

OKINAWA



US Marines of the 29th Regiment on Okinawa, April 1945.

By the spring of 1945, it was clear that Japan had lost the war, but intense and fierce fighting continued. It appeared that the Allies would have to invade Japan. An invasion, known as Operation Downfall, was already planned for November of 1945. The Allies would need a staging area for the invasion, a place to build up the troops and supplies that would be needed. The island of Okinawa, only 350 miles from Japan, fit the requirements of the military planners. It was large enough and close enough to Japan to serve as a base for the invasion. Bombardment of the island began at the end of March 1945. On the morning of April 1, 1945, American marines and soldiers landed on the beaches along a five-mile stretch of coast near the island's two airfields. Similar to their experience at Iwo Jima, American forces met little resistance on the beaches. Even the airfields were easily taken. But as they moved inland, they were met with fierce attacks from an enemy hidden in fortified caves, tunnels, and camouflaged pillboxes. The Japanese defenders of Okinawa knew they had no hope of winning the battle, but they hoped to make US forces pay so dearly for victory that the United States would be willing to negotiate surrender terms more acceptable to the Japanese.



The USS Idaho bombarding Japanese positions on Okinawa prior to the US landings.

At dawn, on April 1 -Easter Sunday~the Navy's Fifth Fleet and more than 180,000 US Army and US Marine Corps troops descended on Okinawa for a final push towards Japan. The Japanese 32nd Army, commanded by Lt. General Mitsuru Ushijima, defended the island. The military force, consisting of 150,000 men strong, also included an unknown number of conscripted Okinawan civilians and members of the Japanese home guard known as Boeitai. General Ushijima instructed his troops not to fire on the American landing forces but instead watch and wait, mostly in a rugged area of southern Okinawa where Ushijima had set up a triangle of defensive positions known as the Shuri Defense Line. US troops and commanders alike expected the beach landings to be a massacre worse than D-Day. But the Fifth Fleet's offensive onslaught was almost pointless and landing troops could have literally swum to shore-surprisingly, the expected mass of awaiting Japanese troops wasn't there.

On April 7, Japan's mighty battleship Yamato was sent to launch a surprise attack on the Fifth Fleet and then annihilate American troops pinned down near the Shuri Line. But Allied submarines spotted the Yamato and alerted the fleet who then launched a crippling air attack. The ship was bombarded and sank along with most of its crew.



Soldiers of US 10th Army march inland after securing beachheads as vessels from the Allied Fifth Fleet patrol the waters off of Okinawa, Japan, April 1945.

Within days of the landings, US troops quickly secured both Kadena and Yontan airfields. The US Marines who headed North to the Motobu Peninsula met only sporadic resistance and won a decisive battle relatively quickly. The Americans moving South, however, faced brutal fighting against determined Japanese defenders. After the Americans cleared a series of outposts surrounding the Shuri Line, they fought many fierce battles including clashes on Kakazu Ridge, Sugar Loaf Hill, and Half Moon Hill. Torrential rains made the hills and roads watery graveyards of unburied bodies. The Maeda Escarpment, also known as Hacksaw Ridge, was located atop a 400-foot vertical cliff. The American attack on the ridge began on April 26. It was a brutal battle for both sides. To defend the escarpment, Japanese troops hunkered down in a network of caves and dugouts. They were determined to hold the ridge and decimated some American platoons until just a few men remained. Much of the fighting was hand-to-hand and particularly ruthless. The Americans finally took Hacksaw Ridge on May 6. As on Iwo Jima, US forces deployed flamethrowers and tanks to dislodge the Japanese from their bunkers. Casualties mounted and were enormous on both sides by the time the Americans took Shuri Castle in late May.



Two US M4A3R5 flamethrower tanks are seen here clearing Japanese positions on Okinawa.



Two US M4 Sherman tanks are disabled by Japanese artillery during the battle of Bloody Ridge on April 20, 1945.

While US troops faced the fury of an unseen enemy on the island, our naval vessels offshore faced the devastating attacks of Japanese Kamikaze, or suicide, pilots. Early in April, the Japanese unleashed these well-trained pilots on the Fifth Fleet. Some dove their planes into ships at 500 miles per hour causing catastrophic damage. The Kamikaze pilots wreaked enormous damage because they turned their planes into flying smart bombs that could steer directly into parts of the ship that would produce the most damage. American sailors tried desperately to shoot the Kamikaze planes down but were often sitting ducks against enemy pilots with nothing to lose. Throughout the battle, 2,000 Japanese suicide attacks damaged more than 360 ships. In fact, during the Battle of Okinawa, the Fifth Fleet suffered 36 ships sunk and 763 aircraft lost. Almost 5,000 seamen lost their lives. Another 5,000 were injured and taken out of action.



The USS Bunker Hill was hit by two Japanese Kamikaze planes on May 11, 1945. 372 crewmen were killed and 264 were injured in the attacks that day.

On land, by the end of May, American military might had driven the Japanese forces into full retreat. The monsoon rains that continued unabated, however, had turned contested hills and roads into a morass exacerbating both the tactical and medical situations. The ground advance began to resemble a World War I battlefield, as troops became mired in mud, and flooded roads greatly inhibited evacuation of wounded to the rear. Troops lived on a field sodden by rain, part garbage dump and part graveyard. Unburied Japanese and American bodies decayed, sank in the mud, and became part of a noxious stew. Anyone sliding down the greasy slopes could easily find their pockets full of maggots at the end of the journey.



US Marines clear a Japanese cave with a flamethrower on Okinawa.

By June, defeated yet not beaten, the Japanese retreated to the southern coast of Okinawa where they made their last stand. The remnants of Ushijima's shattered 32nd Army fought in a desperate attempt to hold back the American onslaught. Most Japanese troops and Okinawan citizens believed Americans took no prisoners and they'd be killed on the spot if captured. As a result, countless took their own lives. About 7,000 Japanese soldiers did surrender, but many chose death by suicide. Some jumped from high hills, others blew themselves up with grenades. Thousands of Japanese and Okinawans had been killed, but the fighting continued on until June 22, 1945. When faced with the reality that further fighting was futile, General Ushijima and his Chief of Staff, General Cho, committed ritual suicide, effectively ending the battle.

Okinawa was the bloodiest battle of the Pacific War. The United States had won the battle, but at what cost? The Americans suffered 82,000 casualties, including 20,195 deaths. The fighting on Okinawa took an even heavier toll on the Japanese. Japanese losses were much greater. 110,000 Japanese defenders died, including two generals who committed ritual suicide rather than surrender. Almost 80,000 Okinawan civilians either died during the struggle or committed suicide. The intensity of the fighting affected even those who survived the battle. Many survivors suffered from profound psychological trauma, referred to as combat fatigue at that time. 90% of the buildings on the island were destroyed, along with countless historical documents, artifacts, and cultural treasures, and the tropical landscape was turned into a vast field of mud, lead, decay and maggots. The military value of Okinawa exceeded all expectations for the Americans, however. Okinawa provided a fleet anchorage, troop staging areas, and airfields in proximity to Japan.

Although the battle for Okinawa was over, the war continued. There was still no indication that the military government of Japan would surrender. Policy makers in the United States had a decision to make. If the battle for Okinawa was an indication of how ferociously the Japanese would fight, the cost of invading Japan would produce staggering casualties for our fighting men and Japanese civilians. Then as planners weighed the possibilities, news arrived from Alamogordo, New Mexico in July. The world's first atom bomb had been successfully detonated. A new option was available that would allow us to avoid the bloodbath that would surely ensue if the US invaded Japan. The grueling punishment and devastating losses experienced on Okinawa would help to sway that decision.



A flamethrowing tank attacks Hill 60 during the Marine assault on "the mound."



US troops persuading some of the last Japanese defenders to surrender on Okinawa, June 1945.