

BOOK REVIEW

Danger's Hour: The Story of the USS *Bunker Hill* and the Kamikaze Pilot Who Crippled Her¹

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A true story, *Danger's Hour: The Story of the USS Bunker Hill and the Kamikaze Pilot Who Crippled Her* reads like a novel depicting the day of the worst kamikaze attack on American forces.³ This attack on the *Bunker Hill* occurred on May 11, 1945, three days after Germany surrendered in World War II. The *Bunker Hill's* story has never before been told. The reader knows from the outset that the aircraft carrier is attacked by kamikaze pilots, but in the hundreds of pages leading up to the fateful day, a certain attachment to the characters develops and it becomes a story that one hopes will end differently.

In preparation for the book, Kennedy made three trips to Japan, interviewing over 100 former kamikaze-trained pilots and their families.⁴ He also requested that naval records be declassified and relied on ship logs and action reports from vessels surrounding the *Bunker Hill* on the date of the attack.⁵ Based on his research, he brought together detailed accounts of the period leading up to the attack on the *Bunker Hill* and the event that changed her history.

Kennedy weaves the story of the daily lives of the Japanese student draftees, and the kamikaze pilot Kiyoshi Ogawa in particular, with the story of the United States sailors and pilots

¹ MAXWELL TAYLOR KENNEDY, *DANGER'S HOUR: THE STORY OF THE USS BUNKER HILL AND THE KAMIKAZE PILOT WHO CRIPPLED HER* (2008).

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³ KENNEDY, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁴ *Id.* at 465.

⁵ *Id.* (noting that official reports and action reports generated by officers and crewmen of the *Bunker Hill* and the action reports of various component squadrons of Air Group 84 are available at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, Maryland).

aboard the *Bunker Hill*. He brings to life the kamikaze pilots who were treated as expendable weapons and the sailors and pilots whose lives would be changed forever by the kamikazes' destruction. Kennedy's descriptions make the experience come alive as if the characters are lifted up from the pages and are acting out scenes right in front of the reader.

In relating the story of Kiyoshi Ogawa, the author notes that this unlikely kamikaze pilot grew up in a farming community in a family of an emerging rural merchant class.⁶ Family, friends, and neighbors who had known Ogawa as a boy described him as smart, funny, handsome, and kind, with a "vibrant booming voice filled with joy."⁷ Unlike most children in rural villages, Ogawa graduated from junior high school, passed an exhaustive examination, and was admitted to a college preparatory school on the campus of Waseda University.⁸ While Ogawa was in preparatory school, Japan had signed a peace agreement with the Soviet Union, and, in response, the United States had frozen Japanese assets within American borders and cut off oil exports to Japan.⁹ In time, relations between Japan and the United States deteriorated, leading to the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the United States' subsequent involvement in World War II.

Ogawa entered the School of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University on October 1, 1942.¹⁰ He was preparing for a life in public policy and had never considered joining the armed forces.¹¹ The founder of Waseda University was a "nationalist intellectual who believed that Japanese success was tied to reconciliation with the West,"¹² but, unfortunately, Ogawa never lived to see reconciliation with the West. Initially, Japanese university

⁶ *Id.* at 24-25.

⁷ *Id.* at 26.

⁸ *Id.* at 28-29.

⁹ *Id.* at 29.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 33.

¹¹ *Id.* at 88.

¹² *Id.* at 29.

students were exempt from the draft, but on October 1, 1943, Emperor Hirohito issued an Imperial Order suspending the exemption and Ogawa was drafted, along with every other nonscience student in the country.¹³

Japan has a long history of using suicide as a war tactic,¹⁴ but the first use of such a tactic after the attack on Pearl Harbor was during the battle for the island of Saipan in July 1944, when ground-based Japanese troops made a suicide charge out of caves and mountain hideouts.¹⁵ This strategy, however, did not work to defeat the Americans at Saipan.¹⁶ After numerous Japanese fighter planes were shot down by the Americans, a Japanese captain realized the inexperienced pilots could not defeat the Americans unless they resorted to aerial suicide attacks, specifically crashing into aircraft carriers before the bombs were released.¹⁷

As of February 1945, after Japan had lost all of its aircraft carriers as well as critical territory in the Pacific, including the Philippines, Saipan, and the Marshall Islands, the Japanese still refused to surrender. Instead, young cadets, including Ogawa, were told that the war was so severe that *tokkotai*,¹⁸ a special attack corps for suicide attacks, was necessary.¹⁹ Cadets were given a form to fill out regarding their desire to join the *tokkotai*.²⁰ One of the kamikaze survivors later explained that he felt they were not permitted to decline participation in the corps.²¹ As it turned out, they were all forced to join the *tokkotai* regardless of their preference.²²

¹³ *Id.* at 87.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 116.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 110-14.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at 115.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 181.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 182.

²² *Id.*

Former kamikaze pilots recalled that the cadets were initially disturbed by their new assignment but eventually accepted their fate and “were relieved by the certainty that they would die quickly in an airplane.”²³ Ogawa’s *tokko*²⁴ group formed two weeks before the fall of Iwo Jima in March 1945.²⁵ Even after Iwo Jima, Japan knew it was defeated but refused to surrender.²⁶ The goal was to sink individual ships, including the *Bunker Hill*, even though the Japanese knew they could not stop the United States Navy.²⁷

In relating the events of the May 11, 1945 attack on the *Bunker Hill*, the author gives play-by-play accounts of the experiences of the kamikaze and of various American sailors and pilots during the minutes and seconds leading up to, and following, the attacks that killed 393 Americans.²⁸ At 10:02 a.m. on May 11, 1945, kamikaze pilot Yasunori Seizo crashed into the ship, taking out planes on the flight deck and eventually skidding into the sea.²⁹

Thirty seconds later Ogawa hit the bulls eye – the island structure and command center of the ship.³⁰ Seizo had flown in so low that by the time his plane was picked up on radar, the anti-aircraft gunners could not block it.³¹ The time between the two strikes gave the gunners on the *Bunker Hill* and the surrounding ships the opportunity to train the full force of their anti-aircraft ammunition on Ogawa’s plane.³² Unbelievably, Ogawa hit his target even with large holes in his wings.

The destruction that ensued was not just what one might envision from a simple plane crash, as the kamikaze planes carried

²³ *Id.* at 187.

²⁴ *Id.* at 180.

²⁵ *Id.* at 188.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 468.

²⁹ *Id.* at 284-86.

³⁰ *Id.* at 289, 293.

³¹ *Id.* at 290.

³² *Id.*

550-pound bombs.³³ Kennedy's description of the inferno that overtook much of the ship will have the reader shuddering in disbelief. In addition to the physical destruction, the choices the sailors were forced to make were inconceivable. For example, lookouts placed high up in the island structure leapt into the sea from their burning positions.³⁴ Others jumped or fell into shark-infested waters to escape the smoke and fire.³⁵ Still others continued to work in the boiler room to keep the ship afloat until they were overtaken by carbon-monoxide poisoning.³⁶

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching account was that of a sailor responsible for controlling the flow of seawater in and out of watertight bulkheads in order to keep the ship at an even keel. He followed orders to leave a locked hatch closed even though he heard sailors pounding to be let out.³⁷ After the officer who issued the order walked away, the sailor continued to obey the order even as he heard "the men crying out, scratching, banging, and pleading for him to open the door."³⁸ He waited by the door until the last man stopped knocking.³⁹

More attention-grabbing than an ordinary history lecture, this book draws the reader in to feel like they are part of the event. Through Kennedy's effective lesson on the account of this one aircraft carrier, the magnitude of the war becomes more clear, both in terms of the personal experiences and the general logistical challenges of moving a carrier vessel. The reader finds an eye-opening picture of what our soldiers went through in World War II, and the Pacific theatre in particular.

³³ *Id.* at 284, 290.

³⁴ *Id.* at 295.

³⁵ *Id.* at 323-24.

³⁶ *Id.* at 371.

³⁷ *Id.* at 308.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 309.

It is hard to remain untouched by the bravery of the young American sailors and the tragedy of the kamikaze pilots. Most of the sailors involved were just teenagers, without knowledge of how they would be remembered in history as heroes of the ill-fated *Bunker Hill*. Remarkably, even after the kamikaze attacks, the injured ship was able to return home.⁴⁰ According to a New York Times article, *Bunker Hill* sailors still gather for reunions over 60 years after the war's end,⁴¹ demonstrating the significant impact those months in the Pacific had on their lives.

This book is broken into chapters, which makes finding specific subject matter easy for readers who may be particularly interested in different aspects of the story. Although the story needs no help in painting vivid pictures worthy of an Oliver Stone film, there are photographs throughout the book. *Danger's Hour* should interest both history buffs and casual readers alike.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 426-27.

⁴¹ Dan Barry, *Keeping Alive Memories That Bedevil Him*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 14, 2009, at A10, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/us/14land.html?_r=1&emc=eta1.