
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the September session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speakers are D. M. Giangreco, author of *Hell to Pay*, will discuss the planned invasion of Japan, and David Barrett author of *140 Days to Hiroshima*, will discuss the indecision of Japanese leadership that resulted in the dropping of the atomic bombs.

The beginning of a war, the dramatic change from peace to conflict, the *whys* of war, and the sheer drama and intensity of war making is the focus of much scholarly and popular attention. How wars end, especially short of complete military conquest, is an often a neglected area of study. What seemed the 'inevitable' outcome of World War II in the Pacific to later generations was a terribly complicated and uncertain process at the time. The use of nuclear bombs in the defeat of Japan marked a terrible threshold into the era of ultra weapons. The morality of nuclear weapons in themselves and fear of their future use still animate contemporary discussions.

By the Fall of 1944, with the defeat of Germany virtually assured by success of *OPERATION BAGRATION* in the East and the sweep across France in the West, the full focus of the United States war effort began shifting toward Japan. In contrast to 1942 and 1943, the United States naval operational strength was vast, and the complex logistic system to sustain air, land, and naval warfare across the Pacific was well established. Thus, the defeat of Japan was a foregone conclusion: but the price of her destruction was a frightening unknown.

As the United States drew the noose tighter around the Japanese home islands, the military leadership of Japan faced a desperate situation: the increased lethality of US submarine warfare was starving Japan by the systematic destruction of her merchant marine fleet. After taking Saipan and Guam and winning the hard-fought battle of Iwo Jima (February to March 1945) B-29 bombers began to rain widespread destruction across Japan. The elaboration of firebombing tactics by General Curtis LeMay had left many Japanese cities burned-out hulks. Japanese military leaders were under no illusions that they

could win the war. Instead, they developed was a strategy designed to raise the cost of victory so high as to force the United States to negotiate more generous terms for Japan's surrender. Confronted by the unconditional surrender policy adopted by the Allies at the Casablanca Conference in 1943 senior Japanese leaders felt they had everything to lose if they did not secure better peace terms from the Allies. Deeply held cultural beliefs in Japanese racial and national superiority reinforced their intransigence. Since the Japanese islands were formed in the mists of time, when the goddess *Amaterasu* dropped her *naginata* lance, Japan had never been successfully invaded. It was unthinkable that Japan could be invaded.

On the American side, Allied war planners faced the reality that rather than weakening as Japan suffered defeat after defeat, her resistance was becoming more tenacious and determined. After the costly experiences of Peleliu and Iwo Jima, the Americans were stunned when they attacked the first of the home islands, Okinawa, in April of 1945, and encountered numerous ferocious *kamikaze* attacks and even more costly defensive tactics. Okinawa's defenders fell in June at the cost to Americans of over 75,000 casualties including over 20,000 killed in action. By this point, Hitler was gone, and the conquest of Japan was the singular goal of the war effort.

In the summer of 1945, with Japan under relentless bombing attack, both American and Japanese leaders were working out their plans for the cataclysmic Battle for Japan. Behind the scenes many Japanese leaders and diplomats tried to find any alternative path that yielded an honorable Japanese surrender. Japanese military planners were preparing to put every Japanese man, woman, and child directly into the fight to defend the country. Thousands of airplanes with fuel and bombs had been carefully hidden for vast *kamikaze* air strikes. Suicidal attacks using mini submarines, suicide bomber frogmen, human guided torpedoes, women and children trained to run at American tanks with explosives, teenagers being taught spear fighting against the American forces – the depth and extent of Japanese defensive plans were astonishingly comprehensive and on a scale that dwarfed the defense of Iwo Jima or Okinawa.

American intelligence reached the depressing conclusion that while there were elements

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

in the Japanese political system that sought an end to the war, rigidity and cultural chauvinism ensured that the Japanese military leadership would never willingly make peace. As a result, planners of *OPERATION DOWNFALL* (*OLYMPIC* and *CORONET*) projected that hundreds of thousands of Americans and millions of Japanese would be killed and millions more wounded in a conflict that might last another two years. (A recent news article reported that the US Department of Defense is in 2020 still drawing on its stockpile of purple hearts which had been mass produced in anticipation of the invasion of Japan. (<https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/176762>))

The successful detonation of a nuclear fission device – “TRINITY” – at Alamogordo, New Mexico in July 1945 blindingly illuminated the Chihuahua Desert and offered an alternative to the grim death numbers of *OPERATION DOWNFALL*. President Truman was delighted to have secured a firm commitment from Josef Stalin for the Soviets to intervene against Japan by 15 August 1945 as a way of sharing the casualty load. At the same time, Truman increasingly distrusted Stalin and did not want any greater Soviet presence in Japan than necessary. In addition, he was horrified by the casualty forecasts and approved the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs to use the available atomic weapons against Japan as soon as possible in hopes of mitigating the casualties for both Americans and Japanese. Japanese peace seekers were frustrated by the Allies’ Unconditional Surrender policy and supported Emperor Hirohito who, following the devastation wrought by “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” and Truman’s promise of even more to come, and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, decided to surrender and end the war. In asking his people “to endure the unendurable” Hirohito prevented the annihilation of Japan.

At the time, the decisive use of nuclear weapons was greeted with relief by the American forces mustering for the coming tremendously costly battles of *OPERATION DOWNFALL* – “the answer to our fighting boys’ prayer” as the song went. Interestingly today many Japanese also believe it was a good decision as well, because the alternative would have been at least two more years of suffering, starvation, and the near destruction of the Japanese people and culture. The present-day revulsion and political opprobrium attached to Truman’s use of the bombs have less to do with a grasp of the historical circumstances, and more to do with the simplification of the moral questions not involved beyond “good” or “bad”. (No one on either side of this debate seems to value the at least 350,000 or so Asians who were dying each month under ongoing Japanese occupation.)

Further Readings:

D. M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation Downfall and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-47* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009).
David Dean Barrett, *140 Days to Hiroshima: The Story of Japan’s Last Chance to Avert Armageddon* (New York: Diversion Books, 2020).
Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999).
Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
Thomas B. Allen & Norman Polmar, *Code-Named: Downfall* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - TBD - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 15 Sept. 2020 - *Lincoln’s Spies* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - TBD - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - TBD - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com
Civil War Symposium -TBD - info@tccwrt.com
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org
8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.
Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>
Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - TBD - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighter-swwiimuseum.org>.
Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - TBD - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org
Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com
Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmisp.org -
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjer-ry45@hotmail.com
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2020-2021

8 Sept Invasion of Japan
13 Oct US Army in the Pacific
27 Oct Nazi Strategic Failures
10 Nov Deutsch Lecture on Walter Bedell Smith
8 Dec Origins of the Great Pacific War
2021
19 Jan Aerial Intelligence in Europe’s Air War
9 Feb Struggle for Middle East Oil and War
9 Mar Nazi Art
23 Mar Nazi Scientists in the US Space Program
13 Apr The Tragedy of Poland: Nazis; Soviets
11 May The “Mighty Eighth” and Victory in Europe

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