

Caught in the Crossfire: Civilians during the Battle of Okinawa, April-June 1945

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The island of Okinawa is situated between the East China Sea and the Philippine Sea. It is a small island on the southern end of the Japanese archipelago. The island is riddled with caves, many of which became refuges for civilians on Okinawa during the Battle of Okinawa. This small island in the Pacific became the staging ground for one of the fiercest battles of World War II. It was April of 1945 and the Japanese had become desperate at this point in the war. U.S. forces were now on Japanese soil and the Japanese were going to do everything in their power to slow their advance. They started using brutal tactics inspired by the Bushido Code such as kamikaze attacks and banzai charges.<sup>1</sup> When a desperate enemy was confronted with a dominant force, the civilians suffered the most. Sumie Oshiro recalled Japanese soldiers telling her and her friends to kill themselves instead of being captured and then proceeding to hand them a hand grenade. Takejiro Nakamura, 15 years old at the time, remembers the Japanese Imperial Army telling civilians that if American forces captured them they would be raped and killed. He remembers his sister begging his mother to kill her as American forces advanced on their position. He recalls trying to kill himself as well.<sup>2</sup> This type of story does not even come close to the worst that happened to civilians on Okinawa during the battle. Although Japanese atrocities were grislier, there were many cases of American atrocities during the campaign as well. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> David Powers, "History - World Wars: Japan: No Surrender in World War Two," *BBC*, February 17, 2011, accessed May 2018, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/japan\\_no\\_surrender\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/japan_no_surrender_01.shtml). The Bushido Code was the ancient samurai code of honor that was used by the Japanese during WWII to glorify war and death. It was used to say death was more honorable than being taken prisoner and made the Japanese a tenacious and unforgiving enemy. The Bushido Code inspired tactics like the Banzai charge, where Japanese soldiers on the brink of being overrun would fix bayonets and charge the enemy screaming "Banzai!", and kamikazes (meaning "divine wind" in Japanese), which had Japanese pilots load their planes with explosives and attempt to fly them into American naval vessels. These tactics put fear into the Americans, but also seemed to indicate that the Imperial Japanese was desperate and at the end of its reign.

<sup>2</sup> James Brooke, "Okinawa Suicides and Japan's Army: Burying the Truth?" *The New York Times*, 20 June 2005, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/20/world/asia/okinawa-suicides-and-japans-army-burying-the-truth.html>. Nakamura ends saying that him and his mother talked about the war a lot, but she never said a word about killing her own daughter.

American forces were credited with killing a greater number of civilians than the Japanese.<sup>3</sup> Even so, the narrative of the Battle of Okinawa throughout history has become a narrative of Japan versus the United States. Whether the glossing over of the civilians' plight on Okinawa was a product of national shame and regret or wholesale ignorance is yet to be determined, but what is clear is that the story of the Okinawans is one that too often is marginalized or falls through the cracks of history.

The historiography surrounding the Battle of Okinawa seems to naturally fall into three groups. The first group is the battle history, official records that were sanctioned by military historians. The second is what I refer to as "I was there" history, personal accounts of combat veterans that were at the Battle of Okinawa. And the third is the analytical history. They all offer their own unique perspective on the history of the Battle of Okinawa.

The first group of existing historiographies is battle history. Battle history was written by military historians that were commissioned by the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps to follow troops into combat and record what happened. The reports are usually very matter-of-fact, detailing troop movements, giving casualty reports, and recording expenditures of resources. The two most prominent and comprehensive battle histories are Samuel Eliot Morison's *Victory in the Pacific, 1945* and *Okinawa: The Last Battle*.<sup>4</sup> The former is a detailed Naval account of the Ryukyus campaign.<sup>5</sup> Morison was commissioned as a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy as a historian and one of the things that he focuses on heavily is the kamikaze tactics employed by the Japanese. There is little to no mention of the civilians on Okinawa throughout his comprehensive

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<sup>3</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> This source was written by Roy E. Appleman, James M. Burns, Russel A. Gugeler, and John Stevens.

<sup>5</sup> This refers to the island chain that Okinawa is a part of.

history of naval involvement in the Okinawa campaign.<sup>6</sup> *Okinawa: The Last Battle* was written by a conglomeration of military historians who were commissioned as officers and followed the troops at Okinawa. It was mainly an Army history of what happened at Okinawa, but the historians also met and consulted with Navy and Marine historians during and after the battle to paint a full picture of what happened on Okinawa. This account is incredibly detailed and even accounts for the number of bullets fired by American forces during the campaign. One glaring omission from the account is the plight of the civilians. This is a history of the Army's exploits on Okinawa, so it is understandable that there is not a significant part dedicated to the civilians, but there were undoubtedly countless interactions that the Army had with civilians that go unaccounted for in this history. The only two mentions of civilians say, "the mass of civilians encountered delayed the troops almost as much as did enemy resistance" and "Civilians became a nuisance to combat units after the assault on the final enemy lines began, and remained a burden until front lines no longer existed."<sup>7</sup> There is also an official pictorial record for the Battle of Okinawa that has no pictures of civilians or troops with civilians.<sup>8</sup> These histories are very clearly geared towards telling what the military forces did and leaves out the effects of the battle on soldiers and civilians. It is still easy to tell that the writers, because of their constant contact with the troops and seeing the same atrocities they did, carried a very strong distaste for the enemy they were writing about and, since their writing was to be official for each respective branch, they did not want to paint a negative picture of the United States military.

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Victory in the Pacific, 1945*. Vol. 14. 14 vols. History of United States Naval Operations in World War II. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012. Morison is a renowned naval historian who has earned multiple Pulitzer Prizes.

<sup>7</sup> Roy E. Appleman, James M. Burns, Russel A. Gugeler, and John Stevens, *The War in the Pacific: Okinawa: The Last Battle*. Washington: Historical Division, Dept. of the Army, 1995 (First Printed in 1948).

<sup>8</sup> *The War Against Japan: Pictorial Record*, Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952.

The second logical grouping of historiographies is what I call “I was there” histories. These are detailed accounts of combat veterans during the Battle of Okinawa. They are characterized by brash terms used by the soldiers at the time and emotional accounts of the battle. They are usually unapologetically graphic when describing some of the horrors that they went through. Eugene Sledge wrote what is considered the best World War II memoir of an enlisted man. He wrote the book after jotting down notes in his New Testament Bible throughout his time on Peleliu and Okinawa as a mortar man. The book is very graphic in describing the fighting and the psychological effect it had on him and his comrades. He also gives a detailed account of the comradery of him and his unit and how that got him through the war. When talking about the civilians on Okinawa, Sledge said, “They were pathetic. The most pitiful things about the Okinawan civilians were that... they were scared to death of us. Countless times they passed us on the way to the rear with fear, dismay, and confusion on their faces.”<sup>9</sup> Bill Pierce, another Marine who fought on Okinawa, detailed the horrors he witnessed while on Okinawa. Bill fought on Okinawa for 82 straight days and said he never went a day without seeing a dead civilian.<sup>10</sup> These sources certainly mention civilians because they are not worried about the image of the U.S. military, but they did not wholly focus on them, nor were they fond of them.

The last grouping of historiographies is analytical history. Analytical history brings the longstanding effects of the battle into view. This mostly involves a political look at the battle and how it was used as justification for using the atomic bomb. *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb* by George Feifer does just that. Feifer gives a thorough history of the battle (over 600 pages). The majority of the book focuses on the American versus Japanese

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<sup>9</sup> Eugene B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*. New York: Presidio Press, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> James Holland, "The Battle for Okinawa: One Marine's Story," *History Extra*, March 29, 2018, accessed May 2018, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/the-battle-for-okinawa-one-marines-story/>.

aspect of the battle and then why the horrific battle led to the use of the atomic bomb. He uses many firsthand accounts to show how gruesome the battle truly was and why it was used to justify the atomic bomb.<sup>11</sup> The effect on civilians begins to be mentioned in this group of sources, but it is still marginalized in favor of the issues of America versus Japan and the atomic bomb. With Tennozan and other accounts of analytical history, we begin to see that the staggering number of civilian casualties cannot be ignored.

The Battle of Okinawa was the last major battle of the Pacific Campaign. Just as much of the Pacific Campaign is portrayed, the Battle of Okinawa is often depicted as a battle between the just and moral Americans and the immoral, grisly, and brutal Japanese. I contend that, in the general historiography of the battle, the civilians of Okinawa are too often mentioned briefly and/or ignored entirely. I want to explore whether they are just forgotten in the historiography of the battle or they are shamefully left out.

The Battle of Okinawa began on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945 and ended on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1945. The battle was code-named “Operation Iceberg.” It was the last major battle of an island-hopping campaign which took American forces across the Pacific from Guadalcanal to the Marshall Islands to Guam and Peleliu to Leyte Gulf and Iwo Jima and finally to the island of Okinawa. For “Operation Iceberg,” the United States created the Tenth Army, an army that consisted of four US Army infantry divisions and three Marine Corps divisions. The Tenth Army had about 180,000 personnel, compared to the Japanese’ forces on Okinawa, which numbered 70,000. At this point in the Pacific Campaign, the Japanese had become desperate. At the Battle of Leyte Gulf the Japanese used a tactic called “kamikaze” which involved Japanese planes being loaded with explosives and pilots flying them directly into ships. The tactic was first introduced at Leyte

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<sup>11</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*.

Gulf, but was much more widely employed at the Battle of Okinawa, earning the battle the nickname of the “typhoon of steel.” While the Navy battled with kamikaze attacks and provided artillery support for ground troops, the plan for the American land forces was to establish a beach head in the middle of the western side of the island. Then, the Marines moved north sweeping the island, while the Army moved south from the middle. The plan for the Japanese was to let American forces come onto the island with relative ease and then disable their fleet with kamikazes to trap the ground forces on the island. Then, they were going to bring in the gargantuan battleship *Yamato* to finish off the American fleet and then beach itself and become an artillery battery for Japanese ground forces.<sup>12</sup> The *Yamato* was intercepted and destroyed before that could happen and the kamikazes were not effective enough to disable the fleet, leaving thousands of Japanese soldiers to fight until the last man and prolong the campaign as long as they could. By the second week, the Marines had reached the northernmost part of the island. The southern part of the island was where the fiercest combat of the campaign took place. The Marines quickly redeployed to the southern half of the island. This was where the bloody battles of Hacksaw Ridge, Shuri Castle, Cactus Ridge, Kakazu Ridge, and Sugar Loaf Hill took place. Throughout all of these encounters, the Japanese used tunnels and caves that were riddled across the terrain. The tactic that the Americans used against these tunnels and caves was referred to as “Blowtorch and Corkscrew.” The Blowtorch was flamethrowers spraying a napalm mixture into the caves that would stick to the inhabitants and the Corkscrew was demolition charges that were planted to collapse the cave and trap the burning inhabitants. This worked to a devastating effect. Throughout all of this there were monsoon rains that made the battlefield

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Gandt, "Killing the Yamato," *HistoryNet*, March 03, 2016, accessed May 2018, <http://www.historynet.com/killing-the-yamato.htm>. The *Yamato* is the largest battleship ever created to this day. The Imperial Navy only gave the crew of the *Yamato* enough fuel to make it to Okinawa and beach itself as a shore battery. They did not anticipate that the *Yamato* would make it back to Japan.

reminiscent of a World War I battlefield. The battlefield conditions could not have been worse.<sup>(13)(14)</sup>

The Battle of Okinawa was unique for two reasons. The first was that it was fought on Japanese soil. The second, more significant reason, was that it was the first battle fought in the United States' island-hopping campaign where the civilians were present and almost none of them had been evacuated. Iwo Jima was fought on Japanese soil, but the civilians were entirely evacuated. With both sides refusing to change tactics, the civilians were caught in the middle of banzai charges and the effects of the Bushido Code while also being subjected to the overwhelming firepower of the American forces. During the southern land campaign both Japanese and American forces sustained heavy casualties, but the civilians were the ones that suffered the most. They were not loyal to either side and thus were suspected by both sides of aiding the enemy.

The Okinawans have a complicated history with Japan. Okinawans were opposed to annexation by Japan in 1872 and then faced assimilation policies that cultivated a relationship that was less than ideal.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when the Japanese arrived on Okinawa, the Okinawans were skeptical. Toshi Maruki said of the soldiers coming to Okinawa, "Japanese soldiers came to Okinawa and told the people, 'We are here to defend you, so do as we say...'. Whom did the Japanese end up defending? They killed the very people they were pledged to defend."<sup>16</sup> Instead of protecting the Okinawans, the Japanese used them for labor, military service, and even as human shields. Ota Masahide remembered being forced into service by the Japanese in the Blood

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Victory in the Pacific, 1945*.

<sup>14</sup> Roy E. Appleman, *The War in the Pacific: Okinawa: The Last Battle*. Both of these sources are used extensively throughout the background information presented here for the Battle of Okinawa.

<sup>15</sup> Vicky Tuke, "Understanding the Complexity of Okinawa," *East Asia Forum*, November 01, 2012, accessed May 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/11/02/understanding-the-complexity-of-okinawa/>.

<sup>16</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*.

and Iron Student Corps. He spoke of young school boys dying and school girls being forced to be nurses. He remembered more than half of his schoolmates dying. The Japanese would spread propaganda detailing how the American forces would rape and kill any Okinawans.<sup>17</sup> The Japanese treated civilians like any other soldiers in the Imperial Army in terms of killing them instead of allowing them to surrender. The Japanese soldiers' slogan became "soldiers and civilian had to live and die together." This often meant that the Japanese would perform banzai charges with civilians as human shields. American forces had no choice but to shoot.<sup>18</sup> Just like the story of Sumie Oshiro, Japanese soldiers would give civilians grenades or force them to jump off of cliffs instead of being captured by the Americans. There was one case in which Japanese soldiers were hiding in a cave with Okinawan civilians and one of the civilians had a young child with her. The Japanese told her to get the baby to be quiet or it would alert American forces to their position. The woman could not quiet her baby, so she left the cave. She came back shortly without the baby. No one questioned what had happened.<sup>19</sup> Masahide estimated that the Japanese killed more than 1,000 Okinawans under suspicion of being spies. Oftentimes, this was because they spoke in Okinawan, which was banned by the Japanese central government.<sup>20</sup>

The Japanese had grisly testimonies of massacring civilians, forcing them to commit suicide, and forcing them to kill each other, but the American forces accounted for far more civilian casualties. The reason that this is not talked about as much is because the casualties at

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<sup>17</sup> Ota Masahide, "This Is Why We Should Remember the Battle of Okinawa," *History News Network*, January 5, 2015, accessed May 2018, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/157763>. Ota Masahide ended up becoming the governor of Okinawa from 1990 to 1998. This source applies to the four sentences preceding it.

<sup>18</sup> James Brooke, "Okinawa Suicides and Japan's Army: Burying the Truth?" This source applies to the four sentences preceding it.

<sup>19</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*. Applies to story preceding it.

<sup>20</sup> Jon Mitchell, "The Battle of Okinawa," *Counter Punch*, June 19, 2015, accessed May 2018, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/06/19/the-battle-of-okinawa/>.

the hands of American forces were often less personal. The Japanese did not have the resources to kill civilians quickly, so deaths at the hands of the Japanese were often slow and gruesome.

When American forces first landed on Okinawa, they had no prior knowledge of the complicated relationship between the Okinawans and the Japanese and therefore just viewed them as sympathetic to the Japanese. John Lardner of *The New Yorker* said in 1945, "Every Marine regarded Okinawans as Japs and would split no Oriental hairs whatever except to concede that these 'Japs' looked very harmless and beaten down."<sup>21</sup> This type of mindset led to attitudes like that of a platoon leader that described a scene of Okinawan civilians committing suicide saying, "they dove onto the rocks or went into the sea. We didn't shoot but we didn't try to stop them either. Seeing civilians do all that didn't bother me one bit, not one iota...I had other worries. I'd seen a lot of horrors by then."<sup>22</sup> Since the American forces also had almost limitless resources, they were not afraid to bomb an entire village if there was even a small chance that there were Japanese soldiers there. A medical corpsman remembers that one night his unit saw some bushes moving, so they lobbed about a dozen hand grenades at the bushes. He described their moaning throughout the night as horrifying. When they got up in the morning, they discovered that the bushes had all young women in them, most likely nurses. They were trying to escape across American lines.<sup>23</sup> This type of incident was all too common with American forces and the Okinawan civilians. Bill Pierce remembers seeing about 100 hundred people advancing towards his position. They fired mortars and small arms on the large advancing group. The morning after, they discovered that about 80 of the individuals were women and children that were pushed out in front of the Japanese soldiers so they could try to escape.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*.

<sup>22</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*.

<sup>23</sup> George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*.

<sup>24</sup> James Holland, "The Battle for Okinawa: One Marine's Story."

Civilians were often caught in the crossfire when Blowtorch and Corkscrew tactics were employed by American forces. Fumiko Shimabukuro was 15 years old when she hid in a cave to escape the advancing American forces. The Americans fired at the cave, but no one left it. Then, the Americans brought up a flamethrower. Shimabukuro said, “Around 20 Okinawans went into that cave — but only seven of us came out. When I emerged, my kimono was burned to my skin and I was half naked, I thought the Americans were going to kill me.”<sup>25</sup> Americans expressed their frustration with Okinawans for trying to move at night despite propaganda leaflets telling them not to because Americans could never be sure whether it was Okinawan civilians or a surprise attack by the Japanese. The civilians had little choice though, because the Americans were constantly bombarding the island. The civilians had to choose between getting blown to bits by artillery or being shot approaching American lines.

The thoughts and preconceived notions of American forces about Okinawans, along with the unwillingness of Japanese forces to allow Okinawans to surrender truly had Okinawan civilians caught in the crossfire. A diary from Tatsusei Yogi chronicles his time on Okinawa bouncing from cave to cave trying to avoid death at every turn. Almost every day he mentioned bombing and rain.<sup>26</sup> Yogi’s account personifies what almost every Okinawan felt. They were constantly on the run and always had death in their mind. The number of casualties sustained by Okinawan civilians during the Battle of Okinawa ranges from anywhere between 70,000 and 150,000. Regardless, Okinawa lost about one third of its native population. Ota Masahide said that during the battle the civilians’ experience was like being “attacked by tigers at the front gate

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<sup>25</sup> Jon Mitchell, "The Battle of Okinawa: America's Good War Gone Bad," *The Japan Times*, accessed May 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2015/03/30/issues/battle-okinawa-americas-good-war-gone-bad/#.Wvx4thIrlq0>. She explains later how thankful she was for the medical care and fair treatment of the Americans after she was put in their care.

<sup>26</sup> Tatsusei Yogi, "A Wartime Diary," Edited by Takashi Yogi, January 4, 1998. <http://www2.cruzio.com/~yogi/diary.htm>.

and wolves at the back.”<sup>27</sup> The staggering number of civilian casualties along with terrible atrocities on both sides of the conflict is something that cannot be ignored. It has had a lasting impact on the Okinawan community and it should be talked about more than it is. Both countries involved have to be transparent about their involvement in the atrocities and must refuse to let this slip through the cracks of history.

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<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, Jon. "The Battle of Okinawa: America's Good War Gone Bad."

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