

## BATTLE OF OKINAWA

Codenamed Operation ICEBERG, the Battle of Okinawa was the largest amphibious assault of the Pacific Theater and the last battle of World War II. It involving seven US divisions, support units, and naval assets, a joint operation headed by Admiral Chester Nimitz, General Douglas MacArthur, and Admiral Raymond A. Spruance who assumed command of the British Task Force. Though the American Navy was already shelling the coasts and planes from Task Force 58 were busy bombing Japanese installations between March 21 and 31 (a period labeled by local Okinawans as the “Typhoon of Steel”), the actual landing began on 1 April 1945, “L Day”, at 0830 when divisions of the 10<sup>th</sup> US Army came ashore on Okinawa's Higashi Beaches (the area known as Sunabe). Surprisingly they were met with little resistance, pushing forward to fulfill their first objective of splitting the island in two. Shortly after landing Marines and the 10<sup>th</sup> Army captured Yontan and Kadena airfields respectively, with Kadena being in US possession until Reversion in May 1972. Equipment and 60,000 US troops were on shore by the first day.

The subsequent 82 days of combat would prove to be a grueling ordeal for the armed forces of both sides. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Imperial Army's numbers on Okinawa were lessened by the Japanese military's choice to move the 9<sup>th</sup> Division to Formosa en route to the Philippines,

Something that was worsened by arguments over resources. This left Lieutenant General Mitsuri Ushijima with about 110,000 men and limited assets to fight an overwhelming defensive battle. As such the 32<sup>nd</sup> Army set up defenses in depth throughout the southern half of the island. Having to fight well-entrenched Japanese forces and endure shelling by artillery batteries would prove difficult for American ground forces. Both sides also faced adverse weather, notably typhoons and heavy rainfall that affected terrain in such a way that it frustrated equipment and troop movements.

Regardless of trying conditions Marines secured the north half of the island by April 20, but resistance in the south was slowing Army units. Their struggle to progress further led to General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr.'s decision to send Marines to aid and eventually replace the forces fighting at the Shuri-Yonburu Line, a string of defensive positions that cut the island in half, its centerpiece being Shuri Castle. The combat along the Shuri-Yonburu line in May was some of the most brutal in the Corp's history, especially at Sugar Loaf Hill, a position that was assaulted eleven times and claimed the lives of 2,662 Marines of the 6<sup>th</sup> division. By May 30 the 32<sup>nd</sup> Imperial Army had lost seventy percent of its forces, compelling them to retreat to Oroku Peninsula at the southern tip of Okinawa. With the approval of General Buckner Major General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., commanding General of the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, launched an amphibious assault on the Japanese naval headquarters located on the peninsula and later secured Naha airfield. On June 6 the naval base was overrun, leading Rear Admiral Minoru Ota and his staff to resort to *seppuku* (ritual suicide). Army and Marine infantry divisions drove the 32nd Army further south to where the resistance finally ended on 22 June 1945 at Mabuni Hill (Hill 89), Okinawa's southernmost point. In the face of inevitable defeat Lt. Gen. Ushijima and his Chief of Staff, General Isamu Cho, committed suicide the evening of June 21.



In those three short months there was much bloodshed and large losses of aircraft, ships, and equipment. Historians disagree on the number of casualties from the battle, but judging from various sources the totals can be placed at approximately 110,000 Japanese, 70,000 American, and 140,000 Okinawan casualties (though the actual number of civilian deaths may never be known). Strangely enough amongst those who died on Okinawa were two of the highest-ranking officers to perish during the entirety of World War II. One was the aforementioned Lt. Gen. Ushijima and the other General Buckner who was killed by a Japanese artillery shell on 18 June 1945. The US Navy experienced its greatest loss of life in its history with 4,907 killed in action. In addition to human fatalities US forces lost 36 ships (due mostly in part to multiple *kamikaze* attacks) and 763 planes. In turn the conflict cost the Imperial Japanese military 16 ships and a whopping 7,800 airplanes.

The Battle of Okinawa drew to a close with the cessation of organized resistance in late June. Fighting in the Pacific officially ceased when the Japanese formally surrendered aboard the USS Missouri in September 1945. The Surrender of the Ryukyu Islands occurred five days later on the Island of Okinawa.

