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The Sacred Warriors: Japan's Suicide Legions

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Warner, Denis and Warner, Peggy with Sadao Seno. *The Sacred Warriors: Japan's Suicide Legions*. New York: Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 1982. 370pp. \$24.95

Not to tell sea stories but in the tradition of the British boardroom one must declare an interest at the outset; the ship in which the reviewer was serving was sunk by a suicide plane off Okinawa in 1945 (in fact, the Warners manage to sink her twice in Appendix 1, which gives "the kamikaze scorecard"). Mr. Warner writes not from the light of the lamp alone; he was in HMS *Formidable* as an Australian war correspondent when she was hit twice at Okinawa (not Leyte Gulf, as the dust jacket says) and knocked out of the war. Warner describes his injuries and reactions modestly in the third person; he recovered quickly enough to fly in a Superfortress raid on Japan that summer. The Warners' collaborator, Commander Seno, JMSDF (Ret.), was graduated from the Japanese naval academy toward the end of the war and was assigned to midget submarines in the defense of the expected Kyushu invasion. Commander Seno's access to Japanese survivors of the suicide legions lends interest and vitality to the story.

The Sacred Warriors covers the range of Japanese suicide groups, civilians on Saipan, flyers, submariners, infantrymen, the crew of the *Yamato*, etc. The underlying philosophy for the fighting man was, of course, that of the samurai—death in battle was to be sought, to be welcomed. No samurai would allow himself to be taken prisoner. Yet, the samurai code was a class matter, and the samurai, as a class, had been abolished in the Meiji Restoration. This unwritten code of the samurai was, however, bureaucratized into a pamphlet, "Battle Ethics," compiled under the direction of General Hideki Tojo and distributed to

all officers and men on 8 January 1941. The Warners quote from this: "A sublime sense of self-sacrifice must guide you Do not stay alive in dishonor Do not die in such a way as to leave a bad name behind you." Certainly, the diaries, letters and memories of fallen Japanese servicemen that the Warners quote show this "sense of self-sacrifice" to be overriding. What is left unsaid is the group aspect. Just as the success of the Japanese in group endeavors is said to have much to do with Japan's prowess in the economic world, so it is with death. Robert Jay Lifton in the preface to *Six Lives, Six Deaths: Portraits from Modern Japan* points "in life and death," to "the Japanese intellectual tradition of emphasizing individual integration into an immediate group rather than personal commitment to a transcendental value or religious or philosophical world view." Later, Lifton writes: "particularly striking in Japan . . . the phenomenon of collective suicide. Collective suicide dramatically illustrates the precedence of group-centered values in death no less than in life . . . the experiences of the kamikaze pilots . . . certainly a form of collective suicide"

But the Warners have another explanation of the suicide legions that relies less on Japanese psychology than it does on the mordant observation of von Clausewitz: "War is an act of force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit: a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes."

The Sacred Warriors shows the various ways both sides in the Pacific war moved to extremes until, "To both sides, the enemy seemed less than human." Japanese atrocities and brutalities to civilians and prisoners were well known. Less publicized attitudes and incidents on the other side are given by the Warners.

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The commanding officer of the 37th Division ordered surrendering Japanese shot; Admiral Halsey's chief of staff saw concern over the sinking of Japanese hospital ships as "an unnecessary refinement to worry too much about"; the Commander, US Army Service Forces recommended germ warfare against the Japanese (in October 1944, the Vice Chief of the Japanese Navy General Staff asked for plans to launch bacteriological bombs from submarines against West Coast cities). The stage was surely set for the kamikazes and the atomic bombs.

The tactical effectiveness of the suicide weapons varied widely. Suicidal infantry charges were forlorn hopes; human bombs were not effective; the suicide submarines had some successes, but were not well enough developed technically; it was the kamikaze pilot that was the effective weapon. The Warners quote several admirals on the seriousness of the threat to naval operations. The gravest assessment was that of Admiral Nimitz who on 25 May 1945 suggested to Admiral King that the proposed invasion of Kyushu on 1 November be postponed "unless speed is considered so important that we are willing to accept less than the best preparedness and more than minimum casualties" Twenty-seven ships sunk and 225 hit in the first seven weeks of the Okinawa operation had to be a sobering factor in any commander's thinking about an amphibious assault on the Japanese home islands; the 1982 Falklands travail of the Royal Navy with Exocets was clearly foreshadowed by the suicide planes off Okinawa.

The book concludes with an appraisal of the chances for the Kyushu invasion. It is a rather overly pessimistic one. Eventual success was foreseen, but with a real possibility of Soviet occupation of a substantial part of the home islands

(there is a novel on the Kyushu invasion, *Lighter than a Feather*, by David Westheimer, author of *Van Ryan's Express*, which also sees heavy casualties and eventual victory).

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Howarth, David. *Famous Sea Battles*.
Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1981.
185pp. \$22.50

To begin with the less than positive comments: This is a puzzling book. Its large format and beautifully reproduced artwork and photographs (including the jacket whose front is a painting of "The Battle of the Nile" and whose back is a photograph of the flight deck of HMS *Indomitable* in 1945) seem to mark it as one of what we have come to call coffee-table books. There is, however, much too much text for a display book. On the other hand the text thoroughly, accurately, objectively and, at times, compassionately describes the background, ships, weapons, actors, tactics, and results of the chosen sea battles—but does so with a very nearly complete lack of the scholarly apparatus we have come to expect of serious history. There are acknowledgements in respect of the sources of the artwork and there is an appendix but no footnotes, references, or bibliography. Some books, even others of naval history by the well-known David Howarth, provide some clue to their aim, purpose, and intended audience in their front matter—their foreword or preface or some sort of prologue. Not here. We move from cover to title page to table of contents then bang into the first battle.

With little exception, Howarth devotes one chapter to each of the battles he considers "famous." Had his title been *The Most Famous . . .* or *The Most Important . . .* we might quibble with his