
Yasuo Kuwahara and Gordon T. Allred. *Kamikaze: A Japanese Pilot's Own Spectacular Story of the Infamous Suicide Squadrons*. Clearfield, UT: American Legacy Media, 2007. 255p.

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Instead of thinking about Japanese *kamikaze* pilots stereotypically as fanatics, how would it be to see one teenage pilot up close and personal? It would be refreshing to learn that he has a human face, that he is a person like the rest of us with hopes and fears and dreams. That's what Gordon T. Allred gives us in his reconstruction of Yasuo Kuwahara's World War II experiences as a member of one of the infamous suicide squadrons.

Told both impressionistically and realistically as a first-person narrative, Allred uses what he calls "creative logic" (xi) to bring Kuwahara's story to life, becoming one with Kuwahara empathically in the telling. This 50th-anniversary edition of an original story published in 1957 reveals Allred as a highly skilled writer, one with more than twenty books to his credit, and one who hopes that this telling has "greater literary quality than the original" (xii). When I first read this version of *Kamikaze*, I immediately sensed literary echoes: Stephen Crane's impressionism, his psychological probing of Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*; Erich Maria Remarque's tone of ultimate doom, his portrayal of Paul Bäumer, a sensitive and perceptive narrator in *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Ernest Hemingway's realistic vignettes, his depiction of a traumatized Nick Adams in *In Our Time*; and Tom Wolfe's top-gun celebration of Chuck Yeager, test pilot and fighter pilot, in *The Right Stuff*. But Allred's book is much more than even these literary echoes might suggest. It is a finely crafted story, but also a mystery fraught with controversy.

In the summer of 1955, Allred was a member of the United States Army stationed at Camp Kobe, Japan. While there he was introduced to Kuwahara, a twenty-six-year-old Japanese national working at the camp, a man who claimed he was a *kamikaze* survivor. Allred, a freelance writer, asked Kuwahara if he could interview him for a possible magazine article about his experiences, eighteen months as a trainee and fighter pilot in the Japanese Army. Kuwahara agreed to tell his story, one that was later "factually" validated by signed statements from Yoshiro Tsubaki, Kuwahara's commander at both Hiro and Oita, and from Seiji Hiroi, a fellow pilot. Allred interviewed Kuwahara during their lunch hour each working day for ten months until Allred's departure from Japan. The immediate result of these interviews was a magazine article published in the January 1957 issue of *Cavalier*, titled "I was a Kamikaze Pilot."

When the article appeared, Allred received an invitation from publisher Ian Ballantine asking him if he would be interested in expanding the article into a book. Allred agreed to do so. After reading extensively about Japanese culture, life, and war, Allred drafted the book, submitted it to several reviewers, including native Japanese, made numerous revisions, then published *Kamikaze* with Ballantine as a mass market trade paperback in late 1957. It quickly became a national best seller, helping Americans temper their view of the Japanese after World War II. During the next twenty-five years, the book went through six editions with sales exceeding 500,000. And then gradually the book went out of print after its last edition in 1982, although it still remains on reading lists at some libraries, high schools, and colleges worldwide.

In 2000, according to Allred, a *Kamikaze* movie promoter was doing research in Onomichi, Kuwahara's home town in Japan, when he met two men who said they were Kuwahara's high school acquaintances. They claimed that "his account was a fabrication" (xi). But the allegations surfaced conveniently twenty years after Kuwahara's death in 1980, making it impossible, of course, for him to refute the allegations. To add to the dilemma, William Gordon and Yuko Shirako, in September 2006, published an article about the autobiographical *Kamikaze* titled "Ten Historical Discrepancies," relegating the book to the category of fiction. But the word *fiction* itself is problematic. A harsh definition is that fiction is a lie or, at the very least, a pretense. However, in a more positive sense, fiction is both imaginative and inventive. And Kuwahara's account has both of these qualities. It is an impressionistic account of his experiences, more concerned with human perceptions and feelings than with technical or factual accuracy. Though Allred is troubled by the allegations made both in 2000 and 2006, he still feels the story is a true account, but he acknowledges, in a recent interview, "There are undoubtedly factual errors in *Kamikaze*."

Yet the debate about the book's factual accuracy actually sidetracks us from a more important issue: does this popular book, now reconceptualized and expanded by an author sure of his craft, have literary merit? It certainly does. A line-by-line comparison with an earlier draft of Chapter 24: The Divine Storm with the version just released shows a wide range of improvements in word choice and the fuller use of descriptive details. Allred knows when to discard needless words such as *fathomless* in "the fathomless skies" (194). He now has greater appreciation for precision, both in sound and in sense, in his often syllabic prose when he replaces *evaporated* with *faded* in "time itself had faded like vapor on an immense mirror" (196). But it's his lengthier addition of sensory details that is most impressive. For example, while Kuwahara is flying in formation, he thinks about the woman he is in love with.

In the clipped and overly sentimental passage from the earlier draft, Allred writes: “Swift painful glimpses of my past, again of Kyoko. *Wait for me, Kyoko—wait for me!*” Here is the revision:

Swift painful glimpses of my past, my home and family...of Toyoko. Toyoko embraced in slumber, Toyoko in her white nightgown with the lacey fringes. Her brow and cheek bones graced with light, lips touched with their faint entrancing dream smile, impossibly far away and long ago now, in some lost dimension. (197)

In *Kamikaze* Allred’s Kuwahara lets us see what it’s like to be a teenager highly skilled as a glider pilot, then selected, by personal invitation, for flight training in the Japanese Army. He describes the brutality of basic training, the thrill of learning to fly high-performance aircraft, the horror of the atomic blast at Hiroshima. The book is also about family dynamics and relationships, a chaste but intense love affair, the conflicting ideologies of National Shintoism and Buddhism—along with explorations of honor, obedience, the warrior spirit, patriotism, and the doctrine of expendability.

Is it possible for a seasoned writer to rewrite and expand his first book composed fifty years ago, imbuing it with greater literary quality, making it even more compelling for today’s post 9/11 readers, both teenagers and adults? Yes, Allred has done just that. ✱