

Bloody Okinawa

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR (Ret)

The Battle of Okinawa, 20 March through 2 July 1945, the last great conflagration of World War II, was also the grand finale of numerous island campaigns in the Pacific. By far, Okinawa venue the Pacific War's biggest engagement in terms of numbers of combatants on both sides, naval and air actions, and casualties—including many thousands of civilians. Over 180,000 Allied troops initially went ashore, and over a half million servicemen were committed to the operation. Japanese forces, including thousands of Okinawan “volunteers,” numbered well over 100,000.

It was a battle for the ages, and Joseph Wheelan's *Bloody Okinawa: The Last Great Battle of World War II* now adds a worthy and valuable contribution to existing histories of the battle. Wheelan sums up the campaign this way:

The Battle of Okinawa was neither the climax nor the resolution of the Pacific war, but its battle royale—fought by the United States with crushing power and ferocity, and by Japanese forces with calculation, abandon, and fatalism. The fighting left the once peaceful island a blood-drenched battlefield. At sea, the three-month siege of the U.S. Fifth Fleet by Japanese kamikazes and conventional warplanes was unparalleled. The Battle of Okinawa stands as the longest sustained carrier campaign of World War II.

“Never before had there been, probably never again will there be, such a vicious, sprawling struggle,” wrote *New York Times* correspondent Hanson Baldwin of the Battle of Okinawa.

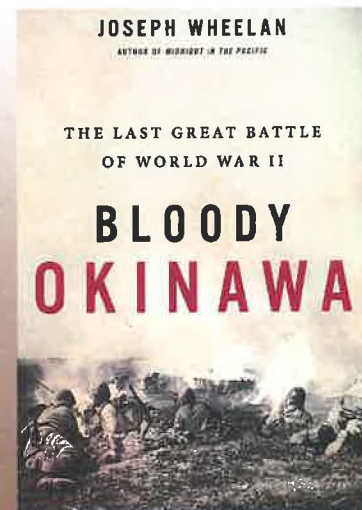
>Col Chase, an attorney in private practice in New Jersey, served as an infantry Platoon Commander in Vietnam and retired from the Marine Corps Reserve in 1998 after more than 30 years of active and reserve service.

Before and during this grinding, savage campaign of over 100 days, American planners saw the mission, called Operation ICEBERG, as the last stop before the launch of Operation DOWNFALL: the anticipated invasion to defeat the Japanese Empire in the homeland itself. Although well offshore, Okinawa was part of the Ryukyu Islands and a Japanese prefecture. It was only 400 miles south of Kyushu, one of Japan's five main

Okinawa venue the Pacific War's biggest engagement ...

islands. As such, it was the last and most important steppingstone to the ultimate invasion. DOWNFALL, which would have continued into and likely beyond 1946, never happened, as Imperial Japan surrendered on 2 September 1945 aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, just weeks after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945.

While the island battle raged, the war in the European theater ended with Germany's surrender on 7 May



BLOODY OKINAWA: The Last Great Battle Of World War II. By Joseph Wheelan. New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2020. ISBN: 978-0306903229, 419 pp.

1945. America's war effort thereafter would concentrate on Japan alone, which meant, for now, Okinawa. By then, the American military colossus was at its peak in military strength—measured in warships, aircraft, fighting vehicles, artillery, infantry small arms, crew served weapons, and personnel. U.S. war production capability was at full throttle: “In just three years [since Guadalcanal], America had become a world-striding goliath wielding astonishing power.” By contrast, Imperial Japan—three years earlier the preeminent power of the Asia-Pacific region—was now a diminishing shadow of the military leviathan it had been but could still deploy destructive forces to be reckoned with.

The well-led Japanese on Okinawa had stored and staged necessary supplies, weapons of war, and vast stockpiles of ammunition to last months (although, within weeks, ration shortages caused near-starvation conditions among Japanese soldiers). They exploited and improved countless caves, hills, and ridges where they built or refined hundreds of underground enclaves—effectively neutralizing relent-

less American bombing and naval gunnery. Japanese leaders and their troops knew that reinforcements and resupply were not possible for them. Yet, they stoically, even proudly, stared down their likely fate.

Although Allied victory was a certainty, the cost in blood on both sides on Okinawa would be horrific, and its casualties forecast a warning of much worse to come in Operation DOWNFALL. Leading up to Okinawa, the Japanese had suffered an unbroken string of crushing island defeats, including irreplaceable losses of men (including nearly all seasoned pilots), ships, aircraft, and weaponry since the Battle of Midway three years earlier. Nevertheless, the Imperial Army and Navy prepared on Okinawa to defend in depth against their American foes.

As with Iwo Jima (19 February to 26 March 1945), American forces landed on Okinawa virtually unopposed. Wheelan described the Japanese plan:

The new Japanese strategy, the so-called defense in depth, was first seen at Peleliu and Leyte the previous fall, and at Iwo Jima in February. An important feature was the construction of mutually supporting fortifications in caves, cliffs, and hills where Japanese infantrymen waited, as mortars and artillery pounded the Americans at a distance until they reached machine-gun range. Conventional counterattacks by mobile reserves supported by tanks replaced the headlong banzai charges that figured prominently in the Japanese defense of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Saipan.

The aim was to inflict maximum casualties, grind down the enemy, and break his will—a strategy summed up by the Thirty-Second Army's slogan: "One plane for one warship/One boat for one ship/One man for ten of the enemy or one tank."

The Japanese developed and carried out their patient defensive plan, with men protected deep underground, emerging at night, exploiting prepared positions with interlocking small arms fire, rolling artillery out at times of their choosing, and rolling it back after engaging.

In addition to exacting massive American casualties on scores of ridges and on hills and in valleys, often given names by the Marines (e.g., Sugar Loaf Hill; Hacksaw Ridge), Japanese kamikaze missions launched from the homeland became more frequent and deadlier than ever before—destroying or damaging numerous ships and killing or wounding a record toll of U.S. Navy personnel. In their objectives to delay a American victory and to rack up heavy enemy casualties, they succeeded but at the cost of the deaths of nearly all their island forces (although more Japanese soldiers surrendered on Okinawa than anywhere else).

Wheelan previously authored *Midnight in the Pacific: Guadalcanal—The World War II Battle That Turned the Tide of War*, as well as several books on earlier American conflicts. Thus, having now produced histories of America's first and last island invasions, he is well versed and skilled to portray the brutal, savage fighting that so characterized the Pacific War. *Bloody Okinawa* is an apt title for this detailed saga. On the island of Okinawa, as well as in the air and at sea nearby, the fighting became intensely personal and often racially motivated:

This was no anomaly; the Japanese in fact looked down upon all other races, believing that their origin was divine and that they were preordained to rule the world. This belief rested on their conviction that Emperor Hirohito was the 124th descendent of the goddess Amaterasu, the mother of Japan's first emperor, Jimmo Tenno, whose reign began in 660 BCE.

George Orwell, who wrote World War II broadcasts for the BBC, said the Japanese had for centuries espoused "a racial theory even more extreme than that of the Germans." For reasons of racial superiority, said Orwell, Japanese soldiers believed that it was their prerogative to slap other Asians in conquered territories, and to similarly abuse Anglo war prisoners.

As on previous islands, atrocities became commonplace, and a no-quarter practice characterized the Japanese especially—but also the Americans to a lesser extent.

Even more than *Midnight in the Pacific*, *Bloody Okinawa* is so graphic, with numerous portraits of the grisly and nightmarish close combat and suffering that some readers might pass over some of the most disturbing battle scenes. Yet, the narrative provides indispensable lessons on the ugly realities of war. Professional warfighters should gain from it a solid sense of what happens when infantries clash at close quarters for weeks and months on end, as they came to their fights with "kill-or-be-killed" expectations. Although previous island battles—like Peleliu and Iwo Jima—were all harrowing killing arenas, Okinawa was the worst.

Bloody Okinawa displays Wheelan's organizational and story-telling mastery, describing what were really many simultaneous or serial battles that raged in different parts of a widespread geography. He deftly provides continuity and context for the innumerable day-to-day contests. Daily struggles for yards of turf with deadly consequences characterized the fighting. The Marines and Army units would take contested high ground, only to be chased off the next day and to retake it later. Constant artillery barrages and "the accumulated days and weeks of methodical killing," abetted by the most primitive conditions of jungle rot, disease, sleeplessness, and lack of food and clean water, drove both sides to massive "shell shock" or "battle fatigue" casualties—the precursors of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), now an "officially recognized ... mental disorder." American "non-combat casualties" on Okinawa numbered in the tens of thousands.

In addition to the deadly challenges from a highly motivated enemy and conditions on the ground, there was also abundant inter-Service rivalry with Marines often chiding Army units and vice versa. Wheelan concludes that there were basic differences between the two Services' fighting philosophies. He revisits a Battle of Saipan (15 June to 9 July 1944) controversy that erupted when Marine LtGen Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith relieved Army MGEN Ralph

Smith, Commander of the 27th Division.

The Army sacrificed speed to minimize casualties—usually advancing with deliberation following heavy preparatory gunfire, ideally with the support of tanks. By contrast, the Marines sought to quickly reach their objectives, even if it meant foregoing supporting fire and accepting a steep “butcher’s bill.”

The deep-seated distrust between the two Services was aggravated by the controversy that flared during the 1944 Saipan campaign. The Army resented the Marines’ disparagement of the 27th Division for slowness and the dismissal of the 27th’s commander for not moving faster. Many Marines believed the Army was too cautious; many soldiers thought that the Marines needlessly squandered men’s lives.

Thus, the unfortunate coincidence of Marines sharing responsibilities on Okinawa with the Army’s 27th Division

made for unhelpful intramural animosity from the start.

Throughout *Bloody Okinawa*, Wheelan describes and quotes combatants on both sides. In doing so, flag officers appear and speak on almost every page. A puzzling aspect of Wheelan’s references to generals and admirals, however, is his identification of them as “General so-and-so” or “Admiral such-and-such.” He never refers to general officers by their actual ranks, except for those who happen to be of four-star rank; they are *all* “General” or “Admiral.” Unfortunately, with so many flag officers in play, this shorthand approach can be confusing and cause a reader to look up the actual flag ranks to discern their levels of authority. On Okinawa, the differences among the actual ranks and seniority of participants are especially relevant to the narrative because, on both sides, the chain of command of-

ten looms large, frequently reflecting differing points of view and open disputes over tactics.

Nevertheless, *Bloody Okinawa* is a must read for a cohesive, coherent understanding of the inherently confusing day-to-day chaos of the Pacific War’s biggest battle. It also serves as a poignant reminder of the extraordinary grit, stamina, and courage of the men who fought there. With his *Midnight in the Pacific* and now *Bloody Okinawa*, Wheelan admirably “book-ends” the first and last island campaigns in the Pacific War.




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