

[MOVIES]

Surviving Kamikaze Pilots Set the Record Straight

WINGS OF DEFEAT (2008)

Director: Risa Morimoto

Time: 90 minutes. Color/

B&W. Edgewood Pictures.

Adm. Chester W. Nimitz remarked that the U.S. Navy's Pacific war pretty much unfolded according to plan. The only surprise, he admitted, was the kamikaze campaign. Imperial Navy suicide pilots sank some 50 American warships and inflicted damage on hundreds more, mostly during the Okinawa operation in spring 1945. Today, the kamikaze campaign remains surrounded by misconceptions—something this powerful film will change, as it preserves the memories of a unique group of World War II vets: four kamikaze

airmen, three of whom actually took off on missions against the American fleet off Okinawa.

Most Western views of the kamikaze have emphasized their fanaticism, and after 9/11, many pundits suggested parallels between the suicide bombers of 2001 and the Special Attack Force. The film's producer and director, Risa Morimoto, a Japanese American, shared that belief. Then, the discovery that her late uncle had been in training for the kamikaze force (he had told her only, "I was a pilot cadet") forced her to confront this perception. She became determined to locate survivors of the dwindling kamikaze cadre, those who crash-landed safely during a mission, turned back with engine trouble, or were still in training

when Japan surrendered. The result is a unique historical document as well as a gripping film.

Wings weaves together interviews with veterans, including sailors from the USS *Drexler*, a destroyer sunk by a kamikaze off Okinawa; commentary from historians, both American and Japanese; archival footage (much of it new and very effectively integrated); and visits to former kamikaze bases, memorials, and museums. The film's centerpiece, of course, is the four airmen. Their stories reflect a continuing effort to come to terms with the Japanese wartime experience. One pilot speaks with pride of having answered his nation's call, while another candidly admits that his reaction upon being told he was to fly his mission was, "Oh, I'm screwed."

With first-rate production values, this worthy documentary sheds new light on a poorly understood aspect of World War II. —Richard R. Muller