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JAPAN'S "SECRET" WEAPON: SUICIDE

Japanese military leaders, facing a superior and aggressive enemy, increasingly have exploited the Japanese soldier's capacity for suicide as a basic defensive weapon. The Japanese soldier has been carefully conditioned toward death through being taught that the warrior's greatest glory is death in battle for Japan. This indoctrination, combined with the psychological tensions of battle, fear of torture if captured by the enemy, and moral pressure from his group, enables him to fight a suicidal defense or to carry out orders for a suicidal attack. Japanese Army tradition has always demanded that imperial troops in hopeless situations commit hara-kiri or launch a death-inviting *banzai* charge. The High Command now has consciously expanded this traditional concept to encompass the employment of suicide tactics as a standard military device. The Japanese soldier has accepted missions in suicide assault and antitank units, suicide boats, and suicide aircraft. Most recently, Japanese propagandists have been trying to develop this theme one step further by insisting that a suicidal defense to the last man would meet Allied forces daring to invade the home islands.

The Japanese cultural pattern immensely facilitates the exploitation of suicide tactics. A young man's education is rigidly controlled by the state and by tradition. He cannot freely develop his own personality, and the choices he can make in life are limited. Although he may be highly emotional, melodramatic, and sentimental, he is taught to restrain his emotion to the point of appearing impassive. He is governed largely by the group code. The main tenets of the Japanese code are loyalty, to the fatherland and to the family, and filial piety. The young man commonly regards life as resignation to Fate and the pursuit of a path which Fate has decreed. Duty is frequently interpreted as submission to Fate and endurance of the suffering which may accompany it. Calculated spiritual training from earliest childhood conditions the youth to accept the necessity of death itself. Japanese religion, with its emphasis on ancestor worship, stresses the continuity of national and family life and the relative insignificance of the individual life.

The Bushido indoctrination given the young warrior at school and on the parade ground, far from battle, only serves to particularize his early training. He learns that he is expected to suffer in pursuit of his profession, and to bear physical hardship and torture without flinching. He is told: "The way of the warrior is to die," and "Die in battle with a fortress for a pillow." He is taught to bid farewell to life in his native land when he embarks on foreign service and to believe that he will

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return only in a supernatural reunion with his ancestors. He is promised a future life as a "protecting deity of Japan" and enshrinement at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo along with the spirits of all who die for the Emperor. He is exhorted by his War Minister to "defend to the last our Imperial land in which his Imperial Majesty the Emperor reigns and the souls of the Imperial forefathers are enshrined. Never fail to exert your all to beat back the invading enemy, and even after death defend the Imperial land with your souls."

Along with being taught not to fear death, the young Japanese early learned that hara-kiri traditionally has been the only honorable course in peace or war for the responsible person who has met with failure, whether or not it is the result of his personal actions. This training is reinforced when he becomes a warrior. According to an instructor at the Tokyo Army War College, "The principle of seeing clearly one's responsibility, and of immediately resolving on suicide when one is left in a helpless position in battle, contains the true spiritual significance of combat, which is removed from rational considerations"

The young warrior receives instruction in specific methods of hara-kiri. The Japanese believe that the spirit resides in the belly, and that an incision there frees the spirit for its journey to the Yasukuni Shrine. Originally hara-kiri was accomplished by means of the sword of the Samurai. A modern form is the holding of a hand grenade against the body, with the use of a pistol or rifle an acceptable alternative.

As recent campaigns neared their end, individual and mass suicides of this type have multiplied. On Saipan, a Division Commander told his troops, "We were going to be the breakwater of the Pacific; unfortunately we fought to our end; therefore I want you men to follow me. . . ." They retired to the hills, where all physically capable officers and enlisted men committed suicide. Commanding officers of field hospitals are reported on many occasions to have issued orders that all patients be killed to avoid capture by the enemy. Slightly incapacitated cases would be given hand grenades, while the badly wounded were killed by injections.

In the Marianas and on Okinawa, hundreds of Japanese were reported to have killed themselves by jumping off the cliffs into the sea. American forces often found the bodies of high Japanese officers in caves behind the lines where they had committed hara-kiri. *Banzai* suicide charges, another manifestation of the suicide indoctrination, have become commonplace in the Pacific War. Frequently, drunken Japanese soldiers have charged heavily fortified enemy positions armed only with bamboo spears or swords. Those who are not killed by the enemy kill themselves, ending all major resistance to an American advance.

Soldiers' diaries and letters refer repeatedly to the necessity and desirability of death in a hopeless battle situation. A young man embarking on a suicide mission at Morotai wrote his father, "Even if I

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were killed, there will be no satisfaction which would surpass this, and I feel honored . . . I shall distinguish myself by killing many Yanks and will destroy myself at the end. I do not think I shall ever set foot on the soil of my country again. I do not think I shall ever set foot on the soil of my country again. If you want to see me, come to the Yasukuni Shrine. We shall meet there. . . ." Another soldier wrote in his diary on his last night, "My heart is filled with joy because I can become the guardian spirit of my country. . . ."

The factor of shock-induced hysteria, added to this well-inculcated attitude of "death is lighter than a feather," occasionally leads soldiers to kill themselves during battle when capture is not imminent and escape possible, or when they could still put up a good fight if they chose. In such cases the indoctrination for death has done its work too well, paralyzing the reasoning faculty, and substituting self-destruction as an automatic response to circumstances which would normally call for strenuous action. Sometimes a futile suicide charge may be launched when an effective fighting potential still exists. As American forces advanced on Saipan, a second lieutenant, in direct violation of orders to fight a holding action, ordered his platoon to charge forward to "glorious death." Their speedy elimination enabled the American forces to advance northward much more rapidly than had been anticipated.

This tendency toward premature suicide is apparently causing the Japanese High Command to consider whether the Japanese soldier's carefully cultivated attitude toward death is not a military liability when Japanese troops are faced by superior Allied forces. In several instances, high Japanese officers have pointed out that, although there is a "similarity between fighting to the end and desperate self-destruction, the spiritual interpretation of the two is diametrically opposed. . . and that what counts is not death but duty." In Burma, a battalion commander declared, "It is regrettable that suicides and desertions have occurred. . . . Retainers of the Empire must not destroy themselves because of personal matters. No compassion can be felt for one who commits suicide or deserts. Not only his personal honor, but the honor of his relatives and home town are debased." Officers on Luzon preached the necessity of "living for the Empire," and one battalion commander told his troops that "Japan is a divine land; we will surely win the final victory. Live to the last and win through."

Currently, therefore, greater stress is being laid on making the death of an individual serve a military purpose, and in organized offensive and defensive tactics military leaders are increasingly taking advantage of the fact that the Japanese soldier places a low value on his life.

For example, a company commander on Luzon, faced with a hopeless situation, tried to formulate a plan that would do the greatest harm to the enemy. The battalion commander had been killed in action, his own company numbered only sixty, and rations were gone. He reasoned:

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"It is easy for the entire personnel to carry out suicide penetration attacks in force and die gloriously, but considering their strength, morale, training, and power of resistance, they will only be targets for enemy fire. To be annihilated without inflicting any damage on the enemy is very regrettable . . . [To retreat and plan future movements] is unthinkable for the troops of the Imperial Forces who believe in final victory. Therefore we will carry out [another] plan, penetrating the enemy lines and launching attacks at the most suitable times on their rear. We plan to disrupt enemy communications and inflict as much damage on them as possible before we perish . . ."

Members of the Japanese High Command claim that from now on Japanese air and naval activity will be based mainly on suicide tactics, and such tactics have already been accepted as a legitimate basic part of ground defense. Already such "secret weapons" as suicide assault and antitank units, "human-mine" suicide swimmers, suicide boats, suicide planes, suicide flying bombs, and human-bomb gliders have emerged. These suicide tactics are more than a way of expediting a warrior's journey to the Yasukuni Shrine. They are planned to exact the maximum toll of Allied forces at the most advantageous times.

Before the battle reaches its final desperate stage, Japanese commanders have been known to use the so-called *Kirikomi Tai*, or "suicide assault unit," as a means of harassing enemy troops. Men of the suicide assault units not only were supposed to have a thorough knowledge of the enemy situation and the terrain, but should be "prepared in spirit" so that they might start out with the certainty of victory "in their hearts." Similar groups, called "close-quarter combat units," were frequently employed in antitank fighting.

"Human-mine" suicide swimmers have been used in recent campaigns to destroy landing craft, transports, and cargo ships. These men, generally organized in platoon strength, swim under water in the direction of an approaching landing craft and then surface, throwing a grenade. Or they swim toward the landing craft, pushing antitank mines until they explode in contact with the oncoming craft. The attack is generally made in the dark or when visibility is poor. In one such attack a small bamboo raft was used to transport demolitions. Other swimmers are reported to have had explosive charges strapped on their backs while some carried grenades, booby traps, and small explosive charges.

Many small depth-charge suicide boats intended for large-scale use in smashing Allied landing and supply operations in the Pacific were discovered in the Philippines and in the Ryukyu Islands. More than 300 of the boats and tons of explosives were captured in caves near the beaches in the Kerama Islands before the Japanese could use them. The boats, intended for attacking Allied convoys approaching a beach landing area, were to be manned by units composed of 100-150 young men with special physical, educational, and character qualifications.

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These small speedboats, capable of 35 knots, were designed for operation by one man and carried two depth charges. Attacking in groups of three they were supposed to glide alongside the invasion ship and drop depth charges set for rapid detonation at vital points. The attacking boats, unable to escape before the blast, were sure to be blown up with their victims.

The suicide planes and piloted bombs are the most glamorous of the suicide weapons yet devised. Implementation of the idea of self-immolation in a crash of flame on the deck of an enemy battleship for the undying glory of self and Emperor results in a serious threat to Allied surface operations. Despite the serious attrition of Japanese aircraft and pilots, the threat is likely to continue.

Japanese suicide air tactics have been improved and refined since their first appearance on a large-scale during the Leyte operation in October 1944, and attacks by Japanese suicide aircraft against Allied shipping have increased sharply in the last few months. Early attacks were probably somewhat improvised, with the flyers spurred on by propaganda stressing the stern necessity of stopping Allied military progress. The Japanese High Command now appears determined to exploit these unorthodox tactics to the utmost and has taken steps to improve the training, planning, and accomplishment of suicide air missions. The alleged successes of these missions, the Japanese declare, "must be considered a great victory of spiritual forces over the enemy's material power."

The suicide pilots (called *Kamikaze* by Japanese propagandists in reference to the "Divine Wind" which according to Japanese legend frustrated an invasion of Japan by Kubla Khan in 1281) are said to personify the "spiritual forces" allegedly peculiar to Japan. Such a pilot may belong to a "Special Attack Unit" in the Japanese Army Air Force, undergoing intensive training at designated airfields and receiving spiritual indoctrination and instruction in formation flying, radar evasion, and diving techniques. After impressive rites at a battalion shrine, lectures on soul purification, and some practical instruction on how to crash-dive a ship's deck or a building, the *Kamikaze* pilot is sent to his post. His plane is a single- or twin-engine bomber loaded with explosives. For his first and last mission, he dons a burial gown, then says his final prayer to the divine spirit of the Emperor and his Imperial forebears. No deviation from duty is possible, for the pilot's ancestors, his family, and his name would be forever disgraced. Attacking in steep high-altitude dives or low along the water, these *Kamikaze* pilots have inflicted considerable damage on Allied shipping.

At Okinawa the Japanese introduced another suicide device, the *Baka* piloted flying bomb. An efficient, cheap, and potentially dangerous weapon, it is a miniature rocket plane 19 feet long with a 2250-pound explosive warhead as the nose, and a cockpit big enough to hold one Japanese pilot. It is launched in the air from a twin-engine bomber

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at a high altitude 25 to 30 miles from its target. There is no provision for landing.

Japanese propagandists have contrasted the Japanese attitude toward death, which facilitates last-ditch resistance, with the European and American concept, which precludes such exploitation of suicide tactics. Germany was defeated, they alleged, because of the unwillingness of the German armies to continue to fight "to the last man" and their preference for surrender after the collapse of a continuous front.

"This phenomenon may be explained only by some fundamental difference between the oriental and occidental philosophy on death and honor. For in this war of Greater East Asia alone we have known many instances in which our officers and men have literally fought to the last man . . . the European war situation even in its final phase would have been quite different, if the enemy had had to encounter 1,000,000 troops who re-enacted the heroic stand put up by our garrisons on Iwo, Saipan, Attu, and other Pacific islands . . . Japanese troops have no taste for a thing called capitulation or surrender . . . Every member is only too ready to fight to the last . . ."

Most recently the Japanese, in an effort to stimulate home front morale and also to frighten the Allies into a revision of the unconditional surrender formula, have been threatening a last-ditch civilian resistance in the home islands. Addressing the 87th Extraordinary Session of the Imperial Diet in June 1945, Premier Suzuki declared: "Judging from the trends within enemy countries and considering the developments in the international situation, I cannot help feel strongly that the only way for us to do is to fight to the last." Other Japanese spokesmen have described "the natural aptitude of the Japanese to die to the last man," and have pictured "an entire nation armed physically and spiritually to stamp out any attempt to defile Japan's sacred soil . . ." The national song of the Civilian Volunteer Corps promised, "Our orders have come, O land of Japan: To death we fight, to our last man." If carried out, these threats would exploit to the final limit the Japanese capacity for suicide.

However, such expressions of determination appear to be a propaganda maneuver rather than a realistic appraisal of the situation ahead. Japanese success in exploiting suicide as a military device does not mean that national suicide is inevitable. The Japanese soldier's willingness to sacrifice his individual life in his country's interest is based in part on his strong feeling of the continuity of Japan's national life. Regardless of the current propaganda, should the continued existence of Japan as a nation be threatened by the possibility of anything approaching the total extinction of its population, many Japanese soldiers and civilians might well come to prefer surrender to death.

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