

Suicide Torpedo-men Pay Visit

7 Japanese veterans tour Naval Museum

By RICHARD COWEN Staff Writer Bergen Record



Figure 1: Veterans of the Japanese suicide torpedo program in WWII aboard the submarine USS Ling in Hackensack.

Their hair is now gray, old age having taken its toll on these former warriors. But behind the bifocals and the stooped shoulders, the seven Japanese men who climbed aboard the Kaiten torpedo at the U.S. Naval Museum in Hackensack on Tuesday still wore the steel-eyed gaze of soldiers on a mission.

Fifty-six years ago, these men had an appointment with death aboard the Kaiten, having volunteered to become human torpedoes in Japan's desperate, last-ditch effort to halt the U.S. Navy's relentless advance during the closing months of World War II.

On Tuesday, members of the ALL Kaiten Pilots Association stood before a Model 11 Kaiten, now on display at the Naval Museum in Hackensack. Men who had once pledged to die for the cause now stood before the green hulk, long since rendered harmless by the removal of its 4,000-pound explosive charge.

Had they had the chance, they would have steered their own Kaiten into the hull of an American warship, but their lives were spared when Japan unconditionally surrendered in the late summer of 1945.

"We were told that in order to have peace, we must fight," remembered Toshiharu Konada, as he gazed upon the drab green metal hulk in the shadow of the USS Ling, the American submarine that's the centerpiece of the museum, which sits next to The Record's parking lot on River Street. "There was only pride, no fear. I was fighting for my family and my country."



Figure 2: Japanese veterans next to the type of suicide torpedo they were training to pilot at the end of WWII.

Konada was one of an estimated 1500 Japanese sailors who volunteered for what was the underwater equivalent of Japan's kamikaze suicide pilots. On Tuesday, he came to the museum on the bank of the Hackensack River with members of the Kaiten Pilots Association, which is visiting sites in the United States where the torpedoes are on display. The Kaiten (Japanese for, Turning of the Heavens") was introduced in 1944, at a point when the American forces had taken nearly total control of the Pacific Ocean and were headed for victory.

Unlike other torpedoes, the Kaiten was equipped with a periscope and a cockpit for the driver, who would sit behind 4,000 pounds of dynamite- sort of like an exploding submarine. Once the Kaiten was launched from a submarine or a surface ship, there was no turning back.

The Kaiten moved swiftly - about 30 knots - and just below the surface. To American sailors, the sight of a periscope cutting across the water could be as threatening as an enemy plane hurtling through the sky toward their ship.

"Imagine the fear that the Kaiten instilled," said Jack Carbone, a member of the board of directors who led the tour Tuesday." Now you're not just looking for Kamikazes in the sky, but you're looking for them below the surface.

Japan built 80 Kaitens and lost nearly 100 pilots in the program, which was hampered by Kaiten's short range and the annihilation of the Japanese fleet at the end of the war.

The operation did have two notable successes. On Nov. 20, 1944 a Kaiten sneaked through allied defenses at Ulithi in the Caroline Islands and sank an oiler, the USS Mississiniwa, killing 50 men on board. Eight months later, a Kaiten sank the USS Underhill after the destroyer left Okinawa. Half the crew died.

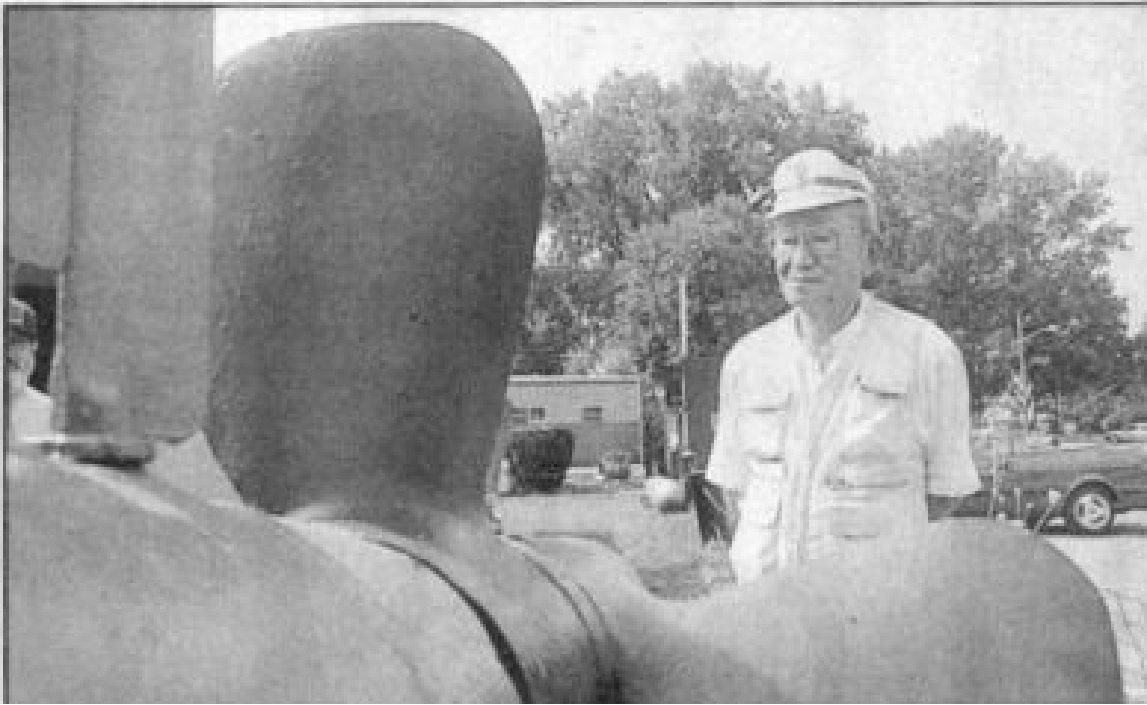


Figure 3: Alira Mizuno studying the propellers on the Kaiten.

Now 78, Yaichi Ui was a university student when he volunteered for the Kaiten corps. "The target was my sacrifice for the Japanese nation," He said Tuesday. "I felt if I were to die for the cause, I would be lucky."

Neither the Kaiten nor the Kamikaze proved to be decisive weapon Japanese leaders had hoped they would be. The United States had developed the atomic bomb, and after it dropped them on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Emperor Hirohito announced that Japan would "bear' the unbearable" and surrender.

The seven men who visited the museum on Tuesday were in training the day Japan surrendered.



Figure 4: Hazumi Kawasaki, like his colleagues, were expecting to die in a Kaiten.

"I knew toward the end of the war that Japan would be defeated," Ui said. "I wanted to die then as well."

Instead, United States troops arrived and occupied Japan." Ui says he was impressed by the respect and dignity that the American troops showed the Japanese. He also learned something else.

"I realized that the reason they had won the war was that American technology was far advanced than the technology of Japan," he said, through an interpreter.

Although American GIs came home and took advantage of an economy in which America, reigned supreme, the Japanese went about the hard business of rebuilding their nation - with massive American aid.

For Ui and his colleagues, that became their new mission.

"After the war, we were so poor. We had to work really hard. There was no time to look back," he said.

Ui knew the future was in technology. He opened a machine shop and went on to sell auto parts.

There are monuments to the war all over Japan today, but Ui said it is not the Japanese way to dwell on their sacrifice.

"We just did our duty," Ui said. And lived to tell the tale.