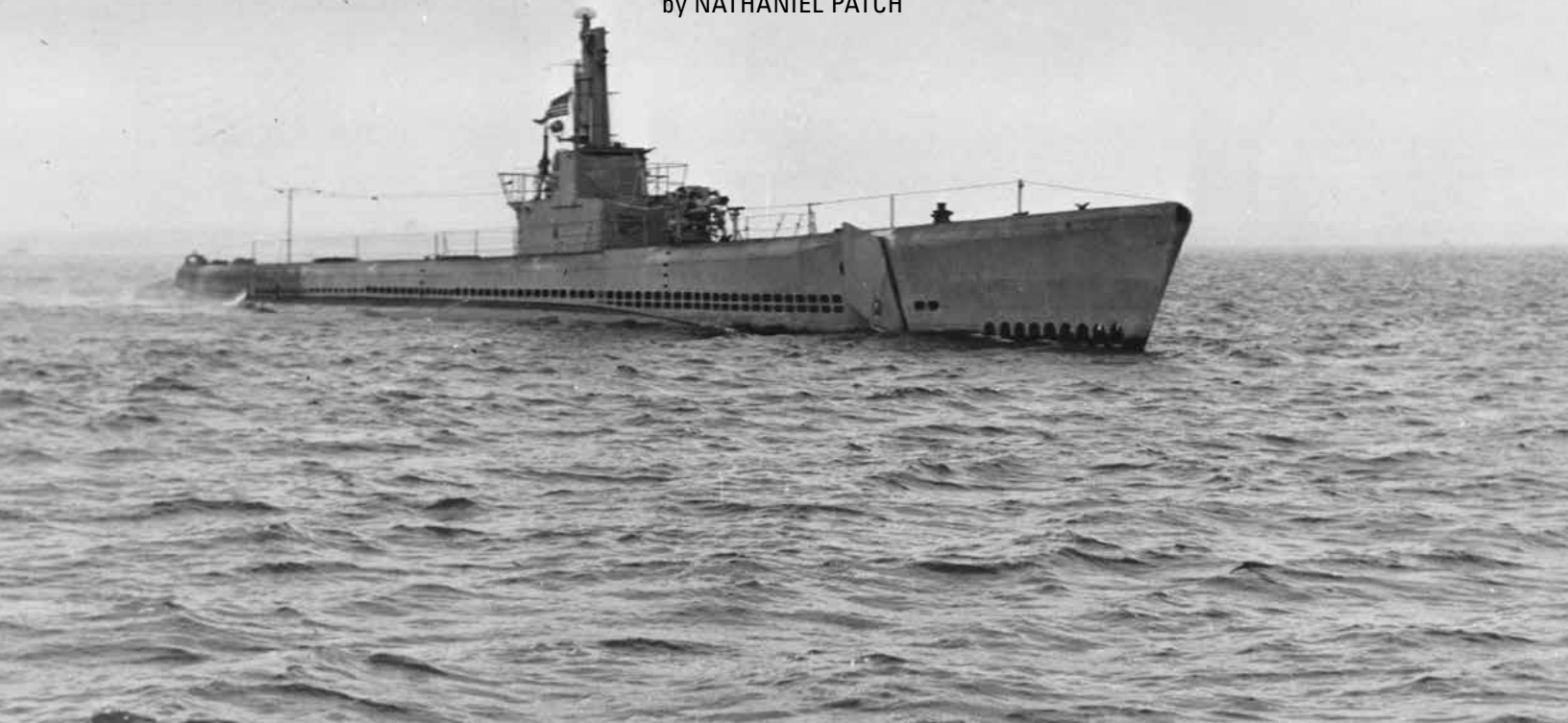




KAMIKAZES!

When Japanese Planes Attacked
the U.S. Submarine *Devilfish*

by NATHANIEL PATCH



The image of desperate Japanese pilots purposely flying their planes into American warships in the closing months of World War II figures prominently in American popular culture.

When most people hear the term *kamikaze*, they think of swarms of planes flying through a torrent of antiaircraft fire and plowing into the decks of aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, taking the lives of sailors and damaging or sinking the ships in this desperate act.

Out of the hundreds of these attacks, one was quite unusual: the only kamikaze attack on an American submarine, the USS *Devilfish* (SS 292).

Why was this submarine attacked, and why was there only one attacker? The story of the attack on the *Devilfish* seems to be a fragment of a larger story, separated by time and distance, occurring on March 20, 1945. If kamikazes attacked in numbers, where were the other planes? If the priority for kamikazes were aircraft carriers and other surface ships, then why attack a submarine? This article explores a possible answer to these questions by analyzing the attack on the *Devilfish* within the context of other actions on that day.

The story begins in the afternoon of March 20, 1945, when the *Devilfish*, under the command of Lt. Comdr. Stephen S. Mann, was starting her second war patrol. The submarine was cruising on the surface west of Iwo Jima, heading toward the rotating patrol area called the “Hit Parade” between Tokyo Bay and the Northern Nanpo Islands. At 4:45 p.m. local time, lookouts spotted a Japanese plane five miles behind them. The submarine rigged for a crash dive to avoid attack from bombs or depth charges. After passing a depth of 50 feet, the submarine shuddered from an explosion from what the vessel’s war report called a “light bomb.” A few moments later, water began to rush into the conning tower from under the SJ RADAR mast and the APR lead in.

Crew Worked Quickly To Minimize Damage

Submarines are strange vessels. They are built to endure hundreds of tons of water pressure closing in around them when submerged, but they are not armored like surface vessels. Bombs and gunfire can easily damage them. An explosion, either on or near a submerged submarine is a terrifying ordeal. A simple break in the tension of the vessel’s structural integrity can trigger a cascading failure and cause the submarine to implode.

Fortunately, the *Devilfish* was close to the surface when the explosion occurred, and the submarine took only minor damage that the crew could control.

The officers and crew in the control room took quick action to prevent the submarine from sinking and to mitigate the damage done by the incoming saltwater. They leveled off the submarine at 80 feet, and the drain pumps were barely keeping up with the incoming water. The bilges of the conning tower filled rapidly, and water began pouring into the control room. A constant spray of saltwater from the conning tower splashed onto the electrical panels and consoles in the control room. The crew covered the panels with canvas, rain gear, and anything else they could find to prevent fires and short circuits. They also fabricated a trough to channel the incoming water into the periscope well.

After getting the flooding under control, the officers began to assess the larger situation. Much to their surprise, they could raise the No. 1 periscope, but they could not see through it. They then tried the No. 2 periscope. It could not even be raised. The crew of the *Devilfish* endured several hours of terror and uncertainty, waiting until darkness to surface in order to evaluate the damage. Then, under the cover of night, the crew discovered extensive damage. What surprised them was the aircraft debris strewn across the deck—they had been hit not by a bomb but by a “suicide plane.” The *Devilfish*’s war patrol report described the damage:

Draped across the shears were several pieces of aluminum which appeared to be parts of a planes wing section. On the cigarette deck was found a piece of aluminum fairing, mounting a piece of tubing which looked like a section of a planes landing gear. Closer examination revealed Japanese symbols on some of the pieces. A name plate in Japanese was also found. It never occurred to us that we had been the victims of a suicide attack until after we had surfaced.

The kamikaze plane had sheared off the SD and SJ RADAR masts, punched an eight-inch hole in the periscope shears, destroyed the APR and VHF antennas and the underwater radio loop, and distorted the upper

Opposite, bottom: The USS Devilfish was the only submarine that suffered a kamikaze attack in World War II. Opposite, top: Some of the crew of the Devilfish.

periscope bearings. Because of the extensive damage, Commander Mann decided to abort the war patrol and head back to Saipan for repairs. The next morning, the *Devilfish* crossed paths with the USS *Tinosa* (SS 283) on her way out to patrol.

Kamikaze Attacks Not New to Warfare

A look at the organization and methods of the kamikaze units shows why the *Devilfish* incident was considered so unusual in the history of kamikaze attacks during World War II.

Kamikaze methods were developed in the last year of the war as Allied forces began to encroach on the home islands of Japan. At the end of 1944, the loss of the Mariana and Caroline Islands during the summer and the invasion of the Philippines in the fall pushed back the boundaries of the Japanese Empire. The defense of the empire was becoming desperate.

Conventional tactics and methods were no longer effective because the Japanese had lost most of their experienced pilots. The new, inexperienced pilots were no match in dogfighting with veteran American naval aviators.

With the shortage of veteran combat pilots and the need to pursue the defense of Japan at all costs, the Japanese Naval Air Command modernized an old Japanese tactic.

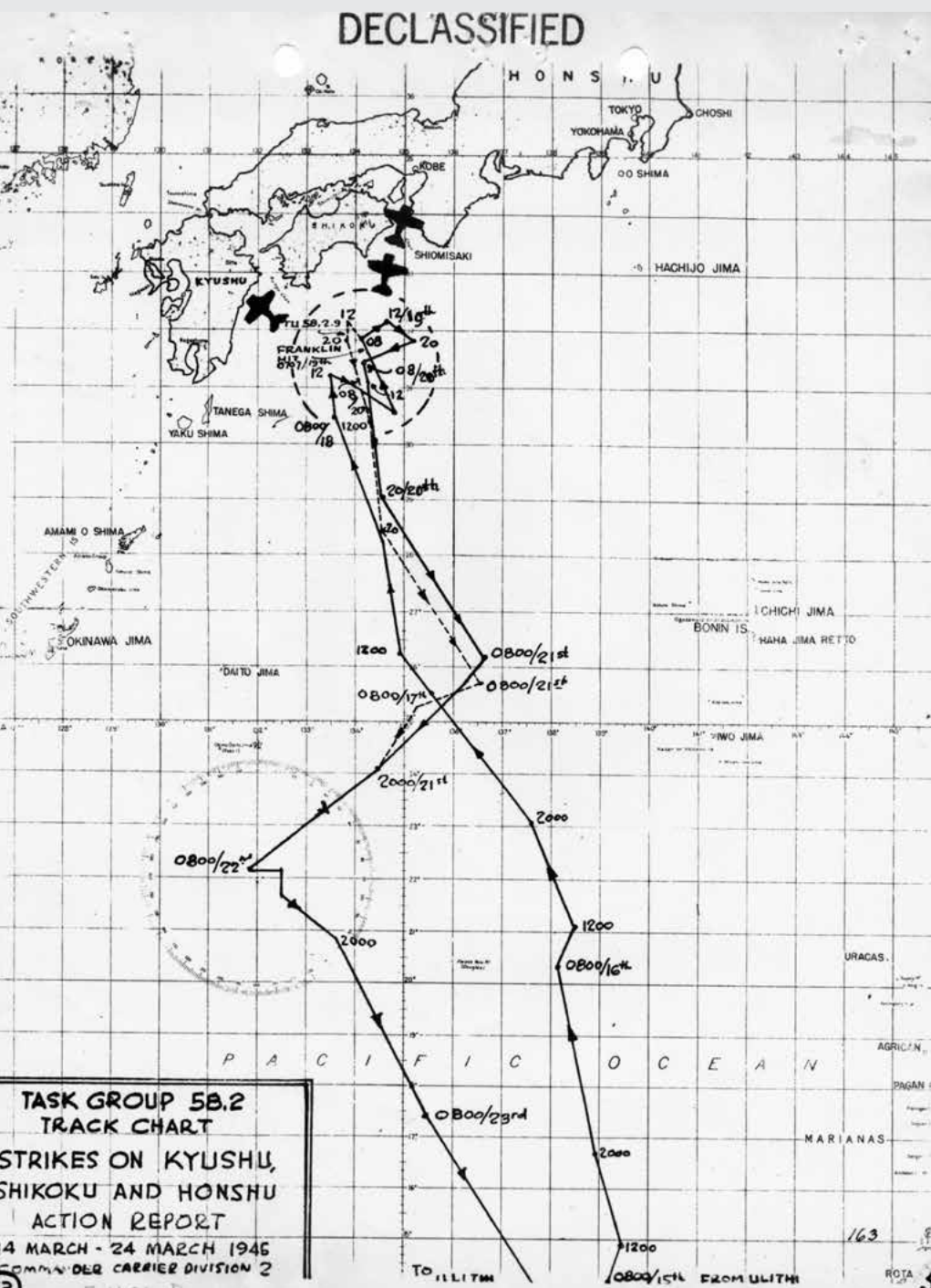
The concept of fighting to the last man was not uncharacteristic for the Japanese. Making such a stand was a common theme in stories of samurai faced with insurmountable odds, and the Japanese had already begun to use last-resort *Banzai* charges in their defense of their island territories in the Marshalls and Gilberts by pushing the American invaders into the sea. A Japanese soldier, sailor, or pilot understood that sacrificing his life was a way to pay his debt to the emperor. He did not consider such a death as throwing away a life, but fulfilling a duty.

The first organized kamikaze attack took place on October 25, 1944, when Lt. Yukio Seki of the 201st Air Group commanded the first group of five *tokko*, or Special Attack Corps units, against the American fleet at Leyte Gulf. Four groups in all were launched from bases in the Philippines to attack the numerically superior American aircraft carriers. Catching the Americans by surprise, the *tokko* planes were able to damage and sink a few ships, but most of the damage was psychological: the United States had never fought an enemy willing to commit young lives in a momentary action of destruction.

U.S. Forces Prepare For Kamikaze Attacks

The technique of *tai-atari*, or “body-crashing,” was not unheard of. Both sides used this as a last resort when a plane was damaged beyond its ability to return safely to base. A pilot could choose to either ditch the plane into the water with a hope of being recovered or make a final gesture by ramming the plane into an enemy ship or facility.

A map from the Task Force 58 action report shows the general patrol area of the USS *Devilfish* west of Iwo Jima, along the rotating patrol area called the “Hit Parade” between Tokyo Bay and the Northern Nanpo Islands.



SS292/AA

CONFIDENTIAL

U.S.S. DEVILFISH(SS292) - Report of SECOND WAR PATROL.

Designated Task Unit 17.1.1 and assigned Hit Parade area to conduct offensive patrol in waters between Tokyo Bay and Northern Nanpo Shoto Islands and to provide life guard services as directed, instructions in accordance with Opord. 64-45.

16 March 1945

1645 K Departed Saipan escorted by PC 536 enroute to patrol area.
2250 K Dismissed escort.

17 March 1945

0600 K Made routine trim dive.
1200 K Noon position - 15° 24'N 141° 42'E. Conducting daily training exercises.

18 March 1945

0230 K Exchanged recognition signals and calls with U.S.S. SEA POACHER(SS406) on opposite course.
0948 K Made routine trim dive.
1200 K Noon position - 18° 22'N 137° 38'E.

19 March 1945

1200 Noon position - 22° 45'N 137° 39'E.

20 March 1945

0623 K Made routine trim dive.
0842 K Sighted unidentified plane. Plane closed to about five miles. Dove and evaded.
1645 K OOD sighted Zeke or Hap diving from cloud astern at about five miles. Dove. While passing 50 feet heard light explosion which sounded like a light bomb, not close. In about 10 seconds water commenced pouring through bottom of SJ mast and through APR lead in. We were able to close off latter leak but could do nothing about the SJ. Water came in at such a rate that drain pump could just keep up with it. We leveled off at 80 feet. Conning Tower bilges filled rapidly and a regular waterfall came down the hatch into Control Room. In order to prevent a fire, circuits were pulled to Conning Tower equipment which was being showered.

Damage to the *Devilfish* is detailed in the vessel's Second War Patrol report. It describes the dangerous leak into the control room and the efforts to control the flooding.

for them. As the campaign continued, the Americans adapted their defenses, shooting down more kamikazes than could strike their targets. The Americans had increased their fighter protection, developed new anti-aircraft ordnance with proximity fuses, and employed longer range radar, which gave them earlier warning of incoming sorties. As American defenses adapted to suicide planes and as their forces advanced toward the home islands, the number of kamikaze sorties increased.

Training for Japanese Pilots Was Shortened Gradually

How did kamikaze pilots differ from the pilots who flew at the start of the war?

At the beginning of World War II, the Japanese military estimated that pilots needed 500 hours of flight experience to be prepared for combat missions. In 1941, Japanese naval combat pilots had an average of 700 hours of flight experience, and army combat pilots had an average of 500 hours. By 1944, the average hours of flight training had dipped down to 300 hours for the Japanese navy and 200 hours for the Japanese army. By comparison, the *tokko tai* pilots received 40 to 50 hours of flight training. Kamikaze pilots were trained for approximately seven days. In the first few days they learned to take off. In the following days, they learned to fly in formation; the last days were devoted to study and practice in how to attack a target.

Pilots who flew missions early in the Special Attack Corps history had more experience than their successors. As the war progressed, the number of hours for flight training was reduced, and the time to teach rudimentary piloting skills like navigation was curtailed.

One of the key elements in flying combat missions is to reach the target, but with only a tenth of the amount of training, how

Tai-atari, as a purposeful act, became popular during the B-29 raids over Japan when defending fighters, unable to shoot down the heavy bombers, attacked them with their planes. Again, body-crashing the plane was up to the pilot, and there was still the possibility of surviving. During a B-29 raid on August 20, 1944, two pilots made the ultimate sacrifice, Sgt. 1st Class Shigeo Nobe and Corp. Denzo Takagi. When they failed to shoot down the lead B-29 in the conventional way, they crashed their plane into the Superfortress. Both planes were engulfed in a huge fireball, and all crew members perished. The Japanese papers praised the impulsive act of the pilots and began to cultivate the mystique of the kamikaze by connecting *tai-atari* with the deification of the suicide pilots' souls

in the Yasukuni Shrine, the temple where the emperor worshipped.

The initial name for the *Tokko* Corps was the *Shimpu* Special Attack Corps, but American code-breakers translated the kanji for "*Shimpu*" as "*kamikaze*," meaning "divine wind," the timely typhoons that disrupted the Mongol invasions. The name *kamikaze* stuck and became imbedded in American culture as a fearful opponent.

Organizing kamikaze planes into units became a numbers game: the greater number of planes the Japanese could commit to *tai-atari*, the more chances they had for successful strikes.

During the Philippine campaign, the Japanese got away with small kamikaze raids largely because the Americans were unprepared



The destroyer USS Halsey Powell off Saipan, undared.

accurate would new pilots be in navigating and locating targets on the open ocean? Getting lost after being separated from the group was highly likely.

Because kamikaze units were only to fly their planes into ships, and not engage in aerial combat, the Special Attack Corps planners devised a creative solution for getting the planes to the target and defending them at the same time. A group of Zeros (Mitsubishi A6M, also sometimes referred to as Zekes) was assigned to escort them. The pilots of these escorts were more experienced

combat veterans and could navigate to and from the target areas. The kamikazes would play follow the leader to the target and then engage the American ships once they were in sight. The escorts brought back word of the kamikazes' success.

Where Did It Come From? Why Was It Alone?

If the rationale behind kamikaze sorties was to increase the number of planes attacking American aircraft carrier task forces, why would a single Japanese plane in 1945 attack

an American submarine? Where were the other planes? Was there anything else happening on March 20, 1945, that would explain where this plane came from?

The time and place of the attack on the *Devilfish* can provide some clues. The *Devilfish* was close to Iwo Jima, but would the kamikaze attack a month after the landings? But by March 20, 1945, Japanese forces on Iwo Jima were all but defeated. There was still a small pocket of resistance in the northeast part of the island, but it seems unlikely that the Japanese would commit

THIRD ENDORSEMENT to
DEVILFISH Report of
Second War Patrol.

NOTE: THIS REPORT WILL BE
DESTROYED PRIOR TO
ENTERING PATROL AREA.

COMSUBSPAC PATROL REPORT NO. 719
U.S.S. DEVILFISH - SECOND WAR PATROL.

From: The Commander Submarine Force, Pacific Fleet.
To : The Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet.
Via : The Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet.
Subject: U.S.S. DEVILFISH (SS292) - Report of Second War Patrol
(16 March to 6 April 1945).

1. The second war patrol of the DEVILFISH, under the command of Lieutenant Commander S. S. Mann, Jr., U.S. Navy, was to be conducted in the Empire areas.
2. While the DEVILFISH was proceeding to area an enemy plane, estimated to be a Nap or Zoké type, dove out of a cloud at her. In fact, the plane dove into the mast-structures of the DEVILFISH as the latter was diving resulting in one plane splashed in return for the loss of SD and ST masts, APR and VHF antennae and damage to periscope shears of the DEVILFISH.
3. Award of Submarine Combat Insignia for this patrol is authorized.
4. While the Force Commander does not recommend this method of destroying enemy planes, he does congratulate the DEVILFISH for the destruction of an enemy plane and the courageous actions of all hands in handling the battle damage.

D E S T R O Y E D

1 - Plane (Fighter Typo) (EU)

DISTRIBUTION:
(Complete Reports)

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CTG 71.9	(2)	Flag Secretary.	
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MERRILL COMSTOCK.

EXTRA - ORIGINAL
SORG. _____ MICRO _____
PHOTO-LAB _____ OP-16 _____
RETURN TO F-4253

The Third Endorsement of the submarine's patrol, dated April 12, 1945, commends the crew of the *Devilfish*, but half-jokingly notes that "the Force Commander does not recommend this method of destroying enemy planes."

group, struck against southern Japan, attacking airfields on Shikoku, Kyushu, and southern Honshu in preparation for the invasion of Okinawa. Task Force 58 was attacking air bases to prevent the Japanese from providing air cover for the defense of the island forces or sending kamikazes to the amphibious force landing on Okinawa. In turn, it suffered many kamikaze attacks.

The American destroyer USS *Halsey Powell* (DD 686), part of the screening force for Task Force Group 58.2, was struck at 2:55 p.m. on March 20. The kamikaze sortie included 20 Yokosuka *Suisei* D4Y3/D4Y4 bombers (also called Judys) from Kokubu and Oita in southern Kyushu. The kamikaze escorts claimed that the attack was successful, damaging an *Essex*-class carrier and setting a *Saratoga*-class carrier afire. In truth, only the *Halsey Powell* and the *Devilfish* were struck that day.

U.S. Carrier and Destroyer Attacked by Enemy Planes

On the day the carrier and the submarine were hit, the Task Force Group Combat Air Patrol (CAP) encountered several enemy aircraft approaching the formation. Between 10:30 a.m. and 2:50 p.m., the planes from the different aircraft carriers successfully kept enemy aircraft at bay until a single plane broke through. The destroyer *Halsey Powell* was moored to the aircraft carrier USS *Hancock* (CV 13) and receiving fuel. When the approach of the enemy plane was reported, the destroyer disconnected from the aircraft carrier. Within moments of breaking the connection, the aircraft carrier and other ships lit into the kamikaze and set it ablaze. The damaged plane went into a roll and flew across the deck of the *Hancock*, missing the carrier. The hapless plane, after

kamikazes to the remaining defenders. On February 21, 1945, during the American landings on Iwo Jima, the Japanese had used 32 kamikazes, but there were no other such attacks related to Iwo Jima after that date.

The next major American action was Operation Iceberg, the invasion of Okinawa, planned for April 1, 1945. It had become standard practice for the U.S. Navy to conduct preliminary strikes into areas they were

planning to invade. Because Operation Iceberg was hitting so close to the Japanese home islands, the Navy expected that air bases in southern Japan would lend support to repel any invasion of Okinawa. Were there any carrier strikes against southern Japan on March 20, 1945, that might have attracted kamikazes?

The answer is "yes." Beginning March 18, 1945, Task Force 58, an aircraft carrier

To learn more about

- Japan's plan for a decisive naval battle, go to "The "Z" Plan Story" at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/fall/z-plan-1.html.
- The Allied drive, island by island, toward the Japanese mainland, go to "Operation Blissful" at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/fall/blissful.html.
- NARA's holdings of records from World War II, go to www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/.



A Japanese plane crashes between the USS *Halsey Powell* and the USS *Hancock* on March 20, 1945, causing a fire on the fantail of the *Halsey Powell*.

clearing the *Hancock*, careened into the fantail of the *Halsey Powell* just aft of the #5 gun. A gasoline fire broke out in the living compartments and the steering control compartment. With the steering control compartment damaged, the destroyer lost the ability to maneuver properly. The casualties of the *Halsey Powell* included 7 killed in action, 4 missing in action, and 27 wounded in action. As best they could, the crew managed to steer the destroyer away from the other ships to avoid a collision.

About an hour later, a second wave of enemy planes was sighted in the northwest. Several planes attempted suicide runs or tricked Allied vessels into firing at each other by flying so low that antiaircraft fire became friendly fire. No other ships were badly damaged after the *Halsey Powell*, although the USS *Enterprise* had a few fires on the flight deck caused by friendly fire.

The distance between the destroyer and the submarine at the time of the attack on the *Devilfish* was approximately 382.5 standard miles (332.4 nautical miles). Estimates range between about 322 and 382 standard miles, based on the noon positions of the two vessels (the *Devilfish* was at 28° 13.5'

N and 137° 34.2' E and the *Halsey Powell* was at 30° 55' N and 133° 11' E) and taking into consideration that the vessels had changed position between the times of the attacks on them. Because the *Devilfish* was heading east toward Japan and the *Halsey Powell* was conducting operations near Japan, the distance between the two ships would be getting shorter throughout the day. Was the lone kamikaze part of the group that attacked the *Halsey Powell* and the carrier group? If it was, then it seems it had a long way to travel.

Was there enough time for a kamikaze from the *tokko* raid to fly from Task Force 58 to the *Devilfish*? According to the *Halsey Powell's* deck log and war diary, the ship was attacked at 2:55 p.m. According to the *Devilfish's* deck log and war patrol report, the submarine was attacked at 4:45 p.m., nearly two hours later.

Was a Judy capable of attacking the *Devilfish*—if that Judy had gotten lost or separated from group attacking Task Force 58? Yokosuka *Suisei* (Judys) were single-engine, two-seater dive bombers that were originally designed for aircraft carrier operations. Later models D4Y3 and D4Y4 of

the Judy were improved with radial engines for greater speed and range, and their bomb capacity was increased, making them ideal for later kamikaze missions. Judys had been used in kamikaze attacks since October 15, 1944, when Rear Adm. Masafumi Arima flew a Judy into the USS *Franklin* (CV 13) near the Philippines.

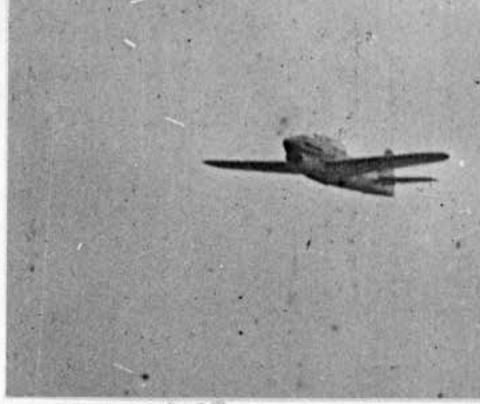
Judys had an operational range of about 910 to 920 standard miles for a maximum range of 1,796 standard miles. Their maximum speed was 342 to 357 miles an hour, but their cruising speed was around 207 to 265 miles an hour. It is unlikely that a lost pilot would be tearing around the Pacific at maximum speed.

Using a cruising speed of 207 miles an hour, the Judy could have flown 372.6 miles in nearly two hours. This distance is well within the estimated distance of the two American vessels' noon positions and within operational range even for the late afternoon estimate of 382 miles. One of the planes from the Japanese attack group could have flown from the vicinity of the *Halsey Powell* to the *Devilfish*.

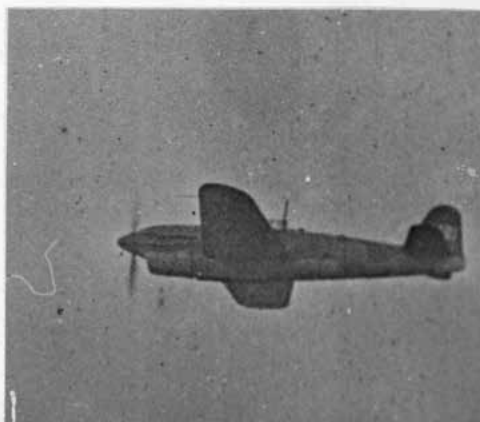
But why would a kamikaze attack a submarine?



CV-16-1817A



CV-16-1817B



Several views of the Japanese Yokosuka Suisei bomber (also called a "Judy") on the attack. It is possible that a Judy, separated from the earlier attack on a U.S. carrier group, struck the *Devilfish*.

Unfortunately, we cannot know the answer or even be sure that it was a kamikaze plane at all. It is, however, believable that a lone kamikaze could become separated from his group. Kamikaze pilots had far less training than even a beginning combat pilot.

Because kamikaze units had armed escorts with experienced pilots to guide and protect them, there was no real need to teach the pilots navigation. The kamikaze pilots depended on their escorts for navigation until they had the enemy fleet in sight. Their lack of combat training and aerial navigation lends support to a scenario in which a kamikaze pilot from the *tokko* group attacking Task Force 58 on March 20, 1945, could have gotten lost and attacked the *Devilfish*. In this case, it is unlikely that the pilot could have navigated back to the group or to the target area. The pilot may have been lost and disoriented, with little time left as fuel was running out. It is possible he happened to see a wake of ship in the distance and decided that any

target was better than none. This might have been the situation with the attack on the *Devilfish*. It might have been sheer chance. The submarine became a target of opportunity, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The story of the *Devilfish* ends with her sailing to Pearl Harbor for a more thorough repair. Strangely, this incident does not even count as a full war patrol because the *Devilfish* was damaged before getting to her patrol area. But it did earn the *Devilfish* and her crew the coveted Submarine Combat Insignia pin, which can only be awarded for successful encounters with the enemy.

Force Commander Adm. Merrill Comstock, in his endorsement of the second war patrol report, wrote in a half-joking tone, "While the Force Commander does not recommend this method of destroying enemy planes, he does congratulate the DEVILFISH for the destruction of an enemy plane and the courageous actions of all hands in handling the battle damage." **P**

NOTE ON SOURCES

I discovered the story about the attack on the *Devilfish* when I was working on my master's thesis on the American submarine patrols around the Japanese Home Islands and their effects on the war. The two chief sources are from Submarine Operational History, World War II, by the Commander, Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet, found in the National War College Library (Entry NM-16 315) in Record Group 334, Records of Inter-service Agencies, and Theodore Roscoe's *United States Submarine Operations in World War II*. In both of these histories, the story of the *Devilfish* is mentioned as an anecdote without further detail.

The story was confirmed when I read the report of the second war patrol of the USS *Devilfish* in Record Groups 38 (Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations) and 313 (Records of Naval Operating Forces), in which the skipper described the encounter with the kamikaze with terror and confusion, not understanding what had just happened to them. The endorsement by Merrill Comstock of COMSUBPAC and his cheeky comment that this was not a recommended method for submarines to deal with Japanese aircraft made the story even more compelling, and I wanted to try to flesh it out.

Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II, by Capt. Rikihei Inoguchi and Comdr. Tadashi Nakajima with Roger Pineau, shows the connection between the attacks on the *Devilfish* and the *Halsey Powell* on March 20, 1945, in Appendix C, "Kamikaze Attack Operations in the Okinawa Area."

The deck logs of the two ships in Record Group 24, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, provided locations and descriptions of the events on March 20, 1945. The action reports and war diaries of the *Halsey Powell* and Task Force Group 58.2 in Record Group 38 described the conditions of the air strikes against southern Japan in mid-March 1945 and the kamikaze counteroffensive to those strikes, which led to a single kamikaze encountering the *Devilfish*.



Author

Nathaniel Patch is an archives specialist in the Reference Branch at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, where he is on the Navy and Marine Corps Reference Team. He has a B.A. in history and an M.A. degree in naval history with an emphasis on submarine warfare.