

65th Anniversary of Battle of Okinawa

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3/31/2010 - **KADENA AIR BASE, Japan** -- Sixty-five years ago this week, over 100,000 artillery shells, rockets, and mortars blasted the Okinawan coastline from approximately modern-day Torii Station to Camp Lester.

United States ships and aircraft saturated the area with fire and metal, landing as many as 25 rounds on every 100 square yards of ground for a half-mile inland. This "Typhoon of Steel" was designed to soften the Japanese defense along the landing beaches in anticipation of the largest amphibious invasion of World War II--Operation ICEBERG.

Nearly 1,500 ships and a landing force of 180,000 U.S. Marines and soldiers sat off the western coast of Okinawa waiting for April 1, 1945, the day designated for the assault.

Based upon lessons learned from previous island campaigns, such as Tarawa, Peleliu, and Iwo Jima, American military planners expected fierce resistance from the Japanese upon landing and hoped the massive bombardment would disrupt the Japanese response. Nevertheless, American officers still braced for 80% casualties in the first wave of Marines and soldiers.

Kadena airfield and the larger airbase at Yomitan were selected as primary objectives for the initial invasion. The airfield near Kadena Village, constructed by the Japanese shortly before the battle, consisted of little more than a single 4,000-foot-long, crushed-coral runway. Despite the fact that Kadena airfield lay so close to the landing beaches, U.S. planners anticipated three days of fighting before Army troops could secure it. All of these assumptions were predicated upon the realization that Okinawa was the first major Japanese home island to face an Allied ground attack and would be costly.

In the opening hours of April 1, 1945, thousands of anxious soldiers and Marines gripping rifles, machine guns and mortar tubes charged off their landing vehicles, across the beaches and into the unknown. Defying all apparent logic, the dreaded Japanese counterattack never materialized. The men landed virtually unopposed. A few rifle shots rang out and random mortar rounds dropped in and around the beaches, but the Americans swept past the beaches and into the Okinawan countryside without trouble. By the end of the day, roughly 60,000 Americans had landed on Okinawa with fewer than 200 casualties.



Okinawa landing



Resupply



Okinawa landing

Everyone wondered where the Japanese might have gone. Besides a few poorly-trained and under-equipped Okinawan conscripts, the Japanese were nowhere to be found. Although advancing troops saw firsthand the results of the barrage--one Marine recalled that nothing was alive in the fields, "not a . . . grasshopper or snake or fly"--the absence of Japanese soldiers was not the result of the pre-attack bombardment: well-constructed Japanese defensive positions remained intact and formidable. They were simply unmanned.

In fact, only an odd twist of fate prevented the landings near Kadena from matching the carnage of Iwo Jima. Months before the invasion, officials in Japan transferred a key division from Okinawa to Taiwan, leaving the Japanese commander on Okinawa, Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima, insufficient forces to contest the landing. Choosing to consolidate his forces along a defensive line flanking Shuri Castle, miles south of Kadena, Lt. Gen. Ushijima left his well-constructed bunkers and pillboxes empty, allowing U.S. forces to capture the Kadena airfield with relative ease.

This easy landing gave the Americans little clue of the impending death and destruction further south. After encountering the first significant, organized resistance by Japanese Imperial Forces south of modern-day Futenma, the Battle of Okinawa turned into a war of attrition through the months of May and June. The campaign spanned over eighty days, during which American forces suffered 49,151 casualties--12,520 of which were KIAs. Japanese military losses ranged as high as 77,000 killed, with another 8,000 or so captured. The Okinawan population suffered the worst, however, with approximately 150,000 dead.

The Battle of Okinawa began as an opening stage for the invasion of mainland Japan. However, only weeks after it concluded, the use of atomic weapons hastened the end of the war. Thus, the battle stood as the last--and bloodiest--ground campaign of the Pacific War.