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Challenging Kamikaze Stereotypes: "Wings of Defeat" on the Silver Screen

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Is there a more enduring World War image than the kamikaze pilots: those super-patriots who, according to the stereotype, willingly, even joyfully, pledged loyalty to their beloved emperor as they flew their doomed planes into Allied ships? The image still produces sympathetic tears and angry sneers: prime minister-to-be Koizumi Jun'ichirÅ weeping at the Chiran Peace Museum for Kamikaze Pilots in 2001; an American college history textbook referring to Japan's late-war air force as "a band of fanatical suicide pilots called kamikazes." [1] Indeed, Risa Morimoto began working on her provocative new movie, "Wings of Defeat," out of a desire to understand how her own uncle, "a funny, kind, and gentle man," could have been such a "crazy lunatic," one of those "jumping at the chance to die for their emperor." [2]

Stereotypes such as this are problematic not just because of their inaccuracy–though that is serious enough–but also because they block our ability to think clearly about war, or about any of what Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney calls those "human tragedies on a colossal scale." [3] The great strength of "Wings of Defeat," conversely, is the way it counters the emperor-loving, death-inviting kamikaze stereotype, humanizing both the Japanese pilots and the American GIs they attacked. Watching the 89-minute documentary, which ran for three months in Tokyo and is scheduled for a PBS screening in the United States next spring, one is struck by the humanity of youthful pilot trainees as they confronted imminent death. In the film, they cry, as all people do, for lost loves and sing about spring flowers; they loved their country but hated the hypocrisy of their leaders and the cruelty of their officers; they loathed the idea of dying; and they responded to "duty" as most other soldiers do, with a fatalistic sense that they had no other option.

Co-produced by Morimoto and Linda Hoaglund, "Wings" uses interviews with several surviving kamikaze pilots and two GIs, along with comments by Ohnuki-Tierney, John Dower, and Morimoto Tadao of RyÅ«koku University, to tell the kamikaze story from the participants' perspective. The major historical details are included; we learn about the creation of the Special Attack Forces (TokkÅtai) late in 1944; the drafting of 4,000 pilots as Japan's military situation deteriorated, and the downing of scores of American ships. But the focus is on the motives, feelings, and memories of the men who were selected to make the attacks, as well as those whose ships were bombed. Backed by visual footage of training camps, graduation ceremonies, bombing raids, and life back home, the film tells a powerful story of the ordinariness of human tragedy. While it posits no claim that these interviewees represented all kamikaze pilots, it nonetheless makes it clear that significant numbers, probably most, of the suicide pilots departed from the stereotypes, in a narrative style designed to provoke lively discussion, both in the classroom and around the table or bar.

On one level, the pilots belonged to Japan's elite, since a high percentage were former college students and a third were army and navy officers, but at the human level, the film shows them to have been quite ordinary, reacting not as zealots but as the thoughtful, insecure, complex people most soldiers are. Early on, for example, the Japanese survivors discuss their typically human inability to talk about their kamikaze experiences once the war was over. One reason for the hesitance lay in the criticism they felt from many of their fellow citizens (a rejection that bears comparison with the experience of American soldiers returning from Vietnam twenty years later): they had lived while their compatriots had died; they had failed to secure victory; they reminded neighbors of the great shame that the war itself had become. Another was rooted in the complicated, hard-to-articulate emotions triggered by the kamikaze experience itself: fear, failure, self-doubt. While history provides evidence of more than a few pilots who saw their mission as heroic, none of the men in "Wings" did so; theirs was the ambiguity of confused, even frightened young warriors. Survivor Nakajima Kazuo says that to this day his neighbors do not know that he was a kamikaze pilot. "It's nothing to boast about," he says, adding that his fellow pilots "mostly . . . died in vain."

Kamikaze gunner Nakajima Kazuo, as a kamikaze gunner and at the time of the filming

The stereotype of patriotic heroism is challenged too by the film's depiction of the difficulty military leaders experienced in securing enough recruits to fill the TokkÅtai. When air force pilots refused to volunteer, extensive public relations campaigns ensued. Parades were staged and slogans propagated to encourage young men to join the Pilot Cadet Academy; local citizens were called on to boost the morale of kamikaze-in-training by inviting them to their homes for rest and games, and sewing cloth dolls for the pilots to carry on their flights; recruits were not only told repeatedly how badly their country needed them, they were promised that they would become gods if they died. And pilots were prompted endlessly to sing a kamikaze anthem:

> You and I are cherry blossoms in season. . . .
> Every flower knows it must die.
> We will die gloriously, then, for our homeland.

Even with all of this pressure and inducement, however, securing recruits never became easy. As "Wings" points out, not a single air academy officer ever volunteered for the TokkÅtai. The result was that the air force had to turn, finally, to the drafting of poorly trained teenagers and students, a point made repeatedly by the interviewees.

To a person, the recruits in this film also shared a pervasive–and ordinary–fear of death. Indeed, no theme reverberates more consistently in "Wings" than that of fear. "You can see the shadow of death on my face," says Ena Takehiko, looking at a photo of himself as a pilot; "you see, it's my funeral portrait." Another recalls his guilt-ridden sense of relief on hearing about the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, because he knew the war likely would end before he had to fly a mission. And Nakajima recalls seeing graffiti on his barracks wall by someone recently ordered on a kamikaze mission; it said that when his number was called, he thought, "Until now it was someone else's problem. Now I have to go, goddammit." "I wanted to live; I didn't want to die," he says at another point, giving the lie to the American newsreel, also reproduced in the film, which assured Allied citizens that "there can be no more honorable death" for the kamikaze pilots "than self-immolation and crashing a plane on the deck of one of our warships."

Navigator pilot Ena Takehiko, who survived when his plane crashed on a remote island.

Perhaps the most surprising of Morimoto's and Hoaglund's findings is the pilots' antipathy, not only toward cruel training officers but also toward the emperor. It probably should not surprise us that the pilots held the men who trained them in contempt. These were men, after all, who beat them, cursed them, and treated them, in Nakajima's words, "like wastepaper." Expressions of anger toward the emperor, however, are unexpected. It may be that these men's memories have been distorted by the passage of six decades since the war, making it easier to separate patriotism (to which all lay claim) from love of the emperor (which they deny having felt). But their attitudes toward the ShÅwa Emperor were remarkably consistent, very much in tune with the findings of recent researchers who have studied documents left by kamikaze pilots. Ohnuki-Tierney, for example, has found that pilots typically became "less patriotic" while in training, and Yuki Tanaka of the Hiroshima Peace Institute notes that very few pilots' wills, diaries, or letters expressed "loyalty to the emperor." [4]

"I love Japan, but that Emperor, . . . that Emperor!" comments one of the interviewees, before launching into a tirade about his sovereign's failure to bring the war to an end and save "tens of thousands of lives" once it was clear that Japan was doomed. So much for dying for a beloved emperor; so much for faithfulness to the imperial father who had been exalted in the texts these men had read as youths. While the interviewees' views may not represent those of all TokkÅtai (perhaps not fully of themselves sixty years ago), the fact that not one expresses any love for that emperor is significant.

The shadow of a plane over a Japanese ship suggests the threatening, grim conditions in which Japan fought the last months of the war.

"Wings" is superbly suited to both the classroom and public showings. The visuals are graphic and often gripping; the interviewees are provocative, engaging, and surprising; and their conversations raise the kinds of fundamental, troubling questions that, handled well, ought to make discussions easier to start than to conclude. Moreover, the film is supplemented with a forty-eight page teaching guide, prepared by Gary Mukai of Stanford University's Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), which provides a host of practical and provocative supplementary materials: letters from the producers and the scholars involved in the film, sample discussion questions, tests, and creative learning activities, along with maps and a glossary.

One reason "Wings of Defeat" merits extensive classroom use is that it is chock full of complex questions that many students, reared in the cultures of Madison Avenue and anime, will grasp only if encouraged to dig more deeply. The humanity of the pilots is obvious and likely will require limited comment. Other issues deserve careful attention.

Consider, for example, the issue of comparing the suicide pilots to the suicide bombers who populate today's headlines. Both have undertaken self-destroying missions, reputedly out of belief in some higher cause. But are they really similar in anything but name? If so, what are the points of comparison? Today's terrorists, at least in the popular mythology that surrounds them, choose their course freely, out of religious conviction and hatred of the enemy–who happens, once more, to be "us"–while the kamikaze pilots were drafted, then ordered into missions they found it impossible to refuse. "Wings" tells us, however, that our myths about the Japanese pilots were inaccurate. We thought them fanatics, but few were. We "knew" that almost all of them went happily to their deaths, driven by love of their emperor, but we were wrong. What then should we think when we read today's accounts of jihad-driven suicide bombers?

Any discussion certainly must take account of the clear differences between the current and former fighters: the fact that today's suicide bombers do the bidding of non-governmental groups and organizations, in contrast to the state-directed military commands that impelled TokkÅtai members; and the willingness of today's terrorists to attack civilian targets, while the kamikaze bombed only military ships. But there also are clear similarities. Both resorted to extreme measures mainly because they lacked the technology and resources to fight their enemies on equal terms; both sought primarily to inflict psychological rather than material damage, and both were impelled by rhetoric with religious overtones, whether the attackers personally believed that rhetoric or not. Both groups also were demonized as fanatics and devils by their more powerful enemies. [5] Discussion of such issues will do more than help students understand the kamikaze better; it should take some of the mystery and exoticism out of suicide bombers both then and now.

Another issue, even more troubling and pertinent, is why the pilots followed the suicide orders even when they despised the officers who issued them or questioned the emperor in whose name they served. Wartime diaries and letters from the home front make it clear that by late 1944, most Japanese—kamikaze pilots included—knew that, official propaganda to the contrary, their country's situation was desperate, and that many shared the fatalism of letter-writing Hatano Isoko's husband who "says it would be a complete absurdity to die in such a war as this." [6] So why did many kamikaze pilots follow orders, even to the point of death? The GIs interviewed here offer valuable insight when they comment that, had they received similar directives, "We have people who would have done that. We were that patriotic." Their point seems to be that, given orders, soldiers and pilots typically follow. But is that reason enough? And if so, why do soldiers almost always follow orders, even when their intellect, or even their fear of death, tells them not to? This film provides few explicit answers; indeed, it deals little with the contradictions between the kamikaze pilots' hatred of officers or fear of death and their reluctance to disobey orders. But its content raises the question most powerfully, as will many a sensitive teacher.

A fighter pilot stands in front of his plane, ready to take off

Tanaka has argued in Japan Focus that the TokkÅtai forces fought out of a combination of loyalty to their country and family (though not their nation-state), solidarity with fellow pilots, and a fear of being irresponsible or cowardly. And Ohnuki-Tierney, one of the film's commentators, argues elsewhere, in a study of kamikaze pilot diaries, that one answer lay in the state's ability to "aetheticize" the military, to make student-pilots take the fragile cherry blossom as the soldier's symbol and thus idealize service to their country even when they have lost faith in the emperor and his generals. The young pilots, she says, were thus left unequipped emotionally to resist even fatal and irrational orders. That was why they reproduced the military's "ideology in action while defying it in their thoughts." [7] A similar point has been made by "Wings" producer Hoaglund, who felt "fuzzy" sympathy and wept, as a young student in Japan's schools, whenever the kamikaze anthem was sung. Only in doing research for this film, she says, did she realize "that my fuzzy notions were actually a web of fabrications designed to protect the Japanese militarists who condemned the Kamikaze to a horrible self-inflicted death." [8]

This contradiction between sentimental acquiescence to national myths and realistic appraisal of objective situations carried the seed of tragic consequences, for the nation as much as for individual pilots. And it continues to do so today, in a time when the red-white-and-blue flag resonates as loudly for many Americans of military age as the cherry blossom did for highly educated young Japanese pilots—a time when, "nationalism is the dominant ideology of our era." [9] The differences between Japan in 1945 and the United States in 2008 may be striking in some respects; certainly opposition to war is more open and more widespread today than it was in Japan then. But the tendency to accept national myths uncritically continues, largely unabated, as does the willingness of leaders to send young men and women into crusades guaranteed to end in large numbers of deaths, both military and civilian. And that very fact suggests how essential such a discussion is.

A final–no less weighty–issue is raised by another survivor, Ena Takehiko, at the end of "Wings." "Unless we abolish war," he says, "I believe this planet is doomed." The simplicity of his assertion is striking, almost shocking. It raises the question of how and why soldiers who fight their nations' battles as youths (whether or not they support the war's issues or agree with its commanders) often become peace advocates when they near death: why Prime Minister TÅjÅ Hideki allegedly came to understand that greed had led Japan to war only when he sat in Sugamo Prison, awaiting execution as a war criminal, or why the American sailors in "Wings" spent decades hating the kamikaze pilots, then decided after visiting Japan to let go of their hatred and work for reconciliation and peace. [10] This question may be the most difficult of all. It also may be the most important.

Wings of Defeat (2007), produced by Risa Morimoto and Lisa Hoaglund, can be rented or purchased from New Day Films, PO Box 1084, Harriman, NY 10926 or from New Day Films. For more about the film and to view the trailer, click here.

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Notes

[1] John A. Garraty, The American Nation, II (Harper and Row, 1979), 700.

[2] Morimoto letter, A Teachers Guide for "Wings of Defeat," Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 2008, 7.

[3] Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 37.

[4] Ibid., 6; Yuki Tanaka, Japan's Kamikaze Pilots and Contemporary Suicide Bombers: War and Terror," Japan Focus, November 25, 2005.

[5] Tanaka's "Japan's Kamikaze Pilots and Contemporary Suicide Bombers" presents a thoughtful discussion of similaries and differences. For Allied characterizations of the kamikaze pilots, see John W. Dower, War Without Mercy (Pantheon Books, 1987), 52-53.

[6] Undated October 1944 letter, Isoko and Ichiro Hatano, Mother and Son: The Wartime Correspondence of Isoko and Ichiro Hatano (Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 62.

[7] Tanaka, op. cit.; Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 300.

[8] E-mail correspondence from Hoaglund, September 11, 2008.

[9] Mark Selden, "Japan, the United States and Yasukuni Nationalism: War, Historical Memory and the Future of the Asia Pacific," Japan Focus, September 10, 2008.

[10] The TÅjÅ account comes from Murakami Hyoe, Japan: The Years of Trial 1919-52 (Tokyo: Japan Culture Institute, 1982), 213-214. The material on the GIs is found in "Wings of Defeat: Another Journey," a 39-minutes companion film on their visit to meet the kamikaze pilots.

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