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Kamikaze Mentality Leads to the Atomic Bomb

During World War II in the Pacific, the Japanese Air Force used a unique method of fighting, the Kamikaze Pilots. They were suicide bombers who flew their planes, containing explosives, into enemy ships to ensure mass destruction. They believed heavily in duty and honour and would stop at nothing to prevent invasion of their homeland, including the mass suicides of thousands of Kamikaze pilots. Due to Japanese cultural beliefs that death was more honourable than surrender, the Kamikaze attacks on the Allied forces played a crucial role in the outcome of World War II. The pilots were uncompromising in their determination to serve their country and the US recognized that without extreme measures, Japan would never surrender and the war would continue for many months or even years longer. This drove the US to put a swift and decisive end to the war by dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Japanese Kamikaze mentality put death before surrender which intimidated the American enemy. The Japanese lived by the code *Bushido*; a value system that emphasized honour, obedience, a sense of duty, war-like spirit and considered surrender to be the highest dishonor. (Ziff 42). From a young age, children in Japan were taught that duty to the Emperor and nation were primary above all else. Military training was taught in schools where students of all ages were required to participate in two hours of military drills and five to six hours of

military instruction each week. (Rielly 10). It was ingrained in the minds of Japanese children that fighting and dying for the good of the Nation was an honourable deed. It was also taught that orders from superiors were to be obeyed without question. During their military training, even the slightest infraction of the rules would result in punishment. (Rielly 16). When Kamikaze pilots were needed, a message would be sent out to air bases across Japan asking for volunteers to join the Kamikaze special attack force. The pilots were made to feel guilty by their superiors and by other pilots if they did not volunteer, so the majority did so. ("Day of the Kamikaze"). 1st class TO Takao Musashi, a member of the 105 Fighter Flying Unit, stated,

“No JAP pilot would volunteer for such a mission of his own free will, yet if volunteers were called for, practically all pilots would volunteer... the matter would be put to them in such a way that no one would dare to do other than put his hand up. Apart from this, if a pilot did not volunteer, his life would be made unbearable by other pilots.” (Rielly 26)

Many Kamikaze pilots took pride in their future mission because it brought glory and honor to their name. Akio Otsuka, a Kamikaze pilot, met his death on 28 April 1945. In his last letter home he wrote, “I shall set off for the mission with a smile on my face.” (Rielly 22). Up to 7,000 Kamikaze pilots sacrificed their lives for the benefit of their nation. (Summers). These numbers shocked and terrified the Allies since the western view of suicide differed significantly. They believed suicide was cowardly and in some Allied nations, it was illegal to do so. According to Ed Duffy, a USS Bunker Hill Gunner, “I couldn’t understand the thinking behind it. That they would give up a life just to send a plane in. I could see they were accomplishing something because everybody was nervous and upset.” (“Day of the Kamikaze”). Another Allied Veteran, Albert Axell who survived a Kamikaze attack claimed, “This was the first time in

history there had been mass suicides in war and it came as a complete shock to the Allies." (Summers). The Japanese Kamikaze tactics were demoralizing, but very effective. ("Day of the Kamikaze"). Their belief that surrender was the highest dishonour led the Americans into a state of disbelief. It also led the Japanese to commit suicide in any way possible before surrendering and being taken captive by the enemy forces. Because of this mind-set, when Allied soldiers would surrender, the Japanese would treat them terribly while in captivity. To them, prisoners of war had dishonoured themselves by choosing surrender before death and deserved to be treated with contempt: "Only 0.9 percent of those held by Nazi Germany died in captivity, compared with 35 percent held by Imperial Japanese." (Ziff 42). These alien-like and brutal traditions, cultural beliefs, and values of the Japanese military intimidated the Americans, and they recognized that the Japanese had no thought of surrender, even when they were evidently losing the war. The Japanese hoped that somehow they might still resist their attackers, perhaps obtaining a negotiated peace. The Allies were never likely to contemplate such an outcome. (Horner 54).

The Kamikaze attacks caused major casualties to the Americans, which left them reeling with disbelief and fear. The US declared war against Japan on December 1 1941 after their surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour, which sank or damaged eighteen ships and claimed the lives of over 2,400 American servicemen. (Ziff 37). Following this, they battled for four years costing the lives of millions. On October 25 1944, during the Battle of the Leyte Gulf, the Japanese deployed Kamikaze suicide bombers against American warships for the first time. (Rielly 119). They shocked the Allied fighters and caused the deaths of eighty-five, along with 102 missing and fifty-eight wounded. (Rielly 122). Most had never seen this type of warfare and this caused them to fear the Japanese even more. Ed Duffy, a USS Bunker Hill Gunner said,

“There’s nothing like somebody coming at you that’s not gonna stop... I looked up and I saw 300 bogeys headed our way and all hell broke loose. This is something new, we’ve never experienced this. I just can’t believe what I’m looking at. Standing on the hangar deck thinking what the hell is going on with these people?” (“Day of the Kamikaze”). Keith Quilter, a British pilot of the HMS Formidable says of a similar incident, “We knew there would be a lot of resistance, but we didn’t know what to expect. We certainly feared them.” (“Day of the Kamikaze”). The Kamikaze tactics, after the battle at Leyte, became commonplace throughout the war, from the first attack on October 25 until the last battles in Okinawa ending on June 22 1945. 407 Allied ships were damaged in Kamikaze attacks, sixty of which were sunk, killing a total of 6,805 allied soldiers, and wounding 9,923. (Rielly 324). This left the Americans in terrible fear. They were fighting against an enemy that didn’t seem to care if they lived or died, and would do anything to kill. Dean Caswell, an American pilot, assigned to shoot down Kamikaze planes before they could attack said, “I don’t mind telling anybody, I was afraid. I couldn’t get small enough behind my gun sight.” Herb Lewis, a US gunner said, “It’s about as personal as you can get. You know they’re trying to kill you. I thought they were animals.” (“Day of the Kamikaze”). These soldiers not only faced the frightening force of the Kamikaze pilots and suffered great physical casualties, but they suffered emotional trauma as well.

It was because of the Kamikaze mentality and the Americans’ awareness that the Japanese were unlikely to surrender in battle, that they felt extreme measures were necessary to end the war. This is what drove them to drop the atomic bomb. The Japanese throughout the war were on the brink of defeat but were still fighting fiercely, and no one was sure how long they would hold out. The Americans had planned to invade the mainland of Japan in November 1945 (Claypool 76), but were afraid of the possible outcomes. Secretary of War Stimson wrote in a

memorandum to President Truman, “The Japanese soldier has proved himself capable of a suicidal, last-ditch defense; and will no doubt continue to display such a defense of his homeland.” (Claypool 74). The casualties of previous battles had been extreme on both sides, and the Americans believed it would be even worse when invading the homeland of the Japanese. They were willing to sacrifice a frightening number of their civilians to avoid surrender, as they had done previously with so many Kamikaze pilots. The US felt they needed to take extreme measures to end the war. On August 1, President Truman wrote the following in a letter:

In the light of what we knew at the time, which was that the military were in command in Japan and the Japanese would fight to their last man...and the war would go on for six months, more probably...with God knows how many casualties...In the light of that, I figured the decision (to use the bomb) was right.
(Claypool 84)

The Americans hoped that warning the Japanese of newer and more dangerous weapons (the atomic bomb) would avoid the need for a full scale invasion of Japan. (Claypool 74). The Potsdam Declaration was a document written by the three top Allied leaders—Truman, Churchill and Stalin— at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945. (Claypool 81). It was issued on July 26, 1945 to the Japanese Government insisting their unconditional surrender. It suggested they had the right to choose their own form of government, presumably keeping the Emperor, and called for “prompt and utter destruction” if they did not surrender immediately. (Claypool 83). On July 28, Japan rejected this demand (Horner 81), so on August 6, 1945, the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later on August 9, they dropped another on Nagasaki.

The two bombings instantly vaporized an estimated 140,000 people. Japan officially surrendered on September 22 1945. (Ziff 115).

The Japanese mentality enforced the idea that surrender was the highest dishonour and one should die before doing so. These mentalities led them to use Kamikaze suicide bombers to damage and frighten the enemy. Their tactics terrified and shocked the Allied forces and led them to believe they needed to take extreme measures in order to achieve victory. Japan's unwillingness to surrender and ruthless fighting tactics, which promoted suicide for the destruction of the enemy, caused the US to believe the war would continue for months, even years longer and result in the loss of many more American lives. Truman believed dropping the atomic bomb would end the war instantly and save the lives of possibly millions. The US constructed and tested the atomic bomb and decided to drop it on the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki after Japan's refused surrender. This resulted in the Allied victory in the Pacific war. (1,891 words)

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