

## CHAPTER 1

## Divine Ships of a Bluewater Navy

The snowy wind, unspeakable weather and so dark ...

The *Kagerō nikki* (the *Mayfly Diary* or *Gossamer Years*, 974)

WE START WITH IMPERIAL NAVY WARSHIP NAMES, including *Yukikaze*'s, and what they reveal about Japanese nationalism in the twentieth century. As they steamed into battle, Imperial Navy warships became emblematic of Japan's divine landscape, over which the Emperor, both head of state and Shinto's chief priest, reigned supreme. Destroyer names, in particular, tapped into ancient Japanese aesthetics, ones often tied to classical poetic conventions, and they often evoked an ancient melancholy that suited wartime. These names, such as *Yukikaze*, resembled the "scripture of the gods" and served as "spirit words" that linked sailors and the Japanese public to the aesthetics of Japan's imperial nationalism.

These warships deserved divine names, given their colossal cost in national treasure. But, if Japan was to become a world power at the end of the nineteenth century, defend itself from predacious great nations, and ultimately become one, it needed a blue-water navy. Starting in the Meiji period, Japan's government spent untold treasure to build this floating divine arsenal, one that could assert Japan's national desires across the sea and help create and defend an empire. These warships became dramatic symbols of the Japanese nation, celebrated on postcards and taught in schoolbooks; they became celebrities of a sort. Their purpose, however, from the beginning, was to defeat the US Navy in a hypothetical war with Japan's Pacific rival.

In the opening months of the war, the Imperial Navy deployed these heroic warships with nearly religious intensity in the idea of an Alfred

## YUKIKAZE'S WAR

Mahan-style “decisive battle” with the US Navy, one that would knock the Americans out of the war. But, ironically, World War II was rarely about decisive battles (though it had some), and the Imperial Navy found itself adjusting to a war over lines of communication, shipping routes, and fuel transports.

Nonetheless, it is with these colossal warships, prides of a nation, mechanical celebrities with their “spirit word” names, and their doctrinal pursuit of a “decisive battle” with the US Navy, that we begin *Yukikaze's* war.

\* \* \*

*Yukikaze* means “snowy wind” in Japanese. In 1939, yard workers at the Sasebo Naval Arsenal painted that name in four bold white *kana* characters on the starboard and port beams of a newly constructed warship. The navy-gray vessel splashed into the water on March 24 of that year. With draping garlands of Japanese *sakaki* leaves, rising-sun battle flags, ceremonial bunting, and, dangling from her bow, an ornamental paper *kusudama* bursting with streamers like a giant upside-down tulip, the destroyer *Yukikaze*, fully dressed in signal flags extending from her bow up to the tip of the mast and then down to her stern, prepared for her first sea trial and shakedown. She would need it. Within two years of launching, she plunged into total, unrestricted warfare in the deadliest conflict the world has ever seen. The ferocity of World War II could never have been anticipated.

Guests and dignitaries received two commemorative postcards at *Yukikaze's* launching, packaged together in a neat decorative envelope. The first is a highly stylized depiction of *Yukikaze* sliding down the slipway (see Figure 1.1). The image evokes a sense of technological progress more than it does a war machine designed to break bones and boats. *Yukikaze's* bluff red bow looks as if she's on rails, heading inexorably into a limitless, preordained future. Snowflakes float and swirl around her, much as her name, *Yukikaze*, evoked. From her bowsprit, the *hinomaru*, or Japanese national flag, and the *kyokujitsuki*, or the rising sun flag (battle ensign of the Imperial Navy), also wave proudly in the wind, a reminder of the national obligations that transcended the cosmopolitan artistic trends that inspired the postcard's unknown artist. It's nationalistic, but not overly so: it's more celebratory.

## DIVINE SHIPS OF A BLUEWATER NAVY



**Figure 1.1** The postcard reads: “In commemoration of the destroyer *Yukikaze*’s launch.” March 24, 1939. Sasebo Naval Arsenal (author’s collection).

The second postcard depicts *Yukikaze* under way, with thick lines and rich colors more akin to traditional Japanese woodblock printmaking than to early-twentieth-century Italian futurism. In this postcard, snow blankets the destroyer, a little reminiscent of a winter scene by Utagawa Hiroshige, the Edo-period master. She charges through heavy seas in a snowstorm surrounded by frothing whitecaps, the black exhaust from her funnel blending with the gathering dark clouds in the sky. The rising sun battle flag flutters from her transom (see Figure 1.2). Together, the two postcards

## YUKIKAZE'S WAR



**Figure 1.2** The commemorative postcard reads the same as the one in Figure 1.1 (author's collection).

are optimistic, almost light spirited. Nothing in them hinted at the havoc the little warship would unleash in the Pacific in some two years, or the trials and tragedies that would be reciprocated on her by her enemies.

Indeed, nobody fathomed on that early spring day in 1939 that *Yukikaze* would become known as Japan's "unsinkable destroyer," but only after she had survived some of the most harrowing naval warfare of World War II. She was part of what naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison labeled Japan's "perimeter of steel,"<sup>1</sup> a formidable armada of warships designed to defend its southern oceanic empire of natural resources, particularly oil, from Allied attempts to reclaim it. Her role in the world was a violent one, and her history belies her quaint depictions on those two commemorative postcards.

Over the course of the war, *Yukikaze* sailed nearly everywhere in the Pacific. The warship escorted troops during the invasion of the Philippines and launched torpedoes at Allied cruisers at the Battle of the Java Sea. She escorted Midway invasion forces, screened the aircraft carrier *Zuikaku* during the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, and her main guns blazed and torpedo tubes hissed during the ferocious night fighting that occurred in the waters around Guadalcanal.

## DIVINE SHIPS OF A BLUEWATER NAVY

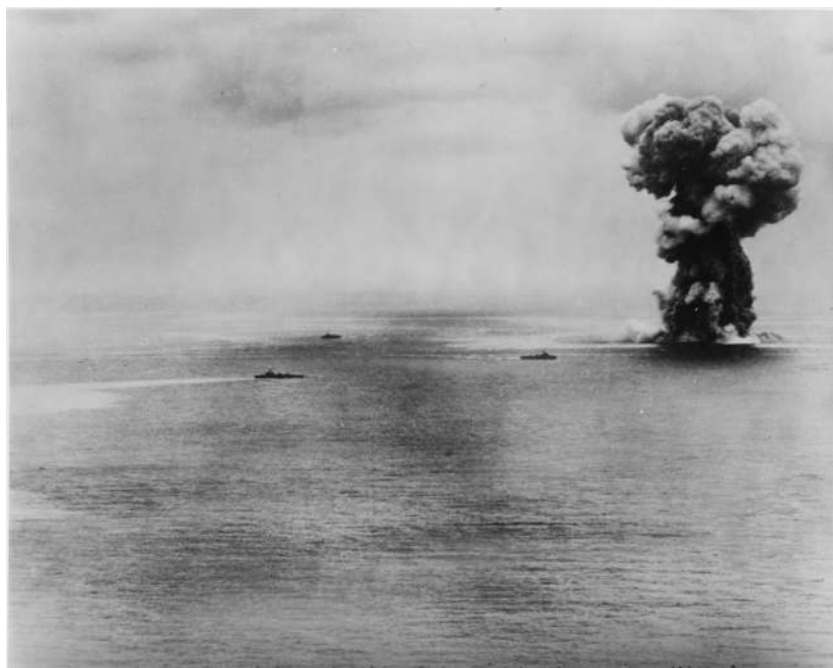
*Yukikaze* fought almost always at night in the Solomon Campaign, including at the Battle of Kolombangara, where by moonlight she and other warships launched Type 93 torpedoes to devastating effect against Allied cruisers. She guarded valuable assets, including Kawasaki-style refueling tankers at the Battle of the Philippine Sea, and tangled with escort carriers twice her size at Leyte Gulf. She escorted flattops, including the super-carrier *Shinano*, when torpedoes struck the carrier and sank her. *Yukikaze* battled submarines and aircraft as well, in numerous locations throughout the Western Pacific, and with several different commanders, each of whom had his own style and all of whom survived the war, much like their destroyer did.

On April 7, 1945, she escorted *Yamato* on the battleship's final suicide mission. A famous US Navy photograph shows *Yamato* vaporizing into a mushroom cloud after sustaining repeated torpedo and bomb hits from hundreds of US aircraft that descended upon the behemoth. *Yukikaze* is the destroyer holding station just to the left, her bow facing the explosion (see Figure 1.3). The photograph speaks volumes about the intrepid little warship. She fought until the bitter end. No longer is her bow facing a limitless horizon, as depicted in her commemorative postcard; now she faces certain defeat and an uncertain future. For the Imperial Japanese Navy, the war was over in that explosive moment, even if the war's story still required two bigger mushroom clouds for it yet to truly be over.

After Japan surrendered, engineers removed *Yukikaze*'s two amidships quadruple torpedo launchers, the two remaining twin 12.7 cm (5-inch) .50 caliber Type 3 naval guns, and the over twenty-five double and triple 25 mm Type 96 antiaircraft mounts and transformed the warship into a toothless refugee transporter, as thousands of demilitarized Japanese troops fled the once-occupied territories of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. She brought home hungry, desperate, and disheveled men in droves in this manner, with makeshift living quarters erected on her deck, traveling to Rabaul, Saigon, Bangkok, and Okinawa, as well as the eastern coast of Guangdong and the southwestern coast of Liaoning in China.

On July 6, 1947, after designated war reparations, she departed Nagaura Bay bound for Shanghai. As she cleared the breakwater, her white wake fanning outward in the blue water behind her, the crew heard shouts of "Banzai!" and "Japan's best ship!" from yard workers ashore. It proved her last sortie for Japan, but not her last sortie as a warship. As the newly

## YUKIKAZE'S WAR



**Figure 1.3** The explosion of battleship *Yamato* on April 7, 1945. *Yukikaze* (Snowy Wind) is the first vessel on the left, then *Hatsushimo* (First Frost) and *Fuyutsuki* (Winter Moon). Official US Navy Photograph, National Archives, Catalog #: 80-G-413914.

renamed *Dan Yang*, she became a cold warrior for the Republic of China, serving for decades after the evacuation of the Nationalists to Taiwan.

Scuttlebutt has it that, after the war, the US Navy had initially drawn *Yukikaze* as war reparations, but acquiesced that the Nationalist Chinese needed her more. Despite her weapons and combat systems being hopelessly outdated, the loving care lavished upon her by her crew caused this ship, even with her systems nearing obsolescence, to be carefully maintained and combat ready. When Allied officers overseeing the transfer ceremony at the Shanghai Wharf inspected the warship, one allegedly remarked, “I’ve never seen a naval vessel from a defeated nation in this kind of impeccable order!”<sup>2</sup> When the Nationalists succumbed to the Chinese Communist Party and evacuated mainland China for Taiwan in 1949, *Yukikaze* fled with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. Ultimately, she was scrapped in 1970.

At the outbreak of World War II, the Imperial Navy had eighty-two Special Type and First Class destroyers, of which *Yukikaze* was one (Map 1.1).

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-108-83729-3 — Yukikaze's War  
Brett L. Walker  
Excerpt  
[More Information](#)



Map 1.1 Imperial Japanese naval bases, Spring 1943



## YUKIKAZE'S WAR

She was one of precious few to survive the war intact. *Yukikaze* logged 96,000 linear nautical miles. But destroyers seldom traveled linear miles. Imperial Navy destroyer captains zigzagged to evade submarines, as well as dodged and weaved to avoid bombs dropped from the air an estimated 30 percent of the time, which meant that *Yukikaze* actually sailed some 120,000 nautical miles on the water.

This is what destroyers do in battle. They typically navigate with a destroyer squadron, usually designated with the acronym “Desron,” under the command of a squadron commander, while operating as part of a larger task force. They launch torpedoes, hunt submarines, and evade aerial assaults. They guard and then aggressively attack. They do so while covering maritime territory quickly. They epitomize the saying “dynamite comes in small packages.”

Four captains commanded the unsinkable destroyer during the war: Tobida Kenjirō, from Sendai City in southern Japan; Kanma Ryōkichi, from a different Sendai City, this one in northeastern Japan; Terauchi Masamichi from Tochigi City; and Koyō Keiji, from Kamakura City, south of Tokyo. The four captains not only survived the war, which is more than can be said for most Imperial Navy destroyer captains, but lived to ripe old ages. *Yukikaze's* story, like that of her commanders, is the tale of a “lucky warship,” and not all Imperial Navy vessels carried such fortunate monikers.

Imperial Navy sailors, like their counterparts in other navies, came to believe in luck on the water, and it became a tangible asset while fighting. Sometimes, desperate war plans actually depended on a certain degree of luck. Naval warfare can be whimsical in this way, and random misfortune could sink even the best warships. Sailors aboard *Yukikaze* knew she was a lucky warship – in fact, they openly spoke of it, as did Imperial Navy brass – and *Yukikaze's* officers and crew always assessed new commanders on whether they were lucky, too. The Imperial Navy commissioned plenty of unlucky ships, such as the carrier *Taihō*: they never lasted long.

The Kawasaki Kobe Shipyards had built *Taihō* to be the most powerful carrier on the water. She was 855 feet and displaced over 37,000 tons fully loaded, which included 65 combat-ready aircraft. She sported the newest defenses and a thick plate of high-tensile steel covered her entire flight deck. Rather than a teak flight deck – elegant to be sure, but also dangerously flammable – engineers painted a thick coat of latex over



#### DIVINE SHIPS OF A BLUEWATER NAVY

the steel deck covering. Engineers designed her to survive the kind of aerial pummeling that decimated the flattops at Midway. *Yukikaze* had escorted *Taihō* during her shakedown at Tawi-Tawi Island in the southern Philippines. Her officers and crew knew the flattop well.

But the carrier proved woefully unlucky. The US submarine *Albacore* fatally holed her with a single torpedo on June 19, 1944, at the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Imperial Navy planners had meant for *Taihō* to serve as the centerpiece of a newly constructed Combined Fleet, one that could halt the Allied advance in the Mariana Islands. Instead, she sank ingloriously, six and a half hours after her torpedo hit, blown apart by two massive internal explosions, a result of design flaws.

In his novel *Citadel in Spring*, Imperial Navy veteran Agawa Hiroyuki described the carnage aboard *Taihō* when she exploded and sank. In the galley, one sailor had the “bone of a broken leg, jutting up like a crutch,”<sup>3</sup> with “pieces of dark red flesh adhering to it.” One sailor’s head had “split open like a pomegranate, wedged between the door and the jamb.” As sailors abandoned the stricken flattop, their open wounds throbbed in the seawater. Nonetheless, *Taihō*’s demise was relatively peaceful: the “forty-four-thousand ton vessel thrust its stern up into space and slipped beneath the waves in a twinkle of an eye.” With her sank the Imperial Navy’s dreams of winning a decisive battle against the US Navy before Saipan fell and US bombers could reach the home islands and burn them to the ground. It was good to be a lucky warship in World War II.

“Really,”<sup>4</sup> wrote Itō Masanori, a respected wartime journalist and author of numerous books on the Imperial Navy, including the one that has guided my story, *Yukikaze*’s history remains “miraculous in the entire world of naval warfare.” It was a miraculous career indeed. It begs the question of the boat biographer, though: where should we start in telling her story?

\* \* \*

I start with her name. “Snowy wind” is weather that should not be confused with a blizzard. In the Imperial Navy, there was an entire class of destroyers called *Fubuki*, or the Blizzard class. They were built about a decade before *Yukikaze* and her sister ships, between 1926 and 1932. Armed with three twin-mounted 5-inch guns and sporting a flat foc’s’le and flared deck, the boats sliced through even the heaviest seas and

## YUKIKAZE'S WAR

delivered a serious punch. In historian Morison's estimation, in their day they "led the world's navies in design and armament."<sup>5</sup>

*Mutsuki*, or the Harmonious Moon class, had preceded them, a name that refers to the first month of the Lunar Calendar. Japan had followed the Lunar Calendar until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when the country modernized along Western lines. *Hatsuharu*, or the Early Spring class, succeeded the *Fubuki* vessels. After these vessels came the *Shiratsuyu*, or the White Dew class, built until 1937. Then came the *Asashio*, or the Morning Tide class, built for only two years between 1937 and 1939. There is an entire pantheon of Japanese destroyers and many with elegant names, but none celebrated more accomplishments on the water, or more elegant names for that matter, than the *Kagerō*, or the Gossamer class, of which *Yukikaze* was one of nineteen built.

There is a lot to a warship name, and Japan's naming practices reveal something important about Japanese culture, particularly in wartime. The Imperial Navy named destroyers after weather or atmospheric phenomena, ones often with classical poetic references. They named battleships after ancient provinces, or on occasion ancient references to Japan itself, such as *Fusō* or *Yamato*. They named heavy cruisers, such as *Atago* and *Chōkai*, after mountains and light cruisers after rivers and streams. *Atago* is a mountain near Kyoto with a Shinto shrine where the local avatar protects Kyoto from fire, for example. *Chōkai* is an active volcano in northeastern Japan. *Atago* was also a *Takao*-class heavy cruiser that the US submarine *Darter* holed prior to Leyte Gulf. It had served as Rear Admiral Kurita Takeo's flagship, and he ended up swimming for his life. *Chōkai* was scuttled following the Battle off Samar, also part of the Leyte operation. In essence, the Combined Fleet, with black smoke belching from its stacks, became a steel maritime reflection of Japan's divine landscape, one rooted in Shintoism.

Two years before Sasebo launched *Yukikaze*, the Education Ministry launched a campaign to highlight Japan's "unparalleled national polity"<sup>6</sup> by tying it to the natural landscape. The *Cardinal Principles of the National Polity*, a highly nativist text, wove Japan's "beautiful nature not seen in other countries" together with its people's unique "national essence." While "Natural features overpower India, and in the West one senses that man subjugates nature," the Japanese lived in "constant harmony with