Japan at War
An Oral History

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INTRODUCTION TO A LOST WAR

JAPAN was defeated in its last war decisively and completely. Approximately three million Japanese died in a conflict that raged for years over a huge part of the earth's surface, from Hawaii to India, Alaska to Australia, causing death and suffering to untold millions in China, southeast Asia, and the Pacific islands, as well as pain and anguish to families of soldiers and civilians around the globe.

Yet how much do we know of Japan's war? The experiences of individual Japanese caught up in that enormous conflict seem somehow never to have emerged from collective images of a fanatical nation at war. What was the war like for Japanese soldiers, sailors, workers, farming wives, factory girls, and schoolchildren? How did they survive, what motivated them, and what did they learn from their ordeal? Certainly, the texture of the Japanese experience is absent from most American discussions of the Second World War in Asia. But so, too, is it generally missing from Japanese treatments of the war. In Japan, one can encounter a powerful, generalized hatred of war, a strong belief that wars should not be fought, but little appreciation for or understanding of the reasons why Japan was at the center of that global conflict a half-century ago.

In fact, perhaps the most common feeling we encountered while studying the Japanese war experience was a sense among those we interviewed that the war, like some natural cataclysm, had "happened" to them, not in any way been "done" by them. All around us were people who had lived the most intense moments of their lives in that era, yet we were often acutely aware that many desired the experiences of that war to remain forever lost. It was as if no framework existed within which those who had lived through that time of war could release their personal stories into the public realm. Yet, feeling that that Japanese war could not be allowed to pass beyond memory without some effort to record what wartime life was like for the Japanese people, we had to ask ourselves, Where does one go in search of a lost war?

One particular encounter captured for us the strange state of the Second World War in Japanese memory today. We were examining the wartime records of a small village in central Japan in 1989 when we turned up a document showing that a man still living in the area had had
two brothers killed in the war. Acting on the kind of impulse that was to serve us well, we went directly to his home, a sprawling farmhouse set in a grove of ancient trees on the side of a hill. A man in his early fifties, he greeted us and, on hearing why we'd come, invited us in. Willing to talk, but tense and unsure where to begin, he finally focused on his eldest brother, who had died in October 1937 during the "China Incident"—as the Sino-Japanese war that began July 7, 1937, was known in Japan.

"At that time," he explained, "not many people had been killed in action, so everyone in the hamlet showed great compassion. Eldest Brother was called a 'military god.' My parents even went to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on the occasion of his enshrinement there. The nation treated the family members of the war dead with such care then, that their families almost felt grateful to their sons for having died."

The second brother—our host was the third of five sons—went into the navy in 1942. "That was the year I entered elementary school. This time, my parents were worried. They even bought a radio, something we couldn't afford, because they felt they had to hear the news. We had no idea where he'd gone. Whenever there were gyokusai (sacrificial battles) reported, at Attu, Tarawa, or Saipan, my father was subdued all day long. My brother was actually killed at Truk in 1944."

At this point, our host retired to another room, and after a few moments returned with a packet of cards and letters, carefully bound with twine. Tenderly selecting one, he held it out to us, "This is my elder brother's final card home. His last words are 'It is my long-cherished desire to fall [like the cherry blossom]. My brothers, raise our family honor by becoming military men!' " Suddenly, our host halted, drew his shoulders together, and seemed to wince with pain. Then he broke into sobs, tears streaming down his face, falling onto his hands, which clutched his knees. Gradually, he controlled his tears, and continued in a choked voice, "On the day the war ended, my parents cried out bitterly, 'Two of our sons died in vain!' But afterwards, my father never criticized the country, never spoke about militarism or anything. He just talked about what good sons they'd been."

He now served us tea. He seemed more relaxed, and almost as an afterthought, he wondered whether we'd like to see some of his eldest brother's things. He led us into a tatami room, along one of whose walls were displayed grainy photographs of a young soldier in a fur-lined hat, sporting the insignia of a private first class, and a sailor, with the name of the destroyer Tachikaze on the band of his cap. Next to them were crisp photographs of two old and weathered faces, their parents. From deeper in the recesses of the house he returned with a large square box made of wisteria wood. Inked on it in bold brush strokes were the characters, "Box for the Belongings of the Deceased." Inside was an official description of the circumstances of his eldest brother's death, and a map, bearing the seal of his brother's commanding officer, showing the exact location of his final moments. Beneath it was the "thousand-stitch belt"—said to ward off bullets—that his sister had sewn for him before his departure for China. Our host pointed out the brown stain from his blood.

At the bottom of the box was a heavy album. The embossed lettering on the cover immediately told us it was the official album of his eldest brother's unit, the Thirty-Fifth Infantry Regiment, commemorating its service in Manchuria. After the obligatory photographs of Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako, of the Imperial Standard, and the tattered regimental banner, the portraits of the medal-bedecked hierarchy of the Japanese Army in Manchuria, and of the regimental commander, came the shots of vigorous, fresh-faced young men on their first trip overseas—"going ashore" at Dairen near Port Arthur, "in front of the memorial to the Japanese dead of the Russo-Japanese War," and "competing in a Japan-Manchukuo athletic meet."

The last pages of the album were blank to accommodate whatever snapshots a soldier might want to add, and many had been pasted in. Here was the youth whose portrait hung on the wall behind us in informal poses, a handsome young soldier with his friends and his mess mates. Here were shots of Chinese women with bound feet and wild Manchurian landscapes. Here also was an official-looking photo, entitled "Bandit Suppression Operation Commemorative Picture," showing soldiers in combat gear going into action, followed by a series of candid shots revealing the fate of "bandits" in the operations his eldest brother had clearly taken part in. One showed three severed heads, one with eyes still staring, balanced on a fence; another, a soldier holding a precisely severed head by its hair, the face turned toward the camera; yet another of a Chinese, his arms bound tightly, is captioned in his eldest brother's hand, "his life hangs by a thread." The last few pages contain the family's photographs of their eldest son's grand funeral in his village when his remains were returned from China.

As our host closed the album, he turned to Haruko and said calmly, but with concern, "I don't know what to do with this box. When I die, there's nobody to protect these things. My other brothers died while still young. My sons and my daughter have all left the hamlet for the big city. I don't think any of them want to come back. I've been airing the box out each year to preserve it." Then he added, "I'm sure my brother would be
happy that you’ve seen these things. But please don’t connect our name
to those photos. It’s just that it was that kind of time. It was war. It wasn’t
like today. Today’s peace, I feel, is founded on those sacrificed then.”

During our years of interviewing in Japan, that box and its contents
haunted us as a symbol of what that war was and what it has since become
to the Japanese: a man with a box containing both memories of a brother
he adored and evidence of the crimes of war; love and atrocities bound
together and hidden from sight; a man who desires to preserve what he,
indeed, what his whole family shies away from acknowledging. For that
box holds an accurate self-portrait of a young Japanese man who went to
war and did what in those years his country, his community, and he felt
had to be done. While our host is prepared to air out the objects in the
box each year, he refuses to give the meaning of the contents the public
airing it demands, and yet if we cannot speak of what actually happened
then, can the preservation of the past have any meaning?

Every August 15—the anniversary of the day in 1945 when the
Japanese Emperor accepted the demands of the Allies and announced to
his people that the war was over—Japan officially recalls “the war” with
a government-sponsored “Day Commemorating the End of the War.” It
is not a national holiday, but on that day the Nihon Budōkan hall in
Tokyo, normally the site of concerts, professional wrestling matches,
and martial-arts events, is transformed into the venue for a “National
Ceremony to Mourn the War Dead.” Seated facing great banks of white
and yellow chrysanthemums, the prime minister, government figures,
local officials and selected representatives of the “families of the war
dead” are among the several thousand invited guests. The Emperor
reads a short statement broadcast live on radio and television, and a
minute of silence is observed precisely at noon. This brief observance,
unlike those of that long-ago war, contains no religious elements.

Although conducted at the highest level of government, the
 ceremony is not used to discuss the reasons for the war, nor to debate
its causes, costs, or consequences. It is accompanied neither by ringing
speeches in honor of the valiant men and women who fought for Japan,
nor in memory of the bravery and suffering of those who died at home or
endured agonies in the war’s wake. No apologies or regrets are offered to
the millions throughout the Asian-Pacific region who survived the depreda-
tions of the Japanese, and no one seems to consider anything to be
amiss in that. In an uncompromisingly solemn tone, the ceremony to
remember the dead confirms the participants in their generally mute and
unaroused state. The hall is full of the faces of people who lived
through those years and who by the rules of invitation must have lost a
family member in that war. Yet how those war dead died or what caused
their lives to be lost, are not questions to be raised on such an occasion.
There is no way for an onlooker to know what stories these relatives of
the dead might have to tell. Nonetheless, we often wondered about them
as the annual event rolled around and we, like so many others, took a few
moments off to watch the ceremony, or at least to view clips of it on the
evening news.

In that strangely disembodied official ceremony, the lost war seems
anchored in neither time nor public memory. In fact, for younger
Japanese—the vast majority of all Japanese were born long after August
15, 1945—the day to mourn the war dead has become a “seasonal event”
signifying high summer, like the cry of the cicada or the hawking of the
goldfish seller. For us, the ceremony in its historical opaqueness seemed
to capture much of what was both tantalizing and initially forbidding in
our decision to try to do an oral history of the Pacific War from the
Japanese point of view. We wanted to ask the wives, brothers, sisters, or
the few remaining parents, aunts, and uncles of those whose lives had
ended half a century or more ago for their stories, and for those of their
dead relatives, and we wanted to do the asking before those with direct
memory of the war years themselves died.

But was it possible to inquire of such faces? Or even to find them?
Where to begin? And if we succeeded, would any of them truly speak to
us, or speak truthfully to us after so many years? Haruko had her own
doubts. She had lived through the war as a small child in a village to
which she had been evacuated with her mother (while her father worked
as a civilian employee in the Palembang oil fields in Japanese-occupied
Sumatra), and she knew from personal experience how little the war years
were a spoken part of postwar family life. But she was also aware of an
impulse to explore those wartime experiences she herself could hardly
remember. That was why she had made the war the subject of programs
she produced for Japanese television and radio in the late 1960s and why
she later made the lost literature of that war period the topic of her
research into Japanese literature. She suspected that others, too, had this
desire to uncover those years so long locked away inside. Ted, whose
mother and father met in the Pacific theater during the war, had, thanks
to his research on Japanese military institutions and the place of the
military in prewar Japanese society, a certain confidence in the willing-
ness of the wartime generation to speak of those days. He had been struck
by how many army and navy officers had proven willing to talk with him
of their careers and lives, and he hoped it would be possible to expand
such contacts to soldiers and sailors and their families.

Just to find interviewees, however, proved a daunting experience in
ways that reveal much about how Japan has dealt with its war experience. In fact, our first attempt at an interview, with a respected professor of political science, someone we already knew, whom we hoped might both tell us about his own wartime experiences and direct us to other interviewees, went not at all as anticipated.

After discussing the war generally, he began, with seeming reluctance, to speak of his own war experience as a university draftee who had used all his family's influence to avoid call-up until he was finally tapped for coastal-defense duty late in the war. One day in July 1945, he went on, the intensity of his voice increasing with each sentence, he found himself in charge of an emplacement of ancient coastal guns just as an American flyer parachuted into Tokyo Bay. As the downed American swam toward his position, the youthful candidate-officer found his mind racing. What should he do? Kill him, or take him prisoner? Suddenly, he was spared the choice, for right there in middle of the bay, a U.S. submarine surfaced, scooped up the pilot, and submerged again, taking him to safety. At that moment in his story, the scholar broke off almost breathlessly, and said, "You see, that's the only kind of thing you'll hear. Pointless stories. It's too late to talk about crucial issues. All the people in decision-making posts are long dead." He then assured us in unambiguous terms that people's memories of those years had long faded, and emphasized again that the important stories, those that moved events in the war years, were no longer obtainable. Terminating the interview, he said with some condescension, but at the same time a hint of embarrassment, "You should read more."

It was a shock to hear the premise of our project rejected. Was it truly no longer possible to go beyond what was already in the history books to probe the experience of individual Japanese by seeking out and listening to the stories of those who had lived through the war years? As we thought about it later, we realized that he'd just told us a story which had revealed something of the dilemmas faced by Japanese in the war: How a young man balanced duty and desire; the strange moment when he himself faced the decision of whether or not to kill; and, as he told his story, the sudden insight it gave him into what his life would have been had he killed an American prisoner-of-war in the last moments of conflict.

So we began anyway, knowing that August was the best month for war research in Japan, and that August of 1988 was both a fortuitous and propitious one in which to launch our project. It seems that every year August 6 and August 9, the dates Hiroshima and Nagasaki were devastated by atomic bombs, and August 15, surrender day, serve as a focus for some reminiscing about the war. Television documentaries are aired, and newspapers often run series of short articles or letters by those remembering their wartime experiences. As if by general agreement, booksellers use August as the month to set up displays on the war years, exhibiting the latest military volumes and personal memories or collections of reminiscences, often published that month. Even old movies from the war years are sometimes revived by tiny movie houses in Tokyo, where they play to small audiences of mostly elderly patrons.

We were fortunate that as we began our work, a spate of memory pieces had begun to appear in the large daily papers in Japan. Most were only a few paragraphs long, snapshots in time, capturing a moment of crisis, or release, or realization, or horror. These pieces, fragments of released war memories from otherwise ordinary Japanese who clearly had lived silently with their war experiences for decades, were a little like flashes of lightning briefly illuminating bits of a dark landscape. They convinced us that the stories we sought were there and could be found.

We began to search for our storytellers. A newspaper printed a haiku that used a line about the war to signify the season, which led to a poet-soldier willing to talk; tiny public notices of a meeting of veterans of an island campaign turned up a unit's sole survivor; a bulletin board carrying notice of a woman's search for the fate of missing childhood friends produced a tale of wartime bombing, and a classified ad appealing for even a few words about how a man's brother might have died led us to a family unable to forget for even a day. (Of course, obituaries often reminded us that the clock was ticking.) On such small clues, we began our search.

Interviews were usually arranged as one-on-one affairs. Indeed, we soon learned to avoid interviewing more than one person at a time, if at all possible, since group sessions tended to yield comfortable consensus rather than personal disclosure. It quickly became clear that the intense intimacy of the process was greatly enhanced by the ability of the speaker to share his or her story in seeming confidence. The interviews were usually conducted by Haruko. Occasionally, Ted also participated. We wanted to elicit from each person his or her individual memories and impressions of that time. We usually did not proceed with a set list of questions, but over the course of an interview tried to offer the interviewee full freedom to remember in his or her own way. This often took many hours. A pilot of a "human torpedo" told Haruko, "I've never talked this much before. Usually they just want to know, 'What's it like to go on a suicide mission?' Before I've said anything I wanted to say, the interview's over." We learned to listen, but not all were willing storytellers. A few who agreed to meet us found they could not bring themselves to
describe what they had experienced, even when they clearly felt obliged to speak. Of course, others simply did not want to unearth what they considered unpleasant subjects. In such circumstances, the tone of an interview could become almost adversarial, but the answers thus elicited provided something of the missing picture. Indeed, not telling all was itself sometimes part of the story.

Whatever our methods of interviewing, the moment we chose to begin our project was serendipitous. In the Japan of the late 1980s, there seemed at last to be a growing willingness on the part of ordinary people to speak of their wartime experiences, and speak not just as if they had been the victims of a calamity, but to talk about what was done to others in Japan's name. Certainly, the end of the Shōwa era, on January 7, 1989, with the death of Emperor Hirohito whose reign had lasted just over sixty-three years, contributed to the sense of an epoch passing. For some, that date underlined their own mortality, and left them with a desire to release what they had been holding inside—if not to confess, at least to confide. At the same time, others took the Emperor's death as a moment to put the whole war behind them rather than to reflect on its meanings.

It may be hard for an American—used to a war with a distinct and accepted public story with a clear beginning (Pearl Harbor) and a clear end (Hiroshima and Japan's surrender); a war with its public monuments, from the Arizona memorial in Hawaii to the Iwo Jima memorial near Arlington National Cemetery in Washington; with numerous special museums and libraries dedicated to the war, with its exhibitions of public pride and public memory, its proud veterans ready to recount the exploits, glories, and horrors of various campaigns, and its decades of movie and TV retellings—to imagine the state of the war experience in contemporary Japan. It must be said that, for the Japanese, their war has almost none of that public quality. Films made during the war years are virtually never screened. The art and literature of those years—denied, denounced, and repudiated even by many of the artists who created it—is locked away. Often it is even omitted from an artist's "Complete Works," as if the fifteen years from 1931 to 1945 had never existed. The war as seen on television, despite valiant efforts by some independent producers to introduce critical questions into dramas and documentaries, still focuses mostly on Hiroshima and Japanese suffering in the years of defeat.

There is no national museum or archive to which children can go to find out about the war, or where students can freely examine wartime documents; no neutral national setting where one could study wartime art, explore major photo collections, or examine artifacts of daily life.

Although there are certainly displays in local museums devoted to those years, there is no concerted national effort to preserve, accumulate, and reconstruct the war from an historical perspective. Indeed, the only significant large collection of war memorabilia is held in the memorial hall at Yasukuni Shrine, which itself served as the focal point of the cult of the war dead in prewar and wartime Japan. Without a neutral public space for public investigation of, or reflection on, the war experience, scholars of today—and more importantly, those who wish to study the war years in the future—must depend on what little private documentation reaches the public.

As odd as it may seem, almost half a century after the conclusion of the conflict, the war doesn't even have a single nationally agreed-upon name. Throughout the course of our interviews people spoke of "the Pacific War," "the Greater East Asia War," "the China Incident," "the Japan-China War," "the Fifteen-Year War," or explained how the war in Asia was different from the rest of the "Second World War." The choice of name implies a choice of chronology—a given name might place the beginning of the war as early as 1931, or as late as 1941. Choice of name often also indicates ideological perspective. "The Fifteen-Year War"—generally a term of the left—emphasizes the imperialist origins of the war, beginning with Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931. "The Greater East Asia War"—now generally a term of the revisionist right—shows the speaker either still caught up in images of wartime, or still displaying a sympathy with the war's goals and objectives. (The term, which came into use immediately after December 8, 1941, was so closely linked with the concept of the creation of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, declared to be one of the great objectives of Japan's war with the West, that it was specifically excluded from official publications of the Allied Occupation authorities after the surrender.) Most commonly chosen was probably "the Pacific War," the widely used term of the Occupation years and the name which most clearly differentiates between the open warfare that began in China in 1937—called the China Incident at the time, now sometimes called the Japan-China War—and the war with the U.S. and Britain which began in 1941. Using the Pacific War, in fact, freed many speakers from the need to refer to those years of combat and conquest in China at all. Most interviewees, however, preferred "the war" to any more elaborate name. On the most personal of levels, we came to see that each individual has his or her own notion of when that war began. To speak of "the war," meaning the Japanese conflict with the Soviet Union, for instance, could even mean a war that did not begin until August 9, 1945.
As it turned out, to make this book was to discover how hidden the memories of “the war” really are in Japan. To find the people who speak in these pages meant plunging into a half-hidden world of “sources” as well as an underground world of memories. At times, we were passed almost furtively along a chain of individuals, by private introduction, and in an atmosphere of hushed approval. Most of the time people approached individually agreed to speak only for themselves. Indeed, many emphasized their refusal to speak for anyone else, claiming that they knew only what they themselves had experienced.

Meetings often had a secretive quality to them. Many of the hundreds of people interviewed for this book had difficulty even deciding where they would feel safe to tell their stories. For most, it was clearly an issue of some import. Sometimes people chose the most impersonal or deserted of public settings, and so we interviewed on benches in the corners of busy railroad stations, back booths of underpopulated coffee shops, hospital cafeterias, paths separating flooded rice fields, the lobbies of hotels or clubs, or open areas in public parks with barely a bench to sit on. Other times, people felt safest inviting us not just into their homes, but into the shrine-like rooms within those homes that they had set up to remember the dead in utter privacy. More than one person described such a room or alcove, safe even from their own families, as “my sanctum sanctorum” or “my museum.” Such a space might be simply adorned, with only a few personal photos from the war years set by a Buddhist altar, or packed from floor to ceiling with memorabilia, documents, books, photographs of lost friends, models of wartime ships and planes, or flags signed by long-dead war comrades. Letters, wills, professional blow-ups of treasured and well-worn photos of beloved relatives, poems, wartime diaries, military notebooks, even “souvenirs” from wartime China might be in these places. Bottles of sand and pebbles from a beach in the South Pacific, or stones from a mountain in Burma, brought back from more recent trips to the site of military disasters, were regularly a part of the interview environment.

Not surprisingly, people were often at a total loss for where to begin their stories, since the war in Japan has no generally accepted beginning point. Nor did people—except for the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where there has been general agreement on ways to relate the story of what happened there—quite know how to tell their stories to another person, a public person, an outsider. Consequently, each interview proved less an experience in which a speaker could plug his or her story into an ongoing narrative than a struggle to create a structure for the tale as it was being told. This is why many of the stories—particularly of the years of defeat—have the feel of wanderings in a shapeless terrain.

Again and again, people halted, sometimes in mid-sentence, as if to question their own words, as if they could hardly believe that what they were telling us had actually taken place, or that they could have been the central characters in their own stories. “You can’t believe me, can you?” they’d ask, only to continue. “But it was true.” Or they would say, in almost the same words in interview after interview, “I know it seems impossible now, but that’s what we truly thought then. We really believed that, from the bottom of our hearts.” A nod of confirmation, an assurance that we did indeed believe them, was usually enough to send them back into the past.

For almost all of the people interviewed for this book, the experience of telling about their years at war was an incredibly fresh one, often an extraordinary return to memories held in privacy and silence for up to sixty years. As a consequence, almost every interview involved incredible outbursts of emotion. Tears were a commonplace—of sorrow, of bitterness or grief, of loving memory, of chagrin or even horror over acts committed. Voices choked. Bodies were convulsed with sobs. There were actual groans of pain and anguish, even the literal grinding of teeth. Loud voices boomed from small frames and old shoulders were squared, fists clenched, in anger and outrage. Laughter was rare, although sometimes ironic chuckles and self-deprecating smiles broke moments of great tension. One of the hidden obstacles to securing interviews with some of those who agreed to talk proved to be family members “concerned” that remembering would only cause pain. Perhaps the interviewees themselves, aware from a moment or two long ago, of what emotions might be released if they really let themselves recall their past, dreaded talking about it. When we shared their emotions, even cried with them on occasion, they took that as confirmation that they had communicated their own feelings, and sometimes even expressed gratitude for finally having been able to reveal themselves to another.

In this book, their stories have been arranged in rough chronological order, to convey a sense of the duration, scale, and course of the war as experienced in Japan. It was, of course, a conflict between nations, but for the soldiers, sailors, or airmen, no less the factory girls, farthing wives, or workers in the Homeland, the experience was ultimately an individual one. We have selected people from general to private, prison camp guard to journalist, dancer to diplomat, idealistic builder of “Greater East Asia” to “thought criminal,” who talk revealingly of their wars. As the reader
approaches these individual accounts of wartime Imperial Japan, we feel it might be useful to keep in mind four ways in which the Japanese perception of the war differs from the American experience.

First, Japan was defeated, and there is no well-established narrative form for telling the tale of the defeated. In war histories and literature alike, the tale is often told most convincingly by the victors, even when they shade the story in neutral tones. For the Japanese, even the victories at Pearl Harbor and elsewhere in December 1941 and early 1942 do not contribute the beginning of a narrative, as in America’s war stories. When asked, each interviewee can recall precisely where and how they learned the news of Pearl Harbor and how they felt, but few of their own accord make it the starting point for even a brief narrative of victory, of euphoria and excitement, of successful battles won on land and sea. Pearl Harbor is usually hardly mentioned in their stories. This omission perhaps indicates how thoroughly the overwhelming defeats that came later invalidated the obvious narratives of Japanese victories that otherwise might have been told by the participants.

With neither a decisive beginning nor an ending point, Japanese memories of the Pacific War can have a structureless quality in which the individual wanders through endless dreamlike scenes of degradation, horror, and death, a shapeless nightmare of plotless slaughter. This formless narrative of defeat—of soldiers overwhelmed in battle, or girls escaping a Tokyo air raid, of a student nurse’s living nightmare in Okinawa, or a desperate mother’s flight for her life in Manchuria—is how they tend to see their war, at least in the instant they are recalling it. The country so often portrayed in the West as a fantastical, suicidal nation, united in purpose by their Emperor, looks more like a collection of confused, terrorized, and desperate individuals beaten down by overwhelming force.

So little in the public sphere stands between their war memories and the moment of their telling decades later that the language of those war years comes immediately back to their lips. Again and again, such terms as gyokusai (sacrificial battles), okuni no tane ni (for the country’s sake), tokkō (special attack) and kamikaze (divine wind), kempei (military police), Tennō no sekishi (the Emperor’s children) are used with immediacy, and specialized wartime words—akagami (red paper, a call-up notice for military service), sampachi (Type-38, the standard infantry rifle), imonbukuro (comfort bags, gifts for soldiers sent from the Homeland), bōkūzukan (air-defense helmet, the padded cotton headgear universally worn in the cities by women and children late in the war)—pop into sentences as if they were current slang. For instance gyokusai, whose literal meaning, “crushing the jewels,” comes from ancient Chinese, was used widely in the war years to glorify dying and to create a heroic image of courageous soldiers charging into a cruel and overwhelming enemy force. A gyokusai battle like Saipan was as often as not a miserable slaughter of starving soldiers with nowhere to go, soldiers under iron-clad military orders forbidding them to surrender. While some of our interviewees used the word with a certain perspective simply to evoke the wartime atmosphere, many others used such antiquated, and historically discredited euphemisms at face value. For them, the postwar period had failed to coin new words that described the realities of their war.

A second point which should be remembered while reading the following accounts is that war responsibility is not clearly established in the minds of many Japanese today, no matter how certain the rest of the world may be about it. The Japanese people were not, in fact, held responsible for the war by the Allied occupation forces, who tried, convicted and executed selected Japanese leaders and military figures for plotting an “aggressive war” and for condoning and encouraging war crimes. The nature of Japanese responsibility for the war was further muddied when Emperor Hirohito, revered during the war as the figure from whom all authority to act was said to derive, was never charged. In fact, after declaring himself in January 1946 to be a human being and not divine, he was continued in office under a new postwar—and present—constitution as “the symbol of the unity of the people.” In Germany, the Nazi Party and Hitler were linked and the dead Führer provided the focus of postwar attempts, however attenuated, to cleanse the society. While Japanese “militarism” in the form of military institutions could be abolished, and the new constitution might renounce war, there was no clear focal point for efforts in Japan to look at all the links between those who had power and wartime behavior.

The reader may then find the war memories presented here extremely personal in focus. Millions of Japanese who supported the national war effort to the last day without any active substantive resistance against their government or military found themselves amid the devastation of a defeated land reeling from personal loss. The war experience was largely shoved out of public view, buried beneath private pain. Larger questions of causality and responsibility were either passed along to the small group of convicted military leaders, politicians, industrialists, and bureaucrats singled out by the Allies, or deferred to the Occupation forces who replaced the authority of the military government. Sorting out the war experience, with some notable individual exceptions, found little
place in the public sphere in a country where all that now seemed to matter was rebuilding and starting again. The issue of Imperial responsibility for the origins and execution of the war was left largely unexplored."

Emperor Hirohito never discussed the war with his own people. As a result, in the forty-four postwar years of his reign, the Emperor whom the wartime generation had been taught to worship as a living god, and in whose name so many had died, never clearly accepted or assigned responsibility for the decisions which brought about the war or the acts which occurred during it. Despite the fact that the war was fought under his command, very few of the people in this book mention him when they explain their experience, except for those who were in elementary school in those years, and grew up thinking of themselves as the "Emperor's children." When he is mentioned, it is usually only with reference to his war responsibility.

Third, in some of these interviews, people introduce the notion of "a Good Defeat." That defeat can bestow benefits is not a concept likely to occur to an American reader attuned to seeing the war from the perspective of an unconditional surrender forced on an implacable foe, in which there could have been no substitute for victory. The idea today takes much of its impetus from postwar Japanese economic achievement and is founded on the position Japan today holds internationally. This complex and sometimes conflicted "lesson" of the war is seldom a fully resolved one for any of the people who used it. For example, Zen priest Itabashi Kōshū, who attended the naval academy in the last year of the war, summed up the war's legacy by saying, "If Japan had stopped that war after taking the Philippines—you know, gotten a decent settlement—it would have ended up with Taiwan and Korea, but even they would eventually have been separated from Japan. How long that would have taken I don't know, but it would have been a long struggle. I believe because Japan lost, today's prosperity exists." He was quick to add, "Now, I'm not saying it is better to lose a war. I'm only saying that if you fight a war seriously, its impact remains. We fought the war thoroughly, with all our energies, and we lost. It was better to do it that way than to take an intermediate path. I am prepared to say aloud, it is good that we lost. We have to pray for the war dead. We must pray for the victims of the war."

Many of those we interviewed rejected the very idea that nothing good came out of that terrible war and those awful "sacrifices." Many felt impelled to find in it something to give meaning to their efforts. Almost inverting the more common theme, the younger sister of a navy Special Attack officer took solace from the knowledge that her brother had died in an accident. "That means," she said, "he never took anyone's life, although he died in the war." There was also a desperate sense that even defeat must have had a purpose, that it could not all have been in vain. Often this took the form of speaking about Japan's release from militarism. As Haratani Ichirō, the ninety-four-year-old retired chairman of one of Japan's largest corporations, put it, "Swaggering military men and rigid bureaucrats! If they were ultimately victorious, where would that have led?"

A fourth point that may give the reader pause is how rare are Japanese invocations of the enemy, or of hatred for the enemy, and how nearly the war becomes almost an enemy-less conflict. Rather than seeing defeat coming at the hands of the American, Chinese, or other Allied peoples, the Japanese here are far more likely to attribute defeat to Allied production processes, to blame materiel more than people. When they speak of enemies, they may use the slogans of war—"Anglo-American demons," for instance—in a limited way, but rarely do these bear the sting, the fervor, the racial hatred of terms like "the Japs," often encountered in Western reminiscences.

It may also be important to note here what this book is not. For the most part, there is little discussion of war strategy and only occasional mention of Japanese planning for the war. This is not—as that political science professor who was our first interviewee predicted—a collection of Japanese political or military leaders reflecting on their war. There emerges no clear overview of the war. Very few of our interviewees looked back and tried to reach conclusions about the overall experience of war. Rare indeed was the person able or willing to put his or her own story into the larger context of the war, no less the global situation of that time and its implications. No elegant and simple assessments appear here. The conclusions of most Japanese about the war are "small" and personal, and it may not be going too far to say that a summing up of the war experience has yet to happen in Japan.

Fifty years after the war, the generation that was in charge of Japan's political, military, and industrial apparatus is largely gone, and...
only a few who held prominent positions spoke to us. Others who could have spoken refused. The industrial barons who profited from Japanese expansion in the prewar era, whose factories produced much of Japan’s war supplies, and whose firms have found their way back into leadership in today’s economy are not represented here. This book cannot claim to be all-inclusive, but those people whose stories are here were selected from among all our interviewees for the widest possible spectrum of experience.

In the course of the many conversations and interviews conducted for this book, we realized that these memories of wartime have rarely been sought out. For much of the Japanese public, memories of the war that ended in defeat seem too unpleasant, too embarrassing, too barren, too futile, too painful, and as a great many people told us, “too stupid,” to be dwelled on. They derive no comfort from such memories. For many, their thoughts seem frozen in the past, a state that precludes giving new meanings to, or seeking out new interpretations of, their emotions and acts of the war years. Two incidents may illustrate how the experiences of the past are still locked up inside people of the wartime generation.

One Saturday in September 1989, Haruko was invited to attend the annual reunion of the “Changi Association.” She had already interviewed several of the group’s members, military men convicted of war crimes in 1946 and 1947 and subsequently imprisoned in Singapore’s Changi prison—its the site of many atrocities during Japan’s occupation of Singapore. The meeting was to take place at Tokyo Daihantén, one of the capital’s most famous Chinese restaurants. Arriving there, she immediately noted in the lobby a prominent “Changi Gathering” sign of the type used for wedding parties. It seemed inappropriately open for a group of men convicted of war crimes in Southeast Asia. In the small private dining room, two large round tables had been set up and men in suits and ties, about twenty in all, were already greeting each other quietly. The tables were well-supplied with appetizers, and the first bottles of beer and Bireley’s orange soda were just being opened as the chairman, Dr. Wakamatsu Hitoshi, rose to convene the meeting. He assured the group that he had fully recovered from pacemaker implantation, and then spoke of two men who had passed away since their last meeting, and of one other who was unable to attend because of illness. He then led the group in a toast to the members’ health, “Kampai!” and everyone plunged into dinner. Conversation bubbled up about travels made, grandchildren born, and children promoted. The Changi veterans laughed, drank, and repeatedly filled each other’s beer glasses, but through all the meal’s courses, no one referred to the war or mentioned Changi. The meal over, money having been collected for the dinner, and the necessary bows of farewell exchanged, the men went their separate ways. By eight o’clock, less than two hours after the meeting began, Haruko found herself alone in the room with the Changi veteran who had invited her. He seemed to note her bewilderment, and said softly, “As I told you, all that brings us together is that we all spent time at Changi. Most of them never reveal anything about their trials. They seem ready to take all their memories to their graves.”

Even those who went through the scrutiny of investigation, trial, punishment, and years of imprisonment do not to this day seem able to fully share the past with each other. They may, however, find in those who did share something of their experience a comfort, a warmth of familiarity, which protects them from feeling absolutely alone with their memories. Inside the group, they are free not to ask questions of themselves, not to examine their most basic assumptions. Turning inward towards those who share, at least in time or place, a similar experience, can provide a way to sustain something of that time. Within the group, there is the possibility of clinging to values attached to memories of friends and comrades lost in the war.

For example, a woman whose husband had died forty-five years earlier as a Tokkó, a member of the Special Attack Corps, told Haruko of her friends, “We four or five widows of Tokkó pilots—there are so few of us, since they all died so young—we see each other once a year, at a memorial ceremony to the Tokkó. In March, April, and May, all of us get strangely restless, because they all took off around that time. The season of cherry blossoms is the most painful time for us. We chat over the phone about things that happened more than forty years ago as if they took place yesterday.” With a conspiratorial air, and yet almost playfully, she confided, “My closest friend and I secretly pledged to each other that we will have a tiny piece of our cremated bones released into the ocean after we die.” She believes that those bones, after a journey of many millennia, will eventually reach the sea off Okinawa, where their husbands plunged to their deaths. “We are going to do it in secret, because it’s illegal to scatter a person’s ashes without permission from the Ministry of Health and Welfare.” Quietly she added, “I don’t know if my husband actually crashed into the enemy, but some did. I want to believe that he didn’t die in vain.”

Like the Tokkó pilot’s wife, like the veterans of Changi, those who remember the dead of those years do so in private, in hushed tones, or in surreptitious or silent communion. But it is our belief that the living will
not rest easy in the public sphere until that increasingly ancient, but still living, war is no longer avoided, but instead faced and examined in public, and until the complex Japanese experiences of the war are opened to all and become a matter of public discussion and public understanding, in both the U.S. and Japan. Our hope is that this book will help begin that task.
"In December 1939, I returned from my active-duty service. I had been at the China front as a cavalryman for six months. You could say it was the last victorious welcome-home conducted by Japan. The streets were full of people cheering and waving flags. We thought the China Incident was a winning war, so we marched bravely behind our commander, who was on horseback, from Kanazawa Station to our camp clear across town. War is something you should stop at the appropriate time."

Widely spaced houses, each surrounded by rice fields, are the distinctive features of villages in the Toyama plain. His home is set off by a line of tall cedar trees. The village from which he went to war is now part of Tonami City.

"There were 10,521 military-affairs clerks in Japan. I was one of them. I was the only one who preserved the actual documents, despite the orders we received to burn them when Japan surrendered." All military records that might be of use to the enemy were ordered destroyed. With a great guffaw he adds, "I am a serious criminal." A wiry man, about five feet tall, he speaks in a loud, vibrant voice with a sense of mission. One of the lenses from his reading glasses often pops out as he bangs the frames down for emphasis, but that hardly interrupts his discourse. He rushes back and forth, to and from his storeroom for boxes of materials, all meticulously arranged, concerning the soldiers he had sent to the front, and he illustrates his points with the appropriate documents.

A man's life, it was said then, was worth only one sen five rin—one point five percent of a yen—to the prewar military. This was the price of the postcard that many thought was all that was involved in conscripting them. But that’s not how it was. I knew well. I was in the village office. I served to provide the military with soldiers and sailors. I also had to follow the appointed procedures when a soldier was killed in action. I did everything. I was rated number-one military-affairs clerk in Toyama prefecture. I even received an award from the commander of the Ninth
Divisional District headquartered in Kanazawa City, incorporating regimental headquarters across the whole Hokuriku region, including Ishikawa, Toyama, and Gifu prefectures.

I ask you—which was superior, the German military system, renowned throughout the world, or the Japanese system? Our system, which could raise large-scale units in less than twenty-four hours, was world-class! No one had a more thorough and efficient system for mobilizing soldiers to the colors than Japan.

All males had the obligation to report for a conscription exam at the age of twenty. But after serving your active duty, you were still eligible for later call-up. As early as the Russo-Japanese War, it had already been decided that liability for military service would extend to the age of forty. In case of war, those with experience would be of great use. Veterans know how to shoot guns, so preparations to summon these people to what was called the National Army were made way back then.

Records had to be maintained prior to active duty, and afterwards for reservists and others still subject to call-up. The soldier himself didn’t really know what kind of documents had been gathered about him at the village office. But let me assure you, they were very thorough, very complete, and so clearly entered that even a third person could read them accurately. The military provided a glossary of the precise terms to be used in preparing such records.

If we look at just this one example it should be clear. In 1925, this man, Hakusen Shin’ichi, took the conscription examination. He was rated Class A in his physical—that is, in the best qualified group. He was assigned to the infantry. He was appointed an infantry second lieutenant in 1927. At that time, he was placed on the reserve list, having completed his active duty. In the next column, reserved for remarks, we can see he was mustered again for the Pacific War, called up in 1944, and served in Unit 48 in Japan’s Eastern Region.

That is the most basic information. But the next column gives the address of the person to whom that second draft notice was delivered. Ōkado 1229 was the address of his father, Hakusen Jisaku. The responsibility was thus clearly assigned to the father. He was the one who received the red call-up paper. His obligation to inform his son was defined by law. If his wife was there, in the absence of a man, she would have had to convey the news to her son. If she did not discharge this responsibility, she would be charged under military penal law. The government undertook to pay the person’s transportation cost back to Toyama from wherever he was when he was informed of his call-up. The actual military unit that was responsible for paying that fee was recorded on the red paper itself. This process was truly the finest in the world.

This system and preparation were nationwide. With a single red paper, all unit organization could be accomplished. Each man’s physical condition, work situation, classification according to his military status—all these things had to be memorized by the military-affairs clerk. The clerk usually bore responsibility for investigating each and every person, and reporting any changes to regimental district headquarters. This wasn’t just for fifty or a hundred people. It had to be done for several hundred people in two hundred and forty households. In peacetime, not just wartime, one had to be fully apprised of the situation of each individual, know every one of them, including the village youths. You had to know conditions in their families, too. Many children were evacuated to this area from Tokyo. Teachers, too. If there ever was a final battle in the Homeland, like the ones in Okinawa, teachers were to take the lead, so I also assumed control over their military registration.

I often walked around in the village to learn what the villagers were up to. Even those walks belonged to the realm of military secrets. I couldn’t say, “I came to check on you,” so I’d just ask, “Your son who’s working in Osaka as a barber—how’s he doing?” In that way I would find out. Then I’d send a letter directly to the man. A person couldn’t really lie about their physical condition, in a time of war, so he’d write back. “I’m fine.” They always responded like that, without fail. Even those who were classified Class C wouldn’t get a doctor to write they had infection of the lungs or whatever. Each man knew how to behave. This was wartime.

It wasn’t the military-affairs clerk who stuck somebody with their red paper. But the preparatory work he did was huge. There was no way Toyama regimental headquarters could know about the individual. Yet when a man entered the army for the first time, everything was recorded, including his thoughts. The military-affairs clerk had to investigate these things regularly. When a soldier entered a unit, the military-affairs clerk sent the military a complete report—including the soldier’s family background, whether it included a criminal or not, the size of the family’s rice fields, the value of their properties—but the individual had no idea what has been sent to the unit. They never really saw it. From time to time officials came from the regiment in Toyama, or from the division in Kanazawa, to inspect the documents.

Most of the time, notifications came in the middle of the night. An envelope was delivered to the village police chief from military headquarters. The police office then phoned the village mayor. I heard that at the beginning of the China Incident it was brought to him under the guard of a policeman, but later the military-affairs clerk had to go from the village office and pick it up because the police station had gotten too
busy. I would open it in the presence of the mayor. Until that moment, even I didn’t know who was going to be drafted. I’d make notations on the various documents and then call on a person to deliver it. For most of the Pacific War, I delivered them myself—whether they were conscription notices or official notifications of a soldier’s death in battle—because if some accident should happen to it on the way it would be a disaster.

This often happened very early in the morning. For example, this record shows that it was delivered at four-forty-five. If it was July when daylight hours were long, that wasn’t too bad, but in winter it was really tough. All this was to prevent spying. The mustering of soldiers was a military secret. It wasn’t good to incite disturbances among the general population, and you didn’t want to give the enemy information about how many soldiers Japan was calling up or where they were assembling.

Once, thirteen red papers arrived in our village on a single day, August 25, 1937. The China Incident had begun July 7. I had to report to the police the exact time when I handed the call-up paper to the family of each of the conscripted. The military-affairs clerk was always sick with worry until the moment the conscript actually entered his unit. At that time, I was only a deputy. When thirteen draft notices arrived at once, I could only pray. If, by chance, one of them didn’t turn up or refused induction, the village mayor and the military-affairs clerk would be reprimanded by the military. These things weren’t spelled out in criminal law. Maybe the conscript himself would bear the legal responsibility and get punished, but things were seldom that simple.

I learned of the declaration of war on December 8, 1941, via the radio. Preparation had begun in July. We were ordered to call up men, but they were to report carrying a fishing rod, or with a beer or cider bottle hanging from their belts, and dressed in a light summer kimono. Those instructions weren’t indicated on the draft notices. They came on a separate sheet. I thought something was strange, but I knew immediately that it was a military secret. We couldn’t even send these people off at the station in broad daylight as we’d done for the war with China. But we had a sending-off ceremony at the school.

The families started making “thousand-stitch belts” after the draft notices arrived, but there was very little time. If you wore one of these sen’ninbari, it was believed bullets would not hit you. Even when nothing was available, no matter the expense, people would buy a sea bream, prepare red rice—trying to show, on the surface, at least, what an auspicious occasion this was. All the people would then send the conscript off, offering congratulations and felicitations. No one could reveal their deepest emotions. The drafted man had to formally request everyone to take care of his family after he was gone.

All across Japan, village mayors would always say to each of them, “Please do not worry after you leave. If you fall in action, we will enshrine you in Yasukuni.” He was speaking for the whole government, the whole people of Japan, promising their spirit would find its way to the great national shrine in Tokyo for those who had fallen in defense of the Emperor. Schoolchildren would stand there in front of the conscripts. The village people, their relatives, everybody would be assembled for them. Prior to the Pacific War they even raised banners, declaring in wide bold letters: “Congratulations On Being Called To The Colors” or “Prayers For Your Eternal Success At Arms,” and displaying the inducted man’s name. A village youth climbed the tallest cedar by the house and put up a sun-disk flag. For some families, three or four flags flew over the house. Those flags stayed up until the day the man returned. If a soldier from that family had been killed in action, a black streamer would fly beneath. Some families had two or three flags with black streamers.

The public sent them off with cheers. “Banzai! Banzai!” “Congratulations! Congratulations!” You had to say it. I remember one man of a fairly advanced age, with children, who was filled with concern over how his family would live after he was gone. In front of the mayor, he had some sake, and a box lunch was served. The village people came one after another to pour for him, and he drank immediately, sopping it all up, until he could no longer walk straight. Then he came over to me and said, “I don’t want to go.” He was weeping. “I just got back from the front, and now I’ve gotten another call-up notice. Why?” That man was killed soon after, at the time of our landings in the Philippines. A postcard I received from him was his last word. Then, the box with his remains arrived. His name was on it, but it was empty. All I could do was give that postcard to the family of the deceased.

In a unit where three or four men died at the same time, even when their remains came back over one or two months, the funerals would be held together. A condolence speech would be delivered by the mayor, and in this area, where the Pure Land sect of Buddhism is strong, a priest from the temple usually came. Among those who died, there were people who had been at the front for eight, nine, or almost ten years. They got caught up in it when they were on their active-duty service, and never got out. When you think about it, the ones who fight wars are the people. Each soldier fought the war. The history of war is not only armies occupying territory.
At the peak of the Pacific War, in 1944 and 1945, the village received an order to get several tens of volunteers for the navy among the youths under conscription age. There weren't any bullets or guns anymore, but still the order came: Make the boys volunteer. It was so absurd. So unreasonable. I'd been to war once, myself. I knew whether there was ammunition or not.

At that time, the village chief told me, "I will get my second son to volunteer. You get the middle-school boy in your family to volunteer." It was expected. His boy volunteered for the Special Attack Corps from Waseda University. He never returned.

My brother was in his third year at Takaoka Commercial School. He was still a fifteen-year-old child. He cried and said, "I don't want to go." But I told him he must. I brought out this very table and a razor and made him cut his finger and write a petition on the finest paper to volunteer in his own blood. His blood dripped into a sake cup. He had to squeeze more out from his finger to finish writing it, since the paper so soaked up the blood. We submitted the petition to the prefectural governor. He was enrolled as a junior trainee pilot. My parents were silent. It had to be done because I was the military-affairs clerk. I had to send men to the front. Even just one man more.

My brother asked me to give him a military sword when he was about to leave. We went and bought it together. If the war had lasted two days longer, he would have gone, loaded with bombs, as a member of the navy's Kamikaze Tokkōtai.

When I needed volunteers, I walked again and again through the entire village. A grandmother opposed me, saying, "It's too early. Let him wait for his conscription physical at twenty." That boy was killed. The grandma berated me. "You sent him to be killed!" I apologized to her afterwards: "Please, I beg you for forgiveness."

The one who encouraged him to volunteer was me. The man who had to inform his family that he had been killed was me. So many soldiers were sent off this way. Falling for the country, dying for the country. And then, after we lost, they ordered the burning of the records. Was nothing to remain despite all their sacrifice? That was too harsh, I thought. The dead died thinking of the nation. I couldn't bear my feeling of pity for them; that's why I knew I had to keep the documents, even if it was only my village alone that preserved them.

By war's end, I was the only man left in the village. Even those who were in poor physical condition or slightly disabled had been taken. Even those classified C or D had been called up. At the end of the war, I was twenty-eight years old. One of the best-kept military secrets was that military-affairs clerks would not be called up. They were classified with Imperial National Diet members, mayors, and village headmen and deferred from military service. But finally in 1945, in the extremes of the Pacific War, even mayors and assemblymen were called up, leaving only us military-affairs clerks. The army couldn't raise soldiers without us.

At the end of the war, Shōge village had two hundred and forty-six households and three hundred and eighty-eight serving soldiers. The number of war dead was fifty-three. We gave that much weight to our country. I had to do the job with the belief that it was for the sake of the nation, for the sake of the military. Otherwise, the divisional commander wouldn't have rewarded me for my service. There were many villages and towns in the Toyama regimental district for the Kanazawa division. I was the one singled out for an award. This really shows how much I did. When the military told us how many should go, we had to produce them without fail. I didn't want to shame the village chief. It would have embarrassed the whole village, wouldn't it?

"As long as I don't fight, I'll make it home."

SUZUKI MURIO

Speaking gently in the accents of Osaka, he recalls, "I wrote many poems in China. Whenever we made a major redeployment, the Kempeitai would come and confiscate our notebooks and papers, so I had to put my poems into my head. When I got onto a boat, I'd write them down again. The brevity of haiku was very convenient:

Kaze no naka,
Kompai no akaki kawa nagare.

Amidst the winds,
The anguish red river flows.

I spent nearly two years in Central China, and that river, the Yangtze, was the center of everything:

Nete miru wa.
Tōbō arishi.
Ama no gawa.

I lie on my back looking up.
A desertion took place.
There's the Milky Way."
I wrote many haiku about deserters then, but I never really deserted myself. Too weak-willed."

Now a well-known poet, he heads his own circle working in the seventeen-syllable haiku verse form. He is a professor at Osaka University of the Arts.

I was a bottom-ranked soldier straight from the Homeland when I joined the Thirty-Seventh Regiment of Osaka in the Central China theater. It was 1939. I was put into a heavy-machine-gun company. The guns weighed more than fifty kilograms each, so they were disassembled and packed on horseback for transport, but when you approached the battlefield, four men put the gun back together and carried it. Two men actually manned it in action. Each man in the company was assigned a number, and all the numbers one, two, three, and four were assigned to the guns, while everyone else, from numbers five on, were in charge of the ammunition. Number Two fired the gun. Because a heavy machine-gun is a large weapon, Number Two could hide himself behind it. He was supposed to fire the gun with his hands, but, bent over, he usually pressed the fire button with the top of his steel helmet. "Da-da-da-da-da!" Number One had to load the belt, so his whole side was exposed to the enemy. Ones got killed at a fearful rate.

No matter what country you’re from, when soldiers talk about “suppressing enemy fire” they mean getting the enemy’s heavy machine guns. A single soldier’s rifle puts out one bullet at a time, but by pushing just one button, you can send thirty rounds—a whole ammo strip—out of the barrel of a machine gun. By the time you fired ninety rounds you had to change position or they were sure to find you, but since you had to rise up to do that, and you were moving right in the face of the enemy, even though you were zigzagging like a lightning bolt, you often died right there.

If you’d ever attracted anyone’s attention, the machine-gun company was where you were thrown. Not just men, either. Even the horses that carried the machine guns were outcasts. In an ordinary stable, horses stand with their faces peering out from their stalls. In the military, the other end’s out. A horse that kicked wildly was marked with a red piece of cloth on its tail. Those that bit had a blue piece on their stirrups. Horses that tried to grab you with their front legs had a red cloth on their breasts. Our horse was marked with all three. Yokosaku was his name, and he was one damned shrewd horse. He’d paw the air in camp, full of energy. Outside, when he’d been walking just a kilometer or so, he’d hang his head to the ground and play sick. Since the army had to pay money to requisition horses, but could get soldiers just by sending out a conscription notice on a piece of red paper someone in charge would say, “Maybe the horse is sick. You men carry the load.” So we’d have to carry everything on our backs. There really wasn’t any love lost between the soldiers and the animals.

I wasn’t the “dedicated soldier” you were supposed to be. In fact, three of us were even transferred to a regular infantry unit. Booted out of the machine guns! One was from Waseda University. He soon disappeared somewhere. Escaped. That left two of us, Yamada and me. I’m sure there must have been something in Yamada’s background; he was so glum and melancholy. I’m the only one who survived the war. My “spiritual component” was most deficient! Veteran soldiers taught me the tricks: how to get into hospital, how to wangle a tour at the training camp, how to get the best jobs. I was thrown into one training camp after another. There were special camps to instill "Yamato damashii." Some soldiers who wanted to make the army a career were trained there too, but most assigned didn’t want to go back to their units. After three weeks, if you’d gotten the Yamato Spirit, they’d make you go to the front lines, so we’d urge each other to stay a while longer.

There was one kind of duty, called liaison, where you were a courier, carrying messages between units. You were told where to go, and when you left you asked if a reply was needed. The answer was usually no. You were to just hand over the message and come back. Sometimes you caught a ride on a truck that departed maybe once a week or so. In China, as far as you could see there was nothing. You were completely exposed and there weren’t any guards on the truck either, if you were lucky enough to have a truck at all. The weapon you were carrying yourself was your only defense.

If you didn’t move along with the main force when you were out in the countryside, there was always the possibility you’d be captured. Everyone was scared of that. We were all exhausted. Usually the road was just a straight stretch connecting hamlet to hamlet, no crossroads at all. Still, I thought, if they were going to jump out and capture me, they could do it whenever they wanted, even out among the fields of sorghum, so I just strolled along, taking my time. I took things as they came, worried about them only if they happened. I still have dreams where I’m walking alone on the continent, and there’s never anyone around me.

Battlefields are weird places. Once you left your unit, unless you told them your location, they wouldn’t come to pick you up, at least not a

*Yamato damashii [the spirit of Yamato (Japan)] encompassed the purportedly unique qualities of the Japanese people, invoked to explain the courage and dedication of the Japanese fighting man. Such spiritualism was a key element in military training.
lowly soldier like me. As long as the headquarters of your unit was in the district, and you could prove which unit you belonged to, any unit would let you stay and feed you for as long as you liked. But when your unit made a major move to an entirely new area, this wouldn’t work anymore. “Your unit’s not in Central China, get lost!” was all they’d say. You did have to get back to your home unit once a month or so. If you were asked what happened to you, it was enough to say “the situation was really bad,” or “I got lost.” If your goal was to avoid shooting bullets, this was the only way. While roaming around the continent, I learned a lot.

I came down with malaria fairly early, and was put into the malaria ward at a hospital thanks to a deal I worked with a doctor. When I eventually did return to the front, though, I had no choice but to go into action. I was in the ninth company—the last company—in the third battalion of the regiment, and in the third squad of the third platoon. We weren’t exactly the best of soldiers, but our casualties were low. I guess we fought well enough. Generally it was said that the casualty ratio in China was one killed to six wounded. A company was roughly one hundred and eighty men, so if thirty were killed, you could say the company had been “wiped out,” its combat capability reduced to zero. While I was hiding myself in the hospital, my unit suffered near total annihilation. When the survivors came back, I asked, “What about the commander?” “Died.” Practically anyone else—“Died” was the answer. Twice this happened while I was away from my unit in the two years I was on the China front.

I met all kinds of people. Every unit has people who don’t like being soldiers. You can spot them immediately. Slackers were put into all kinds of places for “training,” but we’d always hear when they’d finished their stint. It was practically like gangsters coming out of the pen. The news would spread that someone had “come out” on the other side of the Yangtze River, so I’d go down to the Hinoki Unit—that was the embarkation office of the ferry unit that carried troops back and forth across the river, same name no matter where you were—find out who was actually being released, and go meet him when he landed, for a “coming-out party.”

One time we started drinking saké at three in the afternoon at one of the bars run by Chinese. They were long and narrow like an eel’s bed. My companion’s unit was assigned in a big city, where units were under the internal administrative regulations of the army, the same as back in the Homeland. If a soldier went out, he had to be back in barracks by eight in the evening. Suddenly, we realized he’d missed roll call and would already be considered a deserter. We rushed to his base, but the back gate to his barracks was locked. Even the front gate was closed, and a sentry stood there with a rifle, bayonet shining. Then we noticed an automobile marked with a medical officer’s blue flag coming. Should we stop it? If professional soldiers who’d just graduated from military medical school were in it, they’d shoot us dead. But we decided to take a chance. Luckily, it only contained the driver, a private first class whose boss was out on the town somewhere. We begged him to take us through the sentry line in return for a case of beer. The car approached the main gate. They opened the barricade to welcome back their doctor. All the sentries lined up. The driver stepped on it and charged past them.

Some Japanese were known to have been captured, some deserted, sometimes we fought among ourselves. Everybody was whipped up to a fever pitch. There were people who bullied others. Weak ones might resist by using their hand grenades. They’d pull the pin and hold it, while everybody flew off in all directions. We all had the tools for murder, but if anybody got killed, the case was just left alone until there was combat. Then the death would then be recorded as died-in-action or missing.

The military is an amalgamation of human beings. Some you can get along with, others you can’t. There are a lot of backstabbers. Sincere men attract sincere men. Easygoing men seem to get together. Birds of a feather.

Shanghai itself wasn’t so bad. You got a special pass when you went to Shanghai, like a wooden card you put in your vest pocket, which gave you a little leeway to return after the normal nine-o’clock curfew. I’d ask sentries from my own unit when they were going to be on duty. Sometimes I went out drinking alone in Shanghai and didn’t come back until two or three in the morning. Shanghai was the base for the Liberation Army, so you weren’t supposed to walk around alone. Even the Japanese Shanghai Naval Landing Force patrolled in pairs, carrying rifles. Even during the day, there were snipers. I borrowed a pistol and took it with me, hidden, the safety catch off. The main streets of Shanghai bustled with crowds, but if you took one step off into an alley you might see five or six corpses no matter which way you looked.

I was often drunk when I got back. Normally I brought a bottle of whiskey as a gift for the sentry. But when you’re drunk, you sometimes think the sentry’s one of your own. You just walk up to him, and say, “Hey, I’m back,” holding out the bottle to him. Once, I was hauled off to the commander of the guard. He kept berating me: What was I doing out that late. Why was I alone? You should be courtmartialed! “You gave me permission,” I kept repeating. In the end all he could do was shout, “Let the bastard in.” He kept the whiskey.

Soldiers like me had no idea why we were fighting this war. We were treated as nothing more than consumable goods. The men ordered to
fly in the kamikaze planes had only one route open for them. On the continent, at least, it was wide open. It all depended on an individual's own character. I thought it would be enough for me if I stayed alive. I wanted to return home, though I didn't particularly strive for that. I didn't have the courage to engage in antimonial activity, but on that desolate continent I lost the purpose of that war. The feeling grew in me that it was ridiculous to die there, fighting the Communist Eighth Route Army, or the Nationalist Army, or even sometimes finding out that it was the Japanese Army who were shooting at you. There were times I thought I might die at any moment. Tomorrow was far, far away. In that mood, I'd written a haiku in the corner of a military postcard addressed to a friend back in Japan:

Me tsumureba  
Tani nagare  
Chi no akari nado.

When I close my eyes,  
I can see valleys  
Flowing blood red.

But that attracted attention. I was caught in a random mail search and they threatened to send me to the Kempeitai. I was told if I changed the part about "blood red" to "pure blood" [chi no kiyoki] the censor would let it pass. What could I do but agree? I changed it back to red when I published it in my book years later.

If you are in that kind of place for long, you become nihilistic. I think at the basis of such a nihilism is an abiding humanism, though quite different from the nothingness a Buddhist priest asserts is humanism. I still can't see myself connected to any large entity like a country or state. I can't view war macroscopically. I feel I can write about battlefields, but I don't think I can write about war. If you talk about things like the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, that's too grand for me. I can touch only a sphere as large as I can warm with my own body heat.

After the Pearl Harbor attack, from the next day on, things became really strict. I'd often been told, "We're sending you to the Kempeitai!" If they really had, the Kempeitai would have half-killed me. There were officers who were always drawing their swords and crying out, "I'll take his head myself!" Usually military-academy graduates, twenty-four or twenty-five years old. Commanders made out the Spirit of Yamato. If you got stuck in a unit like that, you were really in trouble. Since I wasn't usually at my own unit, I'd take off the first chance I got.

In March 1942, we knew we were about to be sent to the Southern Area because we were wearing summer uniforms in the midst of the falling snow. We shipped out of the port of Wusong. On board the ship, they spread out a map of the Philippines, so for the first time I knew where we were headed. They also gave us two or three mimeographed sheets titled "Pan-Ocean Operations." We were moving as an entire division in a convoy. This leaflet told us, "Don't panic when your ship is torpedoed! It will take many hours before it sinks." So they said! But when I went down deep into the bowels of the ship to try to find a former schoolmate, I found fifty-kilogram shells, stacked up like huge tuna fish, with only their fuses removed. I asked a sailor how long it would take to sink if we were torpedoed. "Maybe twenty minutes," he answered, "but since we're carrying shells, probably less." They lied to us again. Even worse, in Shanghai I'd been one of the three from my regiment sent to take the course in submarine-lootlook training!

In the Philippines, the enemy showed himself to us. On the Bataan peninsula, my unit was "in reserve." To say it was a "reserve unit" might make it sound easy, but it was like Japanese chess. In shōgi a piece you take from the enemy as prisoner may be turned around and placed right back at some crucial spot on the board as your piece. Just so, they dropped us down right in front of the enemy machine guns in the hottest part of the fighting.

By the time we approached the front line, we were already exhausted. "Fall out!" they said, and you'd collapse for five or six minutes. Lie down and try to catch your breath. In the dark you can't see well, but there was a horrible stench. I threw myself down on what turned out to be the belly of a dead horse. Probably from our artillery. Later that night we were given another short rest, but it was such agony to get up once you'd sat down that I tried to sleep standing up. I leaned against something. It smelled terrible and was soft, but I couldn't see it in the dark. I found out it was a breastwork made of corpses. The Americans had piled up native bodies like sandbags. The heads were facing toward us. On the other side there was a firing step. They shot from inside. Our enemy was an allied army of Americans and Filipinos, but the corpses in the wall were all Filipino.

Our main forces kept in close contact with the enemy and pressed them back. Our whole army was advancing toward the sea, since Bataan was a peninsula. But we bogged down because there were pillboxes up in the cliffs above. They had Czech-type machine-guns. "Kan! Kan! Kan!" Those air-cooled guns hammered away with bullets as big as rolled hot towels, and we were their target. We were halted in our tracks. It was April 5, 1942. MacArthur was still at Corregidor.

My group of seven didn't know where to go. We thought we'd be
best off if we charged to the very bottom of the cliff, where we’d be in the “dead angle,” out of the sweep of the machine guns. In the rush I was hit. The person in front of me just wasn’t there anymore. Killed instantly. There was one medic assigned to each company of a hundred and eighty men. I had befriended ours and I’d asked him to be sure to save me if I was ever wounded. I often poured extra saké for him. He was with me when they got me, but while he was treating me, orders came from the commander, “Medic, to the front!” Men were being hit up ahead and he had to go forward. I still have thirty bullet fragments in my body. Two of them are as big the bones of my little finger, lodged in my bones.

But as soon as our main forces had pushed on, enemy soldiers came out of the jungle where they’d been hiding. Our forces couldn’t sweep the whole place. I once thought all humans were good by nature, but there we were, left behind on the battlefield, jammed up under that cliff, when a force of maybe sixty or seventy Americans and Filipinos appeared perhaps twenty meters from our position. We had to decide immediately if we would open fire or not. Hamano, the light machine-gunner, and I were the only two who were against shooting. I had to talk the others out of blazing away. I told the men we could probably kill five or six, but stressed that there were sixty or seventy white soldiers and black soldiers. We’d be shot so full of holes we’d look like honeycombs. They glanced in our direction, but kept moving cautiously, passing us by. We were gambling, but we won our bet. They didn’t fire either. We didn’t shoot, and they didn’t announce to anybody that they saw several Japanese over by the cliff. They probably knew the tide was running against them. Maybe they felt, ‘Why die when you’ve already lost? I guess if you’ve been long on the battlefield, you know instantly whether the enemy’s going to shoot or not. Anyway, that was my philosophy: As long as I don’t fight, I’ll make it home. I believed in that. Besides, I’d already been shot! I was sent home in June 1942.

A nation has to have great confidence in its own strength to go outside itself. Setting aside any question of motives, in the time of my youth, my physical strength coincided with the strength of my country. There was a strong tide running, and I was swept away in it without any chance to accede or dissent. If you ask me if I have any war responsibility, yes, I believe I do. We walked right into somebody else’s country, their home, with our boots on, and we didn’t even have visas.

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Zero Ace

SAKAI SABURÔ

His study is a museum of Japanese naval aviation. Models of Zero fighters and several American planes, including a Grumman Wildcat and a Hellcat, are suspended from the ceiling. Paintings of Zeros and an oil portrait of young Sakai in a flight suit adorn the wall, together with an impressive array of gifts from American air units, both military and civilian. In one corner a tiny Buddhist goddess of mercy stands by a small cup of water and several oranges.

His book, Samurai, published in English in 1957, has made him world-renowned among fighter pilots and airplane buffs. He is seventy-three years old. He says he frequently gives talks on leadership to companies in Japan, including such giants as Hitachi, Nissan, and Toyota. He seems smooth and well prepared, but his tone abruptly changes as we speak.

“It is now more than forty-five years since the end of the war. I believe it is proper to tell the truth about the air units in the Pacific War to those who want to know the truth. Well, I’m going to tell you what it was like.” His compact frame, packed with energy, vibrates as he moves from somber reflection to anger. Frequently, his voice cracks with indignation when he speaks of the way the Imperial Navy fought that war.

When you’ve gotten used to combat, shot down one plane, two planes, ten planes, then the moment you face an enemy plane you know instantly the skill of your opponent. You can pigeonhole him into Class A or Class B. “Oh, this one’s gutless. He’s timid!” you may think. But still you can’t always hit him. So you shoot out a stream of bullets. The Zero had two 7.7-millimeter machine guns mounted in front of the pilot, firing through the propeller. The main guns were two wing-mounted 20-millimeter automatic cannons two meters away from the center of the pilot’s seat. The only time you could be sure to shoot down a plane was when bullets hit the pilot, or the engine, causing it to malfunction, or the fuel tanks, causing a fire. You’re not aiming at the pilot; that’s impossible. But if you’re lucky, you might get him.

Aerial combat between fighter planes occurred at speeds of between one hundred and two hundred meters per second as they twisted and turned in the air. Hitting a target with machine guns under these conditions was like trying to thread a needle while running. If it weren’t so difficult, a pilot would never have enough lives to fight all, let alone...
shoot down another plane. Centrifugal force is also at work. Your eyeballs seem to press into your head. The pressure of the explosion driving the bullet from the machine gun is a constant, but the weight of the bullet leaving the barrel increases by up to five times. We called it "pissing bullets," since they bent down instead of going straight. In today's jets, computers calculate the fire for you, but we had to calculate the G-force in our heads and measure the distance with our own eyes. It was impossible to hit anything if you didn't know exactly what you were doing.

It was murderous combat. Kill the opponent before he killed you. That's why you fired too early. It was the same with feudal samurai engaged in a duel with real swords. The master teaching his apprentice says, "Unsheathe your sword in a wide arc. Jump back, separating yourself from the opponent. Then inch yourself toward him, grunting aloud with all your spirit as you move. Approach so closely that you believe you can hit your opponent's forehead with your own hands. Then strike. You will hit him between the eyes with the tip of your blade." At three hundred meters, the opponent's plane seems to be right next to you because unless you shoot quickly, he'll blast you.

Veterans were strong. Within four or five months after the Pacific War began, fighter planes flew in three-plane formations. While one plane was attacking, the other two defended your tail. Whoever discovered the enemy first had the advantage. I was usually the first to spot the enemy. Then you let the flight commander know. Later we didn't take even that extra time. It was "Follow me!" and you'd assume the role of commander the instant you spotted them. You didn't radio, since the worst thing about Japanese fighters then were the radio-telephones. Too much static. You couldn't hear a thing on the one band allotted. I'd kick mine before I took off, so I could report it "out of order." Worse, you had a wooden antenna sticking up behind you. I asked my ground crew for a saw and cut mine off. My group commander caught me at it. When I told him, "I can shoot down an enemy with that extra knot of air speed," he asked me to remove his, too!

Prior to the Pacific War, we received many instructional documents and capability tables for the fighter planes of America, Britain, France, and Australia. They startled me. All of them showed some capabilities superior to those of the Zero. I thought the planes of such advanced nations, moved by the spirit of the Wright brothers, would be magical in their devil-like strength, and that certainly, their pilots would be outstanding, too. But I resolved that if I could spot them first, I could defeat them, no matter how good their planes were, so I worked to train my sight. I was constantly searching the sky. My fellow pilots used to ask, "Are you forecasting weather again, Sakai?" Everyone laughed at me then, but I was able to see stars in daylight by the time the Pacific War broke out. I refused to let myself be killed! I had the same basic training as the other pilots, but there's no limit to what a flyer can do to strengthen himself when he isn't in a plane. Warriors fighting on the land or on the sea are on a flat surface. They must observe left and right, back and front. But aviators fight in a sphere. The soles of your feet, along with the back of your head, need eyes, too.

I fought from the beginning of the China Incident, and then from the start of the Pacific War until the very end. I never lost a single wingman in almost two hundred engagements. I'm prouder of that than of my record of enemy planes downed. Sixty-four by official count. I remember every combat. Each of them was kill or be killed. Some I recall as moments of extreme danger, of terror, and I marvel that I survived.

When I was hit over Guadalcanal, I was flying to save a man under my command. As a reward, God did not take my life. [He produces a battered old leather helmet with built-in goggles, and a bit of dirty brown silk rag.] I wore this flight helmet and these goggles in that battle over Guadalcanal in which I was wounded. After shooting down two planes, I charged an eight-plane formation single-handed. They were bombers, and I found myself facing concentrated fire from their rear gunners. Twelve thousand bullets a minute! No way to avoid their fire! I hit two planes, which exploded violently, sending billows of flame and debris directly at me. The canopy on my plane was blown away. At that instant I felt a shock to my head. A bullet hit here, above the bent metal on the goggle of the right eye. It skip-jumped and exited here, making this hole in the helmet. A fraction of an inch lower and I'd have been dead. Another bullet entered through the glass of the goggle. I can't find where it went out, but it must have exited somewhere. I was half-paralyzed. The right side of my head was hit, my left side ceased to function.

I was losing lots of blood. Both eyes were temporarily blinded. Blood was pouring down into them. This is the scarf I used to stop the bleeding. All the triangle bandages and bits of towel I had were whipped away by the wind. I cut the scarf into pieces gradually to staunch my wound on that flight back to base. This scrap is all that's left of my white silk scarf. It's brown like this only because it was soaked in blood. I got back in that condition, completing a round-trip flight of one thousand one hundred kilometers in a single-seat fighter. It took me four hours forty-seven minutes to return. Sometimes I flew upside down. At times I seemed to black out. It was an impossible feat. It is more for that flight than for having shot down many planes in combat that I'm remembered now.

Yet the Zero could make such flights. We flew five hundred and sixty kilometers from Rabaul to Guadalcanal, fought, and then returned to
base. Eleven hundred kilometers round trip. Normally six hours in the air. At that time, the range of American planes was limited. From Guadalcanal's Henderson Field to Buin on Bougainville, that was it. They couldn't believe we did it! Some military histories still have such flights as the attack on Port Darwin in Australia being made from carriers, but land-based Zeros hit them.

In the early stages, I can't give most of the American pilots high marks. Dating back to the days of the China Incident, our fighter training was extremely rigorous and our planes had beat even the vaunted Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers. When I go to America, I often talk with American aces and they say, "At the beginning, Siburi, you and your pilots seemed to enjoy shooting down our planes. At the end of the war it was the same for us. We enjoyed it. It was almost like shooting turkeys. I never had so much fun! I understand your feelings well." America was at first startled at the appearance of the Zero. Yet they produced new, powerful fighters one after another to "Beat the Zero"! Japan couldn't produce new planes in any numbers since the country didn't have the industrial strength. More than ten upgrades of the Zero weren't enough.

Yet, if I can speak openly, even in 1945, if I were the one gripping the stick of a Zero and soared into the sky, I could meet their Mustangs or Grumman Hellcats and shoot them down. The combination of the human pilot and the Zero fighter was its true fighting strength. When Japan started the war, the level of our pilots' skills was reasonably high, but within a year the average level declined sharply. Veteran pilots were killed, leaving us like a comb with missing teeth. The development of planes fell behind, and the training of pilots lagged. The skill of the American pilots far surpassed ours by war's end.

Formation aerial combat should have almost Buddhist spiritual ties among pilots. However, the real situation in the Japanese navy was very different. Of one hundred pilots in a unit, eighty to eight-five were noncommissioned pilots, like me, who had worked their way up from being sailors through hard training. The remaining fifteen were officers. When we were at the base, even aces who had knocked down twenty or thirty planes, if they were noncommissioned pilots, ranked lower than those who had just finished their schooling. If they had the gold stripes or two stars of a lieutenant, well, they were "Honorable Lieutenant, Honorable Officer." We were billeted out in the drafty common room, while the nation put them into their own individual rooms, as if they were in a hotel. They were young kids, fledgling "Respected Ensigns," who'd never seen combat, fresh from the Homeland, who'd never be able to get themselves or their Zeros back if they went into action. There they were, drinking Johnny Walker Black—spoils of war—while we wouldn't even get beer full of preservatives! "You dirty swine!" I wanted to shout.

Meals were completely different, too. Veteran aces were fed with food and provisions best fit for horses, while those who hadn't done anything were given restaurant meals. They were even provided with orderlies. Can you believe it! Let me tell you about Rabaul as an example. The quality of the food declined for everyone; it was all poor. But even then, a distinction was maintained. I was the senior pilot, so I was to look after the complaints and problems, physical and mental, of all the pilots. And where were the officers? They were in the town of Rabaul, four or five kilometers away. Not one of them knew what their highly valued subordinates were up to. None of the noncoms knew any of their honorable leaders, or even where they were honorably living, or what they had at their honorable meals. I knew only because as senior pilot, I was summoned up there for liaison with them.

When we were at the airfield, our ready room and the officers' ready room were separate. When were we going to "consult"? When were the leader officer and the noncoms in the second and third planes in our groups to get to know each other's souls? When were we to develop the unspoken understanding needed for aerial combat? We didn't even drink tea together. They came from far away in the morning. Even then, they didn't mix with us. Even when they were preparing to take off, they hardly spoke to us.

You couldn't fight hungry, so when we were on a four- or five-hour mission we would take lunch with us. It was called a "kōka bentō"—an airborne box-lunch. You won't believe this, but even in the same formation—with each pilot responsible for the nation's fate, not expecting to return, several hundred miles from base, linked to other formations, all going into battle—even there, what the officers ate and what the noncoms ate was different! And still you were supposed to think in combat, "I can depend on you to cover me?" What a farce! This was the shape of the Imperial forces.

I never learned anything from those officers who graduated from the naval academy about how to search out and spot the enemy, or how to outmaneuver and shoot them down. Instead, we learned from fellow noncoms, and the noncoms learned from the old noncoms, and the old noncoms learned from the warrant officers who were themselves learning from the special-service officers at the bottom of the officer heap. We became like brothers, looking after each other. Yet those officers—graduates of the naval academy, unskilled, lacking in any technique, they were officially our leaders. The nation does not know this. How many of
their precious men were killed because of the misjudgments and lack of military acumen of those men! It was horrific, let me tell you!

There, at Rabaul, I often gave inspirational speeches before we took off: "Do you know what wars you’re fighting?" "One against America and one against Britain," someone answered. "You idiot! There’s only one enemy out there, but there is another one you face. Right here, on our own side. It’s the graduates of Etajima, the officers who come from the naval academy! In the Homeland, in peacetime, we’re oppressed and tyrannized by them just because of rank. Luckily, although this Pacific War is a matter of great misfortune, we’re given a chance which comes but once in a thousand years. Who is stronger? The noncoms who fought their way up from the lower ranks, or them? We don’t know whether we’ll win or lose this war, but if we lose out to them, we’ll continue to be despised. The gods have given us the golden opportunity to show who is stronger and more skillful, us or them." That’s what I said.

Distinctions by rank were made even at the flying school at Kasumigaura, the home of the naval air corps! The noncoms there were all veteran pilots who’d defeated fleets of enemies! They didn’t want to be there flying training planes. Yet they were to teach Honorable Lieutenant Junior Grades. In Japan, there’s an ancient saying: "You should never step on your teacher’s shadow"; better to step back three paces as a sign of respect. But at the navy’s flying school, what kind of attitude did they take? Because they were Honorable Lieutenants, they’d shout at you: "Hey, you! How’s my skill coming along?" They weren’t joking. The noncommissioned officer would answer, "You are doing exceptionally well, Honorable Lieutenant." That was all you could say. You couldn’t instruct them. But when it came to teaching our younger brothers, the new noncoms, we’d be as strict as possible, hoping and praying to impart to them all the skill we could, no matter how tough we had to be.

My squadron commander at Rabaul was Lieutenant Commander Sasai Ryūichi. Sasai-san was the sole exception. He and three others came to our unit after finishing Flight School. My commander gave me an order: "You are senior pilot. Train these four to become full-fledged pilots. They pretend to be officers, but they’re useless. Don’t hold back. Work them over! Make them skillful." I did that. I trained Sasai thoroughly. Sasai and Sakai became a famous duo in Rabaul, paired in pioneer movements and attack operations. When Sakai wasn’t doing well, Sasai wouldn’t go up. When Sasai was indisposed, perhaps from drinking too much, I didn’t fly either. We’d fought together for a long time. He fought savagely and I protected his back. When I was wounded, I insisted that I wouldn’t go back back to Japan. Sasai urged me to return. I kept refusing, but eventually maggots infested my eyes and my sight clouded over. I finally agreed to return home for treatment only on the direct order of my commanding officer. I was just a lone petty officer, but they arranged for a four-engined flying boat to take me home via Saipan!

Sasai came to the harbor at Rabaul to send me off. He shed tears and tore from his own belt the silver buckle with the design of a tiger, which had been a present from his father, a Navy captain. He’d told his sons, "War is not just dying. Come back, even with only one hand or one leg, like the tiger." It’s said in the East that a tiger goes out a thousand leagues from home and always returns. Sasai told me "Please return here again. I will do my best here alone until that time." Sasai was killed on my birthday.

I underwent operations on my eyes, even incisions on my eyeballs, without anesthesia. I was put in an occupational-therapy section to learn massage, because there were no other jobs for blind men. My right eye was completely sightless. The vision in my left eye was poor, too. I was removed from the active-duty list and transferred to the reserves. While there, I learned that the fighter squadron from Rabaul had returned to Toyohashi in Japan for reorganization and rebuilding. One night, I escaped from the hospital. I was a deserter. Ordinary deserters would run for safety, but I was looking to get back into action!

The officer in charge of my old unit took one look at my face and said, "You’re a sick man. You look like a green squash." I begged him to let me come back. "Can you see with one eye?" Yes, said I. "Well, if he can see with one eye, he can see better than most young pilots," he told the doctor. We got special permission from the Navy Ministry for me to join the unit. But a one-eyed pilot has a lot of trouble! I was forbidden from going to the front and was assigned to flight training at Yokusuka. I was told that in my condition I couldn’t go to the front, but I finally convinced them that I had to prove myself.

My first engagement back was June 24, 1944. It turned out to be the greatest aerial combat of the war up to then. Two hundred planes on each side. I had been out of combat for a long time. What’s more, now I had only one eye! The battle lasted for one hour and twenty minutes in the skies over our base on Iwo Jima. It was carried out over, through, and under the clouds. After just one pass, planes were spread all over the sky.

At the start, I lagged behind a little, so I was below the clouds. I shot down two planes and found myself alone. In front of me was a beautiful formation of planes. I breathed a sigh of relief and sped to join them. Damn! They aren’t Zeros. They’re Grummans! I gasped. I tried desperately to escape. From an altitude of forty-five hundred meters I dropped to the surface of the sea. I was blessed with the secrets of the art of
escape, as well as the mysteries of shooting down the enemy. Poor pilots
started shooting from seven or eight hundred meters away. When I was
about to be hit, I'd slip my plane off to the side for an instant, avoiding
the fire. Then the next plane would come. One after another. Sweat was
pouring from me. I descended right to the deck. The altimeter showed
zero meters.

The enemy came at my Zero from every side. The water just in front
of me burst with white spray from their bullets. There's a way of flying
called "sliding," which gives the illusion you're flying straight ahead, while
you slip off to one side or the other. "If I can just survive a little longer,
they'll reach their time limit for returning to their carrier." I was chased
for fourteen or fifteen minutes. My throat was parched. My hands were
practically claws from gripping and pulling the stick. Yet I was not hit
even once. I asked the antiaircraft machine-gunnery on Iwo Jima for help
and one battery opened up on my pursuers. On that day, I shot down five
enemies and became a one-eyed ace.

Soon after, we were ordered out on a suicide mission. Continuous
aerial combat had reduced us on Iwo Jima from over two hundred planes
to only nine Zeros and eight torpedo bombers. At the end of those battles
we were even hit by naval surface bombardment. We were the first in the
Japanese navy to be deliberately organized for and ordered to make a
suicide attack on the enemy fleet. Bombers were ordered not to jettison
their weapons. We fighters were told not to engage in aerial combat, even
if attacked, but to attack the enemy ships, when found, by plunging into
them with our bombs.

We took off from Iwo Jima on July 4, 1944. The commander was
a naval lieutenant, a graduate of the naval academy. I was named leader
of the second flight. Mutō Kanyoshi, known as the navy's Miyamoto
Musashi—a great sword master—led the third flight. The navy
selected such outstanding pilots to lead a suicide attack!

I called to Mutō, a close friend from our China Incident days, and
asked "They say 'go', what do we do?" "What do we do, you say? It's
decided," he said. "We go. "We can't live long anyway. You're right, let's
go," I chimed in. I never thought, "Long Live the Emperor!" To bring
the nation to victory was our thought, and what was that nation? The land
of my parents, younger brothers, and sister. Can we bear seeing our
country invaded by outside enemies? That's what was on my mind. We
were innocents.

My engine was overheating. Normally, I would have landed imme-
ediately. But now there was nothing I could do. We flew south-south-east,
one hundred sixty-three degrees. I was prepared for death at any
moment, but still I looked back over my shoulder. I saw Iwo Jima
gradually falling below the horizon. But that pipelike mountain, Mount
Suribachi, was tall and it remained visible. "My country's still there," I
thought, until it finally disappeared after about thirty minutes. I told
myself, "It's time to do it."

We were at about thirty-six hundred meters. I looked at my watch.
In about twenty minutes, sixty miles off, the U.S. fleet would be there,
waiting for us. The torpedo bombers had navigators, so they began to
plunge toward the sea in order to be ready to attack. I wondered whether
we were already caught on their radar. We had no accurate radars of our
own. I stared up at a towering mass of cumulonimbus clouds about a
thousand meters overhead. I was hoping there would be nothing there
when a glint caught my eye. One, two, three, four, five... I counted
to fifteen. They passed us. "Serves you right, you bastards!" They could tell
the distance, but they'd miscalculated the altitude. I was the first to spot
those enemy planes, me with one eye. So I prepared to attack them.
I signaled my flight. All of our planes acknowledged and started to follow
me. Then in front of Mutō's group, about thirty planes suddenly materi-
alized, bubbling up from below. Well, we certainly couldn't "avoid aerial
combat" now! Instantly, our bombers were targeted. They couldn't do
anything because they were carrying torpedoes. Two or three fighters
attacked each of them, and they exploded immediately. A circle about
twenty-five to thirty meters in diameter spread in the water where they
fell. They looked like the smoke rings on a can of Bishop's tobacco.

We met the enemy with an attack in a formation loop, going in all
together. In a counterattack I hit one of them and sent it spinning and
knocked it down. I recovered myself and looked up and saw Shiga Heižo's
plane, with his engine cover blown off. A Zero without an engine cowling
is a rare and strange sight. "Don't get separated," I signaled him, check-
ing to see if he was all right. "Fine," he signed back. All of the planes
were gone. It had been less than two minutes. Gradually darkness was
falling. In front of my eyes there was a large cumulonimbus cloud, billow-
ing up to eleven thousand meters. Underneath it was a severe squall. The
American fleet was hiding somewhere in that area. As the light faded,
only three of our planes were left. What should we do? We'll smash into
them, just the three of us. We dove down to the surface of the sea and
looked for the enemy fleet in the driving rain and near darkness for about
fifteen minutes. We couldn't locate them. To search until we ran out of
fuel would be a vain death. A wasted life. I will take responsibility, I
thought.

We reversed course—not simple on the open ocean with nothing to
guide us. We were a one-way attack force, so we hadn't done any naviga-
tion. We'd never thought of fuel consumption. I had watched the ocean
surface instinctively on my way to this point. All I had to rely on was my experience of many years. The surface of the sea was like crepe. We were at seventeen or eighteen hundred meters. I calculated distance from what I thought was that cloud we’d seen before, though it had already changed shape. Soon it was ink black. There was no sense of speed. When I looked left and right I could see purple exhaust coming from the the engines of the two Zeros on my wings. I could tell the pilots were there because of the ultraviolet light on their faces. One hour passed. Two hours passed.

Iwo Jima is just a dot in the middle of the ocean. All five of my fuel gauges showed empty. My wing-men too must have run out of fuel long ago. I thought, “So this is the day I die. Here. Now.” In front of me, before the cowling of my engine, my mother appeared. “This way, this way,” she said. I had been awakened once before by my mother’s voice when I passed out after my wounds over Guadalcanal. Now there she was again. I received the silver watch for graduating first from aviation school. The newspaper clipping that describes that was the first thing I ever did for my parents. My mother, back in Saga, on Kyushu, was shocked and surprised. The poorest boy in the village had gone and won a watch from the Emperor. That rascal Saburō who did nothing but run wild! I’d even stolen my parents’ seal so I could enlist in the navy underage in 1933.

I was ready to die. I thought I would plunge into the sea with my two companions when the time came. But if my calculations weren’t wrong, we should be approaching Iwo Jima. In the cockpit, even on a pitch-dark night, there is some starlight, and that light can be reflected from the sea. If there’s no reflection, if there’s a dark spot, specialists like me could tell that an island was there. I was watching my clock. Soon our engines would simply stop. “Show yourself!” I cried out to the island. According to my calculations, it was time. I was searching the ocean, looking over the leading edge of my wing, when I saw that something black, like a tadpole, seemed to be running across the surface of the sea. This was impossible. Things couldn’t be working out this well! I pinched myself. It hurt, so I wasn’t dreaming. There it was, again, the dark spot had traveled under the wing. “That’s Iwo Jima!”

We descended. At lower altitude it was nearly pitch dark. Three planes returning. On the ground they thought that American planes from Saipan might be carrying out a night attack, so they had the base completely blacked out. We had to get down quickly, but neither of my wing-men had ever carried out night operations. We were too busy to practice night take-offs and landings. You need lamps on the ground to mark the place you are to land. There was nothing down there, just darkness. I was afraid we might not have enough fuel for a second pass. I could just make out the coastline south of Mount Suribachi, where the Americans later landed, lit by the luminous sea creatures that glow phosphorescently when the waves break. That’s where we wanted to go. I took our planes at a direct right angle to that beach. At that moment, one lantern, lit by a ground-crewman, shone forth. Just an empty can with waste oil in it. Not normally enough for a landing, but I was desperate, so I went in, “Zu-zuuu. Do-don.” We were back, but we were considered dead. When we returned to our billets, wooden tablets bearing our posthumous names had already been erected. But we’d lived to fight again.

Somehow I survived the war. I never thought of staying in the military after it. I didn’t want any more to do with fighters. I only had one eye, after all. I’d had enough of organizations. In Japan it’s what school you attended, not what you did, that counts. It’s still so. Golf is now my hobby. I’ve made three holes-in-one. My goal is to get five—become an ace—before I die...
THE DIVINE WIND SPECIAL ATTACK CORPS [Kamikaze Toku-betsu Kōgekitai, usually abbreviated in Japanese as the Tokkō] is most often associated with the airplane attacks against the American fleets invading the Philippines and Okinawa. But a wide range of other special-attack weapons were prepared by both the army and the navy, and the concept of “special attack” was eventually applied widely to any attack that used unorthodox methods from which the attacker did not expect to emerge alive.

Various aircraft were adapted for the Tokkō missions, from first-line planes to trainers. One special aircraft, the Ōka [Cherry Blossom], was a rocket-powered flying bomb. Virtually unstoppable once launched, it had to be delivered to distant American task forces during the Battle of Okinawa by slow, overburdened, and exceedingly vulnerable two-engine medium bombers. In its initial mission all eighteen Ōkas employed were destroyed when all of their mother planes were shot down before they approached launch range. The navy’s Shinyō [Ocean Shaker] and its army equivalent, the Maru-ni, were powerful motorboats with a large charge in the bow, which were to be driven into enemy ships at high speed. Perhaps the nadir of this type of warfare was reached with the Fukuryū [Crouching Dragon], in which men wearing underwater breathing devices and carrying specially designed mines on poles would meet enemy landing craft as they approached the beaches of the Homeland.

One of the weapons prepared to strike at the enemy where they could not be reached by conventional tactics was the Kaiten [Turning of the Heavens] Special Attack weapon. This was an improvisation—two of the Navy’s Type-93 “Long Lance” torpedoes, enlarged and fused together. Most of the forward part of one torpedo was filled with 3,000 pounds of explosives. A section containing the pilot’s seat and the needed controls was attached behind it. Aft of the pilot section was the rear portion of a second torpedo, containing the propulsion system. It was not so much a ship as it was an insertion of a human being into a very large torpedo. Five or six Kaitens could be carried on the deck of a single submarine, each accessible from inside while submerged, through a hatch that was then shut from below. A Kaiten was secured to the submarine
with iron bands that could be released on command from the sub’s captain. Once launched, a Kaiten could achieve a speed of forty knots. It was a powerful weapon which, if it found a target, was capable of sinking even an aircraft carrier. But if it missed, there was no way to recover it—or its pilot.

Volunteer

YOKOTA YUTAKA

He wears a wine-colored beret, a tweed jacket, a pink shirt, and a string tie bearing the face of a Buddhist deity. He seems very shy at the station, but drives his tiny gray car through the narrow streets of Tokyo as if it were a Formula-1 racer. “Don’t worry, in thirty years I’ve never been caught speeding. Except once, when they put up a speed trap.”

“This is my room,” he says, showing a small room at his house. “I worked hard to clean it up for you.” On a shelf is a miniature model of a Kaiten in cut-away, showing the pilot, the only crewman, wedged between two huge torpedoes. It is a gift from a reader of his book. *I get lots of letters from young girl students. They’re my warmest fans.* An Imperial Navy ensign blazes on one wall with photos of the parents of members of attack forces he had been part of and memorial photographs of the groups before they departed. Whenever he mentions the name of one of his comrades, tears come to his eyes.

“Your Motherland faces imminent peril. Consider how much your Motherland needs you. Now, a weapon which will destroy the enemy has been born. If there be any among you who burn with a passion to die gloriously for the sake of their country, let them step forward. Mark the paper before you with two circles. If you do not care one way or the other, inscribe a single circle. Those who do not wish to go may throw the paper away. Do not think of returning alive. These arms have not been created in order that you may return alive. Weigh your decision overnight. In the morning present the appropriate paper to your subsection commander.”

We heard these words as we stood assembled before the commander


d of our school. We were all graduating from Youth Flying Corps, the Yokaren, at Tsuchiura Naval Air Station. At that very moment I decided. “I’m going!”

At the time of Pearl Harbor I had been a sixteen-year-old, finishing middle school, really impressed by the nine war gods of the midget submarines who were credited by the papers with much of the success at Hawaii. They weren’t, of course, actual human torpedoes, but even then, I thought to myself, I wouldn’t mind dying like that. I was a militaristic youth. I’d been purely cultivated to serve. I wanted to go to Etajima, the naval academy, but I never got in. You had to have perfect parents, above reproach. Mine were always fighting. The Kempeitai, military police, came to investigate our family. I was rejected. I gave up that hope and jumped into Yokaren. But if I’d entered the naval academy at that time, the war would have ended with me still a candidate ensign. I would never have participated in the war. So flunking the naval academy made my life much more fruitful. I am really grateful that I was rejected.

At the time, I was afraid that if I only wrote double circles I might not be chosen, even though I had one of the very best records in our squad and was very strong in jūdō. Underneath my circles I added, “Without reservation, I request that you select me. Yokota Kan.” I wrote it in big letters and handed it in.

I was picked first.

When selected I felt a slight sense of sadness. My life now had no more than a year to go. But I was already in Yokaren. I wasn’t thinking of surviving the war. Rather than getting shot down by some plane, better to die grandly. Go out in glory.

Ninety-four percent, I heard, put down double circles, five percent put a single circle, less than one percent threw the paper away. I was exhilarated. But I remember Noguchi, who held the second grade in kendo. They didn’t choose him. He dashed up to our squad commander, a desperate look in his eyes. “How could you leave me? Why won’t you take me?” He was in tears. “Please make me the one hundred and first.” They chose one hundred out of two thousand. In the end, he wasn’t allowed to go. But he tried so hard to be one of us.

We trained desperately. You couldn’t complain of pain or anything. You had to push on: “If I don’t hit the target, if I have to ‘self-detonate,’ I’ll die without doing what I must.” It was agony. For everybody. Once

* Five two-man midget submarines were lost. Nine men were killed in action. One, Sakamaki Kazuo, was captured by the Americans on December 8, 1941, becoming the first Japanese prisoner-of-war. He was never mentioned by the Japanese press during the war. The other nine men were featured on front-page stories as “war gods.”
you become a member of an attack force, you become deadly serious. Your eyes became set. Focused. If you'd had two lives, it wouldn't have mattered, but you were giving up your only life. Life is so precious. Your life was dedicated to self-sacrifice, committed to smashing into the enemy. That's why we trained like that. We practiced that hard because we valued our lives so highly.

Yet despite everything we did, American battle reports credit us with only two ships! Don't toy with us! As sub commander Orita said, "We should storm off to America! We should protest violently."

Even in the submarine I was on, we definitely sank three or four ships. And there were many other subs out there, too. All without result? Don't make me laugh! It can't be! When I went off on I-47, Lieutenant Kakizaki and Warrant Officer Yanagiya were launched, too. While they still had operating time, we heard a big blast, "GUMWAAN!" They wouldn't have self-detonaed while there was still time. They must have hit something. The only alternative was that they were hit by a burst of machine-gun fire while on the surface.

Seven- or eight-thousand-ton ships were the ones most often sunk by our Kaitens. We thought that it would be all right to exchange our lives for a ship at least as big as a heavy cruiser. But what we really wanted was a carrier! Lieutenant Kuge and Warrant Officer Yanagiya hit a destroyer. I didn't want to trade my life for anything as small as that, but if they hadn't sunk it, we would have found ourselves under a rain of depth charges. In the midst of its bombardment we carried out a "blind launch," and either Kuge or Yanagiya got him. That destroyer was worth at least as much as a carrier to all of us. If we'd been hit then, I wouldn't be here now.

The morning of our departure from Hikari we said farewell to life. We wore our dress uniforms. They gave us each a short-sword, a tantō, just as if we'd graduated from Etajima, and a headband marked with the words, "Given Seven Lives, I'll Serve the Nation with Each of Them." I received my first that day. I still have two of them. This one here's really filthy because you banged your head so often in the crawl space that led from the submarine to the cockpit of your Kaiten, which was strapped to the sub's deck. When I die, I'm going to wear this into the next world. [He wraps it around his head.] I'll wear it in my coffin. This is my death costume.

When the motor launch first took us to our mother ship, we jumped onto our own torpedoes and, standing with our legs apart, waved our Japanese swords in circles in answer to the cheers. Before that, let me tell you what I did. I actually kissed the bow of the Kaiten that carried the explosive: "Do it for me... Please. Get an enemy carrier for me." I didn't know anything about kissing then, but I kissed my Kaiten without thinking.

"In a week it's Okinawa! Nothing less than thirty thousand tons! No suicide for any tiny ship!" We all shouted like that. Our voices probably didn't reach other ships in the harbor, but we shouted anyway.

The islands in the Inland Sea were beautiful as we passed through. It probably sounds affected to say it, but we felt, "These islands. These waters. This coast. They're ours to defend." We thought, "Is there any more blessed place to die?" I don't think anyone who wasn't a Kaiten pilot could understand that feeling.

There's an old expression, "Bushidō is the search for a place to die." Well, that was our fervent desire, our long-cherished dream. A place to die for my country. I was happy to have been born a man. A man of Japan. I don't care if it makes me sound egotistical, but that's how I felt. The country was in my hands.

As we passed the Bungo Channel off Shikoku on March 29, 1945, I felt acutely that this was my last view of the Homeland. Even here at the gates of Japan, enemy submarines were waiting for us. We sailed in zigzags. As soon as we left the channel, the sub captain and the whole crew were tense and alert. During the day we sailed at full speed in order to close with the enemy as quickly as possible.

"Please let us meet a big one!" That was our deepest desire. "If we're lucky," I thought, "fortune might bring me a big fat aircraft carrier." In the submarine we joked with each other, played shōgi, go, cards, too. Ensign Kuge, who was to annihilate an enemy destroyer, was almost a professional in doing magic tricks with cards. One sailor on the sub was an outstanding shōgi player. His name was Maejima. Once, I played him. Until the middle game I was doing very poorly; then he started making blunders. I said, "Stop it! Fight to the end. Don't make allowances for me!" "No, no," he replied. "You're very strong." Eventually, he lost. I later learned that he was rated first dan, while I was only eighth kyū, far below him in strength. Even when I had a chance to talk to him after the war, he still maintained he'd given it his best effort.

Our submarine, I-47, with its six Kaitens on deck, was part of a four-sub attack plan, a total of twenty Kaitens in all. But we never made it to Okinawa. We were discovered only two days out, bombed, and depth-charged. Afterwards, our Kaitens looked like they'd been made of celluloid, all bent and twisted out of shape. We had to return to Hikari empty-handed.

I sailed the second time on April 20 for the American supply lines between Ulithi and Okinawa. When we reached the area where we might encounter enemy ships, they gave us pilots a feast. The larger a ship is,
the stricter the rules. The petty officers bully the sailors. But on a sub, from the captain to the leastmost sailor, all the meals were the same, though the officers had their own mess. In a submarine, if you die, you all die together. The Kaiten officers were berthed with the sub’s officers, and I was with the sailors, but they gave me the best bed. The crew were all young. The captain toasted us: “We don’t know when we’ll encounter the enemy, so this will be our farewell party. I wish you a most satisfying dash against the enemy.”

Warrant Officer Yamaguchi, whose Kaiten was to be launched right next to mine, was a real joker! On a morning when an attack seemed possible, we’d change into our dress for death in our ready room. You had to strip naked before you could put on the proper clothes. One day, I wanted to say good-bye to the reserve officers who’d taken such good care of me, so I was a little late. When I got back, all the others were fully dressed. They all gathered around, leering, giving me a hard time.

“Hey, guys, look the other way, I have to change my F-U,” I said, referring to my loin cloth. “Yokota, there’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Yamaguchi said. “No cute girls here. What’s the matter, your main gun just a water pistol?” I turned my back and quickly put on my loin cloth. “You stingy bastard!” he said. “Your cannon looks even smaller than my side arm.” “Yamaguchi, you’ve got two?” asked Shinjirō. “Naw. I call it a side arm when things are peaceful.” We laughed until our sides ached.

We were young. We often talked about women. Dirty jokes were our stock in trade. We never talked much about “loyalty,” or “bravery,” or “nobility of the soul.” We were just like brothers. Kalkazi never mentioned it, but he had a girlfriend. He had a picture of a woman in his gear. After he’d carried out his mission, a letter from her arrived for him. He never got to read it. I always had a picture of my mother in my pocket. She’d died when I was just four. Whenever I boarded my Kaiten the words, “Ma, I’ll soon be there with you,” escaped my lips.

“Kaiten pilots! Board! Prepare for Kaiten battle!” The sub’s speaker blared. Our time had come. Once again we tied our hachimaki about our heads. Because we were men we were vain. It would have been a disgrace to lose composure. “We are now departing,” we declared. “Please await our achievements.” You clambered up the ladder to the hatch leading to your Kaiten. You didn’t have much time, but still you looked back down and forced yourself to smile. “I’m going now,” was all you said. You wanted to be praised after you died, just as much as you wanted it during your life. You wanted them to say, “Yokota was young, but he went with incredible bravery. He was dignified to the end.” It would be terrible if they said, “He went shaking. So unlike a Kaiten pilot.” There was only one like that in our whole group. He was a disgrace to the Kaiten Corps.

I cut him out of the pictures I have of us preparing to depart. But that’s not important anymore.

At that moment, you’re sitting in the cockpit. “Compose yourself. Gather your thoughts. If you’re harried you’ll fail. You have only one life. You’re going to your mother.” I calmed myself like that. “If you get confused and can’t really display your ability, out here in the middle of the rough Pacific Ocean, your life will be wasted. You’ll be giving it up in vain.” Nothing came to my mind except accomplishing our objective. “You must succeed! Absolute success! That’s all that I can accept. If I do not succeed, I cannot die in peace. Even if my life is gone, I will not rest.”

The crewman who took care of my Kaiten was Warrant Officer Nao. As he closed the hatch from below, he stretched out his hand. “I pray for your success.” In that tiny cramped space he grabbed my hand.

When the hatch has been closed from below, the only means of communication is by telephone. “All Kaitens prepare for launch!” came the order. “We will launch number one and number four Kaitens! Others await orders!” Those were Commander Kalkazi’s and Yamaguchi’s Kaitens. You hear the sound of the restraining belt being released. Then the roar of them taking off, moving away. We were lying side by side. You only hear the sound. Through your periscope, you can see only the pure white bubbles left behind.

After twenty minutes or so we heard “GUWAAAAANNNN!” A tremendous explosion. You call out on the phone, “When am I going? What am I supposed to do?” “Only two enemy ships sighted.” “What, can’t you find more?” “Wait,” comes back on the phone. “What’d you mean, wait? There must be more of them. Search harder!” Then they ordered Furukawa to launch. Three had now been dispatched. That was the last launch on that occasion. I was ordered to come back in. That was the moment I really wanted to die.

Our third mission, near Saipan, was also the third time I came back unable to make an attack. On my third mission, all members of my attack group had been members of previous groups but had been unable to launch for various reasons. Before we departed, we swore to each other that we would not return. No matter what. But I returned because three of the Kaitens failed. There was a crack in my main fuel-line pipe. The other three launched. Kuge left a letter asking that nobody think of those of us who couldn’t go as cowards. He wrote, “When Sonoda found out he couldn’t launch, I saw him crying. Please let those three go again immediately. They are going to return. Welcome them back warmly, I beg you. This is my only concern, I who must now leave before them.” Kuge himself had returned twice. Since his torpedo drove cold and the engine
wouldn’t ignite. He knew how we felt. How we wanted to crawl into a corner and die from our failure!

It didn’t help. I was really beaten up this time, called a disgrace to the Kaiten Corps for coming back alive! Because of that beating I still have difficulty hearing with my left ear, and I bear scars on my left hand, too. They envied me for having been chosen to go when they had not yet been selected.

One day, a maintenance mechanic told me that Japan had lost. “What are you saying, you filthy bastard?” I couldn’t believe it. That night, we were all assembled. The senior commander of the Special Attack Forces told us the news. He was in tears. I left the gathering, and went through a tunnel in the base toward the sea. There, for the first time, tears sprang to my eyes. I cried bitterly. “I’ll never launch! The war is over. Furukawa, Yamaguchi, Yanagiya, come back. Please return!” I cried and cried. Not because Japan had lost the war. “Why did you die, leaving me behind? Please come back!” I shouted toward the sea. My tears were not tears of resentment or indignation, nor were they in fear for Japan’s future. They were shed for the loss of my fellow pilots. My comrades. I even thought about killing myself as I stared out to sea. I didn’t have a gun. I got some explosives, but I didn’t have the guts to just blow myself to bits.

I cannot tell you the agonies I went through after the war. Only a few of us went through this, Sonoda, Shinkai, me. Just a few. You go off in a submarine together, like brothers. Real comrades-in-arms. You board a torpedo strapped to the back of the submarine, then they leave, the ones right next to you. Nobody can understand this. Sonoda never speaks about it. He tells me he doesn’t want to recall that time. I’m sure he has his own reasons. Even other Kaiten members don’t understand. I don’t really ask anyone to understand my feelings.

I smoke a lot. I drink sake. I drink thinking it’s not written in the Bible that you shouldn’t drink. I’ve been going to church for the last twenty years. I’m a survivor of the Special Attack Forces. One who’s distorted. I can say I’m sort of a distorted Christian.

Normally, your memories fade with the passage of forty years. In my case, they seem to come back stronger and stronger. Last January I went to Ulithi Atoll, Guam, Palau, and Yap. From Guam to Ulithi there aren’t any planes. So we chartered a tiny eight-ton hull. On the way back the engine broke down and we spent three days drifting about the reefs of the atoll. Like Robinson Crusoe. We didn’t have any water, so we ate coconuts given to us by the village headman on Ulithi. He welcomed us with “Isshai”—“Welcome” in Japanese. Said we were the first Japanese to return to Ulithi Atoll since the war. I threw flowers into the sea, together with the Buddhist sutras I’ve been writing for every one of the lost Kaiten pilots for many years now.

We thought it probably was the spirits of our dead comrades that stopped our engine. Kept us from leaving. They were probably telling us, “Don’t rush back home. Stay with us awhile.” So many fine young men, wonderful men, were killed.

Human Torpedo

KÖZU NAOJI

“I didn’t die in a Kaiten. I lived forty-five years after that. Still, up to today I don’t know why I was born. Yet here I am alive. Writing my book may be it. I consider it part of my will. But they tell me, ‘That kind of book won’t sell anymore.’ Yet, I feel I must do something, so I keep writing. My heart goes out to those who died so young. I still feel their deaths had some meaning. They didn’t die from illness. Each died with a clear purpose in mind.’

He speaks softly, with little outward show of emotion.

At the time of Pearl Harbor, I was only nearing the end of my second year at the Higher School. The war was being fought by adults. Students were still deferred from the draft. If everything had gone normally, I wouldn’t have graduated from university until March 1946. I was sure I was absolutely safe, and I acted that way.

Then they changed the rules. The first thing they did was reduce the period of study. That happened just before the outbreak of the Pacific War. I was forced into university after two years and six months instead of the normal three years. Then in the fall of 1943, student exemptions were canceled. The day after the announcement was made I went to my campus. Everything was in an uproar at Tokyo Imperial University. Nobody knew anything. Some said, ‘They’ll never take students from the Imperial universities. Not Tōdai and Kyōdai [Tokyo Imperial University and Kyoto Imperial University]’ But as things turned out, that couldn’t have been further from the truth. In October I was pulled into the military. Forced in.

I was skinny. I didn’t think I’d be able to take it if they got hold of me. I was sure I just wasn’t cut out to be a soldier or a sailor. Officers from the army had been attached to our schools since my middle-school days. They were swaggering bastards. I couldn’t stand them. The navy looked better from the outside, and I did find myself in the navy, a
second-class seaman, the lowest thing it was possible to be. I took the
officers’ examination. They felt that those of us from the Law Faculty of
Tokyo Imperial University had the minimal qualifications to sit for the
paymaster exam in the Imperial Japanese Navy.

What happened was that with one exception, everyone in my group
who wore eyeglasses became paymasters. In those days, seventy percent
of Tōdai students wore specs. Then they called out the names of all those
who’d been assigned to gunnery, navigation, torpedo school, but they
didn’t call mine. Next they announced the names of those who had been
selected for service as “defense-specialty reserve students.” Mine was the
only name called. “Defense-specialty?” At that time I didn’t know we
were losing battles one after another. I thought, “I don’t have to attack!
That’s great. Things have really worked out well.” But in the kind of war
they were really fighting, “defense specialist” was a black joke.

I was sent to the anti submarine-warfare school in February 1944 and
was stuck there until the end of October. I was fed up with school by
then. “What am I doing in this place?” I asked myself when they
started calling for volunteers who were “full of energy,” who were “willing
to take on a dangerous job,” and “willing to board a special weapon”
that would “reverse the tide of the war at once.” Why not? It’s got to be
better than this. I applied for it carelessly. Almost ninety percent of us
volunteered.

Since they only wanted forty of us, though, I was pretty sure I
wouldn’t be one of those selected. They called us out a second time, a
third time. Each time some of our classmates hadn’t been chosen. In the
end, we began dimly to grasp the criteria used in selection. Eldest sons
were removed from the list. You had to be a second son or lower. Even
then, if you had an older brother at the front, they took you off the list. If
you were the third son, but neither of your elder brothers had a chance
to survive, you were dropped. I was a second son. My younger brother
was still in middle school. My eldest brother was an officer in the navy. I
suppose they thought my younger brother had a good chance to survive,
so I was picked. But I never imagined I’d be going to a place from which
I’d have absolutely no chance to return alive.

So forty of us entered the Kaiten Corps. We arrived at Kawatana on
the twenty-fourth of October. There weren’t any weapons for us yet. They
couldn’t even tell us what these secret weapons would be. Highly classi-
fied, was what they said. At Kawatana they had these plywood motorboats
—they called them Shinyō, “Ocean Shakers.” We charged into “the
enemy” on those! You fixed the helm three hundred meters before
impact, locking the rudder in place. A hand-engaged lever controlled
acceleration. Once you let go of it, it didn’t automatically let up like the
pedal of a car. Then you jumped into the sea. The unmanned boat would
then plunge into a target representing the enemy. They weren’t telling
you you had to die. We were wearing life jackets, but you had to wonder
if it was possible to survive this kind of attack. I thought it was damned
outrageous, but they told us not to worry, the Kaiten would be a much
superior weapon. How could I have imagined they wouldn’t include any
escape system at all?

As we were beginning our training, the first announcement of
Kamikaze attacks was made. I think that was October 29. Reading the
news of the “Divine Wind” Special Attack Corps in the newspapers—
planes crashing into the enemy ships—I was bowled over. Even then, I
didn’t grasp the true nature of the Kamikaze. I still wondered, “What are
they going to do if they parachute down in the middle of the enemy
fleet?” Yet there I was. We couldn’t share our doubts with each other.
We were all drawn from different universities. If I had expressed my
disquiet, my university could have been disgraced. I had to keep my own
counsel.

Today, I know they deceived us! I know it with all my heart! But
then—and for many years afterward—I thought it must have been me. I
thought I misheard them. We only received explanations orally. I thought
I missed what they said. Even a decade ago, I had some doubts. But in
1957 a document turned up. When I saw that for the first time, I knew
the document had been drafted August 20 and issued August 31, 1944,
by the Chief of the Personnel Bureau and the Chief of Education of the
Imperial Navy. It bears the seals of Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa
and his chief subordinates. It sets forth instructions for recruiting and
training reserve student officers to fill positions in special-weapons units,
and outlines how to select and train them. It expressly forbids touching
on the weapon’s capabilities or its use. Those doing the soliciting were
instructed to say only that if you attack in the weapon you’ll kill the enemy
without fail. They were told to state that some danger was involved. But
that was all. Seeing those words in print, I knew they’d misled us deliber-
ately.

As we were waiting to move to our final staging base at Hikari
we received a postcard from one of our comrades who’d gone there ahead
of us. On it was “Say hello to Kudō.” That was our code phrase for “Escape
is impossible.” Until that moment we had had no confirmation that the
Kaiten was a self- exploding weapon which gave you no chance to escape
death.

We’d heard rumors, but I didn’t actually see one until I got to Hikari.
The body was painted flat black. It overwhelmed a man. A small sail
and a tiny periscope located at its center seemed to disturb the harmony of
the whole. The rear third was a Type-93 torpedo. A maintenance officer described it to us dispassionately, "The total length is fourteen point five meters. Diameter, one meter. The crew is one man. Explosive charge one point six metric tons. Navigation range seventy-eight thousand meters. Maximum speed thirty knots."

I was supposed to be ready for this, but the shock nearly knocked me down. In the summer of 1946, I recorded my thoughts at that moment: "At last we saw the weapon we would ourselves board. I sensed something larger than the power of a human being lingering down at me. I lost my reason and my emotions. I was dumbfounded. I felt that I had myself turned into something no longer human." I couldn't really tell, at that time, whether what I sensed was higher or lower than a human being, but I felt I now knew why we human beings could no longer control our own destiny.

If you worked at it carefully, you could get out of the Kaiten Corps. All you had to do was fail to operate the Kaiten properly and do the same thing again on your second try. You'd be shouted at: "You stupid bastard! We won't let a dumb shit like you operate a Kaiten!" and they'd take you off the list. But I never thought of escaping myself; that would only have meant somebody else dying in my place. Even if the whole unit had to be replaced, they'd have found others. It was that kind of system. I couldn't bear the idea of sacrificing someone else by quitting. I knew if I did, I'd regret it for the rest of my life, even if I never knew his name. I hated the thought that I'd fail and they'd say, "Those reserve students are no good!" I couldn't do that to the others. I wanted to navigate well. Like they say in Chinese, "Mei fa"—"It can't be helped." I was resigned to it.

It was horrible to contemplate death in a Kaiten. Many young men charged into the enemy and died during the war—in Kamikaze planes, in Óka manned rocket bombs, in Shinyo boats. If everything went well for them, and the battleship that was their target was close, looming in front of them, at least they could count the seconds to impact: "Three, two, one . . . ." Then, as long as they kept their eyes open, they'd know the moment of their deaths.

But the Kaiten wasn't like that. You're underwater. You can't look out. You've already determined your course, peering through the periscope. "The enemy position in one minute and thirty seconds will be this. I set my angle of attack at this." You submerge. You run full speed at the estimated enemy position. From the moment you commence your attack, you see nothing. You have a stopwatch. You know how much of the one minute and thirty seconds has elapsed. But you may have made an error in measurement. You keep thinking, "Now. Now. Now!" But you never know when that moment will come. "Time's elapsed," you realize. "I missed the target." You come to the surface. You search again for the enemy. You realize you passed astern. Once more you set your course. But again, you don't know the moment of your death. You may die ahead of schedule. You don't even know that. I can't imagine a crueler weapon. Yet I can't ask anyone how they felt at that moment, because no one who experienced it came back alive.

There were men who returned as many as four times from missions, but in every case it was because their Kaiten was unable to launch from the host submarine, or no enemy was found. Nobody who was launched from a submarine ever returned, so we don't know their feelings. At that final moment a cold sweat must have broken out. Or maybe they went mad. But there are no witnesses. Nothing could be crueler than that. Nothing. Who am I to say that a Kaiten pilot could remain sane at a moment like that? In the book I've been writing about the Kaitens, I couldn't put these thoughts in it. With the families of those who'd perished in mind, I just couldn't say that aloud. Even after forty years, I just couldn't write it. Such a hardhearted weapon! So callous. I have here a list of the dead. All of them. I still wonder how they felt at the moment of death.

In reality, hardly any ever hit an enemy ship. Those who returned following Kaiten launches say they heard the sounds of explosions. They say they heard them just before the mother ship broke off to return home or seek new targets. That must mean they self-detonated. When the Kaitens are released to begin their attacks, the targeted ships are far, far away. The pilots try desperately to overtake them. They fail. They're alone in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It's possible to open the hatch and climb out. But what would you do in the middle of the Pacific? I believe they thought it better just to blow themselves up. At least I'll die in one blast, they may have thought. That, I don't know. Nobody knows.

The verification of all American ships lost during the war has long been completed. According to their records, Kaitens claimed just three ships sunk or heavily damaged. One at the Ulithi Atoll was hit, two others in the open Pacific. But I'm sure there must be ships not registered by the American military—drafted ships, Australian ships, British ships, others for which records are not complete. Some might have been lost to Kaitens, so I cannot speak with absolute confidence. Still I can't help thinking, with the exception of those three pilots who hit, how must the others have felt?

One hundred and six Kaiten pilots lost. This includes seventeen killed in practice or in accidents. With the three hits, that means eighty-six remain to be accounted for. Two were lost during an air raid on their base. Seven were killed on ships transporting them, others together with
their mother ships. The total number of men who were actually able to carry out attacks was very small, I tell you, very small.

There was a plan to build one thousand Kaitens over several months, but in reality only four hundred to four hundred fifty were produced. They assembled one thousand three hundred sixty-four pilot candidates, but manufacturing fell behind. It wasn’t that they trained many at once and then selected the best. There weren’t enough training boats or instructors for that. You got about four practice runs in basic training. If you survived without accidents, then you were appointed to an attack unit. There you practiced some more and then went on your mission. I first actually boarded a Kaiten in May. It was an “accompanied ride” with an apprentice instructor. How long I’d waited for that moment!

I don’t know who selected the attack unit. There were usually five or six men in a unit. When you were selected, the commander of the unit called you up and informed the others, “You will serve in my unit.” From that moment on, they considered themselves as one.

One hundred and twenty-one men who had graduated from the naval academy were assigned to our unit. Two hundred and thirty of us were reserve students. We also wore the single cherry blossom on our collars, but the naval academy graduates used to tell us, “You got your cherry blossoms from Roosevelt. You became ensigns after only a year. We spent years earning ours.” We thought, “Hell, it wasn’t us who wanted these things.”

They beat us up regularly. I don’t think they used such methods at the naval academy, but with us they didn’t hold back. In the navy, they put almost superstitious faith in the belief that brutality and physical punishment made better sailors. Normally, though, officers didn’t touch the men under them, but the regular officers in the Kaiten Unit must have believed it was the best way to handle these irregular upstarts, these former students, so weak in spirit. They never let up. “Academy this, academy that”—we didn’t give a damn how they did it at the naval academy, but at the same time we thought, “We’ll show ‘em, they’ll see what we can do.” I guess that’s what they wanted us to feel.

The Kaiten Corps was formed on September 1, 1944, on Ōtsushima. The first Kaiten attacks were made in November and December. The fervor was intense. The Hikari Base opened December 1, and the first attack force left there February 20. Everyone was caught up in a mad rush. By the time the second and third attack forces departed, the frenzy had died down and a sort of normality had taken hold.

Dispatching the attack force was a grand show, let me tell you. It was so thrilling. Probably every man who sent off his fellows was himself carried away with excitement. It was almost like the departure for battle of a great general and his samurai warriors in the feudal age—very different from the pushbutton war of today. There was a sense of man-to-man combat in it. In the army, war had already become a clash of power against power, a battle of tank divisions, or mass war like the Imphal attack in Burma. The individual was obliterated in a war like that. Even air war was no longer the clash of lone warriors. But the Kaiten was still an individual affair. An elaborate ritual was staged, a grand send-off.

“Tomorrow, I’ll be the one sent off like that,” we thought. “There’s no distance separating me, the new arrival, from those departing today and those who have already gone and are now dead.” I could send them off without feeling guilt, but how did these paymasters or the superior commanders who were not themselves going to die feel? I can’t tell you that. I never thought the Emperor could act on his own. I didn’t see myself throwing my life away for him, nor for the government either, nor for the nation. I saw myself dying to defend my parents, my brothers and sisters. For them I must die, I thought.

**Bride of a Kamikaze**

ARAKI SHIGEKO

We meet by the statue of the Goddess of Mercy dedicated to the Special Attack Forces, the Tokkō Kannon, at Setagaya Fudō Temple in a quiet residential neighborhood of Tokyo. A gathering is held there the eighteenth of every month. Wearing a green dress with a large floral pattern, she looked very young and moved gracefully, as she changed the water for the flowers, lit incense, and arranged objects on the altar. She seems like a daughter, or younger sister of a man who had been a Tokkō, until she is introduced as “the widow of Flight Lieutenant Araki.”

At her home, where we later talk, there are many photographs of family members—on walls, on bureaus, and the tops of cabinets. Off by itself in a corner is a photograph of a young man in a flight jacket.

He passed away in 1945. Forty-five years have gone by, and yet strangely the face of the man who died in action remains that of a twenty-one-year-old. My second husband died at fifty-seven with an old man’s face, while his is almost like my son’s. I guess that’s why the yearning gets stronger year by year. It’s like the love of a mother cherishing her son’s memory.

I hadn’t planned to get married so young. We were brought up as
brother and sister. When my parents married, they each had a child. My mother brought me with her and my father brought him. He went to Seijō Middle School and then entered the Military Academy. I was studying Japanese dance, hoping to teach. But we were told, “You can’t dance this.” “You can’t dance that.” There were so many rules then. We couldn’t dance Madame Butterfly because Lieutenant Pinkerton was an American.

We lived in Takadanobaba in Tokyo, but when the war started, we were evacuated to Kōzu in Kanagawa prefecture. In Kōzu, I worked at a pressing plant for the navy. We made a kind of starch cake from rice. The plant was in the middle of a field. Every day, from the direction of Sagami Bay, dozens of planes flew over us, heading toward Mount Fuji. They must have been Tokkō, Special Attack planes. You could see the Rising Sun on their wings. We’d go outside and wave flags, or just our hands. One plane, perhaps the leader’s, would fly low and dip its wings in greeting. We cried and cried. We knew that would be the last we saw of them. We’d wave frantically until they disappeared, then we’d pray for them.

This was our daily life in April and May, 1945.

One night, he came home suddenly, without any warning. It was April 9, about eleven o’clock. It was raining. Everyone was already sleeping. “What’s happened? What a surprise!” He told us he’d been given permission to take overnight leave. An air-raid warning had sounded earlier and we were under a blackout, so we moved about the house groping in the dark. He said, “There’s something I have to tell you. All of you, because we’re a family.” He told us he’d been selected as a group leader of a Tokkō mission, that he didn’t know when his attack would take place, but it would be soon.

He then said, “I have one request to make, although it’s very selfish. I want to marry Shigeok, if possible.” For a second I was stunned. I knew at that moment he was going to die. My father and mother were silent. I was silent, thinking. He, too, of course was silent.

“I will do as Haruo wishes,” I finally replied.

“It’s decided, then. Let’s arrange for the ceremony!” Everyone seemed to say it at once. My mother was weeping. She was my mother, after all. There was no sake, but we had some potato liquor. Mother brought it from the kitchen, together with some sweet-potato stalks and a little dried squid. It was all we had. We then performed the nuptial ritual, exchanging toast three times from a tiny cup. My father started to sing the “Takasagoya” wedding song, but when he got to the part about living forever, he fell totally silent. We couldn’t help crying then. We all wept. He knelt in the formal way. I tried to control my tears. My mother ran off to the kitchen. Even now, I can’t take that song. I don’t like going to weddings. I’m reminded of my wedding and not theirs. I can’t seem to keep from crying. At last, my father started again and sang through to the very end.

It was after two o’clock when we finally retired. Dawn came so soon. He didn’t say a thing to me, not one word. He probably couldn’t say what I should do after his death. I wanted to say something to him, but I couldn’t find the words either. At a time like that nothing seems right. I had so many things to say and felt frustrated at my inability to voice my thoughts. There was the air-raid warning, too. If it had only been a preliminary alert, we could have had some light. Unfortunately, it was a full alert. My mother was making some noise in the kitchen. The rain shutters were shut tight. The all-clear probably came about two o’clock. No enemy planes came over, but along the coast the blackout was very strict. Your eyes get used to the dark and you can make things out dimly. I could hear a suppressed sob from my mother. I sat formally. He did, too. I noticed something move and felt his hand grasp mine. I returned his grip. We were so modest. Why were we so bashful in the darkness? We didn’t know anything. We rose at four o’clock in the morning. He left home just after five, not telling us where he was going. “When can I see you again?” I asked. He said only, “I’ll be back when it rains.” He left with those words. We were husband and wife only four hours.

All of us waited for him whenever it rained. From April to June. “He’ll be back today,” we’d all say when the rain fell. We didn’t lock the entrance, so he could come in at any time. We’d wait until the last train, but he couldn’t come back, of course. He’d died in action long before. We waited for him, waited and waited for him, all of us, without knowing he was long dead.

Meanwhile, I got pregnant. I found myself throwing up often and wondered why. My mother didn’t have any experience. I’d been adopted, you see. My mother was actually my aunt. We thought I was ill. We went to a doctor. He asked cautiously, “Do you have anything to tell me?” I said, “No.” “Are you married?” “Yes” “Well, it seems you may be carrying a child.”

I was stunned. From that moment on I wanted to see him and tell him. We searched and searched, but we had no clue. It was in mid-June that Takagi Toshirō visited us. You know him, don’t you? The famous author? At that time many reporters visited the bases used by the Tokkō pilots, among them Mr. Takagi. “At Chiran, I was entrusted with the last will and testament of Araki Haruo, together with some clippings of his hair and nails,” he said solemnly. I was overwhelmed! “He was killed in action on May 11.”

Carrying the baby now became my reason to live. It was so for all of
us. We took special care and I gave birth to a son on December 25, Christmas Day. We named the boy Ikushi, taking the Japanese reading of the characters of his father’s military unit, Yūkiya (“Eternity”). We all worked so hard to raise him. But suddenly, on the fifth of November, 1946, he took ill and within thirty minutes he’d stopped breathing. I was holding him in my arms. Everything was over and I was only twenty-two years old.

I’d always fought with him. “I can’t stand the sight of you,” he used to say. I’d tell him, “I don’t care either. There are lots of boys better than you. I’ll marry one of them.” We were the same age. We made good opponents. He must have always thought he’d marry me. Somehow, I thought if he became a lieutenant we’d be together, even if we did fight. I was always conscious of his presence, as if we were engaged. If he’d married someone else, I’d have been furious.

In his will, addressed to his father, he wrote that he’d flown over our house at the end of April, circling many, many times. Father was working in the fields and didn’t look up. “Father,” he wrote, “I was unable to catch your attention.” We were all wracked with regret. Father was filled with remorse forever after. Whenever airplanes flew over, he’d always wave at them and say, “Why didn’t I notice the plane carrying my own son?”

It was such a brief and simple will. The letters I’d received up to that time had always started, “Dear Miss Shigeko.” The will started, “Shigeko,” as I’d hoped. It was addressed to his wife. He told me of his concern for my long-term future. He said he felt brokenhearted over that. He told me to live purely, strongly, and correctly. When I think of it now, I cannot help but cry. He asked me to forgive him for taking a harsh tone with me. Why did a man who was going to die have to beg my pardon? I was the one who wanted to be forgiven. He asked me to absolve him for his selfishness and willfulness. Since he showed concern for my future, he must have wanted to be forgiven for getting married, too.

Father’s was a long letter and covered many subjects. Mine was really short. He must have written it last. His hand was shaky. Asking to be forgiven. That is the most heartbreaking for me. I had no way to respond to his plea. I could only pray. I could only feel sympathy and misery. My emotions reach out to him. My mother’s name didn’t appear anywhere in his wills. She was hurt by this. I comforted her by saying that when he spoke of Father, he meant her, too.

From June to July, the Tokkō planes were practically all shot down one after the other as they approached their targets. I don’t know if he actually crashed into the enemy, but some did. There were results. I want to believe that. I want to believe that he didn’t die in vain. Otherwise he still lies at the bottom of the cold Okinawan sea for nothing. I want to raise him even now. I know there’s nothing left, but I can’t help this feeling.

[She brings out a small photograph album.] Would you like to see these? These are photographs taken by Mr. Takagi on the tenth. This is Haruo, he’s in the middle. These three men were all group leaders at Chiran, the air base the Tokkō used in Kyushu. They were classmates at the Military Academy, fifty-seventh class. This was really unusual. By chance, they were all assigned to attack on the same day, although they went off at different times. All three were twenty-one years old. Haruo took off in the lead plane, just after six A.M. The headband he wears bears the rising-sun emblem. The students at the girls school near the air base at Chiran had cut their fingers and filled in the red sun with their own blood. This picture shows Haruo giving the final address before take off. He’s smiling, conscious of the camera. In this situation nobody could smile naturally. There is another photograph, a group picture of their trip to pray at Ise Shrine. See the tall man? Haruo really stands out, doesn’t he?

These are the only pictures I have. We didn’t have time to take pictures. We talked about it. “We’ll have to take a proper wedding portrait when he comes back.” But that chance never came.

I did marry again and bore children. When my children were of grade-school age, I sometimes wondered who I would choose if he returned. Should I go with Haruo, leaving my husband and two children, or should I preserve my family and leave him? I really thought about this seriously. To be frank, I was somehow relieved after my husband died. I had the thought, “Haruo can come back anytime now.” Isn’t it odd? You can’t believe that, can you? But I never saw Haruo dying. I watched my husband die with my own eyes. My first child died in my arms. There is no way to confirm death in his case. Some members of the Special Attack forces made forced landings or ditched at sea. There are people who did come back. Some who survived wanted to break all contact with their classmates and friends. Even when classmates tried to get in touch, some absolutely refused to meet them. I hear those stories and sometimes I wonder.

In those years, he appeared in my dreams many times. It seems impossible to believe, but he even gave his child a name. “He’ll be born tomorrow,” he told me, and he was born the next day. After my husband died, I stopped seeing dreams of Haruo. Why doesn’t he appear to me anymore? Maybe it’s because now he can come back anytime. All that’s left for me is to look forward to the day when I meet Haruo in the other
world and can say, "I haven't seen you for a long time." He'll be awfully surprised, I'm sure! "Who's this grandma?" Maybe he'll just look aside and claim he has no idea who I am.

"I'll go first. I'll meet you at Yasukuni" is what the lead pilots said to their groups. It was their pledge. To meet at Yasukuni. They were clinging to the idea of meeting again. They couldn't help themselves. I believe their courageous spirit is only there at Yasukuni Shrine. I frequently go to Yasukuni, but I go to the graves more often. On the anniversary of his death, or any day when the weather is good, I go. I only end up crying if it's a rainy day. It's a beautiful place. You can see the sea stretched out before you. Mount Fuji is directly opposite. It's high on a hill, surrounded by mandarin-orange groves.

I went to Okinawa about six years ago. I wanted to see that sea, once. I was told it was in the vicinity of Kadena Bay that he made his attack. We don't really know. Anyway, I brought some sand and pebbles from there and put them next to his grave. When I was there, I called to him by name, shouting loudly "Haruo-san!" Sometimes people ask me to go with them to Okinawa, but it's not a place I want to go to twice. Okinawans think they were the only victims. It's amazing how strongly they feel that. That feeling is everywhere. They think Okinawa was cut off and only Okinawans had terrible times. I see such stories in the newspapers and I don't like them. Haruo died to protect Okinawa. I get angry when they consider themselves just victims. Did you hear about the incident where they even burned our flag? I'd hate to set foot on the soil of Okinawa again.

So many memories came back to me like pictures on a revolving lantern. There are times when I wish the Emperor had reached the decision to surrender earlier. So many civilians also suffered. There was so much damage. We were going to do it with our bamboo spears. When they landed we would attack them. We had those spears at our right hand at all times at the factory. "Each one, stab one, without fail!" they'd tell us. "Yes!" we'd reply in unison.

Our spear was about a meter and a half long, with a sharp point cut diagonally across at the end. We practiced every morning. "Thrust! Thrust! Thrust!" I thought I'd definitely be able to stab them. We had the image of the Americans as being gigantic. We were told, "Americans are large and well built, so go for the throat. Stab here, drive your spear up into the throat. Don't look at the face. Stab without looking." We really believed we could do it. Isn't it scary? We often called this "Yamato damashii," the "Spirit of Japan." We'd put on our headband with the rising sun emblazoned on it. Then we'd bow deeply in the direction of the Imperial Palace. Next, we drilled with our bamboo spears. Finally, we'd start our work. But I enjoyed it. It was for Japan, it was to preserve and protect the country. We were sending our loved ones off to die to protect the country. It was the least we could do on the home front. It's amazing isn't it? Beyond comprehension today. At that time we had an unbounded faith in Japan. We felt the Yamato race was unequalled.

Even after forty years my memories will not be extinguished. I get really excited when I talk like this. At that time, I thought it was natural that Haruo would die. It would have been shameful for him to go on living. I was half-waiting for his death. But he had assured me he would come back once more. I thought the next time would be the last time. What should be my frame of mind then? I was contemplating what I would do as the wife of a samurai. How would I welcome him? With what words would I send him off? Then he died on me! Just like that, out of the blue. That's what shocked me. It wasn't that I wanted him to die, please understand. But I was waiting for his "glorious and honorable death." If he didn't die, it would be a disgrace. If a family lost someone in action in those days, we would congratulate them. We'd say, "That's wonderful." We really meant it! At least, that expressed half of what we felt.

When at last I learned he'd died, people said, "That's good; congratulations." I replied, "Yes, it is. It's for the country," and then I returned home to cry alone. I let no one see my tears. We were told that with our eyelids we should suppress our tears. We were told not to cry, but to endure. My father and mother showed no tears in front of others. Nobody expressed their sorrow or sympathy for us. They only said, "It was an honorable death in battle, wasn't it?" and we'd agree.

Even between parents and child we never expressed such ideas as Why did he die? or What if he had lived? We were simply silent on these things. Nobody held me tight in their arms and comforted me with words of sympathy. But when the baby boy was born, my father cried out in a loud voice: "This is Haruo's reincarnation!" He wept openly. Everyone broke down, the only time we all sobbed, holding each other's hands. The midwife was startled and told us to hurry up and boil some water and stop crying. Father must have held those tears inside for the whole year. We took special care of the boy: When the baby died I thought there was no God, no Buddha in the world. I fainted at the grave when we had the funeral. Just as I was putting Haruo's wooden box and the baby's remains together.

I have only good memories of him because he died young. If we'd lived together until now, maybe we'd have gotten bored and divorced. That four hours was such a valuable time. It is a time only we know about. I felt I was loved body and soul. We didn't sleep at all. But we
didn’t speak. It was precious. Truly wonderful. He must have been overwhelmed with sorrow. I thought I would see him again. I didn’t think it was the last time. He did say, “If we had a rope, we would jump into the sea off Közu, our bodies tied together.” I could only say “What?” I didn’t know what to say. He went on, in a quiet voice, “I cannot do that now.” If I’d told anyone, people would have accused him of shameful conduct for an officer. He was more mature than I was. The room we were in was a Western-style room, about ten tatami. It had glass windows. We were able to see each other’s faces in the light from outside. The room where we had the wedding ceremony had paper walls, with rain shutters outside, so it was pitch black. After the stand-down from the full alert, about two o’clock, we were able to turn on a light shielded by black cloth. The light embarrassed us and we turned it off again. The next morning we were still too bashful even to look into each other’s faces. We both turned away. Later I regretted not having looked at him closely. I wish I’d studied his features. But I can easily see him the next morning, standing in the hall near the window, looking out, dressed in his uniform. That moment is impressed on my mind. His form took shape in the early morning light.

Breakfast was ready. Then I asked him, “Can I come with you to the station?” “Walk behind me,” he answered. I went with him to the train wearing monpe, though I wore a kimono for my wedding. It was embarrassing for us. My eyes were on him, but he walked straight ahead, never turning back to look at me. He bought a ticket at Közu Station. I tried to glimpse it, just to know where he was going, but he snapped, “You can’t look!” I stepped back, startled.

When I visit the graves, I always make it a point to walk along the beach and then visit that house before coming home. It’s still exactly as it was, though we sold it and moved long ago. I talk to him. “I’m walking now alone on the road we walked together,” or “I’m already sixty-seven years old.” Sometimes his image overlaps with my husband’s. Maybe I get him mixed up because I married my husband in Közu. I may start out talking to Haruo, calling him “Haruo-san,” but I end up addressing “Father” or “Grandfather,” as the children and I always called my husband. He was a tall, handsome man. A man like that was blown to bits, so that not even a shred of flesh was left. It’s all right if he crashed into an enemy ship, but it’s possible he is alive if he were shot down on the way. You cannot be certain he was hit in the head or heart. If he’d been hit in the leg or arm, he could have survived. I hate having thoughts like that.

My grandson says, “Grandma always looks up when a plane flies over.” I look up because it’s as if the Tokkō planes are overhead as they once were, forty-five years ago. That won’t ever change. I remember these things as if they happened yesterday. I don’t have much of a chance to speak in this way. I try to tell myself not to look back, to keep everything bottled up. But once the dike breaks, it seems like it never stops flooding out.

Later, she asks, “Would you like to see his will?” She brings out a brownish, single sheet. It reads:

Shigeko,

Are you well? It is now a month since that day. The happy dream is over. Tomorrow I will dive my plane into an enemy ship. I will cross the river into the other world, taking some Yankees with me. When I look back, I see that I was very cold-hearted to you. After I had been cruel to you, I used to regret it. Please forgive me.

When I think of your future, and the long life ahead, it tears at my heart. Please remain steadfast and live happily. After my death, please take care of my father for me.

I, who have lived for the eternal principles of justice, will forever protect this nation from the enemies that surround us.

Commander of Air Unit Eternity
Araki Haruo

Requiem

NISHIHARA WAKANA

She comes to the station on a bicycle, a tiny woman with black, short-cut hair, wearing a bright red sweater. When she talks about her parents and her brother, her gaze seems to drift off. Sadness, happiness, and despair are vividly expressed by her passionate alto voice.

She is active in the Association to Memorialize the Students Who Died in War [Nihon Senbotsu Gakusei Kinenkai]—known as the Wadatsumikai. Most of the students memorialized left their campuses when university deferments were ended in late 1943. Many of these highly educated young men were drawn into the special-attack forces. They frequently left behind letters or diaries in which they grappled with issues of life and death which they were facing just as the war reached a fever pitch. Some of what they wrote in their final moments was published in Japan as Kike wadatsumi no koe [Listen to the Voices of the Sea] in 1952. Their thoughts just prior to the moment of death are widely read. Four
volumes of diaries, letters, and materials left by her brother have been published.

In Britain they say "God Save the Queen." With the help of God, the King or Queen can govern. If they do not obey God's will, if they are tyrants, the people have the right to cut down the King or Queen. But in Japan they said, "Die for the Sake of the Emperor." No one could disobey an order to die for him. I've been thinking these issues through for the last forty-three years. I'm no Communist, but I'm convinced that if we hadn't had "The Emperor's Army" they would never have invented a Special Attack weapon like the Kaiten "human torpedo."

I'm the youngest of five brothers and sisters. Minoru was the eldest, so there was a gap of twelve years between us. He was born in 1922. I only lived under the same roof with him in my early childhood. When he left home to enter the First Higher School in 1939, I was six. It was a matter of great pride for the family that he was able to gain admission to such a fine school. He then entered Tokyo Imperial University. Hardly had we celebrated his advancement to Tōdai than he was called to the colors. I remember it well. I was really rather proud of his joining the navy. The year I entered elementary school, they had all become "National Schools," so we received a thorough indoctrination in the notion that we were the Emperor's children, "little patriots." It was entirely natural that we would offer our lives to the Emperor.

Besides, we didn't expect Japan to lose. Even if you went into the military, we believed that would bring brilliant results and we were certain a return home was assured. It never occurred to us to oppose this. On the contrary, a little girl, a third-grader, could brag, "My big brother's going to war. He'll be in the navy." I'm sure my parents felt anxious that their precious son was leaving, but I don't believe even they imagined he would really die.

I was brought up in Numazu City in Shizuoka prefecture. It's a small town and not much information reached us. People in the middle of Tokyo might have grasped the riskiness even for university students called to serve, but we in a provincial city never thought that way. We sent soldiers off to the front in the highest of spirits. When my eldest brother went, the block association marched to the station waving rising-sun flags and wearing white sashes boldly inscribed with the message "Congratulations on Being Called to Service." Some women's-association members in white aprons sang. When other men in the neighborhood had been called, we all went waving our flags. Now, it was brother's turn and I was bursting with pride.

He went to the naval barracks in Tokuyama. He had three sisters and we wrote to him often—everything about the family, large and small. We wrote to him, described how we made mochi rice cakes, how much progress we'd made at school, what we studied, what we'd done every day. We took turns sending him letters, so he got them all the time. That enraged his commanding officer. "What's wrong with you, letting them fill letters with such worldly thoughts? I prohibit them to write to you!"

My brother addressed a letter to Father asking him to keep his sisters from writing for a while. That's in his diary. Elder Brother was bitter and chagrined by this order. Father told us not to write to my brother anymore. It came suddenly, and we weren't told why we should stop. The intervals between his letters lengthened. Once we were able to see him at Numazu Station on his way to the Tateyama Naval Barracks from Kyushu. I cut a lock from my bangs with a pair of scissors and gave it to him. Looking back now, it amazes me, but I just wanted to convey my feelings to my brother. I wanted him to have something of mine. I think he may have kept it to the moment of his death.

In May 1945, he returned home suddenly. We were ready to retire for the night when the entrance bell rang. It was raining hard, close to ten o'clock. We opened the door and there was my brother! "Minoru-chan's home!" We roused the house. We woke up Mother and Father. My eldest sister had already gotten married, and my second sister was studying at Tokyo Women's College. Just four of us were still at home. Minoru brought a trunk full of canned salmon, candies, and yokan sweet bean cake with him.

We asked "How come they let you come back?" He just said, "I've become important, so they allowed it." I was a child, so it didn't occur to me to doubt the meaning of his words. I took what he said at face value. I clung to him until late into the evening. If I were not careful, I felt, he might disappear. I was so desperately happy! He stayed two nights and returned to the base in Hikari on the third day. This was, according to his diary, his last farewell prior to his departure in a Kaiten.

It took twenty-four hours by train from Hikari to Numazu at that time. On his way home to us he wrote in his diary, "I have no confidence in myself. I feel like I may spill it all if I see my parents' faces," but he didn't give us even the slightest inkling of what was ahead. Only my father may have sensed something, because by May 1945—this was after the Tokyo air raid—the word gyokusai (sacrificial battles) was heard everywhere.

The morning after his return I announced, "Elder Brother's back; I'm not going to school." It was a small town, and everyone knew everything about everybody. "Let's go for a walk," Elder Brother said to me that morning. I'd loved going for walks with him from the time I was
really small. If I were a dog, I’d have been shaking ten imaginary tails, that’s how excited I was—and I hadn’t even begged for that walk. He’d suggested it!

Right in front of our house was a pine grove, and just beyond that, the sea. You could hear it at night. With me practically clinging to him, we went down to the shore. We’d always played along the edge of the ocean, skipping stones, trying to get them to break through the onrushing waves. Elder Brother displayed great skill for me that day. He broke the waves three or four times. The memory remains vivid. There is a place called Osezaki across the bay, on the Izu Peninsula, where Tokyo University had a lodge. We could see it clearly from where we were. Brother called out the azimuth, so many degrees, so many minutes. It must have become a habit for him during his training at Hikari. Whenever he saw an island, or a ship, he must have instantly calculated the degrees and minutes with his eye. There, on the shore, we sang a song and then walked to Numazu Park. That was our usual route. Then we strolled into town.

On the way back, we entered a photographic studio. It was so unexpected. I followed him in, filled with delight. Elder Brother first had a picture taken of himself alone. Then he sat and I stood next to him. The photographer told me to put my arm around his shoulder. I was eleven years old, a tiny child due to the malnutrition of the time. He was already an ensign. Because the photographer posed us that way I can tell that he knew this would be the last picture. For a naval officer to come to a photographic studio with his little sister was not a trivial thing. These were the only pictures taken on his last visit. Brother had a camera and it would not have been strange for him to take a picture of the family together, but he must have worried that we would think something amiss. To my brother, I suppose I was really only a little child, too young to know or understand his feelings. That must have been a salvation to him.

Elder Sister was only a year younger than him. The next morning, they went out on a walk, but could say nothing to each other and turned back halfway through their course. I bitterly regret that I didn’t notice anything. But, at the same time, I pray that my childish innocence, my inability to fathom his feelings, was a comfort to him.

Unaware my elder brother’s departure [for battle] in his Kaiten was imminent,
I played with him, skipping stones on the sea.

I composed that poem more than thirty years later. I remember the physical presence of my brother so clearly. How could I have imagined he would disappear forever? I didn’t know what it meant when a warrior came home in the midst of war.

Submarine I-363, which carried my brother, soon went out on its mission. It wandered at the bottom of the sea for more than a month. Once they actually boarded their Kaitens and prepared themselves for the command to launch, but the American transport ship outdistanced their submarine and the attack was called off. They returned, unable to find their prey. It was like having your head placed below the guillotine, only to be saved just before the blade falls. Brother’s comrades say that those people who returned home were like ghosts. There was no way to comfort them. You couldn’t congratulate them—“Great, you came back alive!”—No, indeed, for they had to go out again so soon.

My brother stopped writing at that point. I’ve always been very impressed with how much he did write until that moment. Such a diligent writer, he put down his pen completely when he returned alive from that mission. This probably meant that he had conceived of death up to that point in an abstract way. How could someone prepare his mind for that? He was only twenty-three-and-a-half years old. Perhaps he’d never known a woman. He loved his parents, loved his younger brother, loved his sisters. He played the violin and he wrote poetry. What he wanted to do was infinite. In his diary, until that point, he writes, “This is the last birthday of my life,” and elsewhere, “This is my last Imperial Rescript Day.” In this abstract way, he was ready for death, but after coming back alive, he confided to his war comrades that he didn’t want to die. He told one of them that while he was playing the piano. On another occasion, when classmates were looking through albums together, my brother showed them my picture. “This is Wakana, my youngest sister. See, isn’t she cute?” Two of his comrades whom I really trust told me that, so I don’t think there’s any doubt, he no longer wanted to die. But the date when they would next go into action was already fixed; it was to be August 31.

During morning training on July 25, he and his Kaiten were lost. It was probably due to a steering problem, perhaps a loss of ability to maneuver and control descent, even though that Kaiten had just returned from maintenance. My brother was not an unskilful pilot, but his Kaiten porpoised and must have dived to the bottom of the ocean. They searched desperately for him, but, unfortunately, a large-scale American air attack came in. The Japanese naval arsenal at Kure was the target of regular carrier attacks. It was always best to search for a Kaiten from above, but our side couldn’t launch a plane to look for him. From the testimonies of his comrades, I know they worked hard and did their best, but his Kaiten
had stuck on the bottom. I was told he might have lived another twenty hours trapped inside.

My family here in Numazu, we didn’t know anything at all. The war ended August 15. Numazu had been attacked in a large air raid July 16. Fortunately, my house survived unburnt. Our relatives, from all over Numazu, came to our home. Each family occupied one room. Sometimes as many as seven families were there at one time. We suffered from fleas and stifling conditions indoors when we had the shutters closed because of blackouts. There was little food. It was a horrible month. But by the fifteenth of August, most had left us and we had returned to the quiet, subdued life we had known before. That morning we were told there would be an important broadcast and we were instructed to listen without fail. People from the entire neighborhood came to the house, filling the main room. They must have thought, “They’ll have a radio,” since by luck, our house was in the one corner of the city that had escaped the fire. We knew from the introduction that his Imperial Majesty would address us, but then we really couldn’t understand the high-pitched voice that came next. Today the announcements we hear on television are clear, but then sending and receiving conditions were poor. We hardly understood what was said. I sat there, listening absently. My father wiped away tears with his fist and groaned loudly, so I became sad and cried.

That night, my father said for the first time, “Minoru will come home!” Of course he’d return! We didn’t have any thought that he’d died. Who cares if the country’s lost? Minoru-chan will be back! A smile returned to Mother’s face. “It’s all right to take these down, isn’t it?” my other brother said of the black cloth over the windows. He tore them all down. I played piano that night as if possessed. I was so happy. “Minoru-chan will come home!” That’s all I could think about. For ten days we waited like that. On August 26, that morning—it’s still crystal clear in my memory—I was lying on the porch sofa reading Mother’s Virtue, Yoshiya Nobuko’s version of a famous English story about a mother’s love. My mother, who had been sweeping the entrance hall, came to me quietly and said, “Minoru killed himself.” My mother’s face was ashen. In her hand was a telegram. I glimpsed it, and it said “Wada Minoru Public Death.” It was dated August 25. “Public Death,” not “Death in Battle.” We didn’t know the meaning of the term “public death.” We thought it must mean Minoru had taken his own life. General Anami and other military men had slit their stomachs by the Nijūbashi Bridge in front of the Imperial Palace.

I took that notice in my hand. My thought was, I must take it to my father. Father owned his own clinic at the time, but he was working in a public infirmary. I borrowed a bicycle from a neighbor because we didn’t have one of our own, and carrying that notice, took the road through the pine wood along the shore. It was a sweltering day. The voices of the cicadas were boiling over all around me. Japan had lost, not only that, but my brother, who was supposed to come back, was dead, and we didn’t even know what had happened to him. That misery and anger! I rushed into where my father was receiving patients, crying, “Minoru-chan’s died!” I was immediately told to go home. It was a terrible thing for an eleven-year-old girl to go home alone, dragging her bicycle. But I had no choice.

Already the neighbors knew. The strength and unity of the women’s association was manifest in this situation. Mourners started to call on us instantly and began cooking vegetables for the guests to come. It was like this out in the country. There’s a very cynical haiku which says if someone dies, someone else comes and starts cooking white radishes, but it’s true. When father came home he went and opened the trunk which my brother had entrusted to him. In that trunk were his will and all the letters he sent, neatly arranged. His will and his diaries. They put his will on the family altar and Father sat under the windup clock by the long hibachi. That was always Father’s seat, but now he was bowed over, head in his hands. “Why did you die? Why did you die?” That’s all he kept saying. Tears fell in big drops from his eyes. If it had been written “Died in an accident July 25,” my father would have been spared that lamentation.

My father, who was born in Meiji and brought up with this nation, never grumbled about his son’s going to war. If this notice had come before the news of defeat, he would not have grieved in such a way. I came to understand this much later. His was the lamentation of King Lear. He offered his son to the nation, therefore he could accept it if his son died when the nation was engaged in combat. But now, when the nation was defeated, why shouldn’t he have come home to complete his duties as the eldest son? Why did he forget his parents, sisters, and brother?

I was more frightened by my father’s appearance than by the fact that my brother had died. Until that moment, I had thought children could not die before their parents. I really thought that. “Until this morning we were so happy” was what went through my head. Why couldn’t we just reverse time? If we could, just for half a day, I wouldn’t mind dying myself. These were the desperate thoughts of an eleven-year-old girl. The next day my father and my other brother went to Hikari. There they found out it wasn’t a suicide. After that Father never again showed that kind of emotion in front of other people.
Mother tried desperately to keep herself occupied. For many, many years I followed around after her and clung to her, begging her, "Please don’t die, Mother. There are still four of us left. Don’t leave us." I felt I had to keep my eyes on my mother, or she might just go away somewhere and die. Sometimes she would leave the table in the middle of a meal, disappear. Father would ask me to see how she was doing, and I’d search. Sometimes I’d find her crouched in the corner of the garden, weeding. Perhaps my mother would have wanted to get my elder brother back in exchange for the four of us. Now I have three children. If one of them died, and I was told by the other what I’d said to Mother, I don’t know what I’d do. I didn’t understand my mother’s feelings then. I couldn’t say, “I’m here. Don’t die, for my sake!” I couldn’t say that, even though I was a small child.

I think the utmost crime of man is to use another man as a tool. When the Americans attacked Tokyo in the great fire-bombing, I understand that there were few American casualties. Nine died, and they killed a hundred thousand people. They came in three hundred planes, about three thousand crew members. Some were shot down, but most were rescued by American submarines. They valued lives to that extent. They didn’t attack until such preparations were made. In Japan, if you were told it was an order from the Emperor, you couldn’t do anything about it. The fact that the Special Attack strategy existed only in Japan means this was only possible in the Emperor’s Army. Is there any other country on Earth willing to send its people into a combat from which they could not possibly return?

In May 1944, my brother wrote, “If human torpedoes are being developed, it must be we who will ride them.” My brother was not acting for the sake of the Emperor, but for the parents he loved, the brother and sisters he loved, for the hometown he loved. He probably thought the air raids would stop if he went out and sank an enemy battleship or aircraft carrier. I must say frankly that it was a kind of delusion that the whole nation was caught up in. “Eight Corners of the World Under One Roof” was part of it. The belief that this is a godly nation and that the divine wind would blow soon. Japan must have seemed a strange nation, viewed from outside. Iwo Jima, Attu, Saipan—there they carried out gyokusai, knowing the situation was hopeless. They should have surrendered to the Americans, but perhaps it was because of the Field Service Regulations. They didn’t teach what it meant to be a prisoner-of-war. To become a prisoner made you a traitor. There’s no way of knowing how many people died in Imphal, New Guinea, and the Philippines. Why didn’t they surrender?

One of my brother’s comrades, Mr. Kōzu,* belongs to an antiwar soldiers’ association. A couple of its members became POWs at the end of the war. Yet even their colleagues say things like, “How can they speak about war when they ended up prisoners?” After experiencing that war, you’d think they’d all recognize its meaningless stupidity—but still they denigrate those who became prisoners. Even today.

“Two or three million Japanese deaths in the war,” “the deaths of six million Jews.” We shouldn’t make deaths into numbers. They were each individuals. They had names, faces. “Thirty million Asian deaths.” One hundred thousand dead in the Tokyo air raid. Hiroshima, one hundred thousand dead. My brother might just be a fraction of several millions, but for me he’s the only Elder Brother in the world. For my mother he was the only Eldest Son. Compile the dead one by one. All those precious lives thrown away, most of them nameless and completely forgotten. My brother was one of the most blessed of all the dead in the Japanese military. His memoirs were published posthumously because he was a student soldier, because he was a Kaiten pilot.

At the end of September 1945 there was a big typhoon. The bottom of the sea was churned up and his Kaiten was beached on an island called Nagashima. Some people were still at the Hikari base, finishing up business. Three of them went to the island. Only one Kaiten—his—was unaccounted for at war’s end. “That must be Wada,” they thought. He was sitting cross-legged, with a small trunk in front of him. He’d died from suffocation due to the lack of oxygen. Decomposition had not progressed very far. I think it was a few days into October, when I answered the call at the door. His superior officer was standing there with a white box. “I’ve brought your brother’s remains,” he said.

This ring on my finger is a heirloom from my brother. When he came home for the last time he gave Mother a pin for her obi. At that time, he had a pretty good salary, so he bought one with a large pearl in the middle. The pin became worn, so Mother made it into a ring. When she was dying she said to me, “You’ve done so much for Minou-chan; you should have this.” What I’ve done, though—it’s only because the dead are mute. They cannot speak. The living must act with energy for them. That’s all I’m doing.

After my brother learned he was going to war in 1943, he made a recording of himself playing Jules Émile Frédéric Massenet’s Requiem on the excellent violin Father had bought him when he entered First Higher School. When my daughter married and I’d sent off her things to

* Kōzu Naoji, whose story appears above as “Human Torpedo.”
her new home, I was overwhelmed by a strange feeling that I was sinking into the depths of the earth. I was washing dishes in the kitchen, and I turned on the radio. That piece of music came on. It was as if my brother was telling me, "Why are you sad at such a joyous time? Think how your mother must have felt when she sent me off to war." This piece of music is the only sound that my brother left for me. When I hear that melody I think of him.

Through the pine wood I race clutching the Public Notice,
While the cicadas of the defeated nation cry out in chorus.

I'm frightened of ideology, of -isms, and of nations. I prefer an unjust peace to a justified war. No matter what the ideals are, if they are going to lead to war, I prefer a corrupt, immoral, unprincipled, unredeemed peace.

I cannot forget my father howling,
Crouched like a wounded beast.