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# What Is Kamikaze, “The Divine Wind” And All About It

## What is Kamikaze?

Kamikaze is a Japanese word that directly translates to ‘Divine Wind’. In 1281, when Mongol fleets were attacking Japan, a mysterious typhoon appeared out of nowhere and completely eradicated the Mongol fleets. [Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016] The Japanese saw this typhoon as a gift from the gods, and named it ‘Divine Wind’ or Kamikaze. Later in World War 2, the term was used once again, this time to refer to a special team of pilots who the Japanese hoped would be the divine wind that saved them from yet another perilous situation.

## When, Where and Who

On the 25 October 1944, during the Battle of Leyte in World War Two, Japanese pilots carried out a suicidal attack on an Australian Navy ship, killing 30 sailors, in a desperate attempt to gain an advantage over the Allies. [Nichols, 2018] ["Kamikaze - Suicide Pilots of World War II", 2018]

This was the first of many suicidal attacks carried out by the Japanese pilots, known as ‘Kamikaze pilots’. [Sue, 2014]

The suicidal pilots, usually aged between eighteen and twenty-four ["Kamikaze - Suicide Pilots of World War II", 2018] would drive a specially designed piloted missile named ‘Ohka’ or ‘Cherry Blossom’ that was dropped from approximately 7,500 metres in the air. ["Kamikaze - Suicide Pilots of World War II", 2018] Once the missile glided to around 5 kilometers from its target, the pilot would turn on three rocket engines to accelerate to an incredible speed of 960 kilometers per hour while yelling “Tenno Heika Banzai!”, or “Long Live the Emperor!” as they crashed their planes into enemy ships. [McKay & McKay, 2018] [Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016]

## Why was this decision made?

After losing the Marianas Islands in the war, the Japanese should have surrendered or prepared to be invaded by the Allies as they had absolutely no way of winning. ["Why did the Japanese use so many kamikaze missions? - Quora", 2018] However, the Japanese refused to surrender their country, choosing to fight to the death instead.

Japan was badly lacking experienced soldiers, natural resources, weaponry, materials and most importantly flight-ready planes and experienced pilots. Therefore the only possible option for

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Japan was to maximise the number of Allied casualties for every Japanese death and instil a sense of fear in the opposition to make the Allies believe that attacking Japan would be futile and a waste of resources. The Kamikaze were the perfect battle tactic for both objectives. [Kauffmann, 2016]

Hence Vice Admiral Onishi Takijiro began to train young pilots after the fall of Saipan. The chosen pilots were usually university students motivated by obligation and gratitude to the country, and went through intensive training for as little as a week. [Keegan, 1977] These students needed very little training, takeoffs but no landings. ["The Perilous Fight . The Kamikaze Threat | PBS", 2018]

"I firmly believe that the only way to swing the war in our favor is to resort to crash-dive attacks with our planes. There is no other way. Provide me with 300 planes and I will turn the tide of war." declared the commander of the kamikaze squadron, Motoharu Okamura. [Sue, 2014]

## **Why the were Kamikaze reasonably successful**

Although the Allies were familiar with their opponent's sacrificial nature, they were completely unprepared for the Kamikazes, which immediately created fear and apprehension in the American troops. ["The Perilous Fight . The Kamikaze Threat | PBS", 2018]

A crew member of the Allied Troops confessed, "I didn't want to admit how scared I was. You have a large fleet of aeroplanes approaching, many of whom will probably be kamikazes. They don't drop bombs that probably miss you, they hit you, and doing nothing, hanging around waiting, was petrifying." ["What it was like to fight the Japanese Kamikaze", 2015]

At the time, the Japanese thought that dying for the country was extremely honorable and often viewed themselves to be like the samurais from the middle ages. ["Kamikaze - Suicide Pilots of World War II", 2018]

"I am firmly convinced that the idea of the kamikaze attack developed quite naturally in the fighting spirit of the younger pilots. In my opinion, the best fighting method is to kill a thousand with one soldier and to sink a battleship with one aircraft." stated a man who had joined the Kamikaze and survived as the war had ended before it could be 'his turn'. [Truman, 2015]

Another stated, "We saw the poor war situation and believed that the Special Attack was the best method. We volunteered and determined to sacrifice ourselves so that our country could win a victory." [Truman, 2015]

This is why Captain Motoharu Okamura was confident when he stated, "There will be more

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than enough volunteers for this chance to save our country" ["First kamikaze attack of the war begins - Oct 25, 1944 - HISTORY.com", 2018]

## Was it really worth it?

Many people argue that the Kamikaze attacks were an irrational and ethically incorrect decision by the Japanese government at the time, as only 10% of the missions were thought to be successful and it failed to turn the tide of the war, effectively letting all those live go to waste. The day before Japan's surrender, Onishi Takijiro even committed suicide with a note apologising for the wasted sacrifice. ["The Perilous Fight . The Kamikaze Threat | PBS", 2018]

When asked what they thought about the Kamikaze in a BBC interview, the young people in Japan had varied responses of "irrational, heroic and stupid."

Survivors, now in their 90s, confessed that not every Kamikaze was completely willing to die for their country.

"I would say 60-70% of us were eager to sacrifice ourselves for the emperor, but the rest probably questioned why they had to go," revealed one of these survivors, Osamu Yamada.

However, Mr Yamada was also a supporter of the kamikaze, "It hurts me because Kamikaze was my youth. It was an innocent thing. It really was something pure. It was much more sublime. But now it is being discussed as if we were induced," he said

["How Japan's youth see the kamikaze pilots of WW2", 2017]

Although the Kamikaze attacks did not change the outcome of the war, which ended after America dropped the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it should still be acknowledged that there were more than 7000 Allied casualties. [Sue, 2014] The Kamikazes also sunk 40 to 50 ships and damaged hundreds of others.

From a Japanese point of view, the Kamikaze had put off the end of the war, and implanted a deep sense of terror in the Allied troops' hearts. The Kamikaze was a showcase of Japan's immense fighting spirit.

"It's because I cannot do it," one teenager described. "I find them heroic and courageous."

["How Japan's youth see the kamikaze pilots of WW2", 2017]

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## **Kamikaze's Long-term effects:**

Aside from the short term effect of showing the enemy how far they were willing to go, Japan's Kamikaze also had a long term effect on both the war and consequently today. Harry Truman, the president of America at the time, was told there would be approximately 500,000 Allied deaths if he were to invade Japan in the traditional way instead of drop the atomic bomb. Casualties due to the Kamikaze would have accounted for a large part of this predicted amount. Regardless of the fact that the estimate may have been ten times too high, it was a major factor in convincing Truman to use the lethal weapon. [Nichols, 2015] The atomic bombs were one of the biggest turning points in history that shook the world, the first one Enola Gay killing 80,000 people immediately. ["Atomic bomb was biggest turning point in modern history, according to new research", 2012] ["Atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima", 2009]

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