

YUKIKAZE'S WAR

Only one elite Imperial Japanese Navy destroyer survived the cruel ocean battlefields of World War II. This is her story. Brett Walker, historian and captain, delves into questions of mechanics, armaments, navigation, training, and even indoctrination illustrating the daily realities of war for *Yukikaze* and her crew. By shifting our perspective of the Pacific War away from grand Imperial strategies toward the intricacies of fighting on the water, Walker allows us to see the war from *Yukikaze's* bridge during the most harrowing battles, from Midway to Okinawa. Walker uncovers the ordinary sailor's experience, and we see sailors fight while deep-running currents of Japanese history unfold before their war-weary eyes. As memories of World War II fade, *Yukikaze's* story becomes ever more important, providing valuable lessons in our contemporary world of looming energy shortfalls, menacing climate uncertainties, and aggressive totalitarian regimes.

Brett L. Walker is a historian of Japan, medicine, the environment, and World War II, as well as an experienced captain.

YUKIKAZE'S WAR

*The Unsinkable Japanese Destroyer and
World War II in the Pacific*

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To my mother, Linda

Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,
The angels, whispering to one another,
Can find, among their burning terms of love,
None so devotional as that of “Mother” ...

Edgar Allan Poe

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>A Note on Sources</i>	xv
1 Divine Ships of a Bluewater Navy	1
2 Torpedoes, Destroyers, and Samurai of the Seas	23
3 Oil Empire and Japan’s Southern Advance	43
4 Conquest of the South Seas	62
5 Escorting Catastrophe at Midway	82
6 Barroom Brawl at Guadalcanal	112
7 Defending the Solomon Sea and Bismarck Barrier	137
8 The Mariana Islands and the Collapse of Japan’s Defensive Sphere	159
9 The Leyte Theater	183
10 Dangerous Homewaters and <i>Shinano</i> Destroyed	212
11 <i>Yamato</i> and the Specter of History	234
12 Surrender and the Enduring Dangers of <i>Yukikaze</i> ’s Haunt	254
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	281
<i>Notes</i>	283
<i>Index</i>	297

Preface

Many famous ships, by virtue of their captains and crew, passengers, navigational wherewithal, engineering, construction, charts and electronics, armaments, contagious diseases, livestock, weeds, hitchhiking barnacles, and parasitic bilges have shaped the course of historical events in ways just as powerful as any human idea. This fact is undeniable, so I will not belabor the point.

And ships resemble people, too. They have personalities; some even have attitudes. Like people, they are also born with differing degrees of fortune – some ships are lucky, while others are not. Frankly, writing a biography of a ship is not unlike writing a biography of a person. It involves the same balance of historical context and individual grit. We are a product of our will, to be sure; but we are also products of the ideas and material world that swirl around us and shape us every day. We can't escape these currents, and ships can't, either.

Polynesians settled the South Pacific in large, multi-hulled canoes, with only the stars, waves, and the occasional white tern to guide them. Leif Erikson's Norse ship is said to have brought the Icelandic explorer to North America about 500 years before Christopher Columbus was even a twinkle in Susanna Fontanarossa's eye. Vasco da Gama's *São Gabriel* rounded the Horn of Africa in 1497 and opened trade routes to the spice-rich lands of Arabia. Columbus's *Santa María* crossed the Atlantic Ocean and enabled the European colonization of North America, sadly leading to a holocaust against native populations. Zheng He's colossal Chinese treasure ships visited Brunei, Java, Thailand, the Horn of Africa, and Arabia in the sixteenth century, before China's self-imposed dynastic isolation.

PREFACE

James Cook's *Endeavour* charted islands in the Pacific Ocean from New Zealand to Hawai'i in the eighteenth century, bringing contagions that decimated local populations. Horatio Nelson's *Victory* led the way in the defeat of Napoleon at Trafalgar in 1805, reshaping the map of Europe forever. In the 1830s, Robert Fitzroy's *Beagle* transported Charles Darwin and a copy of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* to South America, including the Galápagos Islands, transforming how we look at natural change and geological time forever. Tōgō Heihachirō's battleship *Mikasa* helped sink the better part of the Russian Baltic Fleet at the Battle of Tsushima Strait, leading to Japan's meteoric rise as a world power at the dawn of the twentieth century. History undeniably changed in the wakes of these ships.

This book is the story of one of these ships, a World War II warship named *Yukikaze*. This Imperial Japanese Navy destroyer navigated through many of the most harrowing naval battles in World War II, where brave young sailors on both sides, confined in cramped galvanized warships, fought valiantly in a life or death struggle for survival and, ultimately, victory over the enemy. Her story provides fresh insights into why Japan waged war in the Pacific, and how the Imperial Navy won and lost key battles.

Yukikaze's story traces dangerous changes in Imperial Navy culture and conduct as the war ground on, particularly Imperial Navy abandonment of conventional naval strategies and tactics in favor of a "kamikaze spirit" that was often resisted by the shipboard rank and file. After the Battle of the Philippine Sea in the summer of 1944, the Imperial Navy waged war less for tactical successes than to preserve honor: to appease the ghosts of its founders, men such as Tōgō Heihachirō and Yamamoto Gonnohyōe, and to satiate Japan's martial heroes, men such as the samurai loyalist Kusunoki Masashige. It's hardly surprising that *kikusui* – the floating chrysanthemum, the Kusunoki family crest – became code for Imperial Navy "special operations" in the final years of the war.

Finally, *Yukikaze's* war was part of the global story of World War II, highlighting the interconnectedness of the conflict. Historian A. J. P. Taylor, in his landmark *The Origins of the Second World War*, wrote that the Asia-Pacific and European wars "remained distinct"¹ from one another. He continued that the "European war and its origins can be treated as

PREFACE

a story in itself, the Far East providing occasional distractions off-stage.” Actually, as we shall see, this statement couldn’t be further from the truth.

Yukikaze’s war was anything but a distraction happening off stage, particularly when viewed through the strategic lens of Japan’s need to extract oil from the soil of decaying European empires, such as the Dutch East Indies. In May 1940, Adolf Hitler’s blitzkrieg had forced the Dutch government into exile in London. Consequently, the London Cabinet, as the Dutch government in exile was called, abandoned the East Indies and its oilfields, leaving them like an “orphaned child.” What *Yukikaze’s* war shows is that the two military theaters constantly overlapped, and nowhere was that more true than at sea.

Yukikaze’s war challenges us to reexamine larger questions regarding how we interpret the broader meaning of World War II some seventy-five years later, after most of the men and women who served in that war are no longer with us. Sadly, history departments in the United States have all but abandoned military history in favor of other fields, and this remains particularly true regarding the study of Japan. But, in the wake of Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine and continuing hostilities around Taiwan, and Japan’s Prime Minister recently stating that, “With the security environment in the East and South China seas ... becoming more severe,”² Japan has “no time to waste” in beefing up its military posture in the region, it’s probably high time for historians to reexamine how war shapes our world.

It’s critically important that the horrors of World War II not be lost in the twenty-first century. Today, the postwar consensus for liberalism is fading at the same time that memories of World War II do. As those war memories fade and the global democratic tide begins to ebb, the jagged reefs of nativism and despotism are being exposed in the coastal nadir. Historian Robert Kagan, in *The Jungle Grows Back*, writes that most of human history is about “war, tyranny, and poverty,”³ and the triumph of the liberal order since World War II has been a “historical aberration.” The postwar liberal order “is like a garden,” observes Kagan, “it is ever under siege from the natural forces of history, the jungle whose vines and weeds constantly threaten to overwhelm it.” There are many ways to tend the garden of the liberal order, and teaching more about World

PREFACE

War II is one of them. It is, after all, in the bloodsoaked soil of World War II that the seeds of the liberal garden first began to germinate.

Yukikaze, as a technology of war, not only shaped history, but also served as a window into it. She fought in what can only be described as a cataclysmic and grotesque eruption of industrial modernity and political ideologies, a global conflict that killed an estimated 70–80 million people and maimed countless more. The historian Eric Hobsbawm called the twentieth century the “age of extremes,” and little proved more extreme during this age than the killing during World War II.

Yukikaze's story is not an easy one to flesh out. The Allies, who won the war, kept and preserved copious notes, while the losers' notes, in this case those of the Imperial Japanese Navy, were largely destroyed. Still, historians know the outlines of Pacific battles well, and expertly illustrate them with charts of fleet dispositions, tactics, navigational decisions, torpedo actions, aerial assaults, and gunnery exchanges to help understand the intricacies of often-chaotic engagements on the water. These charts might illustrate that Imperial Navy destroyers launched torpedoes here, at some known longitudinal and latitudinal coordinate; and, consequently, a US Navy vessel sank there, at another known coordinate – the map icon of a wrecked ship designates its watery grave.

But, in large part, historians can only speculate regarding what happened aboard Imperial Navy warships during key confrontations, what sailors thought and why. Many Imperial Navy vessels sank, and their records, including sailors' personal memories, sank with them. Sailors aboard *Yukikaze*, by contrast, survived the war and burned her shipboard records on land after Japan's surrender in 1945, and only a smattering of histories, interviews, and diaries remain to bring her travails to life. Of course, I have mined these, and also augmented them with the copious US Navy action reports that, I hope, help transport the reader back in time to these watery battlefields.

The history that emerges in these pages reveals more than just industrial-scale killing by men in clanking, cranking, and smoking machines. *Yukikaze* shares with us a world in the white-knuckled grip of total war, when entire nations, including their women and children, geared up to fight, and offers suggestions regarding how we might remember the epic conflict today, in a world filled with similar

PREFACE

uncertainties. Even after the war, when the big guns quieted, *Yukikaze* and her treasured name navigated through the postwar world in the form of her enduring historical legacies, similarly informing us about dangerous Cold War geopolitics, Japan's postwar popular culture, and the enduring global security challenges in the Taiwan Strait, the most fraught body of water in the world. Ironically, the energy requirements that Japan used to justify its "Southern Operation" in 1941 still persist today, and Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces, not unlike their Imperial Navy forebears, plan for new challenges in an age of disappearing oil.

Yukikaze serves as a historical avatar of sorts, a floating, mechanical representation of the complex, multifaceted reasons industrial nations fought World War II, from their political ideologies to their industrial dependency on oil. Her story is a valuable one in our world of lurking energy shortfalls, menacing climate uncertainties, and aggressive totalitarian regimes.

A Note on Sources

In the name of readability, I have reduced the endnotes in this book to a bare minimum, citing only quoted dialogue. But sources other than the ones cited contributed to this book, many of them in important ways. Primarily, this book was inspired by three chapters in Itō Masanori's *Rengō kantai no eikō* (*Glory of the Combined Fleet*, 1962), a book I discovered for the first time as a Reischauer Fellow while perusing the Harvard-Yenching stacks. It piqued my interest in the destroyer *Yukikaze*, and I've been hooked ever since.

Those chapters framed much of the analysis in this book up until around 1944. After that, one of Itō's other histories, *The End of the Imperial Japanese Navy* (1962), framed the analysis of the final two years of the war. I've always respected Itō's work, particularly his close friendships with many in the Imperial Navy. I'm fully aware of some of the problems with his scholarship, and I have meticulously checked his work against other sources. But Itō provided a unique perspective into the Imperial Navy, and I have tried to retain this distinct flavor – he's both historian and primary source.

Otherwise, to track *Yukikaze*'s movements in a long and geographically dispersed war, I referenced her Track Record of Movement (TROM) on Jonathan Parshall's remarkable database www.CombinedFleet.com. I also cautiously used Toyota Jō, *Yukikaze wa shizumazu: Kyōun kuchikukan eikō no shōgai* (*Yukikaze Can't Be Sunk: The Glorious Career of a Fortunate Destroyer*, 1983). Several general histories of the war in the Pacific informed my thinking, including Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*, 15 vols. (1947–1962); William Leonard Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940–1941* (1953); *Senshi sōsho* (The War History Series, 102 vols.,

A NOTE ON SOURCES

compiled by the War History Office of the National Defense College of Japan), including the translated *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies* (2015); Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1941–1945* (1978); Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun* (1985); Richard B. Frank, *Downfall* (1999); Ian W. Toll's trilogy, *Pacific Crucible* (2012), *The Conquering Tide* (2015), and *Twilight of the Gods* (2020); Waldo Heinrichs and Marc Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes* (2017); Craig L. Symonds, *World War II at Sea* (2018); Evan Mawdsley, *The War for the Seas* (2019); and Richard B. Frank, *Tower of Skulls* (2020). For Japan's occupation and postwar history, including naval history, I referenced John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (1999); Euan Graham, *Japan's Sea Lane Security, 1940–2004* (2006); and Alessio Patalano, *Post-war Japan as a Sea Power* (2015). I consulted Chen Jiang, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (2001), regarding the Taiwan Strait during the Cold War.

I used numerous histories and reference books on the Imperial Japanese Navy, including Charles Schencking, *Making Waves* (2005); David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun* (2012); Mark Stille, *The Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific War* (2013); and David C. Evans, ed., *The Japanese Navy in World War II* (1969). I referenced Anthony John Watts and Brian G. Gordon, *The Imperial Japanese Navy* (1971); Hansgeorg Jentschura, Dieter Jung, and Peter Mickel, *Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1869–1945* (1977); and Eric Lacroix and Linton Wells, *Japanese Cruisers of the Pacific War* (1997). I relied heavily on the *US Naval Technical Mission to Japan* (1945) for data on Imperial Navy vessels, weapons, and other maritime systems. For information on food aboard Imperial Navy warships, I used Fujita Masao, *Shashin de miru kaigun ryōshokushi* (*A History in Photographs of Imperial Navy Provisioning*, 2007). On the US side, the National Archive's "World War II Navy Command Files" contain an absolute treasure trove of primary sources, including World War II Action Reports from Pacific battlefields.

I drew on general histories of wartime Japan, including Saburō Ienaga, *The Pacific War* (1978); John W. Dower, *War without Mercy* (1986); Mark R. Peattie, *Nan'yō* (1988); Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War* (1992); Samuel Hideo Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies* (2005); *Sources of Japanese Tradition, 1600 to 2000, Volume Two, Part Two: 1868 to 2000*, compiled by W. Theodore De Bary, Carol

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann (2006); Samuel Hideo Yamashita, *Daily Life in Wartime Japan, 1940–1945* (2015); and Noriko Kawamura, *Emperor Hirohito and the Pacific War* (2015), among others.

My thoughts on Imperial Navy destroyer names and Imperial nationalism are rooted in such scholarship as Haruo Shirane, ed., *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (2007); H. D. Harootunian, *Toward Restoration* (1970); H. D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen* (1988); Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print* (2006); and Brett L. Walker, *A Concise History of Japan* (2015), among others. I consider Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure* (1974) essential reading when thinking about Japan's tragic heroes.

To recreate an on-the-water perspective, I relied on four autobiographical accounts, in particular: Hara Tameichi, *Japanese Destroyer Captain* (1961); Nishizaki Nobuo, *Yukikaze no notte shōnen: Jūgosai de shusseki shita kaigun tokubetsu nenshōhei* (*A Boy aboard Yukikaze: Departing for the Front at Fifteen as a Special Navy Youth Sailor*, 2019); NHK Interview Archive, *Kuchikukan Yukikaze Suisokuin: Noma Mitsue-san* (Destroyer *Yukikaze* Hydrographer, Noma Mitsue, October 23, 2011); and Yoshida Mitsuru, *Requiem for Battleship Yamato* (1985).

For individual battles, I used the above general histories, as well as more specific studies (in approximate chronological order), including David Arthur Thomas, *The Battle of the Java Sea* (1968); Donald M. Kehn, *In the Highest Degree of Tragic* (2017); John B. Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral* (2016); Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword* (2005); Craig L. Symonds, *The Battle of Midway* (2011); Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal* (1990); James D. Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno* (2011); Trent Hone, *Learning War* (2022); W. David Dickson, *The Battle of the Philippine Sea, June 1944* (1975); James D. Hornfischer, *Fleet at Flood Tide* (2016); Barrett Tillman, *Clash of the Carriers* (2005); Anthony P. Tully, *Battle of Surigao Strait* (2009); Mark P. Parillo, *The Japanese Merchant Marine in World War II* (1993); *The United States Strategic Bombing Surveys (Pacific War)* (1987); and Shizuo Fukui, *Japanese Navy Vessels at the End of World War II* (1992), among others.

Historians always build their work on the foundation stones set by the work of others; they sometimes even rearrange those stones, ever so slightly, and this book is certainly no different.