

by Michael Graham

# Okinawa: 'Ultimate Battle'

**To the enemy it was Tennozan — “the ultimate battle.” The Japanese general on Okinawa gave explicit orders: “Each soldier will kill at least one American devil.” And “the present position will be defended to the death, even to the last man.” Three months later, in July 1945, the Ryukyus were in American hands.**



Japanese troops were told “the victory of the century lies in this battle.” For GIs, those morale-boosting words proved to be true. But for Tokyo, the end was near.

Okinawa is the largest and principal island of the Ryukyus chain. It is strategically located northeast of Formosa and the Philippines, and west of the Bonins. Only 350 miles from Kyushu, the southernmost of the Japanese home islands, Okinawa had the only two naval anchorages between Formosa and Kyushu from which an invasion of Japan could be launched.

Sixty miles long, two to 18 miles wide and covering 485 square miles, the island was also large enough to base and train troops there for the forthcoming invasion of Japan. In U.S. hands, Okinawa would make a superb air base.

Sensing their homeland would soon be invaded, the Japanese fortified Okinawa to delay the U.S. drive. By the time U.S. forces appeared in the Ryukyus, the Japanese 32nd Army had 120,000 men defending the island. (This was double the 65,000 troops American intelligence believed the Japanese had.) That total included a 20,000-member Okinawan home guard called the *Boeitai*.

The island is extremely rugged and mountainous. Some 80% of the land was then covered by pine forests interspersed with dense undergrowth. The Japanese took good advantage of

the terrain.

Since their intention was to hold out as long as possible, they concentrated their strength in a massive underground defensive network in the south. Their battle cry was: “One plane for one warship. One boat for one ship. One man for 10 enemy. One man for one tank.”

**Operation Iceberg.** The amphibious assault of Okinawa, code-named *Operation Iceberg*, reflected the greatest concentration of land, sea and air power ever used in the Pacific.

The supporting armada of U.S. Fifth Fleet (*Task Forces 58 and 51*) ships totaled 1,457 vessels of all types, including the British Pacific Fleet. Bomber and fighter-bomber aircraft of the U.S. Seventh Air Force and B-29 Superfortresses of XXI Bomber Command provided air support. All told, 548,000 men carried out the operation.

The 183,000 troops who would land on Okinawa comprised the most experienced amphibious army in history. Principal combat units, which fought under Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner as the U.S. Tenth Army, were battle-tested in Pacific island-fighting and included:

- XXIV (Army) Corps — 7th and 96th Infantry divisions; 419th Field Artillery (FA) and 1176th Engineer groups; and 866th Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA), 88th Chemical Mortar, 71st Medical, 780th Amphibian Tank



Marines advanced across “Cemetery Ridge” on Okinawa in May 1945. Leathernecks take cover behind battered tombstones as enemy bullets whistle overhead. Courtesy Donald A. Eunice

and 534th Amphibious Tractor battalions.

- *III (Marine) Amphibious Corps* — 1st and 6th Marine divisions; 2nd, 5th, 8th and 16th AAA; 1st and 3rd Armored Amphibian Tractor; 1st, 4th, 8th and 9th Amphibian Tractor; 1st, 3rd, 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th FA; and 1st Separate Engineer, 802nd (Army) Engineer, 71st and 130th Naval Construction battalions.

- *Western Islands Landing Force* — 77th Infantry Div.

- *Tenth Army Troops/Reserve* — 2nd Marine and 27th Infantry divisions; 20th Armor Group, 80th Medical and 144th Coast Artillery groups; 53rd AAA Bde.; and 713th Armored Flame Thrower Bn.

Beginning in February 1945, U.S. ships and planes started pummeling Okinawa with an intense, methodical naval and air bombardment. In response, Japanese suicide planes unleashed *Ten Go* — “heavenly operation” — against the fleet, consisting of *kikusai* — “floating chrysanthemums” or mass formation attacks.

Between March 26-31, 16 ships were knocked out of action or severely damaged by *kamikazes*. Carrier *Franklin*, hit by two bombs, suffered close to a thousand casualties, but she got home under her own power — the most heavily damaged carrier ever to be saved.

Landings began March 26 with 77th Div. battalions in the Kerama Retto group in the western Ryukyus. Their mission was to obtain a protected anchorage for refueling and resupply ships. This was achieved in four days at a cost of 31 U.S. KIA and 81 WIA. An interesting find was also made there: 350 *renraku tei* — explosives-laden suicide boats.

Nearly 1,000 Navy frogmen cleared Okinawa’s shore in preparation for L-Day, April 1. Consequently, only 28 American lives were lost during the actual invasion.

III Amphibious and XXIV Corps landed against light opposition on the beaches north and south of Hagushi and seized Yontan and Kadena airfields. By April 6, the Tenth Army was at the island’s center.

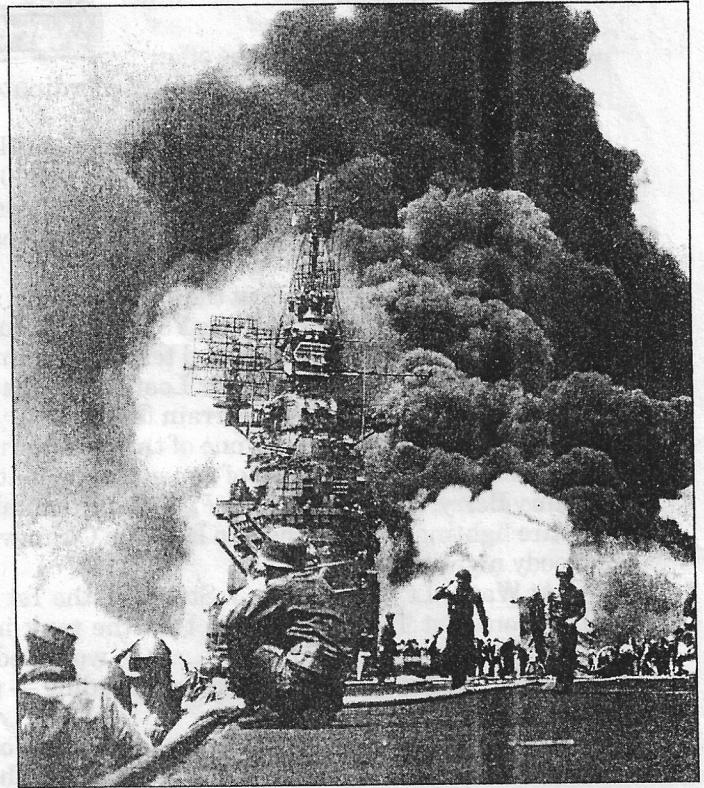
Seven hundred Japanese planes, however, ravaged *Task Force 58* on April 6-7, sinking a destroyer, an escort carrier, two LSTs and an LCT, and damaging two troop transports and six other vessels. *TF 58* claimed 249 kills. In addition, remnants of the Japanese navy sortied from the Inland Sea to attack ships off Okinawa.

A U.S. submarine west of Kyushu, on April 7, sighted the Japanese naval task force, which consisted of the superbattleship *Yamato*, a cruiser and eight destroyers. Three hundred U.S. carrier planes attacked and sank all the enemy vessels but four destroyers, which fled back to Japan. *Yamato* — the biggest and most powerful battleship in the world — went down with 2,500 men.

By April 8, the Marines had secured all of the northern part of Okinawa except Motobu Peninsula, where the Japanese were dug into the 1,500-foot Yae Tae hills. The peninsula finally fell on April 19 after fierce fighting.

During this period, *kamikazes* continued to mount devastating raids. On April 12-13, a second mass air attack by 400 planes caused great damage to Allied shipping. Attacks on April 15-16 and April 27-28 were less successful, but still caused grievous casualties aboard the ships.

One ship, the destroyer *Laffey*, withstood 12 hits in 80 minutes while fighting through 20 *kamikaze* and bombing attacks and downing nine planes. Some 32 sailors were



Aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), Vice Adm. Mitscher’s flagship, is hit by two *kamikazes* in just 30 seconds on May 11, 1945, losing 396 men killed and 264 wounded. National Archives, W&C 980

KIA and 71 WIA. Tragedy struck the hospital ship *USS Comfort* April 29 when a *kamikaze* hit the operating room killing six nurses, five doctors and 18 wounded patients.

Meanwhile, the 27th Div. seized Tsugen Shima, southeast of Okinawa, on April 10-11. The 77th Div. landed 6,100 men on Ie Shima, an 11-square-mile island northwest of Okinawa, on April 16. U.S. casualties totaled 239 KIA, 879 WIA and 19 MIA vs. 4,700 enemy soldiers killed and 149 captured in six days of fighting.

**The Shuri Line.** Beginning April 9, XXIV Corps ran up against the formidable Shuri Line, the main line of Japanese resistance on Okinawa. Their fortifications were anchored to an ancient castle from which the defensive network took its name.

The line was softened up for 10 days by artillery, aircraft and naval gunfire. This was the most massive and concentrated artillery pounding of the Pacific War. Yet the Japanese were so firmly dug in that when attacked April 19, U.S. troops made little progress. The assault on Kakazu Ridge alone cost 22 tanks.

GIs renewed the attack five days later but found the Japanese had secretly withdrawn behind an even stronger line. So III Amphibious Corps joined XXIV Corps in the south to prepare to throw the entire Tenth Army against the entrenched enemy.

On May 5, however, the enemy, with tanks and artillery support, surged forward from their fortifications, striking the U.S. front in an enormous counterattack cen-

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tered around Kochi Ridge. The offensive was well-planned and skillfully coordinated with kamikazes.

Though it was stopped by U.S. infantry, artillery and naval gunfire and cost the Japanese about 5,500 casualties, the counterattack inflicted 700 U.S. losses and helped upset plans for resuming the offensive, postponed until May 11.

That day GIs drove against the Japanese line, stretching from the Asa River estuary to Yonbaru. Through May 20, Marines and soldiers suffered terribly in continuous fighting for Wana Ridge, Sugar Loaf Hill, Hills 55 and 110 and other Godforsaken terrain features.

These battles comprised "one of the most horrendous bloodlettings in the history of American combat" wrote Henry Berry, author of *Semper Fi, Mac*. "In actuality, the entire fighting south of the Asa River on Okinawa was a bloody nightmare."

At Wana, Lt. Col. Arthur J. Stuart, of the 1st Marine Division's 1st Tank Bn., wrote that the tank-infantry teams stuck with each other "...alive, wounded, dead, maimed, crying in anguish, limping, bleeding — no matter how, they came out together."

A Peleliu veteran, E.B. Sledge, later recalled of Sugar Loaf: "When enemy artillery shells exploded, the eruptions of soil and mud uncovered previously buried Japanese and scattered chunks of corpses. The ridge was a stinking compost pile. If a Marine slid down the muddy ridge, he was apt to reach the bottom vomiting. Fat maggots tumbled out of his muddy pockets, cartridge belt, leggings... The conditions taxed the toughest, almost to the point of screaming... The war was insanity."

One reason why U.S. attacks bogged down repeatedly was non-stop rain that turned the roads and battlefield into a sea of mud and hindered battlefield maneuvering. By May 28, after the heaviest of the rains had stopped, the advance resumed again.

Next day, the 1st Division's 1st Bn., 5th Marines, succeeded at last in overwhelming the Japanese defending Shuri Castle. As a result of this action, the Japanese were compelled to abandon the main Shuri Line. Nonetheless, the feat was bittersweet since the Tenth Army had already suffered terrible losses.

As the Japanese were driven in upon themselves, fresh elements of the reserve units, including the 8th Marines, moved ashore to bolster the tired Tenth Army. Enemy defenses began to weaken steadily.

On June 22, organized enemy resistance ceased after two remaining pockets — Hill 85 and the Ara-saki area — fell to the 77th Infantry and 6th Marine divisions.

Still, that was followed by 10 days of heavy mopping-up, including the 381st Infantry eliminating the last elements of the 24th Japanese Div. in the south. The Tenth Army also launched a four-division clean-up drive in the north, which didn't end until Aug. 4, 1945, when the 27th Div. reached Hedo Misake.

**In Deadly Earnest.** Okinawa was the costliest single battle of the Pacific war for both sides, second only to the Battle of the Bulge in terms of U.S. casualties. The

Japanese counted 107,539 dead and 10,755 captured. In addition, they lost 7,800 planes (at least 1,465 of them kamikaze), 16 ships sunk and four ships damaged.

American ship losses between April 1 and July 1, also the highest in U.S. history, were 36 sunk and 368 damaged. Some 20% of Navy KIA in the entire war were sustained off Okinawa. Kamikazes were the culprits in most cases. Also, 763 aircraft were shot down.

Among the U.S. dead was Gen. Buckner, the highest-ranking American officer killed in the Pacific war. He died June 18 in a Japanese artillery barrage while visit-

### Okinawa Death Factory

Branch	KIA	WIA	Other Casualties*
Navy	4,907	4,824	—
Army	4,675	18,099	15,613
Marines	2,938	13,708	10,598
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,520</b>	<b>36,631</b>	<b>26,211</b>

\*Mostly combat fatigue.

ing the front on Mezado Ridge. Buckner's favorite toast, incidentally, was: "May you walk in the ashes of Tokyo."

Okinawa also demonstrated the lethal ingenuity of man. To clear caves and tunnels, the recoilless rifle (for the first time) was employed, along with flame-throwers. "Blowtorch and corkscrew" tactics, as Buckner called it, were used to seal caves. Flame-throwing tanks provided the blowtorch, while dynamite charges and grenades served as corkscrews. In fact, flame-throwers accounted for 25% of Japanese dead on Okinawa.

The Japanese were ingenious, too. Besides the *kamikaze* and *renraku tei*, the Japanese developed the *kaiten* or "turning of the heavens" — two torpedoes lashed together with a seat for a driver. Some 106 of these drivers died. Then there were the *ohkas* — "cherry blossoms" — rocket-propelled cylinders or piloted buzz bombs.

These and more traditional weapons, such as giant mortars and artillery, took a heavy psychological toll among GIs — producing the most and worst cases of combat fatigue in the Pacific war. The Tenth Army even opened a special field hospital to treat victims.

One example shows why the psychiatric casualty rate was so high. On Ishiromi Ridge, GIs were raked by deadly 50mm knee mortars and "riflemen were blown to bits," remembered 2nd Lt. Robert F. Meiser. Of the 204 men of E Co., 307th Regt., 77th Inf. Div., only 48 came out unscathed after three days of such punishment.

Despite the terrible price, America's overwhelming victory carried the war to Japan's doorstep. Still, as Cmdr. Louis A. Gilles, Fifth Fleet intelligence officer, cautioned: "The Japanese are defeated, but we have not yet won the victory." The writing, however, was on the wall even in Tokyo. Reported veteran Japanese diplomat Mamoru Shigemitsu: "Okinawa left little room for doubt as to the outcome of the war." ❊

Michael Graham is the author of *Mantle of Heroism: Tarawa and the Struggle for the Gilberts, November 1943* (1993).