

18 Tours of Tokkōtai (kamikaze) training bases

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Towards the end of the Pacific War, the Allied fleet in the Pacific faced an onslaught of suicide attacks by pilots of the Imperial Japanese Forces. The Allies named both the attacks and the pilots the Kamikaze ('divine wind'), but the Japanese official term is Tokubetsu kōgeki tai (Special Attack Corps), abbreviated as Tokkōtai. Kamikaze is also a term in Shintoist literature alluding to the legend of the thirteenth-century battles during the Mongol invasion of Japan (Chapter 3). Kublai Khan's formidable fleet attacked the coastal areas of northern Kyushu, outnumbering the Japanese by ten to one. Defeat was inevitable against the Mongols' technological (gunpowder weapons) and numerical superiority. The Japanese fought in suicidal defence, but a sudden storm sank the Mongol ships. Miraculously, the divine wind saved the Japanese. The historical accuracy of this story is debatable, but the legend of self-sacrificial bravery and divine intervention became established in Japanese popular culture. The myth was resurrected in 1944–1945 to justify suicide tactics against the Allied fleet.

The Kyushu region has a high concentration of memorial sites to Tokkōtai that continue to draw tourists of all generations. As raw memories of the brutality of war fade with time, a 'kamikaze world', a tourism imaginary commoditizing the Tokkōtai, has emerged (Seaton 2019). The Chiran Peace Museum is the main site, and there are lower-key sites at museums in Tachiarai and Bansei, but the same narrative of kamikaze courage and self-sacrifice drives contents tourism at these sites dedicated to the memories of Imperial Army Tokkōtai. However, this chapter focuses on four former Imperial Navy Tokkōtai training bases: Kanoya, Kushira, Izumi, and Usa.

Kanoya

Our tour of naval Tokkōtai sites begins at Kanoya Air Base Museum, annexed to the Kanoya Air Field of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force

(JMSDF). The museum presents Japanese aviation history, technical development, and the political, economic, strategic, and psychological factors that drove Imperial Japan to use the Tokkō (special attack) strategy. The Kanoya base opened in 1936, a year before the Kanoya Conference, where the plans for the Pearl Harbor attack were discussed. As the war intensified, the Fifth Air Fleet Command was established in February 1945. Over 800 airmen took off from Kanoya base in Operation Kikusui (Chrysanthemum Water), a series of ten concerted aerial attacks during the Battle of Okinawa between 6 April and 22 June 1945. On average, the pilots were 19 years old and had minimum aviation experience (van der Does-Ishikawa 2015), making Kanoya a particularly poignant war memorial destination.

Operation Kikusui was the backdrop for Hyakuta Naoki's million-selling novel *Eien no Zero* (*The Eternal Zero*) and the 2013 blockbuster film of the same title. The film courted domestic and international controversy about whether it reflected ultra-nationalistic views on war history (Suzuki 2015). Meanwhile, many filmgoers enjoyed the human drama of unsung heroes, who were misunderstood by people but bonded by brotherly love, engaging in suicide attacks against massively superior enemy forces to protect their compatriots. This narrative template echoes the legend of the Mongol invasion in Kyushu. Historians, film critics, and fans have also compared the Tokkō narrative to Leonidas the Spartan king and his 300 men at the Battle of Thermopylae (Rebenich 2002: 327). The audience may also project their own emotional experiences of life's injustices, such as those stemming from the sacrificial work ethic in today's corporate culture, onto the unfortunate pilots (Sōtome n.d.), rather than glorify the war and Kamikaze attacks per se.

Kushira

Twelve kilometres northeast of Kanoya is the former Kushira Airfield, established in April 1944. Approximately 5,000 Naval Aviator Preparatory Course Trainees, or *yokaren*, trained there in aviation mechanics, manoeuvres, and telecommunications. As the war intensified, training units were attached to operational units and, from March 1945, converted into a Special Attack Corps. A total of 363 Tokkō pilots and 210 other fighter pilots took off from Kushira Base, never to return. The underground telecommunications bunker at the airfield is seven metres deep and 57 metres long. Visitors descend a narrow staircase down to the telecommunications room. Tokkō pilots sent their last Morse code signal here before their attack. When transmission stopped, it meant another life was

lost. The tours of Kushira and Kanoya airfields present many stories of individual pilots as well as operational details. They form a part of the recommended local itinerary provided by the municipal tourism association located at the entrance of the Kanoya JMSDF base.

Izumi

By contrast, Tokkōtai-related historical sites in Izumi are still largely left untouched or protected by volunteers. Izumi Naval Air Field opened in 1940 as a supplemental aerodrome for Kanoya and Omura. On 15 April 1943, it was annexed to the Twelfth Joint Air Corps and began training young recruits. B29 raids intensified from April 1945 during the Battle of Okinawa, when the operation unit Ginga was stationed at Izumi. Japan had exhausted its supplies of airworthy planes, trained pilots, and fuel by the summer of 1945 and resorted to sending off under-skilled teenage pilots in trainer aircraft with one-way's worth of fuel to defend the country. They took off day after day on Tokkō missions, resulting in over 260 deaths.

Long straight roads crisscross the city. They are remnants of the former runways. The ruins of *entaigō* (semi-circular bunkers) stand beside the roads. A mound in a park hides the entrance to an underground operations centre. Paper cranes on strings, Tokkō pilots' poetry, and records of their missions are exhibited inside. Across from the park stands Tokkō Shrine, which was established in 1943 as a guardian shrine for pilots and later became a place of commemoration for Tokkōtai pilots. In the shrine grounds, the *Nanpō no Kanata* (Beyond the South Seas) statue of a youthful Tokkō pilot gazes towards the south seas. It is dedicated to Seki Yukio, Kanazashi Isao, and every airman who perished in Tokkō operations. Kanazashi took off from Izumi on 19 March 1945 and hit the Essex-class aircraft carrier USS Franklin off Cape Ashizuri. He had been inspired by the first kamikaze pilot, Seki Yukio, whose special attack mission was during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944. The Allies had cut the Japanese supply lines and destroyed most carrier-borne and land-based aircraft as well as naval vessels. Faced with the impending US invasion of the Philippines, inspiration was sought from ancient heroes. Admiral Onishi Takijiro issued the first order. On 25 October, Lieutenant Seki led five Zero fighters in the first Shimpū (Divine Wind) attack. Seki crash-dived his plane into the USS St. Lo and sunk it. Seki's sacrifice evoked the legend of the Divine Wind against the Mongol invasion and inspired many more to follow.

However, Seki reportedly confided with a journalist that he believed the suicidal attack order was a sign of Japan's desperation and inevitable

defeat. He would obey the order ‘not for the Empire, but only to protect my wife and loved ones from the Yankees’ (Onoda 1971). Seki’s words were published after the war, adding to his popularity. Admirers saw them as a symbol of defiance against the injustice of war and institutional society. This reveals the contested interpretations of the kamikaze: while many eulogize their patriotism and sacrifice, others admire Tokkōtai pilots as emblems of anti-war expression, and others can see the potential of using the sites as a testimonial heritage of war.¹

Usa

On 1 October 1939, a facility of the Imperial Navy Air Service under the command of Kure Naval District was established in Usa. It was a combat training base for the crew of carrier-borne attack aircraft and bombers and occupied 184 hectares. A special attack Ohka (glider bomber) squadron Jinrai came from Miyazaki to train at Usa before moving to Kanoya. The Allies frequently conducted air raids in March and April 1945, resulting in several hundred military and civilian casualties. Therefore, Usa’s community is committed to preserving the town’s war sites to let them ‘speak of horrors of war and human suffering’ (Oita Heritage 2017). Local historians and the city’s education board have jointly campaigned for the conservation of ten remaining bunkers. Over the years, the airfield was converted back to agricultural fields, and the runway was turned into public roads, but visitors can still feel its sheer size. Ruins are scattered over a vast area: a parachute storage building with bullet holes in the walls, water management facilities, and other remnants of the airbase. They form a part of an open-air museum, while a small building on the southside of the airfield houses a full-scale model of a Zero fighter and an Ohka. Damaged propellers and a claustrophobic cockpit (Figure 18.1) testify to the fragility of life in futile missions, inducing one visitor to write sensory reflections on Usa’s local history on TripAdvisor (Rokai 2015).

Conclusions

Tokkōtai-related tourism exemplifies a ‘usable narrative world’ (Figure 1.3) at the overlap of the three tourism imaginaries discussed in Chapter 1: (subjective) war experience, (objective) war heritage, and war-related entertainment. Packaged in an emotive formula with ancient and universal roots, the enduring narratives of self-sacrifice can cater to tourists’ emotional consumption of the spaces once occupied by their tragic heroes. Initially, the semi-fictionalized human dramas depicted in numerous works of entertainment such as *The Eternal Zero* inspire them



Figure 18.1 A reconstructed cockpit at a museum on the site of the former Usa Airfield. Author's photos.

to visit these sites as light-hearted contents tourists. One such tourist visited Kanoya 'out of curiosity' after seeing Tokkōtai dramas and films, but once there, the suicidal mission of the people of 'my son's age' hit home. Now she considers the site a must-see (Dānei 2014). Another visitor noted how reflecting 'in situ' can trigger a critical examination of the narrative of 'legendary courage and self-sacrifice' (2008sannohfighters 2020). When thus inspired, tourists can go further down the heritage trail, tracing the path of Tokkōtai trainees in Kanoya, Kushira, Izumi, Usa, and beyond.

Note

- 1 Interview with Mr Inoue Haruhiro, Department of Social Education (Cultural Heritage), Usa city and Usa Peace Museum.

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