

The Round Tablette

April 2009

Volume 17 Number 8

Published by WW II History Roundtable

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www.mn-ww2roundtable.org

Welcome to the April meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Roundtable. Today we will discuss the Battle of Okinawa.

The Battle of Okinawa stands as the final, and in some ways the climactic large-scale engagement to be fought between American and Japanese forces in World War II. It was a multi-dimensional struggle, waged on land, air, and the sea. It also had important effects on American planning for the end of the war, including shaping American willingness to employ atomic weapons against Japan to bring an end to the awful conflict.

In early 1945 Allied forces were advancing inexorably on the Japanese home islands. The naval forces of the Empire of Japan had been largely destroyed during the fierce fighting in and around the Philippines during October-November, 1944. The remnants of the Imperial Navy were huddled in the home islands; depleted, damaged, and short of fuel. The path to Japan lay open.

However, Allied planners recognized that before an invasion of Japan could occur, they would need to secure an island sufficiently large to base the vast array of land-based air power that would be needed in any such future campaign. Okinawa was the logical choice for such a base, as it lay only 350 miles off of southern Japan. The result was one of the largest amphibious operation in history, with 1,600 American warships landing an eventual total of 200,000 U.S.

Army and Marine personnel on the island beginning on March 26, 1945.

The Japanese 32nd Army under Lt. Gen. Mitsuru Ushijima had dug in along a series of defensive lines concentrated in both the north and south of the island. The initial American landings proceeded smoothly, and the mid-section of the island was captured with comparative ease. Shortly thereafter, though, American forces encountered the main Japanese redoubts, and savage combat ensued.

Through skillful use of terrain, the Japanese slowed the Americans advance to a crawl. Resistance in the north ended on April 18th, but fighting in the south dragged on for 87 days. The so-called Shuri Line, and in particular Kakazu Ridge, were the scene of violent, protracted combat. While attempts by the 32nd Army to counterattack were crushed by superior American firepower, the Americans similarly could make no headway in the twisted, rocky terrain. It would not be until mid-May that several key positions in the line were captured, forcing the Japanese to retreat to their final defensive positions.

During this same time period, a violent struggle was occurring at sea. The Japanese were determined to break American naval power around the island. To that end, the Imperial Navy was willing to expend its last strength. On April 7th the super battleship *Yamato* was sent on a one-way mission to Okinawa with orders to break through to the beaches, destroy what shipping she could, and then beach herself as a floating battery. *Yamato* and her 9 escorts were quickly attacked by carrier aircraft, and in only two hours the world's largest battleship and five of her consorts were sunk for the loss of only

10 American aircraft. Four Japanese destroyers escaped the slaughter. Over 4,000 Japanese sailors were not so lucky.

Deadlier to the Americans, though, were the nearly 2,000 kamikaze sorties the Japanese sent against the Allied naval squadrons over the following weeks. Particularly hard hit were the destroyer radar pickets on the outskirts of the fleet. By the end of the battle, kamikazes had sunk dozens of smaller warships, damaged hundreds more, and killed nearly 5,000 American naval personnel. American naval power was merely bloodied, however, not beaten.

The final act on land was played out in mid-June. By this time the combination of monsoon rains and intense fighting had transformed Okinawa into what one account called “a vast field of mud, lead, decay and maggots.” Trapped in their final positions, surrounded by American forces, thousands of Japanese soldiers and civilians died. General Ushijima killed himself on June 22, 1945. The battle was over.

American forces suffered more than 12,000 battle deaths; the Japanese, more than 100,000. In addition, between 50,000-150,000 of the island's civilians were killed, representing perhaps as much as a third of the population. Many were forced to commit suicide or were killed by their own troops.

The stubborn combat, as well as the horrific carnage among the island's civilian population, foretold yet greater bloodshed should the Japanese mainland be invaded. While the U.S. was clearly prepared to undertake such an operation, and was actively planning to do so, Okinawa created a greater openness on the part of the Americans in seeking supplemental methods to bring the war to a successful close. The advent of the atomic bomb, and President Harry Truman's willingness to use it, was undoubtedly shaped in part by what had just transpired on Okinawa.

More Reading On Tonight's Topic:

The Ultimate Battle: Okinawa 1945

By Bill Sloan
Simon & Schuster
New York, New York 2007

With The Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa

By E.B. Sledge
Presidio Press
San Francisco, CA 2007

The Battle of Okinawa: The Blood and the Bomb

By George Pfeifer
The Lyons Press
Guilford, CT 2001

The Battle For Okinawa

By Hiromichi Yahara
Wiley
Hoboken, NJ 1997

Women of Okinawa: Nine Voices from a Garrison Island

By Ruth Ann Keyso
Cornell University Press
Ithaca, New York 2000

The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II

By Rikihei Inoguchi, Tadashi Nakajima and Roger Pineau
U.S. Naval Institute Press
Annapolis, MD 1994

Kamikazes, Corsairs, and Picket Ships: Okinawa 1945

By Robin Rielly
Casemate Press
Drexel Hill, PA 2008

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