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The Upside-Down Japanese Mind: It Makes Our Defeat Seem Easy

But the Allied Conquest Might be Difficult and Costly Because of Suicide Defense

If the enemy approaches by sea, destroy his transports on the high seas. If he approaches our shores, crush him at the water's edge. And if he lands, all that has to be done is annihilate him on land.



Suicide Symbolism: Jap hara-kiri planes started blazes on the Saratoga's flight deck

In a land where white is the color of mourning and black the color of ceremony, where newspapers are read from right to left, this may have been a logical strategy. It was announced last week by the head of the Japanese government, Premier Kantaro Suzuki. Furthermore, the Japs took steps to put it into effect.

Day and night the Japanese radio exhorted the people to constitute themselves a special-attack (suicide) corps 100,000,000 strong. Speakers hammered at them to convert the home islands into one great Rabaul, the bomb-blasted Japanese base on the tip of New Britain. The government made plans to draft men from 15 to 60 and women from 17 to 40 into the Civilian Volunteer Corps, which will serve as a suicidal home guard. Lt. Gen. Sanetsune Ushijima, Vice Director of the Tokyo Civilian Volunteer Corps, sternly told the women they are expected to engage in active combat in emulation of the women of Okinawa who, he claimed, "fought valiantly at the front lines with their babies in their arms."

That it all sounded somewhat ridiculous to Americans was beside the point. The battle of Okinawa had reinforced the lesson learned over and over, all the way across the Pacific: the upside-down Japanese mind could make the cost of conquest terribly expensive in American lives.

Okinawa: Hara-Kiri Plateau

In waves of rage and frustration, scores of Japanese on Okinawa last week jumped into the sea, or blew out their brains with grenades. One Jap soldier popped up near an American artillery position, shouted at the startled doughboys in good English: "Look out, I'm going to blow my head off"—and did. One group of 21 enemy soldiers raced around in circles screaming wildly, ran back behind a boulder to hold a conference, and finally blasted themselves to bits. Another maddened Jap decided to have one last fling at the Americans before dying. He came forward with his hands over his head as if to surrender. When he got to within ten feet of Capt. Charles D. Farnham, he suddenly stooped over, picked up a handful of dirt, and tossed it into the officer's face. Doughboys standing nearby drilled the Jap as he turned and walked away.

Unconditional Hara-Kiri: The Americans had expected this wholesale flurry of suicide that usually foreshadows the convulsive end of every Pacific battle. And they fully expected the Japs to hold out to the last man. But on the slim chance that further bloodshed might be prevented, the American Tenth Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., who was killed this Monday while observing front-line action, offered the enemy commander a formal surrender—the first of its kind ever made to the Japs. Three copies of the note were written out in Japanese and English, placed in aluminum canisters and dropped inside enemy lines.

"You fully know that no reinforcements can reach you," Buckner's message said. "I believe you understand as clearly as I that the destruction of all Japanese resistance on this island is merely a matter of days."

The Jap general was instructed to hang out a white square at a designated spot if he were willing to give up. Next day, American planes flying over to look for the surrender flag were fired upon. Once again the Japs had decided to fight until they were killed or shoved into the sea.

American Marines and doughboys, lined up before the white coral Yaeju-Take plateau, changed its name to Hara-Kiri, and heaved forward in brisk attacks. The First Marine Division on the right end of the line and the 96th and Seventh Army Divisions on the left crept ahead in the early morning darkness, threw ropes up rocky crags, and hauled themselves up hand over hand. When daylight came, the Japs fought back with mortars and deadly white phosphorous shells that cause usually fatal burns. One Marine company suffered casualties of over 50 per cent and lost all its officers. The Americans brought up heavy artillery, and flame-throwing tanks with long extension hoses. Then they rushed into deep caves and tunnels after the Japs. Slowly the enemy line thinned out, and the Americans sped over the plateau toward the southern end of the island.