A COLLEGE BOY JOINS THE NAVY

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Every day the newspapers tell us about naval engagements in the Pacific, about the attacks of cruisers and destroyers, bombers and pursuit planes. Here is an article written by one of the young officers who man them. It is the straightforward, personal account of a college boy who joined the Imperial Japanese Navy, and it reveals his innermost thoughts and emotions.

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In December 1941, I left the Economics Department of the Imperial University at Kyoto. As students, we had often discussed whether we would find it possible to adapt ourselves mentally to the new order. We had placed great hopes in this respect in a soldierly life. For it is very difficult to mature from within only; one would never be able to deny a certain dissatisfaction with oneself. It was only through our spirits being hammered away at from without, so we believed, that we should be able to develop properly. We must learn to acquiesce without argument, to obey orders quietly, to yield up our ego and sacrifice ourselves for the whole, and a state of mind of this kind is only to be found in a soldier’s life.

I felt sure that I would find a new path in the world of the soldier. I was enthusiastic at the very idea of throwing myself into this world and of abandoning myself to it without a murmur, no matter how much I would be hammered away at, no matter how much it would stifle me. This is how my friends and I used to talk about the military life, a life of which we knew nothing at all. If I were given the opportunity to serve on the high seas, I was bound to become a man of stable character, so I believed. So I volunteered for the entrance examinations of the Navy.

A few days after the historic December 8, 1941, I received news that I had passed the examinations and had been accepted by the Navy. I cannot describe my joy. I would be able to go into battle in one of His Imperial Majesty’s warships! Full of hope, I looked forward to the future with eagerness and impatience.

SPARTAN TRAINING

In January 1942, I entered a training academy of the Imperial Japanese Navy. From the second day on, we all wore working suits, and there began a period of hard and strenuous training. Roused before dawn, we were allowed only five minutes to dress, make our beds, and line up faultlessly on the parade ground. Most of us who had been leading a college life of rather lazy comfort were at first in despair, as this seemed impossible; but soon we all began to take it as a matter of course and cheerfully adapted ourselves to the daily discipline. At meals we all sat with straight backs in neat rows, quietly waiting for a signal from the student on duty to start. Then we all dug into the humble yet tasty soldier’s food which we were given during the months of training in order to form a better understanding of the life of our future subordinates. But hunger is the best cook, and you cannot imagine how good each meal really tasted.

Day by day, by dint of constant scolding and trying hardships, mind and body were molded and strengthened to bear more and more exertion. Each morning began with two solid hours of rowing.
We strained at the oars of our heavy cutters. At first we found it utterly exhausting, but gradually our training course seemed to grow shorter in length until finally we hardly felt the distance at all. The weight of the oars of the cutter seemed much too heavy and unwieldy during the first few days, but later they, too, seemed to lose their weight. But our hands were cracked open by blisters and we discovered for the first time in our lives that blisters can actually form on top of blisters. The "cats of Marne" of the cadets became absolutely raw. In spite of all this, we bravely and cheerfully submitted to discipline, for we all told ourselves: "How can we become officers worthy of being loaded with the honors of the Imperial Japanese Navy without enduring these minor hardships?"

Training in handling weapons was just as severe. Rifle in hand, we were made to lie for hours in the snow. But we enjoyed it just the same. Of course, no fire of any kind was ever permitted within the training grounds or buildings. Even in the biting January wind, we were not allowed to put our hands in our pockets. The only way to get warm was to run about the training grounds. Even fever was not allowed to interfere with our daily training. It was thus that we began to realize the power of the mind over the body.

During the afternoon we were given instruction on various subjects. Among them were military law, military regulations, as well as naval history and other practical sciences. Finally, the day came for us to graduate from the training academy, and all graduates were appointed to various posts. Some were stationed aboard battleships or cruisers, others appointed to the naval air corps or to arsenals. Listening to the many stirring speeches made at our graduation ceremony, our thoughts were already at the far-off battle fronts. "Now we are ready to do our part, and we shall fight the enemy with courage." I saw that every face was flushed with this determination.

INTERLUDE OF A NOVICE

I was first attached to an air corps. This was my initial post of responsibility, and I was put in charge of my first subordinates. I was very fond of my men. They quietly obeyed all my orders. Even in cases where, because of my inexperience, I demanded the impossible, they tried to carry out the orders without complaint. When finally, after having tried their best, they said that it could not be done, I generally found that I was in the wrong.

My lack of experience brought me many a difficult and lonely day, and it was only the consciousness that I was doing something for my country that made me carry on cheerfully.

My stay in the air corps was not very long, but in spite of that my men sent me off with tears in their eyes when the day came on which I had to leave. I left them to sail for the war zone in a destroyer.

LIFE AT SEA BEGINS

On board the destroyer to which I had been appointed I watched the high-spirited young officers from the Naval Academy, the cream of the Navy's personnel, at their work. At first I could not help wondering whether I, a university graduate, would manage to keep pace with these first-rate men, but then I made up my mind that, whatever the conditions, it was my duty to do my bit sincerely and to the best of my ability.

One day our destroyer flotilla weighed anchor and steamed out of port southward bound. We all lined up on deck to send a heartfelt farewell to the familiar outline of the mountains and islands of our native land gradually disappearing from our view in a haze. As we stood there in silence, our hearts were filled with but one thought: to show our gratitude to our Gods and our country in sacrifice.

One day our squadron entered an island base. For the first time in my life, I set eyes on the dreamlike beauty of a South Sea island. The sea was deep and shone green over submerged coral reefs. Rich
clusters of coconut palms fringing the islands were silhouetted against the tropical sky, and one could almost hear the natives chanting their mellow dreamy songs in the cool green shade of the graceful palms. But we could only gaze at this lovely picture from a distance, for we were soon ordered to join a larger naval unit which was already on its way to the front. Cutting through the white crested waves of the foaming Pacific, our flotilla steamed further and further south. My mind was entirely occupied with thoughts of the approaching battle—which was to be the first engagement in my life. Assembling my men on deck, I addressed them as follows:

"Men, we are now on our way to encounter a powerful enemy in fierce battle. The time has come for us to lay down our lives for the sake of our country. We are certain of victory and of our invincibility. However overwhelming the number of our enemies may be, I know we can and will utterly crush them. Let us place our entire faith in God and endeavor not to leave a single stain to blemish our country's honor. For God only helps those who strive to do their best. All of you must be as brave and composed as befits heroes." And as I spoke these words I realized that they were spoken more to myself than to them.

MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE ENEMY

We joined the bigger unit in due time, and our combined forces cruised southward. Day after day nothing could be seen but the dark-blue tropical sky and the vast expanse of the rolling sea. The training on board increased in vigor as we approached the battle zone.

One day a shrill signal interrupted our lunch. "Action station!" Those who were in the officers' mess sprang up instantaneously. I raced up to the bridge. "Port... degrees, one B-17, moving to port," the watch called out. Trying to keep my excitement under control I scanned the horizon in that direction. Yes, there it was! I could see the "Flying Fortress," still a tiny speck in the sky, flying straight toward us. "Estimated distance: 30,000."

With a resounding thunder, our fighters immediately took off from the carrier which we were escorting. Breathless I followed them with my eyes. The enemy B-17 approached with amazing rapidity. Our three pursuit planes suddenly broke up formation, and a fierce dogfight ensued. One, two, three minutes of breathless suspense. Then, to our joy, the enemy plane, trailing thick black smoke behind it, crashed into the sea. But we knew the fight with the enemy had only started; for it was certain that, before being brought down, the enemy plane had wired the presence of a large naval unit to its base, which meant that the enemy base was already aware of our approach.

For days we crossed the equator back and forth, back and forth, trying to contact the enemy. This was a laborious and nerve-wracking procedure. But at last the long-awaited day dawned. The sky in the east was turning purple and then suddenly burst into scarlet and gold. I was shaken out of my enjoyment of this glorious sunrise by the announcement of a report received from one of our reconnaissance planes: "Enemy fleet sighted. Large squadron." We had caught the enemy at last! Turning toward the carrier, I saw that our planes were already taking to the air in rapid succession: first the pursuit planes rising straight up from the deck, followed immediately by the roaring bombers and then by the torpedoplanes heavily weighted with their deadly missiles.

The planes assembled in the air in beautiful formation and flew off like wild eagles after their prey. Watching them disappear into the distant clouds, I could not help silently praying for their success and safe return.

INTO BATTLE AT LAST

The sea was as calm as ever. The waves gently rose and fell, a rolling carpet of emerald green. Ten minutes, twenty minutes passed. It was about time our planes came in contact with the enemy.
but still no reports were forthcoming. At that moment the watch called out: “Port, . . . degrees, enemy aircraft approaching!” This was quickly followed by an order which resounded throughout the ship like a war cry: “Antiaircraft defense to port!”

Here was my first taste of real war. My heart began to beat violently. Before I could gather my wits, our aircraft carrier was completely enveloped by huge water spouts caused by a shower of bombs. My heart stopped beating. In the past, I had been a slave to my own ego, although I had been constantly questioning myself as to whether I was worthy of the trust placed in me by the Emperor and State. The very instant the bombs fell, however, my ego was blown to pieces and I could face things like a true soldier. My mind held only thoughts for the welfare of my country and our Navy—nothing else.

As the heavy screen of water fell, I glimpsed the unscathed form of our mighty carrier suddenly looming into view like a furious monster. With a sigh of relief I gave way to feelings of joy and thankfulness I had never experienced before. But just at that moment, a pillar of solid water rose close to our right with a tremendous hiss and crash. “Here she comes!” the Captain called and looked through the pane. I followed the direction of his eyes and there, out of the sky, right over our heads, an enemy bomber swooped down on us. The bombs had already been released. “Hard over to starboard!” The ship swung round in a great curve. The next instant, there was a tremendous detonation followed by a gigantic splash as a huge column of water spouted at the lee side. One of our pursuit planes was already on the trail of the enemy bomber, while a deafening staccato of antiaircraft artillery and machine-gun fire angrily pursued the fleeing enemy plane. Our ears hurt although they were stuffed with cotton. To my satisfaction, I found myself completely bereft of fear and absolutely calm. I had stood the test—my first test in real war.

Over and over again the enemy attacked and showers of heavy bombs fell around our carrier. With each bomb a gigantic pillar of water rose into the sky. My heart almost missed a beat as I noticed thick white smoke rising from the big ship. “Good heavens!” I muttered. The young assistant communication officer and I stood there helplessly watching the carrier, biting our lips. The Captain turned around toward us and, reading our thoughts, said quietly with a smile: “Don’t worry, chaps. Look at that smoke. It is white. As long as smoke is white, there is no danger.”

Indeed, the Captain was right, for we noticed that the carrier was steaming on faster even than our own ship. Presently, in confirmation of the Captain’s words, we received a radiogram from the wounded aircraft carrier: “Slightly damaged. No interference with speed and fighting power.” We sighed with relief. In no time, a number of the enemy raiders were shot down in quick succession and the rest fled. Before long, not a trace of the severe combat was to be seen on the calm surface of the ocean.

In the meantime, reports from our fliers had arrived in rapid succession. The havoc and destruction that our planes had brought on the enemy was almost stupendous. Gazing at the distant clouds and the calm deep sea, I silently prayed in gratitude to God for His benevolence and our brave comrades of the air for their valor.

Before long our victorious fliers returned, though not in the same orderly formation in which they had set out. They came back in groups of threes and fives, back to their carrier which received them like a mother affectionately welcoming her long-absent sons.

**IMPERTURRABLE HEROES**

But landing the planes was no easy matter. Among those returning there were some that, running out of fuel, were compelled to make forced landings on the sea. One of these was circling over our heads at so low an altitude that
we could discern the faces of the crew quite clearly.

The wireless operator sent us a message: "About to make forced landing. Please render assistance," to which we replied with an "O.K." Soon the plane banked, dipped, and then dived headlong into the sea. Our ship had already slackened speed and was now moving at a snail's pace. Just as the plane touched the water, it capsized. Was this the end? I almost wrenched a pair of binoculars away from the hands of a nearby sailor. Straining through the glasses I could see two men; each had a revolver clutched in one hand which was held high and dry above water, while close by the wings of the capsized plane were outlined in the transparent water. I learned later on that the men had been rigorously trained to take their guns out of their holsters when their planes crashed, and always to keep them dry to save themselves from an ignoble end, should the necessity ever arise.

A lifeboat was immediately lowered and swiftly rowed out to the rescue of the two men. Meanwhile, orders were given to prepare dry clothes, whisky, biscuits, and hot drinks for the rescued men.

The rescue completed, the boat soon returned. On boarding the ship, the two dripping men started to discard their soaking uniforms with alacrity. One was a lieutenant, the other a first deck officer of the air force. Noticing me, the former asked for some clothes. "Certainly," I replied. "We have them all laid out for you over there. Please hand your wet clothes to our men." One of our boys took the dripping clothes and hurriedly disappeared into the washroom.

After having changed, the two officers entered the officers' mess and cheerfully ate and drank to their hearts' content. Gratefully accepting cigarettes which I offered them, they sat back in their chairs and puffed away with the utmost nonchalance. So utterly calm were they that I could not help wondering: had these men failed to meet the enemy and returned without participating in the fight? So I began questioning them.

"What was it like? How did you get on?" and so on. "Well, we just dropped . . . kilograms on what looked like the largest of the carriers, that's all." That was the nonchalant reply I received from the young officer, and it was spoken as though it were but a mere everyday occurrence. "What was the enemy's antiaircraft fire like?" I went on. To this he quietly replied: "It was like facing a sandstorm or meeting a sudden squall. I think any man would close his eyes in spite of himself before diving into the face of that furious antiaircraft fire." Was this the man who had, only a moment ago, been through the most harrowing of experiences and even at the brink of death? The man was calmness itself, the very symbol of courage in the face of peril, of loyalty to his Emperor, of pride in being a subject of his country, a veritable soldier of Nippon.

So I was wakened anew to the might and invincibility of our Navy and to the true spirit of the men who formed it.