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## The Sequel to Pearl Harbor

As the war in the Pacific dragged on, the Japanese hoped to demoralize the U.S. with an attack on the mainland by submarine-launched bombers.

By *Edward Kosner*  
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World War II is like a great novel, its peak moments—the Battle of Midway, Stalingrad, D-Day—chapters that can be endlessly retold, no less thrilling for the repetition. But the war has forgotten or overlooked episodes that are also compelling. One was Japan’s desperation plan to launch dive bombers from monster submarines to turn the tide of the war by devastating the Panama Canal. John Geoghegan’s “Operation Storm” is a fascinating, meticulously researched and deft account of this bizarre chapter.

### OPERATION STORM

By *John Geoghegan*  
Crown, 478 pages, \$28



Subs larger than the 400-foot-long Sen-toku weren’t built until 1961. U.S. NAVY

Japan’s more realistic warlords knew their country had no chance to defeat the U.S. in a protracted conflict, Mr. Geoghegan writes. Their original hope was to use the six-month advantage won by the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor to consolidate their gains in Asia and the western Pacific, establish a defense perimeter, and then demoralize the Americans into quitting the war. They needed another coup to persuade the U.S. to call the Pacific war a draw and concentrate on defeating Hitler.

Thus the scheme to build a fleet of the biggest submarines yet conceived and construct on their decks watertight hangars to house specially designed dive bombers that could be catapulted from the subs’ pitching decks. These top-secret Sen-toku submarines would have such range that they could round Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope into the Atlantic, launch their planes to bomb New York or Washington, D.C., retrieve the bombers, and return to Japan as the stupefied Americans lost heart.

The brainchild of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the Pearl Harbor raid, the subs were the I-400 class, more than 400 feet long, able to stay at sea for four months at a time. The planes they launched would carry 1,800-pound bombs, the largest in the Imperial Japanese Navy’s arsenal. The bombers were named Seiran—“Storm From the Clear Sky”—inspired by an 18th-century woodblock by the master Hiroshige.

In an unflinching but respectful tone Mr. Geoghegan tells the story of the admirals, submarine officers, pilots and enlisted men who conceived and tried to execute the plan. He pays tribute to their technical wizardry, tenacity and stoic valor, but he unflinchingly describes some of the same captains’ massacres of the survivors of Allied ships torpedoed earlier in the war. He is equally dispassionate about the American submariners who ultimately vanquished them—a mixed lot of model commanders and erratic skipper.

Of the 18 mega subs originally proposed, the Japanese managed to build only three, and only two of them made it to sea, the I-400 and the I-401. By the time the subs were operational, the psychological value of bombing New York or Washington had evaporated, and the new target was the giant locks at the Atlantic end of the Panama Canal. With the war in Europe winding up, the idea was to block the canal so that the U.S. couldn’t transfer ships and troops to the Pacific theater. A wooden replica of the gates to the locks was constructed, and the Seiran pilots practiced what they later learned was to be a suicide attack.

But the pace of the war outran them again. Now it was summer 1945, and the Americans were massing an armada at Ulithi, a Pacific atoll with a huge harbor. These were the Allied ships and men assembled for the bloody final assault on the home islands that would force Japan’s surrender. With its cities incinerated by firebombing, its surface ships and subs mostly sunk, Japan’s last hope would be a Seiran attack to deter the invasion force.

The 11th hours of the Japanese sub crews and their suicide pilots were poignant. The commander of the shrunken squadron, Cmdr. Tatsunosuke Ariizumi, spent his last night with his wife and five children just outside devastated Tokyo. Lt. Cmdr. Nobukiyo Nambu, the commanding officer of the flagship I-401, arranged for the families of the suicide pilots to come to the sub base to bid them farewell. As the assault drew closer, the doomed pilots sang a popular song of the time, which began:

You and I, blossoms of the same  
cherry tree

That blossomed in the Naval  
Academy’s garden

Blossoms know they must blow in the  
wind someday

Blossoms in the wind, fallen for their  
country . . .

But the mission itself was a tragicomedy. The I-400 and the I-401, traveling separately for security, were supposed to rendezvous in the waters off Ulithi. But the proper coordinates were never transmitted. The I-400 arrived on station. The I-401 was waiting nearly 1,000 miles to the west. It hardly mattered. Before a single Seiran could be launched, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, the second on Nagasaki three days later. The formalities aboard the USS Missouri took another week, but the war was over.

The last orders from the Japanese admiralty directed the subs to head for one of their bases, but to surrender if intercepted. The I-400 was quickly spotted, but the I-401 hoped to remain undetected until it could ditch on the eastern shore of Japan. With torpedoes, artillery shells, code books and logs jettisoned, the I-401 set off and promptly encountered the USS Segundo, a sub half its size.

Squadron commander Ariizumi wanted to scuttle his sub, but Nambu and the other officers ignored him. Then he threatened the American sub captain that all 200-odd men aboard would commit ritual suicide. “Hara kiri no good,” the American replied. Finally a face-saving solution was worked out, and the victors raised the American flag over the I-401. But before they could, Ariizumi locked his cabin, donned his dress uniform and blew his brains out.

Mr. Geoghegan goes into great detail recounting the surrender of the boats and the fate of their officers and crew, many of whom served with distinction when Japan’s naval defense force was reconstituted a decade later. Indeed, the end of his story is as compelling in its way as the more dramatic earlier stages. His patient and sympathetic deconstruction of the Japanese officers’ conflicted obedience to their shattered chain of command and their behavior in defeat illuminates the contradictory nature of an adversary capable of idealized conduct and hideous barbarity.

The whole misbegotten episode amounted to barely a footnote in the great war. “The *Sen-toku* force saw only eight months of service . . .” Mr. Geoghegan writes. “Its subs never fired a shot in anger; it attacked not a single enemy.” “Courage and perseverance,” he concludes, “are not enough.”

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of *Newsweek*, *New York*, *Esquire* and the *New York Daily News*.

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