Wings of Defeat

PRODUCER/WRITER, LINDA HOAGLUND
PRODUCER/DIRECTOR, RISA MORIMOTO
DISTRIBUTED BY EDGEWOOD PICTURES
DVD, 90 MINUTES COLOR/B/W, 2007
ENGLISH/JAPANESE W/ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Alejandro Echevarria

Wings of Defeat is a documentary that contains rare interviews with surviving kamikaze pilots, also known as the tokko or Tokkotai (Special Attack Forces). However, the film deals with much more than the kamikaze. Risa Morimoto, the director of the film, had an uncle in Japan who was a surviving tokko. Although she found this out after his death, she had many questions about his life. For many Americans, the kamikaze may be considered fanatical suicide bombers who did not value human life. Yet, for Morimoto, this did not describe her uncle. The film explores the human side of the kamikaze through interviews, newsreels, photos, an animated sequence, documents, and voice-overs by Morimoto, as well as Japanese and American veterans.

This film belongs in the secondary and post-secondary classroom and is especially suited for World History and American History courses. Educators in early secondary education should decide if the film is appropriate due to the subject matter and the graphic images of war. One of the difficulties a teacher will have with the film is deciding whether to allot ninety minutes to the subject of the kamikaze, in addition to discussion time. In the past, I found that I could cover the subject of the kamikaze with fifteen minutes of newsreels and discussion. However, this is not the type of film where one can show a fifteen-minute segment. The entire film needs to be seen from beginning to end, and I believe it is indeed worth spending that amount of time.

Reviewed by Alejandro Echevarria

ASIANetwork Grant Opportunity

This grant enables individual faculty members at liberal arts colleges to take up to five students to East and Southeast Asia to conduct undergraduate research. Faculty mentors and students apply as a team. Funding is available for up to sixty persons (mentors and students combined) to conduct research in Asia in summer 2009. Application deadline: December 1, 2008, with award notification by February 1, 2009. For additional information, contact: Dr. Van J. Symons, Program Director, Augustana College, (309) 794-7413; vanjsymons@augustana.edu, or Dr. Teddy O. Amoloza, ASIANetwork Executive Director, Illinois Wesleyan University, (309) 556-3405; tamoloza@iwu.edu.

For more information about ASIANetwork, please visit www.asianetwork.org
Wings of Defeat does not dwell solely on the kamikaze. The film gives a synopsis of the Pacific War, but focuses mainly on its final eight months. The lives of the pilots do not dominate the film, but instead become a story within a story.

Perspectives of Japanese civilians during the war play a pivotal role in the film. This perspective, difficult to find in other films, takes the students to a necessary place for them to understand the complexities of war. The film moves between the pilots' historical memory, the perspective of the civilian population, and the official policy of the Japanese government in such a complete way that the viewer understands why Japan continued to fight a war that devastated the nation.

Many of the tokko pilots were teenagers, the same age as my students. Of the four thousand pilots, around three thousand were "boy pilots" with little understanding of the war, let alone knowledge of how ideology and belief guided the Japanese to use the Tokkotai as a last resort.

This film is about how ideology and belief guided the Japanese to use the Tokkotai as a last resort.
Karin Muller’s Japanland book was published in 2005, and the double DVD set was released in 2006. Classroom supplements went online at japanlandstudyguide.com at the end of 2007. This review focuses on the four hours of short video segments that can be viewed as stand-alone pieces or played as a linear story that follows Muller’s year of observing and participating in mainstream Japanese life, as well as pursuing far less common experiences across the islands.

The story opens with Karin introducing herself and the judo training that brought her to Tokyo. She then ventures out to some places within easy reach of the capital. From her interest in the similarities to and difference with her life in the US, she sets off for several months across the islands to learn about ongoing traditions and everyday life among the Japanese people.

What Karin does not say is that she has made travels before and presented them through film. Her other work, along with still images, some commentary (www.japanlandjourney.com), and ordering information for the Japanland set are online at www.japanlandonline.com. The quality of the audio and video is high. The pacing of edits and the length of each segment are also well done. Her storytelling and production skills are clear. No prior knowledge about Japan is presumed. The opening menu on each DVD allows easy navigation to individual episodes, which run between two and eight minutes. The story flows in chronological order.

This film has relevance today, as students are confronted almost daily with news about terrorists, fanatics, and suicide bombers. Perhaps this film will give them an anchor to ask the questions that should be asked. This is why Edgewood Pictures markets Wings of Defeat not just for History classes, but also for courses in Peace and Justice, Human Rights, Political Science, International Relations, and Media and Culture.

Teachers who purchase the film also receive a teacher’s guide created by SPICE with “Letters to Educators” from Professor John Dower, Professor Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Linda Hoaglund, and Risa Morimoto.

After viewing this film, I know I will devote more than fifteen minutes to the kamikaze. Wings of Defeat is an ideal film for concluding a unit on the Pacific War, and it will generate a classroom discussion questioning the nature of war.

ALEJANDRO ECHEVARRIA is a history teacher in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program at Rampart High School in Colorado Springs. He was the 2007 US-Japan Foundation Elgin Heinz teaching award winner in the Humanities category.

Journeys in Japan the Japanland

DIRECTOR, KARIN MULLER
DISTRIBUTOR: WWW.JAPANLANDONLINE.COM
225 MINUTES, COLOR, TWO DVD SET, ALSO AVAILABLE IN VHS

Reviewed by Guven Witteveen

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