

Artist concept of a *Kaiten* Type 2 in action. The entire program would prove to be a failure and resulted in the destruction of most the submarines designed to carry the weapon.

# UNDERHILL VERSUS THE KAITENS

THIS VALIANT DESTROYER ESCORT AND ITS HEROIC CREW FOUGHT OFF JAPAN'S LATEST SUICIDE WEAPON IN AN ACTION THAT WOULD SAVE THOUSANDS OF ARMY TROOPS  
BY RAY ARMAUND

Beginning on 14 July 1945, the Japanese launched the final Imperial Japanese Navy offensive of the Second World War as six boats of Submarine Division 15 departed the Home Islands on the ninth (and last) *Kaiten* mission of the war. Basically, the *Kaitens* were manned torpedoes and the name was a literal translation of "Turn the Heavens." By the end of 1943, the IJN high command knew the war was going to keep pressing closer and closer to the Home Islands

with no chance of Japanese victory. Various proposals were put forward and considered for suicide craft that would slow the progress of the Americans. At first, these radical ideas were rejected but were quickly deemed necessary and numerous suicide craft were developed for use by the Japanese Special Attack Units. These included *Kamikaze* aircraft, *Shinyo* suicide boats, *Kaiten* manned torpedoes, and *Fukuryu* suicide divers.

*Kaiten* development began in February 1944 and progressed

rapidly with an order for 100 of the weapons placed mid-year. Initially, they were Type 93 torpedo engine compartments attached to a cylinder that would become the compartment for the pilot with all the needed controls to give full control of the weapon. Eventually, six models of the *Kaiten* were designed but most were prototypes and were not developed.

With the first *Kaitens*, provisions were included allowing the pilot to escape after the final acceleration towards the target. However, it appears that no pilot attempted escaping nor intended to do so and the provision was dropped as production increased.

*Kaitens* were designed to be launched from the deck of a submarine or surface ship or from coastal installations when used as a coastal defense weapon. The IJN cruiser *Kitakami* was equipped to launch eight *Kaitens*. Two destroyers were also modified to carry the weapon. In combat, only the Type 1 craft using the submarine delivery method was

utilized. The *Kaitens* were lashed to the host vessel on wooden blocks with a narrow access tube connecting the submarine to the lower hatch of the weapon. This allowed the crew to enter from the sub while it was submerged.

There were many things wrong with the basic concept and one of the main ones was the fact the *Kaiten* had a very limited diving depth. This meant, of course, that the submarine also had a very limited depth and this made them vulnerable to attack by American aircraft and ships. Once the submarine was in range of a target, the *Kaiten* crews would be briefed. The *Kaiten* pilot would separate from the host submarine and head at speed in the direction of the target fed into the gyroscope. Once within attack range, the *Kaiten* would bring the weapon near the surface and the pilot would check the range and bearing via periscope and make any adjustments necessary. He would then submerge to a suitable depth, arm the warhead, and go on the final attack run. If the target was missed, he could try again. If the mission was a failure, the pilot could detonate the warhead as a last resort. Only the Type 1 *Kaiten*

Damaged *Kaiten* recovered by Americans at Ulithi Atoll in 1945. The forward portion — including warhead, oxygen tanks, fuel tanks, and crew compartment — is missing and may have been destroyed in an explosion.



USS *Underhill* off the Boston Navy Yard on 21 June 1944.



USS *Underhill* shortly after commissioning.