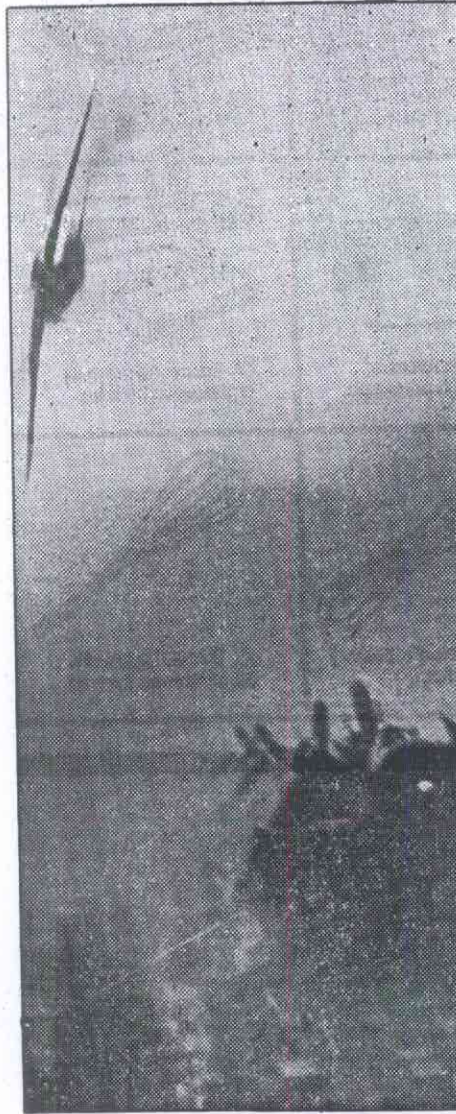


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The Pacific War: Divining the



Kamikaze dives at USS Sangamon. (U.S. Navy photo)

There seems to be a rule of thumb that only after a long period, varying from a quarter to a third of a century, is a bloody conflict transformed from an all-consuming current event into a fascinating piece of history. The interval generally is a period of turning away, often of revulsion.

It is now almost a third of a century since World War II—"the" war, to my generation—ended with the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And only now is the American government beginning to release some of the most fascinating documents of the Pacific war: the intercepted and decoded Japanese diplomatic and military messages. A story in *The Washington Post* the other day offered a tantalizing glimpse at the results of this arcane business.

My own interest is more than passing because I spent the latter part of the war in a windowless room in the Pentagon in that very business, ending up with a War Department citation for having "conceived, organized and maintained a complete file of information on activities at Japanese airfields, as a result of which a thorough and accurate picture of Japanese air activity at individual locations became available for the first time." This sounds much neater after the fact.

The diplomatic intercepts, the glamorous part of the business, were known as "Magic," itself a classified name. I had nothing to do with that traffic (although I had access to it and read it out of intense curiosity); rather, I was struggling with the far more difficult military intercepts. What came into our office, known as Special Branch, the supersecret part of military intelligence, were thousands of already translated intercepts. They were only partially decoded and usually puzzling messages exchanged by various military commands and headquarters in Tokyo.

It was out of this mélange that we tried to pinpoint the locale and movements, especially those about to occur, of land and air forces. The Japanese Navy was a problem for the U.S. Navy. My own area was Japanese air and, most especially, the Japanese suicide forces known as kamikazes.

As I see it today, there were two great differences between the allied interceptions of German and Japanese coded military messages: the Spe-

'Divine Wind'

cial Branch people and their British compatriots at a country house outside London had far more complete decodes to work with than did we on the Japanese side, and they were dealing with a military psychology much better and much more widely understood by Anglo-American minds than was the case with us, struggling to interpret the psychology and motivation behind the Japanese messages.

Nothing better illustrates this than the American problem of understanding, and thus being able to counter, the Japanese kamikazes. Somehow, early on, the word became in English "suicide." The Japanese word, however, meant "divine wind," a historical term deriving from a typhoon that prevented a Mongol invasion of Japan in 1570.

In the months immediately following the Pacific war's end I was in Japan heading a small team of intelligence officers trying to find out how good our intelligence had been on the kamikazes. A Japanese lieutenant general we interrogated, among many officers, made a point of rebutting the American view of those "suicide" units. That, he said, is "a misnomer, and we feel very badly about your calling them 'suicide' attacks. They were in no sense 'suicide.' The pilot did not start out on his mission with the intention of committing suicide. He looked upon himself as a human bomb that would destroy a certain part of the enemy fleet for his country. They considered it a glorious thing, while a suicide may not be so glorious."

It was evident from our explorations in Japan, chiefly in Kyushu, the westernmost island, where the first American landing had been scheduled (Operation Olympic) for November 1, that kamikaze attacks would have met it. At war's end, we found, some 790 such planes were on hand, and the army commander told us he figured his total would reach about 1,000. Many were trainers, some lacked gasoline or were fueled by alcohol, which caused some malfunctioning. How many planes would have been destroyed by the planned softening-up American bombing and consequently how many actually would have gotten into the air in a desperate effort no one will ever know. But American officers and civilian leaders well remembered the 88-day campaign earlier that year to capture Okinawa during which kami-

kazes sank 30 vessels and damaged 368 others, including 10 battleships and 13 carriers, in some 850 such "suicide" attacks.

By chance, our intelligence team on that intended D-Day, was flying in a light plane over Miyazaki, one of the three planned landing beaches. My notes say that the estimate we got at the time was that there were 56,000 troops dug in nearby with another 70,000 in reserve—in addition to kamikazes and certain navy "suicide" units. We had no doubt it would have been a bloody landing.

From the bowels of the Pentagon we had sent up in the chain of command our estimates of kamikaze strength, figures very close to what our later intelligence foray concluded were the actual facts. Those estimates in turn worked their way to Gen. George Marshall and thus to President Roosevelt and then to President Truman as part of the military judgments on which FDR sought the Soviet Union's entry into the Pacific war and then on which Truman decided to drop the atomic bomb. I have yet to see published what was the final definitive American estimate of potential casualties for the projected conquest of Japan. Truman later said perhaps 250,000 dead and half a million wounded had been anticipated.

Thus, at the time of the A-bombs and subsequently when we examined the facts in Japan I had no doubt that Truman had made the right decision. It simply meant trading Japanese lives for American lives.

Revisionist historians and others have conjured up numerous theories to impute evil American motives, ranging from a Truman effort to blackmail the Soviet Union and a cold war psychosis to various failures of American morality. It is true that the Japanese were far weaker than we Americans then thought, but it also is true that there was a fanaticism—or xenophobic patriotism, if you will—epitomized by the kamikazes that was halted only by Emperor Hirohito's speech of surrender.

The general who had commanded the kamikazes in both the Philippines and Okinawa expressed his belief that "our spiritual conviction in victory would balance any scientific advantages, and we had no intention of giving up the fight. It seemed to be especially Japanese." Indeed, it did.