American diplomatic and military primary sources, while at Oxford studying for my Doctorate, the clearer it became to me the extent to which the interests of these three countries coincided, and that it was as a result of preconceived perceptions and misunderstandings that they convinced themselves that they were not reconcilable.



Dr. Keiichiro Komatsu

The stereotypical image of 'Kamikaze' or 'Divine Wind', shared by post-war British, Americans and Japanese, was firstly that it was suicidal; secondly that it represented ultra-nationalist ideological extremism; thirdly that it was State Shintoist and fourthly that it involved brainwashed teenagers. Some of you may be surprised to see the inclusion of post-war Japanese, but the Japanese of all generations, like the rest of the world, have been strongly influenced by the way in which Kamikaze pilots became legends.

The question arises, to what extent were Japan and the Kamikaze pilots unique?

I myself was surprised when I very recently discovered a number of things. Firstly, Kamikaze pilots were given parachutes. Secondly, their operations were rational and pragmatic to the extent that they were given enough fuel for a return to base. Thirdly, those who volunteered included Catholics, some of them carrying their Bibles with them, as well as socialists, liberals and many others. They were not a homogeneous ideological group, but came from all walks of life. Fourthly, and finally, their ages ranged from the high 'teens to the over fifties. Many were bright-minded, highly educated personnel from prestigious Universities such as Tokyo. Many, indeed, wrote letters to their families and friends quoting from Western poets and philosophers, and were outstanding thinkers who had thought through different options and what the war was about.

One of their instructions, just before take-off, was as follows.

“Release your bomb just before yourself almost crashing into the target. In fact, the bomb is more effective in shooting through the target on its own, rather than your plane crashing into the target with the bomb. If you are confident to bomb the target from a distance, do so, and leave the combat zone to come back to this home base, If unfortunately you meet enemy fighter planes before finding the targets, unload your bomb to do your best dog-fighting, and come back to this base. We trust that all of you understand the purpose of your mission. It is not to die; it is to achieve the best military result. Come back again and again. We will let you take off again and again.

(Captain Motoharu Okamura)

To give an example, Petty Officer Second Class Setsuo Ishino was recently identified as the pilot who crashed into the US Battleship Missouri on 11th April 1945. Research shows that 16 Naval Zero Fighters, in 4 Flights, took off that day from his home base, together with others from various bases in Southern Japan. In his Flight, three out of four, including Ishino himself, had been on previous Kamikaze missions. Eleven of his group had been shot down or crashed into their targets, whilst 3 had returned to base by the time Ishino and Petty Officer Second Class Kenkichi Ishii spotted the Missouri.

They all knew that the mission was very dangerous and the risk of dying extremely great. But, as Lieutenant Yukio Seki, known as the ‘first Kamikaze’, replied, when asked by a colleague if he really wanted to do this, “I am going for my wife’s sake and family’s sake, for no one else. Do not worry, I am alright.” Protecting the country was not the end, it was the means to meet the end.

The fact is that, depending on the Flight, and for various reasons such as engine failure, failing to find targets and surviving through bombing operations and dog-fights, 40-60% of Kamikaze pilots survived to the end of the Pacific War.

Until very lately, conventional wisdom had it that Kamikaze was mostly a waste of lives, achieving little military result, but records recently released by the US authorities suggest otherwise. In terms of purely military impact, Kamikaze, as a way of fighting, could be seen as being rather effective. While around 2,500 Kamikaze pilots were killed, their opponents lost about 7,000 personnel, together with several tens of thousands who were injured, while against the Japanese planes destroyed must be set those lost by their opponents, together with the considerable number of warships, including aircraft carriers, that were sunk or put out of commission.

A Lieutenant Commander of the US Navy, a member of the Occupation Authorities over Japan, said to one of the Zero Fighter flying aces, Kazuo Sugino who had himself twice joined Kamikaze flights, when they met after the end of the war. “We realized that if we forget the Japanese spirit symbolized by Kamikaze, our Occupation Policy is not going to work. That is why it became a moderate occupation policy.” This comment reminds us of what Lieutenant Iwao Usubuchi of the Japanese Navy said to his colleagues immediately before his death near the end of the war. “We will die in grace leading the way to Japan’s rebirth. Wouldn’t it be the desire of our hearts.?”

Again, the Kamikaze pilots were, in many ways, not so different from their counterparts in the West, such as the 5,000 American B 17 daylight bomber aircrew who died, often having to fly without fighter escorts, or the 50,000 British night bomber aircrew who were killed. They all knew that their chances of survival were extremely slim, only a very small proportion of them surviving a full tour of duty.

The greatest tragedy is not just the human and material costs of the Pacific War, but the fact that both sides failed to recognise the extent to which their opponents were similar to themselves and to which they were the victims of preconceived misconceptions and misunderstandings based on the belief that the other side was monstrous. Reconciliation starts from recognising this fact as a step towards preventing such things recurring.

Keiichiro Komatsu