

Introduction

On August 11, 1945, the Japanese Government decided to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration and surrender to the Allies. The decision was finalized on August 14, and the Emperor formally announced the decision to the Japanese people through a radio broadcast at noon on August 15. Most units of the Japanese Army and Navy, at home and abroad, accepted the Emperor's decision. However, a few units overtly opposed the decision to surrender. In the following, I will discuss the largest of these, which was the rebellion by the Imperial Navy's 302nd Air Group. This started on August 16 and ended on the 23rd. Better understanding the Atsugi Rebellion can improve our understanding of how World War Two ended, just over 80 years ago.

The Navy's 302nd Air Group was the principal protagonist of the Atsugi Rebellion. The 302nd was established on March 1, 1944. It was stationed on Atsugi airfield, which is about 25 miles southwest of Tokyo. While the Army Air Forces were responsible in general for the air defense of the home islands, the Navy was authorized to defend the skies over its major bases. The 302nd was one of three air groups established by the navy for that purpose and was responsible for defending the skies over the Yokosuka Naval District. In practice, it defended, alongside its Army Air Force counterparts, the skies over the entire Kanto region, which encompasses the Tokyo-Yokohama area. It was equipped with single and twin-engine fighters, and bombers converted to a fighter role. The operational strength of the 302nd fluctuated between a few dozen planes to about 100 planes of all types. For the first few months of its existence, the 302nd acted more as a training unit for other air groups, but from November 1944, began playing an increasingly active role in the air defense over the Tokyo-Yokohama area. It fought its most intense air battles in 1945, as the American strategic bombing campaign against Japan reached its climax, and in fact engaged in aerial combat through and on August 15, the last morning of hostilities.

The 302nd's first and only wartime commander was Captain Yasuna Kozono. Kozono was born in November 1902, and commissioned a naval officer in July 1923, straight out of the Naval Academy. He earned his pilot's wings in 1926, and served in China, before being appointed vice commander and executive officer of the Tainan Air Group in October 1941. He served in that position during the offensives against the Philippines

and Dutch East Indies before advancing to Rabaul in April 1942, where he took part in the campaigns against Port Moresby, and later, Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands. The Tainan Air Group was renamed the 251st Air Group in October 1942. Kozono was named its commander in November and led the group until he was relieved and sent back to Japan in September 1943.

Kozono was a charismatic, aggressive, and innovative combat commander. He was extremely popular among the pilots under his command, and Kozono reciprocated their devotion and loyalty. On the other hand, he increasingly became disillusioned with the officers of the Naval General Staff, who he felt were “desk admirals” who had no combat experience and no knowledge of the realities of the front. Kozono felt that the Navy had brought Japan to the verge of defeat in 1945 because of the incompetence of those officers. For their part, the navy establishment recognized Kozono’s abilities as an effective combat leader but also considered him to be an eccentric maverick and headstrong troublemaker.

In addition to being a capable military commander, Kozono was a devoted student of the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters), which is an early Japanese chronicle, part history and part myth, of the creation of the Japanese archipelago, the *kami* (gods), and the Imperial line. Through this interest, Kozono came to have strong beliefs about the inviolability of the Japanese emperor and Japan as a “Divine Nation” (*Kokoku*). This would become a major factor in his decision to initiate the rebellion in August 1945.

By early August 1945, Kozono was advocating an overhaul of the Naval General Staff through lawful means. His stance changed on the night of August 11, when Kozono was informed that the Emperor had decided to accept the Potsdam Declaration and to surrender. Since Kozono firmly believed that “surrender” was a concept which did not exist for the Emperor and the Divine Nation, the decision to surrender had to be the result of duplicity or disinformation by the Emperor’s cabinet and advisors, and not the Emperor’s sincere intention.

Above all, Kozono was deeply concerned that surrender would destroy Japan’s *kokutai*. *Kokutai* is an ancient, classical concept. It has been variously translated as Japan’s polity, or national essence, or the emperor system. It essentially includes Japan’s entire political, social, cultural, economic and other systems and values, headed by the emperor. Kozono feared surrender would destroy all of these things which made Japan

what it was, and therefore would destroy Japan itself. Most of the various groups opposing surrender shared this concern, which was expressed as *kokutai no goji*, or preservation of the *kokutai*.

Kozono first tried to convince the command of the Yokosuka Naval District to intervene and block the surrender but was rejected. Giving up any further hope of working through the Naval District command, Kozono from the 12th through the 14th tried to convince the various commanders of the Army and Navy units in his vicinity to rise up with the 302nd and continue the fight to ultimate victory or utter defeat and destruction. Most were sympathetic but almost all were noncommittal about joining Kozono in an overt rebellion. The only “commitment” Kozono secured was a promise by Rear Admiral Hisahachi Kudo, the commander of the Security Force of the Yokosuka Kaiheidan (the personnel training and education command within the Naval District). Kudo promised to not order his security forces to subjugate any rebellious activity at Atsugi.

On August 15, following the Emperor’s noontime radio address to the nation, Kozono assembled his officers, and declared that the Emperor had been deceived by his advisors into surrendering, and that Japan, as a Divine State, and its military knew not and could not surrender. He further announced that the 302nd would continue to fight with an absolute faith in ultimate victory. Interestingly, Kozono had told the 302nd that they were free to decide whether to join him in his fight to ultimate victory or to be discharged and go home. All of the 302nd willingly stayed to continue the fight, although a few had some misgivings.

Then, in a radio message to the entire navy, Kozono declared that the Japanese Navy’s leadership had forfeited all legitimacy to command because it had agreed to surrender, and that the 302nd was therefore no longer obligated to follow the Navy’s orders and would thereafter fight on as an independent force. Unfortunately for Kozono, however, the Navy managed to suppress much of the transmission, and Kozono did not receive any supportive or favorable response from other units.

The 302nd Air Group was determined to fight on alone, if necessary, to ultimate victory or utter defeat. It had stockpiled three months’ worth of food, weapons, and ammunition, and had approximately 130 aircraft, although many were under repair and inoperable. Kozono commanded 1,000 men in the 302nd and counted on 3,500 more

from the neighboring 1st and 2nd Sagamino Air Groups.

The Navy was now fully aware of Kozono's intentions, and moved to quell the rebellion, first by attempting persuasion. The commander of the 3rd Naval Air Fleet, Rear Admiral Kinpei Teraoka, proceeded to Atsugi on the afternoon of the 16th and tried to persuade Kozono to stand down, only to be rebuffed. The Navy then relieved Kozono as commander of the 302nd and appointed Captain Sakae Yamamoto, commander of the 71st Air Flotilla, to serve concurrently as the 302nd's commander. Kozono, however, remained physically at Atsugi and thus in de facto command of the 302nd.

From the 16th through the 18th, the 302nd dropped leaflets over other Japanese Army and Navy bases as well as various cities, exhorting the Japanese to fight on with the 302nd. Various members of the 302nd also went to neighboring bases and nearby urban areas for the same purpose. Unfortunately for the 302nd, however, none of these efforts produced any results.

Even as the rebellion thus got underway, Kozono began suffering a relapse of malarial fever, which he had been infected with during his earlier deployment in the South Pacific. He began experiencing recurring bouts of severe fever and delirium late on the 14th. Over the next few days, he repeatedly suffered relapses. While he did have periods of lucidity, he was essentially confined by the 18th to his quarters by his staff, and repeatedly had to be sedated with tranquilizers. On August 20, the 302nd's chief doctor misdiagnosed Kozono with schizophrenic tendencies and arranged for him to be forcibly removed from Atsugi and transferred to a navy hospital. Early on the 21st, Kozono was heavily sedated and transferred to the Nobi naval hospital in Yokosuka.

While these events were transpiring, the Navy reaffirmed its decision to quell the rebellion through persuasion rather than force. The Navy leadership feared the use of force might escalate the rebellion, which might then derail the surrender process, especially if the Americans became aware of the fact. On August 19, staff officers of the Third Air Fleet met with the 302nd's assistant commander, Commander Hideo Sugawara, instead of Kozono, who was incapacitated by fever and delirium, and proposed that Sugawara talk directly with Prince Takamatsu, Emperor Hirohito's younger brother and a Navy captain, if Sugawara was still not convinced the Emperor himself actually wanted to surrender. Sugawara had had misgivings about the rebellion from the beginning, was all but convinced personally by this time that the Emperor truly wished to surrender, and

agreed to meet with Prince Takamatsu on the evening of the 20th, accompanied by Lieutenant Commander Minoru Yoshino, chief of the 302nd's maintenance group and one of the rebellion's hardliners. Sugawara believed that the hardliners waiting at Atsugi could be convinced to give up the rebellion if Yoshino could be persuaded about the Emperor's true intentions. Prince Takamatsu calmly told them that surrender was indeed the Emperor's true desire, and suggested that the two speak directly with the Emperor if they were still unsure. This finally convinced Yoshino that surrender was truly the Emperor's own decision and not the result of deception or coercion. The two returned to Atsugi, and told the waiting officers that surrender was the Emperor's decision and that the 302nd should surrender accordingly.

By early morning of the 21st, the 302nd's senior officers had resigned themselves to surrendering, and orders were given to ground and disarm all aircraft. However, this precipitated a mass exodus by the junior officers. Approximately 80 junior officer and noncommissioned pilots and crew commandeered 34 aircraft to continue the fight and flew to the Army's air bases at Sayama and Kodama, each about 30 minutes' flying time to the northwest of Atsugi. However, these efforts were ultimately futile. The Sayama group was persuaded to give up and subsequently flew back to Atsugi. Officers sent to Kodama rendered all of the renegades' planes unflyable by slashing their tires. The Kodama group was then loaded on trucks to return to Atsugi but found themselves under arrest. The Sayama group's officers were later also arrested.

At Atsugi, with Kozono and the most rebellious pilots gone by late morning of the 21st, the rebellion swiftly petered out. Fuel was drained and propellers removed from all remaining aircraft. In the afternoon of the 21st, the 302nd was disbanded, and its members were told to go home. While there was a final violent outpouring of emotion on the night of August 21, the remaining members of the 302nd began heading home from the 22nd, and the war at Atsugi was essentially over.

As mentioned above, Kozono had strong beliefs about the uniqueness and inviolability of the Japanese imperial family. These beliefs, along with his strong distrust of and contempt for the Navy's high command, were the catalysts which triggered Kozono to openly rebel against Japan's decision to surrender. Kozono felt a rebellion was justified because he sincerely believed that the Emperor did not truly desire to surrender, but rather had been deceived into deciding so.

Kozono's personality was also a major factor in the Atsugi rebellion. The feelings of loyalty and devotion he and his subordinates, in particular his junior officers and non-commissioned crew, felt towards each other resulted in his becoming somewhat of a cult figure among his pilots. The strong bond between the commander and his junior officers led to the marginalization of his senior officers. The senior officers thus found it more difficult to restrain their commander, and Kozono could more readily exert personal and direct influence over his junior officers. However, it should be remembered that most of the senior officers initially were in favor of the rebellion and continuing the fight.

Kozono's strong personality and distrust of the Navy's leadership also hampered the Navy's ability to defuse the rebellion before it began. Many in the Navy's leadership had come to regard Kozono as a loose cannon, and by 1945, there was nobody who could or was willing to talk Kozono out of resorting to extreme measures.

Finally, the sudden decision to surrender was a factor in the 302nd's decision as a whole to continue fighting. The 302nd fought hard and was highly motivated even during the morning of August 15, in the last aerial combat of the war. In retrospect, it was unrealistic to expect them to suddenly stop fighting, just because they had been ordered to do so by higher commands.

Kozono and the Sayama and Kodama groups were charged with group insubordination, instead of the more serious charge of sedition or mutiny, and court martialed in October 1945. The non-commissioned aircrew were given suspended sentences and released immediately. The officers were initially given five-year sentences, but all were fully pardoned in April 1947. Kozono was initially sentenced to life in prison, but his term was commuted to twenty years, then ten, before he was released on parole in December 1950. However, their ranks and service records were not restored, which affected their ability to qualify for pensions. Kozono passed away in November 1965, aged 58. His widow did not qualify for a survivor's pension until the Pensions Law was revised in May 1974.

The Atsugi Rebellion thus ended without any real, tangible effect on Japan's surrender and the start of the American occupation. The advance party of the American occupation force was delayed by a typhoon and did not arrive in Atsugi until August 28, which gave the Japanese time, albeit barely, to clean up the utter mess left by the riot on the night of

the 21st. Japanese concerns that the Atsugi rebellion might affect the start of the occupation therefore did not materialize.

The Atsugi Rebellion remains significant today because it is another reminder that the termination of conflicts can be messy and complicated. Participants on both sides of a conflict must keep in mind the importance of managing and controlling groups which are opposed to conflict termination because they feel it would mean the end of their nation and way of life. In the case of the Atsugi rebellion, both Japan and America were fortunate that it ended without escalating further, enabling the World War to finally and formally end on September 2, 1945.