

BATTLE OF OKINAWA – LINER NOTES

Editor's Note: The following program notes have been compiled using the best available sources. Due to the continued debate regarding certain elements of the Battle of Okinawa, discretion should certainly be practiced. AnimEigo's limited research is hardly definitive, especially regarding the more sensitive and controversial areas.

Present Day Okinawa Island

Okinawa Island is the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, a chain of Japanese islands in the western Pacific Ocean at the eastern limit of the East China Sea. The islands have a subtropical climate with warm winters and hot summers, and a lot of rain throughout, especially during the rainy season of Spring. Okinawa is home to the coastal capital city of Naha, and has a total area of 464 square miles.

Okinawa was originally an independent Ryukyu Kingdom, with a history dating back to the 8th Century. Annexed to Japan in 1872, Okinawa's relatively recent addition to the mainland can be compared to Hawaii, one of the last states to join the U.S., with its own unique culture and languages that set it apart from that of its nation.

Following the events of this film, after the Imperial Japanese surrendered in 1945, the United States controlled and occupied Okinawa Island until June 17, 1972. From 1972 until the present day, U.S. Armed Forces have maintained a strong presence on Okinawa Island, by invitation of the Japanese government, as part of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. Controversy still surrounds the continued U.S. military presence in Okinawa, as Okinawans continually request to this day to decrease or eliminate completely the U.S. troops and bases that have overcrowded the island.

As of the year 2000, the total population of Okinawa Island was over 1.3 million people, including native Okinawans, Japanese, and American military. Northern Okinawa is largely unpopulated due to dense forests, but the south is very urbanized, particularly the city of Naha. Okinawans are known for their longevity, mainly because of their unique food and life style. Five times as many Okinawans live to be 100 than the rest of the Japanese people, who hold the record for the longest living nationality in the world. Okinawans have their own language, which is spoken in the southern area of Okinawa as well as some of the surrounding islands. This dialect is divided into two groups: Central (Shuri) and Southern. The speech of Northern Okinawa is generally considered a separate language, called Kunigami, due to its unique phonological characteristics, but there is no definite consensus as to whether it is a language of its own or one of many Japanese dialects. Though Japanese and Okinawan may be as different as Spanish and Portuguese, Okinawans are racially recognized as Japanese.

The extremely cooperative and dedicated attitude of Okinawans to the Japanese military had derived at least partly from their own handicap in history. As the last to join mainland Japan, and coming from a different cultural background, they were strongly encouraged and even forced to "fit in" with mainland Japan. So they sacrificed everything to fight for the battle of Okinawa. The entire Japanese were educated to do so at the time but it was more so in Okinawa.

In contrast, some of the military leaders did not regard Okinawa as an important part of Japan, and sacrificed her like a chess pawn, as was clearly depicted in this film.

Has Okinawa been treated any better after WWII, as requested by Major General Ohta in the film? At the least, there have been numerous words of apology given by Royal family members and the general public of Japan. They deeply feel sorry for Okinawa's enormous sacrifice to mainland Japan. Have they been compensated? Unfortunately, Okinawa missed the opportunity to enjoy post WWII prosperity due to the US occupation, and she still struggles with the handicap and differences from mainland Japan. In many ways, the battle of Okinawa still continues for the people of Okinawa.

Battle of Okinawa

The Battle of Okinawa was the largest amphibious assault of the Pacific campaigns of World War II. It lasted about three months, from March to June of 1945. The legendary battle is sometimes referred to as the

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“Typhoon of Steel” due to the ferocity of the fighting, the intensity of gunfire, and the sheer numbers of Allied ships and troops that assaulted the island.

Before the battle, it's estimated that Okinawa had a civilian population of around 435,000. At least 140,000 of them were killed while the Japanese army attempted to defend the island. Besides civilian casualties, over 60,000 members of Japanese and Okinawan military were killed, and 12,500 Americans were killed or went missing. The fighting was so intense that 48% of all U.S. soldiers involved in the Battle of Okinawa were treated for shell-shock.

The Japanese had ample time to prepare for the American invasion, and utilized the time to create a heavy defense line that could only be flanked from the sea. Lt. General Mitsuru USHIJIMA was in charge, and centered his defense around the historical Shuri Castle, a medieval fortress of the ancient Ryukyuan kings. It was built on steep ridges, perfect for the defensive line. For the first time in the Pacific War, the Japanese had large numbers of tanks, artillery pieces, and military supplies, and also dug elaborate fortifications to aide in defense, as they had utilized in Iwo Jima. These factors combined ensured that the Okinawa defenses would be the toughest the U.S. faced during the war. Ushijima knew in advance that the Allied assault could not be stopped, but that did not stop him from going down without a fight.

Naval Campaign

The U.S. naval campaign consisted of about 1,300 ships, including 40 carriers, 18 battleships, and 200 destroyers. The U.S. Navy contributed most of the ships and airplanes involved in the operation (The British Pacific Fleet provided about 20%), and in the end sustained greater casualties than in any other battle of the war. The Japanese had used some kamikaze tactics since the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but this Battle marked the first time they became a major part of the defense. During the two months battle for Okinawa, over 1,900 kamikaze missions were attempted, sinking dozens of Allied ships and killing more than 5,000 U.S. sailors. The most dramatic action of the Japanese naval campaign occurred with Operation Ten-Go, the attempted kamikaze attack by a strike force led by the largest battleship in the world, the Yamato. Shortly after leaving Japanese home waters en route to Okinawa, the Yamato and other vessels were intercepted by Allied forces. After an assault by more than 300 carrier aircraft over a two day span, the battleship was sunk, and the Japanese Navy did not participate for the remainder of the war.

Land Campaign

The U.S. land campaign was conducted by the Tenth Army and commanded by Lt. General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. It consisted of 102,000 Army, 88,000 Marine Corps, and 18,000 Navy personnel, over 200,000 soldiers in all. The Japanese land campaign was conducted by the 32nd Army, which consisted of about 77,000 soldiers, and was made up of the 9th, 24th, and 62nd Divisions, as well as the 44th Independent Mixed Brigade. As mentioned in the film, the 9th Division was moved to Taiwan before the invasion, resulting in a shuffling of defensive plans. The 32nd Army was led in the south by Lt. General Mitsuru Ushijima, his chief of staff, Lt. General Isamu Cho, and his chief of operations, Col. Hiromichi Yahara. Yahara was in favor of a defensive strategy, while Cho advocated an offensive one. In north Okinawa, Colonel Takehido Udo was in command. The land battle took place over 87 days, beginning on March 26, 1945, when the U.S. 77th Infantry Division landed on the Kerama Islands, fifteen miles west of Okinawa. The islands were secured by the U.S. troops in five days, and on April 1 (which was both Easter Sunday and April Fools' Day in 1945), General Buckner and troops of Marines began invading the main island, concentrating on seizing northern Okinawa, and then wheeling south through the narrow strip of Okinawa, where most of the fighting was to take place.

Because of the extensive Japanese preparations and tenacious fighting, the land battle was fierce and long. American forces had difficulty clearing the Japanese out from each cave or hiding place of the outer defenses, and suffered heavy casualties. While this fighting was taking place at Kakazu Ridge, Lt. General Cho influenced Lt. General Ushijima to take the offensive, and on April 12, the 32nd Army attacked American positions across the entire front in a heavily sustained and well-organized assault. They eventually retreated, only to repeat the offensive the next two nights. While these nighttime assaults proved that the Americans were vulnerable to night infiltration, the sheer amounts of U.S. firepower made any Japanese offensive extremely dangerous, so they reverted to their defensive strategy for the next few weeks, holding off strong American

offensives and resulting in massive casualties on both sides. While the U.S. forces made some progress, the Japanese defenses situated on reverse slopes ensured that defenders could survive artillery barrage and aerial attack, and hold their defenses. On May 4, Ushijima attempted a final counter-offensive, involving amphibious assaults on the coasts behind American lines, but the attack was a complete failure.

The Battle Comes to an End

By the end of May, General Bunker had captured Conical Hill and “Sugar Loaf Hill”, which were key positions enveloping Shuri Castle on both sides. At this time of the rainy season, massive monsoon rains made battle a nightmare. Slopes and roads were flooded, and troops lived and fought in fields of mud, which due to garbage and dead bodies became part of a noxious stew of death. On May 29, Shuri Castle was captured by U.S. forces, and on June 21, the island was defeated. Some Japanese, however, continued fighting, including the future governor of Okinawa prefecture, Masahide Ota.

In the closing hours of the battle, Ushijima and Cho committed seppuku in their command headquarters on Hill 89. Yahara asked Ushijima for permission to join them, but the Lt. General refused, saying “If you die there will be no one left who knows the truth about the battle of Okinawa. Bear the temporary shame but endure it. This is an order from your Army Commander.” Major Yahara was the most senior officer to survive the battle, and he went on to reach Colonel and author a book entitled *The Battle for Okinawa*. The only other known surviving member of staff, Lt. Colonel Naomichi Jin, also wrote a book on the Battle of Okinawa. The Battle of Okinawa production staff naturally interviewed these two surviving members as consultants for the film.

Controversy and Aftermath

The Battle of Okinawa is both unique and controversial due to the large indigenous civilian population of Okinawa who were involved. There is still much debate as to whether or not Japanese soldiers had a role in the civilian casualties. Some Okinawans have testified that Japanese troops treated the locals brutally, showing indifference to Okinawa's defense and safety, and in some cases helped civilians commit mass suicide. According to such testimony, fanatical Japanese soldiers persuaded locals that victorious American soldiers would go on a rampage of killing and raping. Many civilians killed themselves and their families to avoid capture, in some cases with grenades given to them by Japanese soldiers, and in other cases threw themselves and their family members from the cliffs where the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum now stands. In the film we also see many civilians drinking poison, slitting their throats with razor blades, and bludgeoning the people they love, all to escape the horrors of war. Disagreement still continues between Okinawa's local government and Japan's national government over the role of the Japanese military in these civilian mass suicides. In March 2007, the national Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry (MEXT) advised textbook publishers to reword descriptions of the event to just say that civilians received hand grenades from the military, not that the military urged civilians to suicide. In June 2007 the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly adopted a resolution stating: “We strongly call on the government to retract the instruction and to immediately restore the description in the textbooks so the truth of the Battle of Okinawa will be handed down correctly and a tragic war will never happen again.”

In the end, 90% of the buildings on the island were completely destroyed, and the lush tropical island was left a vast field of mud, lead, decay, and maggots. The U.S. occupation of Okinawa provided a base in an ideal strategic proximity to Japan, though American losses at Okinawa were so extensive that the U.S. Congress called for an investigation into the conduct of the U.S. military commanders. Some historians, such as Victor Davis Hanson, believe that Okinawa led directly to the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, because the fierce defense and immense casualties led the U.S. to seek “alternative means to subdue mainland Japan, other than a direct invasion.”

Kamikaze

Kamikaze is the name given to the Japanese suicide attacks that occurred near the end of the Pacific campaign of World War II. Although there were other similar attacks throughout the war, the “suicide attack” became synonymous with the time period during Japan's imminent defeat, near the beginning of 1944, a time when the Allied forces were advancing toward the Japanese islands.

During these attacks, Kamikaze pilots attempted to intentionally crash their aircraft into opposing ships, with the hope of inflicting more damage than a conventional attack would have caused. To ensure maximum damage, the aircrafts were usually stocked with extra explosives and full fuel tanks.

Kamikaze pilots were the most common form of Japanese suicide during the war, however the military used other suicide attacks involving midget submarines, human torpedoes, speedboats, and divers.

Kamikaze etymology

The term kamikaze can be translated as “divine wind” (“kami” means “god”, “kaze” means “wind”) and originated in the thirteenth century when typhoons, given the name “kamikaze,” scattered the invading Mongol fleets. The formal Japanese term for the World War II suicide attacks is “tokubetsu kōgeki tai” (the abbreviated version is “tokkotai” or “tokko” for short) which translates to “special attack unit.” The term for the specific air attacks was “shinpu tokubetsu kōgeki tai” (divine wind special attack units).

However, a point of confusion is that the Japanese never used the term “kamikaze” in relation to the attacks. US translators used the indigenous Japanese pronunciation for “Shinpu” (which uses the same kanji characters as “kamikaze”), giving the English language the word “kamikaze.” This phrase eventually gained worldwide acceptance, and after the war, was reimported into Japan where the attacks are now known as “kamikaze tokubetsu kōgeki tai.”

Tsushima Maru Tragedy

On August 22, 1944, the Tsushima Maru, an unmarked passenger ship carrying Japanese civilians from Okinawa to Kagoshima, was attacked and sank by the submarine USS Bowfin. The passengers, which included schoolteachers, students and a few parents, were being escorted off the island to escape the anticipated invasion. Over 1,400 civilians, including 767 Japanese schoolchildren, died in the tragedy.

It was revealed that the crew of the USS Bowfin had no knowledge of the children on board until twenty years later, as survivors of the event were not allowed to discuss the incident.

A memorial ceremony is held each year at the approximate location of the sinking. The wreckage was located and identified in December 1997.

Yamato

Besides the name for the gigantic Japanese battleship seen in the film, the “Yamato people” is a term first used in the late 1800’s to distinguish the dominate native ethnic group (residents of mainland Japan) from other minority ethnic groups (people from the peripheral areas of Japan). These “minority” groups were classified as Ryukyuan, Ainu, Nivkhs, Uilta, Koreans, Taiwanese and Taiwanese aborigines.

Okinawans generally fall into the category of “Ryukyuan” (the indigenous people of the Ryukyu islands). Their native language, part of the Ryukyuan language family, is very different from Japanese and can be impossible to understand by native Japanese speakers without any education.

Mabuni village, Itoman

The Mabuni village, located on the southern tip of Okinawa, was the site of the Japanese 32nd Army headquarters. The area served as the last organized resistance by the Japanese forces.

In June, 1945, as the US forces surrounded Itoman City, soldiers, as well as military students and civilians, convened in nearby caves and committed suicide. On June 22, Lt. General Mitsuru Ushijima and Lt. General Isamu Cho committed seppuku in a bunker under a hill in Mabuni (known as Hill 89); this event marked the end of organized resistance by Japanese troops.

The Okinawa Peace Memorial Hall in Mabuni hosts a ceremonial festival each year to offer prayers for the people who lost their lives in the Battle of Okinawa.

Kihachi Okamoto

Born on February 17, 1923, in Yonago, Japan, Okamoto was thrust into the horrors of war at a young age. In 1943, after graduating from the Meiji University, he was drafted into the last years of Japan's war in the South Pacific, and lost nearly all of his colleagues fighting alongside him. The experience gave him a firm grasp on human conflict, and the Japanese war in particular. He began his long and diverse film career with successful war films such as *Desperado Outpost* (1959), *Japan's Longest Day* (1967), *The Human Bullet* (1968), and, of course, *Battle of Okinawa* (1971). He masterfully tackled the samurai genre with *Samurai Assassin* (1965), *The Sword of Doom* (1966), *Kill!* (1968), *Red Lion* (1969), and *Zatoichi vs. Yojimbo* (1970). In addition, he directed several cynical gangster pictures, including *Boss of the Underworld* (1959) and *The Age of Assassins* (1967), and has brilliantly left his mark throughout many other genres such as jidaigeki, comedy, drama, and science fiction. Kihachi Okamoto died on February 19, 2005, just two days after his 81st birthday, from cancer of the esophagus.

Yahara

Col. Hiromichi Yahara was a young officer with shrewd discernment, who is described as being conservative and calculating in his decisions. His tactical strategies provided a counterbalance to the aggressive energy of Lt. General Cho, and combined, provided a very sound and able set of advisors to Lt. General Ushijima throughout the battle. Similar to Lt. General Kuribayashi who led the Battle of Iwo Jima, Yahara was educated in the U.S., spoke good English, and understood well the power and technology of U.S. troops. Despite criticism from Japan's military staff, who labeled such attrition as cowardly, the two officers are very highly regarded from the U.S. side as the smartest Japanese strategists during WWII. In his 1973 book entitled *The Battle for Okinawa*, in which he recounted the tragic events from his personal accounts, Yahara describes how Ushijima often overruled his battle plans in favor of wasteful offensive strategies he called "absurd suicide tactics." He also reveals in the book what happened to him in the aftermath of the war, as he evaded capture for a while by mingling with civilian refugees, and was eventually arrested and interrogated by Allied forces.

Cho

Lt. General Isamu Cho joined the Okinawa forces from the Military Affairs Bureau of the War Department in Tokyo. He previously held many high staff positions with troops in China, Malaya, and Burma, and was known to be an aggressive, forceful officer. His hard-driving assertiveness is certainly evident in the film, as he urges for less defense in favor of a "general offensive." These offensive strikes mainly proved to be a failure and the cause of a large loss of life, but were certainly well-intentioned at a time when all available options seemed to be exhausted.

Ushijima

Born on July 31, 1887, Mitsuru Ushijima was the Japanese general who led the primary resistance in the south of Okinawa from Shuri Castle, just south of the main line of defense in Okinawa. Despite disagreements between his subordinates, Lt. General Cho and Col. Yahara, Ushijima led a skillful defense which held Allied Forces at bay for quite some time. According to his staff members, Ushijima was a calm and capable officer who inspired confidence among his troops. After the Shuri defensive line was lost, he led a successful withdrawal of his troops to the southern tip of the island, where they eventually became a fragmented grouping of isolated defensive positions, and Ushijima ended up isolated on Hill 89 of the southern coast. Communication was cut, and U.S. Lt. General Simon Buckner offered a personal plea for Ushijima to surrender, but he refused, and met his tragic but honorable fate on June 22, 1945, along with his second-in-command, Lt. General Cho.

"Thereby was displayed the bottommost hell of agonizing screams."

The word Abi-kyokan is from the Sanskrit 'Avici' meaning 'no release', which is considered to be among the lowest realms of Hell within Buddhism. It is believed that people reborn into this Hell have committed one or more of the Five Grave Offenses:

- Intentionally murdering one's father or mother.
- Intentionally murdering one's self.
- Killing an arhant, or Enlightened being.
- Shedding the blood of a Buddha.
- Creating discord within the Sangha, the community of Buddhist monks and nuns.

According to Buddhism, rebirth into Hell is only temporary, as the offending being can work off the karma they performed. While rebirth into Avici Hell is not eternal, suffering in Avici is much longer than all other levels of Hell, of which some believe there are hundreds.

“What is this?” “A group of girls that came to give us a hand.” (Happa-kake)

The wording is “happa-kake”, which means to spur [into action]. There is no real English equivalent.

“Tennou Heika Banzai”

“Tennou Heika Banzai” means “Long live the Emperor!”, and was traditionally used as a formal cheer to the Emperor or other dignitaries, or to wish long life to the Japanese state. As the war progressed, it transformed into the quintessential war cry or victory shout, used to encourage Imperial forces in combat. Its shortened form, “Banzai”, literally means “ten thousand years,” and is commonly used today.

“We'll be on our way!” (Ittekimasu)

“Ittekimasu” are traditional parting words which mean “I'm going and (later) coming back.” In this instance, of course, they won't be coming back, which is why it's so dramatic.

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[Japanese Nationalism](#), [Kihachi Okamoto](#), [Battle of Okinawa](#), [Okinawa Island](#), [Okinawa Prefecture](#), [Avici](#), [Tokkotai](#), [Tsushima Maru](#), [Yamato People](#), and [Ryukyuan](#).

In addition, the following pages were extremely helpful: [Panoramas of WWII Landmarks](#), [Itoman City History](#), and [Mabuni Fire & Bell Observance](#).