Letters home: correspondence of a Special Attack Corps Imperial Japanese Navy pilot during the Asian Pacific War

太平洋戦争時学徒出陣した特攻隊員の家族への書簡

Michael Skelton *

Abstract

1942年６月のミッドウェー海戦後、太平洋戦争で快進撃を続けていた日本軍が次第に後退に転じ、続けて敗北を期す等、大日本太平洋帝国での力と領域においても弱体化していった。軍人の損失著しく、日本政府は1943年秋、20歳以上の学生まで徴兵制の拡大を決定した。これら徴兵された学生の多くは、陸軍より海軍を志し、飛行科予備学生として大日本帝国海軍航空隊に採用された。これら飛行科予備学生の一人が京都帝国大学の学生であった時岡鶴夫である。時岡は1943年12月に入隊し、茨城県と鹿児島県において飛行訓練を受けている。訓練中、時岡は神戸にいる家族へ手紙を書き送った。本稿は1945年５月、特攻隊員として出撃、戦死するまでの３か月間に書き送られた最期の４通の手紙に焦点を当てる。出撃に備え、死を覚悟したこの若き予備学生はどのような思い、どのような気持ちでいたのか。彼の前に横たわる避けることのできない運命に対し、どのように折り合いをつけ、受け入れていったか。本稿はこれらの問いに答えようとする試みである。

キーワード：1. Asian Pacific War　2. Special Attack Corps　3. Family correspondence

Introduction

The word 'kamikaze', as commonly used in English, brings with it the notion of something or someone reckless or suicidal in behaviour, and images and themes with a kamikaze connection abound on social media and in popular western culture generally ('kamikaze taxi driver', 'kamikaze cocktail' and so on). The kamikaze image remains powerful in Japanese culture too, especially in the entertainment media—witness the box office success in 2013 of Yamazaki Takashi's film 'The Eternal Zero' (*Eien no zero*), based on the bestseller by Hyakuta Naoki (2009) and the earlier film of 2007 by Shinjo Taku, 'For Those We Love' (*Ore wa, kimi no tame ni koso shini ni iku*), based on a script by Ishihara Shintaro, the former governor of Tokyo. Each film is centred around the tactic adopted by the Japanese military during the latter years of the Asian Pacific War whereby pilots of the Special Attack Corps (*Tokubetsu Kōgekitai* or *Tokkōtai*) would crash-dive into enemy shipping—aircraft carriers being the preferred target—in the hope of sinking them or, at least, causing substantial damage and loss of life. In the immediate aftermath of the war, these suicidal attacks were heavily criticized as barbaric by many sections of Japanese society (Inoguchi *et al.*, 1958), although empathy for the young pilots who sacrificed their lives in an unwinnable war was encouraged by the 1947 publication of their and other student-soldiers' writings in 'In the Faraway Mountains and Rivers' (*Harukanaru Sanga ni*). Recent decades have witnessed a romanticizing of the Special Attack pilots who have been assigned the role of heroic samurai warriors fulfilling their duties with honour and bravery, a move encouraged by the more conservative elements of Japanese society wishing to push a nationalist and historically revisionist agenda (Sheftall, 2005). What, though, would these

* Michael SKELTON　教育学部教授

young pilots themselves tell us about their motives and feelings, were they to be given a voice? While some Special Attack Corps pilots survived the war and could relate their experiences (Nagatsuka, 1974; Imamura, 2001), in most cases we are forced to rely on the diaries and letters that they wrote before their final sorties in order to acquire some understanding of their thoughts.

This paper comprises a translation and study of the final correspondence to his family in the spring of 1945 of Tokioka Tsuruo, an officer reservist in the Imperial Japanese Navy. The entire surviving correspondence, previously published by the Kyoto University Archives (Nishiyama, 2006) as part of a project investigating the university and college student mobilization of 1943, covers the period from 11th December 1943, just after Tokioka was conscripted as a naval reserve student, to 13th May 1945, the day before he sortied as a Special Attack Corps pilot and died in combat. The present paper focuses on the four letters that he wrote home in the final months of his life. What were his feelings and concerns as he awaited the order to sortie? How, if at all, was he able to rationalize the fate that had been allotted to him? After a brief description of Tokioka's family background, this study will begin by looking at Japan's student mobilization of the autumn of 1943 that abruptly ended his days as a Kyoto University student, before touching upon the historical circumstances that led up to the formation of the Special Attack Corps.

Early life and student mobilization

Tokioka Tsuruo was born in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, on 13th March 1922, the fourth of six children in his family. He had three older sisters and one younger brother and sister. However, by the time that he was writing home as a naval cadet, his older sisters had married and were living in Kyoto, while his younger brother, Shoji, was enlisted in the army and also away from home. Consequently, the family members remaining in Kobe were his grandmother, Nobu, his father, Masatada, his mother, Shigeko, and his younger sister, Teruko, and it is to these four people that he addressed most of his correspondence (Nishiyama, 2006). After graduating from First Kobe Middle School in March 1939, and from Matsuyama High School (where he studied literature) three years later, Tokioka entered the Faculty of Economics at Kyoto Imperial University in April 1942. The extant correspondence makes no mention of his time as a university student, but two of his contemporaries and fellow members of the ice hockey club to which he belonged have reported that Tokioka was an all-round sportsman who, despite having no previous experience playing ice hockey, quickly honed his skills to become the best goalkeeper in the Kansai region (*ibid.*). He is also said to have possessed a forthright, sunny personality which enabled him to be on close, friendly terms with anyone that he met. This cheerful personality is in evidence in the letters introduced in this paper.

After just a year and eight months, Tokioka's university career came to a sudden halt. The reverses suffered by the Japanese military by the middle of 1943 and the rising death toll of Japanese servicemen led to the government's decision in October of that year to cancel the deferment on conscription for university and college students (except for science and technology majors). This measure was part of the so-called 'Departure of Students for the Front', an expression that first appeared in an Imperial Japanese Navy recruiting pamphlet of August 1943 and that came into common use following a ceremony held on October 21st outside Meiji Shrine for students from 77 universities and colleges in the Tokyo area. This government-sponsored event was designated 'A Pep Rally for Students Departing for the Front' and was clearly intended to encourage younger students to enlist. With the introduction of conscription for Humanities and Social Science students 20 years of age or older, Tokioka was forced, in November 1943, to accept provisional graduation from the university that he had taken such pains to enter and to choose a branch of the military. The army's officer system for Air Service cadets had been established in July,

but many students appear to have been attracted to the more "modern and fashionable" aura of the navy (Tanaka, 2005). From the autumn of 1943 until the end of the war, more than 15,000 were enlisted as cadet officers in the Navy Air Service, compared to just over 500 in the previous decade (*ibid.*). It is not known if Tokioka declared a preference for the navy when he received his conscription medical, but he enlisted as a naval reserve student in December 1943 and received his basic training at Otake Naval Barracks in Hiroshima Prefecture. Early the following year, he was accepted into the 14th Class of Naval Air Reserve Students, an achievement that he reported in a postcard home with the phrase "Just what I've long wished for", so the Navy Air Service seems to have been his objective from the outset.

Flight training

The short period of training that Tokioka underwent at Otake appears not to have been so harsh, but after he was transferred to the Tsuchiura Naval Air Group in Ibaraki Prefecture, where the Flight Training Division's basic course of study was given, conditions for the young officer cadets changed. Evidence for this emerges from the testimony (quoted in Nishiyama, 2006) of Tokioka's fellow cadet Nakajima Yutaro, formerly of Keio University:

> On February 1st the eagerly awaited 14th Class of Naval Air Reserve Students was sworn in. The cherry blossom insignia had not yet been attached to our collar badges but the dagger was hanging from our waist and this gave us the appearance of officers. However, the rather worldly desires in our student characters started to take a beating as rigorous and merciless officer training exercises began, the junior class commander providing the required intensive instruction. I wonder if this was the time, with correction [physical beatings] being given every day, when our expressions somehow became tense. Late at night towards the end of February, the buzzer at the student dormitory unexpectedly sounded for an emergency meeting. 'What's happened?' we thought, as all of us reserves assembled on the parade ground. The cold from the frozen ground beneath our feet was felt through our whole bodies as we focused our attention on the mouth of the chief instructor, Lieutenant Commander Murayama Toshimitsu, standing on a platform before us.
>
> 'The war situation is not a simple one. You lot are going to be killed in action sometime this year, OK? From now on, be resigned to your fate. If you lot don't give up your lives, Japan will be in a hopeless, last-ditch situation. All of you are to die in combat, OK? You get it, don't you?'
>
> The daily reprimands changed completely after that. In their place came a quiet tone of voice repeating instructions and suggestions, with much more weight and persuasive power, though also with threats. We quietly accepted the verdict, 'All of you are to die in combat.' (Nishiyama, 2006: 43) [author's translation]

Tokioka was undoubtedly present at this scene.

The Special Attack Corps

It was to be another year, in February 1945, before Tokioka, now a trained fighter pilot, joined the Special Attack Corps. Before looking at his letters home in search of motives behind this decisive step, it is worthwhile considering how Japan's military command instigated and justified the suicidal 'body-crashing' tactics employed from October 1944 onwards by pilots of fighter planes, of manned glider bombs and torpedoes, and of bomb-laden motorboats. By the time American forces were preparing to invade the Philippines in late 1944, successive defeats had left the Japanese army and navy with severely depleted air forces, with pilots who lacked experience and sufficient training, and with shortages of supplies and fuel (Yamashita, 2015). Realizing the danger to Japan's home islands once the Philippines was under the control of the Allies, its naval leaders gave official sanction to the

tactic whereby each Special Attack pilot would sacrifice his life by ramming his bomb-laden plane into an enemy aircraft carrier. Their hope was that this strategy would leave the Americans without coverage from the air in the ensuing decisive naval battle. Inoguchi Rikihei, a naval officer who participated in the formation of the *Shinpū* (Divine Wind) Special Attack Corps at this time, later justified the decision:

> (N)o man welcomes death. But it is more understandable if one bears in mind that, considering the heavy odds that our fliers faced in 1944, their chances of coming back alive from any sortie against enemy carriers was very slim, regardless of the attack method employed. If one is bound to die, what is more natural than the desire to die effectively, at maximum cost to the enemy? (Inoguchi *et al*., 1958: 8)

The new tactic used in the Battle of Leyte Gulf was to a degree successful (Cook *et al*., 1992), and although it brought diminishing returns in the months that followed, the glorification by the Japanese media of these self-sacrificing hero pilots ('warrior-gods') in a society that was exhorted to imitate their example—what Earhart (2005) refers to as 'kamikazefication'—ensured that Japanese military leaders continued the special attacks in a desperate attempt to halt the invasion of the main islands and secure more advantageous terms of surrender.

The Letters

Of the fifty-six items of correspondence sent by Tokioka to his family, the majority were postcards, each stamped 'Passed by Censor'. Only postcards were allowed to be sent from military bases at this time and, during a period of his intensive training at Tsuchiura, correspondence from his family could also only be by postcard. However, when he was allowed out on rest days, Tokioka could send sealed letters from outside the base, thus evading the scrutiny of the military censor, and it is on four such letters, written in March, April and May of 1945, that this paper concentrates. Hill (2005) has remarked on the problematic nature of "(a)ttempting to ascertain the true emotions of special attack pilots from their last writings" (p. 35), but the private nature of the letters to the Tokioka family suggest that, at least to some extent, they reveal his true feelings. This is not to discount, though, the possibility of a certain self-censorship on Tokioka's part: references to the course of the war are few and discussion of the military strategy that his superiors had adopted is absent from the letters, perhaps because of what Tanaka (2015) refers to as the "social and political constraints at the time".

The first letter, dated March 6th, 1945, was written at the home of a friend in Tokyo:

> Dear Father,
>
> Thank you for your postcard. I was relieved to hear that everyone seems to be well. Needless to say, I am well too and in high spirits. I am writing this at the home of Sasaki Akio. His father has looked after me a lot, so I would be grateful if you sent him a letter of thanks. (His address is:- Mr. Sasaki Kentaro, 2 Hazawa-cho, Shibuya-ku.)
>
> I quickly sent a letter to Mr. Goto.
>
> The enclosed photos are of me with a Zero fighter plane. Would you kindly send them to various people for me?
>
> The enemy comes over this way a lot but we aren't worried. If you think you will be able to get out to Tokyo, please come to see me. We can meet inside the unit which is a 25-minute walk south of Tomobe Station on the Joban Line.
>
> It seems that I, too, will prove to be of service. I'm raring to go.
>
> Well, that's about all I have to tell you, Father.
>
> Yours in haste,
>
> Tsuruo

In his use of the phrase "prove to be of service" (or "prove to be useful"), Tokioka is hinting at the fact that he had joined the Special Attack Corps,

something he admitted openly to his family only in a subsequent letter. It was during his flight training at Tsukuba Naval Air Group the previous month that the classified order was given to set up a unit of the Special Attack Corps, with training to be completed by the end of April. According to Nishiyama (2006), 13 squadrons were formed with a total of 84 pilots, of whom over 90% were former university reserve officers. The question naturally arises: were these 84 airmen volunteers or were they nominated for this unit? For some scholars of Japan's wartime history, such a question has little meaning; they suggest that the concept of the volunteer has no relevance in the Japanese military context of the war's final years (Arudou *et al*., 2015). Imamura Shigeo, a special attack pilot who survived the war, writes: "Originally, the suicide mission was thought up as a voluntary service. However, in reality, it became an enforced tactic" (Imamura: 2001: 100). On a personal level he records why he responded in the way he did to the call for volunteers:

> To volunteer to die for the country seemed to me the only right thing to do. Was I scared? No, not at all. At least not at the time. Did I regret my action? Absolutely not" (*ibid*: 100).

There were no doubt some pilots who were willing to die for the Emperor—though, perhaps, more who saw themselves as the last line of defence in the protection of their families whose homes were being threatened by American B-29 bombers. Former Japanese Navy Commander Nakajima Tadashi has argued that there was no force involved in recruiting men for special attack duties in the Philippines campaign:

> If the order had been contrary to the will of the pilots, it would have been cruel beyond description, and I could no more have given it than I could have expected the men to carry it out (Inoguchi *et al*., 1958: 110).

This same writer later admits, however, that, as the war progressed, it became impossible with mounting pilot casualties to rely only on volunteers:

> (T)here developed a pressure, not entirely artificial, which encouraged 'volunteering' …. Many of the new arrivals [pilots] seemed at first not only to lack enthusiasm, but, indeed, to be disturbed by their situation. With some this condition lasted only a few hours, with others for several days (*ibid*: 158).

Since the call for volunteers tended to be made in the presence of all squad members (Smallwood, 2014), there must inevitably have been psychological peer pressure involved in the pilots' decisions, pressure arising from the sense of solidarity with comrades-in-arms and from the need to live up to their expectations, while avoiding any whiff of cowardice. In addition to this pressure, there was another: the "threat of retaliation if you said no was very real, as was the fear that there would potentially be retaliation against [the pilot's] family back home" (*ibid*.).

We get more clues as to Tokioka's feelings about his upcoming suicide mission in his next letter of March 16th, addressed to the whole family:

> Dear Father, Mother, Grandmother and Teruko,
>
> It has been some time since I heard from you but I trust that you, Father, and everyone else is well. As usual I am brimming with health and applying myself to the hard training, so don't worry.
>
> At the moment I am writing this at Ensign Sasaki's home in Tokyo, while listening quietly to a Mozart serenade. It is an indescribable feeling. Come to think of it, this was the piece I was listening to, alone in the drawing room at home, while sipping the cocoa Teruko had made for me, on the evening of December 10th, the year before last, just before I enlisted.
>
> Well, the progress of the war is becoming increasingly grim. The responsibility given to us pilots is now heavy. Of course, ever since you

allowed me to apply to become a pilot, I believe you were resigned to my death. In fact, with the war situation as grave as it is, there isn't one of my comrades-in-arms who is contemplating getting through this war alive. For me, too, the day when I can be of service is at last approaching. With all my heart I'm shouting "Bravo!" so Father, Mother, please be glad for me, too. I'm rejoicing heart and soul and I ask you now to say "Well done!" when you find out that I have been of splendid service.

Though I haven't had any news from Shoji, I'm sure that he, too, is serving honourably. But it appears that his big brother will lead the way. Yes!!

I am really sorry that in my twenty-four years I have failed to repay, in any way at all, my debt of gratitude to you, my parents. My duty to you remains incomplete. Writing like this makes this letter sound like a farewell note, but since it will be difficult to send anything from the unit for a while, I'm writing this in good time. In my twenty-four years of life there has been nothing that I have felt guilty about in front of you. At times I've drunk a lot and behaved wildly, but I seem to have appeared more serious-minded than even I expected.

About Teruko, I'd like you to wait a little before you let her get married. It may seem intrusive on my part but, all the same, I'm worried about the Tokioka family name, Shoji being in the military too. I think it would be best to decline Mr. Takeuchi's offer. The same goes for Mr. Kurashige. They are both good people but, as the words of the song say —'Don't give your daughter to an airman, today she's a bride, tomorrow a widow'— and the possibility of this happening is strong.

Until the end of April I have to stay inside the unit. You can come to see me here, but I'll feel much better if we don't meet.

Did the recent photo arrive? Please let me know. If it didn't, I'll send you another copy. And you needn't bother sending the various articles I asked for earlier. I would just like to see the photo albums once again (the four volumes). It would be awful if they got lost in the mail, so if it appears that Maeda's elder brother is going to Tokyo and if he could leave them with Mr. Sasaki, I don't think they would get lost being sent from Tokyo. I think his company would be a better place to leave them so I'll draw you a map. Alternatively, please ask Mr. Nose. At any rate, I'd really like to see the albums. I don't mind if you send them to me directly by registered mail.

My present state of mind is clear and serene—and this isn't in any way trivial, but instead, more like the feeling: 'This man is no longer struggling to find his place to die.'

From now on, I'll try to write as often as I can. Miss Kobayashi (who is just a friend) took a photo of me the other day on my day off. If you get it from Teruko, please send it too when you have a chance.

Sasaki and I are about to have a heavy drinking session. It's the springtime of life!

Well, be sure to take shelter as much as possible during the air raids and do your best to keep well. I'll be sure to, also. Please keep your letters coming.

Respectfully yours,

Tsuruo

I went for a drink with a brother-in-arms born on the same date as me. Half-price for the military.

March, my twenty-third spring.

As he contemplates his impending death, the attitude that comes across in this letter is one of cheerful defiance. He must surely also have intended not to cause his parents to worry and not to burden them with any feelings of doubt or fear on his part. One clear thread running through Tokioka's correspondence is the warm affection that he displayed towards his family and his concern for their well-being. He would look forward eagerly to receiving their letters, reminding them when a letter did not arrive as he expected. The above letter shows his concern for his younger brother, Shoji,

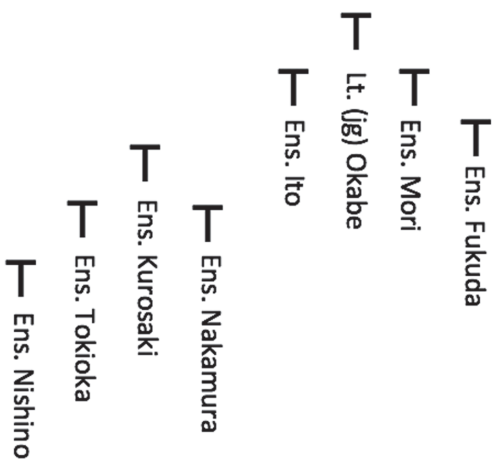
serving in the army, and for Teruko, his younger sister, who had started to work at a bank and was now being presented with offers of marriage. We learn from the correspondence that he was visited once by his family while undergoing training in Tsuchiura —in May, 1944— and that he probably called in at his parents' home at the end of September that year, when he was on his way from Izumi, Kagoshima Prefecture (where he learned to fly planes) to Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture. Just after he was commissioned as a naval ensign in December, he was given leave and returned home for the New Year, on which occasion he had the good fortune to see Shoji who happened to be on his way to his military unit in Korea. Between then and his attack sortie in May, he was to see his parents one more time, each parent on a separate occasion. The visit by his father to Tsukuba was in all likelihood triggered by the next letter of April 23rd:

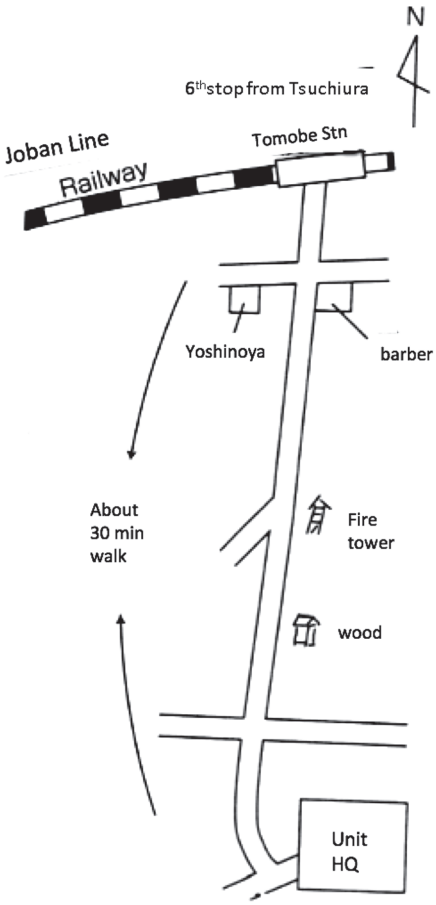
Dear Father,

Thank you for your letter. Have you recovered from your illness? I sincerely hope and pray that you take care of your health. The albums arrived and I had great joy in looking through them.

From the bottom of my heart I congratulate Teruko on her engagement. I'm fine and, day in day out, am working hard at my training, so don't worry about me.

With the war situation in Okinawa, which you will be aware of, a number of my seniors and those from the same graduating class as me have already left on special attack missions. Though I am only telling you now, I was chosen as a member of the Special Attack Corps on February 20th. I believe my grand sortie will be in two or three weeks' time. I belong to the 9th Squadron and the first seven squadrons have already sortied, so it will finally be my turn. This will probably come as a shock to you. However, I'm not afraid of dying at all. I'm resolutely in high spirits. As I wrote in my last letter, I would like you, Father and Mother, to be pleased for me. I asked Ensign Goto to enclose a train ticket in the envelope when he mails this letter for me, but if it is difficult for you to come to see me, Father, as your letter today suggests, please don't on any account go to unnecessary lengths. If you are able to come, please use the ticket; if you can't, then, when I fly to Kyushu, I'll shout out in a loud voice —'Goodbye!'— from the skies above Kobe. The leader of the 9th Squadron is Lieutenant junior





grade Okabe Yukio. If this name is mentioned in the news, then I'll be a 'god' by that time.

You can come to see me at any time. If you can come, please send a telegram to First Unit Headquarters. Then you can visit the unit at any time you wish. If you ask for Ensign Tokioka of the *Shinpū* dormitory, we can soon meet each other. There is an inn called Yoshinoya near the station, or you could also stay in Tsuchiura or Mito.

Any time is OK for coming to the unit, and you can have a meal here. If you choose to stay at Yoshinoya, you needn't bring any rice.

Please send my warm regards to my elder sisters in Kyoto.

Every day we are busy practising steep dives. Single-handedly I'll get a thousand people, without fail, and a hundred planes, just as you wished, Father. After all, I only do it once.

Praying for your complete recovery, Father, and for everyone's health,

In haste, respectfully yours,

Tsuruo

Last goodbyes

As Tokioka intimates in this letter, the thirteen squadrons that made up the Tsukuba Special Attack Corps had, from early April, begun to set out for southern Kyushu and the naval air base at Kanoya, Kagoshima Prefecture. From here sorties would be launched. The departure of three squadrons from Tsukuba, Tokioka's among them, was slightly delayed, and he did not leave until April 26th, heading first for Tomitaka Air Base in Miyazaki Prefecture. Just before take off, however, his father, Masatada, managed to get to Tsukuba from Kobe to meet him for the last time. Despite the poor state of his health, Masatada must have set out for Tsukuba immediately upon reading the letter of April 23rd. One can easily imagine the emotion at this encounter: the son, with death staring him in the face, hoping to see his father one more time, the father's relief at finding out that he had arrived in time.

On May 3rd Tokioka proceeded from Tomitaka to Kanoya where he was put on sortie standby. It was here, on May 6th, while waiting for the order to sortie, that he was able to meet his mother, Shigeko, in what seems an almost miraculous encounter when one considers the difficulties she faced in this wartime journey from Kobe. An account of their meeting, reported by Nishiyama (2006), was given in the diary entry for May 6th of Yoshida Shin, a Tokyo University graduate in the same Tsukuba squadron as Tokioka:

> Today the mother of 9th Tsukuba Squadron Ensign Tokioka came from afar to visit him and had a deeply moving meeting with him. I instinctively recalled my own mother and father in Taipei and feelings of nostalgia welled up inside me. Just like a mother, she had enquired about all the bases in Kyushu and, with the transport being disrupted because of air raids, had walked to and asked at six places in this area. At last she was told of his whereabouts at Tomitaka Air Base and so could come. Her being able to see him while he was still alive —due to the delay in his sortie— was a true joy and cause of pleasure for all present (Nishiyama, 2006: 144). [author's translation]

A photograph of the occasion showing mother and son sitting on the grass talking together was published in the May 17th edition of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

Shigeko's own diary records that she left Kobe on April 30th, arriving in Kagoshima on May 2nd. Her entry for the afternoon of May 6th, describing her feelings at this time, is revealing:

> Ah, it was just like a dream, it was so good to see him.
> Afternoon. The unit members' sports event. I watch from a room. Innocent games—a competition to light a cigarette with your hands behind your back, a contest to hit an upturned pail from a distance with a blindfold on, a game of musical chairs, a spoon race and so forth. With

prizes for everyone. When it was over, the way they returned to their rooms, each carrying a prize in his arms and laughing with his companions, it was just like elementary schoolchildren. It made me think: are you really going to throw away your lives tomorrow? They were truly in a transcendent state of mind. Ah, how sad it is going back over all the memories I have of him, knowing that he is going to fall like Yamato cherry blossoms (Nishiyama, 2006: 145). [author's translation]

Shigeko stayed for two nights at Kanoya and on the morning of the 8th, with painful reluctance, set off back to Kobe.

Final letter

Three days later Operation *Kikusui* Number 6 was set in motion and Tokioka's squadron was given the order to sortie. The nerve-sapping period of waiting was not yet over for Tokioka, however, as he recounted in his final letter to his family of May 13th:

Dear Father, Mother and family,

My sortie is finally set for tomorrow. All preparations have been completed and I am writing this lying down on my bed in the air raid shelter. I was supposed to sortie in the attack of the day before yesterday, but unfortunately I was left behind because of my plane's poor maintenance. Lieutenant junior grade Okabe and Ensigns Mori, Fukuda and Nakamura were killed in combat, but Ensigns Kurosaki, Ito, Nishino and I will go on an attack together tomorrow. I was also supposed to set off yesterday, went to the airfield and was already sitting in my plane when the attack was suddenly cancelled. I was really disappointed. But I leave tomorrow and I'm really eager. I feel in a clear, calm state. For sure, I'll show them tomorrow, without fail, that I can hit the target brilliantly. What I'm aiming for is a regular aircraft carrier. Let's make some cherry blossoms bloom right in the middle of the enemy's task force.

All the fellows I'm going on the attack with tomorrow are either writing letters home or refining their tactics. It's a beautiful, stirring sight, yet at the same time peaceful. They are all admirable men. Is there any reason why I alone shouldn't be able to do what they can all do? I'll do it, I'll do it decisively.

Well, my twenty-four years of life have been truly blessed. I have spent them in freedom and joy, surrounded by a good home, good parents and good siblings. I shall die a really satisfied man. I was able to see Father in Tsukuba, and Mother not only took great pains to visit me in a far place but spent two nights talking with me in an unhurried way, really getting to know my feelings and our way of life. So I genuinely feel blessed with good fortune. I just pray this good fortune continues to the end and I can hit the target skillfully. I met Sasaki, too. He's a little delayed in his sortie schedule and this vexes him.

I went to Kanoya Inn just twice. The three of us—Nishino, Fukuda and I—went there to drink taking with us a chicken and ten eggs. We had a bath and spent an evening talking together at leisure. It was an extremely meaningful night. When I go out on the attack tomorrow, Mori and Fukuda will probably be waiting for me holding a bottle of *sake*. We shall all drink heavily again.

I must apologize for the fact that, throughout my life, I have failed to be a dutiful son. But since I am to be of some service now, please forgive me. As the elder son of the Tokioka family, not being part of the generational line from our ancestors is something to apologize for rather than regret, but if there is no country, there is no family either. Okinawa, at least, will triumph for certain. Rest assured on that point.

A letter from Fukuda to his sweetheart, Miss Yano Fumiko, has been sent to this address: c/o Mr. Ishii, 62-14 Higashishiriike-cho, 3-chome, Hayashida-ku. Please let her know that Fukuda had a cheerful air about him. It's now 11 o'clock and if I don't sleep, it may interfere with my sortie tomorrow, so I'll finish. I leave on this raid full of

thanks to you. I've no idea what death is. Might it not be pleasant?

Oh, I've just remembered. Ensign Fujita's wife may come to the house. Fujita is also going on the sortie with me. Sato is still in Tomitaka.

Well, everyone—or rather, Grandmother, Father, Mother, Teruko—be cheerful and do your best. If you know Shoji's address, tell him my news.

I'm off, full of high spirits, to do my utmost. Goodbye.

Respectfully yours,

Tsuruo

May 13th, 11:39 pm

To: Grandmother, Father, Mother, Teruko (be a good wife, won't you? No self-indulgence)

Dear Elder Sisters,

You were really good sisters to me. I feel blessed and can only thank you. I have to be up early tomorrow morning, so I can't write all I would like to, but let me express my true gratitude. You are lucky, too, aren't you, all of you having such fine husbands? Please bring up Japan's next generation to be splendid citizens, and when they are older, be sure to tell them that their uncle was a great man who was happy to the end. I'll be sure to do my best to send a ship to the bottom. Be cheerful. Japan will surely be victorious. Farewell. Brothers-in-law, goodbye!

The next day, May 14th, the 10th and 11th Tsukuba Squadrons were combined to form the 6th Tsukuba Squadron, and at 6:29 in the morning Ensign Tokioka Tsuruo sortied out of Kaniya Air Base targeting the US task force east of Tanegashima and was killed in action. He was twenty-three years old.

This final letter reveals again his genuine warm regard towards his family, his feelings of affection and gratitude mixed with a concern that he might have been remiss in showing filial piety to his parents. On this latter point, he hopes that his self-sacrifice in defence of the country will compensate for his deficiencies. Just as in the two previous letters, this letter conveys a cheerful disregard for his approaching death and firm resolve to complete the task for which he had been trained. We are also made aware of his feelings of solidarity with his flight-mates—notice his dismay at being unable to join his companions in the attack sortie of May 11th. To what can we attribute the "clear, calm state", this somewhat philosophical attitude towards death that he appears to possess? Yamashita (2015) states that 'spirit' was given great importance in the training of Japanese pilots who were taught that such spirit would offset technical shortcomings in their flying skills. He also asserts that, in order to boost pilots' morale, their superiors would encourage them to identify with Japan's samurai tradition. As a former student of literature at Matsuyama High School, Tokioka may have studied the 18th century classic *Hagakure* (In hidden leaves) by the monk (and former samurai) Yamamoto Tsunetomo: "One has to be able to die at any time and to have prepared one's spirit [to do this]" (*ibid*., p. 137). For Yamamoto, it is in death that the Way of the Samurai is found:

> If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way. His whole life will be without blame, and he will succeed in his calling (quoted in Hill, 2005).

Tokioka's description in the March 16th letter of his emotional state as being that of a man "not struggling to find his place to die" appears almost certainly to be a reference to *Hagakure* (Yamashita, 2015). Moreover, like all Japanese military personnel, he would have been familiar with the Field Service Code (*Senjinkun*) issued in January 1941 and the exhortations therein to preserve one's honour in battle:

> To transcend considerations of life and death is to have a spirit of sublime self-sacrifice. Stand aloof from thoughts of life and death and concentrate all your attention on pushing forward in the completion of your duty! Use up all your mental

> and physical strength and take joy in the principle of eternal righteousness! (quoted in Hill, 2005)

Though we cannot be certain, the above influences may have been a factor in Tokioka's achievement of that state of mind described in his final letters, that "spiritual awakening" that Nakajima Tadashi, commanding officer at Kanoya, noticed in the young pilots under his charge:

> [L]ike an attainment of wisdom, care vanished and tranquillity of spirit appeared as life came to terms with death, mortality with immortality (Inoguchi *et al.*, 1958: 158–9).

Final Thoughts

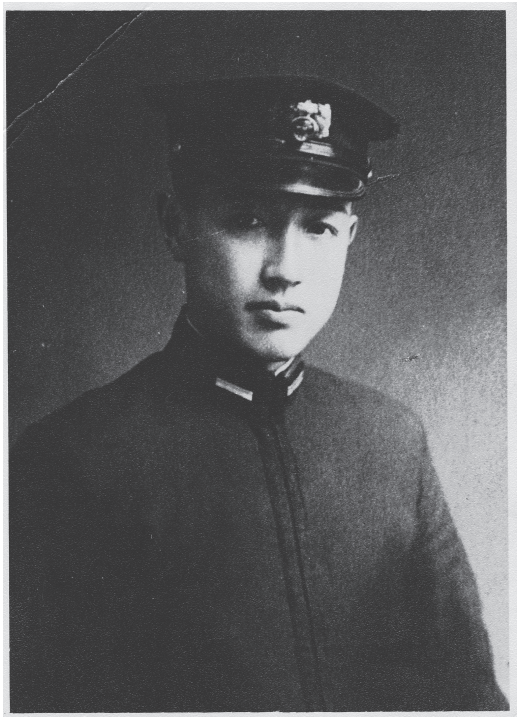
The final letters of Tokioka Tsuruo portray him as a strong, positive character, concerned for the well-being of his family, to whom he displays warm affection, and with a firm conviction that the special attack mission for which he was being prepared was a necessary and just one, regardless of the cost to himself. Nowhere in these letters do we find a man experiencing inner turmoil over impending death and the desire to live; nowhere does he suggest lingering doubts about his assigned mission. We need to bear in mind, of course, that he was not writing for himself but for an audience—his family—in whom he would want to inspire pride and admiration for what he was about to do and whose suffering or feelings of guilt he would be anxious to spare. We can never know for certain what was going though his mind in those final days. What is beyond doubt is the tragic waste of young lives incurred through the adoption of suicide-pilot tactics in a war as good as lost—over 90% of the Japanese Navy's Special Attack pilots were between the ages of 18 and 24 (Gordon, 2004)—and many of these young men were highly educated. We can only speculate as to the contribution that they would have made to Japanese society had they not been given what one surviving Special Attack Corps member, Hamazono Shigeyoshi, called "the ultimate death sentence". For Hamazono, "*Tokkō* is the worst type of act in that it treats precious human lives as if they are objects" (*ibid.*). This accusation—that the young Special Attack pilots were regarded as human resources to be exploited—has some substance when we realize that eight out of ten of the Navy's *tokkō* officer pilots who, like Tokioka, lost their lives in the Battle of Okinawa were former students (Tanaka, 2005). Hill (2005) explains the reason: "As the scale of the Kamikaze attacks was stepped up, using its best pilots in this way was seen as a colossal waste of Japan's most precious remaining military asset" (p. 22). Thus, the naval hierarchy spared their professional, battle-hardened pilots at the expense of their young, inexperienced non-professional fliers.

Aside from their documentary and historical value, are there any benefits to be gained from the study of the writings of Special Attack Corps members? In the case of Tokioka's letters, they remind us of the importance of close human relationships and unwavering commitment to an ideal (however misplaced), and they give us an example of courage in confronting one's destiny when it is held in the grip of a militaristic ideology that demands total obedience and even "patriotic martyrdom" (Iritani, 1991). In her study of how young Japanese suicide pilots represented themselves in their correspondence, Van Der Does-Ishikawa equates the importance of these letters to the testimonies left behind by witnesses to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

> (A)ttempts to keep the Hiroshima/Nagasaki memory alive have had an impact on the public's pacifist, anti-nuclear, domestic peace discourse that crossed national boundaries to stimulate international debate, and the same potential is witnessed with the Kamikaze missives, whenever read with empathy (Van Der Does-Ishikawa, 2015: 375).

The number of *tokkō* pilots who survived the last months of the Asian Pacific War and can testify to its

realities is dwindling rapidly, but the legacy of their younger comrades–in–arms lives on in their final writings. The cynical sacrifice of young lives (nearly 4,000 if we combine army and navy pilots) to the misguided strategy of a military clique should be a warning to us, Sheftall believes, indicating "to what extremes the condition of total war is capable of driving humans psychologically" (Arudou *et al*., 2015). The letters of these young airmen, and the very human concerns that they reveal, merit wider study by their latter–day contemporaries in the twenty–first century if we wish to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.



Naval Ensign Tokioka Tsuruo
(photograph courtesy of Mrs Tokioka Hanako)

The author would like to express his sincere thanks to Mrs Tokioka Hanako and to Professor Nishiyama Shin of Kyoto University Archives for providing access to Lieutenant Tokioka's correspondence.

References

Arudou, D. & Sheftall, M.G. (2015). Japan's Kamikaze Suicide Pilots Exhibit at the USS Missouri in Honolulu: an interview with M.G. Sheftall. *The Asia–Pacific Journal* Vol.13, 23:1.

Cook H.T. & Cook T.F. (1992). *Japan at War: An Oral History*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Earhart, D. (2005). Kamikazefication and Japan's wartime ideology. *Critical Asian Studies*, 37:4, 569–596.

Gordon, B. (2004) Kamikaze Images. Retrieved from http://www.kamikazeimages.net

Hill, P. (2005). Kamikaze, 1943–5. In Gambetta, D. (ed.) *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hyakuta, N. (2009). *Eien no zero*. Tokyo: Kodansha.

Imamura, S. (2001). *Shig: The True Story of An American* Kamikaze. Baltimore, MD: American Literary Press.

In the Faraway Mountains and Rivers. (2005) Trans. Quinn, J. L. and Yamanouchi, M. Scranton, IL: University of Scranton Press.

Inoguchi, R. & Nakajima, T. (1958). *The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press.

Iritani, T. (1991). *Group Psychology of the Japanese in Wartime*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Nagatsuka, R. (1974). *I was a Kamikaze*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Nishiyama, S. (2006). (Ed.) *Kyōto daigaku ni okeru「gakutoshutsujin」chōsa kenkyu hōkokusho dai 1 maku*. [Report on the investigative research into 'Students' Departure for the Front', Vol. 1.] Kyoto: Kyoto University Archives.

Sheftall, M.G. (2005). *Blossoms in the Wind: Human Legacies of the Kamikaze*. New York, NY: NAL Caliber.

Smallwood, K. (2014). How were Kamikaze Pilots Chosen? Retrieved from http: //www. todayifoundout. com/ index.php/2014/11/kamikaze–pilots–chosen/

Tanaka, Y. (2005). Japan's Kamikaze Pilots and Contemporary Suicide Bombers: War and Terror. *The Asia–Pacific Journal* Vol.3:7.

Tanaka, Y. (2015). Reflections on the Commemoration of the Kamikaze Pilots in Pearl Harbor and Chiran. *The Asia–Pacific Journal* Vol.13, 23:2.

Van Der Does–Ishikawa, L. (2015). Contested memories of the Kamikaze and the self–representations of Tokkō–tai youth in their missives home. *Japan Forum* 27:3, 345–379.

Yamashita, S.H. (2015). *Daily Life in Wartime Japan, 1940–1945*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.