# Okinawa

## The Battle, the Bomb, and the Camera

By John S. Reed

Okinawa.

The memory of Okinawa evokes some of the fiercest fighting and highest American casualty rates of all of World War II.

In a battle that lasted nearly three months, almost a quarter of a million people lost their lives—more than half of them ethnic Okinawans, residents of an island just 330 miles from mainland Japan, and another 100,000 who were Japanese soldiers.

And more Americans died on Okinawa than in any other single engagement in the Pacific Theater during the war—14,005 killed and more than 57,000 wounded.

Increasingly, the Battle of Okinawa is receiving scholarly attention not just for its human tragedy or its inherent military interest, but also for its influence on President Harry S. Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan.

Okinawa revealed that the will of the Japanese to defend their homeland remained undiminished. The President and his military advisers used the intensity of fighting on Okinawa to approximate the casualties that would result from an initial invasion of the Japanese mainland in late 1945. It was the probable extreme cost of that operation in American lives that largely persuaded Truman to use the atomic bomb, whenever it became available, to end the war.

The Battle of Okinawa, which ran from April 1 to June 30 of 1945, was one of the most intense military engagements of World War II. Japanese soldiers were willing to fight to the death to inflict as many American casualties as possible, and they did. American troops were engaged from the rear as well as their front. American troops responded by attacking the Japanese in their caves with explosives and flamethrowers.

The human costs of the struggle on Okinawa and the extreme levels of individual sacrifice required of infantry soldiers were documented by combat photographers of the U.S. Army's Signal Corps. These photographers provided images that help us appreciate the *actual* losses suffered by infantry units in early 1945, as opposed to the more obscure question of anticipated *future* casualties. Knowledge of the casualties at Okinawa deepens understanding of the "bomb decision" while calling into question the collective memory of World War II as an authentically egalitarian moment in American history.

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The political significance of the Battle of Okinawa lay in the sustained high casualties U.S. forces suffered on and around the island immediately after Truman assumed the presidency upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. After mid-April, U.S. ground operations on the island slowed due to "fanatical" (but more importantly, quite skilled) Japanese resistance, while offshore naval forces were exposed to a kamikaze assault that sank or damaged 190 ships and landing craft.

Contemplating Operation Olympic, the code name for the invasion of the Japanese home island of Kyushu planned for November 1945, Truman made several unsuccessful attempts to extract from the Joint Chiefs of Staff a consensus estimate of total U.S. casualties expected on Kyushu. Without that estimate, he relied

Infantrymen of the 381st Regiment, 96th Infantry Division, attack Japanese positions on Yaeju-Dake Escarpment, June 9, 1945.

on figures from Okinawa; between April 15 and May 26, there was an average of 2,014 battle casualties per week solely in the four Army divisions on the island. He took these as an index of what the United States would have to suffer on a much larger scale well into 1946 to physically conquer Japan.

Whatever may have been its moral and diplomatic consequences, Truman's resort to the bomb as a means of avoiding a protracted ground struggle is understandable. It was a natural choice by a career American politician who believed his highest obligation was to minimize U.S. losses over the remaining course of the war.

## Japanese Seek High Rate of Casualties for U.S. Troops

The struggle for Okinawa, officially the "Ryukyus campaign," was the most costly battle of the Pacific war. Six U.S. combat divisions: the 7th, 27th, 77th, and 96th Army Infantry (XXIV U.S. Corps) and the 1st and 6th Marine (III Marine Amphibious Corps) opposed the Japanese 32nd Army, which contained the 24th and 62nd Infantry Divisions and the 44th Independent Brigade. For the first time in the Pacific, the Japanese on Okinawa effectively employed large numbers of field artillery weapons and heavy mortars, which increased both raw numbers of U.S. killed and wounded and combat exhaustion casualties, particularly in three divisions (7th and 27th Army and 1st Marine) that had fought numerous prior campaigns in the Central and Southwest Pacific.

Losses on Okinawa point to a particularly poignant aspect of World War II in both Europe and the Pacific. Combat casualties rose abruptly in June 1944 and surged upward again from the fall of that year as German and Japanese soldiers ferociously contested every American step toward their respective homelands.

In three European campaigns between mid-September 1944 and early May 1945, the Army suffered 44 percent of its battle casualties for the entire war, including Air Corps operations. In the Pacific, the Marine Corps suffered 45 percent of its total casualties on two islands, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, between February and June 1945. For the United States, four of the eight costliest months of the global struggle were January through April 1945. Thus, the closer the nation came to victory, the more expensive that victory became.

At the tactical level of war, Okinawa was fundamentally different from the "island-hopping" battles of 1942–1944. By 1945, the Japanese had learned to avoid placing the bulk of their combat power near likely U.S. landing beaches. Rather than counterattack the amphibious assault force, they chose to fight an entrenched defensive "cave war" inland. Exploiting a series of hill masses and limestone escarpments extending across southern Okinawa's narrow width, they built three sequential defensive belts terminating in the "Shuri Line" between Naha and Yonabaru. Combat on Okinawa quickly devolved into a slow, systematic destruction in detail of a seemingly endless number of interconnected, mutually supporting underground fighting positions.

The Japanese objective, which they largely achieved, was not the defense of the island itself, but the maximum number of U.S. casualties. The Japanese sited half their machine guns and mortars on the forward slopes of their positions to place frontal and flanking fire on their attackers. They placed their remaining weapons in concealed reverse

An M4 flame tank of the 713th Armored Flamethrower Battalion attacks a Japanese cave position in Southern Okinawa on May 17, 1945.

slope positions to fire *into the rear* of U.S. troops attempting to advance.

It quickly became apparent that the U.S. infantry would sustain prohibitively high casualties on Okinawa unless they received unprecedented levels of assistance from supporting weapons. Naval gunfire and close air support from Marine Corps and Navy aircraft were used where terrain permitted. High explosive and smoke rounds from mortars and light artillery suppressed Japanese defenses, while precision fire from heavy howitzers and guns destroyed the largest caves. Flame weapons mounted in tanks burned out defensive positions that could not be effectively attacked by artillery. Finally, infantrymen attacked individual caves with bazookas, rifle grenades, hand-placed explosive charges, and man-packed flamethrowers. Fighting on Okinawa was reduced to an essentially industrial calculus: how to increase productivity (Japanese killed) while reducing overhead costs (American casualties).

## Signal Corps Photographs Show Intensity, Difficulty of Fighting

The fighting on Okinawa, as on most battle fronts of the war, was documented by the U.S. Army's Signal Corps. The Signal Corps's Army Pictorial Service (APS) produced training audiovisuals, homefront informational films, and combat photographs. By war's end, the APS still photograph repository in the Pentagon contained more than 500,000 images. In 1944 the Army augmented its existing photographic service battalions and companies attached to field armies with 25 smaller units. Eight of these signal photographic detachments (SPD) were deployed to the Pacific Theater, where their personnel took a majority of the combat photographs on Okinawa.

The smallest element of a SPD consisted of two enlisted photographers, their equipment, a jeep, and its driver, who together decided how far to "push their luck" on any given day to capture images of Americans at war. Their work was not without risk: on June 20, 1945, T5g. Joseph Barabas of the 3240th SPD, wounded in the legs by artillery fire, was photographed being loaded onto an ambulance while gamely hanging on to his Speed Graphic camera, which was also holed by a fragment.

Two combat photographs, viewed together, illuminate the nature of infantry fighting on Okinawa. The first of these (on the facing page) shows an M4 "Sherman" tank from First Platoon, Company A, 713th Armored Flamethrower Battalion supporting infantrymen of First Battalion, 383rd Infantry Regiment, 96th Infantry Division on May 17, 1945, during "mopping-up" operations in the island's far south. Tank number 65, commanded by a Sergeant Benson, was fitted with a flamethrower inside its main gun, which could project a stream of 6-percent napalm-thickened fuel up to 100 yards with a carbon dioxide propellant.

The 713th was the only unit of its kind on Okinawa and usually supported four fully engaged Army or Marine divisions, which meant that on a typical day an infantry battalion could call on only two or three of these fearsome weapons. Four infantrymen can be seen protecting Tank 65 from Japanese soldiers, who often attacked the suspension and tracks of U.S. tanks with explosive charges. A conventional tank battalion was also attached to each infantry division on Okinawa. Of the 394 Army flame and gun tanks on the island, 105 were destroyed by Japanese land mines, antitank guns, or demolitionists, while another 134 were damaged.

Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., directed all Army and Marine ground combat operations on Okinawa as commander of Tenth U.S. Army. Seen here on May 20, 1945, he was killed in action on June 18.

Heavy vehicle losses in armored units on Okinawa meant that many infantry assaults had to go forward without tank support. Another photograph (page 18) documents soldiers of the 381st Regiment, 96th Division, advancing on the Yaeju-Dake Escarpment (known to the GIs as "Big Apple") on June 9, 1945. Nine men are advancing in a skirmish line with one reporting their progress on an SCR-536 "handie-talkie" radio. At this late stage of the battle, most of these men are probably replacements or returned wounded. Each carries a light assault load: extra ammunition in bandoliers, first-aid dressings, two canteens, two to four hand grenades, and a poncho. The intently staring soldier in the center foreground has two grenades hanging from the vertical straps of his cartridge belt suspenders: an M18 colored smoke grenade for signaling on his left and an M15 white phosphorous grenade (WP) on his right.

Four infantrymen of the 96th Infantry Division carry a dead comrade to the rear on April 22, 1945, after the assault on Okinawa's Hacksaw Ridge.

GIs on Okinawa expended enormous numbers of WP grenades to help them maneuver toward Japanese caves, screen the rescue of wounded comrades, and suffocate the defenders of smaller fighting positions. Okinawa was officially declared secure on June 22, 1945: the men in this photograph would survive World War II if they could make it through the next 13 days.

In her 1977 text *On Photography*, Susan Sontag observed that "photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability, of lives headed towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (p. 70). This is particularly true of individuals who died shortly after they were photographed by the cameraman. Death was no respecter of rank or age on Okinawa, as several senior U.S. commanders became casualties late in the battle.

Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. (preceding page) is pictured on May 20, 1945, as he presided over the opening of an armed forces radio station on Okinawa. Buckner, the son of a Confederate general, graduated in the West Point class of 1908. After directing the U.S. reoccupation of the Aleutians in mid-1943, he was assigned to lead Tenth U. S. Army, where he commanded all Army and Marine ground combat units on Okinawa until he was killed by fragments from a Japanese 47mm antitank shell on June 18 while visiting a Marine unit engaged with the enemy.

Far more common were the austerely documented deaths of junior enlisted soldiers—riflemen, machine gunners, and mortar men—who assaulted Japanese defenses day after day. They fought until their numbers shrank to the point where they were briefly rotated into reserve to "rest," reequip, and integrate replacements before reentering the line to repeat the process.

The external appearance and perhaps also the inner qualities of Pfc. Irvin A. Boester were frozen forever (below) in a Signal Corps photograph. Boester, "22, of Route 2, Marion Ill [inois]" in mid-April 1945 used his M2-2 flamethrower to destroy an enemy fighting position on Tombstone Ridge, a fiercely defended strongpoint dominating the first Japanese defensive line on Okinawa. The job of flamethrower operator, permanently assigned to selected individuals in the Marine Corps but usually rotated among soldiers in the Army, was probably the single most dangerous task in the Pacific Theater. The M2-2, a great improvement over earlier models, weighed 70 pounds and could project a stream of flame 50 yards in still air. It was most effective if the operator could "ball the flame" in short bursts by holding the flame gun parallel to and about six inches above the ground, creating what one observer described as "a large rolling mass of flame [resembling] a huge ball of fire." Private Boester was later killed in action with Company A, 382nd Infantry Regiment, 96th Division, in circumstances that have not yet come to light.

Walt Whitman once observed that every aspect of the human condition embodies a form of beauty, even that which may otherwise sadden or disturb. Also taken on April 22, 1945, another photograph (preceding page) displays this form of dark beauty as it silhouettes four infantrymen of the 96th Infantry Division bearing the corpse of a comrade down the rear slope of Hacksaw Ridge for transportation by truck to the division's graves registration collecting point. The four men are safe for now. The battle has moved on; they are not carrying their weapons; and their unit is probably in reserve. However, on April 22 the battle was still young, and almost certainly several of these men became casualties in their turn during the next two months of fighting.

Roughly 23 percent of battle casualties on Okinawa were fatal. Another 23 percent were classified as "seriously wounded in action." Most of these men, once stabilized, were evacuated to hospitals in the Marianas or Hawaii. Bed space on Okinawa was reserved for the lightly wounded, who could return to their units with 14 days, and the gravest cases who could not be moved.

Pfc. Irvin A. Boester, photographed with an M2-2 flamethrower on April 22, 1945, was later killed in action on Okinawa while fighting with Company A, 382nd Regiment, 96th Infantry Division.

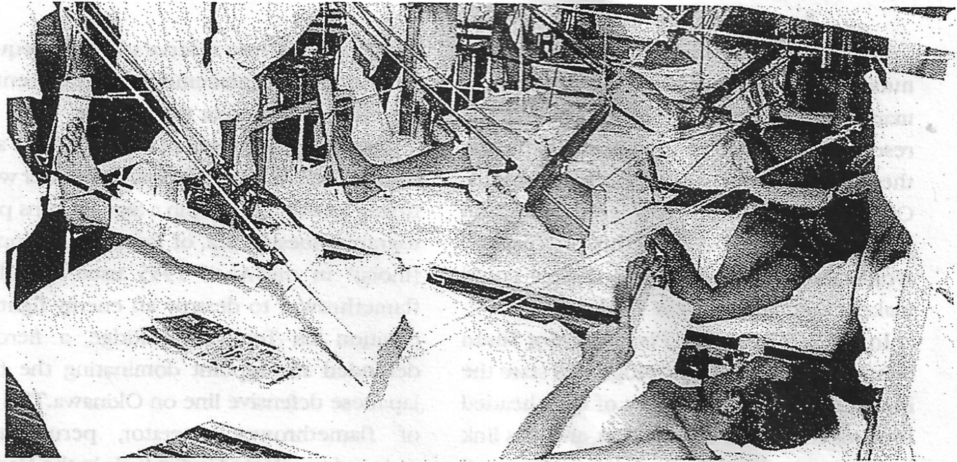
On August 5, 1945, 45 days after the battle ended, about 50 percent of evacuated men were still hospitalized. Another Signal Corps photograph (next page) from May 19, 1945, is captioned "a very small portion of one of the many wards at the 147th General Hospital [on Oahu] showing a fraction of the many wounded received here." The photograph shows the painful, humiliating inactivity imposed on soldiers during long-term recovery from serious internal or orthopedic injuries, the mental and physical effects of which they might never fully overcome.

## Casualty Rates Highest among U.S. Infantrymen

Millions of soldiers, airmen, marines, and sailors contributed to victory in World War II. However, if the basic coin of sacrifice is mutilation or death, the Army or Marine Corps rifleman was surely required to risk and often give far more than most other categories of servicemen. The United States suffered a total of 292,131 battle deaths in all its services during this war, of which 139,910, or 48 percent, were Army infantrymen.

While an infantry division officially contained 14,253 men, only 7,839 were in its nine maneuver battalions, and these men suffered 94 percent of a division's casualties. At full strength a division's 81 rifle platoons contained 3,381 soldiers who, in the words of Brig. Gen. Bruce C. Clarke, could look forward to nothing but "death, mutilation, or psychiatric breakdown" if they had entered combat by the summer or fall of 1944. In 1946, after surveying units in Europe, Clarke discovered that fewer than 7 percent of infantryman remained with their battalions after 210 cumulative days of combat.

The four Army divisions that fought on Okinawa would have contained 6,840 riflemen if their rifle platoons had been fully manned; instead, they averaged 65 percent to 75 percent strength on landing. The Army's Pacific Theater Replacement Training Command later listed 9,448 casualties among riflemen on Okinawa, a rate in excess of 138 percent. This meant that a rifleman who landed on April 1 and served in a regiment that fought throughout the campaign was extremely unlikely to make it to June 22 unhurt. Nor did



Soldiers recuperate from orthopedic injuries in a ward of the 147th General Hospital on Oahu, Hawaii, May 19, 1945. Many, if not most, of these men had been wounded on Okinawa.

replacements entering combat later have significantly better prospects: of 1,008 replacements (the official euphemism at this point of the war was "reinforcements") assigned to the 7th and 96th Divisions in mid-April, 626 became casualties.

An analysis of the morning reports held at the National Personnel Records Center—Military Personnel Records in St. Louis, Missouri, confirms this ferocious wastage of both "new" and "old" men. Company B of the 382nd Regiment, 96th Division, landed with 168 officers and men, or 29 short. Over the campaign's 82 days, it suffered 240 casualties, or 143 percent of its strength on April 1. Every single soldier who landed on Okinawa with the Third Platoon, Company L, of the 382nd Regiment was killed or wounded by May 20, one full month before the fighting ended.

When a small range of individual infantry specialties bears a vastly disproportionate share of combat mortality, the social composition of *that* force determines whether the risks of the war were equitably shared throughout the nation. In the late 1940s the Army conducted a historical review of its personnel policies during the war, which revealed that during 1942–1943 the War Department consistently and programmatically shifted better educated and physically better conditioned men into the Air Corps and the Army's logistical services and away from its ground combat arms. Only a severe shortage of rifle replacements in the spring of 1944 forced the Army to begin closing off various options previously open to "high-quality" inductees to avoid high-risk combat duty.

President Truman, who had commanded a divisional artillery battery in France during World War I, intuitively grasped that appalling casualties could result from assaults on a resolute enemy exploiting prepared defenses; high casualties on Okinawa simply reinforced his own experience. He may also have been aware that if the war in the Pacific progressed into 1946, more and more middle-class men reaching draft age (18 years) would be fed into the meat grinder in the Japanese home islands.

Earlier historians assumed, and then critiqued or defended, a single momentous "decision" to use the bomb, similar to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's launching the cross-channel invasion of Europe with an "OK, let's go." More recent studies examine President Truman's failure to determine the best mix of military violence and political signals during the termination of the Pacific War, and his disinclination to question the political and bureaucratic momentum toward employing the bomb as a bludgeon to force a Japanese unconditional surrender. The technical initiative to develop an atomic capability thus became, by August 1945, the political mandate to use it.

The photographs taken by the Signal Corps on Okinawa thus document a final agony the nation experienced in the last months of World War II and point to a further, even worse, agony that was just barely avoided by the events of August 6 and 9, 1945. ◼

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## Note on Sources

Photographs from Okinawa and contemporaneous fighting in Germany and the Philippines are open to researchers and the public at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, as a part of the Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, Record Group 111.

Several oral interview-based histories of the Okinawa battle have been published in the last decade. However, the best operational and tactical study of the Ryukyus campaign remains the official Army "greenbook" history by Roy E. Appleton, James E. Burns, and Russell A. Gugeler, *Okinawa: The Last Battle* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1948 and periodically reissued). The equivalent Marine Corps history is C. S. Nichols, Jr., and Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *Okinawa: Victory in the Pacific* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1955). For the Japanese defense, see Thomas M. Huber, *Japan's Battle of Okinawa, April–June 1945* (Leavenworth, KS: U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute, 1990). Two memoirs of the soldier's experience of combat on Okinawa are E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Donald O. Dencker, *Love Company: Infantry Combat Against the Japanese, World War II: Leyte and Okinawa* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 2002).

For a recent study of the "bomb decision" that emphasizes losses on Okinawa and projected casualties on Kyushu, see Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999). Casualty statistics for the U.S. military in World War II are contained in *Army Battle Casualties and Nonbattle Deaths in World War II, Final Report, 7 December 1941–31 December 1946* (Washington, DC: Statistical and Accounting Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, 1953); and *History of the Medical Department of the United States Navy in World War II*, vol. 3, *The Statistics of Diseases and Injuries* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1950). For a breakdown of Army casualties on Okinawa, see *Casualty Report Number III, Including Okinawa Campaign* (Headquarters, Replacement Training Command, U. S. Army Forces Middle Pacific, 1945), in the holdings of the U. S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

For the details of infantry-tank-artillery cooperation on Okinawa, see the after-action reports filed by participating units in Entry 427, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917–, Record Group 407, at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

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