



Iwo Jima and Okinawa: The Final Campaigns in the Pacific Theater

Charles River Editors

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- *Includes historic pictures of the fighting.
- *Includes pictures of important people, places, and events.
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On February 23, 1945, one of the most famous photographs in American history was taken atop Mount Suribachi, as five American soldiers began to raise an American flag. The picture, which most Americans are instantly familiar with, has come to symbolize the strength and sacrifice of America's armed forces, and though many realize it was taken during the Battle of Iwo Jima, much of the actual battle and the context of the picture itself have been overshadowed.

The Battle of Iwo Jima, code name "Operation Detachment," is more of a misnomer than anything. It was fought as part of a large American invasion directed by steps toward the Japanese mainland, and it was more like a siege that lasted 36 days from February-March 1945, with non-stop fighting every minute. In fact, the iconic flag-raising photo was taken just four days into the battle, and as that picture suggests, the battle was not a pristine tactical event but an unceasing horror with no haven for protection. As veteran and author James F. Christ put it in the foreword of his exhaustive study of the action, "it is carnage...that is what Iwo was...the Gettysburg of the Pacific." Iwo Jima defined the classical amphibious assault of the World War II era, as much as the Normandy invasion did, but it came later in the war. In Europe, the Battle of the Bulge had already been won, and German forces would surrender in early May. However, the Japanese Empire was still at a considerable level of strength and state of resolve, and an essential offensive, grinding from island to island with naval unit to naval unit and air to air was met with maniacal resistance by the enemy.

When Admiral Chester Nimitz was directed to capture an island in the Bonin group, Iwo Jima stood out for its importance in making progress against the mainland, with three airfields that would allow American air forces to attack the Japanese mainland. But the Japanese were also well aware of how important Iwo Jima was, and they fought desperately in bunkers and tunnels that required the Americans to carefully clear them out gradually. Less than 5% of the Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima were taken alive, and American casualties were estimated at 26,000, with 6,800 killed or captured.

Near the end of 1944, as Allied forces were pushing across the Pacific and edging ever closer to Japan, plans were drawn up to invade the Ryuku islands, the most prominent of them being Okinawa. Military planners anticipated that an amphibious campaign would last a week, but instead of facing 60,000 Japanese defenders as estimated, there were closer to 120,000 on the island at the beginning of the campaign in April 1945. The Battle of Okinawa was the largest amphibious operation in the Pacific theater, and it would last nearly 3 months and wind up being the fiercest in the Pacific theater during the war, with nearly 60,000 American casualties and over 100,000 Japanese soldiers killed. In addition, the battle resulted in an estimated 40,000-150,000 Japanese civilian casualties.

Okinawa witnessed every conceivable horror of war both on land and at sea. American ground forces on Okinawa had to deal with bad weather (including a typhoon), anti-tank moats, barbed wire, mines, caves, underground tunnel networks, and fanatical Japanese soldiers who were willing to use human shields while fighting to the death. Allied naval forces supporting the amphibious invasion had to contend with Japan's

notorious kamikazes, suicide pilots who terrorized sailors as they frantically tried to shoot down the Japanese planes before they could hit Allied ships. As one sailor aboard the USS Miami recalled, "They came in swarms from all directions. The barrels of our ship's guns got so hot we had to use firehoses to cool them down."

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