

# “I am awaiting the final order”

Words from a kamikaze pilot who met his death in June 1945 are among the powerful, and sobering, exhibits in two museums dedicated to the Japanese suicide missions

**WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY:**  
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Kyushu is the southernmost main island of Japan. From here more than 1,000 of the young, inexperienced aviators belonging to the special units dubbed 'Tokko', otherwise referred to as the kamikaze pilots, got airborne during the early months of 1945 to fly towards certain death. Their task was to strike enemy ships and inflict the greatest possible damage on the enemy. Most of them are best-known from footage shot by American cameramen: shaky images of aircraft diving at Allied vessels, ending either with a fireball or a crash into the sea. That some of the cockpits were occupied by 17-year-old boys is often forgotten. The story is told in two museums on Kyushu: in the south the Chiran Peace Museum, and in the north the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum.

"The countryside is so beautiful. I forget that I'm going to die now. The sky is blue without limits. I see a cloud floating in the sky. I feel the summer in Chiran in June, whilst hearing the singing of cicadas. I am awaiting the final order". These lines were written by Capt Kanji Eda before he began his kamikaze mission. The 22-year-old, a university graduate, died on 6 June 1945. Two other casualties that day, Capt Shizuka Watanabe (22) and Toshiro Arai (23), also left farewell letters before their last sortie. Sometimes the message was short: "This is my final statement", wrote Yoshio Itsui before his death on 1 April 1945. "I have nothing to say. I will only do my best". At 32, he was among the oldest kamikaze pilots.

Some 4,000 of these harrowing documents can be found in the Chiran museum, along with portrait photos of the pilots. Their average age was 21 and they had no prior combat experience, coming from flying schools and universities with two or three years of pilot training behind them. The idea of refusing the order to fly a kamikaze attack practically did not exist.

The target for the kamikaze operations in the spring of 1945 was about 370 miles, or two-and-a-half hours' flight time, south of Chiran: Okinawa, the island where US forces landed on Japanese soil. The calculation of the Japanese military was that the kamikaze ('divine wind') missions would cause such great losses as to force

the Americans into ceasefire negotiations. They were flown with everything that was available: fighters, bombers, trainers.

In the Chiran museum, in addition to the letters and the photographs of the 1,036 pilots, there are several aircraft exhibits. One is a Nakajima Ki-84, serial 1446, captured by the Americans in the Philippines during 1945 and shown at the Planes of Fame museum in California until 1978, when it returned to Japan. Initially part of the Arashiyama Museum near Kyoto, in 1991 it went to Chiran. Also on display is a Mitsubishi A6M-5 Zero-Sen Model 52-Hei, serial 62343 — or, rather, what's left of it. Having ditched into Teuchi harbour near Akone, for 35 years the carrier fighter sat submerged on the seabed until it was recovered in June 1980 and taken to the museum. The Nakajima Ki-43 is a replica, built in 2007 for the Japanese movie *I Will Die for You*.

The museum is located on the site of the former military flying school,

which became a kamikaze base in March 1945. In the outdoor area is one of the wooden shelters where the pilots spent the nights before their last mission. Nearby are a statue of a kamikaze pilot, a replica Ki-84 and various memorials.

The story of a successful kamikaze attack is told in a letter from Ed Russell, a retired US Navy sailor, to the museum in September 2001. Russell served on board

the seaplane tender USS *Curtiss*, which was severely damaged by a kamikaze attack using a Ki-84 on 21 June 1945. "I stood up and watched, amazed at what he was doing", Russell wrote.

"He flew so low

his propeller created a wake in the water. I asked out loud 'How can you do that?' and watched him for what seemed like an eternity until he crashed into us."

Sometimes the kamikaze pilots survived. Kensuki Kunugi took off from Chiran on 28 March 1945, heading towards Okinawa. Due to engine trouble he was forced to land on the island of

***"I asked out loud 'How can you do that?' and watched him for what seemed like an eternity until he crashed into us"***

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A kamikaze attack by a Kawasaki Ki-61 about to miss the US Navy escort carrier USS *Sangamon* by just a few feet on 4 May 1945. Another such strike that same day was more successful and caused serious damage to the ship.

US NAVY

**BELOW:** The Chiran museum's Nakajima Ki-84, serial 1446, is the sole complete survivor of the type.







**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:**  
The Nakajima Ki-43 replica at Chiran frames some of the walls on which are displayed photos of kamikaze pilots.

The remains of A6M-5 serial 62343, as recovered from Teuchi harbour.

A representation of one of the huts in which Chiran-based kamikaze pilots spent their last night.

A rare survivor in the Tachiarai museum: what is thought to be the sole extant Nakajima Ki-27.

Tachiarai's A6M-3, serial 3621, ended its service career at Tarao in the Marshall Islands.

Kuchinoshima. He suffered serious wounds to his face and hands, but lived. In 2007 he told his story to the Chiran museum.

Kunugi was born on the northern island of Hokkaido in 1926. As a young boy he wanted to become a soldier, like his father. Graduating from school in 1943, he entered the Imperial Japanese Army's flying school at Koga. The main training aircraft he flew there was the Tachikawa Ki-9 biplane. After that Kunugi — then 17 — went to the 24th Training Corps in Manchuria, which used the Nakajima Ki-27 fighter. "It was very good," he commented. "I had never used such an excellent aircraft. I think that if I [had been] given a Ki-27 from the beginning, my flying skills [would] have improved much quicker."

On 6 February 1945 Kunugi was ordered to become a kamikaze pilot. With others he flew from Manchuria, over Seoul and Daegu, to Tachiarai airfield near Fukuoka.

Finally he moved to Chiran, where he was surprised to see so many kamikaze units. What did the young pilot feel about his mission? "I had no regrets," he told the interviewer. "That's why I was there and I knew it meant risking my life. Many of us had a strong will to defend our people. For this reason, I don't understand why people today hate soldiers."

The pilots slept in triangular barracks, on mattresses filled with straw. When the commander told them they would soon be taking off, Kunugi's only desire was to take his shoes off and let his bare feet feel the soil: "I thought that this would be the last time I would touch the earth in my native country."

They were ordered to depart without loading a bomb and to crash into the enemy ships using the aircraft alone. On 28 March 1945, Kunugi duly left Chiran. When he

was over the sea, he carried out a test-firing of the machine gun, a standard procedure. But the bullets had been incorrectly loaded — poor maintenance often caused problems with the aircraft at Chiran — and hit the oil radiator. Oil began to spread over the windscreen. With no vision from the cockpit, the pilot chose to make an emergency landing on Kuchinoshima. After he touched down the aeroplane caught fire, injuring Kunugi's hands. Eventually he managed to crawl out and jumped into the sea. He was rescued by some islanders and taken to the military hospital in Kagoshima. He wanted to return to operations, but the doctor refused. When the war ended, Kunugi was hospitalised in Tokyo, where his hands were operated on. In October 1946 he returned home. Kunugi got a job as a guard at a fertiliser company, and then worked until retirement at the local city hall. The former kamikaze pilot died in 2014, aged 87.





**LEFT AND BELOW LEFT:** Kamikaze pilots being briefed at Chiran, in front of Nakajima Ki-43s and a Kawasaki Ki-61 respectively.



Heading north from Kyushu, Tachiarai is a small town south of Fukuoka, the capital of Kyushu prefecture. The local airfield was opened in 1919, and a military flying school was established here during 1940. It too became a base for kamikaze missions, a period that ended on 27 March 1945 when US Army Air Forces B-29 Superfortress bombers destroyed the aerodrome.

From then on, the sorties were flown from Chiran. Dedicated to the memory of the kamikaze pilots, the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum was inaugurated in 1987.

As in the sister museum in Chiran, the pilots' final letters

and notes are displayed here, as well as portrait photos. Some of the stories are very notable, such as that of Capt Masaji Takano. He was born in Hawaii as the son of Japanese-American parents and

came to Japan to study, and to marry. Two of his brothers fought on the American side in Europe, and he and another brother for the Japanese. Takano died on 27 May 1945 during a kamikaze mission. "My

target is only an enemy warship", he wrote before getting into his aircraft. "I will surely hit and sink the enemy."

The kamikaze operations were mostly flown by fighters, especially the Ki-27. This machine from

the mid-late 1930s, with its fixed undercarriage and less powerful engine, was almost obsolete by 1945 when it was used for suicide attacks. Sometimes the Ki-27 was flown without a bomb load and the pilots tried to sink or damage their targets with the mass and energy of the airframe alone. In many cases, the approaching Japanese aeroplanes were intercepted by American fighters and shot down before they reached the target area. It is estimated that only every seventh kamikaze attack actually hit its target.

The Ki-27 exhibited in the Tachiarai museum is said to be the only extant machine of its kind. It was discovered on the seabed in Hakata Bay near Fukuoka in 1996 and has been in the museum since its restoration. The Ki-27 was ditched in 1945 during a ferry flight from Manchuria to Chiran, where it was intended for use as a kamikaze aircraft. The pilot survived but ➤

**“In many cases the Japanese aeroplanes were shot down. It is estimated that only every seventh kamikaze attack hit its target”**



**ABOVE:**  
One of the displays of a pilot's personal effects — leather helmet, flying goggles, silk scarf, final letter and portrait — in the Tachiarai collection.

later died in a kamikaze attack while flying the same type. The second aircraft in the Tachiarai exhibition is an A6M-3 Zero-Sen Model 22, serial 3621, which was recovered from Taroa airfield in the Marshall Islands during 1979. Initially restored by former US Navy serviceman Stephen Aiken and displayed at his collection on Saipan in the Mariana islands, it came to Japan in 1983, being displayed in Fukuoka and in the

terminal at Nagoya airport before moving to Tachiarai.

In addition, the museum features a wide variety of ancillary exhibits, such as period Japanese propaganda posters, radios, engines and aerial torpedoes. Information panels show the main sites of the kamikaze operations in the Philippines and around Okinawa, while a diorama depicts the remains of a crashed Zero-Sen on a sandy beach.

Incidentally, a monument to the pilots from the 'Tokko' units can also be seen in the Japanese capital, Tokyo. In the politically controversial Yasukuni shrine, which is dedicated to the fallen Japanese soldiers of World War Two, a statue of a kamikaze pilot is located in a corner. In the military museum next to it are another Zero-Sen, this one being an A6M-5 model, and a Yokosuka D4Y-1 Suisei carrier-borne dive-bomber, along with a replica of a Yokosuka Ohka 22 flying bomb.

**“The city of Minamikyushu wants the farewell letters from the kamikaze pilots to be listed as UNESCO heritage”**

The issue of remembering the kamikaze missions remains a sensitive one. The city of Minamikyushu, where the Chiran museum is located, wants the farewell letters from the kamikaze pilots to be listed as UNESCO documentary heritage. A first attempt in 2014 was rejected amid concern that the letters glorify war. China, which suffered under Japanese rule during the 1930s, condemned the move as “an effort to beautify Japan’s history of militaristic aggression.”



**RIGHT:**  
The issue of how Japan as a nation remembers and memorialises the kamikaze pilots has, for understandable reasons, been a difficult one to tackle.



## VISITOR INFORMATION

### Chiran Peace Museum

**Address:** 17881 Kori, Chiran-cho, Minamikyushu-shi, Kagoshima-ken, Japan

**Website:** [www.chiran-tokkou.jp](http://www.chiran-tokkou.jp)

**Opening hours:** 09.00-17.00hrs daily except Wednesday

**Entry fee:** 5,000 Yen

### Chikuzenmachi Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum

**Address:** 2561-1, Takata, Chikuzen-machi, Asakura-gun, Fukuoka prefecture

**Website:** [tachiarai-heiwa.jp](http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp)

**Opening hours:** 09.00-17.00hrs (last entry 16.30hrs)

**Entry fee:** 500 Yen