

The Kamikaze Defense

By the time Allied forces invaded Okinawa in April 1945, Japan's military leaders had few resources left. Japan no longer had access to natural resources from overseas, and constant air attacks had brought most domestic manufacture of weapons and other critical materials to a halt. Combat-trained airmen were scarce, as most had been killed or were missing in action. In October 1944, military leaders had ordered the formation of the Kamikaze (Divine Wind) Special Attack Force in an attempt to turn the tide during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. The aim was to demoralize Allied naval forces with endless waves of indefensible suicide attacks.

In May 1945, Hitoyoshi Naval Air Base became a center for training kamikaze pilots to defend Okinawa. Airmen from other bases were brought here for dive-bombing lessons on the Type 93 biplane before returning to their home bases for their final missions. The kamikaze strikes, launched

from numerous locations, were devastating: 30 U.S. Navy ships were sunk, 400 damaged, and some 10,000 sailors killed or wounded. The toll on Japanese airmen and aircraft, however, was equally catastrophic, and the 4,000 airmen and 2,600 aircraft sacrificed were irreplaceable. Even some of the biplane trainers, like the one at the museum entrance, were eventually employed in kamikaze attacks. Their lack of speed was made up for by their wood and cloth construction, which helped them avoid radar detection. Museum exhibits include photographs, poems, and tokens given to the pilots to comfort them on their final flights.