

Reflections on the Commemoration of the Kamikaze Pilots in Pearl Harbor and Chiran パール・ハーバー、知覧における神風飛行士記念再考

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On April 11, 2015, a special exhibition on Kamikaze pilots opened on the Battleship Missouri Memorial, which is berthed in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Kamikaze plane attack on the battleship during the Battle of Okinawa. The Missouri survived an April 11, 1945 kamikaze attack, which set fire to the starboard deck, and became the site of Japan's surrender on September 2 of the same year. Hitherto, no exhibition relating to the kamikaze has ever been held outside Japan, so it is of interest that this exhibition came to be held in the U.S., above all at the shrine to the American war in the Pacific, and how it has been received by American veterans and civilians. According to the [Battleship Missouri Memorial's home page](#), the exhibition "offers a rare glimpse into the lives and final days of these young kamikaze pilots or Japanese *tokkō tai* (special attack forces) ... Exhibit artifacts include farewell letters and poems (translated into English) from the pilots to family members and loved ones, personal photographs and information, historical images, and uniform items. The exhibit will be on display through November 11, Veterans Day."

An [interview](#) with M.G. Sheftall, who gave a lecture on the *kamikaze tokkō* at the opening ceremony of the exhibition, provides essential historical background such as the system of pilot recruitment, the psychology of 'volunteer' pilots and the ineffectiveness of the kamikaze attacks. He also explains why kamikaze pilots still attract attention in Japanese popular culture, and suggests that the exhibition

contributes positively to changing the image of kamikaze pilots among American people.

I agree with Sheftall on most of the points he discusses, but on two important issues my views differ.

1) Sheftall holds that both the exhibition of *Chiran Tokkō Heiwa Kaikan* (hereafter CTHK; the official English name, 'Chiran Peace Museum,' omits reference to *tokkō*, or 'special attack') and the current special exhibition on the USS Missouri, convey strong anti-war sentiments, showing deep *humanity* for the young pilots who were forced to kill themselves in so-called suicide attacks. He claims that the special exhibition thereby contributes to breaking down the stereotypical image of kamikaze pilots held by Americans. Indeed, he further maintains that, in this sense, CTHK is different from the patriotic exhibit at the Yushukan, Yasukuni Shrine's museum with its extensive glorification of the *tokkō*.



**School boys reading letters written by
Kamikaze pilots in Chiran Tokko Heiwa
Kaikan**

2) Indeed, the letters to those at home, love letters and diaries written by young men shortly before departing for their final missions are truly moving. They vividly convey genuine feelings and many express deep emotions. Most reveal the intense psychological struggle of those caught between the strong desire to live and concern for their loved ones, on the one hand, and the intense moral pressure to sacrifice their lives to protect the nation at a time when many recognize that defeat is imminent. Readers cannot help feeling deep sorrow and humanity for the writers. Yet, very few of these letters and diaries actually express a clear anti-war sentiment. Many readers of the letters will sympathize with the pilots' distress and their plight facing imminent death. However, simply reading these documents and viewing the photos of these youths does not naturally or inevitably give rise to strong anti-war sentiment. Pity and horror at the fate of young men sent to their death by their nation's leaders, to be sure, but not necessarily anti-war sentiment on the part of American, Japanese or international observers.

In order to raise anti-war sentiment among observers, it would be vital to provide accurate historical background information on how and why Japan waged war throughout the Asia Pacific region over 15 years, and how such an inhumane tactic as suicide attacks was adopted, wasting the lives of thousands of youths, and indeed, extended in the final year of the war to many other draftees and civilians ordered to commit suicide rather than surrender. Yet the exhibition at CTHK offers no such basic information. On [its homepage in Japanese](#), for example, it provides just a short history of the war, starting from the Pearl Harbor attack by Japanese naval forces on December 7, 1941. It thereby ignores Japan's

war of aggression in China, which began in September 1931 in Manchuria and extended throughout China from 1937. It also makes no mention of the various atrocities that the Japanese Imperial Army committed throughout the Asia Pacific region during the following 15 years. Furthermore, CTHK attributes the main cause of the Pacific War to the economic blockade, in particular the oil embargo that the US introduced against Japan. CTHK claims that Japan was pushed into the war against the Western imperial nations, which colonized many parts of Asia, thereby giving the impression that Japan had no other option but to wage war against the Allied forces. (The home page in English omits all reference to this historical background.)



Kaiten members departing on their mission of suicide attack

The message provided by the Kaiten Memorial Museum (hereafter KMM) at Ohtsu, a former naval base for the suicide midget submarine attack force in Yamaguchi Prefecture, is basically the same as that of CTHK. Its homepage (<http://www.city.shunan.lg.jp/section/ed-sports/ed-shogai-bunka/kaiten/>) begins with the words "The (Kaiten) members departed on their mission of attack intending to sacrifice their

own lives in order to protect their homeland and loved ones.” The homepage provides no explanation whatsoever about the cause of the war. Its official pamphlet gives the impression that many young boys voluntarily joined this force, claiming simply that “many young boys came to this base from all over Japan... determined to protect their mother land.” As in CTHK, KMM is filled with exhibits of photos of young boys together with their final letters and diaries written by Kaiten members, their contents strikingly similar to those written by Kamikaze pilots. The total number of boys trained as Kaiten attack members was 1,375, of whom 87 died in actual suicide missions.

When I visited CTHK several years ago, I joined a guided tour. The guide’s brief explanation of the war history was identical to that detailed on CTHK’s home page. Explaining the contents of letters and diaries, he praised the courage shown by those young boys and the deep love they expressed for their kin, girlfriends and particularly for their mothers and homeland. In conclusion, he claimed that it is thanks to the sacrifice of these boys that Japan was able to rebuild as a nation so quickly and to become a prosperous nation. This kind of explanation is characteristic of claims by conservative politicians to justify the millions of Japanese and tens of millions of Asian lives lost in war. At the end of the tour I asked about something the guide had not touched on during the tour. I inquired about 11 Korean Kamikaze pilots who flew out from Chiran for their last mission. Why did those Koreans become Kamikaze pilots? Did they really volunteer to become pilots? How did they feel about dying for Japan, which had colonized their homeland? The guide, who was probably in his late 60s or early 70s, had no answer to my questions.



Chiran Tokko Heiwa Kaikan

It is natural that most Kamikaze pilots wrote about their personal feelings and expressed love for kin and girlfriends in their letters and diaries, knowing that they had little time left to live. The social and political constraints at the time, however, meant that they could not clearly express their feelings about the war, especially Japan’s relationship with China and other Asian nations as well as the Allied countries. Nor could they discuss the war strategy that military leaders were undertaking at the time. Pilots protected themselves and their relatives with ‘self-censorship:’ they knew that their letters would be checked, and in fact their diaries and other writings were scrutinized before being returned to relatives after the pilots’ deaths. In other words, with few exceptions, their writings were apolitical, containing little reference to political or ideological assessments of the war and its leaders. The nature of these manuscripts, thus, easily leads to romanticization of their feelings. The typical format is that of a young boy being forced to die on a suicidal mission, knowing full well that Japan was on the verge of defeat, yet overcoming his fear of death by rationalizing his act of self-annihilation as an expression of love for his mother or girlfriend. It was the projection of this romanticized image that led these men to be seen as war heroes while

leaving intact official narratives concerning the war. For this reason, feature films with themes of kamikaze pilots or other types of suicidal attacks are extremely popular in Japan and almost every year a few such films are produced and screened throughout the country. In short, the presentation of the stories of these young Kamikaze pilots in this way can be politically exploited to enhance war-inspired patriotism and male chauvinism among young children, who visit the museum and see films on this topic. Not surprisingly, leading nationalist politicians such as Koizumi Junichiro and Abe Shinzo, who visited CTHK in their capacity as prime minister, praised the way that the museum presents 'war heroes.' In short, emphasizing the 'humanity' of kamikaze pilots does not automatically lead to nurturing anti-war sentiment or peace consciousness. Humanity can be exploited to enhance national sentiment and patriotism when romanticized and idealized. The volatile duality of the 'humanity' of Kamikaze pilots is something that can be learned from this exhibition.

2) Sheftall claims that "Chiran witnessed the last chapter of the era of industrialized total war. Humanity will never see a war like that again." Unfortunately there is ample evidence to the contrary. The tactic of suicide attacks has been used continuously and is still practiced in many wars and armed conflicts throughout the world. The most recent, large-scale example was the September 11 attack in 2001. In addition, during the recent decades there have been numerous suicide bombings in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Syria, Libya and elsewhere. Some people may argue that those suicide bombings are terrorist acts, not official military action like the *kamikaze tokkō*. Yet, these so-called terrorists regard themselves not as illegitimate fighters, but rather as martyrs fighting for a noble cause against mighty enemies and their acts are frequently planned and financed by political and military leaders.

In particular, people like Palestinian fighters think they have no alternative but to resort to frightful tactics, like suicide bombings, in order to counteract the Israeli forces which possess a variety of modern weaponry such as F-16 jet fighters, Apache helicopters, tanks, missiles and the like. Like the Japanese of 1945, they cherish the belief that suicide bombing will inflict tremendous psychological damage on the morale of enemy soldiers and citizens. Westerners regard suicide bombing as an extremely inhumane act of terror. Jacqueline Rose, however, [observes that, "dropping cluster bombs from the air is not only less repugnant: it is somehow deemed, by Western leaders at least, to be morally superior," but "why should dying with your victim be seen as a greater sin than saving yourself."](#)

In conclusion, allow me to cite the final passage of my own article on ['Japan's Kamikaze Pilots and Contemporary Suicide Bombers: War and Terror'](#), "Ritualized violence and brutality as exemplified by suicide attack may constitute the most negative manifestations of a human being's desire to let one's own people live by sacrificing one's own life. However, war and violent conflict inevitably brutalize not only suicide attackers but all human beings. Undoubtedly war is an act of madness, its absurdity clearly shown in the paired (but imbalanced) actions and reactions of World War II: as Japan adopted kamikaze-style suicide attacks, the US used 'strategic bombing' to indiscriminately kill hundreds of thousands of civilians as in the fire bombing of more than one hundred Japanese cities and towns, and finally engaged in atomic bombing attacks. Yet, to a great extent, it is the former acts that have borne the opprobrium of history while the latter would not only be cloaked in the aura of victory, but would come to shape the strategic horizons of subsequent wars. Thus terrorist suicide bombing, which is occurring more and more frequently throughout the world, bears the opprobrium of 'lunatic actions by fanatics,' while the bombing of civilians, such as those

executed by U.S. and British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, are widely regarded as ‘legitimate military operations.’ It is crucial that we find effective ways to break the vicious cycle of these two types of terrorism.”

Unfortunately, however, even 70 years after the war both Japan and the U.S. are still trying not only to justify, but even to glorify, their inhumane wartime conduct. Despite the failure last year to achieve registration on UNESCO’s Memory of the World list, CTHK is making great efforts this year to have their collection registered. UNESCO rejected CTHK’s application last year on the grounds that the explanation of the collection is based simply on a ‘Japanese interpretation’ and lacks a ‘universal message.’ For its part, the U.S. last year introduced a new law to create the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in order to preserve the facilities of three major sites, Oak Ridge, Hanford, and Los Alamos. It was at these places that the production of atomic bombs that killed tens of thousands of people took place. (Interestingly, China is now requesting that UNESCO register the documents related to the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women as Memories of the World.)

I sincerely hope that CTHK will change its current presentation of the ‘humanity’ of kamikaze pilots in ways that will encourage visitors to contemplate the sheer madness of war, regardless of the method used to take human life and regardless of whose lives are sacrificed. Similarly, I also hope that the Manhattan Project National Historical Park will include detailed information on the utter destruction and indiscriminate slaughter that

resulted from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

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