



The Kaiten: Japan's Forgotten Weapon in World War II

Aris Chinn

I. Introduction

It was around 5 o'clock at the break of day when sweeping clouds had begun to sorrowfully drift above the Ulithi atoll. Minutes after the sound of the trumpet, sailors atop the USS Mississinewa would soon find themselves rocked by an explosion. Scurrying up toward the deck, the men stood in horror as hot droplets of oil began raining out from the ship's magazine, and an inferno blazed around them. As the sky had begun to envelop under a thick blanket of smoke, men hurriedly plunged themselves overboard as the sound of panicked screams filled the air. The sinking of the USS Mississinewa stands as one of the first unprecedented attacks launched by the Japanese against the US Navy. It was the launch of the Kaiten program - one of Japan's final attempts to change the tide of the war.

As the curtain of the Pacific Theater drew closer toward a close in the late months of 1944, Japan would find itself in desperate need of combat against the US. Faced with dwindling supplies, a ravaged economy, and the loss of their veteran soldiers, Japan would resort to a new series of specialized attack groups in hopes of delaying the United State's approach. The Tokubetsu, primarily consisting of men from ages 17-19, deferred themselves from the standards of conventional warfare through the form of suicidal attacks and tactics. Such attacks, although highly controversial, were deemed necessary against the far more advanced and superiorly equipped US troops. This would further lead to its mass implementation, with Hollywood and modern media today often immortalizing the Tokubetsu today solely through its usage throughout the Japanese naval airforce and army.

In reality, however, the usage of suicidal attacks by Japan extends far beyond its depictions amongst planes and soldiers but was especially prevalent among sailors of the navy. Sailors within the Tokubetsu remain an essential aspect of the war that often remains neglected due to their overall contributions to it. The Kaiten strike force is an essential aspect of Japanese history that highlights the final efforts of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) during the war, but the indomitable spirit and bravery of its men. This paper seeks to provide a more thorough understanding of the unique origins of the Kaiten and the program's much more significant implications for Japanese nationalism used throughout the war. Although its appearance would be much less prevalent throughout the war, Kaiten's program should still be worthy of consideration amongst historians toward the remarkable courage and sacrifice of Japan's youth.

II. Background

Following the Battle of Midway in 1942, Japan found itself in a dilemma after the collapse of its major naval operations in the Pacific. It had not only experienced the loss of hundreds of its aircraft and sailors but also the utter destruction of four of its heavy carriers, the Akagi, Hiryu, Kaga, and Soryu. Much to Emperor Hirohito's dismay, the Japanese government sought to cover up the affair, announcing that Midway had been another victory with the sinking of two American aircraft

carriers. Wounded sailors were transferred to separate hospitals in order to prevent the spread of the battle's knowledge to the Japanese public as much as possible. The aftermath of this battle would mark the start of a series of rippling effects that would lead Japan to plummet towards its eventual downfall of the war. The dramatic loss of many of Japan's veteran pilots, sailors, and technicians would heavily limit Japan's capability to return surviving pilots as teachers to newer generations of troops. The lack of experienced teachers and an inferior organizational system compared to the United States would thus lead naval sailors and aviators to the skills and tactics necessary to combat the increasingly growing US fleet.

By the month of August, new aircraft designs and ships built by the US led to the expansion of its navy at an extraordinary speed. This would include the creation of six fleet carriers, eight light carriers, five battleships, four heavy cruisers, and one hundred and thirteen destroyers. The US would utilize this advantage to its fullest, demolishing any hopes of Japan's air superiority at the battle of the Philippine Sea. With the loss of 200 aircraft within the engagement's first day, American pilots would nickname the battle the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot," with one sailor aboard the USS Lexington stating it, "Just like an old-time turkey shoot" (Morison, 1984). By the time the smoke had cleared by the second day of the battle, the Japanese would only have enough crewmen to form a single air group for a light carrier. Therefore, the battle of the Philippine Sea serves as an essential catalyst for the decline of Japanese naval superiority. Through the chain of losses at the hands of the US Navy, it was now impossible for Japan to reinforce its influence over its territories and stall the invasions of the US to a grinding and longer extent.

The decisive blow finally struck against Japan would occur at the Battle of Leyte Gulf, where the IJN would assemble its final force in hopes of striking the landing area at Surigao Strait and luring the main American forces away from Leyte. Assaulted by a group of US carriers, the Japanese navy would struggle to rival the power of the US air force as a barrage of torpedoes and bombing runs would promptly sink the remainder of the IJN's carriers. The remainder of Japan's naval strike force would encounter a group of American escort carriers only guarded by destroyers and destroyer escorts. The lack of incentive to press this advantage would lead to a large gunnery duel before both fleets would break off. The aftermath of Leyte Gulf would spell disaster for the IJN as they were no longer able to access the resources from its vast territories stretched out across Southeast Asia. Forced into a defensive retreat and a mere fraction of its formal power, it would result in the IJN scrambling over control through the desperate need for new prototypes and plans for the defense of Japan. Under harsh conditions, it would thus not only mark the creation of the Kaiten but also incentivize its usage until the end of the war.

III. Creation of the Kaiten

Witnessing the events of Midway from afar, Ensign Sekio Nishina and Lieutenant Hiroshi Kuroki drastically sought to refine new methods in order to turn the tide of the Pacific Theater. With both men serving as pilots to midget submarines, they realized that a similar vessel could be utilized as a weapon if pilots were to purposefully crash against US vessels. Such weapons would not only be effective, as with the recent advancements of sonar technology compiled with the poor aiming system of current Japanese torpedo systems, it had been impossible in recent months for the Japanese to launch successful underwater raids via submarines. More importantly, focusing on the production of midget submarines rather than fully sized vessels would fit within an effective production price for Japan to maintain in regard to its current state of the war.

By the latter half of 1942, the two officers contacted Mr. Hiroshi Suzukawa at the Kure Naval Arsenal with a rough sketch of their new invention. The new weapon would be named the Kaiten by the Japanese, roughly translated to the "Turn of Heaven's Will" (Mochitsura, 1954). Initially, Japanese officials were hesitant about the proposal due to the absolute

certainty of death that Japanese pilots would face when operating the weapon. This action contradicts an often popular misconception that the Japanese navy at this time was blatantly willing to send its soldiers toward their own deaths. In fact, with the loss of the vast majority of their experienced officers and sailors, Japan often prioritized the safety of the naval forces toward missions that leaned in favor of victory. It is this perspective that more greatly reflects that Japan was not oblivious to the undertakings that they faced, as such strategies by no means proper military operations since the establishment of the navy. However, faced with the current circumstances of the war and the possible benefits that the project could offer, both Nishina and Kuroki were ultimately given approval under the conditions that a pilot must have a means of escape. The creation of the Kaiten cements itself not as a practical weapon of the war but one out of necessity that the Japanese demanded the defense of their homeland. Although highly immoral and deviating from the conventional approaches of warfare, historians should view the Kaiten program as a bold risk that the Japanese had taken rather than blind and foolish ingenuity.

The initial designs of the Kaiten would be a reconstruction of the Model 93 oxygen-filled Long Lance Torpedo. The development of the Long Lance had been initially made in secrecy, with Japanese technicians experimenting with early designs since World War I. By filling the torpedo with pure oxygen, its range could increase by around five times that of the standard torpedo powered by steam. This choice to fill the torpedo with oxygen would result in the Long Lance traveling not only farther but at a much faster rate compared to Allied naval torpedoes used across the Pacific. It would essentialize itself as a key aspect to the success of most Japanese naval raids, with battles across the Java Sea and the victory off Savo island demonstrating the weapon's effectiveness.

Despite the benefits that the Long Lance Torpedo offered, it came with dangerous drawbacks that often endangered the lives of personnel and its crew. The torpedo itself carried a reputation for its sudden and premature explosions from mistakes in the assembly process. Sadaharu Otsuka, a former captain of the Imperial Navy, described that throughout the torpedo's construction, "There was always some oil or grease present during assembly of torpedoes, and occasionally some would get into a fuel line" (US Naval Institute, 1994). With the interior design of fuel lines being rather rough, oxygen would tend to mass inside the turns and pockets of the torpedo. This would lead to an increase in pressure, and thus, the loose oil and greases would heat the ignition point to an explosion. With such danger simply from the risk of operating the torpedo, the Kaiten was forced to be redesigned in order to accommodate the implementation of a pilot. Engineers would undergo a period of rapid innovation, redesigning, and focusing on efforts to prevent such accidents. Otsuka would state, "We redesigned the fuel lines into smooth curves, eliminating all sharp angles and making sure their linings were finely finished" (US Naval Institute, 1994). These changes would not only allow pilots to safely operate the Long Lance Torpedo, but offer room to implement a periscope and set of controls for a pilot to operate. With the small size of the Kaiten, it allowed larger vessels, such as destroyers and submarines, to carry a series of these into battle at a single time. Therefore, through the innovations and new designs made for the Kaiten program, it would emerge as one of Japan's final naval programs and efforts of the war.

IV. Origins of the Bushido Code

With many historians holding an irrational perspective toward the usage of suicidal craft throughout World War II it is important to acknowledge that there were a wide variety of reasons that compelled the Japanese to do so. These reasons took on a variety of forms, extending from nationalism and loyalty toward one's country to the social repercussions that one would face if one failed to follow through. It is these reasons that lead to troops holding high enough morale to face the grimness of such deployments that would ultimately lead to the tragic outcome of thousands of soldiers. These actions not only highlight the service and loyalty of their soldiers but also the multitude of disastrous and ultimately unnecessary deaths toward the end of the war.

One of the most dominant of these factors was the promotion of a set of ethics that originated from Japan's ancient samurai code, otherwise known as bushidō. The first origins of the philosophy itself found itself as a code of conduct, similar to the concept of European chivalry. Under the service of lords and emperors, samurai were expected to exemplify and demonstrate virtue to the lower classes throughout feudal society. This concept would eventually refine itself into a lifestyle for the samurai to adopt, and activities such as meditation, martial arts training, and literature became essential throughout daily life. It is important to acknowledge that during these times, bushido was not a philosophy emphasized solely within the ideas of war but an opportunity for samurai to diversify and expand their skills beyond the act of killing. When utilized correctly, bushido allowed samurais to dignify themselves within a period of modernization and change, even allowing them to prioritize the aspect of duty over statute law. However, as the aftermath of World War II continued to unfold, Japan would more closely associate this cultural philosophy with the need to demonstrate one's duty through service to the state. Many of the Confucian ideals and ethics would be disregarded or changed throughout this period, as bushido would instead focus on the achievements of an honorable death during times of war. Such examples can be shown through the preservations of proverbs from warlord Katō Kiyosama, where he would emphasize, "If a man does not investigate the matter of bushidō daily, it will be difficult for him to die a brave and manly death. Thus, it is essential to engrave this business of the warrior into one's mind well" (Kodansha, 1982). Therefore, bushido had transformed itself from a set of ethics into a cultural phenomenon toward loyalty and servitude of the state. In failure to achieve these demands, it would be impossible for one to hold a sense of pride or acknowledgment within society. This would allow bushido to transcend itself beyond a simple philosophy but a universal obligation to be fulfilled and called upon by its citizens during times of war.

Additionally, the usage of nationalism at this time was crucial throughout the indoctrination of the Kaiten program to force individuals out of necessity for the emperor. Following the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the Japanese government required a new martial ideology to transform Japan from a feudal society under the Shogunate into a constitutional monarchy. In his 1901 essay, Tokyo Imperial University philosophy professor Inoue Tetsujirō claimed European chivalry, dismissing chivalry as merely a form of "woman worship" (Benesch, 2014). It is this initial discrimination that would plant the seeds of racial superiority amongst the most radical of the Japanese in the future conflicts of the war. While reaping the benefits of modernization that Western society proposed, nationalism allowed the imperial government to utilize the strengths that industrialization proposed while maintaining the diligence and servitude of its population. It is through these teachings and the rapid acceptance within society that the government consistently fuels the desire and need for even suicidal attacks, glorifying its continuation amongst citizens rather than being reprimanded for its results.

Finally, the peer pressures and obligations shared amongst soldiers would create a system that would force soldiers to follow through with missions despite the consequences they could face. As the intensity of the Pacific theater would rage on, soldiers were taught to revere the emperor in a fanatic belief, with concepts such as retreat and surrender regarded as utterly disgraceful and unacceptable within society. In his paper on the Bushido Code, author Dixon Boyd expresses that "Some Japanese soldiers considered surrender a way of courting death, therefore contrary to the Bushido code" (Boyd, 2012). With the act of sacrifice heavily associated with the norms of righteousness, the act of surrendering would be impossible to be regarded as acceptable in Japanese society. Death, by this point, was recognized beyond a natural phenomenon but, at times, a necessity for soldiers to fulfill their nation's destiny of further conquest and expansion. With the need to refrain from showing cowardice or fear of death at all levels of society in order to achieve this goal, it is this ultimate rise in false patriotism that would lead to the eventual rise of the Kaiten program.

V. Cultural insights through the Kaiten

The deployment of the Kaiten, used primarily by young students who served in Japan's naval force, provided a deeper insight into the effects of nationalism on Japanese culture. Yutaka Yokota, a young Kaiten cadet pilot, describes his training throughout his service at Otsujima. Unlike the strict martial discipline typically instructed in the naval academy, Yokota describes that his students and instructors were kept informal to come to terms with meeting an honorable death. He stated that all truly believed in the words of the Imperial Rescript that "Death is as light as a feather, while duty weighs a mountain" (Columbia et al., 2005). Although the Kamikaze pilots ultimately overshadowed the Kaiten's efforts, its early origins demonstrated how sailors within Japan's Navy would carry the same values and reverence towards the emperor beyond just its air force. Young men in Japan's Navy were also prepared to offer their lives and futures to uphold core values of loyalty and honor firmly cemented in Imperial Japan's society. As a result, the service of the Kaiten further demonstrated how gripping the effect of nationalism was among all members of Japan's youth. Despite belonging to different social classes and backgrounds, it marked a rare period in Japan's centuries-old history where men saw themselves as equals in their self-sacrifice toward their country.

Such effects of nationalism can continue to be explored through the design process of the vessel. The training was an extremely dangerous part of the indoctrination process, where 15 men would die in accidents, including Lieutenant Kuroki, one of the original founders of the Kaiten program. The first initial designs of the Kaiten allowed a pilot to escape during the acceleration of the vessel. However, it was recorded that no pilot attempted to escape or would even intend to do so in order to achieve a death with purpose. In later models of the design, this feature would be removed from the Kaiten; once a pilot was placed inside the vessel, they would be unable to open its hatches.

Although the Kaiten pilot's training was extremely tough, their role in society was seen to be elite and extremely privileged in having the opportunity to die for their country. In his book, "The Kaiten Weapon," Yokota describes his experience in the preparation and respect shown to the pilots before their departure. On the eve of the first Kaiten mission, Vice Admiral Shigeyoshi Miwa presented each man with a short sword as a symbolic gesture in the case of victory or to commit ritual suicide for an honorable death. Yokota would write, "Once this sword was presented, a life was pledged for the Empire, either through battle, death or disembowelment" (Yokota, 2015). By stripping soldiers of their fundamental right to surrender, this policy highlights how many of Japan's youth were forced into mindless slaughter or faced the consequences of dishonor. In the greater picture, the service and glorification of the Kaiten provide a deep insight into the disdain and hatred Imperial Japan held against cowardice due to the effects of nationalism. This code of honor effectively created a culture among the Japanese for a military incapable of accepting the concept of defeat, thus dragging on the war for years to come.

Such a strong mindset would be essential to the continued deployment of the Kaiten despite its limited success throughout the war. With the advancements in technology, such as the usage of depth charges and Hedgehog anti-submarine weapons, a majority of vessels carrying the Kaiten weapon would be destroyed prior to deploying the pilots. Such was the case when submarine I-37 was spotted by US ships off Leyte Island and was promptly sunk by destroyers USS Conklin and USS McCoy Reynolds, which would result in the loss of all 117 officers and men. Additionally, the submarine I-370 would meet the hands of a similar fate as it was found and sunk by USS Finnegan after an initial hedgehog and depth charge was launched, resulting in the report of bubbles after bubbles were observed. The sinking of I-370 would lead to the loss of all 84 officers aboard the ship, including its Kaiten pilots and vessels.

Even with the successful missions of the Kaiten, it would lead to the great loss of a number of its pilots through the explosion of the vessel. The sinking of the USS Mississinewa would lead to the first sinking of the Kaiten program at the

cost of eight of its pilots, including Seiko Nishina, one of the original founders of the weapon. Despite the futility of the program and its design, many soldiers of the Japanese volunteers would continue to dedicate their service due to the destruction of the Japanese navy. The Kaiten program, in their eyes, would by no means lead to the success of new conquests and major victories, but the last means of the navy in order to slow down US domination and stall the invasion of their homeland. Minoru Wada, one of the volunteer crews of the Kaiten, would write in his memorandum, "There was no other way but to use this type of weapon in order to counter imminent defeat. The loss of our fighting forces. Our fleets can't go anywhere without being detected by the enemy's radar" (Wada 97).

By the end of the Kaiten program, the kill ratio would fall well below the negatives, with a total of 106 Kaiten pilots dying in suicide missions and the death of over 800 Japanese submarine crewmen. Sources from the United States state the program would only achieve the sinking of three vessels, the fleet oiler USS *Mississinewa*, a minor infantry landing craft, and the destroyer escort of the USS *Underhill* with a total of 187 officers and men. The poor performance of the program and the relatively successful attacks made by Kamikaze pilots would lead to the eventual disappearance of the relevance of the program in the greater impacts of the war.

VI. Individual memoirs of the Kaiten

The personal memoirs and documentation of Kaiten's attacks and their training demonstrate insight into the courage and self-sacrifice of Japan's youth throughout the war. Written through a series of diary collections, the records of Minoru Wada as a young Kaiten pilot provide personal insights into their mentality before his death on duty. Throughout his final memoir, Wada discussed his interest in literature and poetry in his letter after his first ride in the Kaiten. He stated that he "Read *Kokoro* by Sôseki... I find myself touched by them more than ever... The things I want most right now are tears, the same tears I cried during my life in peacetime" (Wada 96). Personal memoirs such as Wada's demonstrate how members of the Kaiten were not cruel and heartless soldiers but ordinary men who had an appreciation for the arts and culture found in life. It directly shows that members of the Kaiten were not simply soldiers but rather young men who were stripped of their luxury to enjoy the basic simplicities of life. As a result, by actively choosing to sacrifice their relationships and interests for their country, the use of the Kaiten underscores the bravery and courage of Japan's youth throughout the war. Accepting their eventual demise with poise and dignity highlights the honor and dignity of the Kaiten pilots in their efforts to change the war.

Out of the hundreds of attacks made by the Kaiten, the most successful attack that illustrated the pride and courage of the Japanese was most certainly the sinking of the oiler *Mississinewa*. In Michael Mair and Joy Waldron's book, *Kaiten*, eyewitness accounts of the explosion describe the chaos and panic that ensued. One of the personal recounts is the survival of Eugene Cooley, a young boy from New York who managed to escape the vessel's sinking. Mair writes that Cooley "Flipped over on his back, choking as his lungs ingested smoke, and nearly blind from oil that burned his eyes.... [the] *Mississinewa* had disappeared behind a black curtain" (Mair, 2014). Through the sinking of the *Mississinewa*, the effectiveness of the Kaiten can be seen beyond a simple prototype of the Japanese as a cruel weapon that had devastating effects. The survival story of Eugene Cooley thus serves as an example of not only the destructive nature of the weapon against the US but a clear lack of ethical and moral considerations taken by the Japanese in hopes of achieving victory. Ultimately, recognizing the death of the Kaiten pilots and their deployment highlights the weight of their sacrifice and their willingness to serve their country. Thus, recognizing the actions of the Kaiten pilots and their dedication despite the futile state of the war highlights the spirit and tenacity of Japan's youth throughout the final years of World War Two.

VII. Conclusion

The use of the Kaiten and its documentation as a weapon demonstrates its importance in the moral ethics and strategies used by the Japanese in World War Two. In analyzing the effects of nationalism on the Japanese youth, the firsthand documentation of the Kaiten background and development provides a rich insight into the effects of nationalism and its indoctrination of soldiers among Japan's teenage population. The use of the Kaiten in battle and the personal memoirs of their pilots show firsthand documentation of the courage and will of the Japanese in their sacrifice for their country. Therefore, the use of the Kaiten and its documentation of the Japanese youth should be more frequently seen or observed as a crucial benchmark in the moral ethics and understanding of World War 2 history.

Works Cited

- Fassbender, Michael. "Bushido and Japanese Atrocities in World War II." Michael Fassbender Blog, 2024, <https://michaelfassbender.com/nonfiction/the-world-wars/big-picture/bushido-and-japanese-atrocities-in-world-war-ii/>. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.
- J. Cox, Samuel. "H-039-4: First Kaiten Attack." Naval History and Heritage Command, Dec. 2019, www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams/h-gram-039/h-039-4.html. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.
- "Kaiten: Japan's Human Torpedoes." Asahi-Net, www.asahi-net.or.jp/~un3k-mn/kai-kaiten10.htm. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.
- Mair, Michael, and Joy Waldron. *Kaiten: Japan's Secret Manned Suicide Submarine and the First American Ship It Sank in WWII: The Untold Story*. New York, NY, Berkley Caliber/Berkley Books, 2014.
- Martin, Kali. "The Battle of Midway." The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, 4 June 2020, www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/battle-midway#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20lost%20approximately%203%2C057. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.
- Minoru, Wada . "Letters and Diaries of Japanese Soldiers, 1940-1946." JSTOR, Brill, 2002, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23613064>. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.
- Peattie, Mark R. *Sunburst : The Rise of Japanese Naval Air Power, 1909-1941*. Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2007.
- Pichrett, Raymond. "The Imperial Japanese Navy after Midway." USNI Blog, 23 July 2009, blog.usni.org/posts/2009/07/23/the-imperial-japanese-navy-after-midway.
- Stille, Mark E. *The Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific War*. Oxford, Osprey Publishing Co, 2014.
- Su, ShaoYuan, and Andrew R. Wilson. "Divine Winds and Human Waves: The Kamikaze's Rise over the Course of Japanese History." *Journal of Student Research*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i2.1456>. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- tech, vidushi. "THE JAPANESE KAITEN WEAPON - NSL Archive." NSL Archive, Apr. 1994, archive.navalsubleague.org/1994/the-japanese-kaiten-weapon#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20word%20Kaiten%20means.
- Y'Blood, Carolyn C. *Red Sun Setting*. Naval Institute Press, 15 Apr. 2012.
- Samuel Eliot Morison. *New Guinea and the Marianas*. Little Brown & Company, 30 Jan. 1953.
- Theodore, Wm, et al. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*. Vol. 2. Vol. 2, New York ; Chichester, Columbia University Press, 2005.
- William Scott Wilson, and Gregory Lee. *Ideals of the Samurai : Writings of Japanese Warriors*. Burbank, Calif., Ohara Publications, 1982.
- Yokota, Yutaka. *The Kaiten Weapon*. Pickle Partners Publishing, 6 Nov. 2015.

Benesch, Oleg. “The Samurai next Door: Chinese Examinations of the Japanese Martial Spirit.” *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, vol. 38, no. 38, 1 Nov. 2014, pp. 129–168, <https://doi.org/10.4000/extremeorient.376>.

Dixon, Boyd. “The Archaeology of World War II Japanese Stragglers on the Island of Guam and the Bushido Code on JSTOR.” *JSTOR*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42928795>. Accessed 29 Nov. 2024.