

# Banzai charge

**Banzai charge** is the term that was used by the Allied forces of World War II to refer to Japanese human wave attacks and swarming staged by infantry units.<sup>[1][2]</sup> This term came from the Japanese battle cry "**Tennōheika Banzai**" (天皇陛下万歳, meaning "Long live His Majesty the Emperor"), and was shortened to banzai, specifically referring to the tactic used by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Pacific War. This tactic was used when the Japanese commanders of infantry battalions foresaw that a battle was about to be lost, as a last ditch effort in thwarting Soviet and U.S. forces.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

## Contents

[Origin](#)

[World War II](#)

[See also](#)

[References](#)

## Origin

The banzai charge is considered to be one method of *gyokusai* (玉碎, "shattered jewel"; honorable suicide), a suicide attack, or suicide before being captured by the enemy such as *seppuku*. The origin of the term is a classical Chinese phrase in the 7th-century *Book of Northern Qi*, which states "丈夫玉碎恥鞭全", "A true man would [rather] be the shattered jewel, ashamed to be the intact tile."<sup>[5]</sup> Among the rules there existed a code of honor that was later used by Japanese military governments.

With the revolutionary change in the Meiji Restoration and frequent wars against China and Russia, the militarist government of Japan adopted the concepts of *Bushido* to condition the country's population to be ideologically obedient to the emperor. Impressed with how samurais were trained to commit suicide when a great humiliation was about to befall them, the government taught troops that it was a greater humiliation to surrender to the enemy than to die. The suicide of Saigō Takamori, the leader of old samurai during the Meiji Restoration, also inspired the nation to idealize and romanticize death in battle and to consider suicide an honorable final action.

During the Siege of Port Arthur human wave attacks were conducted on Russian artillery and machine guns by the Japanese which ended up becoming suicidal.<sup>[6]</sup>

Since the Japanese suffered massive casualties in the attacks,<sup>[7]</sup> one description of the aftermath was that "[a] thick, unbroken mass of corpses covered the cold earth like a coverlet".<sup>[8]</sup>

In the 1930s, the Japanese found this type of attack to be effective in China. It became an accepted military tactic in the Japanese army, where numerically weaker Japanese forces, using their superior training and bayonets, were able to defeat larger Chinese forces. The Japanese here did not face massed automatic weapons but rather the bolt-action rifle of the Chinese, which could not fire as rapidly as a machine gun.<sup>[9]</sup>



The charge of Saigō Takamori inspired the government that the charge was their final, honorable action.

## World War II

During the war period, the Japanese militarist government disseminated propaganda that romanticized suicide attacks, using one of the virtues of Bushido as the basis for the campaign. The Japanese government presented war as purifying, with death defined as a duty.<sup>[10]</sup> By the end of 1944, the government announced the last protocol, unofficially named *ichioku gyokusai* (一億玉碎, literally "100 million shattered jewels"), implying the will of sacrificing the entire Japanese population of 100 million, if necessary, for the purpose of resisting opposition forces.

During the U.S. raid on Makin Island, on August 17, 1942, the U.S. Marine Raiders attacking the island initially spotted and then killed Japanese machine gunners. The Japanese defenders then launched a banzai charge with bayonets and swords, but were stopped by American firepower. The pattern was repeated in further attacks, with similar results.<sup>[11]</sup>

During the Guadalcanal campaign, on August 21, 1942, Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki led 800 soldiers in a direct attack on the American line guarding Henderson Field in the Battle of the Tenaru. After small-scale combat engagement in the jungle, Ichiki's army mounted a banzai charge on the enemy; however, against an organized American defense line, most of the Japanese soldiers were killed and Ichiki subsequently committed suicide.<sup>[12]</sup>

On May 29, 1943, during the Battle of Attu, the beleaguered Japanese soldiers led by Colonel Yasuyo Yamasaki on Attu Island, Alaska, launched a massive banzai charge through American lines near Massacre Bay and were quickly wiped out all night despite intense fighting. At the end of the battle, only 29 remained of the Japanese force that had numbered roughly 2,600, while the Americans lost 549 combatants out of 15,000.<sup>[13]</sup>

The largest banzai charge of the war took place during the Battle of Saipan. General Yoshitsugu Saitō gathered almost 4,300 Japanese soldiers, walking wounded and some civilians, many unarmed, and ordered the charge. On July 7, 1944, it slammed directly into the Army's 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 105th Infantry Regiment, which lost almost 2,000 men<sup>[14]</sup> in the 15-hour pitched battle. The attack was ultimately repulsed, and almost all the Japanese soldiers taking part in the charge were killed.

During the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, as the 1st Red Banner Army invaded Mutanchiang, the Soviet 5th Army to the south continued its advance westward, enveloping and destroying the Japanese 278th Infantry Regiment, the survivors of which mounted a last-ditch banzai charge rather than surrender.<sup>[15]</sup> By the end of the day, all of Mutanchiang had fallen into Soviet hands, and the battle for the city was over.<sup>[16]</sup> Shortly afterward, the main strength of the Kwantung Army laid down its arms in surrender as per the Emperor's broadcast. The Battle of Mutanchiang, and World War II, had come to an end.

Some Japanese commanders, such as General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, forbade their men from carrying out Banzai charges. Indeed, the Americans were surprised that the Japanese did not employ banzai charges at the Battle of Iwo Jima.<sup>[17][18]</sup>



Japanese soldiers honor the Emperor with the shout "Banzai" during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1938).



Deceased Imperial Japanese Army soldiers on the sandbar of Alligator Creek on Guadalcanal after being killed by U.S. Marines during the Battle of the Tenaru, August 21, 1942

## See also

- [Wansui, Banzai](#)
- [Banzai Cliff](#)
- [Kamikaze – Aerial suicide attacks used by the Japanese in WWII](#)
- [Human wave attack](#)

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14. Harold Goldberg, *D-Day in the Pacific: The Battle of Saipan*, Indiana University Press, 2007. pp. 167–194
15. Glantz & June 1983, p. 96.
16. Glantz & June 1983, p. 95.
17. Derrick Wright, *The Battle for Iwo Jima*, Sutton Publishing, 2006. Page 80.
18. According to military historian Shigetoki Hosoki, "This writer was stunned to find the following comments in the 'Iwo Jima Report,' a collection of memoirs by Iwo Jima survivors. 'The men we saw weighed no more than thirty kilos and did not look human. Nonetheless, these emaciated soldiers who looked like they came from Mars faced the enemy with a force that could not be believed. I sensed a high morale.' Even under such circumstances, the underground shelters that the Japanese built proved advantageous for a while. Enemy mortar and bombing could not reach them ten meters underground. It was then that the Americans began to dig holes and poured yellow phosphorus gas into the ground. Their infantry was also burning its way through passages, slowly but surely, at the rate of ten meters per hour. A telegram has been preserved which says, 'This is like killing cockroaches.' American troops made daily advances to the north. On the evening of 16 March, they reported that they had completely occupied the island of Iwo Jima." *Picture Letters from the Commander-in-Chief*, page 237.

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